

Vasiliy Karavaev

GOA

Confession of the Psychedelic Oyster

Dedicated to my daughter Vasilina.



Right-Brain
BUSINESS plan

CAFE-SHOP

HEMP

Amsterdam

Santitas

\$ 75,000

RUSSIA

?

MADI P. PHUA

Chapter 1. Part One. Inside.

I slowly take my palms, which smell of oysters, away from my face. I open my eyes. Damn!!! This isn't a dream – reality remains unchanged. Ten to twenty... The phrase echoes in my temples. From ten to twenty years in jail! No, this can't be real, they've got to get me out of here! So this is what it's like, my first night in jail. I have never been locked up before. I need to get some sleep and try to eat. The iron plate of rice garnished with dal isn't appealing in the slightest. A ginger cat with bald patches sneaks through the barred window, sniffs my food lying on the floor, and continues walking past it with disdain, in search of something edible. A massive gray rat pops out of its hole in the corner of my cell, jogs unhurriedly across the room, wagging its tail as if to say 'goodbye' to me, and disappears behind the toilet door.

What am I doing here? This is just a nightmare and I need to wake up fast. God... What an excruciating heat has set in this time of year! It feels no less than one hundred degrees Celsius. Every slight flutter of a breeze brings orgasmic joy. I'm sure I look like a caged animal. The only thing missing is a sign reading 'Big White Ape. Habitat: areas with a cold climate. Does not reproduce in captivity.' The cage is quite spacious for a species such as myself. Ten feet wide and four feet long. There are iron bars instead of a door.

The last zoo I went to was in Bangkok; it looked much cleaner and there wasn't such a stench coming from the lavatory. Can they really have such big quarters for each inmate here? Now I can understand the animals that strut from corner to corner every day in their zoo-jail. It's just impossible to stay still. I've been walking around the cell in circles for four hours. I note the guard's indifferent stare: he watches me pacing around my concrete box with a mean grimace.

"Hey you, I'm thirsty! Where do you get drinking water here?"

The guard grins, passes me a plastic bottle through the bars, and silently points to the toilet door. I take the bottle with disgust, push the grimy door open with one finger, and stand paralyzed with horror, hesitant to step inside. I never thought I'd have to drink water in such conditions. I still have to get to the water itself... The whole floor is covered with a layer of mucus, urine and shit. I can't force myself to step forward barefoot.

"Hey, guard, give me my shoes, I'm not some kind of animal, I need to get to the water tap."

The guard smiles again and throws my sandals through the bars.

"After you've finished, give them back, or else you'll never get them again," the young man says, resting his elbow on his long old rifle.

What's wrong with his face? He seems to always be smiling, and that's a relief. It's good that they don't get physical with the inmates here; I'd rather they always smiled.

Carefully making my way across the layer of greenish-brown slime to reach the water tap, I feel happy for the first time since I've been here. Water!!! The warm liquid coming from the dirty tap in a thin trickle reeks of chlorine. Hopefully, I won't have to drink it for long in here... They've got to get me out of here. I have a thousand friends, and surely they will do something about this. Now I need to keep myself busy. Doing nothing drives me insane. I'm dying for a cigarette! Maybe, an inmate could've stashed some tobacco or at least a cigarette butt somewhere. The uneven concrete cell floor can't have been swept for two hundred years. I might have a better chance of finding something in the pile of trash in the corner. I start rummaging through the old plastic bags and crumpled pieces of newspaper and come across a suspiciously neatly-folded piece of toilet paper. I hope it's not some kind of joke, and somebody didn't just put a piece of shit in it. Wary of contracting a contagious disease, I unroll it with two fingers and discover three cigarettes, yellow

from time and humidity, and five matches. There you are!!! My luck is coming back!!! The cigarettes, judging by their color, have been sitting here for over a month. Oh Lord, bless the man who took the trouble to stash this for me! The setting Sun adds to my joy, but the concrete that has been exposed to the heat all day is not willing to part with the heat. I'd love to poke my head through the bars and breathe the air from the street; it is much cooler than in the cell. Another problem appears – mosquitoes. The light lures them, like a magnet. There are thousands of them in the cell, maybe even a million. My shirt and shorts are soaked through with sweat. The mosquitoes sense the smell of sweat and swarm towards the uncovered parts of my body. Randomly slapping myself with my palm I kill a handful of the bloodsuckers. I don't exactly dream of contracting malaria, which not everybody is capable of surviving. Driving the mosquitos away with a newspaper, I light the first prized cigarette. The burning acidic smoke of the cheap Indian tobacco has an effect on me comparable to a hash joint. The light dizziness and feeling of acute fatigue throughout my body force me to lie down and forget about my problems for a moment. If only I could fall asleep now. The smiling guard notices me lying on the floor; without a sound he throws a pile of old newspapers at me. Evidently they are my bed sheets now, a plastic bottle being my pillow. One newspaper is my mattress, another is my blanket. I wrap the newspapers around my head and neck, lie down and for a while I listen to the sound of mosquitoes near my ear; they are looking for ways to get closer to me. It is unlikely that I'll manage to survive in such conditions... However, my exhausted mind collapses and I manage to fall asleep for a few seconds. I dream of when I was a fifteen year old boy fishing in the Volga river and trying to sleep in a tent full of mosquitoes. The mosquitos from my dream finally wake me up. I look at the ceiling. The sticky heat and mosquitoes don't bother as much anymore, gradually giving way to another disturbance – my inflamed brain doesn't stop looking for a solution to the problem. Working at a very high speed and producing negligible results, it starts to overheat. "I've got to do something, I've got to do something," the phrase is pulsing in my head, making my consciousness seek ways of getting out of this situation. "That's it. You're facing ten to twenty years" the casual phrase of one of the cops that struck my life like a lightning bolt.

What am I doing here? This shouldn't have happened. This is some sort of misunderstanding, an accident, an injustice... I've been framed! I'm filled with a burning fury, making my whole body tense up like a compressed spring. I need to start walking around the cell and concentrate on my breathing, that should pacify my troubled mind. If I start walking fast enough, the damn mosquitoes won't have enough time to land on me. For a while one of my problems disappears. Thousands of mosquitoes follow me in a buzzing gray cloud, trying to pierce my flesh.

Where did I go wrong? Why am I here? Like a broken record, my brain again begins to repeat: "I've got to do something, I've got to do something, I've got to, I've got to, I've got to." First I need money, because money always solves everything. Where can I get some cash? The cops took my last five grand. I need to somehow contact my wife and tell her to sell our apartment as soon as possible. I wonder when they'll let me make my first phone call. What will I tell my family? "Sorry, my darlings, but now you have to move out of your three-bedroom apartment into a one-bedroom." What an idiot I am! Well... I may be an idiot, but at least I'm still alive. Let's just say that now is the time to part with the real estate that I considered my last resort. Maybe I should have done it long ago. If I had done it, I wouldn't be here now. When did this all start? When did I take the wrong path that led me here? Dymkov. The name springs to mind. Maybe it started with him. Maybe sooner, maybe later, but it is his image that my mind is producing as an answer to the question "why am I here now?" The whole story must have started with him. This man, whom I met by accident, had a great effect on me. Or you could say that my whole life changed dramatically after I met him.

Chapter 1. Part Two. Outside.

Without going into details of the causes and consequences, I can assume that the bad luck that turned into an avalanche of trouble started to come about just before I became acquainted with Dymkov in the mid-1990s. The turbulent times of political change in Russia were coming to an end, although

we were not aware of this back then. My life had just begun. Earning money was easy and fast, and as a result my days were filled with all kinds of pleasures. I craved more and in greater variety, so earning easy money brought a lot of joy. I was just a small entrepreneur in a big, but provincial city. Back then half of the country's population were entrepreneurs, surviving thanks to their own initiative. During the Perestroika¹ years, the profit from my small business went from zero to a quarter of a million dollars. I kept reinvesting and making new money. There wasn't a thing I didn't invest in! I traded everything that it was possible to trade, and provided all kinds of services, anything and everything that the law allowed. All of my life I have considered myself to be a law-abiding citizen. My obedience was not based on fear, but rather on the morals and ideals that I received from my parents. My mother was a clothes designer and I inherited my good taste from her. My father worked as an engineer in a factory all his life; he taught me how to survive in this world with my hands and my brain. And even though I spent my childhood in working class areas of the city, I was raised on the principles of good morals and abiding by the law.

It was the peak of the nineties. Quentin Tarantino's "From Dusk To Dawn" had just hit us. Like thousands of other young people infected by the fast-spreading virus of freedom, I wanted to get a tattoo, just like the cult movie's main hero. As having half of one's body covered with tattoos was costly, in order to minimize the expense, I opened the first tattoo salon in the city. I rented a small office, did the redecorating myself, hired two tattoo artists, and started tattooing my body while we waited for the first customers.

Dymkov, a short guy wearing a rocker-style leather jacket, turned up in my salon and immediately became one of my clients. Wearing glasses with large lenses, his long dark hair tied in a ponytail, he looked like a pre-Perestroika punk rocker who had outgrown his time. Back then he worked fixing watches in a small shop and had plenty of free time that he spent on his favorite occupation: music. He played the guitar in a small, unknown rock band, collected records by Time Machine and even wrote reviews on new records for music magazines. That year he had a tattoo on his shoulder in the form of the 'peace sign' on a globe background. United by our love of rock music, motorbikes and tattoos, we quickly became friends. We spent a few wonderful years together surrounded by girls, alcohol and marijuana. They were fun times. Easily accessible girls flocked around the tattoo salon, alcohol flowed like a river, and the marijuana and money never ended.

A few carefree years passed before Dymkov inherited an interesting job from his mother. During the Soviet regime she had worked for the philharmonic and brought many stars of the stage to the city. Dymkov quit his watch repair job and became famous in the city as a producer: a trendy profession at that time. I sold my tattoo salon to my friends, but remained on good terms with Dymkov. Every weekend we would see each other on our regular visits to prostitutes. Our wives were both ten years our senior, and that gave us something in common. Our spouses were smarter than us. They were educated, entrepreneurial, self-sufficient, and therefore didn't appear to us as objects of sexual desire. Maybe we were poor lovers, incapable of turning our wives into hot goddesses who craved us all the time, or maybe our wives, overloaded by their careers and daily routine, didn't exude as much sex appeal as we wanted. That is why Dymkov and I regularly visited prostitutes. Prostitutes united us.

Slowly but surely the era of Perestroika came to an end. The turnover of my two Turkish-Italian clothes stores was still about a quarter of a million dollars, but I hardly saw any of it. I had to pay huge monthly bills for business expenditures, taxes, rent; all of which resulted in me having not more than a thousand dollars a month in my pocket. The situation was getting out of control. My brain had gotten used to bathing in waves of ecstasy and was demanding new sensations. By that time I had divorced my first wife and bought a motorbike, and I started to live the life of a Russian biker. In summer I would travel across the country and in winter I would hang out in rock bars, spending money on hard liquor and easy women. The way my business was arranged, I only worked

1 Perestroika – the political movement for reform within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during the 1980s, widely associated with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

two hours a day collecting the money generated by my two stores. Unlike me, Dymkov less and less frequently found free time to spend on himself.

The times of uncontrolled ‘freelance producers’ passed, and Dymkov was taken under the wing of a large, prosperous corporation. He was given the role of director of a nightclub in the Center of Culture and Entertainment, and he had his own office, where we would gather almost every evening to smoke a joint. The office was guarded by a security service, so we could comfortably get stoned, knowing that we didn’t have to worry about anyone disturbing us. It was there that I met one of the owners of the corporation, who we respectfully and fearfully referred to as ‘Sam²’ between us. By then Sam had quit the common, detrimental habit of getting drunk every day and seriously took to fighting the all-out debauchery that surrounded him. Thanks to him, all of the top managers and other management personnel in his corporation abstained from alcohol. But he fought hard drinking in his own way, one that had at one time helped him to stop the terrible habit of taking a hair of the dog every morning. Even before Perestroika, when being an independent contractor or making any money under the table was illegal, he fooled his countrymen playing the thimblorig at an auto market. The job was rough, and he had to drink a lot. He had to drink with bandits and he had to drink with the cops, there was no way around it. The years passed and we changed. Eventually he quit his criminal activities and focused on legal business. Producing plastic windows was his next endeavor, and later on he managed to get a hold of a relatively big share of Autovaz, which manufactures Lada cars. Several major factories and plants across the country were bought for next to nothing. Post-Soviet industry was inefficient and dilapidated; a drunken stupor ruled the country. Everybody was drinking: from simple folk to the elite and even the president. Hard drinking had penetrated every aspect of people’s lives. With that in mind, Sam, who was now the owner of a big corporation, made up his mind to switch his staff from drinking alcohol to smoking marijuana. Sam was able to get off the bottle with the help of the miracle herb. No, he didn’t start buying wholesale marijuana by the ton; he didn’t even get into the drug business. He just set an example of how it was possible to enjoy life without drinking. As a moderate smoker, he managed to be a superb businessman and lead a healthy life. He was the picture of a successful businessman who knew how to live with a taste.

That fall the Russian version of *Forbes* magazine, which writes about the richest people, published an article on the year’s most successful corporation, featuring an interview in which Sam declared that he was the first legal billionaire in our city. At that time, in order to be independent of drug dealers, I was growing different strains of hydroponic marijuana under lamps on my balcony. It was enough for my personal use and to treat my friends. Every two months I harvested it and we tried it in Dymkov’s office, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of new Dutch marijuana strains. Occasionally Sam would join us. He was always laconic and seemed preoccupied with other things. After smoking with us, he would rate the herb, discuss the club business with Dymkov, and after an hour he would leave, accompanied by armed bodyguards.

One evening Dymkov calls me and asks me to come urgently, because he has something interesting to share with me. Not having anything else to do, I grab a bud of White Widow³ and reach his office in fifteen minutes. In his office I see that a couple of my friends are with him, all connoisseurs of good weed, lying on the sofa, watching Dymkov. First of all he rolls a joint, passes it around and then starts to talk excitedly.

“Vasya, can you imagine, I was smoking with Sam an hour ago...”

“That’s no big deal, Dymkov, you smoke with him every day,” I try to make a joke, making use of the pause while he takes a puff.

“Listen to me, Vasya, and don’t interrupt,” Dymkov doesn’t let me finish, passing the joint to me, “Do you know what Sam has got on his mind?”

“I’m afraid to even think about it,” I say, smiling at him and exhaling a stream of sweet smoke, “Is he running for President?”

“Oh, Vasya, if only... Yesterday he went to hang out with the big shots at an official town banquet. He told me that, as usual, everybody got shitfaced

2 Sam – there is a subtext to this name in Russian, which could be translated as ‘himself’ (as in ‘Elvis himself’), reflecting the respect that this character is held in.

3 Black Widow – a potent cannabis strain developed in The Netherlands.

and he had to sit like an idiot listening to all the crap those colonels and businessmen were talking, after they had all turned into drunken animals in just a few hours. He said he couldn't even step outside and have a smoke, as it could have been misunderstood."

"And... so?" I interrupt him, intrigued by the beginning of his story.

"So, Sam has decided to promote the legalization of marijuana. Vasya, when he said that, I almost dropped my joint. If I didn't know him so well, I would have thought it was a joke, but he never wastes his breath."

"And what did he decide to start with?" I ask with irony, not taking his story seriously.

"What he wants, Vasya, is to change our society's attitude towards marijuana, for starters. He wants it to be like Europe, he wants ganja smokers to be treated as normal human beings, and not registered junkies. So, Vasya, right now he is willing to fund any project that will lead to a change in people's attitude towards marijuana. Before you came, Ilya Beech was here, and Sam gave him money to go to Amsterdam and shoot a ten-minute video about the annual ganja festival and the people's attitude to marijuana.

"Yes, it wouldn't be bad to go to Amsterdam for a week and visit the Cannabis Cup⁴," I say enviously and immediately my mind draws a picture of me sitting in a coffee shop⁵ in the Red Light District.

"Vasya, what's stopping you from doing it? Come to think of it, what could you do to promote the legalization of marijuana?" Dymkov says, making a straight-faced parody of Soviet Second World War propaganda posters.

"You know, Dymkov, I'm a trader, I can sell anything and everything, but I won't sell drugs."

"Nobody is asking you to sell drugs. Think of something. What are you, thick or what?"

After hesitating for a second, I feel like I'd been struck by lightning.

"Look, Dymkov, I was ordering new strains of Dutch marijuana online recently and by accident I clicked on a very interesting link. A Moscow firm offers clothes made from marijuana to wholesale buyers, it is called Hemp."

"Vasya, that's exactly what we need!" Dymkov exclaims, jumping out of his leather armchair. "Start putting together a business plan tonight. If you say that this project will pay off in three years, you'll get funding for it."

As I drive my Jeep back home I turn on cruise control, not paying attention to anything going on outside. I am absorbed in this new idea; a plan for a new exciting life is being born in my head. I don't get a wink of sleep that night. I browse all of the Internet resources that have anything to do with Hemp, I sit down with a calculator and by morning I've put together a preliminary business plan that requires seventy-five thousand dollars to realize. My heart beats like a bass drum and I feel like I am Che Guevara. That night I start to believe that everything in this world was possible; one just had to really want it. Dymkov calls Sam and gets preliminary approval for the budget. Everything starts to spin so fast, that in a month I am in Amsterdam to get some overseas experience.

Walking down the beautiful Dutch streets, I enjoy the spirit of European civilization. The absence of aggressive, dismal faces is inebriating. The spirit, taste and smell of freedom can be felt everywhere. One can legally smoke marijuana and hashish in coffee shops and eat psilocybin mushrooms, peyote

4 The Cannabis Cup – the world's foremost annual cannabis festival.

5 Coffee shops – establishments in the Netherlands where the sale of cannabis for personal consumption by the public is tolerated by the local authorities.

and other psychoactive plants in smart shops. In bars one can drink tasty beer, and on the streets one can legally enjoy love for sale. What strikes me most is that nobody bothers anyone else. Everybody seems to enjoy life and not keep others from enjoying it. Everything that is banned in Russia is for sale here, either legally or semi-legally. Street dealers selling banned drugs freely offer passers-by their goods right in front of the cops without any fear of being arrested. “Will this level of democracy ever be achieved in Russia? What can be done for me to be able to see it during my lifetime? Can this be achieved in the near future?” I think, recalling my homeland. Day and night, I can’t get this thought out of my mind.

Cruising from one coffee shop to another, I observe the people hanging out in those places. Some of them are old Rasta men and Jamaicans. In their faith smoking ganja is a religious ritual, so they always take smoking very seriously. Listening to reggae music, I watch with great pleasure how the Rasta men roll joints filled with Jamaican ganja. Pot smokers in Russia never put any effort into making smoking look good. My countrymen usually put a mix of ganja and tobacco in a Russian cigarette, and the taste of cheap paper prevails over the sweet marijuana smoke. In general, Russian smokers hardly ever use aesthetic accessories, preferring to insert the mix into an empty cigarette with their fingers, sitting in their houses or cars, or some hiding place where they will go unnoticed by the police. In Holland one feels class and style everywhere, including in smoking. Some coffee shops are gathering places for creative people, and have a great assortment of marijuana and hashish from all over the world. Paying careful attention to the smell of Turkish hashish smoke, we compare it to Moroccan, Nepali, Afghani, Pakistani, Kashmiri, Indian and other strains. Each one has its own smell, taste and effect.

We spend a whole day in an underground squat at a trance party surrounded by interesting and creative people. Lying peacefully on leather sofas, some of them were paint, while others just socialize. The availability and affordability of intellectual, as well as party drugs, is phenomenal. Everywhere there are ‘Common interest clubs’ packed with people united by the love of ganja and light drugs. In smart shops it is completely legal to buy organic analogues of virtually all synthetic drugs. Substitutes for ecstasy, LSD and other psychoactive substances are on sale, sharing a shelf with hallucinogenic cacti and psilocybin mushrooms. We spend hours on end hanging around small stores selling drug paraphernalia, staring at the shelves and forgetting about time. The whole city of Amsterdam consists of very well cared-for houses inhabited by beautiful, intelligent elves. The democracy that our government talked about now seems a hoax. All of a sudden our country seems a haven of evil goblins, who live in tastelessly built apartment complexes and don’t smile at each other on the streets. It is hard to imagine free municipal bikes with ten sets of pedals being ridden on Russian streets. At a station in Amsterdam I see a man with a case get off one such bike and another man get on in his place, turning the pedals to reach his destination for free with ten other passengers. Nobody slacks off. Everyone turns their pedals, humming a merry Dutch tune together.

One month after I return to Russia, I hold a business plan endorsed by Sam in one hand, and a bag with seventy-five grand in the other. All of the official papers are in my name, as Sam refuses to involve his corporation in such a compromising project as Hemp, which he explains as due to it being too soon to reveal the real forces behind the ‘Legalize’ project. “First we need to change society’s attitude towards smokers, and afterwards: legally decriminalize marijuana. The first step will be to make the penalty for possession of light drugs less harsh, after that we’ll be able to promote the legalization of marijuana,” Dymkov explains, handing the bag with the money to me. During the first stage I am to promote hemp clothes. Sam wants everybody in town to be talking about the brand. According to Dymkov, Sam is funding and supervising our project personally. My business plan stipulates that most of the funds are to be spent on advertising and promotion. I fit myself into the business plan budget as a manager with a modest monthly salary of eight hundred dollars. If they had refused to pay me, I probably would have agreed to work for free. I felt like a hero.

“It’s a risky enterprise, as far as business is concerned,” I say to Dymkov, a few days before the grand opening of the store. “It’s a new business, and

it's virtually impossible to predict what's going to happen in the future.”

“Don't wet your pants, Vasya, we'll make it!” Dymkov replies, tipping a pile of ganja sitting on a folder with the heading ‘Hemp Business Plan’ into an empty cigarette. “You probably understand, Vasya, that this project is political rather than commercial. It's just like a big toy for Sam and he understands that. Do you know what he told me yesterday when he stopped by the office for a smoke?” Dymkov suddenly says in a low voice, taking out his Zippo cigarette lighter, which always smells of gasoline. “He told me, Vasya, that if the initial investment pays off in three years, he will give us Hemp as a gift. I've been dreaming about owning a store with unique goods and being able to promote the legalization of cannabis all my life, Vasya.”

“Yes, we're standing on the verge of big changes and making history with our own hands,” I reply to Dymkov, inhaling the sweet fumes of White Widow. “We might open the first coffee shop in our country someday.”

“That wouldn't be too bad,” Dymkov adds with a smile, staring at the thick cascades of smoke floating towards the open window. “You do know, Vasya, that the first coffee shop in Amsterdam was opened by Russian emigrants and it's called ‘Moscow’?”

“I sure do,” I reply with a big grin on my face, recollecting the times we smoked AK-476 in Amsterdam, on the street right across from the ‘Moscow’ coffee shop. We had been warned that we could only smoke in coffee shops while in Holland. If caught smoking in the streets, you can be fined. But as we were used to smoking in the streets in Russia, we rolled a couple of joints and started walking down the street under the autumnal yet pleasantly warm sunlight. We stood at a Dutch canal, smoking sweet cultivated marijuana and dreaming about the time when we'd be able to do the same in our home country, slowly and easily, just like we did in Holland, without having to watch out for cops, in fear of getting locked up for a few years for just one joint. We stood and smoked our joints right on the sidewalk; two policemen rode their bikes right past us, not paying any attention to the sweet smell mellowing down the street, that made passers-by smile at us with understanding.

“Stop smiling,” Dymkov says all of a sudden, interrupting my sweet reminiscence of that wonderful country. “Do you understand what I'm saying? We'll be gifted Hemp, if we return the money in a timely manner,” Dymkov repeats, shaking my shoulder.

“Of course we will return the money, whatever it takes. If Sam is supporting our project, everything will be alright. Jah Rastafari⁷ is on our side.”

6 AK-47 – a potent strain of marijuana.

7 The Rastafari movement – an Abrahamic religion that developed in Jamaica in the 1930s, following the coronation of Haile Selassie I as Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930. Rastafari are monotheists, worshipping a singular God whom they call Jah.