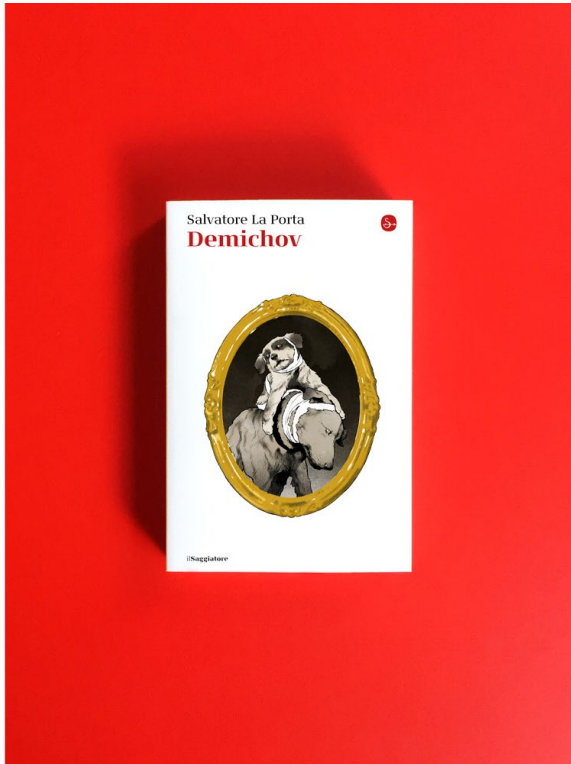


Salvatore La Porta
Demichov



Savior of humanity. Heartless monster. Visionary inventor. Animal torturer. Hero of progress. Enemy of the people. How many lives can fit into the life of a single man? Salvatore La Porta recounts the controversial existence of Vladimir Demikhov, the father of transplant medicine: an emotional and literary portrait that is also a passionate reflection on the boundaries between science and ethics.

It's December 3rd, 1967, when South African surgeon Christiaan Barnard performs the first human heart transplant. The event is revolutionary: finally, a part of us can survive in someone else's body, saving their life.

What almost no one knows, however, is

that this crucial milestone was only made possible thanks to the research of an obscure Russian doctor who, in the basement of a Soviet institute, had for years conducted horrifying operations on dogs—thus giving birth to transplantology: Vladimir Petrovič Demichov.

This book tells his incredible story: from a youth spent working in factories to his brilliant experiments as a university fellow; from his early attempts to transplant the head of one dog onto the body of another to the eventual success of his theories; from the enthusiasm of the international press to the embarrassment and reprisals of Soviet authorities, who branded him a dangerous charlatan; and finally, to censorship, expulsion from all institutions, and *damnatio memoriae*—a legacy of erasure that still haunts much of his work today.

Demichov is an impossible biography, a narrative woven from lost documents and uncertain testimonies, exploring what it truly means to give everything—your health, your peace of mind, your reputation—for what you believe is right: to understand where our body ends and where *we* begin.

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English translation by Seán McDonagh

As hard as I try, I can't remember the exact moment I decided it would be worth telling the story of Vladimir Demichov. It's fairly strange, if not concerning, seeing as I have spoken about him for years now; every time a discussion becomes stagnant and someone stares into the void, I whip out my wildcard: the ordinary, exceptional life of Dr Vladimir Petrovič Demichov, qualified blacksmith, winner of the Burdenko prize in 1950, awarded the Order "For Merit to the Fatherland" in 1988, teacher of Christiaan Barnard, a new Frankenstein, charlatan, genius, and tireless torturer of dogs. A man who, having never operated on a human being, has saved millions of them. I searched among the pages of stored-away notebooks, on the oldest files of my computer, even in the end pages of the books I had read and annotated during the past few summers, but I can't remember how I came to know of his existence. That this is the case is ironic, perhaps cruel even, because throughout his whole life, Demichov had to withstand the humiliation of not being recognised, of being forgotten and buried in life – almost literally. In reality, it's a good question too: why would I want to examine such a story? Thinking about it, it seems like an excellent way to land yourself with a whole load of problems: it's difficult to comprehend who he was, this surgeon who was born alongside the Soviet Union and who died shortly after its dissolution; it's difficult because there remain very few traces of him, and those that he left are as deformed as his reputation: was he one of the most brilliant scientists that humanity has had, capable of predicting and directing the future of our species, and what remains of him? The opinion of others: the disdain, the derision, the will to impede him. Who is Demichov? The savage surgeon of the East, the mad scientist, the corpse cutter, the narrow-minded man, incapable of doing anything but work, the distant husband, the father who raised his daughter in an operating theatre. And yet, is he, at the same time, the visionary who imagined our future, the person who – while being mostly ignored – made our lives the way they are today? Is his identity concentrated in his stocky hands, in his broad bare forehead, or is the essence of this man his ironic smile that used to animate his features in his greatest moments?

What pushes me to write about him is, first of all, the sense of wonder to be found in front of his work: what he managed to do, with few resources and impeded by the bureaucracy of a state like the Soviet Union, is incredible. He was born during the Russian Civil War and lived mainly during the fifties and sixties; he spent his childhood in the care of the Cossacks, he was a soldier during the Second World War and grew old in the chill of the Cold War. He literally lived surrounded by enemies.

And yet, Demichov is the man who invented transplantology. If today a heart attack doesn't necessarily mean death, the credit goes largely to him. If our civilisation cultivates the idea of a human body that can be improved, repaired, replaced even, the credit must go largely to him.

The credit - or the fault: we would have to come to an agreement on this.

The Soviet surgeon appears to those who chance upon his story like a clumsy character from a horror film; something halfway between Dr Frankenstein and Nosferatu, a man who shuffled the cards of human biology without any respect for the rules of the game - or its test subjects.

This is certainly true.

But is that not what we now do every day? Haven't we been confusing everything about our biological body, for the past hundred years or so? Do we not experiment with artificial grafts, bone and cartilage that are replaced with metal prosthetics, neural connections with microchips and silicon, hearts with hydraulic pumps – even shreds of DNA with programmed sequences, cell by cell, essence by essence? Why then is Demichov a reject? I think the basic answer is that he had no intellectual limitations. Beyond the profound

respect he held for human life, the Soviet surgeon considered himself bound by duty to attempt any road that would bring him to an understanding of biology: it seems like a minimal agenda, and instead, it was scandalous. Furthermore, Vladimir Petrovič Demichov had no scruples, and perhaps it's exactly this his unforgivable sin: nobody else shared the results of their experiments with such naivety, and they were – it has to be said straight away – horrific experiments. Many others have hidden from the public the mangled test animals, the dissected cadavers, the refuse of a very dirty work – experimental surgery – which consists of the disassembling of living beings to discover how they work: in exchange for this consideration, they have received money, prestige, and pages of history written in their name. The Soviet, on the other hand, displayed the back of shop dirtied with blood, faeces, and internal organs; he did it smiling like a child, incapable of perceiving the horror that he was depicting to the eyes present.

Demichov, then, became the monster.

Perhaps he was. Perhaps it doesn't make sense to search for the identity of a man who has been dead for decades, of which, there remains so little, but the point is that you could say the same thing about anyone – alive or dead – who finds themselves sharing this existence. What exactly is identity, where is it, if it is anything at all: these are the questions that linger on the coffee cups in the bar in which I tell the story of this man buried in mud and scorn; because his identity has been misinterpreted and imprecise. And because his work, the idea that every part of us can be replaced, makes even its formulation uncertain.

Are we something, beyond our biological configuration? Is there a substratum that persists with every mutation of ours, with the incessant drift towards old age, with traumas and maturations, with surgical operations that repair us, with replacements? Or is anything permitted?

To Demichov, we also owe these questions.

Until not long ago – not too long at all, to tell the truth – we posed ourselves fundamental questions on existence for which the answers were extraordinarily different to those we would give today. Among these, one of the most reoccurring was undoubtedly: what will remain of us?

Most of the time, the answer was simple, sad, and instant: nothing. Nothing at all. Zero.

For a while, something will remain, of course. Children and their memories remain, the tears of loved ones and questions about the human condition that our absence sows in their minds. Wardrobes of clothes emptied of our bodies remain, coats stiffened from being left to hang, shoes that preserve the imprint of our feet, formless pyjamas that kept us company on that final day in hospital. The toothbrush with the worn bristles remains, a can of shaving foam that our son won't have the courage to finish, a razor, and the hair from our face that, caught in the blades, managed to survive. Towels and bedsheets remain, objects that shared a body with us that no longer exists, of which they still bear the marks: a drawer of heel-worn socks, underwear, the cotton t-shirt we used for sleeping, our pillow.

But it's not, however, enough. What, in fact, will our families do with the scarves? Or with the knife we used to peel fruit? None of this will remain for long, and once upon a time, there was nothing else to add. The only alternative was to become someone, accomplish something meaningful: to write, be present, to be. Then, something might resist our death.

Thanks to what he did in life, there remains a statue of Vladimir Petrovič Demichov. A posthumous homage erected in 2016 in front of the transplant research institute named after his colleague Valerij Sumakov - greatly more appreciated by the scientific community. In the bronze, the surgeon has a calm expression. To find a picture of it, I had to search for a long time: there is one accompanying a short article in an old newspaper. The author says that he was recognised for what in life he was denied. Maybe: in the photo, I can make out a ribbon, the inauguration scissors, and, to tell the truth, not too many people.

Venturing into the infinite – and often circular – labyrinth of traces that Demichov's life left, I collect more photographs. The only one that shows him as an old man seems like a domestic shot, perhaps a picture stolen by his daughter. Vladimir is a bald old man, and underneath his wide forehead, his eyes look elsewhere with senile suspicion; his expression a mixture of disgust and irritation, he doesn't look like the serene bronze of the statue at all. I wonder: was this the best photograph to represent him? Was there not a more fitting shot of the great surgeon when he was old? I think back to his final days and I tell myself no: after all, he is well dressed, the picture is clear, and even if his eyes don't look at the camera, it is probably the best that remains of those years. Serious and embittered is also the bronze that depicts him on his grave; it's more similar to Demichov in the elusive look and the curve of the mouth.

Of the young scientist, at the peak of his activities, very few photos of him in civilian clothes can be found: he is always pictured with the white surgical cap on his forehead; he has serious and confident eyes; his mouth is smiling, and it is a nice smile, solid and genuine, the sort of smile you can expect from a man accustomed to physical labour. Here: the young Demichov looks like a worker sure of himself; he certainly seems like a man who knows what he's doing.

A final shot of Demichov. Actually, two: they are pictures taken in sequence, and at first, I hadn't realised that they were different. He is sitting down (still in his surgeon's uniform) on a bench, behind him, some trees can be glimpsed; perhaps it is the internal garden of a hospital. He keeps his legs wide, elbows placed on his knees and his chest forward. His hands are holding a leash and, as is often the case, he has a dog next to him; a German shepherd with glossy fur, a truly beautiful specimen. Its name is Griška. In the second photograph, however, he has stopped smiling and he is staring with a frown at the animal's nape. He has the expression of a man who is obsessed with an enigma.

Here's what remains of him, and to be honest, it is extraordinarily little.

Once upon a time, beyond this, nothing else would have survived. Perhaps Vladimir would have disappeared into the folds of meagre paragraphs printed in specialist manuals, poorly stitched seams that would be useful for patching up a history of modern medicine that without him is fairly incoherent. For a few decades, however, our way of remembering and being remembered has changed radically. Now, we exist, and we will exist above all (exclusively) in that electric cloud that permeates our time: on the web. Even Vladimir – albeit late and badly – ended up there. Living, we leave behind us digital dross – posts, photos, videos, articles; in every moment, we can measure the echo that the world has conserved of somebody typing their name in a search engine. In the end, all that remains is the fossilized surface of our reputation, updates that we gave of ourselves during our existence. They hang on our obituary like scales, joining together, fusing until they form our digital death mask. Ten, fifteen sentences, a definition, and a myriad of images.

What do we find on the web, if we search for “Vladimir Petrovič Demichov”? Which articles, biographies, foundations in his name, praise, prizes, public eulogies

Nothing: a Wikipedia page (by now even the group of kids that play grunge in the garage below my house have one), a couple of articles published in specialist magazines. About him, the "academic" world doesn't say practically anything else. Even his monograph, the only book that he ever published, is completely unfindable. The last Italian edition of *Is the Transplant of Vital Organs Possible?* is from the sixties; in online shops, you can admire the cover, but there's no way to order it, and I don't dare ask for it again in the bookshop - the last time I tried, I received only indignant looks.

On the other hand, Demichov's monograph has never had much luck, at least in his homeland. In the Soviet Union, the book came to be blocked in every way possible, and its publication had a very limited print run. It was practically ignored. When it came out in the West – in 1962, it was published in the United States with the title *Experimental Transplantation of Vital Organs* – it was an immediate success, but it caused controversial reactions. The idea that organs could be transplanted was still a wild suggestion, and few believed it was possible. The most optimistic shifted the horizon of the first operations to the eighties, and the pessimists indicated the rejection of tissue as an insurmountable obstacle. Furthermore, almost everyone had some ethical qualms: transplanting parts of a cadaver onto living organisms seemed fairly immoral, or at least ambiguous. Many, in the end, decided that Demichov's monograph was only an enterprising attempt at Soviet propaganda: a starting point, certainly, but nothing more.

The opinion that the Western world of science formed of Demichov was very much warped and removed from common sense: they would imagine the surgeon in a prominent role, with a cutting-edge laboratory and a budget for purchasing any equipment that might be useful to him. His research was extremely innovative, what else should they have thought? It would have been like believing that the engineers involved with the development of aerospace technology in their endeavour to reach the Moon before the Americans were working with little funding and unanimous hostility. An absurdity.

The first time that Michail Razgulov, the most loyal of Demichov's students, tried to reach his lab, he found himself roaming for hours among the corridors of the Sklifosovskij Medical Institute, asking for him and obtaining only questioning looks. Nobody knew who he was. In the end, right when he was about to give up, Razgulov was approached by the hospital undertaker. The man had to bring a cadaver to the morgue and he was the only one who knew where the cutting-edge laboratory for the study of transplants could be found; the flagship of experimental Soviet surgery, the only place where the young Michail could hope to study the extraordinary medical techniques that would soon trace the future of humanity: in the basement of the morgue, next to the furnace that, when lit, flooded the foul-smelling store cupboard with smoke. There, incredulous, Razgulov, tracked down Demichov. He was at the bottom of the crumbling stairs, buried in shadow, sat on an operating table made of rough freshly hewn wood. The little room was no more than twenty square metres, and on the ground, there were some run-down floorboards: fetid water was flushing out from the floor, and they hadn't found the funds to fix it.

Here was everything that he had obtained by publishing the first monograph on organ transplants in the history of medicine.

Next to Demichov's name, in the few texts and websites that remember him, there is one that is much more grandiose and celebrated, that of Christiaan Barnard, the first surgeon in the world capable of successfully performing a heart transplant on a human. There is a figure used in art history that perfectly describes the manner in which the destinies of Demichov and Barnard cross: the chiasmus. Two very distant worlds, South Africa and the Soviet Union, but also the Sklifosovskij basement and the clinics where Christiaan operated, the practical peasant personality of the Soviet and the charming worldly one of the South African; two extremes that conjoin and then clearly separate again; this is the shape of their relationship.

Everything about the memory of Barnard imparts a profound sensation of success. His work isn't obscure, it doesn't influence society in an invisible or hardly comprehensible way: it is disconcertingly obvious: after his first transplant, defective hearts can be replaced. From that moment on, we become machines that, if in bad condition, can be disassembled and reconstructed. This is the real revolution performed by the South African. This is what compels those who speak to him to bow in that submissive posture, to wag their tails in amazement before an almost supernatural man. Barnard, for the first time ever, shattered the dogma of our singularity – physical and, consequently, intellectual.

Before the 3rd December 1967, the idea that a part of us could survive independently from the rest of the body was simply absurd: there had already been transplants of organs between twins (thereby avoiding the problem of rejection), but they were kidneys or livers, and the donor was still alive. It wasn't stealing from the dead; at most, it was sharing between the living. That a piece of corpse could be removed from the grave and revived was an idea that bordered on the demonic.

Before that, we were our physical whole, barring accidents; from birth to death, a single configuration of organs. The promise was to grow old and all die together – heart, liver, kidneys, bones, brain – and that the first organ that failed would drag all the rest of them with it.

Now that "single" was shattered, becoming a collection of parts – but then, if I'm not that specific set of organs, where am I? What if it was the heart, the deepest part of my chest, that held my identity? Ultimately, it's when the heart stops that the body stops, or so they say anyway.

The first transplant of this organ had an extraordinary impact on our culture; its echo reverberated in thousands of articles, and it's easy to reinvoke the dazed happiness of Barnard: "A Tribute to Christiaan Barnard," "Christiaan Barnard Press Conference, Full Version," "Christiaan Barnard with his New, Darling Wife," "The Christiaan Barnard Memorial Hospital Opens," "We Celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the First Heart Transplant," "The Miracle of Medicine," "Christiaan Barnard's Work and Life Should Be Celebrated," and indeed they are. His figure is portrayed in films, documentaries, and countless interviews and reconstructions; there are foundations in his name, biographies, prizes, and charities. His autobiography is a bestseller that I was able to procure a copy of without too much hassle. His smile is printed on the glossy pages of school textbooks. His name is a guaranteed answer in many crossword puzzles. He is everywhere, and rightly so.

Here is a person who entered our memories through the front door.

Who knows what he used to think of it all? Plunged into that glittering vortex of consensus and respect, he must have felt that his reputation was now irreproachable, codified in the culture of his species according to the rules of myth: he was the first person to have substantially modified the configuration of his fellow humans; it was one of the first subversions of nature, which was then followed by a long series of many more.

What did he used to think, Barnard, while he was having a shower or when he was buttoning up his shirt with his long and inevitably precise fingers? Even he, like all of us, will have asked himself who was he really: the curious and uncertain child that we all were at the beginning of our lives, the student immersed in absurd conjectures (to cut a man to pieces and then put him back together? Is this not a sci-fi classic?), or the scientist portrayed in newspapers around the world. All of this, like the collection of organs that make up a body, was part of his "single whole," but it was difficult to put into focus. To be so many fragments and

feel, instead, a homogenous identity; how do we manage to convince ourselves of such an absurd thing? And how much of this identity is owed to chance and to the opinions of others? Maybe all of it.

If he had failed, he would have had to admit that all of his scientific career, all of these test subjects butchered for practice, all of those years spent seeking a way to take apart the human being, were nothing but a child's dream, a chimaera, an absurdity that history would relegate to the sidelines with such oddities as the philosopher's stone or the resurrection of the dead.

What Barnard passed over is a thin ledge; one misstep, a slight of fortune, a shaky hand in a decisive moment or the hostility of people with whom he shared life and work: it would have taken very little to fling him to the other side of the barricade, among the rejected and the derided, into the cauldron of those who missed, dedicating their whole lives to unheard speculations – devoid of the minimum of reassuring and accommodating common sense. Then the journalists's smiles would have widened, contorting into scornful smirks, and colleagues would have disassociated themselves from him. Salaries, nice houses, prizes, and important roles would have become the frustrated desires of a megalomaniac. Barnard's name today would be found among the depraved sludge of the internet, amidst dubious videos and cheap montages, tangled up in the most absurd conspiracies. Study material and cult figure for those who believe in anything that has been discredited.

To a large extent, perhaps decidedly so, we are what people think of us.

The South African surgeon certainly realised this, in those solitary hours that we all pass in the morning when the gaze of others doesn't yet dress us with the social insignia that – in one way or another – we have procured for ourselves. Vladimir Demichov realised this more painfully, without whom Barnard would have been a different man, more miserable and alone.

Demichov had learnt very well that it's not necessary to be wrong to fail. That, truth be told, it's not even necessary even to fail to be defeated. Barnard could have – as he did – operated successfully dozens of times and still become a mad scientist. This is the most extraordinary and cruel thing about his reputation: it pays no attention to the facts. Not even the most exceptional ones.

We are what others think of us, not what we do. It's excellent news for idiots and the incompetent. And if this affirmation might appear paradoxical – that fame doesn't correspond, after all, to merit and ability – try considering all of the incompetent people who – despite their extraordinary stupidity, amassed failures and a remarkable collection of missteps – have been placed in charge of humanity by public opinion.

On the other hand, the opposite is also undeniable: those who have merit can also fail.

The perception that others have of us is, ultimately, what, during our lives, we will be.

It seems evident if, as mentioned, you try to type Vladimir Demichov's name into a search engine in the place of Christiaan Barnard's: that sense of clean precision disappears, the crowds that surround him vanish, the jacket is replaced by shirts, by blood, by stunned and torn-to-pieces dogs. The attitudes of others become more contemptuous. Commentary, especially, changes radically: no biography, no foundation in his name, almost impossible to unearth public praise and eulogies. The prizes – the few granted – he received them only at the beginning of his career and at death's door.

The most common result is to find him in a ranking of the ten most bizarre things in science and – it is mortifying but must be said – the man with two penises always precedes him by a few positions.

Even if the internet at the time didn't exist, I am certain that Barnard thought of Demichov, in those moments of solitude. How easy it would have been to slip in the middle of so much contempt.

This is what today surrounds the memory of the Soviet surgeon: a video on the "Seven Most Horrific Experiments in Science," "Twenty Horrifying Photos From The Past," "Twenty Most Embarrassing Moments in Sports," "Ten Most Shocking Moments in Boxing History," "Ten Reactions Of Teenagers Sentenced to Life in Prison," "Five Most Disturbing Phone Calls Made by Murderers," "Seven Strangest Things Caught on Security Cameras." And there, in the middle, right in the centre of all that mud, the work and research of Demichov crops up: the "Real Life Of a Mad Scientist," the "Monster Demichov," the "Cruellest Surgeon in History," and, as a side dish, hundreds of pieces on the "Soviet Frankenstein." The comments at the bottom of these pages, then, wish Vladimir the most imaginative and humiliating deaths possible: to be marginalised, to fail, to be forgotten forever.

They don't realise that it has already happened: he died humiliated, marginalised, a failure, and we forgot about him. After all, wasn't it the same in life, when he was operating in the Sklifosovskij basement?

Was it difficult to find himself in the middle of so much disdain? Yes. It was difficult indeed: to avoid it, all that was needed was a bit of common sense, a more flexible backbone, a certain dose of cowardice.

They are all qualities that the majority of us possess and that protect us from the destiny of the Soviet scientist.

To find something more consistent in his life, I had to learn how to transcribe his name in Cyrillic: Демихов. I was rewarded with a few photos, articles on what looked like a posthumous ceremony; one of the most interesting pictures that emerged online was of a haughty-looking woman, who was showing a large, framed photo: a close-up of Vladimir wearing a surgical mask, illuminated by the light of an operating theatre.

Upon clicking, the algorithm deciphered the caption:

"Professor Olga Demichova with a portrait of her father." Then I looked with more interest at his features. He had the expression of a person who – having been offended for a long time – finally had the chance for revenge.

An AI translation made comprehensible a large part of the information that I collected on the screen, and at the same time, it created a bizarre almost nineteenth-century writing style. To define the surgeon's character, the algorithm came up with the extraordinary "incessant Demichov," alluding, I think, to his relentless stubbornness. Elsewhere it comes out as "constant" or "inflexible." Anyone who remembers him seems to agree on this trait: he was "incessant" in his cruel dedication to experiments on animals, he was also in the pursuit of his own convictions, and in carrying forward what he believed to be right.

He was even in his desires; when he met his wife, for example: crossing paths on the escalator of the metro. Who has this not happened to? The escalators seem designed precisely for this: to make eye contact with

the people in front, those who go up and those who go down – or vice versa – to be struck, among hundreds of daily faces, by the gaze of one person.

The moving steps are a magnificent theatrical machine: they run at exactly the right speed, displaying us immobile, one in front of the other, they create the illusion of contact, and in the end, we cross and slide beyond. It's happened to all of us. A morning moment more evident than the others, one of the few that in the evening we remember with interest, a vibration in the monotony of our daily lives. Then the crowd, the rush of air that announces the arrival of the train, the dull stench of the passengers: the rest of the day begins.

Demichov, however, turns around. He takes the stairs the wrong way, elbowing through people, and he runs out of the station. He has decided that this stranger, Lia Nikolaevna, will be his wife.

He makes his way backwards, he runs out of the station. He spots Lia at the tram stop and grabs her by the arm.

What will she have thought? Will she have asked herself – such a fundamental question – who is this man? Do I know him or is he just a stranger I locked eyes with? What will she have seen in that young man to convince her – instead of calling for help – to listen to what he, red in the face from running and the emotion, had to say to her? Lia had one single, odd precaution; perhaps in the excitement of the moment, maybe as a result of two conflicting desires, she gives him her number and at the same time, she asks him to not write it down anywhere. It seems almost like she puts him to the test, that she is trying – with this play – to decipher him: will he accept her conditions but then write down the number after the tram has departed? Will he laugh at the request, will he show himself to be impatient? Maybe Lia wants to entrust that man, that out-of-place moment, to destiny. If he manages to remember, then it will be worth trying to get to know him. If he manages to remember, then he really is interested.

I imagine her dictating the numbers, articulating well, not in a rush but also not too slowly. She repeats them one more time. Vladimir listens, staring at a point in the distance to not let himself get distracted. She gets on the tram, checks from the window; he doesn't move, doesn't pull out pieces of paper or a pencil, doesn't even move his lips to repeat the numbers to himself. He looks at her confidently, then he vanishes from view as the carriage moves away.

Lia will have thought that she'd never see him again and instead, Demichov remembers the numbers – he has an extraordinary mind – and he calls her. He calls her a good few times, until – after a series of incessant phone calls with no reply – she decides to concede him lunch with her family to get to know him better.

Regardless of the circumstances, of his inappropriate persistence, of her prudence, of his typical shameless lack of common sense, they marry, and he fills her house with dogs, he overbearingly inundates her life; and from then on, for Lia, there will be nothing else but her husband's work, her husband's animals, her husband's solitude, her husband's success.

For Vladimir - what need is there to even say it? There will only be the operating table.