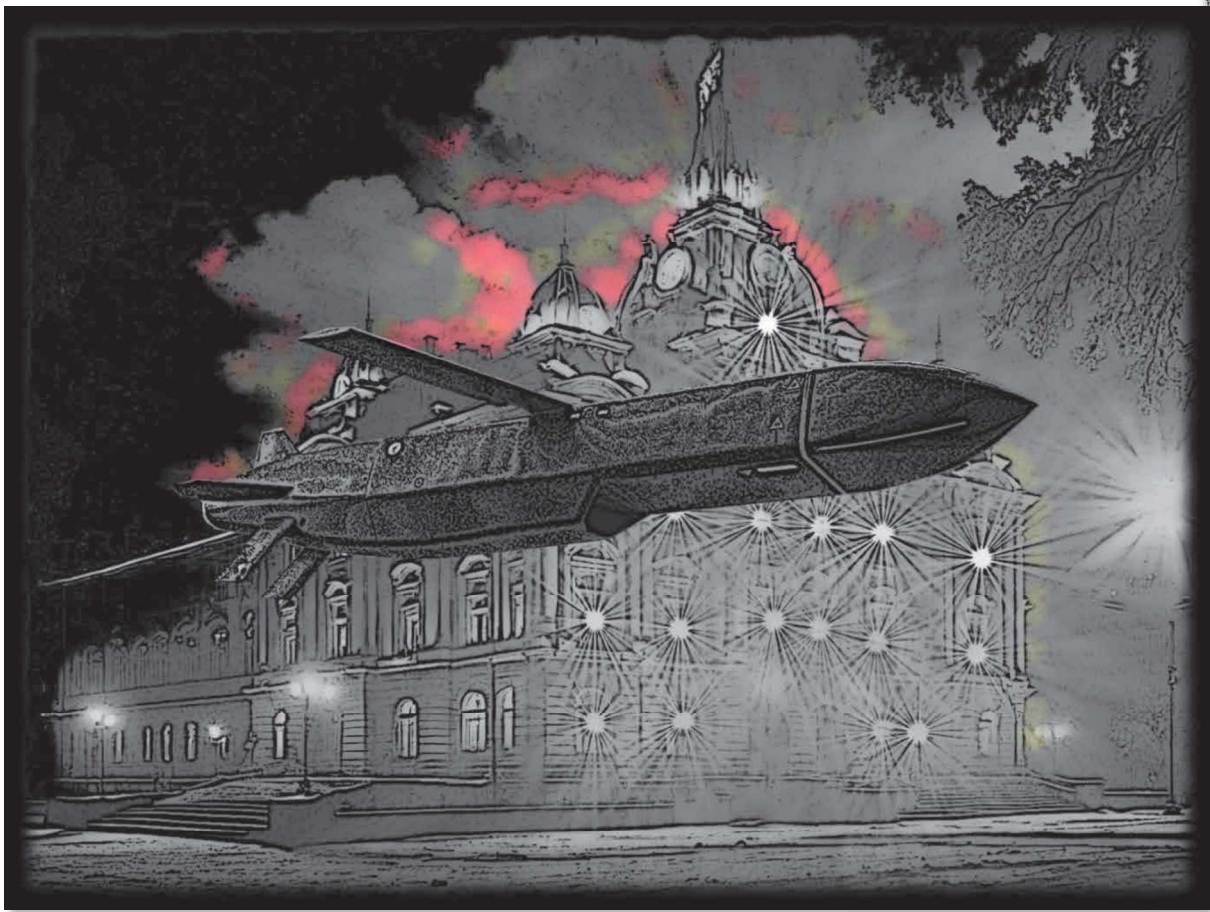




The Charlatans sat up celebrating the whole of the night before election day – the day on which a great parade was already planned to celebrate the Tsar’s surprise win.

They had many lights burning so that everyone might see how anxious they were to conclude the Special Military Operation and avoid the sordid unpleasantness of having to explain what it was actually for.



*Many lights burning.*

They pretended to colour in the map. They changed the names of picturesque towns and villages to ugly brutal names with the stokes of invisible pens. They drank, they smoked, they tried on each other’s hats for fun. “It is so easy to quit smoking” joked one unto the other, “We have done it a thousand times before.” But, dear me, smoking in the wrong place merely attracts unwelcome gate-crashers...