

Yes, Svetlana,
There is a Grandfather Frost

by Jeff Goode
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*(Lights up on: **GRANDFATHER FROST**, a rotund Russian character who looks suspiciously like Saint Nicholas, dressed all in blue.)*

G. FROST In the Soviet era, religious celebrations were curtailed in favor of state-sanctioned holidays in order to ensure that every citizen's highest allegiance was not to God, but country. Even children were forced to set aside their dearest traditions when Saint Nicholas was replaced with the secular fairy tale of Grandfather Frost who brings gifts to children on New Year's Day, instead of Christmas, with the help of the snow maiden Snegurochka, instead of elves.

 It was not easy for a whole generation of children to suppress their fondest beliefs, but for the generations that followed, Grandfather Frost and New Year's became the tradition and Christmas only a fairy tale...

*(SCENE: The cramped and cluttered offices of the Solntse Novosti newspaper in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia's fourth largest city. An eager, young receptionist, **DEVUCHKA**, is merrily wrapping presents at a desk overflowing with carved wooden figurines of Grandfather Frost and Snegurochka, and other holiday decorations. The telephone rings.)*

DEVUCHKA *Solntse Novosti*, Happy New Year! How may I place your call?

 No, the editor is still at lunch.

 No, I don't know when she will be back. Would you like to speak to one of the reporters? Comrade Tserkov is away on assignment, but Comrade Zloveschii is around here somewhere.

 Oh, I see, it's about a letter? Well, if you wrote to the editor, I'm afraid you will have to wait to read it in the paper, just like everyone else.

 No, there's nothing that can be done about that.

 No, there isn't, sir.

 Please don't shout at me.

 I don't think I appreciate the tone you are taking, sir.

 I may only be a receptionist, but my uncle Yuri recommended me for this position, and he is an important deputy minister in a very influential sub-department of the local polit-council, and he would not like to hear the way I am being mistreated.

 Now what is your name again, sir? Because I think I will find your letter.

(She angrily sorts through a pile of mail.)

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

Ah! You see, here it is. I have your letter, and I am taking it directly to my uncle Yuri, who has friends in the security service, and they will be very interested to know whether you are a threat to the state.

Don't try to deny you wrote it, sir, I have the letter right here.

This looks like a little girl's handwriting.

Oh, I'm sorry. The letter is from your daughter?

She's only 8 years old?

Please don't cry, sir.

No, no, we are not going to arrest your daughter.

I didn't mean to frighten you, sir.

Don't worry, I will have someone read it right away.

No, no, not the police. Someone at the newspaper will read it, I promise.

It's all right, sir. You're welcome.

No, I'm sorry, sir. Happy New Year! S Novym Godom. Okay, goodbye, sir.

(She quickly hangs up the telephone, a little embarrassed, and then shuts it in her desk drawer. She looks around guiltily. She sets the letter prominently on the desk where the editor will be sure to see it when she comes in. She tries to go back to wrapping presents, but her curiosity gets the better of her. She opens the letter and reads it.)

“DEAR EDITOR: MY NAME IS SVETLANA. I AM 8 YEARS OLD. SOME OF MY LITTLE FRIENDS SAY THERE IS NO GRANDFATHER FROST. PAPA SAYS, ‘IF YOU SEE IT IN THE *SOLNTSE NOVOSTI* IT IS SO.’ PLEASE TELL ME THE TRUTH; IS THERE A GRANDFATHER FROST? SVETLANA HANLOVNA, 115 DEVYANOSTO PYATI”.

...Oh, the poor thing.

(Devuchka takes out a steno pad and pencil.)

“DEAR SVETLANA...”

(She pauses to consider her response, then writes furiously.)

“WHO ARE YOUR LITTLE FRIENDS? MY UNCLE YURI HAPPENS TO BE AN IMPORTANT MEMBER OF THE LOCAL PARTY COUNCIL, AND I WILL ASK HIM TO HAVE A WORD WITH THEIR PARENTS...”

(MADAME EDITRIX, the editor-in-chief, returns abruptly from a business lunch.)

M. EDIT. Devuchka!

DEVUCHKA *(startled)* Good afternoon, Madame Editrix. How was your luncheon?

M. EDIT. Another bland plate of fish with another bland information minister. But if it gets us the press releases a day early, I am willing to make the sacrifice. Here

are the news items for this weekend from the approved media. Type it up for Tserkov and Zloveschii, and leave the original on my desk.

- DEVUCHKA Right away, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. Has Tserkov turned in any copy yet? I want to see the report on the bread shortage again. If it's going into the holiday edition, it has to be more cheerful. And there was a story about an unauthorized tree lighting in Cathedral Square. I want to make sure it will pass the Party censors.
- DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. Here you are. There are stories from Comrade Zloveschii, as well.
- M. EDIT. He hasn't been bothering you, has he?
- DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. Stay away from that Zloveschii, do you hear me, Devuchka? I won't have another secretary ruined by his philanderings.
- DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. Has the post arrived? We still need letters for this evening's edition.
- DEVUCHKA I was just getting to that.
- M. EDIT. Nothing too controversial. The censors deserve a holiday, as well.
- DEVUCHKA Would we publish something controversial, Madame Editrix??
- M. EDIT. Of course, we would not. I am joking. Cheer up, Devuchka, it is the holiday. In this life, you must always find reasons to laugh, because, trust me, they never find you.
- DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. What is this?
- DEVUCHKA It's a letter from a little girl named Svetlana who's friends have bullied her into thinking there is no such thing as Grandfather Frost.
- M. EDIT. And she wrote a letter to the editor? Resourceful.
- DEVUCHKA I think her father put her up to it. He strikes me as subversive.
- M. EDIT. And what are you doing with it?
- DEVUCHKA I am answering her letter.
- M. EDIT. So you are the editor-in-chief now, Devuchka?
- DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. I didn't think so. Letters-to-the-Editor are letters to me.
- DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. I apologize. I thought I could help.
- M. EDIT. You are not here to help. You are here to learn. I know your uncle is a deputy minister in the local politburo, but that does not mean you are qualified to be a journalist and have an opinion in a state newspaper.
- DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, Madame Editrix. I thought it was important.
- M. EDIT. You are not qualified to make such judgments.
- DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. Here, let me see it. *(takes the letter)* How old are you, Devuchka?
- DEVUCHKA I am eighteen years old. I will be nineteen in eleven months.
- M. EDIT. You still believe in Grandfather Frost, don't you?
- DEVUCHKA Of course, I do, Madame Editrix, don't you?
- M. EDIT. I am an adult. I believe what I am supposed to believe. That is the difference.
- DEVUCHKA *(baffled)* Yes, Madame Editrix.

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

M. EDIT. You seem like a sweet girl, Devuchka—
DEVUCHKA Thank you, Madame Editrix—
M. EDIT. But you must think with your head and not always your heart. If you want to be a journalist, you must first learn to be objective.
DEVUCHKA That is a good lesson.
M. EDIT. You must learn to have no opinion.
DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.
M. EDIT. Only then will you be qualified to shape the opinion of the proletariat.
DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. I look forward to it.
M. EDIT. I have high hopes for you, one day, Devuchka. But in the meantime, you are to listen and learn. And answer the phone.
DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. I understand completely.
M. EDIT. Then why aren't you answering the phone?
DEVUCHKA Because it is not ringing?
M. EDIT. That is because the drawers in that desk are sound-proofed.

(Devuchka opens the desk drawer. The telephone is ringing.)

DEVUCHKA Oh!
M. EDIT. My predecessor was somewhat paranoid, may he rest in peace.
DEVUCHKA *(answers)* *Solntse Novosti*, how may I place your call? Hello?
M. EDIT. And stay away from that Zloveschii!

(Madame Editrix takes the news copy and the letter from Svetlana and exits into her office.)

DEVUCHKA *(on phone)* Hello? Hello?

(She eyes her telephone suspiciously.)

G. FROST *(offstage)* O ho ho! Happy New Year!
DEVUCHKA Hello? Who is there?
G. FROST *(offstage)* S Novym Godom! O ho ho ho ho!!
DEVUCHKA Who is that? Can it be...?

(GRANDFATHER FROST peeks into the room.)

G. FROST Are there any good little girls in here?
DEVUCHKA *(ecstatic)* Oh! Oh! Grandfather Frost!
G. FROST Could that be my little Snegurochka?
DEVUCHKA No, it's me, Grandfather Frost! Devuchka from Balakhna! Do you remember me?
G. FROST How could I forget? My goodness, look how you've grown. In all the right ways, too. Has it only been a year since I saw you last? O ho ho!
DEVUCHKA Did you have any trouble finding me? I was worried about your troika, when I moved to the city to take this position. The streets are so narrow here. But

I'm learning so much! How are your white horses? Are they waiting outside in the alley?

(She goes to the window, but it is covered in frost.)

G. FROST Don't worry about the horses, Devuchka. Why don't you come sit on Grandfather Frost's lap and we'll see if I have brought you any New Year's gifts?
DEVUCHKA Oh, I hope so, I hope so!

(Grandfather Frost rummages in his bag of gifts.)

G. FROST Let's see, what have we here? Perhaps some...
DEVUCHKA Chocolate!
G. FROST And what little girl doesn't like...?
DEVUCHKA Stockings! Oh, Grandfather Frost, I knew you would remember. My parents warned me you might not visit me when I moved to the city, so far from Velikiy Ustyug, but I always knew you would come. How can I thank you? Shall I make some honey toast for your white horses? Oh, but we are out of bread. The lines were so long yesterday, I did not have time to wait.
G. FROST Forget about the toast. You spoil those horses anyway. Let's take care of Grandfather Frost for a change.
DEVUCHKA What can I do for you, Grandfather Frost? I am so grateful to see you!
G. FROST Well, I see you've hung some mistletoe over your desk.
DEVUCHKA Oh, that. My co-worker Zloveschii put it there. He is always thinking of reasons to snuggle and squeeze me.
ZLOVESCHII He sounds like an awful scamp, that one.
DEVUCHKA Oh, yes, he's awful. They say the last two secretaries had to quit because of him.
ZLOVESCHII Ah, well. Tradition is tradition. The mistletoe, I mean. While you are under it, perhaps you'd better give us a nuzzle. You know, for luck.
DEVUCHKA A nuzzle?! Grandfather Frost!
G. FROST Call me Frosty. Come on, Devuchka, you know how cold it gets in that troika? And it's such a long way home to Velikiy Ustyug.

*(He tries to grope her. Devuchka pulls off his beard. She recognizes her sleazy co-worker **ZLOVESCHII**.)*

DEVUCHKA Oh, Zloveschii! You dog! You are trying to trick me!
ZLOVESCHII Don't be such a prude, Devuchka. If you close your eyes and give me a hug, I bet I feel just like the real Grandfather Frost. O ho!
DEVUCHKA You are no Grandfather Frost.
ZLOVESCHII And you are no spring chicken. You would do well to let yourself be seduced by a promising journalist like me, while you are still young enough to make a good trophy bride.

DEVUCHKA Promising is all you do, Zloveschii. And you are hardly a catch. You are only the number two reporter at the *Solntse Novosti*. And we only have two reporters.

ZLOVESCHII Comrade Tserkov will not be number one for long. Not if he keeps making a fool of Madame Editrix. She cannot afford another of his controversies. Not with her family history.

DEVUCHKA You mean her father? She hardly ever speaks of him. But my uncle Yuri told me all the rumors.

ZLOVESCHII He used to run this newspaper, you know. In fact, he was a hero of the Revolution for a time. But then he began to question the Revolution. He thought the Party should answer to the same scrutiny as the monarchists before them. They tolerated him at first, out of respect for his former loyalty. But it is difficult to fight for the cause of the common workers if you are always answering charges about the treatment of the common workers. Eventually he had to be silenced. You know what that means?

DEVUCHKA (*nods*) It must be a terrible embarrassment for her.

ZLOVESCHII Being embarrassed is what got her this job. Do you think she would be running a public newspaper if they thought she was still proud of her father's accomplishments? Maybe you should try a little embarrassment, Devuchka. It is good for the complexion. It's good for the career, as well.

(Zloveschii pinches Devuchka's cheek, then her behind.)

DEVUCHKA You are a pig, Zloveschii!

ZLOVESCHII All right, stop hitting. Has Madame Editrix read my story about the unauthorized Christmas tree lighting?

DEVUCHKA I gave it to her just now. But I thought that was Comrade Tserkov's story?

ZLOVESCHII Not after she sees that I have already written it. Soon, she will realize that I am the one who reports the news, while Tserkov is off "investigating" it. And then my future at the *Solntse* will be made.

DEVUCHKA Well, she is reading it right now. So you could have a future any minute.

ZLOVESCHII Thank you, my little Snegurochka. You are truly a gift. I wonder how I shall have to reward you, when I get my big promotion?

(Zloveschii tries to pinch her again.)

DEVUCHKA You behave yourself, Zloveschii, or you will make me regret giving you a New Year's gift at all.

ZLOVESCHII You have a New Year's gift for me? I knew you could not resist my charms forever. I think you must be sweet on me after all to have gone to such trouble. (*apprehensive*) It's not a nutcracker from your cousin's wood-carving shop, is it? Because that's what the last secretary got me for New Year's. And the secretary before that.

DEVUCHKA Oh, sit down. I promise, it is something you will like. I have put a lot of thought into this. But before I give it to you, I want you to understand that this

does not mean I have special feelings for you. I regard you as a co-worker and nothing more. And I always will.

ZLOVESCHII Of course, of course.

DEVUCHKA You are a crude, obnoxious, despicable slug of a man. And I can think of no worse a fate than being married to you, or being your mistress, or being seen with you in public.

ZLOVESCHII Okay.

DEVUCHKA And I want you to understand that the fact that I took the time to think of a gift for you in no way means that there is any chance that you would ever be able to seduce me. No matter how many clumsy attempts you make. Even if you lived to be a thousand years. Is that understood?

ZLOVESCHII Yes, yes.

DEVUCHKA It is in the spirit of the season, nothing more.

ZLOVESCHII Strictly seasonal, I understand.

DEVUCHKA I have gifts for Comrade Tserkov, and Madame Editrix as well. You are not special.

ZLOVESCHII All right, I get it. If it's a sweater, I hope it fits me. It has gotten very chilly in here.

DEVUCHKA Oh, be quiet. Now hold out your hands. And close your eyes.

(He does. She takes a large gift-wrapped package off her desk and places it in his hands.)

ZLOVESCHII If my eyes are closed, how can I unwrap—?

(Devuchka throws her arms around Zloveschii and kisses him very passionately.)

ZLOVESCHII Mmph!

(Madame Editrix walks in on them.)

M. EDIT. Zloveschii!! What are you doing to that girl?! Let go of her!!

DEVUCHKA Happy New Year, Comrade Zloveschii.

M. EDIT. What do you think you are doing?!

ZLOVESCHII I didn't! It was she—

M. EDIT. I told you to keep your filthy hands off the secretaries. I am tired of replacing them every New Year's. Are you all right, Devuchka?

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix.

ZLOVESCHII It was perfectly innocent.

M. EDIT. Then why are you dressed like Grandfather Frost?

ZLOVESCHII Toward the end it was perfectly innocent.

M. EDIT. How many times do I have to warn you about molesting your co-workers?

ZLOVESCHII This makes seven.

M. EDIT. You always go too far, Zloveschii.

ZLOVESCHII But I am the victim here!

M. EDIT. That's what you said last year.

ZLOVESCHII Last year the girl attacked me!
M. EDIT. And the year before.
ZLOVESCHII You see? It's a pattern with them.
M. EDIT. Yes, I see the pattern, and you are always at the center of it. Always with your fingers in something you shouldn't be fingering. Especially when their relations happen to be important local Party officials.
ZLOVESCHII Ha! Her uncle is only a deputy minister. I've had more important borscht.
M. EDIT. Perhaps you'd like Devuchka to inform him of that opinion.
ZLOVESCHII No, no! Please, don't tell him that, Devuchka. I was only joking. Tell him Zloveschii is a joker. I love borscht.
DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, Madame Editrix, it's not Comrade Zloveschii's fault, this time. I was just giving him his New Year's present.
ZLOVESCHII Thank you, by the way.
DEVUCHKA I have something for you as well, Madame Editrix.

(Devuchka gives Madame Editrix a wrapped gift.)

ZLOVESCHII Yes, you see?

(Zloveschii holds up his own package. Devuchka takes it away from him.)

DEVUCHKA And this one is for Tserkov.
ZLOVESCHII I thought it was mine!
DEVUCHKA You already got your present. This was to keep your hands full while I gave it to you. Happy New Year.
M. EDIT. Devuchka, we do not exchange holiday gifts at the *Solntse Novosti*. This is a place of work. Not satisfaction.
DEVUCHKA Oh, I know. I do not expect anything in return. It's just that I am so grateful for this opportunity: Allowing me to work here and learn from you, Madame Editrix. You are a great example, and an inspiration for any young woman. Please take it?
M. EDIT. *(blushing)* All right, well... thank you. But don't let it happen again.
DEVUCHKA I think you will like it. I am not always good at my job, but I am very good at showing my appreciation. My cousin Mikha says that is my special talent: I always know just the right gift. She works in a wood-carving collective in Khimki, and I had her make something very special for Comrade Tserkov—
M. EDIT. And where is Comrade Tserkov? I need to speak to him.
DEVUCHKA He is not back yet.
ZLOVESCHII He's been gone all morning. *(furtively)* I think he's drunk.
DEVUCHKA Oh, Zloveschii! He's investigating an incident.
M. EDIT. I want to see him about this Christmas tree lighting story.
DEVUCHKA That's the incident. He is interviewing witnesses.
M. EDIT. What witnesses?!
ZLOVESCHII That's what I told him: What witnesses? Why witnesses? All the necessary information is in the official press release. What more do you need?

- M. EDIT. If he hasn't come back, then why do I have the finished article here in my hand? "RELIGIOUS ZEALOTS INJURED AT ILLEGAL TREE CEREMONY." Who wrote this?
- ZLOVESCHII I did, of course. I could see that Tserkov was wasting time with his "investigative research," so I finished the story for him. And well ahead of deadline, you will notice. *(under his breath)* Now who is lazy and stupid?
- M. EDIT. Zloveschii, what were you thinking?
- ZLOVESCHII It's true, I am always thinking—Wait, what?
- M. EDIT. Do you know what you have done, you idiot?
- ZLOVESCHII What's wrong? I thought you would want the story right away. Religious fanatics trampled at an unsanctioned holiday event? It is sure to be the top headline.
- M. EDIT. Yes, it is most certainly going to be the top headline. For tomorrow's paper.
- ZLOVESCHII Why would we delay until tomorrow? This is first page news. A tragic accident at a Christmas tree lighting? It's perfect for the holiday.
- M. EDIT. Do you even bother to read the press releases, Zloveschii?
- ZLOVESCHII Of course, I do. I told you that's where I get all my facts.
- M. EDIT. And yet you missed the fact that the Party has requested this be the front page of tomorrow's papers? How would that look if this copy had gone to the typesetters, and we published it a day ahead of everyone else? This is not Western Europe. We do not "scoop" our competitors.
- ZLOVESCHII No... Oh no... I thought it was for today. I could have sworn—

(He frantically fumbles for his copy of the press release.)

- ZLOVESCHII Here it is. Look, you see? "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: FIFTEEN ZEALOTS INJURED YESTERDAY AT RELIGIOUS PROTEST."

(Madame Editrix takes it from him.)

- M. EDIT. Why does this bulletin have today's date?
- DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, Madame Editrix. Don't blame Zloveschii. This is my fault. I changed the date on the press release when I typed their copies.
- ZLOVESCHII You little fool!! You don't change information in official Party communications! You could get us all killed. We have to hide. Stay away from the windows!
- M. EDIT. Shut up, Zloveschii! No one is getting killed. But stay away from the windows or I may have to pitch you out of one. Devuchka, why would you do such a thing? Do you know how much trouble we could be in for publishing state secrets out of schedule.
- DEVUCHKA I didn't know they were secret. I thought it was a mistake. The report says there was a horrible accident yesterday at an unauthorized Christmas tree lighting in front of Sobor Cathedral. Fifteen religious subversives were injured in the panic to escape. Three of them are not expected to survive. But the item is dated for release tomorrow. Which makes "yesterday" today, which is impossible.

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

ZLOVESCHII You're impossible!

M. EDIT. Shut up!

DEVUCHKA So I changed tomorrow's date to today, to make "yesterday" last night, so the story would make sense.

ZLOVESCHII Why would you want to make sense of anything that comes to us through official channels?!

M. EDIT. Be quiet, Zloveschii!

DEVUCHKA But the information must be wrong. If the accident is tonight, how would they know it already?

ZLOVESCHII Don't be naïve, Devuchka. The Party knows what it wants to know. They have inspectors everywhere. Maybe they discovered faulty scaffolding. Or a fire hazard. Who knows?

DEVUCHKA But if they know about the accident in advance, wouldn't they just prevent it?

ZLOVESCHII How should I know? Do I look like a mentalist?

M. EDIT. Perhaps it's too late for that, Devuchka.

ZLOVESCHII Yes! Maybe the protestors prevented them from preventing it. Did you think of that? Radicals never put their own public safety first.

DEVUCHKA But how would the ministry know the number of the injuries? And the names of the victims? "IVAN PETROVICH, TRAMPLED, GREGOR LEBEDEV, LACERATIONS, FATHER SVYASHCHENNIK, BEATEN INTO A COMA..." The report is very detailed.

M. EDIT. Your uncle is a member of the politburo, isn't he, Devuchka?

DEVUCHKA Yes, of course.

M. EDIT. Then he must have taught you that what the Party tells us in its official releases always turns out to be true, even when certain skeptics find it hard to believe at first.

DEVUCHKA Well, yes, of course. But surely even the Party makes typographical errors from time to time?

M. EDIT. Is that what you want me to tell the information minister when I have lunch with him tomorrow?

DEVUCHKA No, of course not.

M. EDIT. Are you prepared to run the newspaper without me when I am detained for reeducation?

DEVUCHKA No, no! The information is correct. There are no errors.

M. EDIT. Then we are all agreed. The report of tonight's accident will go out tomorrow.

ZLOVESCHII I didn't even see a report.

DEVUCHKA But how can this be? The Party cannot see into the future.

ZLOVESCHII How do you think they make five-year plans? And ten-year plans? You are old enough to know that the Party can see into anything it chooses to see into. They have ways, and methods. Secret protocols. Special machines.

DEVUCHKA Machines—?

M. EDIT. There are no machines, Zloveschii! Don't fill her head with nonsense. But having no explanation for something is no reason to doubt that it exists, Devuchka. Stranger things happen all the time. People who seem to be in perfect

- health at breakfast, suddenly succumb to consumption over supper. Loved ones who were thought to be missing or long dead appear in public after many years, as if nothing has happened. Isn't that so?
- DEVUCHKA You read about it in the paper all the time.
- M. EDIT. And we publish that paper. So now does it make sense to you?
- DEVUCHKA (*more baffled than ever*) I think so, Madame Editrix. The world is full of inexplicable things. No one knows how Grandfather Frost delivers toys to every child in Russian all in one night. But somehow he does it year after year.
- M. EDIT. Yes... well... exactly.
- DEVUCHKA The people's Party would not give us the information if it was not proper for us to have. And you are right, sometimes my uncle Yuri knows things no one thought possible. Yet he always turns out to be right, somehow. Are you going to open your present, Madame Editrix?
- M. EDIT. Not now, Devuchka! We still have to find Tserkov. You gave him the wrong information as well?
- DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. I am sorry.
- M. EDIT. Where did you say he was going?
- DEVUCHKA To the cathedral. He wanted to interview the survivors.
- ZLOVESCHII He can't do that! What if they're still alive?
- M. EDIT. We have to make sure no one speaks to Tserkov.
- DEVUCHKA What? Why?
- M. EDIT. Call the cathedral. Get them on the phone at once!
- ZLOVESCHII Tell them it is a matter of state security!
- M. EDIT. Tell them it is urgent.
- ZLOVESCHII Tell them he is crazy! Tell them he is an escaped lunatic! From Pskov! They're always crazier in Pskov.
- M. EDIT. Tell them: your uncle is a Party minister and you don't know what he will think when he finds out.
- DEVUCHKA I can't do that.
- ZLOVESCHII Why not?!
- DEVUCHKA Because my uncle is only a deputy minister. And I don't know what he will think.
- M. EDIT. So you don't know what he will think?
- DEVUCHKA No, I don't! ...Oh, I see.

(Devuchka makes the call. Madame Editrix and Zloveschii hover over her shoulder.)

- DEVUCHKA Hello? Is this the Sobor Cathedral? I am calling from the newspaper *Solntse Novosti*. I am trying to find one of our reporters: Comrade Tserkov. Do you know if he is there? Are you sure? Could you check? He might be from Pskov.
- M. EDIT. (*scanning the press release*) Ask for Father Svyashchennik.
- DEVUCHKA But isn't he—?
- M. EDIT. Just do it!

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

DEVUCHKA Excuse me for asking, but could I speak to Father Svyashchennik?
(*puzzled*) Yes, I will wait.

(*TSERKOV, a grizzled veteran reporter, bursts in with a bottle of vodka in one hand and a pad of notes in the other.*)

TSERKOV I have wonderful news!

DEVUCHKA Oh, here he is! Comrade Tserkov!

TSERKOV Well, it's terrible news, but it's news! Actual news, at last! Can you believe it? We have to celebrate!

ZLOVESCHII Tserkov, what have you done?

TSERKOV Do you know where I've been?

M. EDIT. Cathedral Square.

TSERKOV That's right. But do you know why—?

M. EDIT. You went there to investigate the tree lighting accident.

TSERKOV You are very good at this game.

DEVUCHKA (*on phone*) Father Svyashchennik? Hello... (*perplexed*) How was your coma?

M. EDIT. Devuchka, hang up, hang up!

DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, I have to go.

ZLOVESCHII Don't tell him anything.

DEVUCHKA And for your information, I am not calling from the *Solntse Novosti*, you must have dialed a wrong number. S Novym Godom!

(*She quickly hangs up.*)

TSERKOV Do you know what I have just discovered?

M. EDIT. That there was no Christmas tree lighting at Sobor Cathedral last night.

TSERKOV That's right. There was no tree ceremony. There was no accident. There was no panic from the accident. No one was injured in the panic. And no one has been killed.

ZLOVESCHII We already know that.

TSERKOV But do you know why?

M. EDIT. Because the tree lighting event takes place tonight.

TSERKOV Because—How do you know these things?

ZLOVESCHII Devuchka changed the date on the press release. The story was supposed to go out tomorrow.

DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, Comrade Tserkov. I didn't mean to cause trouble. You did all that research for nothing.

TSERKOV It's not nothing, Devuchka. This is the story! The information ministry has information about an accident at a Christmas celebration that is scheduled for tonight. Tonight! Don't you see what this means?

ZLOVESCHII Yes.

DEVUCHKA No.

M. EDIT. Yes, we do. Can you please keep your voice down?

(She shuts the telephone in the desk drawer.)

- TSERKOV It means it's not going to be an accident. Party officials already know who will be injured, and how badly. They are planning to provoke an incident at the cathedral this evening.
- DEVUCHKA Oh! Is that what it means?
- TSERKOV They are going to use it as an excuse to attack those poor people.
- DEVUCHKA Oh no...
- M. EDIT. You are reading too much into it.
- TSERKOV The government plans to intentionally injure its own citizens. If I am reading anything in, it is a very short book.
- ZLOVESCHII You don't know that it will be intentional. They could be injured while resisting arrest. Or fleeing the scene of an accident. Or possibly self-immolation.
- TSERKOV We have to do something about this.
- M. EDIT. There is nothing we can do.
- TSERKOV This is a newspaper. We can publish the story. We can make sure they don't get away with it. The people have to know about this.
- M. EDIT. The people do not pay your salary. This is a state paper.
- TSERKOV The people and the state are one and the same. Isn't that what Comrade Lenin taught us?
- ZLOVESCHII Tell that to the state.
- TSERKOV You're not going to sit by and do nothing, are you? There are lives in danger.
- ZLOVESCHII And some of them could be ours, if you don't stop acting like an alarmist. So what if fifteen zealots brought trouble upon themselves? Would you like to join the protest and make it sixteen?
- TSERKOV It's not a protest. I spoke to the parish priest just now, Father Svyashchennik, and he told me it is only going to be a small peaceful gathering to light a few candles in a celebration of their beliefs.
- ZLOVESCHII There are no such thing as peaceful beliefs. Every act of defiance tears at the fabric of the republic. Beliefs are what make a man stand up to things he would do well to accept. Beliefs are what get a man silenced. Or a woman. Or worse!
- DEVUCHKA It's true. My uncle Yuri says those who cling to the old religions are always the most troublesome. And the most unhappy. And I should cross to the other side of the street when I see them.
- TSERKOV Then you may want to stand at a safe distance while I write this, or you might get your fabrics torn. What time is it? I have to get this article to the typesetters.
- M. EDIT. There is no hurry. We will run the story tomorrow.
- TSERKOV If we publish it tomorrow, it will be too late.
- M. EDIT. On the contrary, it will be right on schedule.
- TSERKOV But no one will believe we knew about it in advance. We will be dismissed as conspiracists.
- ZLOVESCHII Which is what you are. What proof do you have that these people do not deserve to have an accident disrupt their unlawful activities?

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

DEVUCHKA Comrade Zloveschii is right. Why must there be a Christmas tree lighting at all? There are plenty of New Year's trees all over the city. Why do some have to have their own holiday, when there are so many wonderful festivities that don't arouse suspicions?

TSERKOV It's not the same thing.

ZLOVESCHII It's a fir tree and some candles. What's the difference?

TSERKOV If there's no difference, then why does it matter?

ZLOVESCHII Because it is an act of treason.

TSERKOV Lighting a candle?

ZLOVESCHII Lighting a candle in an unprescribed manner as an outrage against the established social order.

TSERKOV Then there is a difference.

ZLOVESCHII There is no difference!!

TSERKOV You are all brain-washed. It doesn't matter what their beliefs are. They should not have to be punished for them.

ZLOVESCHII What would you like them to be punished for? Their clothing? Their complexions? Next you will be suggesting genocide.

TSERKOV No, I am suggesting tolerance.

ZLOVESCHII Tolerance for genocide?! This is insanity. Can't you see that we are all getting worked up over nothing?! Nothing!!

TSERKOV This nothing is news.

M. EDIT. This news undermines the credibility of institutions which require our respect.

TSERKOV Isn't that the role of the press? To undermine that which is built upon shoddy foundations. Why do you think the symbol of our paper is the sun? Because it sheds light on the truth.

ZLOVESCHII I thought it was because the sun is the source of all heat and power.

DEVUCHKA I thought the Sun hid his light from Lady Winter because he is shy and she is beautiful. And it is only in the spring that he finally gains the courage to greet her, but by then she is gone, and he is too late to brighten her winter sorrow.

(They all stare at her blankly.)

TSERKOV We have to publish this story. It is our responsibility as journalists.

M. EDIT. We have a higher responsibility, as citizens, to our nation.

ZLOVESCHII And a lower responsibility, to ourselves, as people who don't like being tortured.

TSERKOV I would not expect you to understand, or even grasp the concept, Zloveschii, but you, Madame Editrix—I would think that you, of all people—But I guess I was wrong.

M. EDIT. What do you know of me?

TSERKOV I know that your father built this place. Before the Revolution, this newspaper belonged to him. You were practically raised on the printing house floor.

M. EDIT. I am not my father. And if you know what's good for you, neither are you.

TSERKOV But you must remember what he taught you: “PRAVDA ZA VSE.” His motto is still emblazoned on our masthead.

M. EDIT. Yes, “TRUTH ABOVE ALL.” It is a marvelous slogan. And a deplorable lifestyle. My father’s truth made him many enemies, and in the end, it got him silenced. He thought of himself as a revolutionary, because they let him publish their manifestos. But when the Revolution was over, he never got over his thirst for rebellion. He was warned many times. My mother begged him to listen. But he thought he had a higher calling.

One winter night, they came for him. They probably thought I would be in bed asleep, but I had stayed up late to watch for Saint Nicholas. And no revolutionary likes to pry a crying child from her father’s arm. He tried to go quietly, but I wouldn’t let go until I made them promise to bring him home in time for Christmas. But Christmas never came that year. And now it doesn’t come at all. My father was a selfish idealist, and it got him killed.

DEVUCHKA (*shocked*) Oh! You mustn’t think that.

M. EDIT. What?

DEVUCHKA Well, what if, perhaps he wasn’t dead...

M. EDIT. What are you talking about?

DEVUCHKA Oh... Well... I only mean that... Well, it’s good to have hope. My uncle Yuri says that it is only a terrible rumor that so many died in the purges. Why some of them were only silenced and sent to exile, and now they live perfectly happy lives in the border republics with others of their kind, where they can do no harm.

M. EDIT. I’ll not have such talk. I don’t care who your uncle is. My father is dead. He abandoned me. He abandoned his family. He abandoned everything, except his principles. And I was raised in an orphanage, because principles don’t feed a child.

ZLOVESCHII How dare you throw the name of that traitor in her face, Tserkov! You know how the mention of him upsets her.

M. EDIT. Quiet, Zloveschii!

ZLOVESCHII No! I am sick of his meddling. You spent your whole life working to earn the trust of those in power to let you do the job your father should have done, and restore the reputation of this newspaper. And this one wants you to throw it all away for the sake of some reckless speculations that will only save a handful of rabble from a well-deserved beating.

M. EDIT. I said be quiet!

TSERKOV There is only one way to fight a revolution. Either you stand up and fight it. Or you hide under your desk and cower.

M. EDIT. That’s two ways.

TSERKOV If no one will help me, then I will go back to the square, and stop them myself.

M. EDIT. You will stay here and do nothing, like a good reporter, and that will be the end of this discussion. I learned one thing from my father. And that is what happens to your family when you don’t protect it. Well, this newspaper is mine now. And I will not let anyone in it come to harm. Even if I have to save you from yourselves.

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

- TSERKOV You can't keep me here.
- M. EDIT. I wouldn't think of it. *(handing him a pen and paper)* If you want to be employed here tomorrow, you will not leave here again today. Turn in your resignation and you are free to go.
- TSERKOV But—!
- M. EDIT. Don't think you can fool me, Comrade Tserkov. I have seen that look in a man's eye before. If truth was all that mattered, you could have whispered it to Father Svyashchennik over tea and communion wafers in his confessional just now and no one would be the wiser. But you came all the way back here first, to get the story in print. With your name under the headline. You don't want truth. You want the credit.
- TSERKOV For telling the truth.
- M. EDIT. As you see it. It is my job to see things otherwise. And there is a reason my vision outranks yours. Zloveschii, fix this article. You know what needs to be done.
- ZLOVESCHII You are putting me on the top story?
- M. EDIT. It seems that keeping your hands full is the only way to keep them off of Devuchka.
- ZLOVESCHII You will not regret it.
- M. EDIT. Devuchka, you scream if he touches you.
- DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. And Tserkov, your hands can be full of answering the mail. Perhaps you can apply some truth to the question of how to make bread pudding when there is a shortage of bread. That is something half the city will want to know tomorrow. Or here is a little girl's letter we should publish in the holiday edition. She wants to know if there is a Grandfather Frost.
- TSERKOV What am I supposed to do with that?
- M. EDIT. *(shrugs)* She will find out eventually. *(hands him the letters)* That should keep you both out of trouble for the rest of one day, at least. I will be in my office.
- DEVUCHKA Excuse me, Madame Editrix?
- M. EDIT. Yes, Devuchka?
- DEVUCHKA Don't forget to open your gift.
- M. EDIT. Gift? What gift?
- DEVUCHKA The present I gave you. You didn't lose it?
- M. EDIT. Yes, yes, I have it here. I will look at it right away.

(Madame Editrix takes the gift out of her pocket as she exits into her office.)

- DEVUCHKA I've got something for you, too, Comrade Tserkov.
- ZLOVESCHII He doesn't celebrate the New Year.
- TSERKOV I don't acknowledge the New Year.
- ZLOVESCHII He thinks if he doesn't ring it in, it won't come around.
- TSERKOV That's not the reason.
- DEVUCHKA Oh, Comrade Tserkov, you are not so old.
- TSERKOV I didn't say I was old. The holiday is a hoax, and I won't be a party to it.
- ZLOVESCHII I, on the other hand, would never miss a party to it.

TSERKOV Didn't Madame Editrix explain to you that we don't exchange New Year's gifts anymore? Not since Zloveschii was seriously injured with a nutcracker last year.

ZLOVESCHII It was not a serious injury. The girl surprised me, that's all.

DEVUCHKA You don't have to celebrate the New Year to be happy about it, Comrade Tserkov. It is the most joyful time of the year!

TSERKOV No, in fact, it's not! But we are all too blinded by the holiday lights to see it for what it is.

DEVUCHKA We have the whole year to see things as they are. The New Year is for seeing things as they could be. Like when a new child is born and we don't yet know if they will grow up to be a famous ballerina or a soldier.

TSERKOV I think you know that the first time you change their diapers.

DEVUCHKA What do you mean?

ZLOVESCHII Oh, leave him alone, Devuchka. He's just a New Year's grouch. I will gladly accept your present on his behalf. Do you need me to close my eyes?

(Zloveschii closes his eyes, holds out his hands, and puckers for a kiss.)

*(Enter **BOLYSHOI** and **SHIROKY**, visitors from the Committee for State Security who appear to enjoy their work.)*

BOLYSHOI S Novym Godom, comrades!

SHIROKY S Novym Godom! Happy New Year!

DEVUCHKA Happy New Year to you! How may I help you?

BOLYSHOI Please to excuse us, we are looking—Shiroky?

SHIROKY *Solntse Novosti.*

BOLYSHOI Yes. Is this the address of the *Solntse Novosti* newspaper?

SHIROKY It is newspaper.

DEVUCHKA Yes, this is the *Solntse Novosti*.

BOLYSHOI Ah, we have come to the right place. You see, Shiroky, what did I tell you?

SHIROKY I should never have doubted you. *(to the others)* He is eyes like bloodhound, this one.

BOLYSHOI Tell me, where can I find Comrade Editor? Is it you?

TSERKOV No. I am Comrade Answers-Mail-For-Children.

DEVUCHKA Madame Editrix is in her office. I will get her.

(Devuchka exits into the editor's office.)

SHIROKY Wonderful weather, yes? Very cold. Brutal like Cossack.

BOLYSHOI Tell me, who is head reporter, then?

SHIROKY Top dog. Number one. There is a man, I can tell you, I should like to shake my hands with.

ZLOVESCHII That would be me! I cover the top stories now. Madame Editrix has my complete confidence. Do you have news for us?

SHIROKY *(chuckling)* I think we do. I think we have news for you.

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

BOLYSHOI No.
SHIROKY Not at all. Figure of speech. Where is your telephone?

(Re-enter Madame Editrix still opening the gift from Devuchka.)

M. EDIT. Hello, comrades. I am the editor-in-chief. Who are you?
BOLYSHOI Ah! A pleasure, a pleasure. I am Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi. This is my
colleague Comrade Shiroky.
SHIROKY Very please to meet you.
TSERKOV Inspectors?
BOLYSHOI We are from Committee for State Security.
ZLOVESCHII What!?
BOLYSHOI Unofficially, of course.
SHIROKY It is more of a social visit, really. "How do you do?", "S Novym Godom",
"Why is there no telephone on this desk?" That sort of thing.
M. EDIT. Are you here to inspect the newspaper?
SHIROKY Nooo.
BOLYSHOI Noooo.
SHIROKY Wouldn't dream of it.
BOLYSHOI We have curious questions, that is all.
SHIROKY About how newspaper is run.
M. EDIT. I will be happy to give you a tour. Would you like to see the printing
floor?
BOLYSHOI That won't be necessary.
SHIROKY I think we have seen enough.
M. EDIT. Then I'm afraid I don't understand.
BOLYSHOI I am sorry to have to inform you, Comrade Madame—
SHIROKY Very sorry. Deepest regrets.
BOLYSHOI But we have received a number of complaints.
M. EDIT. About the newspaper?
BOLYSHOI Sadly, yes.
SHIROKY Very sad. Depressing, frankly.
TSERKOV What number?
BOLYSHOI Excuse me?
TSERKOV What number of complaints?

(Bolyshoi and Shiroky glare at Tserkov.)

SHIROKY You ask a lot of questions.

(Shiroky starts toward Tserkov.)

BOLYSHOI Shiroky, no.

(Shiroky stops.)

BOLYSHOI There have been no complaints.
SHIROKY Figure of speech. Like: “*Do svidaniya*”, “Pass the vodka”, “Where can I find a telephone?”
BOLYSHOI But I should be careful, Madame Editrix, if I had your shoes.
Disgruntlement comes in all shapes and sizes.
SHIROKY Big gruntles. Little gruntles. Like kittens, everywhere.
BOLYSHOI One malcontent can topple the whole apple cart.
SHIROKY It is an ugly word: “Malcontent...”
ZLOVESCHII Yes.
SHIROKY Also “disembowelment,” that is ugly, too.
M. EDIT. Excuse me, Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi, what is it you are trying to tell me?
BOLYSHOI Nothing, of course. Nothing at all.
SHIROKY You didn’t hear it from us.
BOLYSHOI But you should perhaps be aware that we have received an anonymous information that someone from this newspaper... Perhaps an employee...
SHIROKY Perhaps a reporter...
BOLYSHOI May have been seen asking peculiar questions about an unauthorized holiday tree lighting in Cathedral Square.
DEVUCHKA Oh...
BOLYSHOI Questions that are likely to arouse suspicion.
SHIROKY Suspicion that could cause curiosity.
BOLYSHOI Curiosity that has been known to kill a cat. Or a rat.
SHIROKY Or a reporter.
TSERKOV And you have this on anonymous information?

(Bolyshoi and Shiroky glare at Tserkov.)

SHIROKY You ask a lot of questions.

(Shiroky starts toward Tserkov.)

BOLYSHOI Shiroky!

(Shiroky stops.)

BOLYSHOI Yes, an anonymous informant.
TSERKOV Then how do you know you can trust them?

(Shiroky starts toward Tserkov.)

BOLYSHOI Shiroky, no.

(Shiroky stops.)

BOLYSHOI It may come as a surprise to you, Comrade...?

TSERKOV Tserkov.

(Bolyshoi and Shiroky both write it down.)

BOLYSHOI *(writing)* Tser-kov...

SHIROKY *(writing)* Tse-ye-er-ka-o-ve-yeri...

(They finish writing.)

BOLYSHOI Where was I?

SHIROKY Surprises.

BOLYSHOI Yes. Surprisingly, I have found that anonymous informants are the only kind I do trust. In my experience, honest citizens are more comfortable telling the truth when they think they will not be held accountable for it. It is so much more satisfying to do the right thing when one does not have to justify one's own reasons for wanting it done.

SHIROKY *(chuckling)* I once informed on a co-worker because I had a recurring nightmare that he had stolen a kitten that belonged to me when I was a child.

ZLOVESCHII They can arrest you for that?

SHIROKY No, but they arrested him for embezzlement. *(shrugs)* I had to say something.

TSERKOV Was there proof of the charges?

SHIROKY Well, I am no legal expert, but he must have been guilty. They executed him for it, didn't they?

ZLOVESCHII What?!

SHIROKY I no longer have nightmares about kittens. That is all that really matters.

BOLYSHOI Now, where were we?

SHIROKY Malcontents.

BOLYSHOI Ah, yes—

M. EDIT. Perhaps the two of you would care to step into my office—Comrade Shiroky, Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi—I'm sure I can address your concerns about the *Solntse Novosti* more comfortably in private.

BOLYSHOI Yes, perhaps a little privacy is best. To avoid unnecessary... discomfort.

SHIROKY Comrade Bolyshoi?

BOLYSHOI Yes, Shiroky?

SHIROKY What about the other suspects?

ZLOVESCHII Suspects...?

BOLYSHOI Ah, yes. Madame Editrix, is it possible your reporters are not going anywhere in the immediate future? Some of them may have valuable perspectives they could be encouraged to share with us later.

M. EDIT. Not to worry, they all have work to do.

BOLYSHOI Very good. After you then?

M. EDIT. *(to Shiroky and Bolyshoi)* After you.

SHIROKY *(to Bolyshoi)* After you.

(Bolyshoi and Shiroky exit into the office. Madame Editrix turns to the others.)

M. EDIT. Zloveschii, fix that. Tserkov, the letters. Devuchka— *(holds up her gift)*
What is this?

DEVUCHKA Oh! I can explain: You see, my uncle Yuri—

M. EDIT. Never mind.

(Madame Editrix follows Bolyshoi and Shiroky into her office and closes the door.)

ZLOVESCHII Now look what you've done, Tserkov!

TSERKOV What are they doing here?

ZLOVESCHII They've come for you, of course.

TSERKOV But how did they get here so fast?

DEVUCHKA Are they really from the Security Committee? This is so exciting! I've never been under suspicion before.

TSERKOV What do you think the Security Committee does, Devuchka?

DEVUCHKA They investigate threats to the state, of course.

TSERKOV Yes, and then they eliminate them.

ZLOVESCHII They've come to take him away.

DEVUCHKA Comrade Tserkov? No! They wouldn't do that.

ZLOVESCHII Why else would they be here?

DEVUCHKA But Comrade Tserkov is no threat, he's only grumpy.

ZLOVESCHII And he's inquisitive, and he's always looking into things when he should be looking the other way.

DEVUCHKA But they wouldn't take him away for that!

TSERKOV I'm afraid they would, Devuchka. But I don't understand how they found me so quickly.

ZLOVESCHII The Party has its sources.

TSERKOV Journalists have sources. The Party has informants. He said something about a malcontent.

ZLOVESCHII One of your protestors, no doubt.

TSERKOV I doubt they contacted the Party security apparatus.

DEVUCHKA You don't think it was someone here at the *Solntse Novosti* who reported you?

TSERKOV How else could they have known? I only left Cathedral Square a short while ago.

ZLOVESCHII Why are you looking at me? I am not the one with Party affiliations.

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

DEVUCHKA Are you accusing me of disloyalty—?
ZLOVESCHII We all know who your uncle is. In fact, you will never let us forget.
DEVUCHKA You think my uncle Yuri is behind this?
Zloveschii What is he giving you in return for your cooperation? A new motor scooter? Maybe some household luxuries? American jazz records?
DEVUCHKA You must believe me, Comrade Tserkov, I would never betray you.
TSERKOV Of course, you would, Devuchka, if you thought it was your duty to the Party.
DEVUCHKA Well, yes, but I would feel very bad about it.
TSERKOV I suspect that will be small comfort when I am rotting in some gulag.
DEVUCHKA No, you will not rot. I will make sure of that. Believe me, Comrade Tserkov, if you were arrested and taken away, I would write to you every day to keep your spirits up. Especially if it was my information that led to your capture.
TSERKOV You can't write to me, Devuchka, if you don't know where I am. That's how it works. I will disappear without a trace, and everyone in this office will cease to speak of me, except in whispers like a ghost, out of fear that one of you could be next.
DEVUCHKA I would not be afraid.
ZLOVESCHII Of course not, because you have blood connections to the Party.
DEVUCHKA That's right, my uncle Yuri will help me find out where you have gone. He has many contacts.
TSERKOV Your uncle Yuri is an administrator, not a magician.
DEVUCHKA Yes, but he is in the sub-department of transportation, and he is very resourceful. He is always knowing things about people, and where they are, and where they are going, that you would not think he should know. But he does.
TSERKOV What sort of things?
DEVUCHKA I cannot say. I have said too much. I should be working. Look at this mess.

(Devuchka nervously straightens her desk.)

ZLOVESCHII What are you going to do, Tserkov?
TSERKOV I don't know.
ZLOVESCHII If you flee down the back stairs, you could escape across the printing floor.
TSERKOV That only makes me look guilty.
ZLOVESCHII You should look guilty. You've probably done everything they plan to accuse you of. They are in there right now torturing Madame Editrix for the evidence they need to incriminate you.
TSERKOV What makes you think they need evidence?
ZLOVESCHII You're right, it is already too late. You have to go!
DEVUCHKA If you try to escape, they will think Madame Editrix is your accomplice. You must wait at least until she comes back to make your attempt.
ZLOVESCHII No, your only hope is to go now. Devuchka and I will cover for you. Won't you, Devuchka?
TSERKOV You'd like that, wouldn't you, Zloveschii? For me to be shot in the back while escaping?

ZLOVESCHII I don't care where you are shot, I am trying to help you!
TSERKOV How far would I get? If it is me they are after, they are probably already at my home.

(Devuchka takes the telephone out of the drawer and places it back on the desk.)

ZLOVESCHII What are you doing? Don't touch anything!
DEVUCHKA I think Comrade Shiroky wants to use the telephone.
ZLOVESCHII *(shoving the telephone back in the drawer)* Well, don't encourage him! He can use the pay telephone on the street corner. Don't you see? This is all a trap. They know about everything. The longer they are here, the more we all look like accessories to this controversy. It has all come crashing down around us, and the only hope is for the guilty party to make a full confession and sacrifice himself to protect the innocent.
TSERKOV Is that a sacrifice you are willing to make, Zloveschii?
ZLOVESCHII I—?! *(opens the desk drawer)* I am not the guilty party! *(closes the desk drawer)*
TSERKOV Then why are you panicking?
ZLOVESCHII Madame Editrix warned you that it would come to this one day. Always stirring the pot of controversy. And now this is the stew you are in.
TSERKOV Stop your gloating, Zloveschii. I know you are the one who reported me.
ZLOVESCHII I—?
TSERKOV You called them the moment I left here this morning, didn't you? It's the only way they could have come here so quickly.
ZLOVESCHII You were off interrogating subversives. Any one of them could have turned you in to save his own throat. You associate with disreputable sorts and this is how they repay you.
TSERKOV I have been a journalist long enough to know the value of discretion. I did nothing to raise suspicions among the parishioners. They are still going like sheep to the slaughter tonight with candles in their hands. The only persons who had reason to believe I was looking into a suspicious accident are here in this room.
ZLOVESCHII *(accuses Devuchka)* Then it had to be you!
TSERKOV And Devuchka's favorite uncle may be a low-ranking member of the Party. But you are the only one low enough to call them directly and give a full report.
ZLOVESCHII Me? How could you possibly think that—?

(He realizes no one believes him.)

ZLOVESCHII Well, so what if I did?! You should have known better.
DEVUCHKA Zloveschii! You didn't! You couldn't have!
ZLOVESCHII Yes, I did. And I could. And I would do it again! He is a danger to us all with his endless investigations, and his outmoded ideas about truth and journalism. Always raising eyebrows and questioning authorities. Always trying to accomplish something! He deserves whatever is coming to him.
TSERKOV You are the worst kind of traitor.

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

ZLOVESCHII No, you are the traitor. That is the name for anyone who does not put loyalty to his country over his own self-interest.

TSERKOV And what do you call someone who's self-interest happens to coincide directly with that of the Party?

ZLOVESCHII The papers will call him a patriot.

TSERKOV You want my job, and it is nothing more noble than that. And if you can steal it from under me while serving the state, so much the better. But you are no hero, Zloveschii, even if they do give you a medal for it.

ZLOVESCHII How dare you mock my service to my country!

TSERKOV This is no country anymore. It is a pack of vermin clawing at each other's eyes.

DEVUCHKA Oh! That's disgusting.

TSERKOV Our nation is a fiction, like your Grandfather Frost. Held together by lies and subterfuge.

DEVUCHKA Don't say that! Grandfather Frost is not held together by lies.

TSERKOV He is held together by Party memorandums and dictates, and orientation classes every New Year instructing teachers on the latest methods for passing the approved traditions on to a new generation of children.

DEVUCHKA How else will they learn the proper way to celebrate their heritage? You are being outrageous. And shame on you, Zloveschii, for turning in your own co-worker. We are supposed to be a nation of workers, not opportunists. Do not worry, Comrade Tserkov, I will vouch for you if it comes to that. I know you do not mean to be a turncoat. I will call my uncle Yuri. He will do something. They cannot arrest you on a holiday. It is supposed to be a season of happiness.

(She tries to dial the telephone.)

DEVUCHKA Hello? *(puzzled)* Is there someone on this line?

(Madame Editrix returns from her office, looking shaken but unbroken. Bolyshoi and Shiroky flank her, leering smugly. She still has Devuchka's gift in her hand.)

M. EDIT. Attention, everyone. Comrade Shiroky and Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi have just informed me of a series of disturbing allegations, which, if true, must be dealt with immediately.

SHIROKY They are true.

BOLYSHOI Allegedly.

TSERKOV I would like to say someth—

M. EDIT. *(pointedly)* I must caution you all to listen carefully to everything I am about to say, for there are sure to be consequences for anyone who fails to pay close attention.

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame—

M. EDIT. Silence, Devuchka!! I will not tolerate anymore of your outbursts!!

DEVUCHKA *(sheepishly)* I apologize, I am sorry.

M. EDIT. Now, if there are no more foolish and unnecessary interruptions?

(Devuchka, Zloveschii and Tserkov fearfully shake their heads.)

- M. EDIT. Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi?
- BOLYSHOI As you now know, it has come to the attention of the Security Committee that someone who may have been a reporter from the *Solntse Novosti* is said to have been seen this afternoon in Cathedral Square asking questions of a suspicious nature about a certain tree lighting that is scheduled to occur this evening in the square in front of Sobor Cathedral. It is an unauthorized celebration which, I am sure, will come to no good.
- SHIROKY In fact, we are quite certain of it.
- BOLYSHOI Yes.
- SHIROKY Unsafe scaffolding. Open flames. Lack of crowd controls. It is a recipe for disaster. Kind of a goulash.
- BOLYSHOI But, of course, this is all mere conjecture.
- SHIROKY An educated guess.
- BOLYSHOI We have no way of knowing what may or may not actually happen tonight.
- SHIROKY Of course not.
- BOLYSHOI Until it is too late.
- SHIROKY What's done is done.
- BOLYSHOI So even if it turns out that we were right all along.
- SHIROKY Which we are.
- BOLYSHOI Shiroky...
- SHIROKY Allegedly.
- BOLYSHOI Spreading such rumors prematurely can only lead to unsubstantiated misunderstandings.
- SHIROKY Which can lead to wild speculations.
- BOLYSHOI Paranoiac delusions.
- SHIROKY And create a general panic.
- BOLYSHOI Which does nothing to promote stability and public confidence in the glorious Party and our way of life.
- M. EDIT. I have assured Comrade Shiroky and Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi that there will be no such rumors and speculations coming out of this newspaper. And that, in future, all such inquiries will be carefully monitored—
- BOLYSHOI In the sense that there will be no inquiries of any kind under any circumstances.
- SHIROKY If you know what's good for you.
- BOLYSHOI Shiroky...
- SHIROKY Allegedly.
- M. EDIT. Now, I am confident that this resolves the matter—
- TSERKOV Yes, Madame Editrix.
- DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix.
- ZLOVESCHII Absolutely, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. But despite my deepest assurances, Comrade Shiroky and Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi have taken pains to impress upon me that the mere suggestion

- of misconduct at the *Solntse Novosti* has been enough to jeopardize the important work we do.
- BOLYSHOI Files have been opened. Reports have been submitted.
- SHIROKY Personal belongings have been examined. (*chuckles*)
- M. EDIT. Bringing this controversy to light in such a flagrant manner has been a betrayal, not only of the Party and the beloved Motherland, but of this newspaper, and of every person who works here. Especially, in light of what has happened to previous publishers at this very establishment. As editor-in-chief, failure to act, in the face of such disloyalty and treachery, would be a dereliction of my duties.
- ZLOVESCHII Yes, Madame Editrix.
- DEVUCHKA Of course, Madame Editrix.
- M. EDIT. Therefore I have promised Comrade Shiroky and Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi that they will have my fullest cooperation and that of everyone here at the *Solntse Novosti*. Isn't that right, Comrade Tserkov?
- TSERKOV Yes, Madame Editrix...
- M. EDIT. So I hope you all understand why—as a show of good faith—I have informed Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi that the man they may wish to detain for further questioning in this matter—I am sorry to say—is none other than the former chief reporter of the *Solntse Novosti*.
- DEVUCHKA Oh no!
- ZLOVESCHII Former?
- M. EDIT. I say “former”, because, after this incident, which has placed all of his colleagues in peril, he is no longer welcome on these premises. Comrade Tserkov?
- TSERKOV (*abashed*) Yes, Madame Editrix...
- M. EDIT. Please help Comrade Zloveschii clear out his desk. Zloveschii, you are fired.
- ZLOVESCHII What—?! I—?!
- M. EDIT. (*pointedly*) You should not have betrayed us.
- ZLOVESCHII What?! No! It's not me, it's him! Tserkov is the traitor!
- BOLYSHOI Comrade Zloveschii, will you come with us? We have some questions for you.
- SHIROKY Did you think you could fool us with this disguise?
- ZLOVESCHII Disguise? No! This is for the secretaries! Ask her! Tell them I tried to molest you! This is a conspiracy. They did it! They all did it! I am the only one—Let go of me!
- SHIROKY You see? These are the paranoiac delusions you have heard about.
- BOLYSHOI Please come quietly, comrade. It will be quieter that way.
- SHIROKY Don't forget your scarf, Comrade Zloveschii. You wouldn't want that terrible cough of yours to get any worse.
- ZLOVESCHII What? I don't have a cough. I am in perfect health.
- SHIROKY Very well then, go without your scarf. But no one should be surprised to hear tomorrow that you had contracted pneumonia.
- ZLOVESCHII No! My scarf! I want my scarf!
- BOLYSHOI Come along, tovarisch.
- ZLOVESCHII You're making a mistake!!

BOLYSHOI You will have plenty of time to file a verbal correction when you get to Siberia. Silence him.

ZLOVESCHII No, mmph!

(Bolyshoi and Shiroky exit with Zloveschii in custody. We hear him struggling all the way down the hall and down the stairs and into the street.)

DEVUCHKA They've taken away Zloveschii! ... Ugh! And I kissed him!

TSERKOV Now is our chance, Madame Editrix. I will take my notes down to the typesetters and have them run off a set of handbills to distribute on the square. There is still time to get the word out. Come, Devuchka, you are about to see the national press in action.

M. EDIT. Don't you think you've done enough damage for one holiday, Comrade Tserkov? I will not have you involving our printmakers in this mess. Some of them have children.

TSERKOV I thought you had a change of heart. Can't you see we have finally struck a nerve?

M. EDIT. If striking nerves was the game, I would have become a dentist.

TSERKOV We have to publish the story. It is our responsibility. For the public good.

M. EDIT. And what about your responsibility to Zloveschii? Or does the good of your co-worker mean less to you than the general population?

TSERKOV Zloveschii is a rat and a sneak. I'm sure he deserves whatever is coming to him.

DEVUCHKA Now you sound like Zloveschii.

M. EDIT. They called my father a rat and a sneak. Before that, he was called a hero. But it wasn't my father who changed. Only the names.

TSERKOV After this, he could be a hero again.

M. EDIT. Maybe so. But you will still be a coward and a hypocrite.

TSERKOV I am willing to risk my life to get at the truth!

M. EDIT. It is strange, then, that I don't see you chasing after those security officers who took Zloveschii away and confessing to being the real cause of their concern. But in the end we all prize our survival over our truth, don't we, Comrade Tserkov? Because here you sit, calling the man a sneak, while he is carried off to whatever fate he had intended for you.

TSERKOV You are the one who implicated him!

M. EDIT. When Zloveschii contacted the Security Committee and brought suspicion on the *Solntse Novosti*, he betrayed the welfare of everyone in this building. That I cannot allow. Just as I cannot allow you to re-endanger those lives with your pyrrhic insolence. If you cannot see the public good in that, then your truth is not worth the paper you would print it on.—Devuchka, keep an eye on him. I am going to call Zloveschii's wife. I'm sure she will be relieved that he is not coming home.—If you feel the urge to be any more truthful today, there is a little girl's letter on your desk which would be perfect for the holiday edition. You are going to have to finish Zloveschii's story, as well. If it does not pass the censors, I may not be in the mood to save your skin again today.

TSERKOV *(stung)* Yes, Madame Editrix.

(Madame Editrix turns to Devuchka with her gift.)

- M. EDIT. Now, Devuchka, explain this to me.
DEVUCHKA Oh, you opened it! Did you read the card? Are you happy?
M. EDIT. *(reads)* “37 NORTH ULITSA GOGOLYA, NOVOSIBIRSK.” What does it mean?
DEVUCHKA It is your present. To help you celebrate the New Year.
M. EDIT. I gather that you think so. But what is it?
DEVUCHKA Well, you have told me how much you enjoyed the old holidays when you were a little girl, before you were orphaned. How your mother would bake and your father would take you into the woods to choose a tree for the Christmas. And you would never pick the first one that caught your eye, but wander around in the snow till your fingers were too cold to feel your mittens. And your papa would chop one down for you and drag it back to the house and you would hang decorations and sit by the fire and eat your mother’s baba cakes, while your father regaled you with stories of holidays in other lands he had written about in his newspapers.
M. EDIT. Are you trying to upset me, Devuchka?
DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix. It’s just that I thought—Even though your father turned out to be the worst kind of man, and not so much a hero of the people. Perhaps when you were a little one, he was still a hero to you. And you must have enjoyed spending holidays with him, no matter who he was.
M. EDIT. I am losing patience, Devuchka.
DEVUCHKA Well, as you know, my uncle Yuri is a deputy Party minister—
M. EDIT. You have told us, Devuchka, many times.
DEVUCHKA He works in the ministry of transportation. And I asked him to use his influence to do me a small favor. You see, I have seen how Comrade Tserkov researches his sources to discover investigations. And you have taught me how to think from my head, not just my heart. So that is what I have done. And the happy result is that on that card is the address of a gulag where your father was taken after he was silenced. I thought you might like to write to him sometime.
M. EDIT. ...He’s alive?
DEVUCHKA My uncle Yuri thinks he could be.

(Madame Editrix looks like she’s about to faint.)

- DEVUCHKA I know you must still be very disappointed with him, but even if he wasn’t such a good father, I imagine he would be glad to hear from you just the same.
M. EDIT. Oh God...
DEVUCHKA Happy New Year, Madame Editrix.
TSERKOV Are you all right? Do you need air?
M. EDIT. I need vodka.

(Madame Editrix takes Tserkov’s bottle.)

- TSERKOV Devuchka, what have you done?

DEVUCHKA I thought she would be happy. Did I say something wrong? Madame Editrix?
M. EDIT. Never mind that. Where is the copy from the Christmas tree story?
TSERKOV Devuchka, is this information real?
DEVUCHKA Of course it is real, I have written it down.
TSERKOV Where did you get this?
DEVUCHKA I told you my uncle Yuri knows things. You see? It is not all bad what the Party can do for the people.

(Madame Editrix finds a copy of the press release and starts for the exit.)

M. EDIT. Excuse me, I have to make a phone call.
TSERKOV Where are you going?
DEVUCHKA Is the telephone in your office malfunctioning again?
M. EDIT. Yes. In fact, that's it. We should call someone to repair it. There is a telephone on the street corner. I'll see to it at once.
DEVUCHKA I can place the call from my desk for you. Wouldn't you rather—?
M. EDIT. It will be simpler to use the pay phone on the corner.
TSERKOV I'll come with you.
M. EDIT. You have letters to write!

(She exits.)

DEVUCHKA How is that simpler?
TSERKOV Use your head, Devuchka. She is going to call her father.
DEVUCHKA But she can't—
TSERKOV You should have thought of that before you gave her the information. Now the cat is out of the basket.

(Tserkov takes the telephone out of the desk drawer and talks to it.)

TSERKOV "Yes, Madame Editrix, I will answer these letters right away and bring them to you in your office. Would you like Devuchka to make you some black coffee, as well—to drink in your office?"
DEVUCHKA Why are you lying to my telephone?

(Tserkov shoves the telephone back in the drawer.)

TSERKOV I am creating her an alibi, in case the office is full of listening devices.
DEVUCHKA But she doesn't need an alibi. My uncle Yuri never gave me her father's telephone number. I don't think he has one.
TSERKOV Then why is she using the pay phone?

(Tserkov goes to the window. He crumples Svetlana's letter and uses it to wipe away the frost, then he tosses the letter in the trash as he peers outside.)

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

- DEVUCHKA You are not going to answer Svetlana's letter?
- TSERKOV This is a newspaper, Devuchka. It is not an appropriate subject.
- DEVUCHKA Madame Editrix thinks it is appropriate.
- TSERKOV She is only saying that to goad me. She is making a point that it is not always safe to tell the truth. I would be the most despised man in Nizhny Novgorod if I told every 8-year-old in the city that there is no Grandfather Frost.
- DEVUCHKA Why would you do such a thing?! That is horrible!
- TSERKOV I suppose you would rather I recited the Party's propoganda for children, is that it? Perhaps you still have the official memorandum on file?
- DEVUCHKA Where is the harm in explaining Grandfather Frost in the approved manner to a little girl who is in doubt?
- TSERKOV Maybe you should write it, then.
- DEVUCHKA Oh, no, I couldn't. I don't have the necessary objectivity.
- TSERKOV It doesn't take objectivity. Just gullibility.
- DEVUCHKA Grandfather Frost is not gullible.
- TSERKOV I'm not talking about Grandfather Frost.
- DEVUCHKA He is a good, decent man, who only wants what is best for all the world. And if he believes that there is good to be found in every child, then maybe we should all be looking for it, instead of always drudging in the muck for what's bad in a person.
- TSERKOV Grandfather Frost is not a person at all.
- DEVUCHKA You take that back!
- TSERKOV He is a fish.
- DEVUCHKA A fish?
- TSERKOV A red herring to distract us away from our true history.
- DEVUCHKA He's not a fish.
- TSERKOV He is a Bolshevik fantasy. Yet another fable fabricated by the Party to squash the religious.
- DEVUCHKA No one is trying to squash religion. It is simply unnecessary in the modern world to rely on old superstitions, when we have all the modern methods.
- TSERKOV Tonight in Cathedral Square, fifteen people will be injured by your modern methods. And if they are not squashed, they will certainly be stabbed, or shot, or beaten. The Party will make sure of that.
- DEVUCHKA I cannot believe that the people's Party would do such a thing to its own people.
- TSERKOV Don't underestimate yourself, Devuchka. You seem capable of believing almost anything. You put your faith in the intentions of the Party and the goodness of the government and of Grandfather Frost, despite all evidence.
- DEVUCHKA That's because I don't need any proof.
- TSERKOV Which is the blindest kind of faith. Just because your superstitions are blissful and optimistic it doesn't make them modern.
- DEVUCHKA You should hear yourself. The Party is not a superstition. And neither is Grandfather Frost. He is a real person. He has a house in Velikiy Ustyug. I have written to him. When I was little, he even used to write me back.
- TSERKOV Why did he stop? Was his handwriting starting to look too much like your mother's?

DEVUCHKA What are you accusing my mother of?

TSERKOV There is no Grandfather Frost! His real name is Saint Nicholas, who the Party has sent into exile. Grandfather Frost is a criminal alias with forged passports and false government papers to protect his identity, so you don't have to find out that he doesn't exist.

DEVUCHKA If there is no Grandfather Frost, then who is it that brings New Year's gifts to my house every single year? How does he know what to bring me? Who eats the honeyed toast I leave for his white horses?

TSERKOV They have filled your head so full of baubles, I don't know even where to begin. The only reason you believe in Grandfather Frost is because you have never known anything but this nonsense. He is a figment of your indoctrination. But I was there when he was born.

DEVUCHKA Ha! No one is that old. Not even you!

TSERKOV I remember the day, Devuchka, when they came into our schools and told us "Saint Nicholas, who has always brought you Christmas gifts and candies, is a Western lie, and he no longer exists. He is dead. And we have a new story of Grandfather Frost. And even though you have never heard of him before today, if you want your candies and toys, you will believe in him, and you will tell your children and your children's children that he has existed for thousands of years and has always been the true spirit of winter."

And they expected us to smile and nod and say, "Yes, comrades, we believe in Grandfather Frost and the greatness of the Party and the goodness of its candy." But that was one story even a child could find hard to swallow. Because they expected us to change overnight and worship the man who had murdered Saint Nicholas.

DEVUCHKA You are a liar!

TSERKOV You are a child.

DEVUCHKA I wish I was a child! For you might treat me with the respect I deserve.

TSERKOV Your beliefs are nothing! Everything you hold dear is confectioner's sugar and tinsel. You are lucky not to know how much you have been deceived, because you can still smile and laugh through the holiday. But those of us who were there when it happened know this is the season of betrayal. It is the season when Christmas was stolen from us, and all they gave us in return was the merry fiction of Grandfather Frost. So enjoy him while you can, because what will you have left when he stops coming to visit?

DEVUCHKA He won't. He never will.

TSERKOV It is time to grow up, Devuchka. You are a long way from your parents' home in Balakhna. Grandfather Frost will not be bringing down gifts from the attic on New Year's that your father has hidden there. From now on Grandfather Frost will be a sorry succession of drunken co-workers groping you at office parties. And sooty panhandlers begging for holiday charity. And lies that you tell your own children to keep them safe from the unhappiness of the world you have brought them into. But the cheerful old Grandfather whose kindness you want to believe in is done with you. You will never see his like again!

(Devuchka is paralyzed with emotion.)

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

DEVUCHKA I do not want to talk to you.
TSERKOV Fine.
DEVUCHKA Ever.
TSERKOV The silence will be a blessing.

(Both of them return icily to their desks. Devuchka sees the gift for Tserkov sitting on hers. She grimaces. She knows what she has to do. She picks it up and takes it over to him.)

DEVUCHKA Comrade Tserkov—
TSERKOV What now!?
DEVUCHKA I have a present for you. You do not deserve it. But my cousin Mikha spent a lot of time making it. So here you are. S Novym Godom.

(Devuchka places the package on Tserkov's desk and takes a step back. Tserkov stares at it in disbelief.)

TSERKOV. You are a stupid, stupid girl.

(Devuchka returns to her desk and bursts into tears. Re-enter Madame Editrix.)

M. EDIT. What happened?
TSERKOV Nothing.
M. EDIT. Why is Devuchka crying?
DEVUCHKA I am not stupid!
M. EDIT. Tserkov? What have you done?

(Tserkov says nothing. Devuchka rises from her seat.)

DEVUCHKA Madame Editrix, I know you do not respect my opinions. No one here does. But I respectfully request that you do not let Comrade Tserkov write that letter to that poor little girl, because he will tell her that Grandfather Frost is a lie meant to destroy her. And it will break her heart. And it isn't true. And even if it is true, no one should have to cry on New Year's Day.
M. EDIT. Did you tell Devuchka there is no Grandfather Frost?
TSERKOV You know there isn't. There is no Snegurochka. There is no New Year's Day. It is all supposed to be Christmas. The real holiday that was stripped from our calendars because it did not bend to the will of the glorious Party. The one day of the year when we all set aside our differences in celebration of a higher good is just another victim of a political purge.
M. EDIT. I see. And what is the higher good you think we should be celebrating? Peace and joy and good will toward men? Is that what you remember about Christmas? Gifts and merriment? Snow castles and vatrushka and kvass by the fire? Because that is exactly what New Year's Day means to her.
TSERKOV Only because she has bought into the propaganda.

M. EDIT. She was born into the propaganda. But you would rather she believed in Saint Nicholas and Christmas instead—and all the old saints and elves and sugar plum fairies—Is that the truth you prefer?

TSERKOV It's truer than this.

M. EDIT. And perhaps you'd like to return us to life under the Tsars, when we had real freedom?

TSERKOV It may not have been freedom, but it is better than what we have now.

M. EDIT. Now who is spreading lies? I may have been a child, but I remember how miserable my parents were when the monarchists were still in power. And the turbulent times in between. And it has always been about like this.

The times are always tough. The future is always bleak. And the past is always full of wonderful nostalgic memories. But you can't go back to it by destroying the present.

I miss the Christmases of my childhood, too. But it's not the holiday I long for. It is my family and what we did with those precious days. Everything else is just trappings and wrapping paper.

You loathe the jolly fat fiction of Grandfather Frost, because he distorts the jolly fat reality of Saint Nicholas—who is only a jolly fat perversion of the true Nativity—which is, itself, who knows how many parts myth and how many parts legend?

It is all fables told to children. And those who wish to be children in their hearts. Opium for the masses. Comfort for the cold. A flimsy excuse to be kind instead of vicious for one day out of the year. And what is so terrible about that?

It is not a question of which fairy tales are true, Comrade Tserkov. It is the question of which ones are worth telling. While they serve the people, they are all good. And when they cease to serve, the people will cast them aside and invent new fables. Like they did when they overthrew the Tsars before this. And the Mongols before that. And so on throughout history any time the established order has fallen out of favor.

You are right to question the truth of the official versions, Comrade Tserkov. But you are wrong to think that yours will be any more universal. At best, the truth is timely. It is never permanent.

Devuchka, go downstairs and tell the print foreman to hold the presses and wait for Comrade Tserkov to bring them one more story for the front page.

DEVUCHKA *(sniffles)* Yes, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. And then get your coat. I am giving you the rest of the day off.

DEVUCHKA It's all right, Madame Editrix, I can work.

M. EDIT. Yes, but I imagine you still have holiday shopping you might like to do?

DEVUCHKA Oh, yes! If I get in line now for bread, there's still time to surprise my cousin Mikha with a pudding. Thank you, Madame Editrix!

(Devuchka hugs her and runs off. Madame Editrix turns to Tserkov.)

TSERKOV I don't need a day off.

M. EDIT. You don't get one. I need you to revise the article on the Christmas tree lighting for tomorrow's paper.

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

TSERKOV What do you want me to do with it? I'm sure Zloveschii followed the official outline.
M. EDIT. The story is fine. But the dates are wrong, and the casualties will need to be doubled.
TSERKOV Why?
M. EDIT. I called the cathedral just now, I spoke to Father Svyashchennik.
TSERKOV What did you tell him?
M. EDIT. Comrade Shiroky was right. You ask a lot of questions. He knows what he needs to know.

(She hands him the copy.)

TSERKOV If the zealots have been warned about the attack, then why do we need the story at all? They will all stay away and everyone will be safe.
M. EDIT. They have been warned, but that doesn't mean they will stay away. Now that they know they've struck a nerve, the crowd will be larger, the accident will be much worse. The official casualties will be at least double. The full account of it will not be in the newspapers, but there will be hundreds of witnesses. The news will spread by word of mouth. ... There are more than two ways to fight a revolution, Comrade Tserkov.
TSERKOV Yes, Madame Editrix.
M. EDIT. I was disappointed in you today. You should be the one I rely on. But it seems you only make my job harder.
TSERKOV It's not supposed to be easy.
M. EDIT. I suppose you will find that out soon enough.
TSERKOV What do you mean?
M. EDIT. I should terminate you for your insubordination today. But I will need someone to run the paper while I am gone. And you are the only one qualified.
TSERKOV I don't understand. Where are you going? How long will you be gone?
M. EDIT. Thanks to Devuchka, it seems I am going to Siberia. And I will be gone as long as it takes. This newspaper is no longer the only family that needs me. I suppose I could contact the local Party committee, and have them send someone over from the ministry of information to run things. But I think we'd both rather you did it.
TSERKOV How do you know you can trust me?
M. EDIT. You mean, how do I know you won't splash this story across the front page as soon as my back is turned? I have held the evening presses for you. You may do as you see fit. But there is only so much truth you can inflict in one day. And whether you still have a newspaper to tell it with tomorrow depends on what Comrade Inspector Bolyshoi reads on the front page tonight. *Do svidaniya*, Comrade Tserkov. Take care of our *Solntse Novosti*. And be kinder to Devuchka. She means well. Unlike so many of us. Happy Christmas.

(Madame Editrix exits.)

TSERKOV Happy Christmas...

(Devuchka returns with her coat. She timidly approaches Tserkov's desk.)

DEVUCHKA Comrade Tserkov, I didn't mean to upset you earlier.
TSERKOV I know.
DEVUCHKA If you don't mind, may I have my New Year's gift back?
TSERKOV Why?
DEVUCHKA I have given it some thought, and I am afraid you will not like it.
TSERKOV Why not?
DEVUCHKA I would rather not say. But I think I wasn't thinking, and in the interest of good will, I should take it back with my apologies. I will come up with a better gift.
TSERKOV Why? What is in here?
DEVUCHKA It's nothing. I don't want you to be upset. Please, just give it to me.

(She tries to take it, but Tserkov pulls the package away from her and tears it open. It contains a carved wooden figurine of Grandfather Frost.)

TSERKOV You gave me a wooden holiday figure? Of Grandfather Frost??
DEVUCHKA My cousin Mikha carves them in her shop. I thought—Never mind, I was mistaken. You must give it back to me. I will find someone who will like it. A child, perhaps.
TSERKOV What could possibly have made you think I would want a figure of Grandfather Frost tormenting me through the holiday?!

DEVUCHKA No, it's not. I didn't want to get my cousin in trouble for making it, so she carved you a Grandfather Frost, but I have dressed him in red. You see? He is wearing his Saint Nicholas costume. It is old Saint Nick. You see the card? He says, "Merry Christmas." I hope I spelled it right. I thought—I thought it might remind you of the old holidays you used to celebrate when you were younger, and you would not be so unhappy about the New Year.

(Tserkov is silent.)

DEVUCHKA I am sorry, it was stupid. I will learn. Let me have it.
TSERKOV ...No, it's all right.
DEVUCHKA You don't have to be angry. I will give him to a child who will love him.
TSERKOV No...
DEVUCHKA There is a little boy just down the street. His mother works at the bakery in the next block. I will give it to him.
TSERKOV It's all right, Devuchka, leave it here.
DEVUCHKA You don't want the boy to have him either?
TSERKOV The bakery is on my way home. I will give it to the boy later. ... I want to keep him for a little while.
DEVUCHKA *(unsure)* Are you sure? You promise? Grandfather Nicholas should spend the holiday with someone who will be happy to see him.
TSERKOV It's okay. Thank you, Devuchka. It is thoughtful of you.

Yes, Svetlana, There Is A Grandfather Frost

DEVUCHKA You are not angry?

TSERKOV No, not any more. You have done your job well, Snegurochka. Maybe there is some good in everything.

DEVUCHKA In everyone.

TSERKOV Yes.

DEVUCHKA The typesetters are waiting for the final story.

TSERKOV I know. Go on, now. I will lock up. Happy New Year.

DEVUCHKA Happy New Year, Comrade Tserkov. I mean—I'm sorry—Happy Holiday to you.

(Devuchka leaves. Tserkov places the figurine on the desk in front of him. He takes Svetlana's letter out of the trash and uncrumples it.)

TSERKOV "DEAR EDITOR: MY NAMES IS SVETLANA. I AM 8 YEARS OLD. SOME OF MY LITTLE FRIENDS SAY THERE IS NO GRANDFATHER FROST. PAPA SAYS, 'IF YOU SEE IT IN THE *SOLNTSE NOVOSTI* IT IS SO.' PLEASE TELL ME THE TRUTH; IS THERE A GRANDFATHER FROST?"

(Tserkov roll a sheet of paper into his typewriter and begins...)

TSERKOV "Svetlana, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except what they can prove. They think that nothing is possible which is not comprehensible to their little minds.

Yes, Svetlana, there is a Grandfather Frost. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and loyalty exist—and though they may seem scarcer now—you know that they still abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy.

Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Grandfather Frost. It would be as dreary as if there were no Svetlanas. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no hope and romance to make tolerable this existence. The eternal optimism with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Grandfather Frost! You might as well not believe in Mother Russia! Or doubt the good intentions of the Party. You may get your papa to call in inspectors to watch all the city streets on New Year's Eve to catch Grandfather Frost coming into town, but even if they did not see him, what would that prove? There is more in life than what is contained in the official reports. Nobody sees Grandfather Frost, but that is no sign that there is no Grandfather Frost. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can perceive.

There is a veil covering the unseen world which not the cleverest spy can pierce, nor even the united strength of all the strongest workers, could ever tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, remembrance, can push aside that curtain and view the supernal beauty and glory beyond. But is it real? Ah, Svetlana, in all this world, there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Grandfather Frost? Thank God, he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Svetlana, nay, ten times ten thousand year from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

Happy New Year, gentle readers. S Novym Godom. And all your holidays be blessed.”

(End of Play.)