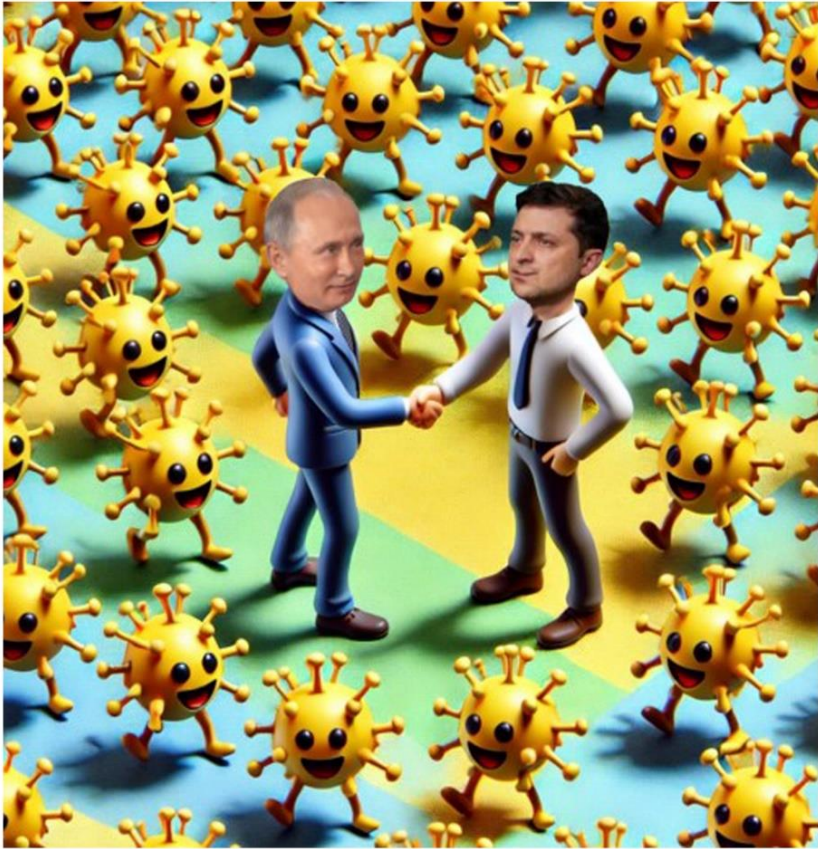


Bernard HOUOT

The day Putin became benevolent

or the virtues of a virus



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or the virtues of a virus

An unknown virus that makes people benevolent infects Putin and spreads throughout Russia and Ukraine, changing the course of history.

In a world dominated by leaders who have terrible power over the future of humanity, the author gives us hope that there will be some among them who are lucid and inventive enough to work for peace, thereby acquiring a greater and more lasting glory than having conquered a few thousand square kilometers over their neighbors by violence and force of arms.

The author



An alumnus of the Ecole Polytechnique and a graduate of Harvard Business School, the author has published a dozen of works (novels, essays, stories, poetry, comic strips), taking a deliberately positive approach to the issues of our time in the fields of education, bioethics, politics, family and spirituality.

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Fiction

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*From their swords, they will forge ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks:
one nation will no longer raise a sword against another,
and war will no longer be taught.*

Bible quote by Nikita Khrushchev, then First Secretary of the Central
Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,
during an official visit to the USA, in 1959,
in an American farm of Iowa.

*I don't do the good I want to do,
but I commit the evil I would not like to...
Wretched man that I am!*

Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans
Chap 7 verses 19 and 24

I – Come out of coma

Novo-Ogaryovo, June 8

Russia's ruler, Vladimir Putin, likes to come to Novo-Ogaryovo to work or rest in a state residence some thirty kilometers west of Moscow. Unlike the other palaces at his disposal, the rooms here are on a human scale. The building's architecture is classical, and the interior decor very sober. One of the salons, which serves as an office, is a rather austere room with smooth walls, painted beige without embellishment, on one side of which hangs a planisphere, and on the other a painting of a green landscape, overlooked by the red shield of the Moscow coat of arms. A flag on its staff is leaning against the wall behind the desk. On the tabletop, covered with a large dark leather blotter, are a pen tray and several telephones and telecommunications devices. Through the picture windows, you can see part of the park, where beautiful ash trees and large birch trees grow amid carefully tended lawns and flowerbeds.

Nothing very original. It's tasteful, comfortable and quiet, and it's easy to see why the new Tsar of Russia likes to spend time here, away from his huge palace in the Kremlin.

For the past few days, however, this residence has been anything but calm and serene. Three doctors took turn caring for Putin, who has just woken up from a coma lasting several hours after three days of very high fever. In the patient's room, Professor Yvan, his personal physician, is worried. He decides to stay with the sovereign, along with a member of the Security Service, while his two young assistants go to lunch in the service staff building.

The young doctors follow in the park the path to the restaurant, chatting away.

- What do you think of Putin's fever and coma?" asks the youngest to his companion.

- I don't think anything. You know that; we're not allowed to think here!

- You're talking nonsense!

- Who recruited you?

- State Security on the recommendation of Professor Yvan, whom I had as a teacher, like you. I passed the required tests and checks. Everything went smoothly and I got the job.

- So, the investigations revealed nothing about your subversive activities?

- What do you mean, subversive?

- I'm joking, of course, otherwise you wouldn't be here. But you have to be very discreet. Be careful, in this residence, the walls have ears.

- You want to test me or what? There are no walls here. There are only trees.

- And in the foliage of that big ash tree above us, don't you see a transparent satellite dish?

- I see a toy for recording birdsong. I used to play with it as a child.

- It's nice to be naive and work in the most watched place in the world without noticing all these surveillance devices. Let's stop talking. We'll continue our conversation later.

They make their way in silence towards the restaurant reserved for the medical teams. As they arrive in front of the Security Service staff pavilion, they see through the wide-open doorway the television screen that enables the guards to follow the continuous stream of information broadcast over the airwaves. This keeps them abreast of the latest news from around the country. As they walk along the wide-open door, they hear snatches of the Tsar's latest speech, in which he speaks of his ambition to restore the former Soviet empire to its former greatness, as it was twenty years before its break-up.

In Russia, this sovereign is regarded by the majority of modest people as a god. Small in stature, but strong, athletic and determined, he carefully cultivates his image as a resolute and determined ruler.

Well-protected by his special services, he only leaves his palaces and residences in armored cars, escorted by armed guards.

Many citizens see in this ruler the ideal of a head of state, and are reassured by his unfailing morale, the strength of his convictions and his determination to defend the country's greatness and its traditional moral and cultural values.

Although he lives in the splendor of many state residences, he remains discreet about his private life and personal possessions. The only things visible are the large official limousines, his presidential guard, his service staff and the parks, gardens and state residences reserved for him. The rest of his fortune - jewels, precious stones, foreign properties, yachts, Swiss bank accounts, wives, stud farms - is only mentioned by a few private investigators, whose reports are not always reliable or credible. In this field, it's better not to be too curious if you want to remain free and not be threatened, arrested or even murdered.

After enjoying the taste of the rustic dishes served in the restaurant reserved for the medical profession, the one of the two doctors who knows the place suggests his colleague to stroll through the park before returning to the sovereign's residence.

- There are no bugs or sensors around here. Follow me and we can talk freely.

- I've heard a lot about Putin's health. Can you tell me a bit about it?" asks his young colleague.

- It's very dangerous to talk about it publicly. It's better to be completely mute.

- I know it, I've been warned, but we don't have State Security on our backs here. So, what do you know? I hear he's got cancer.

- Maybe...

- But before the fever that's just struck him, he wasn't doing so badly, it seems to me. He's even in good shape for his age and responsibilities. I reckon he's got quite a few years to live if he pulls through this surprising illness he's just caught. Don't you think so?

They continue to discuss the health of their very important patient, then change the subject as they head back towards the sovereign's residence.

Both have been promoted to the positions they occupy thanks to the professor who had them as assistants at Moscow's great military hospital. From a professional point of view, this is a great opportunity for them. They are well-paid and enjoy numerous benefits. In return for this comfortable status, they are obliged to live permanently under the watchful eye of the State Security, to reside in the buildings allocated to them and to be available to accompany Putin on his travels and at many official events.

Back at the sovereign's residence, they meet up with the professor.

- Things are going well," he tells them. The Tsar is feeling better. But keep an eye on him. You can look in the next room for the results of the first tests. For my part, 'm going to get something to eat.

- And you, the newcomer," he says to the youngest while going out, "are you satisfied with your work?

He doesn't wait for his answer and leaves his two assistants behind.

They read the laboratory analysis report and the instructions left by the professor, who asked them to ensure Putin's isolation and to contact State Security to ensure entry control.

The sovereign has risen and is having breakfast in the residence's dining room. The two young doctors find him enjoying yoghurt and other specialties he likes to have in the morning, such as tvorog, quail eggs, horseradish and beet juice.

- How are you, Majesty?" they ask. "You still have a slight fever, but you seem to have regained your vitality and health.

- I'm feeling better. I'm going to finish my breakfast and get some exercise in the gym, because I need it.

And turning to them, he asks:

- What do you think of my case?

- We can't tell you exactly what you've caught. Our orders are to keep you isolated until we have more test results.

- You don't know what I caught? How can I trust you! You're incompetent! I should throw you in the jails where traitors and incompetents end up," he tells them in a tone of voice they can't quite decide whether it's serious or not.

- Your Majesty, viruses and microbes circulate discreetly and are difficult to detect, except by their effects.

- It's okay for this time! But you will have to prove to me that you took all the necessary precautions to avoid this disease.

They mention Putin's remark to the professor, who has returned from the restaurant.

- Why is the sovereign so violent and even threatening when we tell him quite honestly that we don't know the cause of his high fever?

- Don't take offense! It's in his nature to threaten his staff with immediate dismissal when something doesn't go his way. The coma from which he has just emerged, lasting over three hours, is truly inexplicable. Fortunately, he seems to have recovered well. His recovery is spectacular.

Professor Yvan continues:

- Until we have more complete analysis results, you will guard the entrance to his apartments with State Security and warn the resuscitation team to remain on the alert. Please proceed without delay.

He returns to Putin's room, who declares to him without the slightest preamble:

- I love you, Yvan!

- But I haven't done anything, Vladimir. I don't deserve any thanks from you. You're strong and almost back on your feet!

- Thank you, thank you again...

- Unfortunately," continues the professor, "I'll have to isolate you and see what I can do with State Security.

- No way, I want to get out of here!

- Your confinement is imperative, Vladimir! Remember the Covid-19 epidemic. This time, it's probably a different virus, but one that can be just as dangerous and contagious. Your protection and isolation are essential, not for you, but for all those who come to see you, because it's you who can contaminate them. So you're going to have to cancel all your appointments over the coming weeks, or hold them by videoconference.

- Look how well I'm doing.

- You're fine, but you're probably contagious. It would be disastrous to start an epidemic through negligence, I'm sure you'll agree. It's my duty to look after public health. Your teleconferencing equipment and telephone will be your working tools for some time to come. We'll help you organize your activity from here. And if anyone asks why you don't want to go out anymore, we'll tell them you've got the flu and are postponing all your appointments out of caution. Everyone will understand.

The sovereign has accused his doctors of lacking vigilance, but the professor knows full well that they have nothing to do with it. The sovereign's state of health, which has seemed reassuring all morning, is not enough to calm him. He is very worried about the risk of contagion, as the memory of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to haunt him, and he is tortured by the question he has been pondering seriously for two days: how did this virus get into this palace? In the buildings where the sovereign stays, everything is done to avoid endangering his health. When he receives guests, whether for political or friendly reasons, he demands that they keep a respectable distance, lest they transmit their germs or viruses to him. This measure, initiated during the Covid epidemic, continues to be applied to such an extent that a discussion between the sovereign and a foreign president was shown on television taking place around a marble table where the two interlocutors were six meters apart. The sovereign's kitchen staff and chambermaids also pay close attention to everything that enters the premises, in order to guarantee the origin of the produce and its non-toxicity. Moreover, many vegetables come from the Kirill patriarch's farms, which State Security trusts to supply only healthy and even blessed products ! And the palace and other state residences are regularly disinfected.

The professor returns to his two deputies to give them further instructions on the precautions to be taken by those who will be entering the rooms reserved for the sovereign, including Katya, his secretary, Boris, his chief of staff, and the service staff.

- From now on, equip all these people with masks and sterilized protective suits like ours. Start the exercise!

In the antechamber of the apartment of Putin, the sovereign's direct collaborators and service staff receive masks, gloves, boots, protective suits and charlottes so they can enter the rooms occupied by Putin.

The sovereign, who has left his room, asks to see his secretary and chief of staff, to whom he declares:

- Katya, Boris, you are very dear to me.

Putin seems moved, as if seized by an irresistible surge of good feelings.

- Let me kiss both of you. I want to give you something for all you do for me.

- But we have a mask!

- Well, take it off!

They refuse, so as not to breach health and safety regulations and to set an example.

- It's a good test," says the sovereign, smiling. I see that you respect your own instructions. You are very dear to me. I want to give to each of you a gift.

- You, Boris, choose a weapon from my collection. Go into the next room and choose the one you like.

- And you, Katya, what would you like? From the wardrobe in the residence, choose a dress, or look at the costume jewelry and take one for yourself.

Then he asks the young doctors:

- Tell the service staff that I love them, and give each of them a 10,000 rubles bill from me, telling them that I thank them. And do the same with all the security guards in this house.

Distraught, Boris doesn't understand the outpouring of affectionate generosity that has seized the sovereign.

- Do you really want to give gifts to everyone?" he dares to ask the sovereign. There are a lot of people looking after you.

- I know what I'm doing. I'd like to thank all of them

- Wouldn't you like to take some time to think things over, because some people could think, Majesty, that we've put pressure on you, or that your illness has caused you to lose some of your lucidity?

- I'm perfectly lucid! I want to distribute gifts. Isn't that my absolute right? And I won't stop there, rest assured. I'm going to make a list of the things I want to give away.

This burst of generosity surprises his Chief of Staff and those around him, for it is something that has never happened before from this authoritarian, cold and gift-averse man. The rumor immediately spreads in the residence that the sovereign suffers from hallucinations, that he has lost his mind, and that his illness has caused a change in him that pushes him to do foolish things.

Watching the sovereign return to his room, Boris can't help but comment to himself on what has just happened :

- His behavior is truly strange, as if the coma had made him fear death and he wants now to distribute his possessions and make amends for his past harshness. Perhaps he's even thinking about his imminent demise, even though he's only seventy-three.

Outside, the population has no idea what's going on in this state residence. Not quite, however, as some of the samples destined for the Moscow military hospital laboratory have been transferred to Vektor Center for Virology Research which is better-equipped. These transfers attracted the attention of nurses. Some of them know that a virus has infected the sovereign and they have started to tell their friends about that.

Despite his recovery, Putin decides to stay in Novo-Ogaryovo, and asks Boris, his chief of staff, to inform the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the Security Service that he will be governing from his residence, and that they are welcome to come and stay for a few days in the guest pavilion, or make quick trips back and forth from Moscow when he will need to see them. He will rule, as he often does, from this residence, which is less than an hour from his Kremlin palace.

His doctor does agree, but reminds him of the risk of contagion. His collaborators and ministers will have to agree to tele-meetings, or come masked and protected if they meet physically in the residence.

Dimitri, the deputy head of State Security, asks his *musqueteers*, as some call the close guards who watch over and protect the sovereign,

to install a video-conferencing station on the Tsar's desk and to transform one of the residence's lounges into an audiovisual studio, with a large screen set up and controlled by Security technicians.

These equipments are barely installed when Putin is informed that Alexandre, the head of the secret police, wants to speak to him, or at least to be put in communication with him.

- He is tiring me ! What does he want?" asks Putin, who settles back in his armchair and asks one of his security staff to activate the video link.

- I didn't know you were really ill, Vladimir," apologizes the police chief. If I had, I wouldn't have bothered you.

- You should have known by virtue of your position! Who's spreading the word that I'm ill?

- It's a rumor that's currently spreading around the capital. I've come precisely to let you listen to a conversation that my services recorded at a meeting of your opponents in a Moscow café yesterday morning.

- What do these people want?

- You'll find out if you have some minutes for listening to me. It won't take long, but it's important.

II – The hopes of political opponents.

The official media are not yet talking about Putin's illness, and the few who are beginning to know about it are thinking that it's just a slight indisposition. The high fever and coma through which he has passed are carefully concealed. It's important not to show any signs of weakness, as the country is in armed conflict with its neighbor, Ukraine, and the sovereign himself is directing operations, with the help of the Minister of Defense and his general staff.

For over two years, many young people have been dying in violent fighting or returning home wounded and traumatized. This is the main concern of the population of Russia and its neighbor Ukraine. The Tsar's health takes second place, except for his political opponents who hope he is going to die or be so ill that he will have to give up power.

Putin is respected by the common people and by his carefully chosen direct collaborators, but his political opponents and the majority of the most educated citizens fear him for his cruelty and brutal methods to eliminate his opponents and journalists who dare to criticize or speak ill of him.

Any citizen who owns large assets or powerful companies is under surveillance and can be arrested without proof. Any citizen who owns large assets or powerful companies is under surveillance and can be arrested without proof. Any citizen who uses terms other than those authorized by the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) to talk about the sovereign's acquisitions or Russia's military operations is liable to ten to fifteen years in prison or a re-education camp. This is the case for those who accuse him of having ventured into a warlike invasion, costly in human lives, by launching his troops without much preparation into a war that does not admit its name to occupy and conquer part of the territory of his neighbor, Ukraine, rich in minerals, equipped with a large port overlooking the sea, and where a part of the

local inhabitants are Russian-speaking. It's also best not to have any political ambitions that could put the sovereign in difficulty at election time. Such people are on file and can be arrested and disappear overnight.

At the head of the opposition movement is a former oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who has fled Russia to exile in Great Britain. Just before him, in the same position, Alexei Navalny, one of his old friends, has died in a disturbing manner. His death is attributed to the ill-treatment inflicted on him by SIS henchmen in the jails of the Far North, for having denounced the corruption gangrenous at the top of the state. Khodorkovsky has learned his lesson. He redoubles his caution, and now operates only from abroad to support those who want to overthrow the Tsar and take power. He can count on a powerful network of friends and resources in different parts of the world.

In Russia, the local leader of this group of opponents, a man called Igor, is a discreet and unremarkable man. As an secretary in the Ministry of the Interior, he is well placed to infiltrate and monitor the sovereign's police force, but also to conceal the actions of the plotters and revolutionaries from the eyes of the same police force and its informers. The SIS has him on file, but he has never been convicted, having well-placed protectors whom he bribes with the money remittances from his boss Mikhail.

The day after Putin came out of his coma, the intelligence services have recorded an important political discussion in the back room of a large café in the capital. That's why Police Chief Alexander rushed to Novo-Ogaryovo.

He has just arrived at the entrance to the residence and was put in video contact with the monarch.

- Listen, Majesty, to what our microphones have just recorded. You're going to hear what your opponents said at this meeting.

Using the videophone, Alexandre lets him listen to a dialogue that begins with an invitation from the leader of the plotters to his collaborators.

- My friends, please be silent! Listen to Maria! Speak, Maria! Tell us what has happened to the sovereign and what everyone still doesn't know.

- The sovereign is gravely ill. He came very close to death. The nurses say he's caught a nasty virus.

- Do you hear?

- Maria, do you know if it's a fatal virus?

- I don't know, but Putin fell into a coma and seems crazy ever since.

- Finally, a glimmer of hope for us! This man has done too much harm to our country!

- Not so fast, Mouloud. He's crazy, but he's not dead yet.

- Too bad! But maybe we can speed things up, if you know what I mean!

- Just a moment! A takeover is coming. If Putin dies, which we all hope he will, power will only fall into our hands if we have armed forces and the media with us. We must...

The recording suddenly becomes inaudible.

- Why does it stop?" asks the sovereign.

- Because they've probably moved to another room where there was no microphone.

- Alexandre, your staff are incapable!" storms the sovereign, who has lost his serenity. When you put microphones, you put them everywhere !

- That's obviously what we did, Majesty. But they were discovered. It's a good thing there were a few left undetected.

- And who was among this band of conspirators?" asks the sovereign.

- You know it, Majesty. Our services have already informed you, but you advised us to track them simply to establish the most complete list possible of their supporters. All these people are bugged and suspicious, of course. They're protecting themselves more and more effectively. Do you want us to arrest them now and send them to prison or to heaven or hell ? We'll find a reason, even if it means we have to lie a bit, to do it properly and not tarnish your reputation.

- Listen, Alexandre, I trust you. Leave them alone for now. Keep me informed and continue to spy on them as discreetly but more cleverly as possible!

- Well, Majesty, you can trust me and our intelligence services.

In response, he hears Putin unexpectedly declare

- My dear Alexandre, I love you! I'd like to take you in my arms if I could. I'm going to give you the Medal of Merit.

- Oh! He loves me ! This is the first time he's expressed such a feeling to me. He must be really tired...

In Russia, the conspirators are closely watched. They can only trust a few people, because any denunciation is rewarded by the SIS. They take precautions and conceal their true activities by maintaining a feverish agitation in Moscow with no other aim than to discreetly identify the economic and political leaders who could be useful to them in the future.

- The sovereign's spokesman will give his health report tomorrow morning," says Igor, head of the local opposition team. But as usual, he's going to lie. So we won't know what's really going on. In any case, it's hard to understand why Putin hasn't been taken to hospital. Perhaps the doctors thought it unnecessary to treat him. This could be the end of him. Khodorkovsky knows all about it. He's asked us to activate our networks and relay his instructions to the people who will coordinate our operations as soon as we learn the sovereign's death or inability to govern will occur. The good news is that the deputy head of the presidential Guard is totally committed to us. He will direct our military and police operations should the need arise. He's an exceptional lad who will go far. We'll make him a minister once we've taken power.

In the afternoon, without even waiting for the sovereign's health report, Igor called Rassoul, who manages the communications for the group of plotters. Rassoul is an expert in propaganda and mind-bending, having worked for the SIS before being dismissed for having displeased the sovereign in a memo deemed insufficiently deferential. He has since joined the ranks of the conspirators.

- Rassoul, let the population know as quickly as possible, by all the means at your disposal, that we are governed by a sick man who must be got rid of. We need to counter the official communication service, which will no doubt only talk about a touch of flu to hide Putin's true state of health.

Excitement is running high. This is not the conspiracy's first campaign plan, but this time, the conspirators sense that a denouement is near. They are jubilant. What they prepare is not a small matter: It is the revolution, the Great Revolution!

Khodorkovsky is following the situation hour by hour from abroad. He already sees himself at the helm of the empire, in Putin's place. He wants to prove wrong all those who predict that the fall of the Russian ruler will lead to appalling chaos inside the country, and that it will be a threat to world peace with the scattering of unoccupied soldiers and starving or hunted people fleeing their country.

He dreams of a beautiful revolution, neat and clean, carried out according to the rules of the art. He has reread the history of the French Revolution for inspiration and to avoid its mistakes. It will be a smoothly-run affair, with incorruptible men at its helm, inspired by the figure of Robespierre.

His ambition is to establish a state where people will live in freedom and security, where they will work joyfully for the good of all, and where friendship, cohesion and understanding between all the country's citizens will be celebrated regularly with great festivities. The whole world will be astonished and reassured.

This ambition is not lacking in means, because this group of opponents benefits from powerful external support. Non-governmental organizations and private groups and banks support it, because its top leader is himself a former businessman and knows how to talk. In a widely broadcast speech, he once declared :

"- I will respect human rights. I will not cut off the heads of nobles or property owners, and I will not drive anyone into exile. Far be it from me to make a Bolshevik revolution. I'm not a Marxist and I never will be. In the new state, we will advocate freedom, concern for the common good, efficiency and moral rectitude, without even needing to resort to any religion. I will be the leader of a country that the world

will admire for its governance, the virtue of its citizens and the integrity of its leaders.

Our form of government will compete with modern democracies. We'll take their good sides, while not taking over their greed, moral degradation and tolerance of all depraved people, delinquents, drug addicts and thugs."

The man who aspires to replace Putin thus idealizes the regime he is about to set up. It will no longer be a corrupt empire, but a modern state whose administration and rulers will be perfect. The rest, he believes, will follow, thanks to the full support of citizens to their leaders and their institutions.

That is a clever line of reasoning, so as not to frighten Western countries, which fear major upheavals in the event of sudden political change in Russia. Thanks to this team, a world of joy, peace and harmony will blossom under their leadership, where today it is by fear, threat, torture, oppression and even assassination that the sovereign governs.

Admittedly, there's a lot to be done to make people cooperative, kind and benevolent, and the results remain uncertain. But this leader is going to do his utmost, using networks of influencers, the best advertising agencies, experts and all the agencies specializing in fake news and artificial intelligence, to convince citizens that with their new rulers, they are happy and well governed, or at least that they are convinced of it. Most of the countries in the world will be pleased to see that this great country, Russia, is moving forward on the road to an unsurpassable horizon, a stable, perfect regime that some will consider to be the true end of history, which a professor from a Western country was a little bit too hasty in announcing when the USSR had collapsed.

This discourse and these programs are largely inspired by the clichés disseminated by the Western states to which the revolutionaries appeal to obtain material and financial aid. Among their supporters Elon Musk alone constitutes the first stage of a powerful rocket designed to launch this new political regime into orbit. Alongside him other groups are, also keenly interested in this leadership team that will transform an immense state, sorely lacking in groups as innovative and dynamic as their own to develop. Oil

companies, new-economy firms, transhumanists looking for guinea pigs, specialists in genetics, new energies, agronomy and artificial intelligence, all see this as a formidable testing ground for their research and a gigantic potential market whose opportunities the current ruler has not yet fully the potential. Supporters of this revolution are banking on a strong return on investment, both financially and politically. No one is hiding this fact.

Thus, this revolutionary organization's Swiss bank account is growing daily, enabling it to amass weapons, buy agents, bribe officials, recruit supporters for its shock troops, and organize active networks.

III - A debate between two journalists

Back: to the date of June 3 at Novo-Ogaryovo

Putin has been in Novo-Ogaryovo for several days. He has had a busy day. At the end of the afternoon, he decides to relax a little by watching television to take the pulse of the country and the world.

He has been informed that a foreign TV channel is broadcasting a program about him that evening. He decides to listen to it in his private apartments. It's not the first report on him, but this time it's a debate between two renowned journalists whose sharp, sharply contrasting opinions are well known.

- Many people claim to know the leader of Russia," the presenter comments. But listening to the very divergent opinions he arouses, many of us are asking questions. Who is he really? To answer these questions, we invited two journalists who have been following him since his arrival at the head of Russia: Julie from El Demon newspaper and Hubert from El Garofig newspaper. You'll certainly know them from their articles and reports.

- Julie, your articles are not kind to Russia's leader. Tell us why and what you think of him.

- What do we think of Putin? It's quite simple. He's a cynical autocrat with no mercy for anyone who dares stand in his way. He curbs freedoms and uses lies and denunciation to consolidate his power. He doesn't hesitate to wage war to dominate the world and impose his supposedly historical, cultural, and geopolitical vision to reconstitute his empire. He is undoubtedly an intelligent but unscrupulous character, very dangerous for many of his fellow citizens and for world peace.

- Allow me to disagree completely with your view of things, dear Julie," replies the other journalist. Putin is a remarkable statesman. He has restored order and discipline to a country that was drifting apart.

He promotes good morals, moral and religious values. He is also a sensitive man who knows how to be moved and react when his country is hit by attacks or natural disasters. As for the invasion of Ukraine, it is justified by history and the dark conduct of some of its leaders in the past.

Turning to his fellow journalist, he continues:

- We know, dear Julie, that you don't much like those who restore order. You prefer chaos, violence and the invasion of our country by hordes of foreign delinquents. Go and see Putin's country and you'll see how things work straight and how many citizens admire him for his determination and his physical and moral qualities!

- How naive!" retorts Julie. There's nothing noble about this dictator's actions. He sends some of his opponents to prison or has them murdered, muzzles the press, all in the name of dubious moral values when we see how he despises human life and treats those who dare to criticize him.

- You're forgetting the external and internal threats he faces. He takes difficult decisions to ensure the security and stability of his great nation. Without him, Russia would fall prey to mafia groups who would kill each other to enrich themselves and corrupt the leaders, and disorder would spread to many other countries.

- You are very gullible, my dear colleague. The order imposed by Putin is an illusory order, achieved through repression and denunciation, with no regard for individual freedoms or human dignity. And what about the way he shamelessly manipulates information to make people believe that he is acting for the good and security of the world? Have you heard that he is threatening to use nuclear weapons in his conflict with Ukraine?

- I interrupt you! Putin has a sense of responsibility. It's not he who's talking about using nuclear weapons, but some of his ministers who are trying to outbid each other. Communication is a complex business in the current context, dear friend. Lies are sometimes necessary to reassure the population and respond to threats. He acts for the good of his country, for its greatness, its culture and its place in the world.

- But how can you ignore his human rights violations and abuses of power? Look at the horrors he has been capable of, such as deporting children from Ukraine to indoctrinate them and cut them off

from their families and roots. His vision of the good consists in crushing all opposition and criticism, in wanting to impose his culture or his grand idea of it, while perpetrating the worst atrocities.

- Allow me to describe your analysis as superficial. Why demonize this leader? History has taught us that authoritarian measures are sometimes necessary to overcome challenges or to re-educate young people who are not taking the right path, something we dare not do.

- History has also shown us the dangers of remaining silent in the face of dictatorships. We must defend our values and fundamental democratic principles in the face of lawless autocrats who claim to act for the good of all and muzzle all opposition.

After a commercial break, the debate shifts to the question of Western intervention in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

- You recognize, dear colleague, Julie resumes, that Putin has violated the territorial integrity of his neighbor in defiance of international rules guaranteeing the borders of every country, and that it is fortunate that Western countries, like ours, are helping Ukraine to defend itself and repel this invasion.

- Why attribute bad intentions to this sovereign,” retorts Hubert? He wants to have his rights recognized over a part of Ukraine that has been attached to Russia for centuries, and to install a more cooperative, less aggressive government at the head of this country, more attached to the traditional values of the former Soviet empire, in order to restore its unity.

- He was sorely mistaken in thinking that he would be welcomed as a benefactor by brutally invading his neighbor. This was without counting on the resistance of a country that has been independent for several years and has tasted the virtues of democracy. Putin has interfered in its affairs in a reprehensible manner. Don't try to defend him. It's unjustifiable!

Each journalist firmly but courteously defends his or her position.

Hubert suddenly continues in a slightly less friendly tone:

- If Ukraine doesn't change its behavior towards Russia, and if this state continues to resist, it will regret it. Can't the people of Ukraine see that they are in danger of missing an opportunity, even a chance?

- An opportunity? You're kidding!

- No, they're going to let the opportunity to unite once again with a great brother country pass, a country with whom it shares a common history. By continuing to support Ukraine's resistance, the countries of the West are making a very bad calculation. In any case, Ukraine's fight is lost in advance.

- Are you sure? I don't think so. This tyrant thought he was shaking the alliance between the countries of the West, which find it hard to present a common front, but his aggression has actually strengthened that alliance. These countries fear that Putin will not stop there in his territorial ambitions and that he will want to interfere in the affairs of all his neighbors.

- Oh, it's not Russia that's interfering, it's the countries of the West that are doing so on a global scale, claiming to rule over a large part of the planet. This Russian leader is right to want to destabilize this Western coalition. He will achieve this by supporting leaders who are close to him in their moral and political convictions, and in their independence of mind.

With this answer, which gives the debaters equal speaking time, the presenter asks for another pause before moving on to another topic.

During this break, Putin hastily jots down in his personal notebook the name of the woman journalist who criticized him the most, with this comment: *"To report to our special services to serve her one of our polonium-scented teas, when the opportunity arises. As for the other journalist, he seems to me prudent and intelligent. I'll ask our services to recruit him. He could be useful to us".*

He writes down his name and switches to another channel, which broadcasts a report he soon realizes is fake news.

It shows a Putin lookalike in a meeting with one of his generals. The latter presents the results of his actions:

- We had some difficulties at the start of our operations in Ukraine, Majesty, because the terrain was not as favorable as we had hoped. But we are now on the road to victory, even if we sometimes have to make tactical withdrawals to let our adversaries get into the open. Our fighters are quality men, very seasoned and superior to our opponents.

In a cold, stern tone, the sovereign's double replies him:

- General, you have the annoying habit of always repeating the same thing. You must follow my instructions and the agreed plan, and never back down. Obey my orders, without asking you questions!

- But Majesty, will you listen to me?

- I demand results, not speeches. Your explanations are a luxury that only the weak can afford. Any opposition will be crushed. Show me your positions and your campaign plans!

The sovereign leans over the map in front of him and throws him several remarks in an icy tone:

- You are incompetent! You dawdle, you are not moving forward fast enough, you procrastinate, while I have given you tens of thousands of troops, thousands of tanks and cannons, hundreds of helicopters, tens of thousands of drones and an air force that Ukraine doesn't have. Think of all our fellow citizens who are waiting for results. You should have finished with this operation long ago. I don't want to see you again! You are relieved of your command!

A heavy silence falls over the staff, who let their leader go. Then a dashing young general appears, marching in front of fresh troops. His units are shown going back into battle, breaking through enemy lines and claiming hundreds of casualties as they rout the enemy.

The next scene takes place in the trenches, where we see Ukrainian soldiers desperately shouting to their superior:

- How do you expect us to hold out for long? We're out of ammunition!

- You don't have any ammunition, so make some! replies a smirking commander, sipping a Coke while several of his men weep and beg to be sent home.

- These fake news, which present realistic situations by forcing the line, give strength to the messages. It's a find!" exclaims the sovereign.

The next day, he calls the head of the SIS and his propaganda chief to order them to come up with and broadcast more and nastier fake videos to demoralize his adversaries and comfort his people and armies.

Time is running and it is time for dinner. Putin turns off his television and calls his advisor and Defense Minister, Sergueï Choïgou, who had come to see him and has not returned to Moscow that evening. He invites him to share his evening meal face-to-face in

the dining room of his residence. Putin loves him for his unfailing support. He appreciates his advice on his major political and cultural projects to reconstitute the Soviet empire, and his reports on the special missions he entrusts to him.

IV - Putin and his Defense Minister

For this dinner, Putin and Choïgou are alone in the dining room. The staff have set the table with the two men at opposite ends.

- It's not ideal for conviviality," says Putin with a smile. Even if this arrangement prevents us from coming to blows if we disagree, it's not ideal. We're going to be closer.

- Yes, especially since we almost always agree! assures Sergueï Choïgou.

They ask the restaurant chef to move the two large earthenware plates, each decorated with Cossack riders and edged in red and blue, so that they face each other across the width of the table. The silver cutlery gleams under the light of the crystal chandelier that illuminates the tablecloth on which various salads and two bowls of milk kefir are laid out. Beet, cabbage and cucumbers seasoned with vinaigrette provide a pretty assortment of colors and flavors that whet the appetite, and have the merit of satiating without loading the stomach. Green tea and two small glasses of Georgian white wine accompany some of Putin's favorite dishes.

Seated face to face, Vladimir and Sergueï have plenty of time on their hands because they're used to not going to bed before two or three in the morning. They don't need strong drinks to loosen their tongues, as they know and like each other well.

They take advantage of the quiet of the room where they're alone to recall some fond memories.

- I liked the masterly way you got rid of that ambitious Prigojine and his gang who wanted to take my place," says Putin to his guest. You two weren't very chummy, but you did a great job. His plane didn't get far before a stupid breakdown sent him and his clique into a tailspin. It was a great show! Well done! Nobody blamed me for that. This liquidation was hardly criticized and earned me respect and consideration.

- Do you have any other missions of this type for me? You know I like it. Doesn't your former opponent Khodorkovsky give you any trouble?

- He's not very dangerous. I'm not afraid of him. And he owes me the good life he leads in Europe.

- But there's talk of a plot he's plotting against you.

- It's not very serious. Leave him alone, my police will take care of him. If my opponents cross the line I've set, they never get away with it. They're puppets who amuse me.

Everyone helps themselves to the plate in front of them, without asking the staff to intervene, so as to keep their exchanges confidential.

- Delicious kefir!" exclaims Choïgou, before continuing:

- Nothing else worries you, Vladimir? All those Western countries trying to ruin our economy...

- These countries want to impoverish us, but our economy hasn't really suffered. We struggled a bit to regain our dynamism, but now everything is positive again. Our growth will even exceed 3% this year. These states deprived themselves of our gas and our markets, and are now suffering as a result of their own decisions. Several of our neighbors are helping us to deflect the sanctions they are trying to impose on us. What's more, this has strengthened the support of our population who feel they are the victims of unjust sanctions for which they do not understand the reason. As for our industry, we're not about to go bankrupt. Our armaments factories are running at full capacity, and we can almost always find a solution to the problem of missing components for the maintenance of our civil and military machinery and equipment.

And Putin adds:

- This alliance of Western countries pushes towards us those states which like our civic and moral qualities and which do not want to align themselves with the West, with its mercantile practices and depraved morals. The values of the West are decaying, making them vulnerable regimes whose leaders have no convictions other than believing that they are the strongest and most virtuous, whereas they have lost their faith and moral principles.

- You're right," adds Sergueï. We don't fight just with economics and weapons. We have convictions, great traditions, a culture. We are a model for all those who hate weakness and indecision, and who are constantly challenged by wild hordes and troublemakers.

- Yes, Sergueï. What counts is civil and moral order, the order I impose, there is no other possible. We have to make those who don't respect this order fear us. My determination to maintain discipline and morality rallies the population behind me and strengthens our cohesion. As you've seen, I've asked our Minister of Health to boost the birth rate, ban abortions, return to more rigorous sexuality, and combat all these LGBT and wokist movements. Our Patriarch Kirill blesses our battles. The Orthodox hierarchy supports us and appreciates our gifts and our commitment to defending our traditional values. We're going to rebuild our old unity with our sister countries, who were once a united and disciplined people around us. We don't care about international sanctions or the reactions of other states.

- You're an ace, Vladimir! You'll make Russia great again. You're going to succeed to do it.

- That's my ambition!

Putin calls the wait staff to clear the plates and hors d'oeuvres. A waitress places another plate beside each of them, patterned in blue and green and decorated with designs inspired by fishing, on which has been placed a good-sized sturgeon steak surrounded by a ring of rice and buckwheat garnish.

While everyone pours themselves a little Georgian white wine, selected by Putin and presented in a small individual jug placed next to each guest, the cutlery comes to life to carefully carve the fish, which gives off a delicious aroma.

- What's worried me since the start of our special operation," continues Putin, "is the state of our armies, their lack of strategy and determination. I can't be their general-in-chief all the time!

The conversation takes on a serious tone, and the sturgeon steak is not the subject of it, even though it's so appetizing it would deserve to be.

- I gave you carte blanche, Sergueï, but it's not working," continues Putin, becoming a little more incisive. It's up to you to solve

the problem and win this war. I'm patient, but my patience has limits. Don't you have any better military leaders to offer me?

- I'll see, but you've already asked me to sack quite a few generals.

- You've got the weapons and the troops. You know the weakness and disunity of the states that support Ukraine in the face of our incursions. So act a little more firmly to get results!

- I've already put things in order, and you've seen that our troops are now advancing steadily and regaining ground week by week.

- Not good enough. It's time to end this! My decision is to conquer and occupy Ukraine once and for all, and as quickly as possible. There is no other way, and no safer way, than by force of arms. We're not going to negotiate. We're going to make this country suffer. Our adversaries and all the ridiculous alliances of Western countries will shatter and will not resist my will. We are a great people, a great culture, it's this civilization that must survive, and that will survive, and will triumph...

- Our adversaries also know that my nuclear threats are no joke," he adds.

- Do you really want nuclear war?

- No, simply Ukraine's surrender and return into our empire.

- You have incredible determination, Vladimir. I'll follow you anywhere.

They start their fish and taste buckwheat and saffron-scented rice, all the while continuing their discussion.

- But there's a tough man at the head of Ukraine," continues Putin.

As he says this, his throat knots. He chokes and struggles to continue his sentence. He coughs and clears his throat. Inserting his fingers into his mouth, he withdraws a small piece of food that has lodged at the entrance to his gullet.

- Sacrebleu!" he exclaims. Sturgeon is one of the few fish that doesn't have a fishbone in its flesh. That's why I chose it. The cooks haven't done their job properly. They'll hear me...

- I don't believe it!" replies Sergueï. It's this Zelensky who's stuck in your throat and whose name you don't want to mention. Personally, I didn't see a single fishbone in this excellent sturgeon steak.

- You're probably right. I'll calm down, but I still want to tell you what I think of Zelensky and what I want to do with him. He's taunting me with his weapons from the West. He doesn't see that his allies are taking advantage of him to test their weapons without risk, by manipulating him. He won't acknowledge that Ukraine is part of our former empire, and that it must join us by placing itself under my authority. He's a usurper. I want to exhaust his resistance, go all the way without wavering, and make him disappear.

- The solution might be to make him suffer the same fate as Prigojine. Do you want me to do it?" asks Sergueï.

- He's hard to get hold of, and he gets constant help from his Western allies. But if you see a possibility, don't hesitate!

This conflict with Ukraine is mobilizing thousands of young people who could be more usefully employed in the country's development. It's a horrible bloodbath and a vast demolition operation, devastating not only the troops and cities of his ukrainian opponents, but also some of his own troops and cities through incessant and increasing reciprocal bombardment.

The Tsar had expected to easily conquer the eastern part of his neighbor with the support of part of its Russian-speaking population, as had happened some ten years earlier in Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula where the local population had rather welcomed him. But this second operation was not so easy and was even disastrous.

This Zelensky, who seemed to him like a theatrical puppet, is behaving like a real head of state, demanding respect for his borders and his rights throughout his territory, and refusing to submit to his big neighbor, Russia, by force of arms. He is also a pugnacious, persuasive warlord who has mobilized his population and convinced a coalition of Western countries to supply him with arms and ammunition. He resists, and against all odds, he has halted the advance of Russian troops and ceded little territory to the huge divisions and armies of his neighbor.

- We are a strong, united people, and everyone knows my strength and stubbornness," Putin repeats to his guest. I want the Western countries to bend, retreat and lose their arrogance. Our values must prevail. It's a battle of civilization against a decadent West, and

nothing must delay our plan to retake the Ukraine, reclaim the territories we've lost and reunite our former empire.

Ruminating on these thoughts, Putin loses his appetite. He gets angry, warms up and concludes without even taking the time to finish his sturgeon steak:

- The Ukrainians know that I have the means, if need be, to annihilate them and their allies with our nuclear weapons. I keep telling them that I won't hesitate to use them if they go too far.

- You were telling me that it was certain ministers, but not you, who were making this threat. Aren't you letting yourself go a little?

- Don't you know me yet, Sergueï? These countries think they're the strongest, but they're afraid of me and won't dare cross the boundaries I set for them. We must triumph and take back Ukraine. That will put an end to the war and give us peace for a long time. Our people will be grateful. We will be feared for ever, both at home and abroad. Isn't that clear ? Don't you think so ?

- I'm trying to do what you want, but using conventional weapons, Vladimir, you know that. There's no point in talking about nuclear war, which we'll never wage, as we'd only succeed in conquering a field of ruins.

- So, move faster and harder!

- I'm going to make a few more purges in my general staff, as you wish, so as to have more efficient generals who no longer use our men as mere cannon fodder. But I need your help to increase the number, quality and power of weapons and munitions delivered to our armies. We also need to strengthen our specialized services to permanently infect the networks and electronic defense systems of our neighbor and its allies. Once this has been done, I will give the order for a more massive bombardment of Ukraine's major cities, energy plants, airports, communication routes, bridges and dams, factories, and stocks of materials and foodstuffs wherever they may be. This will make it possible to put an end to this conflict without even having to resort to nuclear blackmail. We're getting close.

- Good, Sergueï! What you have to do is go all the way and don't hesitate ! Like you, I've been trained in the methods of our secret services. You know my determination. What counts is rigor, perseverance, stubbornness whatever the cost, and devotion to one's

leaders. I want order, my order, not chaos. I want to be feared and respected. I must win this war against Ukraine, Sergueï, and I will win it. I have the power and the people are with me.

The diatribe ends there, as dessert is brought to them. It's not usually the hardest dish to swallow, but the discussion has been so passionate that they're not very hungry any more. Two employees place one of Poutine's favorite desserts, ginger-flavored pistachio ice cream, in front of each plate. This puts the friends back in good spirits.

Choïgou takes the opportunity to ask Putin a more personal question:

- Don't all your responsibilities make you lonely?

- What's wrong with being lonely? It's the price of power when you're at the top and you want to stay there.

- You don't have many advisors around you, other than those you've promoted and who give you their unquestioning approval. Don't you miss having advisors who don't always agree with you?

- You're one of them, Sergueï! That's what I like about you.

- Don't you want others, a little more critical, advisors who might question some of your certainties or decisions?

- Why do you want to complicate my task? Do you have someone to suggest?

- Well, perhaps...

- Who do you have in mind? I'd be curious to know. You're not going to tell me about Khodorkovsky, are you? It's over between us.

- I'm thinking of someone else.

- Who else?

- You only know him indirectly, but it would be interesting for you to talk to him from time to time. He's not far from here. And I'm sure he won't always agree with you. That's the interesting thing, isn't it?

- Are you going to tell me whom you're thinking of?

- Don't you have any ideas? Didn't what I told you put you on the right track?

- You're making me pine. Tell me his name!

- You haven't guessed?

- I haven't the slightest idea.

- Zelensky!.

Putin rises from his seat, rounds the table, grabs Sergueï by the shoulders and chin, lifts him, and with a horizontal leg sweep throws him masterfully to the ground. It's his favorite judo move. He likes to demonstrate it to the young judokas he trains.

Sergueï cushions his fall by striking the ground with the flat of his hand.

- I knew you were a black belt; now I'll remember. You're really strong, Vladimir - too strong, in fact!

- You dared to provoke me by giving me a name that made me react as you saw!

- But you listened to me, and in that respect I won, because I think that sooner or later you're going to have to talk to this adversary," replies Sergueï, who rises to his feet and dusts himself off.

- I'd have to be bitten by a nasty fly or infected by a wicked virus to agree to talk to him!

- Who knows?

Putin looks at his watch. It's almost two in the morning, time to go to bed.

- Before you go to sleep, comrade Sergueï, tell yourself that one day, not very far away, we'll sing victory!

They embrace and start singing the Internationale in chorus, shouting loudly as they did in Soviet times: "*C'est la lutte ...finale...*"

- Let's drink to our future empire!

They pour themselves a glass of vodka, that they drink before throwing it against the wall to make it break into a thousand pieces.

- Sleep tight, Sergueï. I know I can count on you, just as you can count on me. Thanks for your company. I'm glad to have you as my Defense Minister and advisor.

- Vladimir, you really are the greatest man I know!

Their evening comes to an end. It's two o'clock in the morning at the beginning of June

Just as the Tsar is trying to fall asleep, an unusual fever seizes him. Barely lying on his bed, he feels his forehead boiling, even burning,

so much so that he urgently calls his doctor. The doctor arrives very quickly. Little does he know that this feverish outbreak will change many things in his patient's life, and in the whole world.

V - Epidemic is spreading

June 8th

Even a strong, powerful, strong-willed ruler can fall seriously ill. The proof is in what happened three days earlier to Putin, Russia's sovereign, after an evening spent watching television and talking with his favorite advisor, Sergueï Choïgou, at his residence in Novo-Ogaryovo.

For three days, he was gripped by a violent fever which ended by a coma of more than three hours. His doctor Yvan has followed him hour by hour. After isolating him and prescribing complete rest, he urgently requested tests from the laboratory at Moscow's Central Military Hospital to identify the cause of this worrying illness.

But now, the sovereign feels more or less recovered. He's not one to give up. Despite his doctor's advice, and ignoring his prescription, he has taken over the reins of state from his bedroom and office in Novo-Ogaryovo. In the meantime, the monarch's aides have learned from Boris, his chief of staff, of the astonishing gestures of generosity he performed while recovering from his coma.

At the first meeting of his Council, following the video exchange he had with his chief of police, his ministers arrived a little worried, with sanitary masks over their faces. They were allowed to meet in a lounge in the residence, keeping their distance and wearing the recommended protective gear.

Putin opens the meeting with a strangely soft voice by confessing :

- I have often been too hard on all of you. Please forgive me. I must change.

The Prime Minister, astonished, immediatly cries out :

- Vladimir, are you all right?

- Believe me, I mean it,” says the sovereign. I'm grateful to have you by my side. Thank you for everything you do and have done. Come, all of you, and let me kiss you!

- But we've got a mask! points out the puzzled Prime Minister. What's the matter with you, Vladimir?

- That's right, I forgot. Well, stay where you are, it'll be a virtual embrace!

The sovereign, once cold and brutal, has metamorphosed into a tender figure, somewhat unconsciously and haphazardly showing his affection to those around him.

- It's incredible, Your Majesty, you're a different man! Exclaims the Prime Minister's assistant, deeply moved. The country is going to wonder if this is really the same person who reigned supreme just a few days ago. Our sovereign suddenly warm and sentimental!

- I haven't always been kind to you. Thank you for staying by my side. I hold you all in great esteem,” confesses Putin with a pleasant smile.

Within minutes, the atmosphere in the meeting room undergoes an unexpected metamorphosis. No one recognizes the sovereign's new face, imbued with gentleness and benevolence. Something has really changed in his demeanor.

As the meeting adjourns, the Prime Minister and the Chef de Cabinet hasten to make a recommendation to all present:

- Doesn't this strange behavior on the part of our sovereign strike you as odd? Don't say anything about it to the outside world for the time being. It mustn't get out.

While the naysayers are confused about what's going on in Novo-Ogaryovo, the sovereign has recovered from his infection and is enjoying a restorative break. He is now thinking about the various arrangements he wants to make for his loved ones and fellow citizens, in the spirit of kindness and generosity that seized him after his coma. And while his political opponents are thinking about how they would take power in the event of his death, he himself is discreetly drawing up a list of people to whom he wishes to show his affection and gratitude.

Early the next morning, Professor Yvan asks to see him again, looking very worried.

- I see you're feeling better," he tells the sovereign. But... but... I bring you worrying news.

He stutters, so disturbed is he.

- Calm down, please," says the sovereign, encouraging him to speak. Tell me what's troubling you. I'm all ears.

- I've just been informed that you're not the only one to have been infected by a virus. An epidemic is spreading, and there's every reason to believe that it's through an infection similar to yours. The contagion started quite far from here, towards the airport, but it's undoubtedly the same virus that has reached here. At least seven people have been infected, some a little before you.

The sovereign doesn't seem very moved. He even smiles, which only accentuates the professor's speech rate. The latter frowns and insists:

- This is serious, Vladimir! I'm not joking. I'm at the forefront of the fight against viruses. It's my duty to look after public health. With what's happened to you, we have to do everything we can to stop this epidemic, and you have to help me and impose the necessary protective measures.

Putin maintains his Olympian calm and jovial air:

- Yvan, I love and appreciate you. It's to your credit that you look after everyone's health with professionalism. I'm very grateful. But be a little bit zen! Is this virus really that bad? Tell me what you've learned.

- Seven cases of infection outside of you is no mean feat!

- Where exactly?

- Around the large chicken farm next to the airport.

The sovereign catches his breath and smiles:

- Seven cases only. This is almost nothing! And only there?

The uncharacteristically calm tone of the sovereign, whose outbursts and tantrums are well known, intrigues the professor, who continues his report:

- We haven't found any other cases elsewhere for the moment, so we can only suspect that the virus originated there before arriving here.

- A fine deduction!

- Don't joke, Vladimir! I've asked that the chickens of this farm be analyzed as a matter of urgency, and that they be isolated without touching them.

- I know the owners of this farm," declares the sovereign. They're very good people. This is there that my cook gets his chickens.

- So that must be the source of your own infection. I was right to demand a halt to all slaughter and sales.

- You want to kill this farm, ruin my friend and deprive me of his excellent chickens?

- I want to protect you and our population. One of the first people infected before you is the owner of this farm.

- Are you sure about this?

- I'm absolutely sure! Vladimir, the situation is critical. Biologists are currently investigating the virus, and one of their hypotheses implicates this farm very seriously. I've ordered that this owner and everyone who works there to be isolated. Nothing and no-one is to leave this farm until further notice.

The professor continues:

- What's even more worrying is that this virus has already been transmitted to one of the owner's sisters. She was not in direct contact with these chickens, but only with her infected brother. She's just come out of a coma that lasted several hours.

- I know her well. How is she?

- Same as you! She's half-recovered, but still a little feverish and suffering from a headache. All the symptoms and phases of the infection are similar. It's the same virus that's spreading. I've just made some recommendations to those around you to avoid contagion, because not everyone is taking the necessary precautions, even though this virus can spread like wildfire.

Comfortably ensconced in his armchair, the sovereign doesn't flinch. He has other things to worry about, such as the fighting his armies are waging in Ukraine, which seems to be a far greater concern for him than the epidemic.

- What do you think, Vladimir? Didn't I do the right thing?" asks Professor Yvan, who, for his part, is in a state of great confusion.

The sovereign sees fit to temper his concern:

- These patients will suffer the same fate as me. They'll come out of it stronger and better. You can see how I'm doing now. This virus is not a calamity. Just wait and see.

- You are talking without knowing the problem,” retorts the professor. You don't realize the extent of the sanitary risks.

As his doctor looks on, Putin begins to play with a small gold Orthodox cross given to him by his friend Patriarch Kirill. He manipulates it as if discreetly praying.

- Is he asking God to stop the epidemic, or to grant him a swift victory over Ukraine? wonders Yvan, watching him caress his jewel.

The answer is more prosaic.

- My friend Kirill has assured me that this illness is not serious,” says the sovereign. You just have to wait for it to go away.

- I'm not a patriarch, I'm a doctor! Forget your prayers, Vladimir. They won't solve the problem. Unfortunately, I'm afraid there are already many other patients who haven't declared themselves for fear of having to pay a doctor and buy medicine.

VI - Return to Moscow

A week later, the sovereign decides to return to Moscow to be closer to his collaborators and have a better feel of what is going on in the country.

Driving from Novo-Ogaryovo to his palace in the Kremlin, in the heart of Russia's capital, is demanding a complicated organization, as Moscow has become a traffic inferno. The city has prospered and extended. Economic and demographic growth has led to an explosion in the number of private vehicles, and road structures have not kept pace. Freeways and the ring road are so congested that the State Security services prohibit traffic from Novo-Ogaryovo to Moscow when the sovereign uses this route to get to or from his palace in the Kremlin. Each time, it's a long procession of similar limousines that follow one another, in order to make impossible to tell which vehicle the sovereign is in. Sometimes, a Tsar look-alike is in one of the first limousine to mislead those who would try to spot him.

In one of these sumptuous Russian-made limousines, more luxurious and expensive than a Rolls-Royce Phantom, Putin has invited his Prime Minister Mikhaël Michoustine, whom he has just reappointed as head of government. He congratulates him on the results of his management:

- I've never told you enough how much I love and appreciate you. Forgive me for this oversight. With you, our tax revenues have almost doubled in two years. You have modernized tax collection and effectively combated corruption among tax officials. You're wonderful!

As he approaches the capital, Putin contemplates the city's profound transformation. In less than thirty years, it has gone from an industrial and commercial center to a tertiary hub converted to a market economy. The freeway passes through the new business and financial district, which some call "the City" of Moscow. Modern, functional buildings of sober but elegant design have multiplied. Their

architecture has nothing in common with the monumental heaviness of the soviet past.

- We owe this new district and the modernization of our economy to you, Mikhaël. The country's business is doing much better, and you can be proud of that.

As they approach the center of Moscow, they see a number of famous monuments that have been renovated and are the pride of Russia. It's Mikhaël's turn to credit Putin for these changes.

- Our monuments have been beautifully restored. You had the wisdom not to destroy the Stalinist skyscrapers and the massive, imposing buildings of this era. Now that they've been restored, they're a popular tourist attraction. There aren't many cities in the world that can boast such a heritage," comments Mikhaël.

- It's a heritage of our past which has been preserved, but the future of our country is being prepared here," points out Putin, pointing to the buildings of Moscow's universities, research centers, theaters, museums and other academic and cultural institutions which can be seen in the distance.

- I approve you, comments Mikhaël Michoustine. It's through innovation that a country like ours can accelerate its development and create lasting wealth. We need to support the creativity and initiatives of the younger generation.

- On condition, Putin precises, that young people work seriously both in universities and in cultural institutions, unlike Western countries, which accept disorder, protests, uncontrolled demonstrations and savage destruction. I don't want to see any more idle, drug-addled or drifting students and young people challenging our authority and endangering our institutions!

At the end of the journey, Putin takes the opportunity to give his passenger some new instructions, which reflect an altruism he hardly showed before being infected by the virus.

- We've made great economic progress with you, Mikhaël. But many modest people have yet to benefit. Can you take care of them and make the fight against poverty a priority? It's not as exciting as promoting business, but it's necessary for all those who find life too hard and too expensive. I owe this to the modest citizens who regularly place their trust in me through their vote. We need to raise their

purchasing power and redistribute wealth more equitably to those most in need. This will help families and encourage the birth rate.

- I know this is important to you, and I'm going to make it a priority with my ministers. But not everything depends on my government.

- You must mobilize my plenipotentiary representatives in the regions and districts. You need to get them involved. It's up to them to relay your decisions on their territories.

In the imperial limousine, the two passengers almost forget that the country is at war. Indeed, they feel safe in this beautiful capital. Staff in shopping malls and tourist attractions are friendly. Life goes on peacefully. Little violence, little insecurity in the streets and on public transport. Walls are clean and smooth. There are no tags or wild posters, just the propaganda posters allowed by the authorities. Public services are running satisfactorily. Not so long ago, however, a drone managed to project a bomb onto a building in the capital's business district. But in the hustle and bustle of this metropolis, this event was quickly forgotten.

However, this tranquillity comes at a human and political cost: the proliferation of surveillance cameras, and the omnipresence of guards, police officers and informers. The authorities keep a constant watch on citizens. People are spotted and can be arrested at any time, without even knowing why. As for the press and official information, few people trust newspapers and the media. Journalists are notorious for taking orders from those in power. As a result, many infringements of freedoms go unnoticed. But what's the point, since we're safe as long as we obey the Tsar's directives and behave properly?

What is starting to show through and really worry the population is the news reported by soldiers from the front, or by people whose relatives have been arrested for not following official rules and thinking. As a result of breaking these rules, many citizens are arrested. Prisons are filling up, forced exiles are multiplying and arbitrary arrests remain commonplace. This is a reality that the authorities cannot hide. If most of the population put up with it without protest, it's because people don't want to get into trouble with the political authorities.

VII - The strange effects of the virus

The procession of cars arrives at the Kremlin. The imperial guards present their weapons as it passes. As soon as they arrive, Putin and his Prime Minister return to their respective offices.

A note from Professor Yvan, left with his secretary, informs Putin that the epidemic continues to spread. Not seven, but thirty-five new cases of contamination have been identified in the space of a week. The majority of those infected live or work in the neighborhood of the large chicken farm, and a few new cases have appeared towards the center of the capital.

Admittedly, the spread of the virus is not as lightning-fast as the professor had feared, but it is gaining ground.

In view of the figures, the sovereign asks to see the Professor:

- What has the hospital laboratory told you about this virus?

- He hasn't given us his conclusions yet, because he wants more samples from more patients, and he asked the Centre Vektor, our laboratory specialized in virology, to help, as the analysis is difficult. According to him initial observations, this virus is not very contagious. However, he advises us to be cautious and to isolate infected people.

The professor had learned from the service staff that two weeks earlier, the owner of the chicken farm had personally come to Novo-Ogaryovo to deliver a capon to the Tsar. He had also brought a poultry tartare specially prepared for the sovereign and offered a live hen for the henhouse set up in the grounds of his residence.

For Yvan, there was no doubt that this was the source of the infection that had struck the sovereign.

After forbidding the sale of chickens from this farm, the professor had asked his assistants to send two of them to the military hospital laboratory and to the Vektor center.

Seized by a sudden intuition, the professor asks one of his assistants who had remained in Novo-Ogaryovo to visit the residence's henhouse and report on the state of the chickens.

- Not a single hen is left alive! alerts his assistant. They've all died of a disease we're in the process of identifying. All we know so far is that it's not the H5N1 virus. It's a virus that nobody knows.

In parallel with the virological analyses, the professor has also commissioned a study of the characteristics of this epidemic from the National Epidemiology Center working with all Moscow's hospitals, biology laboratories and health care centers.

An initial report arrives to the palace, brought by a young biologist.

- So, what does this report say?" Yvan asks her.

- This virus doesn't seem to be transmitted as easily or as quickly as Covid-19. The thirty or so cases examined concern people who have been in very close contact with each other or with the blood and meat of contaminated chickens.

- In other words, you really have to want it to get it," concludes the professor, crossing his fingers. I prefer that! This epidemic isn't galloping like we've seen with other viruses.

He asks the biologist:

- Have there been any after-effects on people who have gone through comas?

- No apparent after-effects, apart from a persistent fever and mild headache. But," she continues, "what is strange is that those who have come out of comas want to hug nurses, and insist on doing so.

- That is going to transmit them the virus !" exclaims the doctor. Monsters! Have these patients become so vicious and nasty?

- I'm sure they do it on purpose, Professor, because they insist on hugging and embracing our staff members very tightly.

- The perverts!" exclaims the professor again. Are they doing it on purpose to contaminate them?

- We don't think so. According to the nurses, it's a natural reflex for these patients when they come out of coma. Most are also generous, dipping into their wallets to give a few coins to the carers.

- But that's wonderful!" exclaims the sovereign, listening from his armchair. I'm going to ask them to come here.

- Another whiff of affection and delirium," comments the professor in a low voice, turning to the secretary. What's going on in his brain? This virus really does have some strange effects.

The epidemic that started in the airport district is now spreading beyond. A few of those infected have turned up at the capital's main hospital. They were discharged fairly quickly after a coma lasting three or four hours. The hospital advised them to isolate themselves for a few days on discharge, without specifying how long.

Some ten days later, the health services are once again investigating patients who have returned home. There are already several hundreds of them. This survey reveals that, once they have returned home, these patients consider themselves cured, and very few of them respect the recommended isolation. What is striking, as reported by the biologist, is that most of them are altruistic and benevolent towards those around them. They certainly feel tested and tired, but happy. The medical staff and the relatives and friends of these patients testify it. Several scenes reported by social workers are even moving, such as reconciliations between separated spouses, or between difficult parents and children, as well as affectionate and fraternal gestures between residents of the same street. It's all very reminiscent of the sovereign's generous behavior since coming out of his coma.

The next week, the Minister of the Interior is himself aware of several unusual occurrences in the districts where the virus has been rampant. He reports them to the sovereign to cheer him up and distract him from his preoccupations with the difficult advance of his armies in Ukraine.

- Vladimir, I'm happy to tell you that two of our policemen were thanked and even embraced by local residents when they stopped by for a routine check-up in a street where the epidemic was rife. In another place, where violence and a lack of civic-mindedness were deplored not so long ago, another brigade received flowers thrown from a balcony when it intervened to restore order after brawls between rival gangs.

Infected people seem illuminated, exalted, a little mad. At first, the specialists thought they were in the grip of a dangerous madness. But with a little hindsight, they realize that it's a madness of tender affection, kindness and generosity.

The sovereign is only half astonished. As far as he's concerned, there's nothing to worry about. Yvan and his medical teams are much more circumspect.

- In the absence of more complete analysis results," declares the professor, there is nothing to allow us to prejudge the harmlessness of this virus. People who have recovered still have a slight fever, and some still have mild headaches, which is not normal.

Another doctor agrees:

- Two serious incidents were reported to me during the comatose phase. One patient took over eight hours to come out of coma, and another died. Fortunately, I later learned that the death was linked to an underlying comorbidity and not to the virus itself.

The instructions given by the Prime Minister and the head of the staff not to let anything slip to the outside world have been respected. The sovereign's illness remains a state secret. Very few inhabitants know anyone who has been infected. The epidemic is only discussed anecdotally, as just another disease, not a serious one. The issues surrounding the war in Ukraine are far more important. And although the conflict with Ukraine continues to cause anxiety among the population, the majority of Russia's inhabitants remain confident in their sovereign's ability to govern and to carry out the military operations underway.

Only his opponents are aware of Putin's coma and strange behavior. With insistence, they are using leaflets, posters and social networking sites to assert that the sovereign is insane, dying, and no longer capable of governing. We must even expect the end of him soon, they dare to announce, to awaken public opinion and let people know that a new ruler is ready to replace him. But they have trouble convincing people, because many people know that they do this out of malice. None of the major media relay their messages. Journalists accredited by the authorities know only too well that they would be

censored and threatened if they dared to express any doubts about the sovereign's health.

VIII - First precautionary measures

Psychiatrists started discussing among themselves about the effects of this astonishing virus. Some attribute the warm and generous behavior of those infected to a kind of compensation for their near-death experience in coma, and having come out alive. However, most of them believe that this will not last.

And yet, as the epidemic spreads, the benevolent behaviors persist. Patients who have come out of comas and isolation become cheerful and optimistic, and ostensibly want to do good for those around them. People start talking openly about it. And so, in the palace room reserved for service staff, conversations are flowing between members of the medical-social teams.

- Have you heard about the strange behaviors of infected people?
- Yes, it's fascinating! Once they've been through the coma, these patients have a real desire to do good around them.
- Some have come back to give cash tips to the caregivers.
- I've also been told that some patients have reconciled with their children and ex-spouses. That should interest you, with your wife and mother-in-law!
- It gives me a bit of hope for humanity, which is in a bad way," adds the team's philosopher. And it's a welcome change from the climate of violence and war that's spreading all around us.

These unexpected revelations and the similarity in the reactions of those infected raise many questions. Is this the result of a brain disorder caused by the virus? Will these behaviors last or disappear over time? And what impact will this have on patients' health and psychological balance as they will age?

Specialists, doctors and biologists remain extremely cautious about the possible dangers of this virus in the longer term, despite the positive effects observed today. What's more, nobody has yet

identified with any certainty all the modes of transmission of this virus, or the period during which sufferers remain contagious.

When in doubt, the majority of doctors at Moscow Central Hospital and Professor Yvan agree that patients should be recommended effective isolation and that everyone should be required to comply with the barrier measures put in place during the Covid epidemic. They remember that when this previous virus appeared, medical staff was very slow to assess its danger and to take sufficient precautions to limit its spread. This time, the epidemic is not going to be taken lightly.

As it is suspected that the virus originates from chicken farms, biologists are recommending the slaughter of all chickens on farms around Moscow. Fearing that this measure will not be easily accepted, because families appreciate this food resource for its qualities and very modest price, and many small breeders make a living from it, it is planned to accompany this announcement with an information campaign to underline its necessity and justify it.

Faced with the spread of the epidemic, the Minister of Health agrees with these proposals and officially decrees a week of compulsory confinement for the sick and the immediate slaughter of all chickens from farms in the region surrounding the capital. These measures very quickly provoke strong resistance and protests, as well as a division inside the population in the districts affected by the epidemic. On one hand, there are the people who have come out of the coma, who are confident, expansive and warm, and who don't complain about having been contaminated, and on the other hand, the healthy, worried, suspicious and fearful people, who are afraid of the virus, and who keep a careful distance from the former. Although there have been very few comas lasting more than four hours, no disabling side effects and no deaths other than the one due to comorbidity, it is the passage through a coma lasting several hours that frightens most people.

At the palace, a few days later, as some simple employees pass in a corridor, a new outburst of warm sentimentality seizes the sovereign, who has still not left the building.

- Come, let me kiss you. I'm grateful for everything you do for me in this palace," he tells them.

- It's no longer possible to hide the Tsar's health problems and his mild madness," points out the chief of the staff, who has witnessed several similar scenes. It's going to get out!

IX - Putin at the market

Feeling full of energy, optimistic and wanting the best for his people, but still locked away in his palace, the sovereign is on cloud nine, forgetting that there are now people in the population fearful of the virus and malevolent people, notably the plotters, who seek to turn citizens against him by exploiting the unpopularity of the measures just decreed by the Minister of Health.

- All is not as calm as you think, Vladimir,” the head of the SIS informs him. Some plotters are trying to take advantage of the tensions to turn the population against you and preparing a coup d'état.

- Don't they know that I want the good of everyone, even those who don't like me? the sovereign exclaims.

- Vladimir, the little people know almost nothing about the epidemic, and see only the disastrous consequences for them if their chickens are killed and their sale forbidden. They don't understand your decisions, although the Minister of Health has sent out cars equipped with loudspeakers to scare them, saying loud and clear that this epidemic is very serious, that they'll all be contaminated by their own chickens and that they risk their lives if they catch this very dangerous, even deadly, virus.

- How can we say such things?” exclaims a distraught Putin. It's not the truth! This disease is not fatal. Just look at me! I'm fine and I want all the best for my people. I'm going to meet him and show him that I'm alive and well. The doctors are doing a poor job of imposing these measures. They need to be cancelled!

He himself is convinced of this, because from now on, instead of arousing fear and mistrust among those close to him, at the palace, he is the object of thanks and benevolent attitudes.

Despite the danger and the recommendations made by his police, the sovereign decides to stand up to his doctors and personal guard and go himself to listen to what is being said about him in a working-

class neighborhood not far from where his friend the poultry farmer lives.

In order to surprise and listen to his people without taking personal risks, he has devised a stratagem: he will be preceded by a look-alike and will follow him, carefully concealing his face. Having warned the head of security not to worry, he prepares to go out.

Disguised and dressed so as not to be recognized, he drives to the outskirts of Moscow in an unmarked car which follows another car in which one of his look-alikes has taken a seat, accompanied by a dog similar to the one the Tsar walks with from time to time to show that he is a friend of animals, which makes him sympathetic and human in the eyes of the locals, he has been assured.

The two vehicles head for the large, bustling market in Moscow's northern suburbs.

At the entrance to this market, the morning breeze distills a surprising mix of smells: the earthy scent of vegetables, the subtle perfume of flowers, the penetrating aroma of ripe fruit, and the stronger scents of meat and fish. On either side of the aisles, local farmers have arranged their produce in a colorful mosaic of tomatoes, cucumbers and potatoes still smeared with earth. Alongside them, fruit sellers offer apples, cherries and berries that catch the eye with their brilliance. A few small producers sell punnets of blackberries, blueberries and raspberries at two times below the supermarket price. At the cheese stands, local products such as *damachi*, a popular breakfast cheese, are exhibited close to a few foreign cheeses smuggled in from Switzerland and France. Fine cuts of fresh meat hang from the butchers' hooks, while assortments of local fishes, particularly prized, like carps and pikes, as well as sea fishes like sardines, mackerel and pollack, and other fishes, are nicely showcased on the fishmongers' tables.

Apart from a few wealthy customers who are interested in the rare and expensive products, it's mostly modest inhabitants who frequent this market, some of whom seem very poor. They browse the stalls, looking for the best bargains or slightly spoiled products sold at reduced prices. Purchases give rise to cautious negotiation and friendly palaver, as many are regulars who come here for the

affordable prices and the lively, friendly atmosphere. Some transactions take time. It's all about buying with prudence in order to maintain his modest lifestyle. Despite the obvious economic difficulties, exchanges take place in a peaceful, good-natured atmosphere.

It is in this crowd of buyers and sellers that Putin and his look-alike come to immerse themselves. They are discreetly dropped off at the entrance to the market, the look-alike and his dog first, then Putin himself a few minutes later.

When they see the dog held on a leash by the Putin look-alike, several children approach it. One of the mothers wants to catch up with her son and turns to her friends, shouting :

- It's Putin! I recognize him and it's his dog with him. I saw him on TV.

- It can't be!

- It's him, it's Putin, I assure you," she tells her neighbors.

The child takes the opportunity to come forward and stroke the dog, before being taken back by his mother. The look-alike addresses her gently:

- You can let him pet my dog. He won't hurt him. It's a pity I don't have any toys to give to your child, he continues in a father tone, but for you, I'm giving you my watch, it's all I've got.

He unstraps his beautiful watch and gives it to her:

- It's for you. Take it!

She doesn't dare take it, but he insists and puts it in her hand.

Other women in turn approach him to ask:

- Give us a watch too. You must have others!

- I've only one," replies the look-alike. That woman was the first, so she deserves it.

- We're poor," insist her companions. We have almost nothing to feed our families; life has become so expensive... Give us something! cry these women who know how to insist when they have to persuade a customer.

- We recognize you. It's you, Putin! Can't you give us something?" exclaim two of them.

They insist, but to no avail. Several others turn to the one with the watch and try to take it from her.

- Give it to me! You don't need it," shouts one of them.

- You can't even tell the time! What are you going to do with it?" adds her neighbor.

It's the start of a tug-of-war between them to get the watch back. The fight turns into a brawl, and the sovereign's doppelganger takes the opportunity to duck out of the way. The fighters shout at each other, grabbing each other's clothes in an attempt to wrest the watch from the one who received it. One of them exclaims when she sees that the visitor has moved away

- It really was Putin! Look at him, he's leaving because he's been recognized!

- Can you believe it was him, truly him?

- I recognized his voice and saw that he had a nice watch.

- But why did he come here?

The policemen and guards responsible for the sovereign's security disperse the women, then rush towards the double to protect him and clear the way. They brutalize some of the shoppers to the point of alarming Putin, who observes them discreetly. And while the police restore order, the sovereign signals from afar to his double that he can leave the place with his dog and let him alone.

Under the disguise in which he hides his identity, Putin makes his way to another part of the market. He stops in front of a woman sitting on the ground. Leaning against a wall, she spreads out her assortment of barely cleaned vegetables. Next to the produce she is selling, she has placed the portrait of a young man decorated with several medals.

- Who is he?" asks Putin.

The woman breaks down crying.

- It's my son! He was killed in the war. And my husband has just been wounded; he cannot come with me anymore. I'm alone now to look after our garden. Please buy me something if you can!

- You must be very proud to have heroes in your family! exclaims Putin, looking at the photo on display next to her.

She picks up a stick and wants to hit him to get him to back off for these remarks, which she can't bear, such is her pain at having recently lost a son. Putin steps aside and contemplates the weeping peasant woman from a little further away. He discovers the unhappiness and

loneliness of this woman. What he sees is not material misery, but the suffering of a mother stricken by the horrors of war.

Not far from her, another woman presents a photo of a totally disfigured man in front of her salad and fruit stall. He has no nose, no ears, nothing but a ravaged, swollen face in which we can make out two black dots that must be eyes, or what's left of them.

Two policemen suddenly appear in front of the stalls and order the women to remove the portraits. These women refuse and stand up to prevent them from taking them. Other women come to their aid and stand in front of the policemen who take out their truncheons and, under the gaze of the sovereign, disperse the crowd without the slightest restraint. They are obeying orders to prevent any display of documents that might evoke the war or “special operation”, as the war is called in the official language imposed by Putin himself. The two saleswomen ask their neighbors to look after their vegetables and leave the scene, taken by the police out of the market, who knows where. One of their customers, very shocked, explained to anyone who would listen that the first of the two women has lost her only son in a tank battle and that the other is the wife of a non-commissioned officer wounded by the explosive charge of a drone that flew over him.

The sovereign has seen and heard enough. He joins the unmarked car waiting for him at the entrance to the market to return to his palace.

He, the man who wanted to mingle with the population to hear what was being said about him, went about it the wrong way. He, the man who felt kind and benevolent, who wanted to be accessible, to take care of his public image, was downcast. He saw the clumsy, incongruous gesture of his double, which only served to stir up envy and jealousy in the marketplace. And the sight of photos revealing the horrors and misfortunes caused by the war has upset him. His dream of being closer to his people has been transformed into a terrible, distressing spectacle.

He realizes the solitude in which his throne had placed him, far from those who depend on him, far from the misfortunes and happiness of those he governs, far from laughter and tears, far from the feelings that bind human beings together.

- I don't know how to love and how to be loved," he repeats to himself inwardly.

For all the power and influence he wields over others, in the face of the courage and energy of poor and destitute women, or those wounded in their family lives, this bitter truth crosses his mind. All the choices he has made to access and maintain himself at the head of the country have been dictated by cold calculations, without any consideration for his humblest subjects. He built his empire on strength, determination, rationality and cynicism. Devoid of human warmth and empathy, he is courted and respected, but little loved. Compassion and affection have always seemed suspect to him, revealing weaknesses that could prevent him from achieving his ultimate goal of success and domination.

His short stay in this market shook him to the core. The virus and this visit to the bustling crowd command him to abandon his calculations and live more freely and warmly. He has to take the time to listen, to show benevolence and love, to express feelings, to be compassionate. Sharing joys and concerns are not signs of weakness, but manifestations of a fully human and inspiring life for living happily in society, a life from which he has largely excluded himself by wanting to dominate without sharing.

You'd think that after so many years of absolute power, changing the way he governs would be a difficult test for him. But he has a powerful ally to help and inspire him. It's the virus with the strange effects that infected him. All he has to do is let himself go, without restraint, to spontaneously show love, compassion and affection to those he meets. Since coming out of his coma, this kindness has sprung from the depths of his being. So he can look to the future, determined to become a loving and beloved man, while remaining a respected ruler. He will put aside his authoritarian, aloof ways and will change as he feels he must do. Benevolence must become his obvious inspiration for governing his people.

This realization and resolution overwhelm him. As soon as he leaves the market district, to forget the squabbles he has provoked and make amends for this unfortunate episode, he asks the unmarked car taking him back to the palace to make a detour and stop at the entrance to the housing estate reserved for his guards. On the right, in a small

house that he has had fitted out for her, lives a cleaning lady who was one of his first mistresses, long forgotten and living meagrely. He sends her a message saying he remembers her, hopes she's in good health and that he'll send her some money to support herself.

When he arrives at the palace, he summons Boris, his chief of staff, to dictate the concrete decisions he wants carried out as soon as possible to show how much he wants the good of his people.

- What should I write down, Vladimir?" asks his collaborator, who is appalled by his haste.

- I want the population to be invited to denounce all dishonest officials, and ask them to return to the public treasure the money they have wrongly received. Make sure there are no more secret commissions or bribes, as some people demand in order to grant privileges. Ask also those in charge of the administration to evaluate all civil servants and dismiss the most incompetent.

- This will disorganize our administration, Vladimir!

- Our people deserve better than civil servants rooted in bad habits.

- But the state will be shaken to its foundations if civil servants gang up against you.

- Have no fear! The people don't want a corrupt or incompetent administration, and they'll be happy to hear about these decisions.

Sometime later, his altruism proves even more generous.

- Prepare me a list of charitable institutions to which I could make donations," he tells his treasurer and personal financial advisor.

Then he asks the Minister of the Interior to draw up a list of political prisoners who have been arrested too hastily, for frivolous motives or for their opinions.

- Submit this list to me without delay, and I will discuss with you those who should be released, offering them my apologies and compensating them financially for the damage they have suffered.

Suddenly and incomprehensibly for his collaborators, the chart of the sovereign's generous decisions fills up at an impressive rate. Monitoring military operations took a back seat. The virus has upset his priorities.

X - A failed attack

The chatter of the women he has kissed in the palace or on his travels outside, and the appearance of his look-alike at the market, have let the people of the capital know that their sovereign is no longer really ill, except that he is behaving rather unexpectedly. The secret of his true state of health is out.

The news about the effects of the virus and the announcement of measures in favor of the people takes the wind out of the sails of his political opponents. Their strategy for overthrowing the ruler and seizing power was based on social exasperation. But their hopes are dashed when they learn that Putin is clearly no longer ill, and that he is continuing to govern, and doing so in a benevolent manner. These conspirators are stunned and aback. They also know that SIS agents are constantly following them and are ready to arrest them when ordered to do so.

- What a disappointment for our great country, which is missing out on a historic opportunity! they repeat to anyone who wants to hear them. When will our people emancipate themselves from the tutelage of an execrable, bellicose, tyrannical autocrat, while we are ready to offer them a radiant, peaceful and prosperous future?

Warned of Putin's return to the scene of power, Khodorkovsky is not as pessimistic as his local lieutenants. He is convinced that popular resentment against the sovereign will grow, as the opposition from civil servants who will see their prebends evaporate as a result of decisions taken against them by the sovereign. He asks his followers to stand firm, to brave fate and force destiny if they can, by organizing an attack against the sovereign.

- Khodorkovsky wants us to physically eliminate the tyrant. He's pushing us and he'll support us" Igor announces to his troops.

- Easy to say... but how to do? By poisoning, by bombing, or by what other means? his team-mates ask him.

- As has happened many times in history! We need a volunteer who will sacrifice himself by strafing him or blowing himself up with explosives when the sovereign comes near him, within range. Whoever accomplishes this mission will be a hero remembered for centuries to come. He will go down in history!

- Mission impossible!" retort the members of his team. Putin is too well protected!

The local chief is thinking for a while.

- The ideal would be to find someone who can approach him without arousing suspicion, and who is sufficiently convinced and generous to risk his life for this cause.

- We could ask the deputy head of the imperial guard," Rassoul suggests. He's with us. As he often sees the sovereign pass in front of him and carries a service weapon, it should be easy enough for him to carry out this attack.

- It's a lost cause. He's a family man and far from crazy. Besides, we need him to organize the next steps to take the power.

- So, none of us agrees to carry out this mission. Am I right ?" asks Igor again.

A deafening silence answers him.

- I understand you and I'm not quite surprised," concludes the local chief. We need to find a younger, scatterbrained, slightly crazy, stoned volunteer, a guy or a girl who's exalted by the promise of paradise for having served our cause. Would you agree to entrust this mission to the young unemployed man Rassoul knows well, who wants to show he's worthy of joining our team?

- I know what he wants," says Rassoul. He needs a lot of money to buy his drugs and is opened to the idea of shooting Putin with a revolver or throwing a bomb. He's convinced he'll get away with it. I've sounded him out, and he's not afraid, quite the contrary.

- And how much does he want?

- That's not the point! We've got more than enough to convince him.

- He doesn't seem very reliable," adds one of those present. He's mentally ill!

- Yes, he is. But that's what we need: a guy for whom life isn't worth living when you're lacking drugs, which is often his case, according to Rassoul.

- So it's agreed? We entrust him with the mission and I pay him a first instalment. We'll organize the operation with him over the coming month.

A few days later, the conspirators learn some very bad news from Rassoul.

- Our young man has been arrested and tortured. He couldn't hold his tongue and sold everyone he knew among us.

- Everything's ruined!" exclaims Igor. Go quickly to your hideouts! There's no time to lose.

His troops disperse immediately to avoid being caught. All the conspirators split up, hunker down, escape to remote corners of the capital. As they scramble from place to place in cramped, confined quarters, the inevitable happens: members of the team and their local leader catch the virus.

The sovereign's police force, which has been keeping a close eye on them, was waiting for this moment. They know that a dozen of them are very feverish and will fall into comas one after the other, which will make it easy for them to pick them up and arrest them. This is more than enough to put an end to the revolutionary project once and for all.

Within a week, Alexandre, the beloved head of his secret police, proudly announces to Putin:

- Vladimir, you no longer have to fear this band of plotters who were trying to overthrow you. We have done what we had to do to neutralize them

In the following month, this group of opponents learns that their local leader, Igor, has come out of his coma completely turned around. He is now one of the sovereign's admirers, to whom he begs forgiveness for the wicked intrigues he had instigated. Other members of this group who have also passed through the coma go so far as to declare publicly, as if they had been drugged by SIS agents:

- We are ready to support the sovereign if he remains altruistic, willing to work for the good of the people and if he stops recruiting young people to continue the war in Ukraine.

The timing is right. Elections are coming up to renew the country's leadership. These declarations serve the interests of Putin, who regularly consolidates his power through plebiscites. With the rallying of these former opponents, the mass of the most easily influenced voters are convinced that their country has an admirable leader. There's no need for him to campaign. "*Vote Putin!*" is the message heard on all the airwaves and social networks, and which is displayed everywhere on posters. Besides, who else to vote for in Russia, since there has not been for a long time now there have been a serious candidate against Putin for a long time, apart from a few loyal vassals to whom the SIS asks to be candidates to give the appearance of a democratic country ?

In the sweet benevolence and the gentle optimism into which the virus has plunged him, Putin is hardly worried about his re-election. It's just a formality managed by his agents. He doesn't bother to campaign, and is re-elected for a further six years with almost 90% of the vote, without even having to resort to ballot-box stuffing by members of the SIS.

The bright future promised by Khodorkovsky, the boss of the revolutionaries, will have to wait a few more years before it can become a reality...

As for the epidemic, the situation is not improving. Professor Yvan regularly visits Moscow's central hospital, where more and more infected people are arriving. He wants to know what they've been told about the disease, and what they plan to do when they return. Most of them are not worried, and the answers are almost all identical: they consider themselves cured once the coma phase is over. Very few accept the confinement measures because they don't see any need for it.

Back to the palace, the professor wants to reconsider the question of confinement with his colleagues. No sooner has he started talking to them than he feels very feverish.

- I've caught the virus, I can feel it. I've had so many contacts with sick people that I'm not surprised. Go on without me, I have to get some rest.

The following morning, Putin comes to see him in his consulting room, where he continues to work despite his condition.

- The fever hasn't left me," warns Yvan. Tell my colleagues, because if I lose consciousness, I won't know how to treat you or myself.

48 hours later, when he tries to stand up in front of the sovereign who had once again come to check on him, he staggers and is on the verge of collapsing.

- Relax and unwind," Putin tells him. Your deputies have been notified. They're coming.

- Hurry up!" cries Yvan, "I'm fainting!

- No panic ! I came through it all right. Your colleagues will take care of you.

- Thank you, thank you...

No sooner has he uttered these words than Professor Yvan faints in the arms of his assistants, who have arrived as reinforcements. They lay him on a consulting bed and watch him. Like the other patients before him, he plunges into a coma from which he emerges only three hours later, quite groggy as a boxer out of action.

When he wakes up, he hears the sovereign jubilantly declare:

- Wonderful, Yvan! You're going to be as benevolent as I am! You'll see! In a few hours, everything will be fine.

Once he has recovered from his coma, the professor discovers just how much attention he is the object of. A dozen doctors, nurses and orderlies are at the foot of his bed.

- How nice of you to come and keep me company! Come here, so I can kiss you! What can I do to thank you?

- But we haven't done anything! exclaim these collaborators of the professor. It's the virus at work! Do you want us to isolate you as you recommend?

- I beg your pardon. I made a mistake in prescribing this isolation. We're not going to impose it anymore.

- You're finally convinced, declares the sovereign. The virus has won! So we're going to do the exact opposite of what you had been advocating. We're going to help this virus infect as many people as possible, and the country will change.

- Wait till I come to my senses!” calls the doctor. I'm a little tired, but it's true, I see life as rather rosy now and I regret my pessimism of the past few weeks. We lost time because I didn't believe that a virus could make us benevolent. I'd like to kiss you and ask your forgiveness for my disbelief!

To everyone's amazement, almost everyone present rushes to embrace and kiss the hands and cheeks of their leader, who weeps with emotion. And to spice things up and encourage infection, all those present are passed a glass of sparkling champagne in which the doctor has long dipped his lips and dripped a little saliva.

Within a few days, half the palace's medical staff has caught the bug. The working atmosphere becomes warm and friendly.

The sovereign is informed and delighted.

- You see, Yvan. I was right. Now we just have to think about how to spread the virus throughout the population.

XI - Analysis of the virus

Analysis results sent by the Centre Vektor reach the palace. This organization has delegated one of its most eminent researchers to present them to the Tsar who is anxious to know the lab conclusions :

- Let's see what your Institute has found!

- The report clearly concludes: *“Virus not very contagious and apparently harmless. Strange, however, in its inexplicable effects on the psyche. Seems to stimulate certain areas of the brain and the metabolism of certain cells, organs and enzymes, things we've never seen before.”*

These conclusions corroborate what has been seen on a significant scale in Russia's capital.

- Where does this virus come from?” asks the sovereign.

- It could have come from the sewage of a P4 laboratory that didn't treat its waste properly.

- Are you joking? We don't have a P4 lab here!

- Are you sure about that? I've been told in my department that some of your military centers are secretly developing extremely dangerous bacteriological weapons.

- What makes you think that? I am going to have you arrested and thrown in one of our dungeons for daring to insinuate such things! exclaims the sovereign, who seems to have lost his serenity.

Professor Yvan steps in to pick up the thread of the discussion with the Center's expert:

- We told you that this virus most certainly came from farmed chickens. You must have examined the chickens we sent you.

- Of course we did. There are many viruses that attack poultry. We looked to see if it was a *Campylobacter*, a Marek's disease or another known avian coronavirus, but none of these known viruses is close to the one that infected your patients. As you know, very few chicken viruses can be transmitted to humans. So this is a new virus, of which

we have found no trace elsewhere. Our epidemiologist will tell you a little more about it later on, if you like.

- And how does this virus operate?

- Our microbiology specialists and neuropsychiatrists are intrigued by its effects. They are continuing their research. Some invoke a double virus. Others are examining how this virus might activate hormones in the brain such as dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin or endorphin, thereby strengthening neuronal connections linked to empathy, love and happiness. Others have noted that the highly affectionate behavior of patients who come out of coma is reminiscent of that of Down's syndrome children. But we wonder how this virus could affect the number and organization of chromosomes in the cell. There are still many avenues to explore.

We should mobilize the international community if we are to make faster progress. But as long as this epidemic remains local and is progressing only slowly, and as you have not given us authorization to do so, we have not alerted the WHO (World Health Organization), nor the major international laboratories, most of which are located in countries that are rather hostile to us and which could rejoice in our misfortunes.

- Misfortunes? You say misfortunes?" exclaims the sovereign. It's more like a gift that, for the moment, we don't want to give them.

So, only the Russia's scientific community is mobilized in this impatient quest aiming to understand the mysteries of this virus.

Biologists' attitudes oscillate between fascination for its effects and concern about its durability and possible dangerousness. One of the specialists who worked on this virus named it "*the Benevolent*", an expression that has spread virally but peacefully in all the epidemiological centers in Russia that have become aware of the strangeness of this virus. As a result, the virus is much more likeable than the Covid-19. And because of its effects, the sovereign's behavior seems less astonishing, since the virtues of this virus explain it.

While this positive appellation, picked up by newspapers in Russia's capital, encourages contagion, it doesn't really get it off the ground as the sovereign had hoped. It simply reduces the fear of the healthy of catching the virus. So, to stimulate contagion, the Ministry of Health is recommending that barrier-gestures and isolation

measures no longer be respected. It asks everybody to forget the formality of bowing and distancing in greetings and instead to adopt warmer gestures in social relations. All the recommendations restricting physical contacts are simply abolished.

Moreover, the slaughter of chickens for sanitary reasons is suspended, which is obviously a welcome measure for the little people who raise chickens or depend on this meat for their diet.

XII - Questions about the virus

It's been almost six months since the epidemic broke out in the Russian capital, and we're starting to see definitive recoveries, i.e. people who no longer have any trace of the virus in their bodies, and who have lost some of their kindness and benevolence. Several researchers have stated that this virus is probably self-limiting. It will gradually eliminate itself from the bodies of sufferers over time, or even disappear altogether, bringing the epidemic to an end. Some even state that the period of activity of this virus will be six to twelve months at most, after which its effects will diminish and the epidemic will die out naturally, although nothing has yet been proven.

The director of the Vektor research center informs the sovereign and his physician. This announcement worries Putin to no end.

- What's going to happen if the positive effects of the virus disappear and the epidemic stops?" he asks the Center's director. It will be dramatic...

- We can't really know yet, as the first infections date back only a few months. From what we've just seen, and based on other epidemics, it's likely that the viral persistence time in the bodies of infected people is between six and ten months.

- Does this mean that in six, seven or ten months' time, its effects will have ceased? Are we going to see the disappearance of altruism, acts of kindness and benevolence? That's going to pose huge problems! People will want to reclaim gifts given a little too quickly, go back on forgiveness granted without thinking, or close in on themselves. It will be hell on earth. We've got to do something!

So as not to upset the Sovereign, the Center's director asserts with caution and psychology:

- It's possible that this virus will disappear. But it's likely that some of its effects will remain. Not everything will be lost. Reflexes and

behaviors acquired during the infection will undoubtedly persist, as a reminder of the positive experiences lived thanks to the virus.

But this comment is not enough to reassure the sovereign.

- I want to know for sure," he says. First of all, can you tell me whether or not it's possible to catch this virus again once you've recovered?

- It's probable, but with the risk of being affected by a long-lasting form, with a persistent fever and perhaps other ailments such as headaches or aches and pains.

- Only that!" exclaims the sovereign. So you can catch this virus several times without any further inconvenience. Can you confirm this?

- Majesty, we'd need guinea pigs for that, and cases of complete recovery.

- Can't I be one of those guinea pigs? As soon as I'm completely cured and we've established that this virus no longer has any effect on me, I want to do a test myself. I want to be inoculated with the virus again.

And he adds:

- In fact, we can do it right now. Why wait?

- Another act of reckless generosity! comments apart his doctor, before adding:

- I'm telling you, Vladimir, you're not completely free of this virus. We don't know exactly how long it will take for you to be completely cured.

The announcement of a possible weakening of the virus, or even its disappearance, has shaken the sovereign. He wants to know for sure, and demands without further ado:

- Cured or not, I want to be the guinea pig you're looking for. Inject me once again with this virus. I want to serve my people by being the first volunteer.

- I'll remain benevolent and generous, won't I? That's good enough for me! For me, it's preferable to a total cure, which would eliminate the positive effect of this virus! Give me an injection!

The doctors hesitate to respond to the sovereign's wish. Without waiting for their response, the sovereign instructs a nurse to take saliva and a drop of blood from a recently infected patient, insert them into a syringe and inject him without further ado.

The effect is rapid. By the next day, the sovereign is feeling feverish. He is hospitalized at the palace, and three days later falls into a coma lasting almost three hours, from which he awakes feeling quite dizzy and feverish. A headache reappears, but is bearable. Forty-eight hours later, he regains his energy and kindness. He lets those around him know it loud and clear.

- I feel better than ever! he exclaims. There's no point in waiting any longer to keep this epidemic alive and spread this virus around the country rationally and effectively.

He immediately asks one of his colleagues to give gifts to those who have treated him, and invites everyone to recontaminate themselves for another six or seven months, and perhaps more, if this recontamination leads to a longer form of the virus.

Yvan, his doctor, decides to follow the Tsar's example and asks to be reinjected with the Benevolent.

When he regained his senses three days later, he is enthusiastic.

- Thank you, Vladimir. I'm going to encourage my medical teams to follow our example.

- That's an excellent decision," replies the sovereign. But above all, don't spoil this virus! Take good care of it and keep it very active so that many people can benefit from it.

The recontamination has not only changed people's perception of the virus, it has also established a climate of benevolence and collaboration in the country's structures and governance. The sovereign is renewing some generous gestures. He returns ill-gotten gains, and pays the proceeds into the public treasury for equitable redistribution.

He also asks the Prime Minister what progress has been made in implementing the measures he had decreed to combat administrative abuses, to put an end to dubious practices and to support poor families. Contrary to what some had predicted, all is going rather well, as the population appreciates that the sovereign is defending them and fighting effectively against corruption and great inequalities of wealth.

XIII - The B variant

By an unexpected stroke of luck, a much more contagious variantt of the "Benevolent" virus appears in Russia. This variant "B" is a real miracle. Like the Covid 19, it can be transmitted by air and skin, not just saliva or blood.

At first, this variant arouses a certain mistrust because of its greater contagiousness. But it is soon recognized as a godsend, as its positive effects on the population become massive. Entire districts of the capital are infected. The virus is now spreading throughout the provinces. Local governors panic and ask what measures to take to control the epidemic, so as not to saturate hospitals. They are urged to do nothing at all to halt its spread. On the contrary, uninfected people are advised to take every opportunity to get close to infected people. For their part, the small community of breeders who have escaped the massacre of chickens find themselves reassured, and their activities resume vigorously.

The method of greeting each other becomes the almost obligatory embrace. Masks are withdrawn from places where they could be obtained free of charge, and previously forbidden behaviors are authorized, such as encouraging passengers to board overcrowded buses and trains by offering them substantial discounts, the practice sports in poorly ventilated halls, attending big shows where everyone rubs shoulders by shoulders. The impact of these measures is visible. In the neighborhoods affected by the epidemic, crime is falling, family conflicts are calming down, and acts of kindness are multiplying. Prisons are beginning to empty, some confrontations are ending and social inequalities seem more acceptable when it is announced that redistributions are being reviewed to be fairer and more favorable to families in great difficulty.

So the authorities let variant B run as fast and as far as possible, without imposing any particular precautions.

There are, of course, challenges to be met, such as the need to maintain a functional economy and deal with safety issues. Overall, however, the country has become a more pleasant, peaceful and collaborative place. People experience benevolence as a new and natural social modality. The human climate is transformed. For the first time in the world, there is a country of the kindness and gentleness.

More than six months after it began, the epidemic is still little known outside Russia. The political situation and the conflict with Ukraine obviously have something to do with it. The invasion of its neighbor has brought Russia's tourist and economic exchanges with a large part of the world to an abrupt halt.

- But aren't there other reasons for this situation? asks Putin. Are other countries afraid of this epidemic? Have they warned their populations of its dangers? Have they taken steps to protect themselves?

He entrusts a group of researchers with the mission of answering these questions, because he is convinced that the face of the world could be changed if all countries became benevolent thanks to the virus.

The researchers conclude that fear is the dominant factor. Most foreign heads of state and military leaders are frightened by the prospect of this epidemic reaching their populations. The information on the effects of this virus is so incredible that these countries suspect Russia's leaders of lying. Convinced that this virus is dangerous, they want to protect themselves from it. It's difficult to dissuade them, as they know how artfully and effectively Russia's leaders conduct disinformation campaigns. The Western countries that support Ukraine are also convinced of this, even though many of their spies and secret agents have seen for themselves the climate of benevolence brought by the virus in Russia.

To show other countries in concrete terms that this virus is very different from the Covid and any other virus, a first decision is taken by the sovereign. All airports and entry points to Russia are asked to

welcome foreign visitors and businessmen by serving them contaminated drinks and cocktails.

- You mean we're going to deliberately infect them without telling it to them?" points out the Foreign Minister.

- Exactly.

- And why take such a step?

- Because this virus is good for everyone, and by sulking and shunning it, other countries are depriving themselves of a factor for peace and harmony that could prove useful even to us.

Some observers and researchers in the human sciences, more informed and perceptive than others, do not entirely agree with this opinion. Such an epidemic, they point out, can reduce the dynamism of the population, the combativeness of armies, the pugnacity of electoral battles, economic competitiveness and thus weaken their country. So there are not only advantages to encouraging it.

These researchers are listened to in Western countries, but very little in Russia, until certain observations in the administrations and the armies shake the certainties of its rulers.

XIV - The generals' decision

In Russia, the wave of benevolence and goodwill generated by the epidemic has not made everyone happy. The virus has certainly improved the general social climate, but army officers and law enforcement officers are not seeing only positive effects of the virus in their areas of responsibility.

On a particular occasion, the capital's Police Prefect addresses the Minister of the Interior.

- I've a serious problem," he tells him. Police officers infected with the virus change their behavior when they return to work.

- Be more specific!

- I've already said to you a few words of it. They become less reactive when asked to repel or arrest demonstrators or pursue delinquents. They even want to kiss them! They are less and less committed and determined in their mission. Our military leaders are seeing much the same thing in the armies. Here you go! Read what one of my friends, an intelligence officer, passed on to me.

The Police Prefect hands his minister the report sent by a lieutenant to his captain, commanding a company of infantrymen:

"From Lieutenant Farouk to Captain Shirin.

I have recently observed some worrying changes in the behavior of my soldiers returning from leave in their families. Many have become different, less aggressive, less inclined to blindly obey my orders. At times, they seem blissful, smiling stupidly at their comrades-in-arms and wanting to kiss them for no apparent reason.

I've already told you about this, and you said I shouldn't mind. But I'm having trouble getting these furloughs to obey me. Instead of turning and rushing towards our enemies to fire them, they manage to stay back, or they no longer adjust their fire. Some even question the war with Ukraine. They consider it an absurdity, hesitate to kill our enemies and criticize our sovereign.

Of course, they know they can't afford to disobey, because I punish them severely, and I've already placed several of them in the front line for a full day as punishment. Some have even lost their lives for that.

I'm told it's the effect of a virus I don't understand. Aren't there any drugs to treat or neutralize the effects of this virus?

You told me that it's a true disease, but that there's no medicine to cure it. I'm at a loss, because I want to reaffirm that I'm doing my utmost to carry out your orders and follow the instructions of our sovereign, to whom I remain deeply attached."

This was not the only report of its kind to come from the front.

Faced with this situation, several Russian generals are asking the Defense Minister to urgently develop an anti-Benevolent vaccine, and in the meantime, are requiring all military personnel to wear a mask when on leave, with penalties for non-compliance.

Huge resources are made available for the development of this vaccine. In less than two months, - a record speed - , the laboratories announce the release of the first samples. Unfortunately, tests are showing the vaccine to be highly ineffective. Less than 10% of those vaccinated appear to be immune and safe from infection by the Benevolent. The exact figure is even probably lower, as the testers are suspected of having been bribed not to announce figures that might displease the army chiefs.

Officers no longer know how to prevent their troops from catching the virus. Anti-Benevolent vaccinations are proving ineffective, and it's impossible to check whether soldiers are really following protective instructions when on leave with their families.

The old, highly decorated generals of the Russian army, who were undoubtedly valiant fighters in their day, are not very psychologically minded. Believing they are doing the right thing, they decide, without informing the sovereign, to suspend all leave for the troops for an indefinite period to prevent the risk of contagion by families or friends. This decision is communicated to all combat units with immediate effect.

In the hours that follow, this measure hit the headlines in the media and on social networks, provoking violent protests. Soldiers' wives, mothers and friends take to the streets, gathering in large numbers to

demonstrate in public squares, even in the most remote Russian towns and provinces, where the army recruits volunteers, often unenthusiastic ones at that, with financial incentives. This is the first time that Russian women dare to demonstrate publicly and massively against their government.

Putin learns of the generals' decision from his Chief of Staff and Prime Minister, but even more concretely from the thousands of women who have gathered outside the Kremlin Palace to demonstrate and demand the immediate restoration and even extension of the soldiers' leaves. When he discovers this huge blunder on the part of his generals, he is stunned.

The Minister of the Interior arrives at the palace and asks to see him urgently:

- Vladimir, you see as well as I do the unrest caused by this senseless decision by our generals! My policemen refuse to put an end to these demonstrations and don't want to push these women away. They sympathize with them. Please do something, or this will turn into a full-blown riot.

The sovereign summons his generals:

- Restore the furloughs immediately and extend them to three weeks, instead of two," he orders them. What you have decreed is insane! You have a singular lack of judgment! I can't trust you.

And he adds a little more calmly:

- I admit that I myself lacked discernment in declaring this invasion of the Ukraine, because I was relying on your indications that it would only take a few days. I had no idea how ill-prepared your troops were and how wrong your estimates were.

Carry out my orders immediately. You'll be relieved of your command and sacked in the coming months!

Putin immediately issues a new decree confirming the restoration of leaves and extending their duration, while also reconsidering the instructions given to his armies. This is a major victory for women, their husbands and their children who are in the battlefield.

Out of vengeance against the military leaders, the women demonstrators are taking it upon themselves to do whatever it takes to

deliberately infect their husbands and children while on leave, in order to encourage the spread of the virus. This is the exact opposite of what the generals wanted.

Ukraine, like many other countries, is now aware of the effects of the virus. But army chiefs consider the virus too much benevolent. They are determined to protect themselves and prevent this virus from spreading and reaching their armies. From a military point of view, everyone sees the benefits of infection if the virus spreads through the ranks of their enemies without reaching their own armies, even if a general contamination on both sides of the front line would be better in order to reduce the overall violence and cruelty of the fighting. But on both camps, the army leaders rely above all on the strength of weapons, tanks, bombardments and assaults carried out by their battalions to weaken their opponents.

After the failure of the first vaccine, Russia's new general-in-chief orders another anti-Benevolent vaccine, which has the good grace not to come out of the test-tubes quickly. Researchers, scalded by their first ill-fated vaccine, say they need at least a year to achieve a satisfactory result. Meanwhile, the epidemic continues to spread.

XV - The virus in Ukraine

Ukrainian women who look at their Russian neighbors learn of the victory they achieved by defying their rulers. Those who want the war to end so that their husbands and children can return decide to imitate them and take the epidemic across the line separating Russian and Ukrainian troops. Under the pretext of humanitarian aid, they send the belligerents infected food, badly cooked or even raw, but so appetizing that the soldiers rush to devour it. The epidemic then spreads through the air, saliva and skin over increasingly large areas and thus manage to spread on both sides of the front line, with the complicity of the inhabitants, who hope for an end to the fighting.

Initially greeted with concern, then with growing enthusiasm as the magical effects of this Benevolent epidemic are discovered, the Ukrainian population is soon talking of nothing but inventions to help its spread. On social networks and TV shows, people are talking about its virtues and the many initiatives they take to infect themselves. So-called “active benevolence” games, in which players identify and promote the best way to catch the Benevolent, are multiplying. *“You're not infected yet? I am! So come on, you're entitled to a miracle kiss!”* Some listeners testify that they've met a kindred spirit in this way, and speak enthusiastically about it.

Once the epidemic is well underway, Ukrainian women follow the example of their Russian counterparts. They demand longer and more frequent leave for the military personnel, holding noisy demonstrations in front of the presidential palace and in public squares in Kiev and other major Ukrainian cities. In less than two weeks, despite heavy-handed repression by the police acting on the orders of a government fearful of weakening its armies and losing some hard-won territory, these women get what they want. Soldiers are granted longer and more frequent leave.

They swear to each other, as women do in Russia, to take advantage of these furloughs to convince their sons or husbands to infect themselves with the Benevolent virus before returning to battle.

On the battlefields, assaults still claimed many victims, but the epidemic had progressed to the front lines and, in many places, contaminated Russian troops seemed to want to fraternize with their adversaries.

A Ukrainian colonel commanding a fighting unit is intrigued by what he sees through binoculars in his sector.

- Look over there," he tells his officers. A group of enemies are approaching our lines without firing. They are advancing, brandishing their rifles above their heads and waving a white pennant. They surrender!

Excited by this surrender, he gives an unusual order:

- Invite them over here! We're going to help them get to our side safely so we can take them prisoner. Send them a message by optical signals and megaphone from your shelter, asking them to advance to the rocky outcrop to the east of their position and lay down their weapons.

The Russians approach the rocky outcrop and lay down their weapons without any resistance. They are visibly willing, happy and relieved.

The colonel is jubilant:

- It's incredible. They really want to fraternize. Let's welcome them with open arms.

But one of his subordinates points out:

- Colonel, isn't this a trap? The prisoners we took last week say the epidemic has hit their ranks hard. These soldiers are going to infect us.

Another officer agrees:

- This is a Russian tactic to spread the virus through our ranks! It's a viral attack. Keep them at a distance. Above all, don't catch the virus yourself!

The colonel doesn't care. He's taken prisoners, and that's good enough for him.

This scenario is repeated at several points on the front, creating a veritable viaduct through which the Benevolent infiltrates the armies of the Ukraine, infecting them without even waiting for the soldiers to be infected on leave.

Through this stratagem, deliberately devised by Russian officers, the virus is transmitted to several Ukrainian units, then spreads deeper into the army and the civilian population. It reaches Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, and infects several of the country's officers and leaders. This viral war causes no deaths, but make the fighters, if not harmless, at least much less aggressive.

Most of the Russian generals who replace those who have been sacked are themselves less combative than their elders, and no longer seek victory at any price, but only to hold on to the positions they have acquired by sparing their men as much as possible. On the battlefield, they cautiously reduce their attacks and begin to observe their opponents with more sympathy, hoping to see soon the end of a nightmare that has lasted too long.

As he frequently does, Ukraine's President Zelensky visits his troops at the front, in the spots where there are heavy concentrations of infantrymen and motorized units. When awarding decorations, he hugs and kisses his soldiers to congratulate and encourage them. This is important for the morale of his troops in the face of a Putin who doesn't dare take such a risk, except with great caution and by withdrawing as soon as the cameras have taken enough images for the propaganda services, which broadcast them in a loop on television and social networks the world over.

When returned to his capital, Zelensky is feverish. His doctor tells him that he probably caught the Benevolent during a medal ceremony for his soldiers.

- I recommend, dear President, that you go to bed, as you are very feverish. Do you know what's going to happen?

- Am I going to look like Putin? That would be really the last straw!

- Think a little bit! It would be good for you and for him, because, if you don't know, he's changed for the better.

- How could this execrable enemy change for the better?

His doctor gives him a cryptic answer:

- In three or four days, you'll be in a coma for a few hours, and then, you'll see!

Zelensky is worried. As a war leader, he fears that his troops become demoralized if he is no longer seen in the outposts:

- Please, say as little as possible to the press.

- Too late! The journalists who have been following you know all about it. It's already all over the media.

When they learn that their President is ill with a high fever, the Ukrainian population is appalled. They follow his state of health feverishly, because Russia, they think, will take advantage of the situation to resume its attacks, knowing that it will face an army that has lost its commander-in-chief and will be less vindictive and less determined.

After three days of high fever and a coma lasting several hours, Zelensky rises in a daze.

In the public squares of most Ukrainian cities, women continue to demonstrate. Rallies are growing in size and increasingly beyond the control of their leaders. The police men themselves no longer obey their officers' orders as rigorously.

Having regained his health, transformed internally by the effect of the virus, Zelensky is a different man. He listens to women's complaints and is more sensitive to the ravages of war on families. He now wants to reduce the brutality of the fighting and take time to consider how to put an end to the horrific massacres which he is told every day.

However, there is no question of him stopping the fighting without the assurance that the Russian-occupied territories will be returned to Ukraine. His Western allies are urging him to resist and not give in, lest they themselves become Russia's next target.

But is it possible to stop the fighting without admitting defeat? How to reach an agreement with a neighbor whose stubbornness in carrying out what it has decided and does not want to compromise on anything? The situation seems hopeless.

In addition to the confrontations on the battlefields, the media are increasingly unleashed to denigrate the adversary. This is the business of each country's propaganda services, which seek above all not the truth, but to undermine the popular support on which their leaders can count. Disinformation campaigns against disinformation campaigns, it's a merciless war in which there's no shortage of low blows and means used to degrade the enemy's image as quickly and as viciously as possible. Russia's propaganda slanders Zelensky to break his aura, damage his reputation and diminish the support he receives from Western countries. It multiplies virulent and misleading messages about his dishonesty, his fascist past, the ways in which he acquired his assets and enriched himself and continues to enrich himself at the expense of the state, as well as his lust for power and his deceptive arguments for extracting billions from his international supporters while concealing corruption, abuses of power and misappropriation of commodities for the benefit of companies run by front men in his service.

With equal virulence and insistence, the Ukrainian communications services pour into the media, without restraint or verification, an avalanche of malicious information about Putin, his past as a torturer, his criminal methods of disappearing his opponents, his cruelty and thirst for power, and the wealth he shamelessly accumulates to increase his financial resources and to corrupt politicians around the world.

However, the dissemination of these messages to the Russian population is not as effective as Ukraine would like, as it comes up against the censorship exercised by SIS agents, who have enormous resources at their disposal to filter, spot and eliminate from the media any message or activity that could harm Russia and its leader.

This activism on the part of the propaganda services is carried out with little control by the leaders of these two countries. The latter have other concerns. Having both been infected by the virus, the president of Ukraine and the ruler of Russia, are now more sensitive to the suffering of their peoples and are now looking for ways to bring this war to an end in the most favorable and acceptable way possible for their own countries.

Putin is convinced that he can win this war by force of arms, given the superiority in numbers and weaponry of Russia's armies and their current position. But to do so, he has to go to the extreme of terror and horror, carrying out even more massive and simultaneous bombardments across the whole of Ukraine to saturate its defenses, ruin or neutralize its infrastructures, terrorize and starve its population, disrupt its communications networks, regardless of the international outcry and violent hate reactions that are bound to follow. But he no longer has the same determination or desire for destruction as before his infection. He no longer wants to lock himself into the bloody cycle of offensives and counter-offensives. His Defense Minister, Sergueï Choïgou, who has also been infected by the Benevolent, has also become reluctant to wage all-out war. For their part, Russia's military chiefs are waiting until their troops have all been vaccinated with the new anti-Benevolent before launching an assault on Ukraine's armies which will be undoubtedly largely contaminated and therefore weakened.

Time is passing and there's still no word on when the new anti-Benevolent vaccine will be available. Nothing seems really possible to shorten the course of this war. The fighting continues, slowly wearing down the adversaries, with troops a little less combative where the virus has continued to advance on both sides of the front.

XVI - Putin and his granddaughter Evguenia

From the rumors that keep circulating, we know that Putin has a family, that he has two daughters and that they themselves have children. We don't know exactly how old these children and grandchildren are. It's a well-kept state secret that Putin is particularly keen to keep both for his personal privacy and for that of his daughters and grandchildren, whose anonymity he wants to preserve to ensure that they have a normal life without privilege. Little is known about this family, which is said to live an ordinary life in Moscow. No photos or documents are released about them so that no one can identify them. Only State Security knows where to find its members and how to recognize and contact them.

Devoured by his geopolitical and civilizational ambitions, absorbed by the exercise of power, drowning in his work agenda, Putin has hardly cared for his children and grandchildren and did not spend much time with them. But now that he has become benevolent thanks to the virus, he wants to renew and strengthen those family ties he has neglected for too long. From now on, he wants to show his loved ones that he loves them.

One of his granddaughters, Evguenia, is about to turn ten. To celebrate her birthday, he decides to invite her and Maria, her mother, to spend three days at Daïval, a state estate reserved for sovereigns.

He summons Dimitri, an assistant to the head of security, to prepare the trip.

- I entrust you with a personal mission which must not be known to anyone. I'm going to Daïval to spend a few days with my daughter and granddaughter. You know where they are. You'll be personally responsible for organizing this trip, which must be kept secret from the outside world.

My daughter and granddaughter will be traveling to-and-from by car. They must not be recognized on the way, and their driver must

not stop. Their identities must be totally concealed. The little one obeys her mother well enough to keep quiet, and she doesn't know me well enough to know what it's like to be the Tsar of Russia.

For my personal travels, I'll take my private train as usual. You must choose the safest route, clear the tracks of mines and insert my car in a line of empty wagons. This will allow me to travel comfortably and work along the way. Evgenia's dance teacher will be with me in my car. She knows my true identity, but she's a reliable person. Make sure we arrive a few hours before my daughter and granddaughter, so I can welcome them and see how they'll settle in. My train must be hidden and parked in the special shed at this residence, from where I'll be leaving three days later.

Everything is perfectly organized for this trip to one of the state residences reserved for Putin, his friends and relatives, a residence whose location and configuration conceal the identity of its occupants from neighbors and the curious.

On the appointed day, shortly before his daughter with her adorable Evguenia arrive, he gets off his train at Daival with the dance teacher.

There, for his granddaughter, he is no longer Vladimir but “Dadouschka”. Very quickly, she and he get along a perfect match. Evgenia gets her vitality, physical qualities and energy from him, and the grace and finesse that make her a charming little dancer from Maria, her mother.

On the afternoon of her arrival, without waiting, her granddaughter rehearses a few dance exercises with her teacher. Her Dadouschka looks at her with admiration, and as soon as she has finished her first session, he asks her:

- Evguenia, could you teach me a few dance steps? I'll not have your grace, but I want to try.

She doesn't hesitate. Facing him, she raises her leg high to rest it on the surface of a table that serves as a training bar, and asks him to do the same. He tries to imitate her, but finds himself very awkward to lift his leg so high. She bursts into an uncontrollable laugh as she looks at her grandfather, who apologizes for his stiffness.

- I've never done classic dance, Evguenia, and you're catching me off guard. But I have fond memories of the folk dances I used to go to when I was young. We danced to the sound of balalaikas and accordions.

He steps sideways, hops on one leg, turns on one foot and crouches down and throws his legs to one side and the other while crossing his arms horizontally against his chest, as the Cossacks do in their folk dances.

- Well done, Dadouschka! It's not classical dance, but I like it. You're very strong.

- Let's not exaggerate. It's not my favorite sport!

- And what sports do you like?

- There are lots of them: judo, karate, ice or field hockey, cross-country... and then there's another one I'd like to introduce you to this afternoon, on the water.

- What's that?

- Look! We're on the shore of a lake.

- You want swimming?

- It's too cold and dangerous here for swimming. But it's an excellent spot for a quiet, learned sport.

- Kayaking?

- No, cast fishing! We'll have a go at it this afternoon if you like.

- Wow! I never did it before.

After a good lunch and a rest, they set off for a walk along the large stretch of water bordering the villa. He takes with him a set of fishing tackle. Arriving at a favorable spot for pike fishing, he gets into position.

- I'll show you once, and then it's up to you.

He dexterously casts the lure attached to the end of his fishing rod. On the second cast, he catches a small pike that he removes from the hook and promptly throws back into the water.

- Don't you want to keep it?

- It has not the minimum size. You have to throw it back to let it grow.

He invites her to cast her line in turn. His hook catches on a branch of a shrub. The horsehair line twists. They untangle it together.

- You see, it's not so easy to cast your rod and hook! You need precision. Try again, more calmly.

After a few more unsuccessful casts, a magnificent pike struggles to the end of her line. She's so excited. He helps her get her beautiful catch out of the water. She casts again while he watches and advises her. After catching two more fish, they both return quietly to the villa when a fox steps out onto the path a few yards ahead of them. They watch it silently with shared curiosity. The fox stops, looks at them, then runs off through the undergrowth.

At home, after dinner, Putin takes Evguenia into the residence library and invites her to choose a book to take home:

- Choose the one you want! It's your birthday present.

He is wondering : what will she take? A novel? A book on dance? A comic book?

She chooses a beautiful illustrated book on fishing.

- Dadouschka, it was a pleasure to fish with you. This book will remind me of our afternoon.

- Take it away! And now it's your turn to give me one of the books in front of you. Which one are you going to give me?

She picks up a book on dance and puts it in his hands.

- It's a lovely gift that will also remind me of our stay here. Thank you for this.

- With this, you'll be able to perfect your classical dance steps ! comments Evguenia mischievously.

Maria, watching from an armchair, is delighted to see them so affectionately comlicit

- Shall we go fishing again tomorrow? asks Evguenia.

- No, tomorrow I suggest something else with your mom, who's a good horsewoman. I've asked the groom to prepare three horses for us. We'll go for a ride together.

- But I've never been on a horse!

- You've got long legs, you should be fine.

- Okay, I'll give it a try!

The next day, after the morning dance class, a riding instructor introduces Evguenia to the gentle, obedient horse he's selected for her, as well as the saddle and riding gear that suit her.

With his help and a little apprehension, she straddles the animal and listens to her instructor's recommendations. She stands up straight, concentrates and places herself between Maria and her grandfather. They start off at a leisurely walk for a hundred meters or so.

- Are you up for a little trot now? asks Maria.

Evguenia hops up on her saddle and begins to lose her confidence.

- Oh dear! It's so hard! I'm going to fall off.

- Hold your horse tightly between your legs and follow its rhythm by leaning on your stirrups.

She stays in the saddle, but with the fear of being thrown off. Maria considers it prudent to shorten this exercise. All three return to the villa at a leisurely pace. Evgenia dismounts her horse and goes to play with an electric buggy around the villa, while her grandfather and Maria set off at triple gallop for a walk in the forest.

In the evening, around a log fire, they talk about their day. Maria sings sweet traditional melodies, while Evguenia snuggles up to Dadushka and listens to her mother's wonderful voice.

The last day of their stay together arrives. At breakfast, Evguenia is curious:

- What's your job, Dadoushka?

- It's to be the leader of the country.

- Is it a difficult job?

- Very hard.

- Why don't you change if it's so difficult?

- Because I want you to live in a beautiful country, in peace.

- And what is peace?

- It's getting along with everyone.

- But I've been told that you're fighting a war and not getting along with the Ukrainians.

- Who told you that?

- At school, some children talk about it because their daddy went to war and their mommy cries about it. Why don't you stop the war?

- It's difficult to answer you. Maybe you'll understand when you're older.

- But I'm already a teenager; I'm not a child anymore! I want you to stop the war. War is ugly and pointless!

- We'll talk about it later... In the meantime, why don't we take a walk after your dance and go for a picnic? I've packed everything we need.

The three of them and the dance teacher set off for a long walk around the estate. The weather is fine and the picnic delicious.

For the grandfather, whose difficult job as “chef du pays” keeps him terribly busy, the stay comes to an end. It was short, but full, especially with his granddaughter's dancing sessions and the activities they did together. He leaves, promising himself to repeat this brief vacation whenever he can.

Very late in the evening, the Tsar's special train pulled out of its shed. Putin leaves in the middle of the night to return to Moscow, accompanied in his carriage by the dance teacher, who has nothing but praise for her pupil.

As for his daughter and granddaughter, they extend their stay by forty-eight hours before leaving, as Putin does not want them to be seen together in order to protect their privacy and anonymity.

His granddaughter's thoughts did not leave him indifferent. His responsibilities as “leader of the country” impose duties on him, including avoiding the tragedies caused by war. He must do something, even if he remains convinced that the restoration of a great Russia and its cultural traditions is a fine project that must set an example for the whole world.

He thinks back to the evening he spent with Sergueï Choïgou in Novo-Ogaryovo seven months earlier. Today, he is frightened by what they said to each other. The cynicism and brutality of their approach to the war against Ukraine was truly sinister.

Sergueï remains one of his great friends and a loyal collaborator, but since he himself was infected by the virus, the Ministry of Defense and the direction of operations in Ukraine have been weighing on him, and Putin wants to talk to him about it.

He telephones him from his train, without even waiting to arrive in Moscow.

- Allo Sergueï !

- Ah! Vladimir, where are you? But do you know what time it is?

- This is the time for serious discussions between us, you know that!

- What do you have to say to me? ... Maybe you want to sack me like so many others?

- How do you know it? Sergueï?

- Vladimir, I've been expecting this. You really are extraordinary!

- Sergueï, I'm doing this because I like you. I know it's not easy for you to send thousands of fighters to their deaths. It hurts your conscience. I'm relieving you of the Ministry of Defense. I've found you a replacement who hasn't had a military career, but who knows the economy and the arms industry.

- Replace me with a civilian who doesn't know the army?

- Why not?

- Who is this civilian you have in mind to replace me? It's not Troupachev, if I understand correctly.

- Of course it's not!

- Then who is it?

- It's André Beloussov, our Deputy Prime Minister. I've sounded him out. He's agreed to succeed you as Defense Minister. The war is likely to go on for some time yet, because of Western countries' support for Ukraine. We're going to have to hold out and develop our arms production capacities without exhausting our resources. That's why I approached him. He proposes to equip and manage our armies differently, so as to reduce the number of deaths in the field by modernizing our weapons and our fighting methods. That's what we both want, isn't it? Sergueï, what do you think?

- You're a good strategist and I admire your choice. And what do you propose to me?

- You're my closest and most loyal friend. I'm appointing you Secretary of the Security Council, which brings together our highest officials. This will give you a less exposed position among my areopagus of ministers and advisors. It's a position of trust that keeps

you close to me in place of Nikolai Troupachev, whom I intend to appoint deputy to my Chief of Staff.

- Would you have liked this position? It's a less prestigious post. Troupachev will have to be satisfied with it. You, on the other hand, will no longer have on your conscience the wounds or death of our fighters, and you'll have the pleasure of working alongside me. Are you happy about this?

- How could I not be, Vladimir?

Satisfied with Sergueï's reactions and without further ado, Putin cuts the satellite connection to take a shower, while watching the news on the TV screens installed in the gym compartment adjoining his bathroom. Then he savors with his eyes the breakfast laid out in his dining room: omelet, cheeses, fruit juices and a number of products from Patriarch Kirill's farms that he is sure are not poisoned. It's what he likes, and what he hurries off to enjoy it after his shower, before taking a short nap.

Arriving on the outskirts of Moscow, Putin dreams for a few moments as the train slows down. The metallic sound of the axles confirmed that his train and his brain have not derailed during the night. He has been hard at work going through the list of generals and collaborators he wants to sack and the list of those he wants to keep, so as to form around him only a team of reliable, dedicated and competent people who share his convictions and aspirations. He himself feels on the right track when his train reaches the terminus reserved for him.

Moscow awakens to a light mist through which daylight is beginning to break. On the platform where his special train has arrived, Putin lets the dance teacher off, while he stays in his office car to enjoy the peace and quiet and prepare to implement the changes he plans to make in his armies and ministries. He's going to sack the generals and aides who don't share his new vision of war with Ukraine. His intelligence services have enough files to carry out these dismissals in an expeditious manner, without having to give many explanations other than accusing almost all the high-ranking officers and senior civil servants who will have to give up their posts of corruption. Only a few cases seem delicate to him, such as that of

Troupachev, who was the head of the Security and Intelligence Service, and who did not demerit. But his appointment as the Deputy Chief of his Cabinet seems to satisfy him. As for Medvedev, another delicate case to whom he is indebted for having enabled him to get through a bad constitutional patch to remain at the head of Russia, he's not too worried about this ultra who wants the most devastating war possible to defeat Ukraine, including by resorting to atomic weapons, but he has no longer any real power or the means to act without his approval.

These dismissals and mutations are difficult to understand for the people who have not been infected by the Benevolent, but for those who know Putin, and who know how much his mind, thoughts and behavior have been metamorphosed by the virus, these decisions are not surprising.

XVII - A dramatic bombing

Two days later, mother and daughter in turn set off discreetly from Daival, at night, with a driver from the Security Service, taking an ordinary road. Their driver drove carefully. Suddenly, near a fuel depot, they are startled by an alert. Missiles and drones are falling down and explode violently on the huge gasoline tanks installed below the road. A fantastic jolt throws the car into the air, dislocating it and ejecting its passengers before falling back onto the road and bursting into flames.

The firefighters, who arrived within minutes, discover, among the wreckage of the car, the driver with the skull smashed in, an bloodied but living woman and, a little aside, a young girl whose one leg has been blown off by the explosion.

Putin is informed by the Ministry of Defense of the bombing and the extent of the damage. But he doesn't know what happened to his daughter's car. He knows only from the State Security service, which was tracking the car by satellite, that at the moment of the bombing, the car was approaching this depot and that the communication was lost at the very moment of the explosion. Putin begins to pray that nothing has happened to his family. But terrible news arrive from a local security agent working at the fuel depot. The driver of the car is dead. His daughter Maria is injured, but alive. His beloved granddaughter, Evguenia, has lost a leg. The firefighters gave her first aid, stopped the flow of blood with a tourniquet and rushed her to the emergency room of the local hospital. She, who was graceful and full of vitality will no doubt be crippled for life.

On Putin's orders, State Security dispatches within one hour a helicopter to transport the wounded to the Moscow military hospital, where they are taken to the wards and operating theatres reserved for the sovereign and his family.

The next day, Putin is informed that Evgenia's leg has been amputated during the night. She will have to wear a prosthesis and

will probably no longer be able to dance. He manages in the afternoon to reach her and speak to her.

- I know you're seriously injured, Evguenia. Be brave. I hope you're not in too much pain. I asked the doctors to treat you and to ease your pain as well and as quickly as possible. In some days, they will equip you with the most beautiful artificial leg they can make. Evguenia, you are an exceptional girl and I love you. I will continue to stay informed of what the doctors do for you. But rest in the meantime.

A few days later, she calls him:

- Dadouschka, my new leg is almost ready. I've tried it on and I'm waiting to have it fitted. I don't have a foot at the moment, but I'm happy, I've got a friend next door to my room. She's my age and very nice. She told me she doesn't have any parents. I'd like to invite her to stay with us when I get out of hospital.

Putin wants to know more about this little girl. His staff tell him she is an Ukrainian girl who has lost her parents and her home in a bombardment from Russia. She has been transferred to Moscow to complete her treatment before being sent to one of the remote educational centers where orphaned Ukrainian children are placed in order to "Russify" them and make them forget their origins.

When a few days later, Evguenia learns that her new friend will have to leave the hospital, she calls in tears her Dadouschka to tell him she does want be separate from her friend. But Putin is inflexible. He doesn't give in to his little girl's cries. Nobody is allowed to contravene his directives for personal reasons.

A detailed report from the State Security office on the events that led to this tragedy tells him that it was probably in retaliation for the Russian army's attacks on Ukraine that that country fired a missile at the exploding fuel reserves. According to the chronology, it was his special advisor Sergueï Choïgou, when he was Minister of Defense, before being contaminated by the virus, who ordered the bombing, without knowing of course that the passengers in a car particularly important to the sovereign were going to be the victims.

He dares to tell his friend Choïgou, knowing that Choïgou was only carrying out orders coming from the top of the state, i.e. from himself. Both are therefore jointly responsible for this misfortune.

Together with Sergueï, his closest confidant, they keep it as a secret. This tragedy brings them closer together and guides them both towards the search for a solution to put an end to this war.

In Novo-Ogaryovo, where he has returned, Putin says nothing to anyone.

He, who was rather insensitive, is now deeply troubled. Is an empire, however great, worth the wound of a child while “Nothing can compensate for a single tear of a single child”, as Fyodor Dostoyevsky forcefully declares in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Despite all his power and the might of his armies, he could not prevent this tragedy. His little girl didn't die, but she will be permanently crippled. And her friend of the same age, who lost her parents, is now exiled far from her.

In Russia, the identity of those killed and injured in this Ukrainian bombardment has not been revealed. His opponents and Western countries therefore know nothing of this personal tragedy.

Putin is driven by two opposing feelings: anger, which drives him to seek revenge, and kindness, which encourages him to move towards peace and reconciliation.

After brooding over a strong desire for revenge, he stumbles over his powerlessness and abandons his desire to cause even more victims and deaths. The virus of benevolence tells him to move towards a cessation of hostilities with Ukraine. He opens up to Choïgou, who supports him, although his friend believes that stopping the war will not be easy to get the hardliners to accept nor by many of his supporters and collaborators, who will not understand this decision at the very moment when the military situation becomes favorable to him. But he is the Master. He has no explanation to offer. Those who know him will attribute this turn to the virus, because they are unaware of the tragedy he has just experienced.

In his home in Novo-Ogaryovo, he tells no one about his ordeal. He thought the war was over, but it has caught up with him, even in his peaceful retreat among the beech, maple and birch trees.

Russia's fighting units are weary, tired and less supported by the population, and their determination to fight the Ukraine is waning. The sovereign is told that some of his soldiers are refusing to obey the orders of their officers and non-commissioned officers, that there are

mutinies, revolts, dissent by infected troops and officers who no longer agree with this war, and that the prisons and labor and re-education camps are filling up with recalcitrants and dissenters. Added to this is the pressure exerted by women who no longer want to see their children or husbands go off to fight. Putin knows that the situation in Ukraine is very similar.

These observations prompt him to ask himself a number of personal questions:

- What do I have to gain by continuing this war? Everyone knows I'll win it, even if it takes a little longer. We have so many more resources in terms of men, weapons and ammunition that no one can doubt our victory.

- Doesn't this give me the opportunity to show my kindness and generosity? To show that I am not insensitive to the fate of all those who are fighting and suffering? I no longer believe in the vain glory achieved by the power of arms, but in that achieved by a quest for concord and peace. I want to see smiles bloom again on people's faces.

This inner monologue is a far cry from the warlike ambitions he harbored before being infected by the virus. Like his former Defense Minister, Choïgou, he no longer wants to hear about the death, injury and destruction caused by the fighting he could have ordered.

Seized by an inner lightning that makes him see the sweet and beautiful image of peace, he takes the most unexpected and decisive initiative for the continuation of the conflict with Ukraine. He decides to stop the fighting.

Ignoring the advice and criticism of his advisors and strategists, and driven by his intuition and personal convictions, he and his friend Sergueï will work for peace instead of continuing the war.

He unilaterally decrees a ceasefire for his armies, while keeping them in place in Ukraine, making this known to Zelensky, whom he hopes will agree to accept to do the same.

And with a residue of vanity and pride that he cannot shake off, so as not to give the impression that he is acting out of weakness or weariness, he issues a public statement declaring that it is out of generosity and greatness of spirit that he is renouncing an assured victory, and not for any other reason

XVIII - Zelensky and Putin's proposal

The Ukrainian president is taken by surprise when the Tsar of Russia announces his decision to the press. His troops are gradually dwindling and cruelly short of ammunition. His military situation is critical, and the whole world knows it.

Before responding to the initiative that Putin had taken and announced, he summoned his most knowledgeable aides and advisors to involve them in the important decision he had to make. They arrive in the Council Room, which for security reasons is located in the basement of the presidential palace, protected from bombardment and possible intrusion. This blind room is illuminated by an imposing bronze chandelier, diffusing a light that warms the icy atmosphere of the room, in the center of which is a large oval mahogany table.

Around this table, comfortable yellow leather armchairs welcome eight advisors whose stern, tense faces denote the seriousness of the debate in which they have been invited to take part.

The Defense Advisor, an elderly General with a weathered face, sits at the end of the table facing the President's chair. To his right stands a woman responsible for international relations, and to his left another woman in charge of the President's public relations. On either side of President Zelensky's armchair are two young personal advisors to the President and three other advisors who have been monitoring operations since the start of the conflict and keeping the President informed. Wearing the battle dress that has been his favourite working outfit since the start of the conflict with Russia, President Zelensky arrives and greets those present and thanks them before taking his seat and speaking. He wants to answer quickly to Putin's proposal.

Whereas in Russia, everything starts with one man and goes back to that same man without debate or discussion, in Ukraine, consultation has become the normal practice for building consensus. On this particular occasion, when the country has to decide whether

to continue or stop fighting, those present feel how important are everyone's opinions are.

The President has up with him the folder that was prepared for him, containing his neighbor Putin's ceasefire proposal and a few notes. His sunken features betray his exhaustion. Taking it upon himself to overcome his fatigue, he opens the meeting in a calm and resolute tone:

- Our neighbor has proposed a unilateral ceasefire, boasting of his great magnanimity. I've sent you Putin's text and other information on this proposal. I await your reactions and advice on this vitally important subject.

In the silence that follows, only the rustle of the mechanical ventilation motors can be heard. Each councillor is concentrated and attentive. The first to speak is the General, a man with piercing eyes and a martial bearing. His rough voice echoes through the room:

- First and foremost, we must demand Putin's total withdrawal from the territories he is unduly occupying. Allowing him to leave his troops in place is trusting him too much and giving him time to build up his strength. We all know the tricks and lies of this character.

One of the young advisors monitoring military operations tempers this recommendation:

- We are in a situation of military inferiority; he will never agree to withdraw his troops. A ceasefire can give us a respite to strengthen ourselves and prepare for a possible resumption of fighting. And let's not ignore the fact that, according to our intelligence services, Putin has changed. He seems more open to negotiation.

- Aren't you infected by his propaganda to say that ?" retorts his neighbor. There are so many contradictory opinions about what's going on in his staff and in his country! Do we believe that Putin is really trying to put an end to this senseless war or is he just trying to buy time before he finishes us off?

- If the fighting doesn't stop soon, it's not just our country that will continue to suffer heavy human and material losses; it too will suffer," states another of the President's advisers.

The diplomat, a specialist in international relations, takes her turn to speak:

- Let me tell you as a diplomat that refusing a ceasefire could be perceived on the international scene as obstinacy or pointless escalation. We won't make any headway if we don't have a little faith in what is being said about the changes in this statesman's behavior. Our secret services have informed me that he has become kind and benevolent since he fell ill.

- Is that the truth ? He knows how to spread false news! He's intelligent, rational and very adept at concocting the worst lies. To accept a ceasefire without serious guarantees is to weaken our President's political position and show himself to be gullible. Putin would he now respect the commitments he makes?

- I'm not of the opinion of the hardest of us," says the oldest advisor. I believe that a ceasefire will be seen as a real step forward and not as a defeat by our people, and that it may strengthen their support for our President. In any case, the international community is going to put pressure on us to accept this ceasefire, and there's no question of falling out with them.

- There are civilian lives at risk, economic repercussions, and regional and international stability, all these elements are important," stresses the public relations officer. We have to take them into account.

- Let me come back to what I said," resumes the military advisor. It's true that we can't demand that Putin withdraw all his troops immediately in order to accept this ceasefire. We need a little respite to reorganize our own forces, while uninterrupted fighting with additional human losses and material destructions would weaken us. Are there any options other than a ceasefire?

- Can't we involve the UN to guarantee the status quo on the ground once the agreement has been reached? asks one of the young advisors in charge of monitoring the conflict.

- Or can we enlist the support of our allies? adds his neighbor. They're pushing us for a ceasefire, but are they prepared to intervene on the ground if necessary to enforce it?

The discussion goes on for over an hour. The President listens attentively, but says very little. Finally, he concludes:

- That's enough for now ! Thank you very much. You've enlightened me, but it's up to me to decide and commit our country. I'm going to think again about everything we've said and exchanged.

My decision is leaning towards accepting this ceasefire without modifying the situation of the troops on the ground. But I will add a few conditions. If you have any other important information to share with me, please do so quickly. In the meantime, I invite you to refresh yourselves.

He stands up and hands each of them a glass, the “*verre de l'amitié*”, allowing those who wish to say him a few more words informally.

Once the Chairman has left the room, the glances exchanged between the councillors show their approval. They weren't the ones who made the decision, but they could see that it wasn't taken lightly, and it's certain that they'll all defend it.

The very next day, in a calculated move, Zelensky makes it known, via the press, that he is not taking his invader's proposal seriously. He asks for an international force to intervene before agreeing to stop the fighting. It's wishful thinking, he knows, but he has to say it.

The external supports that supply him with arms push him to accept this truce without international guarantees. It's a risky and dangerous gamble for Ukraine, which is in an inferior position, but the ukrainian President sees no other way to stop the loss of life. In the end, he accepts the ceasefire unconditionally, for reasons he presents as humanitarian.

Journalists rush to find out more about Zelensky's gamble. But he will say no more.

As soon as the population gets wind of the negotiations between its leaders, without further ado, gestures of fraternization between adversaries are multiplying on the ground. Several ukrainian and russian military leaders are injecting the virus into troops who have not yet been contaminated. They are thus, without saying so, opposing the continuation of the fighting. They even seek to destroy the remaining stocks of the first anti-Benevolent vaccine. A war is waging in the shadows between those who want peace quickly and those who still do not.

Newly infected soldiers go through the usual cycle of infection. High fevers, a coma, then a benevolent attitude. This is enough to

bring together formerly opposite units, many of whom have lost their fighting spirit and any desire to resume offensives.

On both sides of the conflict, however, the groups at the forefront, made up of mercenaries and ex-convicts released from prison to join the armies, remain fiercely opposed to peace. They are afraid of seeing their jobs and remuneration disappear. They are doing everything to protect themselves against the virus, so as to maintain their fighting spirit and keep on fighting. The implementation of an eventual ceasefire cannot accommodate the threat posed by these rebels to what is under discussion. They must be disarmed. But they are good and fierce warriors. The risk of a ceasefire getting out of hand can only be averted by tough negotiations with their leaders and a contract guaranteeing them continued pay and a continuation of their contract with the army.

The intensity of the fighting and bombing then gives way to a real lull. The country is devastated, but the governments seem determined to move towards an effective cessation of hostilities, thanks to women and the virus!

XIX - Ceasefire negotiations

To negotiate a ceasefire allowing to progress towards a peace treaty, the Tsar of Russia, the President of Ukraine and their representatives decide to meet in an undisclosed location.

As he sits down at the negotiating table, Zelensky frowns. He knows Putin too well not to be suspicious. Putin smiles and extends his hand to introduce his friend and special advisor, Choïgou, whom he has entrusted with preparing the conditions for implementing an armistice.

- So," says the latter, "are you ready to sign a peace agreement?

- Peace? You don't mean surrender, do you?" growls Zelensky.

Putin's special advisor replies:

- I didn't say capitulate, but negotiate. We both have a powerful asset that we can use.

- And what is that asset, Mr. Special Advisor?

With a slight smile, Sergei Choïgou clarifies:

- The virus! The one that has made our troops benevolent and less inclined to fight.

- What's that supposed to mean?

- It's time to use this virus to our common advantage.

- What do you mean by this?

- Let's finish contaminating our troops, our rulers and our population, and prepare them for a reconciliation as benevolent as we ourselves are. This will make it easier for our countries to accept the conditions for an armistice and peace. And why not try to spread this virus worldwide? We want lasting peace, don't we?

The President of Ukraine is baffled.

- But what do you want to do? It's not our problem.

- Make no mistake, we must tread this path with caution, but with determination. It's not a question of hastening the end of this war, but

of concluding it with honor and respect, with exemplary agreements that do not incite any of us to vengeance. Isn't that a wish you share?

The Ukrainian president didn't expect such considerations. But he no longer doubts the power of the benevolent virus on minds and behaviors.

- All right," he replies, "but first things first. We're ready to encourage the spread of the virus at home - that's what we've done and will continue to do. Are you ready to do the same in your own country?

- That's well underway, and we'll continue to stimulate the epidemic as best we can. We're also considering stopping all production of an anti-Benevolent vaccine and destroying existing stocks if you agree not to work on the development of such a vaccine. Is that a satisfactory response?

These preconditions augur well for a genuine desire to move towards a lasting peace agreement that transcends the borders of the two belligerents.

No sooner has he mentioned all the other conflicts going on around the globe than his interlocutor anticipates his thought:

- Let's also include in our agreements a joint commitment to promote the Benevolent virus epidemic at international level", says the special advisor. Let's look beyond our two countries to contribute to world peace.

Zelensky is seduced. It's remarkable that Russia has such a vision, which goes far beyond a simple arrangement between neighboring countries. He is now ready to talk to Putin about his proposal in order to reach an agreement on a ceasefire as soon as possible.

- If we can make our enemies more friendly, more willing to peace," adds the advisor, "conventional wars will no longer make sense. Perhaps this approach will change the game and create a climate conducive to negotiation wherever there are conflicts.

He adds:

- I believe that in many places on our planet, leaders do evil in the belief that they are doing good, because their intelligence and willpower are misguided.

Zelensky agrees, and his interlocutor continues with these remarks:

- The virus invites us to take a fresh look at those we often wrongly regard as our adversaries, because our vision is distorted. Why not follow the good advice attributed to the French king Henri IV: *“the best way to get rid of an enemy is to make a friend of him.”* Wasn't he right? Isn't that what we could be doing right now?

The discussion rises to an unexpected height. Both negotiators seem to be enjoying themselves. But it's time to come back down to earth. The scope of the talks has widened considerably, and this initial exchange suggests that it may not be impossible to agree first on the conditions for an armistice, and then on those for a lasting peace.

Now it's time to get down to concrete and serious business.

The announcement of this meeting in a secret location has aroused the interest of many countries and international organizations who wish to follow more closely the negotiations between these countries, which have hitherto been bitter adversaries.

By mutual agreement, the two teams involved in the negotiations decided to report regularly to the press, while continuing to refuse the presence of third parties on the site. Journalists are required to declare whether or not they have tested positive for the virus in order to be included on the list of people authorized to receive official press releases directly from the negotiators. This condition has the immediate effect of making the Benevolent virus known worldwide, and changing opinions about this tiny organism.

Thanks to this publicity, the epidemic quickly becomes global. It spreads around the world as confidence in the qualities of this virus grows. The WHO is quickly overwhelmed by the demands to promote its spread.

However, the enthusiasm of the virus's promoters is tempered by several pieces of news.

At a meeting of the Global Health and Safety Council, one participant warned his colleagues:

- Several states, which can be described as aggressive, do not approve of measures to support the expansion of the epidemic. They clearly fear that this will weaken their armies and diminish their

fighting spirit. They are opposed to any initiative that they describe as “wishful thinking”, and no longer want to hear about the goodness and generosity attributed to this virus.

A little later, the same Council learns that several countries opposed to the spread of the epidemic have joined forces to work on vaccines to counter the benevolent effects of the virus.

Then, a month later, another health institution sends the following message:

- It is feared”, says the press release, ‘that the virus may mutate into an offensive and dangerous form, causing death or serious illness rather than benevolence’.

Are these “fake news” or not? It's hard to know it for sure.

If some of these announcements do not correspond to proven facts, they show in any case that the battle between benevolence and aggressiveness is now being played out on several fronts. On the one hand, there is concern about the impact of the virus on economic and military competitiveness; on the other, there is unbridled enthusiasm for the new possibilities it opens up. To find the right balance between maintaining peace and preserving emulation between countries is becoming a difficult exercise, complicating the march towards a climate of universal peace.

XX - A phone call from Oslo

Ten months after the signing of the armistice that formalized the ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine, a telephone call from Norway surprises the secretary of Russia's sovereign. She checks the origin of the call and the quality of the caller before passing it on to the Sovereign.

- Majesty, a call for you from Norway. It's someone important, I understand.

- Hello, who is this?" asks the Sovereign as he takes the call.

- I am a member of the Nobel Peace Prize committee. Am I speaking to the sovereign of Russia?

- Yes, why do you want to talk to me? continues the Tsar.

- Your Majesty, please stay on the line and keep our exchange confidential.

- I'm on my own. I'm listening.

- It is our honor and pleasure to announce that the Nobel Committee has unanimously decided to place you at the top of the list of candidates for this year's Nobel Peace Prize, in recognition of your work in calming conflicts between nations.

- Did I hear right?" exclaims the sovereign.

After a moment's reflection, he adds with strange modesty:

- Aren't you mistaken? It's not me who deserves this prize, but a virus you've probably heard of.

- Your Majesty, we don't award this prize to things or micro-organisms, however beneficial they may be, but to those who, like you, have put them at the service of peace. And you are one of them.

The sovereign, surprised but deeply honored by this distinction, which he had by no means expected, didn't know what to say. After a few exchanges, during which he recalls those who have helped him to achieve this result, he asks, with obvious and touching spontaneity:

- Can't you also mention my personal physician and the President of Ukraine, with whom we worked on the dissemination of this Benevolent virus to gain acceptance for our armistice?

- Your Majesty, I understand your desire and admire your altruism. But this year's prize is only awarded to one person. You may, however, be accompanied by the persons of your choice at the official presentation of the Prize. They'll be very welcome. And of course, you can quote them in the speech you're expected to give.

The Committee representative adds:

- Do you agree to receive this award? If so, I will immediately inform the Chairman of our Committee. He will contact you to let you know the day and time which he will announce your name as the winner. The formal award ceremony will take place later in Oslo, in December, as is customary.

Before hanging up, the caller reminds him:

- Your Majesty, as I told your nomination must remain secret until the official announcement is made by the Chairman of the Committee himself. But don't worry, it will be done quickly now that you've given us your consent. An official notification will be sent to you this evening.

Quite stunned by this announcement, the sovereign steps out onto the porch of his residence to take a breath and regain his composure. His mind is racing with ideas, but it is with a sense of fulfillment that he strolls through the grounds of his residence. His decision to sign an armistice with Ukraine and plan a withdrawal of his troops, having obtained from the latter a commitment to grant special autonomous status to the previously occupied territories and the introduction of official bilingualism, was the beginning of a peaceful coexistence. It was a good decision, even if it displeased those closest to him and his most hard-line special services, who saw it as a defeat. It was well worth the Nobel Peace Prize!

He goes home to think about what's going to happen.

- I need to prepare a speech, of course, but also answers to the avalanche of questions that will be pouring in about me and Russia. This will be observed here with all the more attention as Norway is one of the Western countries that supported Ukraine against us.

Nine weeks later, when the whole world had been stunned to learn of Putin's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, the sovereign arrived in Oslo, accompanied by his family, the main members of his Cabinet, Yvan, his doctor, and a few close friends he had invited. He is received by the Chairman of the Nobel Committee, several representatives of the Norwegian government and members of the Norwegian royal family, before staying at a hotel close to Oslo City Hall, where the official award ceremony will take place.

He is informed that the President of Ukraine will be staying at the same hotel as him, and that his arrival is scheduled for the following day.

There is, however, one big absentee at this event. Some think of it with concern and obvious fear, others with the hope of seeing him reappear again, stronger than ever. It is, of course, the dear Benevolent one!

The truth is that the epidemic is coming to an end. For several months now, the virus has been dying out all over the world, despite the desperate efforts of some laboratories to reactivate it. Its agony is well advanced, although many biologists believe it is simply dormant and may reappear one day. But before it disappeared almost completely, it fortunately had the great wisdom to leave a lasting mark on society.

XXI - A prestigious prize

It's time for the official presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo. A large crowd of guests crowded into the Hall of Honor of the City Hall. Seated side by side in the front row are leading figures from Norway and other countries, as well as several former Nobel Peace Prize winners.

The Chairman of the Nobel Committee takes the podium to speak.

Conversations stop. All eyes are on him. He readjusts the top of his tuxedo, carefully unfolds the text of his speech and places it on the lectern. After glancing around the assembly and waiting for complete silence, he speaks:

Your Highnesses, Your Majesties, Ladies and Gentlemen Heads of State, dear representatives of countries and national and international institutions, distinguished guests,

It is a great honor and privilege to welcome you today to this Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony.

As you know, our Committee is made up of members from different backgrounds, specially appointed for this branch of the Nobel Prize. It is the Committee's difficult task to make a choice, after an in-depth examination between the numerous proposals from institutions, associations, personalities and local, national or international bodies recognized in particular in the fields of initiatives and struggles for peace, disarmament, human rights, bringing nations closer together, humanitarian aid and freedoms. Once again this year, we received a large number of applications. Nearly two hundred were shortlisted and examined, then submitted to the prize jurors, who draw up a final list of five names or groups of names in the spring. The winner or winners are elected after debate and discussion, in a vote held last October.

We have carefully examined these nominations. After lengthy deliberation, our Committee has decided to award this year's Nobel Peace Prize to the sovereign of Russia, His Excellency Vladimir Putin, for his action in favor of peace, following the long and difficult period of conflict between his country and Ukraine.

An initial round of applause, interspersed with whistles and protests, greets this choice...

In a modest but persevering way, this sovereign has put himself at the service of an infectious agent which has proved to be a powerful factor in union and peace between peoples. I'm talking about the "Benevolent".

Through his thoughtfulness, determination and enlightened choice in favor of spreading this hitherto unknown virus, he proved that it was possible to establish a climate favorable to peace discussions. And with courage, he took the difficult decision to start negotiations with his neighbor, Ukraine, at a time when the military situation was in his favor.

To demonstrate his commitment to peace in this part of the world, he asked his former adversary, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, to be present at his side today to associate him with this award.

Second round of applause, longer and louder...

In a friendly and generous gesture, our winner also wished to associate his personal physician with this award. Many decisions have benefited from his expertise and advice on epidemiological matters. He is here with us today, and our winner has just announced that he has entrusted him with the creation of a research center on this type of virus, to which part of the prize money will be donated.

The doctor takes the stage. New applause.

Today, we are honoring not only the sovereign of Russia, but two personalities who have overcome their differences, exploited an exceptional opportunity created by a virus, and committed themselves to peace, understanding and fraternity between nations, building on the climate of benevolence created by this virus.

When His Excellency the sovereign Vladimir Putin learned that he had been chosen by our Committee as the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, he initially recused himself, hastily telling us that the real winner must be the tiny Benevolent virus that has transformed the

social and political climate of the countries where it has developed, to the point of restoring peace in many parts of the world.

We listened to him, but we didn't follow him. Could you imagine me, at this very moment, presenting this award to a microscopic virus?

Laughter and applause...

Thanks to the sovereign's doctor and his future research center, this virus is going to be pampered and rewarded all the same!... if we can reactivate it, because unfortunately it seems to be disappearing...

The speech continues with a review of the many contributions made by previous Nobel Peace Prize laureates since the award's inception, and with thanks to the personalities present, before handing over to the sovereign of Russia for a long-awaited speech.

Following in the footsteps of the President of the Committee, the Tzar of Russia climbs onto the podium, takes his place behind the lectern, adjusts his bow tie, lowers the microphone slightly to his waist and fixes his gaze on an assembly many of whose members seem hypnotized by his presence on this stage.

The journalists move slightly to get a better look at him in his magnificent tuxedo with its shiny lapel. He looks a little awkward. Everyone stares at him wide-eyed, waiting to hear his voice.

In this magnificent grand salon of Oslo's City Hall, what is he going to talk about? The end of a conflict he had considered just? The greatness of Russia? His moral, political and economic ambitions for his country and the world?

In a rapid, yet clear and assured voice, he begins his speech:

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, distinguished members of the Nobel Committee, official representatives of various countries and international bodies, citizens of Russia, Ukraine and the whole world,

I am deeply grateful for this honor. I am not unaware of the strong protests that the Nobel Peace Prize Committee's decision has aroused, because I am at the head of a country that was at war and has only just concluded an armistice with its neighbor, Ukraine. I wanted the President of Ukraine to be here with me. He didn't shy away from the

criticism he received for agreeing to accompany me. May he be honored here at least as much as I am, for I feel indebted to him for the kindness I have not always shown him personally in the past.

Compared to all the personalities your Committee has awarded this prize to date, I feel humble, modest, and unduly favoured. Because, unlike many of my predecessors, I have not had to experience in my body the many hardships and sufferings caused by combat, nor have I shown compassion and care for the weakest and most neglected, nor have I given help and support to the victims of the grave calamities that have befallen our planet. Many leaders, heads of associations or even simple citizens of the world would have been far more worthy than me to receive this award.

If I have accepted the great honor you are bestowing on me today, I must tell you why .

It's not me or what I've done that's to be celebrated, but what in me has made me see what leads to peace. It's that much-feared virus which, before disappearing, shed light on that dark part of us which makes us believe that it's through arms that we become great and powerful.

I made war, I found reasons to make war, I considered it necessary to increase our territory and return to our ancient and vast empire. For me, it was a just war, or at least a justified one, to regain a former glory, a lost empire.

A beneficial virus opened my eyes. It made me see that greatness lies in conquering hearts and caring for the people we govern, more than in the surface area of conquered territories, the number of enemy soldiers killed and wounded, or the number of tanks, planes and ships pulverized, shot down or sunk.

It was by allowing myself to be infected by this "Benevolent" virus that I became convinced that conquest by force of arms is an inappropriate and useless means of expansion. This kind of conquest leaves too much bitter-tasting misery, whereas with the heart and benevolence, it's possible to create lasting and large empires.

To invade a country is to take from others territories that we think will increase our own power and security. It's a way of asserting our omnipotence. But the truth is, it's a very bad decision. By accepting to be invaded ourselves, not by our adversary's armies, but by the strength necessary to fight against our desires for omnipotence, we

can build a far superior empire, an empire that grows by the extent of our reciprocal relations of trust, by everything that contributes to peace with our neighbors in the world.

The coma caused by the virus guided me along this path. To fall into a coma, however briefly, is to pass through a corridor that seems to be that of death, because it makes you drop everything for a while. But you come out of it seeing life differently, as if, having gone through a separation from yourself, you wake up as a different man. That's what I thought about when I went through this viral illness.

I realized how kind and benevolent this virus was. Those who weren't afraid to overcome the apparent death to which the coma had taken them discovered that there are many other worlds than the one they had known until then: the world of the heart, of kindness, generosity and benevolence. They feared the virus would change and weaken them. But at the end of the loss of control that coma produces, they recognized that they were stronger, more secure, without having to prove it to themselves through external conquests. They discovered that their world could expand and grow peacefully and almost limitlessly within themselves.

It is this "Benevolent" virus that led me to renounce war and start with my neighbor a new type of relationship for building a lasting peace with him. I am delighted to see our peoples now moving forward on the path of reconciliation and peace.

From now on, I'm going to work for peace in war-torn or aggressive countries, keeping in mind the "Benevolent" virtues. This disappearing virus may not enter our body anymore, but we can keep within ourselves what it has taught us.

From now on, it's up to all of us to be that "Benevolent" to one another, acting like our beloved virus. All those who have had him must remember this, and will certainly agree with me. Social life and relations between people are more beautiful with benevolence!

In awarding me this prize, the members of your Committee have made a generous and courageous choice.

I thank them wholeheartedly. Many others deserved this prize. If I have nevertheless accepted this Nobel Peace Prize, it is really to tell you this message.

After thanking the Committee and the assembly one last time, the sovereign concludes his speech with a personal text, inspired by the circumstances, turning to President Zelensky:

*I wish to those who were once our foes,
That our accords grow and make us close.
May our past disputes fade into the mist,
And peace forever soothe hearts and persist.*

*May our battlefields, once stained with red,
Now be places where joy and laugh are spread.
Where the deafening roar of weapons of war,
Turns to friendly songs that children adore.*

*May our old quarrels transform to unity,
And our gazes meet with shared humanity.
May our differences be left behind,
To forge stronger bonds of a kinder kind.*

*May hearts once chilled by bitter strife,
Now beat as one, embracing life.
May our world finally decree
An order which is now war free.*

*I wish my foe, now turned my friend,
Our understanding know no end.
Our respect in every word be found,
Our friendship with peace forever bound.*

The assembly had clearly not expected such a declaration. They had been left with a cold, hard image of this sovereign. But the virus had got through since.

Before taking his place at the official dinner, Russia's sovereign is besieged by dozens of journalists. He consents to answer only the first of them who has slipped in beside him, and announces to the others that a press conference will follow the next day.

The bold journalist hurries to ask his questions:

- Can you tell us what was going through your mind that made you decide to end this war with your neighbor when you were in a strong position to defeat him?

- As I said before, to go through a coma is, in a way, to go through death, through an abandonment that makes us feel the vanity of our desire for omnipotence, since we're defenseless when we're unconscious. This is what the virus has done.

- Doesn't this sound like magic, or some kind of religious conversion that has transformed or enlightened you? Aren't you a victim of witchcraft?

- I don't think so! It was an acquiescence to an inner force coming from this astonishing virus that guided me. If you want to see for yourself, get infected by this virus... as long as you can still find positive people to infect you. Hurry up! You'll have the best answer of all. ... Thank you. I'm called to take my place at the official dinner.

Filled with honors, the sovereign of Russia and the accompanying President of Ukraine enjoy international recognition and fame as a result of this award.

Back home, they are widely celebrated. For once, the prevailing mood is not one of silence, fear or slavish obedience. It's a time for celebration, joy and reconciliation.

It is decided to erect statues in several public squares in both countries, some of which show the two leaders, side by side, signing the armistice.

It is almost as friends that they are able to embark on the long and difficult negotiations to repair the damage of war and finalize a lasting peace agreement.

In the end, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee was right. This prize did more for peace than treaties, opportunistic alliances, personal exploits or spectacular revolutions.

XXII - Inquiry into the choice of laureate

Many people were astonished that the leader of Russia should have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Within the Nobel Committee itself, some members and their assessors had found Putin's candidacy shocking, even provocative because coming from a country hostile to Norway. To ascertain the seriousness of the application, the Chairman of the Committee had asked two of its members to visit Russia.

As soon as the name of the laureate was announced, a Norwegian investigative journalist became also interested in this unexpected choice by the Nobel Committee. To investigate, he also travelled to Russia, where he met the palace secretary, who showed him the application file submitted by the sovereign's office.

- Two great Norwegians did come here,” had confirmed the archivist. They thought they'd only stay two days to meet the Chief of Staff and the sovereign himself. In reality, they stayed over ten days, as they caught the strange virus that continued to plague our capital. They were hospitalized and treated here. When they arrived, they weren't very talkative or friendly. But after they'd slipped in and out of the coma, they were charming and friendly, and told me how excited they were by what they'd seen and heard here. They even gave me a hug and a present before they left.

Back in Oslo, the journalist had easily tracked down the two Committee members who had visited Russia a few months earlier. Both confirmed that they had been very well received at the Czar's office in the Kremlin and that they had fond memories of their visit, despite catching the infamous virus on the very first day. They felt indebted to the people who had so kindly taken care of them, welcomed them and guided them on their tour of Moscow. They even remembered very well the secretary who let herself be kissed so easily.

When they had returned to sit on the Committee again, these delegates were still slightly feverish, but feeling full of drive and energy to defend the candidacy of Russia's Tsar. Unaware that they were still contagious, they had unwittingly infected four other Committee members and collaborators. And because the latter had not taken any special precautions because they had considered the illness benign, they themselves had passed the virus on to other colleagues, eventually infecting almost half the Committee.

As the epidemic developed within the Nobel Peace Committee, Putin's candidacy gradually was climbed up the list of nominees, to the point where he came out on top in the final ranking.

Thee Benevolent had done an excellent job of sorting and ranking, in complete discretion.

XXIII - Towards peace

The armistice was signed and respected. It had established a ceasefire in all territories where Russian and Ukrainian troops had clashed. As planned, these territories had been demilitarized. In a gesture more symbolic than binding, it was agreed that an international force would be stationed there for two years to guarantee the agreement. As a result, these territories, which had been the object of dissension and fighting between the two states, were returned to Ukraine, in accordance with the borders recognized by international law prior to the conflict, but were going to benefit from autonomy within Ukraine. To facilitate exchanges and re-establish a cultural union between these countries, Russian and Ukrainian were recognized as official languages in these territories. It was also specified that, in the Ukrainian constitution, these territories, which will be divided into regions and cantons, will have their own elected assemblies, with broad powers in education, taxation and police security, and that they will be involved in all national decisions on foreign and defense policy, on the model of Switzerland. These first points of the peace agreement have been implemented without too much tension. But there are still many points to be settled before a definitive peace treaty can be signed.

Where discussions began to stumble was on compensation for the material damage caused by the conflict on both sides of their borders. The amounts involved were staggering, and assigning responsibility seemed an intractable problem, even though it was clear that Russia had caused the vast majority of the damage. But since both countries had admitted that there was no clear winner nor loser, it was not possible to put all the blame on Russia.

The responsibilities and compensation to be paid to repair the human damage resulting from the conflict - the dead, the wounded, the sick, the handicapped and the psychologically traumatized - also

had to be examined, as well as the ecological problems to be solved in order to make the seas and soils habitable and safe again, while hundreds of thousands of mines, shells and machine carcasses littered the ground or drifted in or under the water.

The list and the work to be done to restore the two countries concerned to their pre-conflict state were giving a measure of the appalling stupidity of such a war. But did it really had to be this way for this kind of conflict to end? Did it take so many dead and wounded, so many people displaced or maimed, so many families dislocated, so much suffering inflicted, so much destructions?

Last but not least - and many countries and international bodies were keen on this - the perpetrators of the most serious war crimes committed by the belligerents during the conflict had to be brought to justice. It was on this point that the debates would going to be the most difficult. It was decided to postpone the trial so as not to delay progress on the other points.

Some were pointing the way the victors in Japan had treated the Japanese emperor in the peace treaty that ended hostilities in Asia after the Second World War. Despite his obvious responsibility, the emperor had been spared. Condemning and deposing him would have destroyed the glue holding the nation together, and would only have fuelled a desire for revenge on the part of his military leaders. The humiliation of his dismissal and condemnation had been avoided, and he had not been personally impeached.

For Putin and some of his ministers, it took many negotiations between leaders within the International Criminal Court to admit that the Putin present at the negotiating table, who had granted a ceasefire and wanted to make peace, was a different man from the one who had been a cruel and ruthless warlord. The ICC judges based their decision on these considerations, not to absolve the Russian leader of his responsibilities in the conflict with Ukraine, but to free him completely in order to reunite peoples who will now be able to get along and rebuild a peaceful world around their reconciled leaders.

It was at this point that the last and ultimate challenge of fulfilling the wishes of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate came to mind. It was to

reward the true author of this peace under negotiation, the true author of this transformation of relations between men, an author so discreet that we had lost sight of him. His name was the Benevolent, and he had disappeared.

All the science of biologists proved incapable of making him reappear, reactivating him or recreating a similar one. All hope was not lost, but realism suggested that it would not be for tomorrow.

It therefore seemed highly desirable, without waiting for the unlikely arrival of another benevolent virus, for everyone to become this much-desired virus of peace themselves, drawing on the wonderful memories of what the benevolent virus had brought and made possible.

Places and main characters

This fiction does not pretend to give faithful portraits of the people quoted, nor an exact presentation of the places and events that took place, but it does take up a certain number of descriptions and information published in the press and media to flesh out the story without any pretension to reflect reality.

It aims to show how the decisions of a few men can change the world for good or ill, not only in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, but in all situations of tension and confrontation.

Main locations

- USSR, or Soviet Union, a former federal “empire” stretching from Europe to Asia, that broke up in 1991.
- Russian Federation or Russia, a republic that emerged from the former USSR.
- Ukraine, country also born of the break-up of the USSR, neighboring Russia, which became independent in 1991.
- Moscow, capital of Russia.
- Kiev, capital of Ukraine.
- The Kremlin, political center of the Russian Federation, former residence of the Tsars and Soviet leaders in Moscow.
- Novo-Ogaryovo, estate and state residence of the President of the Russian Federation, west of Moscow;
- Daival, estate and vacation resort of the President of Russia, located between Moscow and Saint Petersburg;
- Vektor, a virology and biotechnology research center, classified P4, i.e. highly secure, as it is likely to work on very dangerous viruses.

Main characters

- Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, presented here as the new Tsar or ruler of Russia.
- Yvan, professor of medicine, Putin's personal physician.
- Boris, Putin's chief of staff.
- Katya, one of Putin's secretaries.
- Maria, one of Putin's daughters.
- Evguenia, Maria's daughter and Putin's granddaughter.
- Evguenia's dance teacher.
- Sergueï Choïgou, Defense Minister, then Special Advisor to the Tsar, Putin's friend.
- Andrei Beloussov, Minister of Defense, after Choïgou.
- Mikhaël Michoustine, Prime Minister of Russia.
- Alexandre, head of Russia's secret police.
- Kirill, Russian Orthodox Patriarch, friend of Putin.
- Prigojine, Putin's former cook and head of a large militia serving Russia.
- Mikhaïl Khodorkovsky, Putin's main political opponent, based abroad.
- Igor, local leader of Putin's opponents.
- Rassoul, in charge of communications for Putin's opponents.
- Dimitri, deputy head of Russia's Security and Intelligence Service (SIS).
- Zelensky, President of Ukraine.
- Zelensky's 8 advisors.

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