

*The Diary of a Superfluous Man
and Other Novellas*

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Superfluous Man
and Other Novellas*

Ivan Turgenev

Translated by Michael Pursglove



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'Asya' first published in Russian in 1858
'First Love' first published in Russian in 1860
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Introduction

The three works in this collection are in a form at which Turgenev excelled – what Russians call the *povest*’ – the tale, the “long” short story or the novella. The stereotype of the Russian novel as a “great baggy monster” does not remotely apply to Turgenev’s work. His longest novel, *Virgin Soil*, runs to only 260 pages in the Alma Books translation, while his shortest, *Rudin*, is less than half its length and has indeed been described by one critic as an “overgrown novella”. Turgenev himself, when planning the writing of *On the Eve* – which is indisputably a novel – refers to it as a “big novella” (*bol’shaya povest*’).

Only ten years separate the publication of ‘The Diary of a Superfluous Man’ in *Notes of the Fatherland* in 1850 and that of ‘First Love’ in *Library for Reading* in March 1860. Yet these were momentous years in Turgenev’s literary career. In 1850 he had not yet published in book form the cycle of short stories, *Memoirs of a Hunter*, that was to make his name, nor had he published a single novel. By 1860, however he had published three of his six novels – *Rudin*, *Nest of the Gentry* and *On the Eve* – and the three novellas which comprise the present book. Two of the novellas – ‘Asya’ and ‘First Love’ – form natural pairs with two of the novels, the elegiac tone of ‘Asya’ being replicated in *Nest of the Gentry*, and the twin themes of love and death predominating in both ‘First Love’ and *On the Eve*. In those ten years the social and political climate of Russia had changed drastically. Before the death of Nicholas I in 1855, an almost paranoid, censor-ridden atmosphere prevailed. Turgenev himself was briefly incarcerated for having written a mildly laudatory obituary of Gogol. Under Alexander II, on the other hand, censorship was much relaxed and change was in the air, particularly regarding the perennial problem

of serfdom. 'The Diary of a Superfluous Man', for instance, was mutilated by the censor on its first appearance; only in 1856 was the full text published. The same relatively liberal atmosphere was still prevailing when 'First Love' was published, just two months after Turgenev's final contribution to the *Contemporary*, his article 'Hamlet and Don Quixote', in which he divides the human race and the human personality into introverted Hamlets and extroverted Don Quixotes.

It is interesting to note how much of the later Turgenev can be detected in 'The Diary of a Superfluous Man'. Most obviously, the title itself immediately put a name to a type which had existed, in varying forms, in Russian literature at least since Griboyedov's Chatsky in the 1820s. The term "superfluous man" was seized upon by critics, most notably by Nikolai Dobrolyubov, whose article 'What Is Oblomovism?' (1859) established a definitive list of "superfluous men", culminating in the eponymous Oblomov. Chulkaturin is not the first example of the type in Turgenev's prose oeuvre: the narrator of Turgenev's first novella 'Andrei Kolosov' (1844) and the protagonist of 'Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District' (1848) are both "superfluous men", or Hamlets, to use Turgenev's own term for his version of the type. He would go on to create several more, notably Rudin in his first novel, Gagin in 'Asya' and the would-be revolutionary and mediocre poet Nezhdanov in his last novel, *Virgin Soil*. Versions of the superfluous man continued to appear occasionally in Russian literature after Turgenev, notably in the work of Anton Chekhov.

All three stories have at their core an unhappy love affair, remembered nostalgically long after the event by the man involved. Jane Costlow's comment that "'Asya'... is a work explicitly about love and memory" could equally well be applied to the other two stories in this collection. In all three stories, verbs meaning "to remember" and the noun "memory/memories" occur no fewer than seventy-nine times in total, the highest number (thirty-three) being, perhaps surprisingly, in 'The Diary of a Superfluous Man'. There are three time frames in this story: the twelve days immediately preceding Chulkaturin's death, as recorded in his diary, and the reminiscences

contained in these diary entries of, first, his childhood and, secondly, his disastrous courtship of Liza and her abandonment by the prince. Both 'Asya' and 'First Love', as well as 'Faust' (1855), also involve rather older males looking back on their youthful passion for much younger women. Chulkaturin is thirty and Liza seventeen. Asya too was seventeen when, "in long past days", "some twenty years ago" when he was "about twenty-five" N.N. fell in love with her. In 'First Love' Vladimir Petrovich, now forty, is said to have been sixteen in 1833, while Zinaida was twenty-one.

Two of the three stories have a markedly autobiographical element. 'The Diary of a Superfluous Man', however, although mostly set in Turgenev's native city of Oryol, cannot, by its very nature, be an autobiographical story. In 'Asya', by contrast, Turgenev follows his usual practice of using several prototypes to create a single character. Asya herself, for instance, appears to be based on three girls, all known personally to Turgenev, born with what was then the considerable stigma of illegitimacy: his paternal uncle Nikolai Nikolayevich Turgenev's daughter, who was known as Asya, a relatively unusual affectionate form of Anna, and was raised by Turgenev's mother; Turgenev's illegitimate half-sister Varvara; and his own illegitimate daughter Pelageya, later known as Polina or Paulinette. The fictional Asya bears many of the traits of Paulinette, whose mother was low-born and who was raised in the family of Pauline Viardot. In 1857 she was fifteen, was failing to get on with Viardot's own children and enduring the trauma of her first love affair. By contrast, the three players in the love triangle at the centre of 'First Love' are drawn from readily identifiable individuals, which Turgenev disguised by altering their ages slightly: Turgenev himself, his father and Princess Yekaterina Lvovna Shakhovskaya (1815–36). Similarly, the summer residence (dacha) in the Neskuchny Garden, where most of the action takes place, is based on an actual building, rented by Turgenev's father in 1833, but destroyed at the end of the 1920s. Turgenev himself claimed, with some justification: "I did not make up this novella; it was given to me by life itself", a statement that can be applied equally well to the great majority of his works.

Turgenev was very conscious of his literary heritage, both Russian, in the persons of Alexander Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol, but also European, in the persons of Goethe and Heine. ‘The Diary of a Superfluous Man’ is clearly modelled on Gogol’s ‘Diary of a Madman’ (1835), and includes a quotation by the “author” of that diary, Poprishchin. There are clear echoes too in the duel scene of Pushkin’s short story ‘The Shot’ (1831). The stimulus for creating the autobiographical ‘First Love’ was Dostoevsky’s short story ‘The Little Hero’, published in *Notes of the Fatherland* in 1857. Turgenev’s characters are often judged by their awareness, or lack of it, of this heritage. Quotations from, and readings of, works admired by Turgenev were a feature of his oeuvre in the 1850s, with Pushkin and Goethe featuring especially prominently. Thus N.N. quotes Pushkin in the first sentence of ‘Asya’, as later do both Asya and her half-brother Gagin. Indeed, Joe Andrew points out that N.N. has “a tendency to try to reconstruct his own life as a dramatic narrative”. Chulkaturin reads Pushkin’s ‘The Prisoner of the Caucasus’ to Liza, quotes Lermontov, and his last words are lines from a Pushkin lyric. This in spite of the fact that, in the first entry to his diary, he asserts that it is not a literary work: “writing a novella, or whatever, is not what I do”; and on the 26th March he tells his diary that “Since I am not composing a story for a gentle reader but merely writing for my own pleasure, it follows that I have no reason to resort to the usual devices of literary gentlemen”. However, the diary, with its acutely observed portraits of the town of O. and its inhabitants, clearly has a literary merit unexpected in one so diffident. Perhaps his disreputable second in the duel scene, Koloberdyayev, inadvertently speaks the truth when he sarcastically describes Chulkaturin, who expresses regret at not having been killed in the duel with the prince, as a “literary type”. ‘First Love’, like ‘Asya’, contains quotations from Pushkin’s poetry, and although Zinaida (unlike her real-life prototype) is “not a poet”, she asks Vladimir to read a Pushkin lyric to her. Vladimir himself quotes Khomyakov but, like Zinaida, is no poet himself and gives up his attempt (in Chapter 14) “to compose something in Sentimentalist vein”. However, literature

plays a part in Vladimir's life, as we see in both the first chapter, where we learn that he is indifferent to aristocratic titles because of his reading of Schiller's *Die Räuber*, and in the last chapter, where his reaction to the denouement of the story is to reach for a suitably apt quotation from Pushkin.

The reception of all three stories was mixed, and not always on the familiar conservative-versus-liberal lines. For instance, Alexander Druzhinin, a liberal, greeted the first, heavily censored publication of 'The Diary of a Superfluous Man' with the comment that it was Turgenev's "weakest" work. However, he was less critical of the 1856 uncensored version. Lev Tolstoy used even stronger language, dismissing 'Asya', published in the *Contemporary* in January 1858, as "garbage". This did not prevent him, however, from apparently incorporating aspects of Asya in his depiction of Natasha Rostova in *War and Peace*. The editors of the *Contemporary*, Nikolai Nekrasov and Ivan Panayev, were warm in their praise of the story, with Panayev pronouncing the story "a delight... one of your most successful". However, it was a major contributor to that journal, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who produced by far the most important and influential response to 'Asya'. His 'The Russian at the Rendez-vous', subtitled "Reflections upon reading Mr Turgenev's tale 'Asya'" (1858), pointed out that the story was more about N.N. the narrator, than about Asya. In so doing he anticipated several modern commentators who have focused not only on N.N. but on Asya's half-brother Gagin. They point out that Asya is viewed exclusively through their eyes and her actions interpreted by them to suit their own preconceptions. As Joe Andrew puts it, she "emerges from the narrative as a riddle incarnate". Much the same is true of Zinaida, who, to quote Joe Andrew again, "is presented as the essence of contradiction, an unfathomable enigma". Chernyshevsky's emphasis is on the key scene in the novella, the assignation scene (Chapter 16); he notes that there are similar scenes in both *Rudin* and the novella 'Faust' (1855) and goes on to attack Russian liberalism in general, saying that the weak and indecisive behaviour of N.N. in that scene "is nothing more than the symptom of the epidemic disease rooted

in our society". The article appeared in the *Athenaeum*, and it was in that journal that Turgenev's close friend and advisor Pavel Annenkov responded to Chernyshevsky. Annenkov's article 'The Weak Man: A Literary Type. Apropos of Turgenev's 'Asya' (1858) claims that N.N. is a historical type rather than a product of a contemporary malaise.

One of Turgenev's all-time favourites was 'First Love', of which he said: "Of all my female types, I'm most pleased with Zinaida from 'First Love'. In her I succeeded in creating a genuinely live person: a coquette by nature, but an attractive coquette." Critical reaction was, however, again mixed, and almost exclusively focused on the "immoral" character of the heroine, which was sometimes linked to the equally "immoral" behaviour of Yelena, the main female character in *On the Eve*. That novel had been published two months before 'First Love' and had given rise to a critical furore, which had not yet subsided when 'First Love' was published. The reaction of the radical critic Dmitry Pisarev is typical of this strand of criticism: he said he did not understand Zinaida's character and had never met anyone like her. His fellow radical Nikolai Dobrolyubov said that Zinaida was "a cross – in skirts – between Pechorin [from Lermontov's *Hero of our Time*] and Nozdryov [from Gogol's *Dead Souls*]". The *Moscow News* described her personality as "no more than coquettish, capricious in the highest degree and far from moral". On the other hand the *Russian Word's* critic pointed to the sensitivity and poetic charm of Turgenev's descriptive powers in 'First Love': "Without touching on serious and complex social questions, it is permeated with the profound poetry of love... It has been read with enjoyment by everyone. Once one begins... to read these pages, it is impossible to tear oneself away before the end. These ardent, passionate pages exude the secret charm of genuine recollection of first love, youthful delight and youthful sorrow." The *St Petersburg News* was equally laudatory: "By the end of this work the author has preserved such a store of inspiration that it is poured out in words reminiscent of the concluding lines of a Pushkin lyric." When the story was translated into French, Louis Viardot, Turgenev's friend

INTRODUCTION

and collaborator, objected to the theme of adultery; Gustave Flaubert, on the other hand, was enthusiastic in his praise for the novella and even claimed he had personal experience of a similar set of circumstances.

All translators are indebted to those who went before, and I am no exception. The annotations to the stories in Russian editions by A.N. Dubovnikov, E.N. Dunayeva, E.I. Kiiko and L.M. Lotman, and in Western editions and translations by F.G. Gregory and Richard Freeborn, have been a valuable source of information. The translations of all three stories by Constance Garnett and Richard Freeborn have been consulted, as has the 1862 French translation by V. Desloges, 'Journal d'un homme de trop', the 1863 translation (probably by Louis Viardot, though it is credited to Henri-Hippolyte Delaveau) of 'First Love', 'Un premier amour', and the 1869 French version of 'Asya'. This translation, whose title 'Annouchka' reflects Asya's birth name, is sometimes said to be the work of Turgenev himself. In fact it is the 1858 version by Delaveau, revised, or at least approved, by Turgenev, whose input into the translations of 'The Diary' and 'First Love' was considerable. 'Annouchka', the text of which can be found online, is particularly useful to the modern translator in that it often gives a clue to the meaning of some of the more obscure phrases in the original Russian.

I am also very grateful to Russian colleagues, particularly to Natasha Dorofeyeva and Anna Komarova, who helped with some of the trickier linguistic points and references, and to Christian Müller of Alma Classics who edited the text with his usual patience and meticulous attention to detail.

– Michael Pursglove

The Diary of a Superfluous Man
and Other Novellas

The Diary of a Superfluous Man

*Sheepwaters Village. 20th March 18***

THE DOCTOR has just left me. I got some sense out of him at last! However much he beat about the bush, he had to come out with it finally. Yes, I'll soon be dead, very soon. The ice will thaw on the rivers, and, with the last of the snow, I'll probably float off... but where to? Lord knows! To the sea, like the rivers. Well, what of it! If you're going to die, it's best to die in spring! But is it all that absurd to begin your diary with perhaps two weeks to go before you die? Where's the harm in that? How are fourteen days less than fourteen years or fourteen centuries? In the face of eternity all is vanity, so they say. Yes indeed, but in that case eternity itself is vanity. I seem to be indulging in idle speculation. That's a bad sign. Am I being cowardly? I'd better make a start on my story. It's damp and windy outside – I'm forbidden to go out. So what is there to tell? Civilized people don't talk about their illnesses. Writing a novella, or whatever, is not what I do; reflecting on elevated topics is beyond me; descriptions of things around me hold no interest even for me. However, to do nothing is tedious, and I'm too idle to read. So let me tell the story of my whole life to myself. A splendid idea! In the face of death it's the decent thing to do, and it won't offend anyone. Here goes.

I was born some thirty years ago into a fairly rich landowning family. My father was an inveterate gambler; my mother was a woman of character, a very virtuous woman. But I've never known a woman whose virtues afforded her less pleasure. She was crushed by the weight of her virtues and tormented everybody, beginning with herself. During her fifty years of life, she never once took a break or eased off. She was forever scurrying busily about, like

an ant – and all to no purpose, which you cannot say of ants. A restless worm gnawed away at her day and night. Only once did I see her completely calm, namely in her coffin, the first day after her death. As I looked at her, it really did seem to me that her face expressed quiet astonishment: the half-open lips, sunken cheeks and meek, unblinking stare seemed to say: “How good it is to stop moving!” Yes, it is good, very good, to be finally rid of the wearisome awareness of life, the nagging and troublesome sense of existence! But that’s not the point.

I had a difficult and joyless childhood. My father and mother both loved me, but that did not make things any easier. My father had no authority in his own house, nor did he have any significance, being a man clearly given over to a shameful and ruinous vice. He was aware of his failing and, lacking the strength to abandon his cherished passion, at least tried, through his permanently affable and modest demeanour and compliant humility, to earn the indulgence of his exemplary wife. Mama really did bear her misfortune with that majestically expansive and virtuous long suffering in which there is so much self-regarding pride. She never reproached my father for anything, handing over the last of her money without comment and paying off his debts. He sang her praises both to her face and behind her back, but disliked remaining at home; he was surreptitiously affectionate to me, as if he were afraid of infecting me with his presence. On these occasions his distorted features exuded kindness, and the febrile grin on his lips would be replaced by such a touching smile, and his hazel eyes, set among delicate lines, would shine with such love, that I could not help pressing my cheek to his cheek, which was warm and damp with tears. I would wipe away these tears with my handkerchief and again they would flow, like water from an overfull glass. I would begin to shed tears myself, and he would comfort me, stroking my back and covering my face with kisses from his quivering lips. Even now, some twenty years after his death, whenever I think of my poor father, silent sobs well up in my throat and my heart begins to beat – to beat with such passion and bitterness and to be tormented with such wistful regret, as

if it would continue to beat for a long time and as if there really were cause for regret.

My mother, on the other hand, always behaved the same way towards me: affectionately but coldly. Such mothers, sententious and righteous, are often to be found in children's books. She loved me, but I did not love her. Yes! I shunned my virtuous mother and was passionately fond of my reprobate father.

But that's enough for today. It's a start, and there's no point worrying about the ending, whatever that may be. That hinges on my illness.

21st March

REMARKABLE WEATHER TODAY. Warm, clear; sunlight playing cheerfully on melted snow. Everything sparkling, steaming, dripping; sparrows singing like mad on dark, mildewed fences; the damp air is a sweet but terrible irritant to my chest. Spring is coming! I sit by the window and look across the river to the open fields beyond. O Nature! Nature! I love you so much, but I emerged from within you incapable even of life. Here's a cock sparrow hopping along with wings spread; he is singing, and every sound of his voice, every fluffed-up feather of his little body, exudes health and strength.

What follows from this? Nothing. He is healthy and has the right to fluff up his feathers whilst I am terminally ill – that's all there is to it. It's not worth saying anything more about it. Tearful apostrophes of Nature are devastatingly funny. Let's get back to the story.

As I've already said, I had a very difficult and joyless childhood. I had no brothers or sisters. I was educated at home. And what would my mother have done with herself if she'd put me in a *pension** or a state school? That's what children are for: to save their parents from boredom. We lived in the country for the most part, visiting Moscow occasionally. I had governors and tutors, as was the custom. I particularly recall one desiccated and tearful German, Rickmann by name, an unusually miserable

mortal, ground down by fate and burning with fruitless nostalgia for his distant fatherland. There were times in the terribly stuffy atmosphere of the cramped front hall, beside the stove, when my unshaven manservant Vasily, nicknamed “The Goose”, would sit in the sackcloth blue smock he always wore, playing cards with Potap, the coachman, who had just put on his snow-white hareskin jacket and his indestructible polished boots. Behind the partition, Rickmann would be singing,

*Herz, mein Herz, warum so traurig?
Was bekümmert dich so sehr?
S'ist ja schön im fremden Lande –
Herz, mein Herz – was willst du mehr?**

After the death of my father, we moved to Moscow for good. I was twelve years old at the time. My father died from a stroke, at night. I'll not forget that night. I was sleeping soundly, like all children usually sleep, but, as I recall, even in my sleep I fancied I heard heavy and regular snoring. Suddenly I felt someone seizing my shoulder and prodding me. I opened my eyes. Before me stood my manservant.

“What is it?”

“Come quickly. Come quickly, Alexei Mikhailovich is dying...”

Like a thing possessed, I dashed from my bed and into my father's room. I looked: my father was lying with his head thrown back. He was red in the face and snoring stertorously. The household servants were crowding round the doorway with frightened faces; in the front hall someone was asking in hushed tones: “Should we send for the doctor?” In the yard a horse was being taken out of the stables; a gate creaked; a tallow candle burned on the floor of the room. Mama was beside herself, but had not lost her sense of decorum or her own worth. I threw myself onto my father's breast, embracing him and whispering: “Papa! Papa!” He lay motionless, his eyes strangely narrowed. I looked at his face – and unbearable horror made me catch my breath. I squealed in terror, like a roughly handled bird. I was pulled off him and

taken out. Only the day before, as if he had had a premonition of his impending death, he had treated me with great warmth and melancholy loving kindness. They brought in a sleepy, unkempt doctor, who smelt strongly of lovage vodka. My father died under the doctor's lancet, and the next day, utterly stupefied with grief, I stood with a candle in my hands in front of the table on which his body lay, uncomprehendingly listening to the acolyte's bass singing, which was occasionally interrupted by the priest's weak voice. Tears kept streaming down my cheeks, my lips, my collar and my shirt front; I shed copious tears and looked fixedly at, could not tear my eyes from my father's motionless face. It was as if I were expecting something from him. My mother meanwhile would fall to her knees and bow her head to the ground, then slowly rise to her feet and cross herself, pressing her fingers hard against her forehead, shoulders and stomach. I did not have a single thought in my head; I was seemingly completely paralysed, yet I felt that something terrible was happening to me... Death had looked me in the eye at that moment and taken note...

After the death of my father, we went to live in Moscow for one very simple reason: our entire estate went under the hammer to pay off his debts – literally everything, with the exception of one village, the very one in which I am now living out my glorious existence. Even though I was young at the time, I admit that the sale of our nest grieved me; or rather I really only grieved over our garden. Almost my only bright memories are associated with that garden; there, one quiet spring evening, I buried my best friend, Trixie, an old dog with a docked tail and crooked paws; it was there that I used to hide in the long grass and eat stolen apples, red, sweet, Novgorodchina apples.* And it was there, finally, that I first saw, among some ripe raspberry bushes, the housemaid Klavdiya, who, despite her snub nose and her habit of laughing into her kerchief, aroused such tender passion in me that I could scarcely breathe or say anything in her presence and would all but swoon. One Easter Sunday, when it was her turn to kiss her master's lordly little hand, I almost flung myself down at her feet to kiss her worn-out goatskin shoes. My God! Was all

that twenty years ago? It seems a long time ago that I was riding my shaggy chestnut along the old wattle fence of our garden, that I stood up in the stirrups and plucked bicoloured poplar leaves. While humans live, they are unaware of their own existence; like sound, it becomes audible to them some time later.

Oh, my garden! Oh, the overgrown paths beside the little pond! Oh, the sandy spot beside the tumbledown weir where I used to fish for gudgeon and char! And you tall birch trees, with long, dangling branches, from behind which would sometimes come the sound of a peasant's doleful song, erratically interspersed with the sound of a cart as it jolted along the byroad – to you I send my last farewell!... As I depart this life, to you alone I extend my hands. I would like once more to breathe the bitter freshness of wormwood, the sweet smell of mown buckwheat in my native fields. I would like to hear once more in the distance the modest ringing of the cracked bell of our parish church. I would like once more to have a little lie in the cool shade of a young oak tree on the side of the familiar ravine. I would like once more to follow with my eyes the course of the wind as it runs like a dark stream over the golden grass of our meadow...

Ah, what's the point of all this? But I can't go on today. Till tomorrow.

22nd March

TODAY IT'S AGAIN cold and overcast. Weather like this is much more what I need. It's in harmony with my work. Yesterday awakened in me a whole host of untimely and unnecessary emotions and recollections. It won't happen again. Sentimental outpourings are like liquorice root: at the first suck they don't seem too bad, but then you get a nasty taste in your mouth. I'll start to tell the story of my life simply and calmly.

And so we moved to Moscow...

But it occurs to me: is it really worth telling the story of my life?

No, it definitely isn't. My life is no different from the lives of a host of other people. The parental home, university, the lower

ranks of the Civil Service, retirement, a small circle of friends, unadulterated poverty, modest pleasures, humble pursuits, moderate desires – pray tell me, who doesn't know about all that? So I won't start to tell the story of my life, not least because I'm writing for my own pleasure. And if even I find nothing particularly happy, or even particularly sad in my past, perhaps there really isn't anything worthy of note in it. I'd do better to try to describe my character to myself.

What sort of a person am I?... People may tell me that no one even asks that – and I agree. But after all, I'm dying. God alone knows, I'm dying, and in the face of death I really think I can be forgiven for wanting to know what sort of specimen I was said to be.

After thinking this important question through and, incidentally, having no need to express myself too bitterly on my own account, like people do who believe strongly in their own worth, I must admit one thing: I was a completely superfluous man in this world – or, if you like, a completely superfluous specimen. And I intend to prove that tomorrow, since today I'm coughing like an old sheep and my nanny Terentyevna* won't leave me in peace: "Lie down, master," she says, "and drink some tea..." I know why she goes on at me: she wants some tea herself. Well, that's fine with me! Why not let the poor old thing get all the benefit she can from her master before the end comes?... There's still time for it.

23rd March

WINTER AGAIN. Snowflakes falling. Superfluous, superfluous... That's an excellent word I came up with. The more I penetrate my innermost being, the more keenly I survey all my past life, the more I become convinced of the strict accuracy of the word. Superfluous – that's it. The word is not applicable to other people... There are evil people, kind people, clever people, stupid people, pleasant and unpleasant people, but superfluous people – no. Let me make myself clear: the universe could get by without such people, of course,

but uselessness is not their main quality, not their distinguishing feature, and when you talk about them, the word “superfluous” is not the first one that springs to your lips. As for me – that’s all you can say about me: I’m superfluous – that’s the top and bottom of it. Surplus to requirements – no more, no less. Nature clearly did not count on my putting in an appearance, and as a result has always treated me as an unexpected and uninvited guest. Not for nothing did one joker, a very keen preference* player, say that my mother missed a trick with me. I’m talking calmly about myself now, without any bile... That’s all in the past! Throughout my whole life I’ve constantly found my place occupied, perhaps because I was looking for it in the wrong place. I was mistrustful, shy and irritable, like all sick people. Moreover, probably because of excessive self-regard or, more generally, as a consequence of my unfortunate character, there was, between my feelings and thoughts – and the expression of those feelings and thoughts – a kind of senseless, incomprehensible and insurmountable obstacle. When I tried to overcome this obstacle, to break down this barrier by force, my movements, my facial expression, my whole being took on an appearance of excruciating effort. Not only did I seem unnatural and overwrought, I actually became so. I was aware of this myself and again retreated hurriedly into myself. Then I would experience a terrible panic attack. I would analyse myself in minute detail, would compare myself with others, would recall the slightest looks, smiles and words of people to whom I wanted to open up, would put the worst construction on everything, would laugh caustically at my claim to “be like everyone else” – then suddenly, amid the laughter, would subside into dejection, sink into ridiculous despondency, then begin the whole process again. In a word, I would go round in circles, like a squirrel in a wheel. Whole days passed in this excruciatingly fruitless activity. Well then, kindly tell me for whom and for what such a man is any use? Why did this happen to me? What’s the reason for this painstaking fussing about with myself? Who knows? Who can say?

I remember I was once travelling from Moscow by stagecoach. The road was good, but the driver had harnessed an outrunner

to the four-in-hand. This unfortunate fifth, utterly useless horse, tethered somehow to the front of the coach with a short thick rope which cut into its thigh mercilessly, chafed its tail, forced it to run in the most unnatural way and made its body assume the shape of a comma, always aroused my profound sympathy. I remarked to the driver that I thought on this occasion we could dispense with the fifth horse... He was silent for a moment, shook his head, then lashed the horse with all his strength across its thin back and under its distended belly – and said, not without a degree of sarcasm, “You’re right, you know. It’s dragged itself here. What the hell for?”

And I’d dragged myself there just like that... Fortunately the post station was not far away.

Superfluous... I promised to prove that my opinion was justified, and I’ll fulfil my promise. I don’t consider it necessary to mention the thousand trifles, the everyday events and incidents which might have served as incontrovertible evidence in my favour – that is to say, in favour of my point of view. I’d better start straight away with one fairly important incident, after which there is unlikely to remain any doubt as to the accuracy of the word “superfluous”. I repeat: I do not intend to go into detail, but there is one rather curious and remarkable circumstance which I cannot pass over in silence, to wit: my friends’ strange attitude towards me (I did also have friends) every time I met them or even when I called in on them. It was as if they were embarrassed; as they approached me they would smile in a way that was somehow unnatural, would look me, not in the eye, or down at my feet, like other people do, but more at my cheeks, then would hurriedly shake my hand and hurriedly say: “Ah! Hello Chulkaturin!” (such is the appellation Fate has favoured me with)* or “Ah! Here’s Chulkaturin” and immediately move aside and even subsequently remain motionless for some time, as if they were trying to remember something. I noticed all this because I am not devoid of perspicacity or the power of observation; on the whole I am no fool. Sometimes quite amusing thoughts come into my head, thoughts that are quite out of the ordinary. But since I am a superfluous man with

a padlock on my inner self, I'm even scared of expressing my thoughts, all the more so because I know in advance that I will express them extremely badly. I even sometimes think it odd how people manage to talk, and do so simply and fluently. The gift of tongues, you might say. I have to confess that I often felt the urge to speak, despite the padlock on my inner self, but I only actually uttered words in my youth; in my more mature years I almost always succeeded in reining myself in. I used to say in an undertone: "I'd better stay silent for a bit", and then calm down. We're all adept at silence; our women are particularly noted for this: a certain young Russian lady maintains such lofty silence that the spectacle can produce a mild trembling and a cold sweat even in one who is prepared for it. But that's beside the point, and it's not for me to criticize others. To return to my story as promised.

Several years ago, thanks to a combination of trivial, but for me very important circumstances, I had to spend some six months in the provincial town of O.* The town is built on a slope, and very uncomfortably built at that. It has about eight hundred inhabitants, who live in unusual poverty. The little houses are like nothing on earth, and on the main street, masquerading as a carriageway, are formidable white slabs of rough-hewn limestone. As a result of this, even carts go round them. Right in the middle of the astonishingly ugly square stands a tiny yellowish edifice with dark holes in it; in these holes sit people in big caps pretending to be dealers. In the same place there is also an exceptionally tall multicoloured pole near which, in the interests of public order and at the behest of the authorities, a wagonload of yellow hay is kept and a single state-funded hen scratches about. In a word, life in O. is first-rate. In the first days of my sojourn in the town I nearly went mad with boredom. I ought to say of myself that, although I am, of course, a superfluous man, I am not so of my own volition. I myself am sick, and I cannot stand anything sick. I wouldn't be averse to happiness, and have even tried to approach it from both left and right... So it's no surprise that even I can be bored, like any other mortal. I was in the town of O. on official business...