

# THE RAVELLED SLEEVE OF CARE

Ties that bind.

BY ANATOLY BELILOVSKY

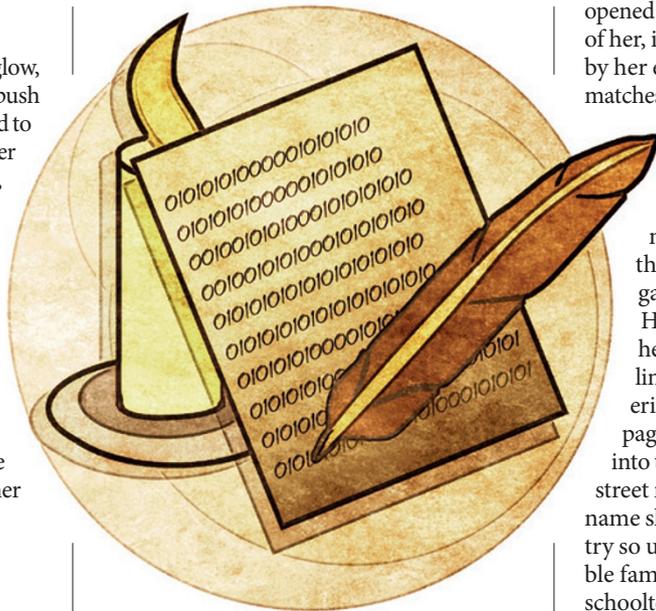
Dark letters danced in the amber glow, and Vera rubbed her temples to push back the migraine that threatened to ambush her from the flickering edges of her vision. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. The error was obvious; in her mind she saw the microprocessor execute the instruction, overwriting program memory with data and creating an abnormal loop. Another moment of contemplation produced a workaround. Vera ran through the instruction sets in her mind again; the operations marched in neat, obedient rows. She had no doubt that the patch would work. A smile crept across her face as she began to write:

*"Dear Cousin Grisha,  
Many thanks for the medicine you sent Grandma Liza through the Aeroflot crew; whatever bribes you gave them were worth it. Grandma's ankles are so much less swollen than they used to be, and she no longer faints every five minutes the way she used to on the old medication."*

Vera heard a goose honk in the birdhouse next to the frozen pond, and she stood up to reach for her shotgun, but no other bird cried in answer. She sighed in relief and turned towards her daughter's crib. Little Anechka wriggled in her sleep, stretching her arms; her lips, barely visible in the darkness, pursed momentarily, then relaxed. Vera rocked the crib, gently, and bent back to her task.

*"My sister Valentina, as you know, had her baby right after I had mine. She lost much blood while giving birth, and needs special diet to restore her health. Meat is very expensive, but goose liver and kidneys are still available (to foxes and stoats, much of the time, but still), and of course in the fall there were mushrooms so we are not starving. Do you remember how we went mushroom picking as children? Chanterelles and slippery jacks grew under every oak, we'd come back groaning under their weight after an hour or two — though the forest you remember from our childhood is off limits, now that we know what*

*really happened at Kyshtym, so we have to take the suburban train and ride for two hours in*



*the opposite direction till we get upriver from that awful place. Valentina's baby is very fussy, and I thank God every day that Anechka is growing well and sleeps through half the night now."*

Vera's fingers grew stiff, and she rubbed her hands together for warmth, leaning to see if Anya's blanket still covered her. Close up, Anya's breath warmed her cheeks, tickled her eyelashes. She blinked and returned to writing.

*"I am very happy to help you with your programming job. I read the machine language manual you sent me, and saw the memory dump and the screen image printouts, and I think I see a way to fix it. If you get the opportunity again, some vitamins with iron for Valentina would be most appreciated, and if American doctors know of anything better than milk of magnesia for Uncle Vanya's ulcers, I hope you can send some of that along as well. Here is my own small service to you, the patch you need to put in the program file, starting at Position 43217."*

She closed her eyes again, marshalling rows and columns of symbols she saw in her mind's eye as clearly as if they were painted on her walls and ceiling. She saw the program execution tree as clearly in her mind as the view outside the window of her izba, as the streets (muddy till the recent frosts but now quite passable) of her village, as Anya's angelic face. She took a deep breath, let it out, and

opened her eyes. The candle guttered in front of her, its amber flame nearly extinguished by her exhalation, and she reached for the matches but the light returned, steadied, and brightened enough for Vera to see it belch a cloud of sooty, acrid smoke. She dipped her goose-quill pen into the inkwell that stood near the candle, touched the nib to the inkwell rim to drain excess oak-gall ink, and bent to the paper again. Hexadecimal characters marched from her mind, down her pen and onto the lined copybook paper, dancing in flickering amber light, and as she filled each page she folded it carefully and placed it into the envelope bearing an address on a street named after a shrub, in a city whose name she could not pronounce, in a country so unimaginably rich that even a humble family composed of an engineer and a schoolteacher could own a car, a home and, incredibly, a personal computer.

By the time she had finished, the Moon had sunk nearly to the horizon, adding through the window its silver glint to the amber-gold spark of the candle. She skipped two lines and wrote, in careful schoolgirl cursive:

*"So please accept, with this letter, my most sincere wishes for happiness for your birthday, and continued success in your occupation, and for your children's perfect marks in their primary school, and for your wife to learn Russian so she can understand you better. I do not want to say goodbye, but it will soon be time for Anechka to wake, and I must bring water from the well and chop wood for our hearth, but please know that as always I remain,  
very truly,  
your loving cousin Vera."*

She licked the envelope flap and pressed it shut. She counted out the stamps and licked them, too, before attaching them to the envelope and slipping it in her pocket. She checked Anechka's breathing one last time, then donned her greatcoat and picked up the water bucket to go outside. ■

**Anatoly Belilovsky** was born in what is now Ukraine, learned English from Star Trek reruns, worked his way through a US college by teaching Russian while majoring in chemistry, and has, for the past 25 years, been a paediatrician in New York, in a practice where English is the fourth most commonly spoken language.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY