ALMOST ZERO

ОКОЛО НОЛЯ

VLADISLAV SURKOV

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Almost Zero

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I.

"Is it long?"

"Not really."

"Then read it to me."

"Okay. It has a title: 'The Career.'" He cleared his throat:

"Viktor O. came from some backwater Holmogory countryside to Moscow because he was a good student, well-reputed and ambitious. He applied for a chemistry degree at some higher education institution you've all heard of and found it all such a dreary bore. But he wanted to stay in Moscow and so married a stranger in a hastily calculated move to obtain a residence permit.

Well, he was permitted to reside in a two-bedroom slum run by a greedy landlady. As part of the lease, he had to live with her degenerate husband and son, both revolting drunks. What a time, permanently residing . . . Viktor groveled for jobs, did everything in the house, cared for the drunks who called him peasant, and at the end of the day was tortured by his wife's increasingly demanding sexual aspirations.

Such a life completely exhausted Viktor O. A few months of this led to the incident. The drunks screamed at him as he hurried out the door, already late to one of his three jobs. When he finally got in, he was summoned to the office of K, one of his six managers, and received a requisite dressing-down. However rather than nod his head and continue the usual course of business, Viktor instead broke down in tears and went screaming down the steps and onto the shop floor tearing at his hair.

He ran into the chemical lab drooling and out of breath. He was no longer frightened, although his hairs still stood on end. He felt a reassuring calm wash over him as he surveyed the room. He was not Viktor O, he was Berthold Schwarz! And he invented gunpowder and quickly blew up half the factory.

Once properly restrained and beaten, the medical staff, by means of psycho-chemical coercion, pretty soon convinced Viktor O. that he was not Berthold Schwarz and that gunpowder had already been invented.

Viktor reluctantly agreed that he was not Schwarz but also denied that he was Viktor O. Re-finding himself, he quickly wrote We in thirteen hours (which, incidentally, he had never read) and now walked the Earth as famous writer Yevgeny Zamyatin.

The medical staff forwarded his novel to the literature department. The novel was recognized as a work of talent, but acknowledged to be an exact copy of a book written decades earlier by Yevgeny Zamyatin. Viktor was dismayed to learn that the writer had passed a long time ago and he was, therefore, not him.

The patient succumbed again to a deep depression, still not recognizing himself as Viktor O. However, he quickly rebounded and became interested in painting and in the morning on the hospital wall shone a frighteningly inappropriate Madonna. Viktor convinced himself he was Raphael and earned a chunk painting commissions but the medical staff confiscated most of it.

The exorcism of this newfound Raphael took a month. Viktor O. softened. He realized he could never hope to be such great men. He began picking up more modest roles—Patient Q from room number eight, or Urizen from down the hall. However, the staff did not compromise and each new persona was met with an equally potent chemical cocktail.

'An astonishing patient,' the Director said, turning to the medical staff. 'He is ready to be anyone but himself. However, his insurance is in arrears. It is high time to end this.'

The Director turned to the patient.

'Viktor O, you are . . . Viktor O. No one else. On this basis, I categorically discharge you as our patient.'

Discharged, Viktor O. staggered through the dank streets as a green rain fell on the city. He looked so distraught and ragged that a passing limit worker, covered in oil and ash, offered to treat him to a beer.

The air in the tavern was stale and hot as the beer. Soon a messy fight bubbled up, swallowing Viktor O.'s benefactor as he clocked a student, who pulled out a knife in fear of his mortal soul. The limit worker grabbed Viktor by his lapels, lifted him overhead and tossed him at the student. Viktor's eyes were on the blood-and-tooth splattered floor as he flew over and smashed right into the student's face. The student stammered back and then smacked his head on the wall, leaving a streak of blood as he sank down to the floor. Viktor moaned and clawed his way back up to the bar. He was almost finished with his beer before someone cranked him in the back of the head.

He woke up at the police station. They were shining a bright blue light at him intensely.

'You were used to kill a man,' a policeman said.

'I . . . didn't want to kill anyone,' Viktor sputtered. 'I'm a patsy . . .'

'It is true, he was merely used as a weapon,' one detective said.

Another stood up and began pacing the room. 'If he is guilty of murder, then so are all knives and guns and thus they should be locked up. But since that is not the case, we must conclude that this man is therefore material evidence!'

'I concur,' said the third policeman, 'he ought to be remanded until the trial is over. We can put him in the evidence lockers.' The group concurred and brought Viktor to his locker.

Viktor settled quietly into his new home. He enjoyed the duties and responsibilities of being material evidence, relishing the investigative procedures, which reminded him of children's theater. In one such experiment, the limit worker took Viktor by the lapels and recreated the motions of the murder, lifting Viktor above his head and then onto a chalk outline of the deceased student.

The trial was also great fun. Viktor was the star material evidence, featured alongside a broken beer mug, a box cutter wrapped in plastic, and the legs of a stool. The day laborer was sentenced to eighty years. Viktor bid farewell to his locker and his cozy profession as material evidence. On the courthouse steps, he looked at the sprawling city. Instead of taking the usual road to his two-room hellhole, he walked along Koltsevaya Road and settled in a small indiscernible grove below the overpass.

There he lived steadily, first as a stoic philosopher, but, due to the cold and scarcity of berries in the forest, Viktor O steadily succumbed to his wild side and began raiding the surrounding villages for sustenance. During the gloomiest winter nights, he did not disdain from tasting human flesh, either. As a consequence of his devolution, he developed horns, fangs, and coarse bristled hairs about his body. Some sources even indicate there was a tail in the picture as well. All of this God abundantly bestowed on Viktor O out of His Goodness and worry about the survival of every creature in our unbearable climate.

So wise is the Lord that He also did not overlook the most base urge of all and turned a blind eye when Viktor O snatched a luscious and fertile train station janitor.

Without the slightest delay, Viktor O began multiplying to a catastrophic extent. Within two years, the population of Viktor O's reached over a hundred persons. Mobile squads of these greedy rovers devastated the entire Moscow region as though plagues of old, leading to a total collapse of gardening and agriculture. In the end, despite the protests

of animal rights activists, local authorities sanctioned the hunting of Viktor O's.

Sportsmen from around the world spent numerous bloody seasons near the Russian capital chasing this most dangerous game. And indeed these market forces achieved a remarkable outcome, for the sighting of a Viktor O in our area is a rarity, a fantasy tale. If there are any left, they are leading a hermitic existence in the dankest reaches of the wildest woods. According to local ethnographers, the very fact of Viktor O's existence came into question and he is now the subject of suburban folklore rather than classical natural history."

"That's it?"

"Well . . . yes."

"And what was that constant beeping there?"

"My battery is dying, so it beeps. Did you not like it?"

"A battery? Yours?"

"I mean, in my cell phone."

"And here I thought it was your heart. Perhaps you had a stimulator of sorts, you know, in your heart or in your head. As for the story, well, you know, it has a bit of an antique quality to it. Moldy. The whole deal with residence permits, the limit worker—there's no residence permit or none of that now. It's an old authority tale, your short story. I'm not saying this out of bitterness—"

"Replace the residence permit with the registration, then, or a credit check. Edit out all the old references. It will be like a totally fresh story."

"Maybe we can replace the permits, fix it up. Hmm. How much are you asking for it?"

"Well, I think it's a decent enough short story. I wrote for pleasure when I was a student and more of a writer. I was also a poet and a philosopher back then, you know, twenty years ago. So, as to its moldy quality, you are, of course, correct to note it. I want twenty-five thousand. I used to be a rock musician, as well."

"Yes, yes, I know you were everything, truly. Now you are somewhat different. However, even then you were different, because your different selves didn't really matter. You did not come to fulfill any of them. You existed somewhere between your selves, in the contradictions invisible on a major scale—no wonder you are in politics. There is no way I am going to buy it for twenty-five k."

"Well, in rubles then."

"Hah, okay, then. But why give up so easily?"

"You are well aware that the demand today is split between so-called highbrow literature and that of a more pop-culture persuasion. My story may not be a very popular product, but it is dear to me and I have over a hundred more works that will sell, and, if you publish this story for me, I'll give them all to you. Do the math."

"Why flush them to me?"

"Because you will enjoy them. You'll see. Will you publish this story?"

"Yes, yes, publish it in the Observer. You can see to that."

"What about reviews, any criticism?"

"I can get positives from Wiseman. Weisberg negative, but stir up controversy—people will want to defend you because he's such a twit. Oh, some relatively famous footballer can touch on it in an interview, you know, not much of a reader but this story caught him, could not tear himself from it. We'll have some mid-tier politician brag about reading it on late-night TV. Then of course there's the Internet. In this dump, there's plenty of everything on anything and for cheap. Twenty-five thousand rubles."

"You mean dollars."

"I won't do that much in dollars or Euros. Wiseman, Weisberg, the footballer, million-

aires will all praise you and you're hesitating over Euros."

"I'm only taking dollars."

"Fine, go ahead. Twenty-five hundred dollars. Weisman will complain—he prefers rubles, but he'll deal."

"Great. Remember to use the same pseudonym."

"You can't be serious. How can you demand dollars and then keep publishing yourself under an unprintable and unmarketable pseudonym?"

"Well, I am more or less famous for such things. Rebranding involves extra costs and risks."

"Then take five off the deal. The Observer was such a pain to persuade last time. Their Chief Editor is a former Orthodox soldier."

"Former soldier? What? The guy isn't even thirty."

"He's thirty-two. Was in the Caucasus War, Order of Courage and all that."

"We can bribe him. Throw him ten for his hero status, but deduct a few as a penalty for being gay."

"What? How do you know he's gay?"

"You said it yourself!"

"Who? Me?"

"Yeah, just now. A former soldier and you-know-what."

"Orthodox?"

"Yeah, yeah, exactly . . ."

"Uh, okay then, well . . . Sanya will drop off the money later. He's my driver, but taking a day off—got something with his leg, or his wife. It's always his leg or his wife and I confuse the two. This other guy will be there, my guard. What's his name? It always slips my mind but you know him, seven-foot-tall guy. Remember you sold me your first story and we celebrated together? He also tried to pull us apart when we struck up a fight later—when you said something real nasty about Pushkin. I had to defend him. I broke your nose. All for Pushkin."

"And I broke yours as well. Can't seem to recall any guard being involved. Doesn't matter, though, let him drop off the cash tomorrow before noon."

"Sanya!"

"What?"

"Sanya is my guard's name, just remembered."

"Ah, same as your drivers."

"Yes. Sanya, with just one 's.'"

"Meaning?"

"Not with two . . . Well, goodbye then, Pavel Evgenyevich. I'll pass the story along to Sanya."

"Till later, Yegor."

II.

A sluggish and sticky storm was worming its way behind a looming skyscraper. Flickering a few voiceless bolts and illuminating various new buzzwords in the sky, its wet gait subsided before reaching the city center. It slid off to the edge somewhere, where it broiled in lukewarm madness. The city was enveloped in an unbearable, sickly sweet stuffiness the likes of which were only tangible in Moscow. Hot, fatty streaks of smoke spread through the city, pushing their weight against the windows, desperate to seep.

Yegor thrived in the stark cold and fell ill in such heat. His apartment was temperature-controlled with all the latest air conditioning technology steadily maintaining fifty-two degrees Fahrenheit. He kept winter clothes and earflap hats on hand for the rare guest.

He was scheduled to meet first with Agolstov—an alcoholic, poet, translator, and coke connect. Then he would have to meet with Nikita Mariyevna, the journalist. This meant enduring at least a hundred steps in the squalid heat outside. Both meetings were scheduled at the Diamond, a restaurant located on the ground floor of the building in which Yegor lived in a luxury top-floor penthouse.

The Diamond had never changed its name despite a thrice-fold change in management. At the end of the eighties, it was the first Soviet restaurant open all night. Inexperienced losers would drift in for a quick bite but soon fall captive to the slovenly drunk Chaldean waiting on them, forcing elaborate specials of mystery fish assortments onto their bills. Beyond the tables, bullied musicians lived out their unfulfilling fantasies as they crooned about the Don River, maple branches, and tears on their beloved's kerchief. The bouncers were buffoonish brutes—people named Shoe, Tata, Gosha the Huguenot.

By the nineties, the dark-blue MOM tattoos began to disappear from Russia's criminal element, shot down by young, progressive gang leaders. The Diamond was renovated to note this new development. Lobster and steak appeared on the menu. The waiters sobered up. Bandits mingled and mixed, their haircuts trim and sleek like well-rounded pebbles on the White Sea's beach. The leaders grew meaty, with rosy cheeks and pig-like eyes. They had never seen prison and were therefore as fearless as only the young could be. They were also sentimental types who believed in philanthropy for the arts, at least to the extent that their shallow minds would allow. Some invested in galleries, others in the publishing houses springing up after the Union's fall. It was around this time that Yegor moved into his penthouse, dropping into the Diamond occasionally to cure his Saturday morning hangover. But soon he grew familiar and would dine there as if it were his own kitchen.

By the beginning of the Zero years, the local gangs had completely mutated. The gold chains hanging from their necks became much lighter and were concealed beneath suits. Tattoos faded like medieval frescoes. Some of them started picking up English and traded in their fake Versaces for real Balenciaga. They got high-ranking-official wives and ballet-dancer girlfriends. Beautiful, chubby offspring were spawned and then sent off to Switzerland for schooling. Life grew harmonious.

Amidst this, the Diamond became fashionable and famous. Everything became so stylish and tasty there in the way that could only be borne by a bored and never-satisfied sub-species of human.

It was in this third refashioned Diamond that Yegor was fated to meet Crybabe. She was accompanied by three men of varying ages, one with black hair, one with white, and one with a tinge of platinum. They looked as stern and expensive as undertakers who had just collected their bonuses in an affluent neighborhood struck by recurring epidemics. Later, it seemed so strange to Yegor that he had noticed those ghouls first, as if she had dissolved into them and only emerged slowly, like a cresting wave.

Only after did he see her fully—so incredible, unusual, extraordinary, and imperious. She had a presence of unavoidable consequence, making one wonder whether it was love or death. Thus began the beautiful disaster of Crybabe, the terrifying merry-go-round that seized and enthralled you with a glowering fury. She knocked you out of breath, capable of gloom, lucidity, humor, and fear in one afternoon.

One of the undertaker-types turned out to be a classmate of Yegor's and wasn't an undertaker but rather a kerosene distributor. He strutted over and introduced himself. Yegor pretended to remember him but could not put a name to the face. Then she said, "I'm Crybabe." He did not ask whether that was her real name; it seemed so silly yet so authentic at the same time.

He later realized that the kerosene distributor was Crybabe's lover. The younger one was her husband, and the eldest, with the platinum streaks in his hair, was her cousin, although a cousin so far removed that they sometimes slipped up so that, out of pure habit, he served as a second lover.

That evening Yegor was quite gregarious. She, on the other hand, spoke only until she realized how incompatible she was with him. They had nothing in common, yet she was immediately ensnared by him. She looked at him and felt a nuclear brightness, a tremendous weight in all surroundings of this supra-world, her thoughts spiraling in twin helixes—was this world his or was it the realm of love?

Yegor had just crawled out of a dark divorce—he gave his ex-wife the house and took this luxury apartment in the slum for himself. He was alone at last—in control of his destiny, he believed. He did not want to love anyone. Crybabe was like a new battle for a harrowed soldier, covered in burns and bruises from yesteryear's bitter fight.

III.

It was in one of the sparkling facets of the Diamond that Yegor chose to hold this meeting with Agoltsov. He took his seat under a TV screen framed by an ornate picture frame, broadcasting a glitching still frame, a portrait of Zvorykin the Engineer. Around them, gum-chewing "fashion models," having undergone intensive pre-sale training and wearing extraordinary make-up, mingled with local connoisseurs and buyers.

The atmosphere there was too brilliant for an alcoholic—colored lights endlessly glittering, mirrors everywhere—but to meet with Agoltsov at home would have been unacceptable from a purely hygienic standpoint. Moreover, meeting anywhere else would have entailed an arduous journey in the ass-drenching heat. Postponing the meeting was impossible, as his comrade owed him a great deal by that point.

Yegor espied the time on a waiter's watch. Eight o'clock. He had exactly an hour to spare for the debtor and an hour for the journalist. Then he would crawl back home—in time for his session with Crybabe. All should go well, provided she wasn't late . . . Then, interrupting his thoughts, Yegor smelled a pronounced filth in the air, indicating that somehow the wretched poet had arrived on time. The debtor's visage was graced with a swollen upper lip, blackheads amongst his temple, ragged stubble, white hairs on his head that sprouted out his nose and ears. His grey eyes matched his white head perfectly. And of course his tie was spotted and smeared, apparently used, variously, as a toothbrush, a handkerchief, and a polishing cloth for his shoes. Yegor could not look into his eyes, glaring instead into space as he spoke to the poet. The poet did not eat, only tea and vodka to wet his whistle, chasing it with air. He lit up a damp cigarette whose blue smoke mingled with the steam of his hot tea. The ash from his cigarette fell into the tea, which splashed onto his spangled tie. Vodka, on the contrary, was handled with professional precision, and every last drop landed in the debtor's belly. He drank his tea noisily, in the rural manner, gurgling and smacking. Each limp drag of his cigarette brought the poet into a fit of pathetic coughing. Only the vodka was metabolized with any dignity—solemnly and safely. Agoltsov was in high spirits after a few sips, spreading his presence like an infernal mist across the restaurant hall. The models and their clientele reacted to this miasma most agreeably, apparently mistaking it with a luxurious cheese aroma or the scent of some vintage cigar.

"You can't keep letting me down like this," Yegor started while watching Zvorykin the Engineer flicker on the dirty TV screen. Agoltsov answered him by taking a shot and squeezing his eyes.

"Sergeyevich cannot wait much longer," Yegor said. "He, unlike yourself, is a Governor. Everything else is going according to plan—except you."

Agoltsov had another shot and washed it down with tea, splashing more on his tie.

"He has a book tour in September. He's set it all up himself, to his own accord. He had to pressure some sponsors, powerful people. And he promised them a new book of poems. His new book. And where is it? This book?"

Agoltsov drank, had a drag, and started coughing and groaning.

Yegor continued, "Intelligentsia is extremely fond of him. A Governor-cum-Poet—a literary star and a tsar in one. But if he can't show off the book, his reputation is risked." Yegor leered at Zvorykin the Engineer.

Agoltsov took a sip and finally started speaking, loudly, so that the nearby models stopped their giggles and whispers. "I dream that I am falling . . . From some mound . . . or a hill . . . above me in the halcyon of a July morning . . . Beneath its dark I can't tell if I jumped willingly or was pushed over by someone But anything I try to get a hold of now is all the same—one ton rusty autumn is dragging me down . . . To the bottom . . . I can't cling . . . Get stuck, or extend my fall somehow. And with each passing second, further below—Mother, watch! I am falling.

"And more:

"You shall suddenly sprout through scraps of the urban wind.
Through the crackle and the chatter of the crowd
You shall hear the glow of tomorrow's century,
In the mocking silence of fate.
And from the place where so solemnly decays your dream in
the extended September,
On a light, as confusion, lunar disc you will fly—to watch the life from above.
Then, observe dexterous harlequins, brilliant female
dwarfs, rare beasts, cheap magicians, inflated giants,
frolicking under a blazing circus tent.
Observe how night is bitter for the current weather,
As the day's anger is mercilessly simple,
How locked up in your own empty freedom
You are lonesome—to tears, to the bottom, to ashes.
Look—here life goes on. Look—it passes.

"And more:

"You should have seen the wind,
The wind of a greedy dream, that comes from
A wild field, pungent with the smell of life,
Driving away a flock of inflorescences,
Through a quicksand of an incandescent afternoon
Up to a shallow downpour.
You should have seen how the Sun
Redeems the Spring out of the Tartar Sky.
You would have known with what currency
This May was paid—it would deem upon you,
How high is sadness; how tenderness is unrealizable.
You would sing differently then.

You would have suddenly found ashes
Above your head and fire under your soles.
You would run off from home,
To hide away better, to drown not here
And not with those tears.
And to disappear in different manner.

"I have no more . . ."

"Only three, then? We can't make a book out of this," Yegor sighed with menace.

"Three, yes, but of the highest sort. Who said the book must have so many poems?" Agoltsov growled. He drank again, ate, drank some more, and then offered another: "Screw you. You and your Governor Sergeyevich. I should be free of this. Sergeyevich is no poet, he is a rascal, and you—his accomplice. I will see you in court. I will sue and expose you both. He is not satisfied with being Governor? He wants to appeal to literary types and plebeians alike, this little bitch. Interviews, publicity, praise . . . These are my poems—mine, not his. Let everyone hear the truth!"

"You wrote the poems. But they will publish under his name. He already paid you for this, you fool. He is the poet and you are on his contract, a ghostwriter, just like a pupil of Michelangelo. And I . . ." Yegor drifted off and stared at Zvorykin the Engineer, who came in and out of signal.

Agoltsov fumed, "He is rich and famous, while I am poor and anonymous; a masturbator; oh, and a faggot to top it all off; and a drug addict; and a liberal. You see, Yegor, I am listed in each and every risk group. Statistically I must have AIDS and delirium tremens, and all the other tricks from the psychiatric textbook. Give me back my liberty. I want my own riches from my own work! I am the genius." Agoltsov chased another shot with a chomp.

Yegor sighed again. "First off, you are not poor at all. That insane Sergeyevich pays you a grand per line. He gives me the same amount. Which publishing house, which magazine, will pay you that well? You drink and sniff it all away. And give it to all your boys. Secondly, fame—that's a mighty empty subject. You are a genius, hence, you are above everyday nonsense. Thirdly, you still owe a screenplay to Sergeyevich's niece, the one who's graduating from the best film school in Moscow. Remember? You promised to write it yourself."

"But I wrote it . . ."

"That was a hack job," Yegor interrupted.

"How do they know whether it is or not? You put Khlebnikov under that Sergeyevich's nose and he will think it's my work. For him it wouldn't matter if it's by Khelbnikov or an ode by some Pantylkin—everything is the same for him. Same goes for his silly niece."

"You're right, they really don't get it," Yegor explained patiently, "But they have consultants who are erudite bastards, not unlike us. So be gone with your hacks."

"Public relations!" Agoltsov drank more vodka. "Half of my income will be yours. I'll be fashionable, like Kirill, that bitch. Serebryanikov, like Severyanin back in ancient times. I crave freedom. I dream of breaking out of these shackles."

"Humanity is doomed to be free. Come on, Sartre. You are free, I am free, everyone is free. Everyone is free to make a contract with anyone else and include any conditions in it. Once establishing such a contract, one is obliged to fulfill it." Yegor's speech started steadily rising, "That is precisely why you have until the twenty-second to produce ten more poems for the Governor, and the script for his niece. If you don't start working right away, I will take you to the yard behind the garbage cans and shoot you in the head. You know how much money's to be made."

"Nepotism," Agoltsov sobbed.

"What?"

"Promotion of nieces and nephews represent an active practice of nepotism. I need a thousand dollars."

"Give me the poems that you just read and I'll give you more."

Agoltsov laid out a crumpled paper and grabbed the cash. He put away another shot and stumbled towards the door, coughing left and right. And—as was his habit when faced with complex situations—pondered the prospect of killing himself in a way that would not hurt terribly. Perhaps suffocating against something soft or with a poison neither bitter nor sharp. All this so no one would get on his nerves anymore.

Disgusted, Yegor abandoned the table that he'd shared with the genius. He plunged further into the depths of the Diamond, closer to the bar, and told the waiter that, when a woman who looked uncannily like the actor Mashkov appeared, he should send her his way.

IV.

Nikita Mariyevna arrived on time and looked exactly like Mashkov. She was about forty.

"Hey there, lad, will you feed the lady?"

"Of course, dinner is on me."

An androgynous waiter wearing a blouse and pants approached the table. They brandished a unisex name, Sasha, written in bold letters on their nametag hanging from a vaguely shapely chest. Their voice, neither shrill nor coarse, was quick and engaging while describing the restaurant's apperativo and specialties.

Nikita broke in, "I would like something light. What would you suggest?"

The crucial difference between Mashkov and Nikita Mariyevna was the latter's fuller figure. She was one of those women who sought every possible way to get thinner—be it folkloric techniques or empirically verified know-how. She lost weight painfully, brutally, then gained it back in an instant.

"We don't have anything that light, I am afraid. We had an udder dish on the menu earlier this month but the public insists on ignoring the udder. For haute cuisine we offer veal tail. There's abalone, as well, but that's not for everyone, either. I'd recommend slow pan-roasted abalone with Peruvian jalapeño. Usually it comes with shallot, but we are out of shallot today. Without shallot the abalone is not abalone. Otherwise I must admit it's much like any other restaurant—a rather dull menu," the androgynous server concluded with compassion.

"Well, I meant 'light' as in . . . Something with less caloric content and harmful toxins."

"A food can be harmful to one but nutritious for another."

This relativistic answer, coming from a paid employee of the restaurant, puzzled Nikita. "Perhaps arugula salad with bottarga?"

The server frowned, "Salted and smoked dishes are bad for the kidneys."

"Tomatoes with mozzarella?"

"Tomatoes are red vegetables. They can induce allergic reactions, like anything else red," Sasha's tone was that of a medical directory, "and mozzarella is pure cholesterol."

"Beef fillet. If it's not too fatty."

"It is only fat—marble-like in its fatness," Sasha assured them. "Yes, and the uric acid present in such high amounts such can lead to gout, God forbid."

"Sea bass . . ."

"Usually high in mercury content. Prolonged fish intake can result in CNS shutdown."

"A shutdown?" Nikita Mariyevna was dumbfounded.

"Central nervous system. Fish, though, is healthier than meat. And porridge is even healthier than fish. Cucumbers are healthier than porridge and only water is healthier than cucumbers. The air, of course, is healthier than water. But, if you insist, go ahead and order the fish. Unlike the others, it won't kill you. If your central nervous system fails, you'll just fall into a vegetative state."

"I'll refrain, I suppose. It's already quite late, anyway," Nikita said, abandoning her gourmet aspirations. Yegor, who had felt his hunger creeping soon after Agoltsov's departure, ordered the arugula salad, the tomatoes with mozzarella, and the marbled beef. Sasha noted the order without commentary and departed at once.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Nikita Mariyevna—how did your childhood friends address your father? Uncle Masha?"

"Dad's name was Mariy Solomonovich. And by the way, you've asked me this three times already. You asked each time you drank your way into your notorious drunken anger. You ask and rage and then forget all about it. And why are you asking me sober all of a sudden? You must angry today, definitely angry."

"But why Mariy? It's seemingly a non-Jewish name."

"It's Roman. Marius was a populist and opposed the oligarchy of General Sulla."

"I thought Marius was some military guy."

"He was a leader and defender of the people while Sulla was all about maintaining the status quo—he was like the deep state," the journalist squealed quietly.

"Sulla was dubbed 'lucky' by the people: 'Felix.'"

"'Iron Man,' too. The people, however, did not give him this nickname. He invented it for himself."

"I will not argue," Yegor pulled his plate and fork closer, "but I will say, however, that Sulla stopped the Civil War. But why name you Nikita? That's not Hebrew, is it? Have I asked you this as well?"

"Yes, you have. They named me in honor of Khruschev."

"Interesting. But you're a girl. You were a girl, I mean."

"And so I remain a girl in my heart. My father despised Stalin with such a passion and was so grateful to Khruschev for ending his repression . . . So he decided to personally immortalize his name that way."

"Well, I guess that's better than being named after the Thaw. Or called 'Gagarin' to honor the first man to reach the cosmos."

"Laugh all you want," Nikita Mariyevna burrowed nervously into her purse. "I'm still grateful to not be called 'Party's Twentieth Congress' or something like that. May I try your salad?"

Yegor normally did not tolerate this type of gastronomical familiarity, but restrained himself. Nikita dexterously slipped her fork into the arugula thicket. Yegor ignored it and began. "Sergeyevich, our poet-Governor—or, in your own words, 'our Nero'—read your article about him and the chemical plant. The article, in his view, wasn't very fair. He agrees that the plant produces lots of smoke and dust, but you should know that those are just superficialities. The symptoms of oncological diseases, especially among children, he says, are not caused by the plant's dust and soot. Your argument is simplistic and not scientifically verifiable."

Her mouth full of greens, Nikita answered, "I touch on this in the article—the wind current shifted this year."

"You know all too well that I'm not an expert in this field. Discussing wind currents and carcinogens with me is the equivalent of reading Einstein to a pig. I'm talking about something else here. Governor Sergeyevich formally requests that you write a refutation of your earlier article and publish it under his name. It should be a triumphant and brilliant reply, naturally. With accusations of lying and incompetence, and evidence-backed proof of your poor representation of the chemical plant."

"Let me try!" squealed Nikita as Sasha placed heaps of mozzarella on the table. Yegor, despite his rather menial job, was a sensitive and squeamish man, sometimes to an unhealthy extent. Cursing himself under his nose, he pushed the plate towards Nikita and she went on happily to indulge herself. "It's a cynical offer, no doubt. How much money am I being paid to screw myself?"

"Twenty thousand dollars, or, as the patriots would say, five hundred thousand rubles."

"His niece's husband owns the chemical plant. Governor, his niece, and the abiding son-in-law each year shove forty million into their pockets, American dollars. Filtering facilities and compliance with environmental laws would cost them half of their earnings. They are being stingy while kids are dying. And he offers me twenty thousand so that I, like that NCO's wife in the news, can flog myself under his name. This all too modest and boring," troubled Nikita Mariyevna concluded, demolishing the final morsel of the mozzarella.

"I expected this reaction from you," Yegor smiled. "Sergeyevich asked me to acquaint you with an alternative payment structure, as well. After all, freedom of choice is the basic value of democracy."

"When I have a choice, I tend to make mistakes," Nikita Mariyevna replied. "However, go ahead, lay out what our dear Sergeyevich really wants. Let me hear your true price."

"Sergeyevich knows that you are one of Russia's most respected journalists. He wants to see another article alongside the one you're writing under his name. This one should be signed with your name and, in it, you will completely refute everything you wrote prior and recognize the chemical plant's value in the field of artificial fur manufacturing. As per Sergeyevich—you will praise him for encouraging competition in the industry as well as for his initiatives protecting the environment and children's health. For instance, you can claim that, by introducing tons of faux fur into the markets, the niece's husband has saved millions of fox from extinction. Or foxes, is it? As well as sable . . . sables, to hell with it."

"Those who can afford sable will not start wearing your plebeian faux-fur all of a sudden."

"Not mine, but Sergeyevich's."

"Especially not his. As far as I know, that very same felt is used for production of coats to be worn by poachers."

"You mean hunters."

"Every hunter in Russian is a poacher. How does your Fur King envision this scenario unveiling? How shall I explain the sudden change of my position?"

"He knows you are clever and will conjure something. For instance, new facts have emerged under fresher circumstances. Or you may denounce the previous article by saying you did not actually write it and your name was used without acknowledgment, whether by the editor's mistake or maliciously. The paper will side with you. Naturally, you'll receive and extra payment."

"To hell with the extra. What's the basic pay for such a task?"

"We won't offer you green American paper, which is losing its value exponentially, but something more tangible—a valuable piece of land in a prestigious location."

"By that I assume you mean two square meters near Vagankovo Cemetery?"

"No, Nikita Mariyevna. In exchange for this nail in the fur industry's coffin, you shall receive . . ." Yegor took hold of the marbled meat. "Meat is not recommended for you, Nikita Mariyevna, the uric acid will subject you to high risk of

gout, and the cholesterol—three consecutive strokes. Back to the land: you will receive a luxurious two hectares by Lake Holodnoe. Heard of it? Total Russian paradise: white waters, like Lukomorye, the fairy tale."

"Isn't it a nature preserve?"

"Not the entire territory. There are unprotected blotches, which are commercial."

"On the lake?"

"Do not fret, all is done in accordance with the law, with an iron seal."

"But it is so far away . . ."

"Be patient, a direct highway is being built next year. The Germans are constructing it. Well, Ukrainians, but using German technologies."

"Or Tajiks, using Ukranian technologies."

"Your irony is in vain. It will be a half-hour drive from Moscow. Well, by your car, maybe an hour, max."

"That place has no communications whatsoever."

"Everything is already set up, but not a soul knows about it. You'll have neighbors, but the elite sort, the kind you always nag about in your articles on corruption."

"If they live by Holodnoe Lake, it means I was nagging them for the right reasons."

"Governor's bank allocates mortgages for around thirty years under a preferential interest," Yegor continued, "and if you continue cooperating, you won't be asked to cover that at all."

"Is that so?"

"All this will be done in the hopes of long-term cooperation, of course. Our Nero seems to have plans of an Imperial scale. Beyond his excellent poetry, he must publish clever articles, deliver clever speeches. Who shall write them for him? Plus, your support will guarantee more sympathy among the, so to speak, irritated social stratum."

"I will think about it," Nikita dived into her purse again.

"I need your response right away."

"Let me try the meat."

"Don't get distracted. Yes or no?"

"You are angry."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"Yes, yes, yes."

"Go ahead, eat, there's more left. And the last point: Deputies Donbassyuk and Don want to book their next TV debate. The debate will be on technical regulations of milk, or something along those lines." Yegor looked at a cheat sheet in his pocket. "Don will be supporting the government plan and Donbassyuk will play against. They will also debate the gambling business. Don is for a total ban— he took some money from strip and dance clubs; they hope the gambling clientele will increase their influx. Donbassyuk will advocate for minor restrictions. Casino owners hired him in turn. These two also tricked beer brewers and vodka distillers. Don lobbies a complete ban on consumption of beer in every space, except for homes, bars, and restaurants. He doesn't get money from the vodka guys. Meanwhile, Donbassyuk is for the complete and final ban on the advertising of spirits and their sale to persons under the age of twenty-fucking-five years. Beer brewers are financing him. That's what's up."

"I shall arrange a proper game of debates for the deputies. These themes are

complex, especially the technical regulations. I will write up their roles three weeks in advance, no earlier. And how does this newfound Tom and Jerry divide their bribes, Yegor? Or they don't divide them at all and just pocket whatever comes their way?"

"No, they have it all arranged in a brotherly manner. They are companions, after all. One goes to the beer brewers and threatens a crackdown on the vodka people. He promises to protect them, speak out against it in the media, in the Duma, to block potentially harmful legislation. He takes from them, say, five hundred thousand. The other, meanwhile, visits the vodka producers, threatens them with a total beer brewers' crackdown, all the while offering them the very same delegate's intercession. Let's say, he asks for a million rubles for his service. If they don't believe him, he signals to the other delegate, and the anti-vodka legislation ensues in real time. In short, the clientele gets trapped quite easily. Later Don and Donbassyuk stack their finances fairly and divide them into two. In this scenario, they each get seven hundred fifty thousand. They're generous guys. And, as you know, they're honest, though stupid. These two concepts are, perhaps, interchangeable. However, you and I are not getting any money from these tricks. So, for each debate, as per usual, you will collect fifty thousand. Don't forget the word count and the easy, accessible language for the masses. Otherwise, you will be scolded. And, please, don't take longer than three weeks. They still have to memorize the speeches and rehearse their roles prior the Parliamentary session."

"I despise power." Nikita Mariyevna hissed with revolutionary fervor. "Governor's, delegates, ministers, security service, the police—greedy hordes around the throne. They are killers of freedom, genius, glory . . . I would strangle all of them. I hate them, I hate them, I hate them."

"It is not the power you hate, but life—life, as a whole. For it did not turn out the way you had intended."

"And you? Would you accept it? The way it is now? Injustice, violence, stagnation . . ."

"These are qualities of life in general, not exclusively of authority. I also envision life differently, but I do not wish to crush it, as you do. I feel for life. I wish to be a kind neighbor to it, to cohabitate, even; and to become better in tandem with it. I would like to improve with it, yes. And you wish to destroy it. What for? Life can be boastful, but at the same time it is quite small and flimsy, and, in fact, so funny. It has imagined itself to be glorious and has thus become insolent, despite the fact that it has huddled in the temperature gap of ten degrees, in some imaginative physics hole, out of which it threatens the darkness, and calls to God with its fickle voice, and fights with infinite Death for some microscopic skyscrapers. It is silly, unprepossessing, courageous—this life. I feel sorry for life, for mine, for yours, and for ours, entirely. It puffs itself up and jumps to appear higher. And then, it's gone, just like that. It is foolish and beautiful. I am completely for life. And you are against it. So, power is just something that came to mind first."

"Yegor, this pro-life hymn would have been moving if I hadn't known that you, pardon me, are a bandit."

"That is unfair, Nikita Mariyevna. I was a bandit, but I quit."

"And, having quit, you have become indulgent for life?"

"I have, Nikita Mariyevna."

"And with all seriousness you consider that one can be promoted to governor,

minister, and MP by honest means?"

"I think that is less likely, but still possible. I also think that dishonesty is ubiquitous in your publication, as well as in the family, and the monastery, and the asphalt brigade, and in the ministry, and in Parliament—dishonesty has spread through all of these more or less equally."

"Why did you drag the family unit into this discourse, Yegor?"

"Because you called me a bandit. And because it is true. I did it for the sake of the truth."

"You are getting older and displaying senile conformism," Nikita Mariyevna howled.

"One minute you call me a bandit, the next a conformist. What is to be done? Who shall I be? You are hard to please."

"To be a bandit in Russia—that is true conformity. I will finish everything within the deadlines. See you then."

"But what about dessert?"

V.

Yegor, finally alone again, relaxed, drank some tea, listened in on the conversation between the bartender and Sasha. By the conversation, he was able to guess Sasha's gender. "Female after all," he decided. Throughout his moneyed life, he experienced some awkwardness in his interactions with the service industry and the help, unwittingly annoyed about neediness and how it degrades some people, people who aren't yet wealthy, who it seems will never become wealthy. Leaving too small a tip would make him feel bad, but leaving too large a tip would be laughable (not to mention insulting), and leave him with little for himself.

What exactly was so degrading about a job like, say, a waiter, Yegor couldn't quite articulate, but he knew for certain that if he were to be a waiter himself, in the very first hours of his new profession whoever happened to be his first pretentious or overprivileged customer would taste the full fury of some haute cuisine dish, or the nearest lady's leather purse, or serving tray, or pepper shaker, or anything else that suited the occasion for accidental, spontaneous, hasty, artisanal violence.

Sasha, meanwhile, didn't register this psychological dissection at all and without a hint of gratitude took the tip.

The humidity settled down in the evening, and the sky became heavy and gray, almost black in some spots. The city was a sauna. People out in the street sweated and suffered as they dodged Hummers and BMWs; slimy bodyguards waited for their VIPs, who lingered at the Diamond or any of the open boutiques. Yegor's exit gleaned some curious looks from the bodyguards, but once they determined it wasn't him they needed—nope, not our guy!—they left him alone. He weaved his way into the side entrance of his home. He would sleep and, tomorrow, chat with Crybabe.

Yegor himself never had any bodyguards. He belonged to a wide collective of strangely rich Russians, whose incomes and moral leanings allowed for the so-called millionaire lifestyle: having the looks and spending habits of absolute wealth, yet spiritually drawing a zero. Money was accumulated in significant amounts and spent mindlessly on God-knew-what. Yegor had no idea how to save or manage it, although he aspired to do both.

Suddenly he needed a new car. Mercedes? Lexus? Suddenly he needed to give generously to the private school where his daughter Nastya was set to attend. Suddenly the father of his ex-wife was ill with an extremely rare disease that could only be cured with experimental (and very pricey) American medicine, which a socially responsible business could only obtain in a dire situation. Suddenly a previously chartered stretch of land turned out to be riddled with contractual faults, which began a legal battle for years, worsened by greedy attorneys and monetary inflation. Suddenly the dollar fell, then the ruble. A business meeting over breakfast turned into lunch turned into a wild nightlife escapade and so on—and let's not forget the three-week binge featuring a heavy consumption of Petrus, the company of the sleekest professional girls, VIP musicians and dancers as his guests, all to the delight of the squad, and with last-minute business trips to Paris where the party continued. Oh, and he was about to be divorced, which meant his ex-wife and Nastya would need a house. Plus monthly support payments. Plus hearing complaints about how financially tough it was to single-handedly rear a child. Boredom and emptiness could lead to the spontaneous decision to start collecting medium-fine art in the interest of aesthetics and capital. By the advice of an art specialist, some watery nonsense

by Ayvazovsky could be acquired, or, guided by personal taste, an acrylic by Klee. Then the impulse would fade, one dumb purchase hanging above the plasma screen TV and another above the elliptical machine, so there was something to look at while working out, and something to throw away when it was revealed to be not a genuine Klee but a garbage copy. Once in a while, Sidorov (his "best friend") begged for money, giving his word that he'd pay it back, only disappear—for weeks, without a trace.

So there could be no savings. Living more frugally than his means seemed pointless. A descent into poverty due to a couple of big purchases seemed inevitable considering this rate of growth—likely to happen at any second, in fact. So the richer Yegor became, the more precarious his mental state. A cold, calm pride—what those schooled in London came back calling a "stiff upper lip"—was essential to this type of millionaire. Their future, with all their chemical plant auctions and offshore stashes, wasn't a sure thing. It was turbulent, tough, and murky. Worst of all, which they could foresee in this future, as time has a habit of running backward and forward in deranged karma-kinetic sequences, was the reflection of their own poor and horrible past. The abandoned, betrayed, dark past. Deserted in the night, like a helpless infant, heartbreaking and cruel, just to indulge a forward momentum to wherever the eye could see. Left there with all its pathetic treasures, unloved by its lovers for the first time, the first homesick feelings for old plebeian friends and provincially pitiful relatives. Left with nothing, hopelessly attempting to claw out of the chains of memory, poverty, naïveté. The past, like a lover scorned, was devastated and vengeful. An encounter with the past would spell destruction. Because of this, Yegor was always moving forward, without fear or even ambition, turning his back on his memories, not knowing what would become of him, as long as it wasn't what had been before.

VI.

Yegor's mother, though strong and healthy, was a chronically unfortunate person. Her unluckiness could very well have been a disease. She thrived existentially on misfortune. Her first husband died on their wedding day from an apoplectic fit at twenty-four years of age. The guests didn't recognize the emergency, yelling "Gorko! Gorko! Kiss! Kiss!", and while the bride stood to kiss, the groom sat staring intently at the cold cuts beyond. Stared, stared, and then, once the bride tapped him on the shoulder, toppled onto the best man, dead as ham.

The best man became the second husband and Yegor's father. The dead groom had bashed him right in the brain, a blow from which the best man never recovered: he fell ill immediately and grew increasingly erratic. The third year of their marriage, he went crazy, became actively dangerous, attacking random people and animals without warning. The best man was eventually committed to a mental clinic and, today, Yegor had no memory of or interest in his father. The best man's son, however, grew up stable, clear-minded, and, most notably, apathetic. The one anomaly in Yegor's character: nighttime sojourns with his eyes closed. He sleepwalked most often in the spring after a particularly influential read, or a movie. His somnambulism was mellow and harmless, although one day, when he was in the army, he did something that shocked everyone: he sleepwalked into the weaponry room and loaded up ten guns. To the alarmed security guard's "Why?", he answered, "I have no idea," and was pardoned after a psychological exam, and once he left the army his sleepwalking began to go away on its own.

He never got to know his mother's third husband, for she, apparently not wanting to impose her son onto a stepfather, would see him on the side. Yegor saw so little of him that at times he thought this third man hadn't even existed, just a figment of his mother's imagination to confirm her misfortunes. Judging by her stories, excessively detailed, almost implausible, he was drawn up to be a dramatic subject—a genius, or an alcoholic, or an alcoholic genius, in any case a mournful husband, unworthy of love, which made him frighteningly lovable. It wasn't enough, however, to air grievances about his stepfather. Yegor himself had inadvertently fueled a few of his mother's dark foresights and gloomy phases. She thought that Yegor ate too little and drank too much. Even worse, he left school. Then he took too long to get married. Then he married the wrong girl. Then he delayed having grandchildren, and then, after Nastya was born, his parenting style wasn't good enough, wasn't compatible with that of the older generation. Basically, mama would cause drama in any situation, over any subject.

When she, a year and a half into that third marriage, was lightly, quickly, and smoothly relieved by her first and last ever heart attack, Yegor didn't show her the slightest sympathy. He didn't go to the funeral, and he relegated all ritual duties to anyone he could find in his family—aunts, cousins, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, uncles and their nephews, brides, grooms, grandmothers, granddads, even an heiress—people who actively participated in going to morgues, cemeteries, crematories, and memorial dinners, that sort of thing. Though apathetic and clueless as to what a person did in such situations, he tried honestly to offer his condolences. A person, he believed, was taken from this world by the soul, ordered up by something divine, but the corpse had nothing sacred about it, just legal and bureaucratic complications.

His mother's mother, though, was different. Every summer from the ages of two to fifteen, Yegor spent time with her in her village. His grandmother's name was, like Chekhov, Antonina Pavolvna. The village was located in the ugliest part of Russia, neither in the steppes or taigas, nor the hills or canyons, nor the white or black sands, neither here nor there. A village in bumfuck nowhere. Dusty, grassy, old. Filled with piles of logs and houses indistinguishable from those logs. A half-constructed church built by vulgar priests. A ravine filled with broken wares that were scoured in the morning by local guys, Kolka and Sanka, sipping bootlegged wine, searching for scrap. They went who-knew-where, a destination unknown even to them, wherever destiny took a Russian troublemaker with an iron will. But destiny didn't take them far; they wandered past the bridge, ending up in the ravine by a tractor, and went to sleep next to the swamp. The river by the village was small, as were its fish. The tomatoes in the garden were small and green. The onions were bitter. The apples sour. The boredom inescapable. The light in the houses at night meek and antiquated. The people's energy weak and inaudible.

But in his childish soul he loved not which was better, but which was closer, he loved wholly this tiny village, this piece of Russia, with her melancholy and her ennui. His most endearing dreams were about its endless fields, clovers warmed by the sun in the pastoral landscape, where bumblebees and dragonflies seemed to laugh in joy along with him. His grandmother, who appeared in his dreams as well, would call him home to drink milk, and he would answer with a big hearty laugh and run away, still small, smaller than the grass . . .

Antonina Pavolvna was a moonshiner, the last master of her dynasty's bootleggers. With a recipe sequentially passed down from generation to generation, the Samohodovs,* including Yegor and his mother, to an extent, were themselves sober people. They were also wild and lonely people; unique, antisocial, and more cosmopolitan than their village peers. Their self-made brand of wine was extremely popular among their close circles.

They were often punished, but never fatally—a slap on the wrist, a warning, or some kind of public retort to their neighborhood alchemy. But off the record everyone respected their product. It was true, too, that Antonina Pavolvna was the last local master of her trade. Her children and grandchildren had moved to different towns, and she, with an ear to the barrels containing liquid processes only she could decipher, had no interest in passing down the secrets of her trade, whether of wine, beer, honey, butter, or liquor, to her offspring. She did, however, often take Yegor with her to the edges of her garden, by the river, where she gathered supplies for her tiny but effective bootlegging operation.

He loved making fire under a cauldron and watching how, drop by drop, the legendary products were made. Grandma would let him put his finger under the boiling drops and taste a sample. It tasted bitter and grown-up, causing anxiety and promising too much, like the kiss of an older girl. This was a deterrent from following in the footsteps of his prior generation.

One day long ago and another day ten years later, having aged greatly, during his last summer in the village, Mr. Aniskin, a policeman in charge of their area, participated in their divinations. Aniskin, self-conscious about his corn-shaped physique, star-less shoulder straps and gun-less holster, appeared to be on the

* Translator's note: "Samohod," the root of Yegor's ancestral name, translates to "self-propelled device."

precipice of alcoholism. He helped bring wood and pour things into the cauldron, sat around silently until the chemical process was complete, bashfully sipped a few glasses, and stumbled back to his motorcycle, now covered in neighborhood kids.

Grandma would give him a canteen for the road, a "fire extinguisher" of fresh wine, and, perhaps because of this, her bootlegging career never ran into any legal hurdles.

She'd buried her husband, Yegor's grandfather, long ago and lived by herself in a house on the outskirts of the village. Besides the art of bootlegging, she busied herself with fishing, bird hunting, home repair, religious icon painting, and the occasional song on an imported (grandpa fought the Great Patriotic War in Berlin) mandolin. Her personal businesses should have made her rich among the village, perhaps even in Moscow at the time, but they didn't, and she wasn't special—no ordinary Russian citizens, knee deep in dirt or flying in space, sweating in the fields or bleeding in the war, with or without oil and gold, attracted capital. Even if they had an Americanized ethic under their sickles, they would've already been beaten to the punch by a Frenchman, or a Chinese man, or a Ukrainian man even . . . As for the Russians, no penny big or small seemed to stick.

Antonina Pavlovna possessed a plebeian character. Her soul was modest, even naïve. Sweet, light, colored by one virtue: kindness. In the absence of other vices or characteristics, her kindness had no foil or contrasting trait, and she was discreet, quietly minding her own business. Within her all-encompassing kindness, unnoticed by many modern people the same way they failed to notice heartfelt labor, there was young Yegor, at least until he grew up and grew out of her. He grew out of her the same way he grew out of his old, simple personality and, over the years, into a rougher, larger, more internally twisted one.

No one came to guide Antonina Pavlovna on her journey to heaven, nor did Yahweh himself speak to her in His ominous tenor through the clouds, the storms, or a burning bush; she didn't fast, didn't pray, and the religious icons she painted were strictly for sale. An unholy Ficus plant grew in her terrace, yet Yegor still considered her a Saint. All things considered, the Almighty Lord colored the unattractive narrative of Saint Antonina Pavolvna with a fierce, slow, natural, painful death. A terrible and tough illness, the name of which was forbidden from memory because it was an insult to the human condition, was bequeathed by the Lord upon his laborer. And He reeled her in like a village fish, slowly, quietly, gently by the soul, so that her spirit, hooked to the other realm, wouldn't be completely torn apart. For a full year this dance played out.

And then the old lady, tired of fighting the illness, couldn't hold on to life any more. It cracked her apart, the pain, and she passed, and the Lord took her, took her and saved her.

Yegor saw his grandmother at the beginning of her suffering, when the sickness first took hold of her, when the pain was just making itself known. Yegor saw the harbingers of death in her eyes, and asked only, "Why? What for? Why her?"

After that, he left the university, the name of which he couldn't recall, and headed straight into the army, where, in the midst of training, he received word of Antonina Pavlovna's passing. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, amen. Yegor fled to the tech park, where unstable "souls" such as himself hid from "tough and unnecessary army duty" and for hours grieved his first adult tragedy—quietly, modestly, properly.

VII.

In Moscow, Yegor was an average student in an average school. He knew nothing of the school when he was accepted; it was simply the first that had come his way. School was easy for him, he did well, but he didn't try. Towards all the subjects, including science, he exhibited a condescending and laughable curiosity, much like a tourist at a podunk small town looking at something he thinks is an ancient treasure. He had a lot of leisure time, which first went to girls and guys and partying—in between the metro, sleeping, eating, before and after sex, drinking wine and vodka—before he started reading books, books, books, booklets, notebooks, textbooks. At first it was a whimsical curiosity, but it turned into something more selective and intense. In the past millennium, when his literary habits were just forming, people used to read novels, huge paper books filled to the brim with arrangements of letters. In those fairytale-like years in Old Russia, super-readers walked the earth, those who could finish War and Peace, The Life of Klim Samgin, and even The Glass Bead Game in any translation. That is to say, what are reformed Marxists to do, the freely educated and well-rested patrons of the lethargic Party's parties? They could find something to do in their spare time, but what to do at work? They don't even let you drink there. Nothing but read. So they read. A solid communist residence itself was congruent to the setting of any boring laureate's novel. So just like that, reading literature held together all those restless minds within the swamp of their boring lives.

Little by little Yegor started to understand that he was not an ordinary reader. Academically, he belonged to the lowest reading level, like Chichikov's Petrushka. He enjoyed the process of reading in which the letters became syllables, the syllables became words, and the words became sentences, whose deeper meanings were irrelevant. The process of narrative composition didn't interest him. On the other hand, words, separate from their meanings, signs, symbols, semiotics, those not native to corporeal reality, those brought Yegor joy. He was interested in the adventures of names, not people.

Names didn't smell, didn't push each other, didn't smack their lips annoyingly. The daily mechanisms of life—the thick weight of iron, the flashy, the thin, the thick, the cold meat of his untamed Moscow which fed his corporeal flesh, and his external body, his outermost layers—slowly peeled off, and his internal perspective, bottomless, egoless, sexless, senseless, freely and intangibly undulated and aligned, ripped apart and fused together into sometimes wonderful kaleidoscopes of others' eyes and visions.

His own reading canon was formed so grotesquely that it was useless to share with others. When asked about his favorite compositions, he thought for a while, seemingly lost, and barely answered, something like: "The Letter for Allabiu about the non-existence of three gods, by Georgy Nissky," or, "John Donne's untitled sonnet," or, "A few paragraphs from Podnyataya Tselina." That was the most he could think of, the most he offered anyone else.

His tastes and perception were strange—he noticed this himself, how lonely and alienated he felt from all human castes. His whole world, he felt, was contained within a shell, and it bothered him to his core that he couldn't break out. His shadows, his puppets, his imagination, were all controlled by the outside audience, but not his own self.

He thought he might have been wired to be autistic, or turned inside out completely, only imitating a connection with the agents of the outside world beyond his boundaries, agents who spoke with fake voices and internal dialogues, so that he could fish for information about useful things like books, food, clothes, sex, money, and glory.

He was sure that true divine knowledge was empty and abandoned, and that people sought it rarely; that people gathered beyond the border of God's imagination, in the deep dankness of dirty shores, holding on to their small places, buzzing towards gossip and superstition, and not leaving under any circumstances towards the middle, where there is a calm and free flow of ultra light beams.

He heard it—he couldn't sing it or repeat it, but he heard it clearly and knew it exactly—through noise and static, through the chaotic tempo of time and timelessness—grand, flat, and rigid, like one of Giotto's frescoes, the laugh of the genesis of silence, enlightened for eternities before and after our time. The laugh audible only to a few people whose hearing was forged in this special mold.

He understood what he heard, once, when he was a child. One blinding, sunny July day, when all of the jumping crickets emitted their same leveled, flat, barely audible, and almost silent noise—right there, before his eyes, ripped the very fabric of reality, the veil of ultimate beauty. The seams of time were torn and all of the most recent layers had peeled off. They were erased, and vanished: the river—blinked like thunder; the forest and fields—folded like a yard of textile; the church, houses, livestock, and gardens—took off like frightened birds; the sun—merged into the sky like a shadow. And a laugh broke through those powerfully enchanted events—the sun, the gardens, the livestock, churches and houses, the forest, the fields, the river. By name, they appeared to be the same, but something within them had changed—not in fullness, or emptiness, or volume, nor were they destroyed or chewed up from within but quite the opposite—strong and lush, significant, created forever from the pure element of silence.

VIII.

Having served as a paratrooper, without difficulty or enjoyment (odd for someone who understood Husserlian ideas), Yegor decided to make his existence more minimal, believing that the more modestly a person exists, the less negativity and bad energy they emanate and attract, thus the less of a chance of harm coming to them. He aimed to live as modestly as possible and so started working at a giant publishing company as an editor in the Department of Twentieth Century Unpublished American Poetry. Work was, for him, easy and leisurely. Many of the American poetry collections and translations that flowed into his department were censored for reasons unexplained: perhaps they were politically controversial, or had never gone to press due to creative differences, or were never completed. Texts from the latter part of the century were organized by decade (‘60s, ‘70s, etc.), by genre (novel, epic, song lyrics, etc.), and by quality (masterpiece, solid read, so-so, graphomania, abomination), and sent out to two addresses. One named Yanis Anselmovich Menshe and another I. U. Kuznetsov. Who these people were and what they did with these controversial texts was unknown.

From over-reading, Yegor himself began to exhibit graphomanic tendencies, even started calling himself a poet (thankfully for just a short time). He participated in illusory, rebellious literary movements; groups that met only to name themselves, steal amplifiers and hi-hats from nightclubs, and break up immediately after completing their mission; in their drunken underground protests, they felt like rock stars. He translated Gregory Corso or Allen Ginsberg from time to time. And he was perhaps the first in his lilywhite, rhythmless country to hear the curses words in the lyrics of American rappers.

His workspace was a tiny room across from the switchboard, where almost daily the electrician Mr. Tolya would get drunk on bootlegged wine, electrocute himself, yell for help, and get carried away to the health center by a janitor. The tiny room fit the entire department, it seemed, and besides Yegor was his manager Ivetta Ivanovna Bukh and her deputy Chernenko Igor Fedorovich. Yegor was their only subordinate at the facility. They didn’t exactly “manage” him, and their department was casual and familial in its operations.

Ivetta Ivanovna was a woman with a mighty figure of unbelievable girth. Her desk overflowed with packaged and unpackaged imported cakes, pastries, puffs, croissants, cookies, biscuits, candies, teapots, cups, jams, and other dessert-time paraphernalia. She sipped tea and snacked constantly, didn’t do anything useful herself and didn’t force others to, either. Yegor would address her, a carelessly aging lady who had never in her life been healthy or youthful or beautiful and so had nothing to lose in her old age, with sarcastic compliments, which in their deceptive flattery would’ve offended a different sort of woman. But Ivetta was robust, lazy-souled, and warm-hearted. She had been planning for about fifteen years to fall in love with her colleague Igor Fedorovich but never got the chance—time and time again she was distracted by pastries and jams, exotic candies and chocolate mirages. They were far sweeter and more delicious than Igor Fedorovich, who was skinny and bald, smelled bad, and covered to the waist in dandruff flakes. Not to mention that he was married to another apple-cheeked sweetheart much like Ivetta. This man she lusted for was also considered to be Europe’s greatest Wallace Stevens expert and recited “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” in perfect English at least three times a day.

Thus, Ivanova, who never read anything and couldn't tell the difference between Cummings and Kerouac, who was only sent to manage the department by assignment from some professional bureau, turned out to be completely wrong for him. But she wasn't an enemy, either, and all three coworkers got along well, never sacrificing their friendship for work. The managers received a salary a bit higher than a hundred rubles, and a little less than that for Yegor.

Having become lazy in this slumbering, unappetizing, and unimportant existence, Yegor also married someone in his workplace: Sveta, an editor who worked on the floor above for the same hundred-ish ruble salary and who, compared to Ivetta, was quite the marvel. Sveta worked in the department of Memorial Literature of Tlensky and Ukbarsky Civilizations (Tlensky she knew well and Ukbarsky she learned on the fly). Both were dead languages and their literary works were obsolete. That department was created at the height of archeological sensationalism in Patagonia, when Tlen and Ukbar were first uncovered, and everyone waited to see ancient skulls and rocks and incredible treasures. But years went by before the skulls and rocks were exhumed, and the incredible treasures had yet to have been found. In haste, the cryptograms on the stones were translated. The Patagonian hieroglyphs unilaterally praised the likes of their kings and contained frightening images depicting masses of wounded and decapitated enemies. There was no literature to be found there. The management either forgot or was too embarrassed to shut down the department, and instead of researching ancient monuments and literatures, the staff solved crossword puzzles, read banned nonsense, and gossiped about the misadventures of Mr. Tolya.

Sveta, however, was an enthusiast(e). She held a mailing list for the world's Tlen speakers—five, including herself. She studied Ukbar, for some reason. She wanted to believe in the drama and the sanctity of what she was doing, that there would perhaps indeed be grand discoveries and literary masterpieces in her dead languages. Yegor pitied her with a pitiful pity, like the kind he felt for his stuffed animals in his childhood, and, later, towards all the women he was close to in his life. They fought constantly, Sveta yelling in Tlen, Yegor yelling rap lyrics, but because they didn't understand each other, they never truly got mad at each other. He didn't want children, believing that he had no right to give life to anybody and couldn't be held responsible for the death that would inevitably follow.

Of course, during a period of near-divorce, Nastya was conceived, and he, with a logical sensibility, decided that the word "happiness" might have had some meaning all along. His pity turned into something gentle, almost like love, but not for long. If only for one minute, perhaps a quarter of an hour, those feelings provided him with warmth even through the coldest and most frightening January nights.

IX.

One day, the native and familiar dwellings shifted, roared, and exploded. The Soviet foundation shattered and shriveled, and the wildest drafts wandered in, roaring through the deepest crevices, and the serfs within began to stir. Coughing, wheezing, and little by little, yawning and staring, they emerged, following the Western scent, creating a new Parisian super-paradise, replacing their Soviet socialist lifestyle and the land that belonged to no one, unearthed by Ulyanovich Lenin, yesterday's worshipped leader, today's bloodthirsty and pretentious bastard.

Minds were confused, and of those born into servitude some fled into freedom, some fell into a comatose subservience, others into vulgar nihilism. Party leaders scolded the party, komsomols started organizing underground banks and societies, ensigns turned into killers, social heroes started slowly but surely selling government-funded oil and defense, hiding dollars in laundromats and dacha bathrooms while holding clandestine meetings where they bitched about reform and lamented the abolished rule. After wiping the tears and snot and sweat from a good cry, they'd go to a privately owned diner and sell their dear Russian defense equipment to various non-Russians. And then they cried, and cried some more. Sell, cry, sell again. Good! It was good . . .

Yegor accepted those changes without much of a shift in his own emotional climate. For him, living under any regime life was good, because life seemed pointless under any kind of rule. This made the regime less of a priority in his view.

One day he and Igor Fedorovich left their firm for the swap meet to buy unregulated German beer and Polish biscuits—chocolate, for Ivette. In the middle of their trip, Yegor began to feel uncomfortable, not quite like himself, though he wasn't sure why. Then he saw the people surrounding him. Kids in plaid pants, some purchased in bundles, some sewn from blankets and curtains at home, and the "pyramid" jeans that were in vogue for two or three weeks at a time, then thrown into the garbage and forgotten. A glimpse here and there of sweat pants, hanging from the knee, and obviously fake Adidas. They circled him, stopped, and stared.

Yegor was frightened nearly to death. They were gopniks, bandits from the first wave of democracy. Igor Fedorovich tried to flee but, after being struck in the throat by a tangle of sweatpants and "pyramid" jeans, settled down.

"We got you, boss," growled a plaid-panted bastard at him. "The Boot swears to you. Now we'll take you to the schoolyard and shoot you. Don't worry, it won't hurt, just in the back of the head, you won't even notice. Just don't try to escape, don't make a sound . . . Who is this hotshot?"

"Don't worry, he's a fellow from work, my editor, he has nothing to do with this." His unexpectedly smooth and tempered tone of voice surprised Yegor.

"Don't touch him."

The plaid guy stared Yegor in the eyes for a long time. Yegor looked within himself, finding nothing, like a tree in the middle of the country at midday.

The plaid guy moved a few steps away, the other tracksuit and pyramid thugs circling around him, except for three who guarded Igor and Yegor, fiercely whispering curse words to each other. Then a redhead, who appeared to be wearing genuine Pumas, stepped away from the pack, came over to Yegor slowly, and said, "Sorry, we didn't recognize you, we didn't understand at first. asshole, be grateful that you are out walking with this respectable person, otherwise you'd

be shot in the head and dead in some school's garbage can. You'll be dead eventually, don't even doubt it, but not today, okay, not today."

The redheaded gangsta shook Yegor's hand and took his bros to that same schoolyard, where they could have shot Igor Fedorovich, who appeared to not only be an expert in Wallace Stevens, but also a boss, asshole, and bastard.

"Yegor, we won't be getting beer. Just walk behind me," mumbled Igor Fedorovich. They walked back to their workplace, circled it, and entered an old building constructed during Stalin's time, a residential castle-like apartment somewhat reminiscent of a dorm, filled with various boozing subcultures. On the fourth floor there was only one door. Igor Fedorovich spoke into the intercom, "Chief, Chief," and the door opened. For the first time Yegor saw a functional intercom. An old dude with long gray hair, who looked like Einstein after he won the Nobel Prize and shaved his mustache, opened the door for them.

"Fedor Ivanovich," the old man quickly and absentmindedly introduced himself.

X.

The place might have been a storage vault, or an office, or a hotel room. From some angles it looked like a showroom or a disused design pavilion. Everything that could fulfill the desires of a well-read, semi-cultured, five-time lottery-winning assistant engineer of a mid-sized factory was stuffed into this area, its tackiness an assaulting to the eyes. Here were: European furnishings of Turkish-Hungarian quality, five or so Mitsubishis and Akais, Italian furniture imported from Armenia, canned beers, Amaretto liqueur, Rothmans cigarettes, brightly packaged pistachios, and boxes inscribed with Xeroxed foreign writing and packed with money.

Fedor Ivanovich silently poured liqueur into shotglasses, emptied an ashtray of its ash, and poured some pistachios into it before delicately leaving the room. and Yegor plopped down into chairs. For about twenty minutes the two of them furiously ate the salty pistachios and swigged the sugary liqueur.

"What do you think, why did they let us go?" asked Chernenko Igor Fedorovich, the Chief, drunk.

"I guess they figured me for someone who knew something or mistook me for one of their own, and got scared," replied Yegor.

"Almost. But not quite. At first they got scared. But then, to justify their fright, to analyze it logically, they decided that you were the right hand man of Mr. Akhmet, the chief criminal of Balashikha."

"What do you think they were afraid of, what make them think this?"

"There's something in your eyes, in your expression, that's just so . . ." After a long pause, Chief slowly said, "Quiet, within you, always quiet, even when you're frightened or happy. With that kind of quiet you could rescue stupid children and helpless old people from fires, or you could be a guard at a concentration camp. That kind of fearless internal quiet could be considered detached, apathetic, indifferent. Anthon Palich always said to fear apathy. He fears those qualities in you. I've always noticed this in you, but today, I see it. Now it's not just a feeling I had about you. It's been confirmed by life. Your apathy isn't a product of weakness or stupidity, quite the opposite. It's the strength of your will. Your mind. You are indifferent and undaunted by everything, because everything around you is insignificant and meaningless. Only something truly grandiose can enchant you. Something so huge that perhaps the entire world will seem tiny. That's what these men saw, how tiny they were through the curtains of your eyes, and that frightened them."

"I was scared, myself," admitted Yegor.

"No, no, that's your facade, but that's not you. Because of that I'd like to offer you an opportunity to collaborate on something."

"On what?"

"On very significant matters. Will you hear me out?"

"I'm ready."

"I don't know if this good news or bad—but communism will fall. For almost forty years, people doubted that Stalin was dead. They didn't believe it. They thought he faked his death, hid in a cabinet, and spied on us from a distance, gauging our fear of him. He giggled, he sharpened his Georgian knives. But then his body was found under a ladder, in a pool of piss. And spat on. And suddenly there was no more fear. The master dies, the lackey laughs. The problem is that, aside from the lackeys, no one's home. Thirty million lackeys are now

on the loose. The guys at the top, with their self-important airs, sit in palatial chambers, they know—they have no authority. Only they haven't broken the news to everybody yet. They're ashamed. But they'll break soon. And then it will begin.

"In a normal country there would be a civil war, but we have no civilians; it will be a war of the lackeys. Which isn't to say it would be worse than a civil war, but it will come to some very low points. The lackeys will begin to divide their old masters' trash, some waging war on Islam, others on the media, others on the financiers. The lackeys will be feral and bloodthirsty. They will live wretchedly, kill cruelly and die cruelly, they will share, and they will divide.

"I am gearing up to participate in this unpleasant event. It's important to collect as much money as possible, and, even more importantly, things that can make and keep making money. Well, it would be a stretch to go for oil or vodka, we don't know nearly enough about the product, although those are the strongest points of our economy. So we have to make do with less lucrative, more familiar things. Books, books, Yegor—that's our share, the share of the angels of high-end literature. Vodka, oil, that's the economy; we can own the culture . . ."

"Let's drink, Igor Fedorovich, let's drink," interrupted Yegor with a sticky glass in hand.

"For your information," announced the Chief, sipping and staring somewhere beyond the floor and beyond tomorrow, "for the longest time in our swamped little staff, something has been rotten. Left-wing circulation, deficit compositions, manipulation of pamphlets, trash dissertations, transcriptions of illicit video . . . The management knows but turns a blind eye. They don't touch it, they've left the intelligentsia alone for some time. So the intelligentsia steals, and they steal very methodically, with tact and independence and grace. Which is exactly how the intelligentsia should be, independent and humble. They steal as a symbol of protest, to dig up and shake up and siphon from the foundations. Bandits and komsomols will devour the basic structure, but the foundations, of course, will be devoured by proletariats of the intellectual class.

"Of all these publishers circulating underground papers beneath the government, and the pamphlet bootleggers, book counterfeiters, and street peddlers, I am gathering an organization, which the mainstream would call the mafia, but our stream will call . . . I don't know what.

"Our mission: to bring all the illegal business in our publishers—intelligentsia and these friends of mine—together under our control, and then all the publishers conducting illegal business across the country, and then all the legal business, too. We'll make enough money, ideally hard cash, to buy them all within a few years when privatization begins, and it definitely will begin. We will create a gigantic publishing conglomerate—legally, and we will have so much influence on politics, and so much authority and power . . ."

"We'll be magnates. We'll be like the sun," mused Yegor, feeling the liquor glow.

"Right now we have three streams of income. The first—almost legal. To move all equipment and staff to cooperatives, to initially and privately make books, and sell them. Right now, this literate country will go for it. They'll go for Nietzsche, Platonov, Nabokov, Hemingway, Chase, King. Our native best-sellers will emerge, too. Business will boom.

"The second stream—completely illegal, a black market of literature. Left-wing circulation, unlicensed texts, publications without authorization or rights.

Basically, intellectual piracy. And just like that, a monopoly, a stronghold on typography, special interest stores, et cetera."

"This is so amazing, Igor, I could just kiss you!" cried Yegor, but he didn't know how to kiss another man, so he didn't.

"The third stream is . . . neither here nor there. It's legal, but frowned upon. Not sure that it will work, but it's worth a shot. Literary counterfeits and pranks. The 'lost appendices of King Lear' that were 'found.' Sensationalism. We just need someone to compose them in Old English and Old Rusian. Like a made-up Nostradamus. Rediscovered journals of Hesse. Intellectual provocations aimed at pretentious idiots. Pseudoscientific theories. Friedrich Engels—a woman, the lover of Marx's wife. Shit like that. Premium pricing, in small circulation. All in all, a boutique of falsified gems.

"And I think a lot of rich and political guys will show up. Some of them might want to sponsor intellectual and creative people of raw talent—who isn't a failed writer? They'll have a bunch of young girls with them, starlets who want to sing and act. And we'll be there with movie scripts and songbooks. And then the boss, who will want to go down in history as a great poet. A dramaturge. A new-wave Griboyedov. We'll have a whole crew of talented but awfully impoverished and alcoholically weak-willed poets. We'll buy whatever they have that's been lying around, whatever poems and plays they don't need. We'll buy them for cheap. But we'll sell them to the big bosses and executives for price tags that Tolstoy wouldn't even have dreamed of. Two hundred dollars an hour to bang on a typewriter at corporate parties. And we'll produce them under the executive name for the executive budget. They'll be expensive productions. And the poet—that's for life. Then we'll always have to pretend to be poets for these bankers and execs and pass other people's poetry off as our own. We'll have constant clients. It will be like a drug for them. So, Yegor, a collaboration in this third stream of organized income is what I wanted to—"

"I'm in!"

"—offer you. If you're in, then, firstly—"

"What, what do I have to do?"

"—you must kill Fedor Ivanovich."

"Without question."

"Right now. For bonding, I'd say, and dedication . . ."

"No matter. Just . . . with a firearm. I couldn't stab or strangle him."

"Here is a gun. Fedor Ivanovich, Fedor Ivanovich, could you come here for a minute . . ."

The old man entered with a tray. First his tea set exploded, then his heart. One cup remained intact and into it poured the wounded Fedor Ivanovich's multicolored blood as though from a samovar. Strangely, the old fart didn't fall right away, but stood and stood for a long, long, long time. And that whole time, the shot sonorously echoed as if in slow motion throughout the room. Then he fell, unconscious, transforming into some kind of rag doll, and lay there, not splattered all across the parquets but modestly folded up.

Yegor pulled the trigger of his killing machine until there was nothing left to fire. Its remaining bullets shot out all around the room, Yegor shooting not at Fedor Ivanovich but into some dark abyss projected from his own loneliness.

A floor above, in apartment #50, a shitty apartment from which the police escorted a family of criminals about every six months only to see a new family of criminals move in a week later, a group sat around a table chugging wine. One

of them wiggled his ears and inquired, “Huh, they’re shooting again? Killing again? Downstairs?” “Let them kill, probably deserved it,” another one retorted. “Who, man?” “All of them, now refill my glass.”

“Congratulations, brother,” said Chief. He walked up to Yegor, took out a pair of scissors from his pocket, and artfully snipped Yegor’s hair. “You now have a haircut that is ready for a new duty, withdrawn from a perishable world into an eternal war. Consider yourself accepted into the organization. And you can know its name—the Brotherhood of Black Books. You are now a Blackbooker. Keep the gun for yourself. You can take some cartridges from the kitchen cabinet. All right, now, pour some more liqueur.”

XI.

Yegor awoke in the same room, in the same chair. All the furniture in the apartment, except for the chair he was in, had vanished. Chief had vanished, as well. Fedor Ivanovich's body was replaced by a black book. A page was bookmarked with a dry pressed violet, with one sentence highlighted: "I have cause, and will, and strength, and means to do't."

Yegor began to feel overwhelmed by the heat and dryness of the room. He stumbled to the kitchen, turned on the faucet, and drank until the water ran out, and then, still thirsty, downed whatever was in the tea kettle nearby. Having drained the building's water, Yegor left nothing for the family of criminals in the apartment upstairs; they left for their business with unwashed faces and unbrushed teeth, cursing as they went.

Yegor understood that he was now part of organized crime, but he had no idea where to report to. So he decided to go back to the publishing house.

"Psst—dude," called a voice as Yegor walked into the street. A few steps later, "Dude! Hey, dude!" Then again after a few more steps, angrily, this time,

"Dude in the blood-covered Keds!"

"Bloody Keds . . . that's me," Yegor deduced, looking at his feet. "Damn, they are bloody." He wanted to take them off but noticed a little man beckoning, a gnome, perhaps, or a child? He followed the little man to an Audi parked outside the pharmacy, which was populated by people with dumb, vacant faces buying Validol. The car door opened and the little man motioned inside to the driver's seat. Yegor got in. Chief was sitting next to him.

"She's six years old. Will be running for a long while. And if in six months you don't have a new one, well, you can consider me a communist." Chief said. "Where were you going?"

"To the publishing house."

"Why? You're in the Brotherhood now."

"I guess, um, to part with Ivetta."

"Why?"

"I mean, after so many years together . . ."

"If you're that sentimental, go ahead and part with Fedor Ivanovich. He's in city morgue #1."

"All right. I won't go."

"By the way," Chief announced, after a long, drawn-out drag of his cigarette, "Fedor Ivanovich was my father. Until you killed him."

"Why did we kill him?" asked Yegor heartrendingly.

"Not 'we.' 'You.' I asked you to," he calmly answered, "because I need something to have on you in case I ever need to kill you. You see, I'm quite a fair and liberal person, well-educated, something of a philosopher. I wouldn't be able to whack someone who falters on an assignment or betrays me for a million bucks. That's heavy, even for a hippie like me. So this will come in handy for later. Who knows how you will behave? I can't just go into this kind of business without some kind of guarantee, or insurance, or follow-through to completion. So, if you screw me over, I'll kill you. But I'll do so knowing that it wasn't for money or something insignificant, but in the name of family. My family won't be on my conscience, and I won't lose my self-respect. And I won't betray my youthful ideals."

"And what if I kill you?" Yegor pressed.

"That is a possibility I can't rule out. But it's a risk I'll have to take. Can't do nothing about it. It's all in the agreement . . . Well, I must go. You rest up today. Tomorrow my people will call you and tell you where you need to go. See you later . . . Brother . . ."

"But . . . Fedor Ivanovich . . . How? How?"

"Has the first time made you sick to your stomach? Get used to it. Don't let it destroy you. And something else: he had terminal cancer, three or four months left—it was going to be a miserable end. Besides, he wasn't my true father, he was my stepfather," Chief said as he exited the car.

"I don't know how to drive," Yegor said, sticking his head out the window.

"You'll learn," Chief said, not looking back. "Wash your Keds, yeah? That man took care of me since I was three years old. And I never even called him dad . . . And you don't need to address me so formally."

XII.

It was almost time for his meeting with Crybabe. When Crybabe lived in this apartment, long ago, she was constantly freezing and complaining about the temperature.

"Where is this cold coming from, why is it always so cold? Why?"
"I feel like if it was just one degree warmer, I'd melt," Yegor would answer, uncomfortable in even the slightest heat.

"Nonsense, nonsense, it's freezing. Let's go out somewhere, then," she'd get up, and without waiting for him, leave through the door without waiting for an answer. Sometimes, he'd walk after her. Other times, he'd run. Other times, still he'd throw whatever was in his hand—most likely a TV remote—in her direction, left alone to wonder, for hours on end, how it was that two people who slept together so much could have so little in common.

Yegor turned on his computer and messaged Crybabe. In response, she sent him a whole essay:

"I hate life, because I love it too much, and it does not in return. I cling and grasp for it, but it still deserts me. I'm faithful, and then I am betrayed. My love is unconditional. Unrequited. This causes me great despair. And so I turn to God, having run away from my fellow humans. My hatred of humanity, mortality fuels my love for God. I turn to God for he is not a mortal, and I think to myself . . . what else is there to love God for? I don't love God for his creations, nor his beasts, his worms and shrubs, his spirochetes and magic wands . . . Certainly not for Joseph Vissarionovich or Adolf Aloizovich. I don't want to die for these impassable tragedies . . ."

"New acting part?" Yegor typed, after dissecting that paragraph.

"That's right," confirmed Crybabe.

"Seems like a man's part to me."

"It is man's part, but they gave it to me. It's a very avant-garde director. So I'll play a man."

"I can advise you, if you'd like."

"Thanks, but there are no love scenes. And outside of sex this man is a very simple character. Not too bright. Quite flat, actually."

"?!"

"Yep."

"Dostoyevsky? Kafka? Wittgenstein?"

"Don't bother. Two-thirds of those are not men. Maybe even three-thirds."
Their life together was so unpleasant yet, even after Crybabe left, it got worse. How awful were his days and his nights, how they plagued him—with or without her. No sort of love in any category seemed to cooperate with this woman, the way that most keys would fail to open a faulty door. She and love went together like, say, skis and flames—random and incompatible. So Yegor loved her not with traditional love as it is widely known, but with some kind of obsessive, soul-taking primordial illness, and wanted her with an unidentifiable animalistic lust. He chased after her with an awkward, deep-seated fear stemming from one of the dark corners of his short-term memory—what if she cheats, what if she changes her phone number, or laughs and disappears into the abyss of time from where she came? It seemed as though she loved him with absolute nothingness.

She wasn't the most intelligent, but she was witty and street-smart. Her beauty was mediocre, but in spite of that she emanated a supernatural magnetism. Her soul was stone cold and prone to discomfort.

She was a transitory lover and even in bed seemed always to be in a hurry. She spoke with inaccurate grammar a mile a minute. She ate quickly and was a terrible listener. She'd look not into your eyes, but through and beyond them, looking for something beyond reality, for something more interesting and aesthetically pleasing. With near-religious fervor she believed in other worlds: perfect worlds with glossy colors, where exotic animals reside and no sighs of sadness are ever heard—only endless parties on endless beaches and endless landscapes furnished like Minotti showrooms. The path to the promised land required this fabulous pilgrim to spend time trapped in Porsches with stupid males or stuffed into overly expensive clothes that constantly went in and out of style. She'd snap back out of her exquisite dreams back to her fragmented reality only in the most urgent cases, for only a minute—to eat, to sleep, to smoke, to have sex, to wait somewhere, to do something. And then back to the path, lit by eternal flames, where no one ages, everything smells heavenly, fatigue doesn't exist, depression and poverty don't exist. Where miracle cream truly gets rid of all wrinkles, cellulite treatments work immediately, and deodorant works the way it does in commercials: one application, and gorgeous men fall over themselves from miles away trying to get to you.

Crybabe, though particularly strange, was like all women in one respect—she wanted to be an actress. She had the desire to leave her image wherever she could: in films, in commercials, in photographs, in Internet articles, in fan art... One day she declared that she wished to exist purely for art, for scenes and drama, by the Staniskavsky method, for casting and filming and premiering. She declared this and, after a long pause, left. She left Yegor; she left a kerosene salesman, and some other guy who once drove her to a meeting with Yegor in a lavender Porsche; a banker named Svinzov and his bother the gangster Svinzov, she left them too. She left with the cast and crew of *The Continent*. To be exact, she left with the director of *The Continent*, Yakin. She finagled an episodic role from Yakin, but she turned out to be a somewhat wasteful actress. Yakin returned to Moscow without a movie (the sponsors were gunned down by the creditors) and without Crybabe (she left him for an actor named Shestov). However, Crybabe soon left the hunky Shestov and found herself in a mess of unreliable industry types: actors, screenwriters, directors, producers. Even film critics and assistant directors and camera operators—they filmed her often, mostly for themselves, and she rarely made it to the big screen. Once in a while she'd get bit parts in stupid movies that were often unfinished or undistributed, so even calling them "uncommercial" would have been a stretch. It was a bunch of crap that people would never watch.

Of course, Yegor knew about it all, even if it took him a while to figure out. For almost a full year he had heard nothing from or about Crybabe. Yegor pined for Crybabe and missed her terribly, yet he couldn't figure out why. She would never love him; marriage to her would be more a living nightmare than a lovely dream; she was an ungrateful, unfaithful wretch.

Besides, Sara was better in bed. After Yegor broke up with Crybabe, Chief introduced him to Sara, an American model who had fled Minnesota for Moscow. He'd included instructions: "Recommended for lonely men. She's a step up from a blow-up doll. Easy to operate. Won't ask for food or drink, won't bother

you with incessant conversation. Easier maintenance than a Ford. Enjoy!" Sara barely spoke Russian, but she wanted to be a singer, and he had to listen to her shrill, ineffective voice in the bedroom. Beyond that, Sara was indeed convenient. Compact, simple-minded, easy to manage. Her memory wasn't fantastic, but it was enough to remember the Kama Sutra, a few phrases in Russian, and dozens of Top 40 hits. A light touch to her right shoulder brought her to immediate sexual arousal. She made love flawlessly, and there was not a single case where she hesitated or changed her mind.

But for some reason he wanted to see Crybabe again. He begged God to have her for a day, if only for an hour. And it would all be as it was before. At first, he would be moved to near tears, seeing her and hearing her gentle weeping. Then his blood would boil and he would automatically desire this woman and rush to her, like a bitter ocean wave cresting over a shore or a wolf rushing to howl at the moon in the empty night; he'd bring this feverish desire to her lips, or further, other places where men want to go. And then, when she disappeared again, he'd get savagely angry, reminded once more of her lying ways, sinking back into a cold and dark loneliness.

One day he found an email from her in his inbox: an insincere hello and a desperate request for money, any kind, any amount. Attached was the name of a bank account with a suspiciously long and complicated title. Thus, their reunion began virtually. They chatted once a week, precisely at midnight on Thursdays, like spies. There was nothing interesting or steamy going on in those conversations. Analyzing her various phrases and hints, as well as many obvious lies and exaggerations, Yegor tried to picture the narrative of Crybabe's bohemian adventures. Apparently, any financial troubles hadn't steered her off the path to her goals. She still dreamed of being in the pictures, on magazine covers, posters . . . She sent him several headshots and screen tests. He didn't really like them. All in all, he found Crybabe to be kind of boring. Yet he still connected with her, every Thursday at midnight, even putting away more important tasks in order to not miss her. It was as if he'd been performing some secret embarrassing duty or fulfilling a long-outstanding debt, his destiny in the hands of this absurd woman.

"I want to invite you," Crybabe wrote a few more sentences, "to the screening of a new movie I'm starring in. I'm almost the lead. They just finished editing. Not everything is complete yet, graphics are done, sound editing is still in process, a lot is still in process. But it's basically done. It's an unusual movie, just letting you know, some parts are really heavy. It's not for everyone. It's not a relaxing stupid movie. Don't go in there looking to relax. But you're an intellectual, so . . . you'll see for yourself. Getting it wasn't easy for me, so I'll be happy if you came and saw it, and liked it at least a little."

"Happy for you. Where do I go see it?"

"Private screening the day after tomorrow at 21:00. Club Svoi. Ordinsky Street, 2A. To get in, say you're with Timothy Evrobeisky. Will you go?"

"Definitely. What else is new? When are we gonna meet offline? Are you coming to the screening yourself?"

"Won't be able to make it. Let's talk after the screening. For this I'll go online on Saturday, also midnight. Honestly this is my first serious acting role. It'll be worth critiquing. We'll decide on a time on Saturday."

"Okay."

"Bye."

"Bye-bye . . ."

Yegor switched to a news site. He was filled with an unwavering urge to skip the screening and to stop communicating with Crybabe altogether, and simultaneously with an absolute certainty that he would go to this Club Svoi and watch this movie, all the while daydreaming about Crybabe and this unnecessary, insignificant, inescapable meeting with her.

XIII.

Yegor's Friday began suddenly—he woke up after two hours of sleep at 4:30 in the morning, with no reason other than a feeling of joyful weightlessness that filled his chest and inflated his whole existence above his body, scattering his thoughts and making him unable to sleep. This happened to him often, and like all the other times, his mind was shimmering with a toxic brightness and feverish clarity, sticking to his brain and fogging up his concentration. These were the first symptoms of insanity, or perhaps the first stages of love, or the signs of a long drinking binge.

Two types of light, electric and sunrise, merged on his windowpane into an eerily metallic blend which (as some urban legends hold) can drive some weak minds to suicide. Yegor stayed in bed until around seven, staring at his TV, flipping through silent channels. Finally, morning had arrived, it seemed successfully. Unlike his stressful, sweltering, swamp of a Thursday morning, this one was fresh and breezy; a harbinger of what should be a clean, cool, easy day.

Having woken up too early, Yegor took extra time in his routine to get himself ready. A few exercises, some habitual procedures, and energizing beverages later, his body and mind were in working form.

Around 10:00AM, Sveta, his ex-wife, called: "What time are you picking up Nastya today?"

"Whenever is good for you."

"It's your day. Decide."

"I'll come by after noon, when she's awake."

"Then 4:00. No, then I'll drive her myself at 4:30. And then you can take her to the doctor tomorrow at 5:00. You know how it is with her and doctors."

"Lucky me. Look, tomorrow is Saturday. What doctor?"

"I made an appointment with Belenky. He'll come in especially for her."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Finally, you asked! She has a really bad sore throat—we need to find out why."

"All right."

"See you tomorrow," the ex-wife said in a bitter tone, as though during the course of the conversation her voice had grown pins and needles. They tried to make their interactions brief, since they knew that even the most harmless comment could trigger a mutual irritability that often turned explosive. Both knew without a doubt that even if they spoke for forty minutes about a neutral and agreeable topic, the pleasantries would slowly cease and their internal drama would manifest, escalating into an argument and quite possibly a serious fight.

XIV.

An hour passed and Yegor drove to the gated suburban community of his biggest and richest client, Stas Stasov, nicknamed Ktitor.* The successful Shaturian ex-con earned his a pious nickname due to his devoted religious practice. He was a lover of the gilded design and ornate icons of the Orthodox Church's divine grounds. A destroyer of souls by profession, a truly cruel mercenary by calling, a man who wouldn't show any mercy towards a child's tears or the prayers of a distressed woman, he nonetheless wept emotionally at the sight of any kind of holy incense or priestly garment. Any speech, and most of his speeches were full of curses and threats, he started with the words, "I am a believer." He had a clingy style of respect and an overwhelming sense of entitlement. All of the churches, monasteries, and cloisters in the area endured the burden of his generous nature and he gallivanted from one sacred place to the next after he finished his dirty work.

Ktitor was usually with his assassin-on-call Abakum, an effective collector of money and also a believer when it was convenient. Bills were taken to and from the sacred spaces in stacks and were thrown into a worn, half-open canvas backpack by the greedy and salvation-seeking Ktitor. Rolling up to the holy area in four or five Hummers or Porsche Cayennes, depending on the city and the mood of the day, Ktitor would get attention by grabbing a yawning granddad or a festive babushka, who appreciated an inveterately generous senior, and filling their pockets with currency of all sorts: dollars, rubles, euros, Danish krone, even Ukrainian bills. Then Ktitor and Abakum would go to all the church kiosks and buy out their candles and candelabras, plastic crosses (and metallic chains to wear them on), booklets and calendars, mass-produced icons, and other soul-cleansing items. These purchases were then forcibly given to any randomly encountered strangers in that vicinity who hadn't fled. After that they'd go inside the church, where they'd fill up every possible crevice with alms and donations, and begin bothering the clergy with theological questions like, "If Archangel Michael was in charge of God's army, then what was Archangel Gabriel in charge of? Is it true that Saint Paul was Jewish? And if it is true, how can that be? When the dead rise again upon the Resurrection, what will they look like? Do they look like they did at the time of death? Or do they look better, brighter, cleaner? Why do the clerics wear kamilavka?"**

Each answer would be compensated. The vaguer it was, the clearer and more insightful it seemed to Ktitor, who provided the clergy with an especially large sum. The choir would then come out, and, for an even larger sum, would swing specially requested holy songs. Feeling blessed after listening to the songs, sometimes two or three times in a row per request, they'd go back out to their Hummers and Cayennes to drink vodka and sweet, potent Kagor. The choir would be brought outside to sing to them, sometimes until sundown, and the blessings would increase exponentially. Anyone who wanted to use the church at that time, for prayer or a wedding or a funeral service, would be bribed handsomely to go somewhere else. Little kids would receive gilded pacifiers and toys encrusted with jewels. Newlyweds would be gifted with a Porsche, Carrera

* Translator's note: in the Middle Ages, a "ktitor" was a donor to churches and monasteries.

** Translator's note: A kamilavka is a cylindrical hat worn by Russian Orthodox clergy and monks.

Cayman, or, if the timing was right, they'd leave right then and there with one of the present Hummers or Cayennes. Funeral arrangements for the departed would be funded with upwards of fifty thousand dollars, with luxury gifts sent out to the grieving families—a finely crafted marble headstone, perhaps, or a voucher for a memorial at a Greek monastery in the Port of Volos where Ktitor had a friend from his murky past. Having heard the Akathist and Canon, having prayed to the point of intoxication (or perhaps that was the free-flowing Kagor), Ktitor filled his vehicles with pious babushkas and choir singers, and drove them to his house, where they would sit in his sauna, praying and drinking.

Ktitor's sauna took up half of his home (approximately three thousand cubic meters). It contained every necessity for every kind of bath and spa luxury: Russian, Roman, Finnish, German, Turkish, Japanese, you name it. Here, Ktitor lived and worked.

About a fourth of those that stayed were ushered to the holy task of cleaning and maintaining his home church, working along with his personal prophets, healers, instructors, and live-in maids. Ktitor dreamed of one day having his own live-in bishop, but the local governor, who considered Ktitor an embarrassment to the eparchy and barely tolerated his antics, talked him out of it and told him to go find a bishop somewhere else. So the unruly congregant went to church, which for him was a relaxing pastime that replaced going to the movies, theatre, library, nightclub, museum, and the like.

The rest of his home, which was planned and built in a wild, expensive, and impractical fashion, was filled with Ktitor's relatives, including his immediate family, even perhaps two immediate families. In this chaotic household, someone was always celebrating something, sharing something, fighting about something, getting sick, and a few members even died. Ktitor didn't meddle in his own household drama, so committed was he to his harsh line of work and clerical activities. Sometimes he tried to count his kids or greet his wives, but after getting tangled up in wives and kids, hearing their cries and fussing, he'd quickly run back to his prayer and to his sauna.

XV.

And so Yegor came to this valiant husband. Escorted by Abakum, he quickly took his usual path through the gilded dressing room, the size of a large Rococo ballroom, the way it was envisioned by outsourced designers and Chisinau finishers. He undressed in the closet, encrusted with silver and Murano glass, lined with kangaroo fur, embedded with pearls, and he wrapped himself up in a sheet sewn by Gucci himself (that's what it said on the two-fold certificate, free of charge with the Italian textiles) and sat in queue in a chair in front of the sauna doors.

"Today in the Russian baths, we have: Yegor Kirillovich!" exclaimed Abakum.

"The third man, Yegor Kirillovich, let's take shots," croaked one of the waiting men, fat and red-faced even without the sauna, a second-tier minister of unidentifiable business. He was wrapped in the same kind of textile as Yegor was. They met two years ago and regularly saw each other at social gatherings since. The other patron was in a uniform: a general's, or a prosecutor's, or an engineer's, or a diplomat's. He appeared, at first, to be shy, eager to get out of there, but he was clearly in high demand.

"That's dangerous before a sauna. We'll drink after, if you can wait that long, Andrei Stepanovich," answered Yegor in place of a greeting.

Then, with an exclamation of, "Oh, how nice! Nice!", a woman emerged from the sauna: a sweating, middle-aged woman in a bathing suit who was also an old acquaintance: the spouse of a well-known politician, constantly settling some questions of his to Ktitor.

"Irina, hello," the maybe-prosecutor said to her. "How's the sauna today?"
"In high spirits, very high spirits, don't faint in there," Irina said cheerfully from under the shower, adding to the minister and Yegor, "Hello to you, too, Andrei, and you as well, Blackbooker."

Irina marched off through the side exit to change, and the maybe-general, even though it was his turn, decided to let the minister behind him into the sauna. He came out after about four seconds, holding on to his left eye with one hand and in the other hand carrying a clump of dirty and crooked broken teeth. Subtly vocalizing, he started to get dressed with the help of Abakum. The practitioner in the uniform then categorically excused himself and disappeared, mumbling to himself about where the bathroom was. Yegor was happy that he didn't have to wait a long time (Ktitor was, thank God, quite punctual), and without hesitation stepped into the sauna.

The sauna was filled with steam and soap, murky like yesterday's evening. The steam was so thick that, throughout their whole conversation, Yegor couldn't even see Ktitor. Only a few glimpses here and there of a ruddy-handed silhouette, or a flash of a pair of tattoos (on the left side of his chest, Bunin's profile, and, on the right, Franz Kafka's full face and the quote, "I'll get revenge on those bastards for everything"), so within this dense sauna heat there would be an interplay between Bunin, Kafka, and a hanging and swinging cross. The invisible silhouette asked Yegor from behind a steaming cloud: "So, did you bring anything useful, or some crap again? You know that I am a man of faith, I like clean sacred items. Holy things are holy things, and crap is crap. Well!"

And this valiant husband was also (as if there was a deficit of colorful adjectives and attributes to describe him with) the nation's first and most zealous

collector of literary miniatures. Exquisite little stories, little poems, little plays. Yegor got this sentimental person into high-quality literature, after once accidentally reading him eight lines of a forgotten manuscript by some genius while drunk at a party. And Ktitor was gone: he couldn't tear himself away and would buy pretty words at unbelievable sums, creating a literary series in his name—"Stas Stasov Reads," in which homemade works were encased in leather, black oak, gems and rubies, paper imported from Switzerland—having purchased the literary rights and put them in a safe for the next generation; he bequeathed everything collectible to Leninists, those still alive, elected, to be critiqued by dozens of scholars he knew—that was how he gave back. He paid authors, but didn't respect poets or playwrights, thinking of them as lowly bards, useful in the right conditions but not prestigious. The wildest thing was that Ktitor turned out to have the tiniest but most genuine literary taste. Thus he was a strong buyer. Yegor became his scout and consultant, taking advantage of his level of trust, although he couldn't sell everything to such a demanding philanthropist.

"Right now there's just one story for you, Stas. But what a story it is! Charming thing . . ." Yegor took out a rolled-up paper from his Gucci sheet.

"New guy? Or some hanger-on?"

"New guy," Yegor shoved the paper into the steam, in the direction of Stas's baritone. The baritone mumbled, "Oh wow, oh ho ho, no way, no fucking way, oh no, here under the lamp, like that, yep, mmhmm, there it is." And he read aloud:

"Being born doesn't mean being born. Destiny endures us significantly longer than nine months, and many, reaching mature ages, achieving an immense biography, with families and offspring, having scaled the highest peaks, even the very peaks of human achievement, like that, many of these people have yet to been born and they do not know their name or their image or their purpose. I move on, then, to announce that, in my time, I got married, like all non-enterprising people, out of love.

(Women, to me, seem like pauses in existence, in which God hides his most vile poisons.)

My friends have always told me that we lived very happily together.
Then one day my wife told me, with a smile, that I looked like a giant bird.
Some time later, one lovely Sunday, the kind that would start off a pleasant novel, I woke up with the odd feeling that I was being inspected.

'You sleep like a griffin,' said my wife, and in her voice I could hear the distant echo of fear and disgust.

The following night I heard for the first time her inconsolable weeping.

'Forgive me, I cannot sleep here. You are a griffin, and in the bed are—feathers,' she tried to explain.

So we started sleeping in different rooms. But then she thought she saw large flapping wings in the corner of her eye or in the shadows and became afraid that I would fly into her bedroom.

We went to the doctors. I funded an abyss of uncertain diagnoses and futile prescriptions. One doctor prescribed my wife Tazepam, another valerian root extract for me, a third, scattering jokes and tobacco ash, recommended a full psychiatric evaluation for the both of us, and yet another muttered something banal about the ordinary decline of spousal relations.

I got into the habit of examining myself in the mirror and soon found several things in my figure and movements that were indeed bird-like.
My wife left after three months, leaving behind an extensive note in which she blamed 'only herself and her stupid fantasies' for the prior events. I counted two grammar and four punctuation mistakes in that note. The word 'griffin' was repeated nine times.

Then my friends came to visit me, to calm me down and talk about details. When I told them that my wife had left me due to my griffin-esque likeness, they laughed, but one of them noticed that I did actually look like a griffin.

From then on they called me 'griffin' or 'grif' in jest, while I got upset and descended into a battle with my own gestures, grimaces, walk, talk, face, the sum of which in any configuration resembled a shrieking griffin, but quickly shot down any possibility of corrective plastic surgery, disguises, or changing of locations.

All smiles seemed like smirks to me, and, as for my neighbors, even the most kind hearted ones wanted, I suspected, to degrade me with their silence about my ugly condition.

The griffin, the victorious griffin as a terminal illness, began to seep out of every pore of my body.

And then, on another wonderful Sunday morning, as sleep left me, I did not leave my bed, afraid to look at myself and those griffin-like features on my body. My long, bony limbs terrified and exhausted me.

Then, like all very susceptible folk, I chose the simplest way to get rid of the terror of looking like a griffin. I became a griffin.

It's a little strange to be a griffin, since in my lack of interest in this creature I learned almost nothing about it. I only know that I am a large black bird, I live for a long time, and I'm a carnivore that feeds on carrion."

"So, what'd you think?" asked Yegor.

"Dark. Why do you always bring me this dark shit?"

"What they write, I bring. How much for this one?"

"Same as always."

"Deal."

From the cloud of steam emerged a handful of dampened papers.

"Give these to Abakum. He'll do everything."

"Okay. I'll give him the disk. The papers are all wet."

"All right then, fuck it," Ktitor threw the papers on the ground. "Now listen to me."

XVI.

The phone rang with a holy ringtone of Eastern Orthodox church bells. The device was custom-made to work in the sauna; it was heat-resistant and waterproof, with an auto-cooling function on the keyboard and the speaker.

"Hello? Hello, hello! Well. And? What do you mean, you messed up? Oh fu—oh, fucking moron! Curse on you . . . What? You got a dog? What dog? A dog that who was walking? Hello . . . What does a dog have to do with this? He's the one who owes me, not his innocent dog. God will punish you severely. Because, moron, you didn't hit who you had to hit. Now I . . . I . . . Shut your trap! I am a person of faith. You know. Take the Vintar* and keep shooting, and, until you get who you were supposed to get, don't bother coming back. All right . . . who else is there? Let him walk." Putting the phone down, Ktitor turned to face Yegor. "Yes, yes, listen. You're giving me a spoiled product here, brother, thinking me for an idiot."

"What do you mean, Ktitor?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Did you bring the poems?"

"Yes."

"Let me hear."

"Ok, here's a not-so-dark one:

There was time.
There was place.
There gathered angels in white to speak of magnificence,
Demons in black,
Gods in celestial,
And children—in all kinds.
It was loud there.
It was strange there.
Place was stomped on and time was lost.
Angels sang,
Demons cried,
Gods laughed,
And children—knew."

"I knew it!" Ktitor exclaimed as though he was waiting for this. "I thought so! I predicted so! Meter again! Rhyme again!"

"What are you on about?" said Yegor, losing his patience.

"About how no one writes in meter and rhyme anymore. Now it's more fashionable to write in vers libre, free-written stream of consciousness poetry. I have a new provider, he's progressive. He'll come now and show you his advanced shit. I want to give you the check. We did some business and that's that. You've gotten old, you're tired of life."

"Free-written poetry isn't new or progressive at all," countered Yegor, "Walt Whitman wrote in free form. And before him, the psalms that you read day in and day out—they are also free-form, with no meter or rhyme . . ."

"Make way for me, make way," chirped a comically gesticulating naked little gentleman who had just fluttered into the sauna. Without looking, he opened the sauna fridge, took out a wine bottle and a wine glass, served himself, and turned on the sauna TV.

* Translator's note: A Vintar is an armor-piercing sniper rifle.

"Ktitor, hey Ktitor, you here? They're gonna show me on TV now. On the Culture Channel. Where's the remote? Hello, nice to meet you, too, Yegor. I'm Gennady. Oh, rats, show's already ending."

On the steamed-up screen the naked Gennady was mirrored by a chicly dressed version of himself, who with a smug gaze looked directly at Yegor before being replaced by a peppy female correspondent, who stated: "Famous film critic Gennady Ustniy has vibrantly and sharply voiced his opinion on director Albert Mamayev's new film *Ghostly Things*."

"Too bad, we missed it. Well, that's okay, they'll do a rerun in the evening," Gennady said as he sipped on wine.

"Gen, why don't you read what you brought," fussed the steaming cloud that hid Ktitor, "And you, listen what today's youth is writing and marvel at our young contemporary geniuses. Gennady is my new provider. Work, Gen, work."

"'What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman,'" began Gennady.

"Whitman, see, and you were saying," quipped Ktitor to Yegor.

"'In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images. I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!'"

"Say no more," interrupted Yegor, "Who's work is that?"

"Super!" declared Ktitor through the steam.

"Super indeed, but whose?"

"I can't say," shyly and playfully Gennady shifted his eyes. "An up-and-coming young author."

"The author is dead. He died at an advanced age. His name was Allen Ginsberg. This is a translation of his poem 'A Supermarket in California.' It was written, I believe, fifty years ago."

Yegor growled in response, "If I'm a peddler of old and shop-soiled work, then Gennady here is a thief."

"No!" Ktitor and his new provider simultaneously exclaimed.

"Go ahead and check. Call someone who's an expert on literature. Or go on the Internet." Yegor, feeling a slight victory, sat back and almost breathed a sigh of relief.

"Is this true?" asked Ktitor after a long pause.

"Have mercy," Gennady peeped, sweating.

"Supermarket, huh?" insisted Ktitor.

"Supermarket. I didn't want to. I need money. My mother is sick. I need money for her treatments. They're expensive. My poor dear mother . . ." Gennady paled from fright.

Abakum was called; he came in and received a brief order: "Take him to the buchenvalka." That was what they called the old abandoned sauna by Ktitor's garden, overgrown with wild cucumbers. There, the guilty sweated out their sins and souls, whipped by brooms until they lost consciousness. Abakum took Gennady, who yelped an endless pitiful "aaaaaahhhh," to his punishment.

Yegor and Ktitor were silent.

"Sorry. Abakum, once he is free, will call you. And pay you. We'll keep doing business. Nothing happened here. Forget it. Go." Ktitor extended a truce.

Yegor, walking out to his car, saw a group of Tajiks shuffling brushwood and logs to the old sauna.

XVII.

Yegor spent the latest hours of his Friday night in a run-down apartment in Truba, Moscow. It was filled to the brim with desks, tents, devices, and fitness machines, saved from the greed and madness of the city in the guise of a groundskeeper's house. Instead of a groundskeeper, there lived two philosophers, three poetesses, a revolutionary, and some other folk. The owners were never home, and they let any poor, ragged, unhappy soul stay over for shelter and tea. In the interest of democracy, each person could only stay for two days at a time and had to bring something to share for tea—sugar, cake, biscuits, books, DVDs, cigarettes, wine, cocaine, toothbrushes, warm socks.

The groundskeeper's apartment wasn't even an apartment but a ten-by-ten-meter expanse with a kitchen stove, a cold-water sink, a few of old cabinets, even more old chairs of all sizes, unwashed dishes, empty bottles, overflowing ashtrays, and dusty TVs and laptops.

In this overgrowth lived rebellious graphomaniacs, nasty and small and multiplying like insects. Sometimes from this swamp it was possible to pull a larger animal, like a famous author or rare poet, who compared to the graphomaniac insects was a large fish with glimmering scales and sharp teeth, wriggling on the surface until they got away and descended back into their deep, mysterious waters. Here, Yegor was often able to find true gems, luring the geniuses to sell to him for mere pennies the poems, plays, novellas, philosophical treatises, economic texts, string theory notes, symphonic scores, and heroic epics that he would mark up for such a price that no one would suspect they came from such a swamp.

That evening, the apartment wasn't too crowded. At its center, in an antiquated bathtub full of hot bubbly foam, relaxed the ancient bohemian goddess of the 1970s, a fashion designer by occupation and quantum mechanic by trade, Musa Merz, who had just returned from Shamkal. A huge joint, the size of a clarinet, stuck out from her shampooed head. From this joint emanated smoke so intoxicating that all who came into its sphere of influence were immediately engulfed. Together, the steaming bath and the smoking joint gave off such a heat that the walls seemed to be melting, and due to its potency Yegor planned to not stay for longer than an hour.

At Musa's feet, having laid out her long, flowing sundress, sat Noam Krisavin, the bloodthirsty-faced, large-chested intellectual son of a famous mathematician and ultraliberal demonstrator. He was assembling with difficulty something from the perhaps illegally obtained parts he had laid out on the dress, some kind of modern and trendy bomb. He needed the bomb for tomorrow at the Dorgomilovsk Bazar—a gathering of Vietnamese and Azerbaijan vendors hosted by Ingush specialists of teaching, shopkeeping, and other trades. The amount of non-Slavic people was set to be a record high. The finished bomb should be able to blast at least a hundred non-Slavs. Ultimately, it would blast forty-seven, a disappointment by Noam's standards, but that would happen tomorrow, and today he was satisfied with his creation, butterflies in his stomach at the thought of it all. Noam passed the time quietly humming something by Lully or Handel, or sometimes an indigenous national folk song:

> *"The alluring taste of old light on windy days cannot be erased by gilded holy junk!*

On the broken sky—eagles and comets!
Rejoice, Russian steppes!
The wind will give birth to a Khan!
He will look to the north, dedicated and frightening, and will draw us from under the snow!
He will feed us fresh spirits and gruel, and shield us from enemies with dignity!
And, fighting off the coldest winter, will rule as a Khan: he will tie us all into a multicolored daisy chain and tie us to the pale earth of the hot summer!"

Both sides of the bathtub were covered in parts of old chairs and crates of bananas. On the right sat Rafshan Khudaiberdyev, on the left Ivan Grechehin, religious swingers who had just switched faiths (the Muslim Rafshan now holy-crossed himself, while formerly Christian Ivan had found Allah). They shared their new perspectives and faith-shopping trips with Musa. When it came to the more intimate and spicy details of their sexual encounters with Musa, both lowered their voices and Rafshan spoke into her right ear, Ivan into her left. "Oh, my! Oh, my, I can't even!" Musa laughed from their whispers; Rafshan and Ivan were always rewarded with a fat puff of the good shit.

Behind the cabinet, between the radiator and the piles of garbage bags were honeymooners Foma and Yulia, young drug-addled titans of Russian rap, whose intake at an event surprised even Zhameikin, the living legend of Russian rock. He, a week after, succumbed to Parkinson's and Alzheimer's and went off peacefully and eternally to strawberry fields forever. The honeymooners were snorting something, with a whistle and a grim groan after each sniff of the unknown powder.

"Yulia, it's totally coke."

"Idiot, can't you tell—heroin."

"Feels like coke."

"Foma, you're wrong. Maybe for you it feels like coke, but for me it feels exactly like heroin."

"Whatever, Yulia, who cares? Go change the vinyl or we'll start arguing again. And then come sniff."

"Okay—cheers."

"To many more; hope this won't be our last."

XVIII.

Merz noticed someone coming in and happily announced, “Yegor Kirillovich is here! You bring anything for tea, Blackbooker?”

“Hello, Musa. Hello, everyone,” said Yegor, and before going further into the smoke-filled apartment, blessed by Musa’s marijuana, he took off his jacket and hung it on a monstrous nail sticking out of the door, from which also hung an old, abandoned biathlon rifle and ski poles. Taking a brick of marijuana out of his pocket, the guest ceremoniously presented it to Musa.

“Made in Tiva,” he said, “handmade!”

“Merci, darling!” Musa gestured Ivan to take the gift. “You just listen, Yegor, to what these neophytes are talking about… Speak, Ivan, give him a laugh”

“Well, for three years I was a churchgoer, then an unsuccessful Daoist, whatever. After Christianity I converted to Islam. And it was like I’d been bathed in pure light and clear wind. How, just how, could I have been a Russian Christian? Allah akbar!” said Ivan, whose young face, neck, even ears and hands were glowing with sweat and covered in zits and pimples of all shapes, colors, and sizes. “Allah is clean, bodiless, intangible, and in your churches y’all feed on pieces of death, fragments of bodies, holy bones, kiss the fingers of this saint, bow to the soles of that saint . . . why not kiss their holy asses, then? And where do their genitals go . . . How disgusting, how filthy!”

“Don’t touch the Russian faith!” growled Rafshan at Ivan, holding his holy cross with both hands. “We eagerly await the Resurrection, and you want world domination and nothing else. Relics save, and my very own mother’s sickness was alleviated by the blood and body of Christ and the jaws of the divine Mother.”

“Jaws, wine, bread, icons, candles, altars—your religion is like a vault—so many material things, things are more important than your God! Allah reaches the heart not through things, but directly to the soul, through the Quran!”

“The Quran is a book, so it’s a thing.”

“It’s not a book!” shouted Ivan, “the Quran is the light of truth! And you’ve shielded yourself from the light with your altars and gonfalons and iconostas. You’ve abandoned the USSR because it got in the way of your boozing, and you’re waiting to get rid of the Russian Federation because it’s hard to endure, you don’t want to take responsibility for anything, you just want to sell stolen wares and go drinking. This misery is all happening to you because, instead of faith, you have material things and relics!”

“Shut up, asshole,” growled Rafshan, gritting his teeth, who knew few Russian words beyond basics and profanities.

“Drama, oh drama,” piped up Krisavin. “The city is filled with fights, filth, unkempt streets, whipped wives, crooked husbands, shady businesses—and these guys are thinking of heaven and spirituality. The motherland is crying, it’s imprisoned, it’s unfair . . . To your weapons, brothers! To your TNT and flash mobs and motherfucking Moscow!”

“Relax, dear Krisavin, fix your explosive primus,” interrupted Musa, turning to Yegor, “Did you see that? Shah Ivan versus Christian patriot Khudaiberdyev. Come sit, Yegor, and partake in the debate. You’re a master of airing your grievances, now whip up something smart, school these senseless youths.”

“Easily,” said Yegor, who indeed liked to stir up a discourse. He was about to grab a chair from one of the clumps when, from under the mess near Rafshan, a happy-faced baby rolled out, holding a ball in its small, fat hands.

"Oh! We found Petrov! Petrova's son. Remember Petrova, Yegor?" said Musa, eyes bulging, "You and her were gonna fuck, right there in the closet, cause there was no where else to go. Like eight years ago."

"The closet? I don't remember," Yegor said.

"She was so sweet and fair, yeah? And now she's hooked on coke so bad that she forgets her kid everywhere. She called today, screaming, 'Where's Petrov? Where's Petrov?' She even begged to the cops, 'Find my kid, you bastards, help this crazy mother!' And what do you know? Here he is!" Musa took the child from Rafshan with her thin fingers, coddled him for a second, and passed him to Yegor. "Out of all of us, you're the only one who's ever been a parent. Why don't you feed him? There's a bottle of kefir on that table. It's expired by maybe one or two days. I don't think any more. And you, bomb-boy," Musa addressed Krisavin, "Immediately call Petrova and tell her we found her son. Tell her to pick him up, if she hasn't kicked the bucket yet."

Yegor took Petrov and put the bottle of kefir in his mouth. Petrov smelled like shit, but looked like an absolute angel.

Egor spoke: "Things and relics, freedom and justice . . . brother Ivan claims that material things are so solid that light cannot pass through them. He juxtaposes things with light, and relics with souls. Says that Christianity is too material, too corporeal, thus too dense for truth and absolution. Islam, which avoids possessions altogether or the creation of holy vitrines, tries to go beyond the material and straight to the spiritual. Brother Noam says that we don't need to go to the highest realm, that the work here is cut out for us. This work is dark and godless—it is for freedom and fairness, to be sorted out among ourselves. I aim to prove that taking care of material things counts for something, and that the desire to transcend the material body is God's work, which brings us closer to truth, light, and justice."

"Light it up, Yegor, get lit! Go off!" snorted Yulia and Foma from somewhere behind the garbage. "Go on, speak!"

The rest annoyingly joined in instigating Yegor, who continued, "Look at Petrov here. Right now he's got around ten kilograms in this whole universe. Can't do much. Sooner or later he'll reach a hundred kilograms. Which is tiny, universally speaking. But this tininess won't be left alone. It won't be left to lay on the couch and do nothing. It'll be scooped up, even though it's not bothering anyone, and battered for evil deeds. While we are here blabbering, how many children are dying of unspeakable diseases, or molested by pedophiles, or killed by war? At least Petrova left Petrov here with us, and not in some godforsaken hellhole that's considerably worse. Petrov would've perished miserably. And for what? When a newborn bastard suffers from illness, an executioner repents—about what, do you think?—to put him out of his misery. And this little guy? How could God have turned a blind eye on him? It's unfair and there's no way to justify this. What about Majdanek? What about Beslan? What about the holy memorial for children? For what and for why?

"Beslan or not, it's awful. Petrov will die, and all of our children will die. They'll grow old and croak. This is unbearable. This . . . this is the true prison, this is existential injustice—nothing as simple as the division between those in poverty who eat gruel and the businessmen at their feasts.

"Why did Christ lead so many people? He said there is nothing more important than life. Life has to be eternal, he promised eternity. He announced freedom from death. But there is no higher freedom yet, it's all a political rat race —an

empty, evil struggle, a show of desperation. A pathetic buzz which promises to stave off death, or fear of death. Even in the revolution, whole nations are frightened to death, led to death by fear and terror, and how they want a new, different—second!—life. The enlightenment of life, the endurance of death, the escape beyond human limits to freedom. A resurrection of the body into a new body, just like Christ promised. This is where the interest lies. To relics, to things, to everything that doesn't spoil or rot. That's why Christ led the people: because he figured out the deepest secret and fear of humanity—greed, material greed for our own flesh and bones and meat and hair, the stubbornness that refuses to give even a few grams of our innards, the fusion of body and soul. Not only the soul yells for mercy, but so do the liver and kidneys and arteries and glands."

"Blessed be thy glands! Indeed they are," crowed the honeymooners from beyond the garbage.

"Amen!" Rafshan clapped his working-class hands.

"The release of life from death and evil; the sanctification of life by tenderness and kindness has altered the place of Christianity even in politics—democracy, and science, and technological innovation," Yegor went on, "What does democracy say? It says, 'You you you, you all matter, your life matters, repression and offence is our last resort, hidden but always at the ready.' What does science say? 'Here is an airplane, come fly with us; here is a fancy medicine, go get healthy; here is a rich and vibrant city to live in, free from boredom and discomfort. Here is fertilizer, automotives, and genetic engineering; may you never be hungry. Technology frees us from cold, hunger, disease, and entropy. It will free us from even death. We will be composed of eternal or easily replaceable parts and elements.'"

"Nano!" Krisavin exclaimed.

"What?" Yegor asked.

"Nanomaterials! We'll all be androids. Dumb and everlasting."

"Everlasting, yes. And those who were here before us will rise. Resurrect. And humanity will come to this point via technology and invention. Prayer will stop, churchgoing will stop, but faith will not stop. And there will be much pity and mercy for life. There will be an invention for eternal life, just like now there are inventions for longer and more comfortable life."

"All right, what may be, may be," Ivan said in mock-prayer.

"Strictly speaking, God doesn't exist yet," continued Yegor, "He, It, is forthcoming, He is that which has begun to exist already and will absolutely happen in the future. Everywhere—where life is pitied, children are defended, homeless are taken care of, war is absent, conversation takes place of fighting—there is God, here, there, every year a little bit more, and eventually it will be mainstream everywhere. God will be in the automobile, in the test tube, in the computer. It will be in humanity's most daring and merciful side.

"Technology, not theology, will open the gates to God. God wants you to live well, Ivan. God wants you to eat well, play sports, have sex, brush your teeth, fly business-class, live in a great apartment, visit the doctor—for the very reason that you and everyone else could be just a step closer to postponing death.

And after that, it's just a little bit further—cloning, biotechnology, genetic engineering—and then eternal life and love.

"Islam wills one to see God, to have divine visions. Christ foresaw God and spoke of what to do in his name. Christ sanctified the human and humanized

the divine, leveling the playing field. Christians are busy then with life, ready to experiment with it; they use it as a medium, tinker with it and fix it and break it and heal it. They test its strength, its flexibility. They have the time and the energy to do so, and from century to century they perfect the iron, the steamer, the bus, the government, the service industry, notary, vaccination, and painkiller.

"Christ does not hold life in disdain, nor does he take it for granted. He lives it and holds nothing higher. At the end of time, he says, there is no sterile abstraction but a concrete return to unperishable form. You, Ivan, you, and me, and Musa, Foma, Yulia, Petrov, and even Krisavin. We are the finale. We are the peak of life, and for us, there is everything!"

The apartment erupted in applause.

"Why did I ever leave Christianity? Listen, Rafshan, you can have your Allah back, I'm with Christ now!" yelped Ivan.

"Fuck you," cursed Rafshan, not out of anger but because he didn't know any other Russian words. "Yegor is taking God and Christ for granted."

"Why do you even pretend to be Russian? You don't even know the language!" protested Ivan.

"So, Yegor, you said that if, in the name of faith, you stop trying to end people's lives, then death will stop following you?" quipped Krisavin, just finishing up his bomb.

"The first step in the battle with death—if people stop killing each other, there will be so little death left that it will be easy to eradicate completely. Because the most common cause of death now isn't God's wrath, or plagues, or hunger, or poverty—it's other people. So in terms of the direct method of death, meaning killing and homicide, it is possible to renounce it even now," explained Yegor.

"And you would renounce it?" asked Noam, bopping his bomb from hand to hand like toy.

"I already have," Yegor said meekly.

"Yeah, right! And if the Ural marshals came to take your bookstores and offshore stashes, would you forfeit them?" retorted Krisavin.

"I wouldn't forfeit the stores. But I also wouldn't kill them," Yegor quietly responded.

"But they would kill you!" countered Noam. "They'd shoot you straight in the skull, and what would you do?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't forfeit the stores or kill them," repeated Yegor.

"No peace, no war . . . Whatever, fuck it. Your stores and stashes are far away. Here, now, if I went over there and spat on your fucking face, would you shoot me?"

"No, I wouldn't shoot you," mumbled Yegor uncertainly.

"You? Wouldn't shoot? Just last week you struck Shnobel because he thought Tolstoy was better than Gogol! Everyone, look! I'm gonna spit!" Krisavin shouted, running towards Yegor.

They faced each other for about four minutes. Everyone waited for the spit and, of course, the shot. Krisavin stalled, uncertain that he wanted to die for nothing at the hands of this politically incorrect chum . . .

XIX.

"Hey, Noam, got any nitre? Got any fuses?" the door opened and in stepped a young, slim, dark-eyed Muslim girl in a dark green sweater and pants cinched by a gaudy, gold-encrusted Arabian Sheik belt.

"Zaleha, hello. I've got both," Noam breathed, relieved that there was a distraction from his possible death, "What do you need them for?"

"On Monday I'm blowing up a Russian theatre in Riga."

"What for?"

"Cause it's Russian!" smiled Zaleha innocently, as angelic as Petrov. She pointed at Noam's bomb, "Who's that hot stuff for?"

"For your people. Tomorrow I'm gonna blow up some Muslims."

"There's gotta be a reason you're blasting them—even if they are my kind, it should be for a good reason. You're blasting mine and I'm blasting yours!" Zaleha erupted into hysterical laughter.

"Hey you, harem bitch, what business do you have with this Black Hundreds Jew?" Musa Merz suddenly sniped.

"All right, get it together, put the dogs on the leash, calm down, ladies, don't fight," Noam answered for Zaleha, trying to prevent any fighting, but failing. Zahela took a gun seemingly out of thin air and pointed it at the bathing Musa. Musa, in turn, pointed at the terrorist an aquatic hunting weapon that she kept in the tub in case a situation like this arose.

Yegor, holding Petrov in one arm, drew with his other arm a Makarov pistol and pointed it at both dames.

"Listen to Yegor, he's a real gangster!" yelled Foma from under the garbage. "Who will spit in his face now? Weapons down, ladies. Zaleha, if you don't put away your gun, I won't give you your stuff. Peace, friendship, and good fucking luck! Tolerance and multicultural love!"

Zahela swiftly put away her Colt, as if it never existed. The aquatic hunting weapon sank in the tub. In total silence, except for Petrov's infantile gurgling,

Krisavin shoved some items into an Armani tote bag and handed it to Zaleha.

"Here. Instead of nitre I have some other pure explosives in there for you, and extra fuses as a bonus . . . Say hi to Ahmad and Musya . . . Good luck in Riga." He showed his hot-tempered guest to the door.

"I never want to see her in here again. Understood?" Musa barked at Noam.

"Then go ahead and snitch on us, tell your KGB friends, you hag!" snarled Noam at Musa. "You spent your whole youth high on vint* with a bunch of bikers, like a fucking cockroach. Flower power, peace power, brothers and sisters, make love not war, and what? Your kindness or whatever you wanna call it led only to laziness and obesity, everyone's turned into a pig, it's pigs versus freaks. You don't believe in shit. But those like Zaleha, they believe. In fact, her husband and son were murdered by the government in their own car while they went out shopping for toys. The husband, all right, let's presume he's probably done his fair share of sinning. But the son! Little Hasan? He was almost Petrov's age! Why him?"

"Is this what she told you? Well, you've softened up, and tomorrow when you blow up that bazaar, are you gonna hang up a sign saying 'children under sixteen do not enter, bomb about to explode?' Didn't think so," Ivan replied, coming to Musa's defense.

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* Translator's note: Vint was a popular homemade drug in Soviet Russia; close contemporary approximations include meth or bath salts.

"If I stole a billion dollars but had no love, I would have nothing," Rafshan vocalized like a muezzin calling to prayer. "If I was a revolutionary and slayed a nation of people and won a country, I would still have nothing if I had no love. Zero love, zero glory. Then everything would have been in vain. And if I were to lie, to the angels and to my own people, and say that I had no faith and could do nothing but evil, then there would be no point to my existence."

"Good boy, Rafshan, good boy," praised Musa.

"Shall we continue?" asked Krisavin, "We do everything half-assed now, but eventually we'll get it right."

"'And now, and then, and for eternity—that we do the best that we can do.' I think that is a badly paraphrased quote from the Corinthians," gloomily recited Yegor.

"You've always had a tough sense of humor, and today it's tougher than usual," commented Musa, "All right, that's enough. Krisavin, my robe!"
Krisavin came out from under a far corner with Musa's favorite robe, handsewn by her grandfather Franz Friedrihovich Merz, who emigrated from Prussia to create a Christian workers' utopia and killed himself upon finding his own untreatable symptoms of Russianization.

Musa came out from the historic bathtub and got into her historic robe. She walked over to an old cabinet and took out a clump of papers and disks.

"Here, take it," she extended the wares to Yegor, "It's poems, plays, and short stories by Konfrandel, Mitskaya, Korneeva, Glushina, Glukhina, Grushkova, Molotko, and all kinds, I can't remember them all. What you like, you can pay. Price will be the same. What you don't like—toss it."

Hiding his Makarov pistol in his pants, Yegor took the papers in his newly free hand, put them under his shirt, and walked towards the exit to grab his jacket.

"Hey, friend, leave Petrov here, okay? Cause Petrova is gonna come here soon to pick him up, and what will we tell her?" Krisavin ran over to Yegor. Indeed, Yegor had completely forgotten that he was carrying an infant on one shoulder. He gently gave him over to Krisavin and left the merry group.

In the lobby, which smelled like Mumbai slums, thick with coriander or maybe cinnamon or maybe cockroaches, Yegor folded his papers into a tidy stack, wondering which ones were going to turn out to be priceless gems for which even generous characters like Sergeyevich and Ktitor would pay up. He thought for a second to return for a box or a paper bag, but decided to walk on to the alley to his car.

There in front of the lobby, by Yegor's quiet grey Mercedes 600, was a similar model (a white 500) with its doors open. Near it stood Zaleha and two big thugs with colorless eyes and hair and ruddy, freckled complexions. One had confiscated her Colt and fancy belt. The other was trying to lure her into the car. She locked eyes with Yegor, who didn't react, didn't say anything, but could hear her silent scream with some gentle, tender sense awakened in him by the baby Petrov. The Armani tote back assembled by Krisavin was sprawled on the hood of the car.

"What's going on over here?" Yegor put his nose where it didn't belong.

"It's a counterfeit Jean-Paul Gaultier, this belt. Probably expensive, regardless," commented one thug not to Yegor but to Zaleha.

The other thug turned to Yegor and flashed an ID, an official badge with a seal of two eagles, and a leaflet: "Ministry of Farmers and Forests and Animal

Husbandry, Special Division No. 602194. Citizens of the Russian Federation are expected and commanded to support these officers with tasks including control of suspicious activity, capturing stray animals, and other socially dangerous organisms."

"Who are you?" asked the thug with the leaflet, which he replaced with a gun.

Grimacing and serious, Yegor flashed his press ID.

"It's fake," the thug determined. "Leave before I put you in for counterfeit. And for refusing to support a government officer. Leave and don't look back."

Yegor sat in his car. He didn't look back. While he searched for his keys, he heard Zaleha cry, "Allah Ak—!" and the two almost silent shots that interrupted her; the thugs saying, "You get her hair, I got her feet . . ." "Kind of a babe . . ." "Damn, so much blood, when the fuck are you gonna learn to shoot straight, all right, on three: one, two, three . . ."; the sound of a trunk shutting, then the doors; the car leaving the premises. Yegor drove off, too, and didn't look back.

XX.

The morning of that Saturday turned out to be long, drawn-out, and tough, like a watchdog's graveyard shift, not at all ideal for a pleasant awakening. By the afternoon Yegor was still in bed unable to get up, unable to fall asleep, turning the TV on and off, gulping down water. Finally, he fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion and woke with a headache. Getting from the bedroom to the bathroom to the kitchen, he felt faint and senseless. He ate breakfast at lunchtime: a lazily cooked omelet reminiscent of wet cardboard, bringing him back to when he was a fifth-grade student and he and his hooligan classmates would chew on pages of Brothers Grimm collections, spit them out, and throw them to the ceiling of their classroom. One of his hooligan classmates had since become the mayor of some mid-sized city near Moscow, and another had infiltrated the academia of some prestigious research institute. His memory went back and forth between his happy but rigid schoolboy childhood, and his happy-ish but malleable contemporary adult life.

Yegor felt sick to his stomach, and then sick to his soul, for two reasons.

First, he really did not want to see his daughter. Second, he really did not want to be the kind of asshole who didn't want to see his own daughter.

He put on a stupid Mickey Mouse T-shirt that he had bought in Disney World (either Paris or Florida). He wore this same shirt every time he saw Nastya, hoping that the smiling, silly-eyed caricature would do for him what he couldn't: greet his daughter with gentle and sincere love.

As he left, he glanced spitefully in the mirror and cursed the reflection. Then he drove over to the District Mall, where Sveta handed over Nastya silently, like a captive spy exchanged between federal agents in old movies.

Yegor fastened Nastya to the back seat, got in the front, and asked, "Where to, Nastya-chka?"

Nastya was one of those children who, despite having rather decent looking parents, had inherited the most unfortunate parts of them, parts that might have been fine by themselves but were awkward together, unsightly almost to the point of caricature. Yegor's large, crooked nose was plastered onto Sveta's thin face. The mother's elflike ears were hard to hide under the father's wiry hair. Narrow childlike eyes, passed down by the mother, were awkwardly juxtaposed with the father's large, unchildlike lips. Yegor had terrible posture, as did his offspring. Sveta had become, ahem, full-figured as she aged, and her daughter, in all her six years, was rotund like a little toad, plump head to toe from stuffing herself to the point of dyspnea. Yegor was lazy—Nastya was immobile, like a polyp on rohypnol. Sveta had a biting, vicious character—Nastya, in turn, was growing up just as wicked. She was an unfortunate, unpretty, unloved, unpleasant child whose temperament and feeding habits were arduous to manage and who would likely grow up to be just as dim, rude, and full of cholesterol as an adult.

Thus Yegor went on to fulfill his parenting duties as he understood them.

"To the pharmacy," she said.

"What for?"

"I want to buy hematogen* and toothpaste."

Yegor, who didn't know how to play or speak with children, always bought Nastya whatever she asked for and saved himself from the nuances that came with raising her under the barking orders of her mother.

* Translator's note: Hematogen is a high-protein, high-sugar nutritional bar made with chemicals from cow's blood and given to anemic children in Russia. It is a saccharine and disgusting medicine.

They went to the pharmacy and bought an assortment of hematogen bars with seven tubes of toothpaste.

"Where to now?" Yegor inquired. He couldn't imagine where she would want to go. "To the movies? Zoo? Museum? Theatre? Circus?"

"No, no, no, no, no . . ." his daughter shot down each idea.

"What about the mall? The Megacenter, for toys?"

"Okay, let's go. They have ice cream at the Megacenter."

"Hey, why are you eating the toothpaste?" exclaimed Yegor.

"All kids eat toothpaste. That's what mom told me. You ate it, too."

"I guess maybe I did eat it," Yegor recalled, "Not that much, though, it's bad if you eat too much."

Nastya immediately and dramatically started sobbing, her cries ringing out like an old car alarm on a neighbor's Hyundai, which could wake Yegor in the dead of night even from his deepest drunken sleep. Creating this uproar of sadistic fortissimo through bitter tears, the girl observed her father the way a lab scientist observes a white mouse that has just been given a chemical mixture that might kill it or cure it.

"All right, all right. Fine, eat the toothpaste." Yegor muttered meekly.

The sobbing stopped.

"Tell me a story." Nastya demanded.

"First, you have to recite a poem for me," Yegor, his tone pedagogic, demanded in return. "I know you're learning poetry in school."

"These rivers turn into lakes,
They flow from them.
It's clear, but it's a secret
Where these lakes are hidden
What do the great rivers know?
These lakes do not exist
That's all, no great secret
I'll tell you as a friend
It is all unknown to me
It's clear, but it's a secret
Why do these rivers run in a circle?
Your worries are all in vain."

Nastya, after reciting the poem, demanded again: "Tell me a story, tell me something new."

XXI.

Yegor thought, deliberated, ruminated, and pondered. Seeing that Nastya was losing her patience and the Hyundai alarm's sobs would start again in a matter of seconds, he quickly decided he would recite one of his old stories:

"'The city is gigantic, the same way the world is gigantic, the same way the city is gigantic'—this eternally esoteric comparison effectively transmits a Copernican view on things which is intrinsic to me and my fellow citizens and which places at its center neither the sun, nor the gods, nor even humanity, but whichever current gossip comes on first on the city news.

Our ancestors, however, a proud nation of moneylenders and commanders, had turned the city into an imperial capital impossible to overlook. They settled it with an immense number of residents and decorated its streets with priceless luxuries. I will not describe the city in detail, though, since most everyone has been here at least once, even in passing.

To begin the story, I will remind you that any type of travel within the city is extremely difficult. Day and night, people and vehicles crowd each other in a kind of indescribable flow.

The traffic jams on the roads were at one time a municipal disaster, but now, like any kind of disaster that is out of our control, it's become just an aspect of daily life. In the traffic jams, people are born and people die. They play cards. They participate in elections. They compose poetry and music. They philosophize. They come up with ideas. From those traffic jams came ideas for functioning vendors, banks, and labor unions.

One can attempt to travel the sidewalk by foot, but one never knows where the crowd will take them. The subway also has its deterrents—accidents, protests, and thugs made this type of transportation an attraction for particularly brave adventurers.

Thus, citizens rarely went far from home, and if they did, there was little faith that they'd return safely.

I, for example, have never been to the city's center (I hear it's fantastic) and nothing could force me to leave the sweet comfort of the suburbs, whose mysteries and strange characters have recently become well-known thanks to the international success of a few of our famous filmmakers.

Because of this, after I got married, I was happy to respond to Pavel Petrovich's offer. He was, I believe, Russian, and he taught biology at one of those experimental schools where they equip unfortunate teenagers with nonsense, maintaining (correctly, mind you) that the city will reward a hard worker, not a smartass.

Pavel Petrovich rented out one room of a two-room attic to me and my wife in his little dwelling. The second room was rented out to a man who (in Pavel's words) was an extremely intelligent and quiet roommate; a pleasure to live with. Pavel himself lived in his school's conservatory with a large collection of exotic plants. He gave us a reduced price on rent, but in exchange asked us to take care of 'whatever didn't fit into the conservatory.'

Having a place right by work (I work at a statistical bureau, which for fifty years has been trying to organize a population census of the city, to no avail), in a nice neighborhood, with a nice view and a quiet neighbor, sounded lovely. So we moved. Peace and quiet, might I add, was imperative to my wife. It was a very sensitive issue. The thing is, half a year before we got married, she went a bit insane.

She began to believe that she was the wife of Chopin—a pretty common occurrence in these local areas, something that actually could have gone unnoticed, but she needed a dead ringer for the composer. So, at some little café, she saw me for the first time. She thought that I was Chopin. I didn't really pay attention to that until it was too late. A month later her doctor phoned me and explained the situation. The poor lady's parents got on their knees and tearfully told me about her problem; they begged me to marry her, reasoning that a lady who thinks she's Chopin's wife must be a wife in the first place, a married wife, or else her situation would escalate to devastating points, even to the point of suicide. I refused, of course, but they kept begging me so persistently, even involving the doctor. When they finally brought her to me, it was like an intervention. The doctor mumbled something about humaneness and self-sacrifice and noble deeds, and Chopin's wife looked at me like no other woman had ever looked at me before. Chopin was a lucky guy (if he was ever indeed married?) because his wife was a true beauty. I fell in love with her, by the doctor's orders lied about some unfinished symphony, and with delight entered a marriage.

I can't say that taking care of 'whatever didn't fit into the conservatory' turned out to be a piece of cake. The responsibilities of taking care of the plants were quite stressful for me and my wife, more so than we thought. The pathology of plants is no less frightening up close than that of humans. Alongside the cute and funny-looking species in Pavel Petrovich's apartment were those that easily drew terror from a weak soul, like a lemon tree that grew downwards, twisting at bizarre angles, bending to burrow into the ground with its angular branches, neon leaves, and unripe lemons. Next to our bed was a colossal cactus covered in vile bumps and torn with ghoulish tumors. 'I ask you to water it once every thirty years,' sternly instructed the botanist, handing me a bottle for this very purpose with a specialized liquid and a sticker demarcating the very far off expiration date—I imagined that date, the cactus and I both old and curmudgeonly, watering each other with this watery chemical.

And then there was this hyperactive moss. It raged in the kitchen and multiplied aggressively. In one night it covered the walls, ceiling, floor, furniture, dishes, and even made its way to the bedroom. Every morning my wife would curse it and furiously scrub it off of her belongings. 'If you don't do that,' said Pavel Petrovich with a strange pride, "it would take over the whole neighborhood in one week."

But the most intriguing thing in our home was our very quiet neighbor. I didn't understand right away—only two months after we'd settled in, I realized we had never introduced ourselves to him, even though we'd been sharing a floor. My wife didn't notice these little things, as on the daily she kept herself busy with the botanical hell. She was also happily busy with her devotion to the great composer. I tried not her disappoint her, even buying a textbook on music theory and solfeggio, to keep up in a conversation about composition if it ever happened.

One evening, figuring that our neighbor would be home, I knocked on his door called out to introduce myself, and, when I didn't get an answer, delicately opened the door and sinfully peeked in. He was home, all right—sleeping in the fetal position facing the wall, with all his clothes on—crumpled pants, plaid shirt, a mess of red hair, and shoes, indicative of a drunken binge, probably drinking to forget. The small mess of leftover spirits on the floor, and the scent in the air, like the scent following a thunderstorm, weren't all that unpleasant

or uneasy. The uneasy thing was that the place, except for the neighbor and the bed, was eerily clean and empty.

All evening my wife and I tried to stay quiet so as to not awaken him. A few times after that I tried to go over there and talk to him. He was always home but always in that position, in those same clothes, sleeping. His constant sleeping began to irritate us because we had to go about our business quietly, and the act of not disturbing him felt like walking on eggshells.

At first I thought that he was awake and active only while I was at work, so I took a week off from my job ostensibly to take care of my sick wife. (Truly, though, in the springtime her illness would intensify and she would persistently extract Chopin from me; I had to be near her constantly in order to not lose her. During those days I'd avidly imitate Chopin's tragic genius: I'd carry around staff paper dotted with bullshit points and lines, and she'd wondrously contemplate the composer at work. This would calm her raging neuroses.)

Anyway, I stayed at home for a whole week and confirmed that the quiet man slept around the clock, not waking even for biological or hygienic reasons. Discovering this multiplied my concern and my heart overflowed with quiet distress.

The first explanation that I could come up with for his state was quite banal. I decided that he was suffering from catalepsy. I called my wife's doctor, who listened to me discuss this patient very intently. He reluctantly examined the neighbor and thoroughly dismissed the possibility of catalepsy—his breathing was deep and stable, like a healthy person's after a long day of hard work. Then I suggested waking up this Sleeping Beauty. The doctor pondered a bit and quietly took me into the kitchen. He declared that the man should not be woken up.

'If we wake him, who are we going to wake?' he asked, making a cup of tea.

'He could be a criminal, or a psychopath, or a false prophet, or someone who may destroy entire nations.'

I've always been one to take a doctor's advice seriously, so I thanked him for his efforts and considered what he said. The man didn't sleeptalk, didn't sleepwalk, didn't toss and turn, didn't bother anybody. He just slept. Besides, were he to be awakened, he'd probably start causing trouble for me and my wife, if not for 'entire nations.'

Once the doctor left I felt relieved. In time, though, the sleeping man began once again to bother me. The medicinal answer was starting to lose its strength, and my uncertainty returned. I didn't want to wake him, and I didn't want to not wake him. I needed an explanation or else I'd go insane like my wife.

Having overcome my intellectual faculties, which I admit turned out to be not as subtle and varied as I had thought, I dissected to the point of perfection a new theory: that the person sleeping in the next room wasn't a person at all but some kind of mutated potato from Pavel Petrovich's collection that was suffering from humanness. I phoned the botanist, anxious to get to the bottom of this fundamental mystery. Pavel Petrovich did not register my impetuosity. He revealed that he had actually never seen the man in person. He'd just hastily rented him the room by the recommendation of a mutual friend. This friend paid a handsome advance sum for the rent, so it didn't matter to Pavel Petrovich whether it was a man or a potato. The news that all the neighbor did was sleep even delighted Pavel Petrovich and, in his opinion, should have delighted me, as well. As for the mutual friend, he—of course—had recently passed. The sleeping man has covered his tracks well,' I thought to myself. My intellect felt

defeated. Resolving the mystery demanded a new tactic. I hired a private detective.

The detective inspected the sleeping man, his room, all of its empty corners, then proceeded to dig through Chopin and Chopin's wife's things for some reason. He asked a hundred questions that I felt were irrelevant, got his answers, got his pay, and promptly left.

He came back in the evening. I didn't recognize him straight away—he was a bit chubbier and had grown a beard.

'You've changed,' I said.

'I'm a different guy,' he replied. 'My colleague is very busy and assigned me to deliver the investigation report to you.'

I didn't really want to read the report, so I asked him for a summary of the findings.

'The findings are as such,' the detective muttered vaguely. 'The sleeping man could have woken up after the investigation ended.'

'No way,' I said, 'He was sleeping.'

'That's what we thought; it's unlikely that he actually woke up,' he quipped uncertainly, 'Also, his type of sleep could be caused by catalepsy. Quite possibly, he could be a recidivist hiding from the law, or a paranoid driven to extreme lethargy. Finally, we propose that he could be a subject or victim of patabotany, judging by the man who rented out his room . . .'

'That's all?' I interrupted.

'Well . . . I am almost a hundred percent certain," the detective continued while counting his money, 'that this person in the other room is a root cause and final consequence of intelligible reality. You and I, this cactus, that field, and God, and the stars in the sky, we're all just a part of his dream. He dreams us, and we exist. Disturbing his sleep would be disturbing the very fabric of our existence. We disappear as soon as he opens his eyes. Our humane duty, and yours as well, is to keep him asleep. To prevent this fatal awakening, we are ready to order guards for this man around the clock, which would incur additional expenses . . .'

I threw out the wise and lively peddler and gave up on looking for an explanation.

Of course, it had come to my attention that I could move somewhere else, away from the sleeping man, but the pressures and details of a potential move gave me anxiety.

My wife, as usual, was too preoccupied to notice him.

And so we still exist within his vicinity, speaking in hushed voices, walking on tiptoes, never making more noise than necessary. Whatever the reason for his slumber, and whoever he is, this third wheel of ours keeps on sleeping."

Yegor was so mesmerized by his own story that he almost forgot where he was going, and, realizing he was in front of the Megacenter, quickly parked. He got out of the Mercedes alone, walked in through the front door, and was swallowed up by the current of shoppers purchasing neckties, chandeliers, T-shirts, blenders, wall clocks; he bought a necktie, chandelier, T-shirt, wall clock and was about to go for the blender when he remembered why he had come here in the first place and ran back to his car in a panic.

Nastya was asleep. She had fallen asleep during the course of the story and was covered in hematogen and various colors of toothpaste. Her seat, window,

and clothes were also offensively splattered. Nastya, sleeping, was less a sweet child than a drunken idiot from a Brothers Grimm novel. Yegor got a moist towelette from his glove compartment and began to reach over to the back seat and clean up the mess on his daughter and his car; he caved, however, and crumpled up the napkin mid-reach. Weakened, suddenly, he began to wipe his own eyes, and sank into the steering wheel sobbing.

XXII.

How he sobbed. He started crying out of embarrassment, out of a lack of love for Nastya-chka, a desire to want to love her, and the awful failure of that desire. He wept in self-pity for himself, and Sveta, and their hollow past, and their unfortunate offspring, and their lost, hopeless existence. He sobbed harder knowing that his daughter would be bullied by those who are cruel and qualified to torment, and that those experiences would make her dumber and chunkier, driving her into an antisocial place where beneath her round and soft exterior she'd be safe and soundproofed from the voices of her tormentors.
It was the first time he'd cried in probably forty years; it was a long catharsis, like he'd been holding in forty years of deep and undignified sorrow. He cried enough for the next forty years, as well . . .

He sobbed bitterly with almost no tears, no tears but a river of spit and snot ran down his face like blood after a head wound—make that three head wounds.

"How can this be!" he lamented. "What kind of asshole am I! Nastya-chka, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, forgive me. God, why can't I love anyone properly? What did I do to deserve this, God? Why do you punish me like this? Have you gone savage, God? Is it only me at fault? Or do I have to answer for everyone else as well? Okay, sure, I have killed. That old man, and Tralshik, and Bonbon, and Desytitsky along with his old milf . . . And Bension Kondratovich Gerberstein, and Aleksei Yaroslavovich Sidoruk, and that other nameless bullshitter, the one who came to kill me, and Chachavu Sr., and Chachavu Jr., and before that another Chachavu, oh fuck it, fuck them all, it's pointless . . . But why Nastya-chka, God, what for? What did she ever do? Why did you make her such a slob, such a lard, such an idiot? Why did you give her idiot parents who don't love here? They don't love her, goddamn it! But they should! Who's going to love her? Who's going to take pity on poor Nastya-chka? Fucking world! Fuck it! Fuck all this fucking bullshit!"

"Stop crying. Your tears won't get you anywhere," Nastya said in a very stern and Sveta-like voice, having just woken up. She was half-sobbing herself. "Daddy, I want Mommy. And I want McDonalds. Don't cry. Do you want toothpaste? I have some mint flavor left . . . Oh, okay, I'll eat it myself."

"We're going, we're going, Nastya-chka, right away, immediately, to your mommy and to McDonalds," answered Yegor, wiping his salty face. He started the car and speeded to Mama Sveta.

Sveta, seeing Nastya, screamed at her ex-husband. "What did you do to her? She's all dirty! What IS that on her face? Did you take her to Belenky?"

"Belenky?" Yegor looked at her with a blank stare.

"You didn't go to Dr. Belenky? But I asked . . . And you just . . . I told you earlier—Nastya has a sore throat, she needs to see a doctor, this exact doctor. Dr. Belenky! Come on, you know him! I asked him to come in on a Saturday. We made a deal. He made an exception just for her. Now he'll probably not want to deal with her at all," Sveta raised her voice with each sentence. "And you took this sick child everywhere but the doctor . . ."

"Nastya, are you feeling ill?" Yegor sheepishly asked his daughter. She hiccupped.

"Yes she is ill!" screamed Sveta. "She needed to go the doctor!"

"Well, no, yeah, no . . . well . . . um . . . We, uh . . . we were at . . . we went to the pharmacy! So that's . . . We were at the pharmacy! Tell her, Nastya," Yegor

awkwardly sputtered as his Mickey Mouse shirt crumpled with his nervous motion. “We went to the pharmacy, tell mommy! Everything’s fine with Nastya . . . look, Sveta, she’s fine, she’s just got some chocolate, er, hematogen . . . from the pharmacy . . .”

“Bullshit! Fucking shit!” out of nowhere roared the little girl for no particular reason or audience.

The mother’s jaw dropped and she continued to stare at her daughter, open-mouthed, for five minutes. Then she suddenly erupted, so loud that the whole city was hit by her screams.

“Where were you? Running around with your Crybabes and Saras, screwing around, while you sent your daughter to the other room, or into the kitchen? Where did you take her, when she was in your custody? What kind of hellholes? You taught her that language, didn’t you? You will never see her again. You hear that? Ever! Get the fuck away from here!” Sveta held her daughter in a protective grip and began to walk away from Yegor. Yegor shuffled off in the opposite direction. He stopped at his car and turned around. Sveta and Nastya were slowly moving away from him without turning back.

“Don’t bother turning around to face us . . .” Sveta was oblivious to Yegor’s wince as he sat in the car and fired a bullet in one soft-spoken, evil word: “. . . bastard!”

XXIII.

Still crying at the Megacenter, Yegor looked at the clock, anxious to be on time for the movie. Having crawled away from his family obligations, he thought of Crybabe and worried. His mood, while not elevated, was a bit improved; he was definitely in a funk, but his state of mind had lifted to a higher, more positive frequency. He began to understand that he wanted her, at least to see her, at least on a screen, even in tacky hair and makeup, even playing a flat and stupid role . . . He ate/changed/showered at home and washed away all traces of toothpaste, hematogen, and perhaps his own self. He scrubbed himself clean and ate a celebratory feast: some weird and smelly exotic fruit chased with champagne. He took a long time to get dressed, leisurely matching his various shirts and ties, sniffing through his collection of fine colognes, rubbing his face with an artisanal wash (the type that promised smoothness and elasticity). He took turns admiring and doubting himself as he preened in front of the mirror, like he was getting a proper date—first, or last, nonetheless a significant one. Deep inside, he hoped she would be there. After all, it was the premiere.

2A Ordinsky Street was a low-rise but roomy office building made out of expensive Italian stone that, from lobby to interior, looked like cheap plastic. Security guards dressed like bankers stood at the door, asking guests for their IDs and invitations, though those who were with T. Evrobeisky were let in without hesitation. Inside, there was a mid-sized theater with antiquated velvet maroon seats. Cocktails and hors d'ouerves circled the buffet. Caviar, canapes, finger sandwiches, and micro chocolate soufflés mingled with the sounds of air kisses and flashes of little diamonds. Mink furs, golden silk, platinum chains, and fake tans adorned fit, fat-free, yoga-trained bodies that smelled of Caribbean vacations and Aspen ski lodges. As far as true nobility and celebrity, there was none here, but it seemed like everyone as famous and important to each other.

It became apparent that this was a particularly tight-knit circle of friends who rarely parted ways. They talked about the grades of their children, students at George V Academy, where the headmasters couldn't find the budget to get Johnny Depp to come in and entertain the children; they got a Captain Jack Sparrow impersonator instead, some goon named Eugene Mironov who the kids saw through immediately before throwing a tantrum. These guests also talked about more festive topics, such as an oyster dinner they'd devoured at the restaurant "Bottom of the Sea" for this millionaire Vetrov's birthday, a gala supporting small business, democracy, Russian-American relations, murdered journalists, battered lawyers, banned authors, incarcerated businessmen, etc etc. Fondly the guests remembered how the day before yesterday they'd all gone in a group to the opening of a nonconformist exhibit called "A Thousand Broken Glasses," organized in protest of corporate bureaucracy, the bloodthirsty stock exchange, vicious economics, high gas prices, etc etc. They recalled their monthly get-together in the Maldives and their yearly celebration in Tasmania. It seemed these people never did anything alone and gallivanted together around the city's nightlife and through every luxurious spot on the planet.

Yegor was a new face amongst this crowd. He wasn't friends with anyone here but he was greeted politely. This group of friends, a hundred or so of them, must have figured he knew one of them marginally at least, since they couldn't picture anybody there being a stranger.

Among the group were suspiciously rich inspectors, sanitary doctors who moonlighted as Vermeer collectors, one progressive minister and seven of his disciples, a national star and six of her husbands (two past, one present, and three future who all had proposed in the past year), two socialites whose names no one could pronounce and who between the two of them were worth eleven billion dollars. There were the notorious Palkind, Sepanov, Klopsev, Erdman, Petrenko, and another Petrenko, who were each worth five billion a piece. There was a sea of billionaires and an even larger sea of multimillionaires. They had dates with them—wives, mistresses, daughters—all approximately the same age, from fifteen to twenty-five. Aside from that, the guests included astrologers, directors, actors, journalists, fine artists, photographers, bodyguards, masseuses, live-in yoga instructors, and other seemingly exotic professionals. They seemed very satisfied with themselves and with each other.

XXIV.

A billionaire dressed in a Brioni suit, accompanied by two women outfitted in head-to-toe Barbara Bui and three photographers wearing designers so chic and avant-garde that the mainstream media hadn't yet picked them up, approached Yegor.

"Where do you plan on vacationing?" asked the billionaire, smiling with not only his lips and eyes but his whole self, the radiance of wealth beaming from his tan, his barely wrinkled face, his tie, his suit, his dress shoes; smiling in a way that indicated "if you don't smile with us, you are against us" so ferociously that Yegor took a step back before mustering up a little grin.

"In Sardinia, where else? Like everybody's doing. There are way too many Russians there. Only Oceania has a few spots left where the Russians don't go," Yegor answered. "Er, there are also a few of those spots in Ryazan, and in Tverskaya, and in Kaluzhsky . . ."

"Quite witty you are," quipped one of the photographers. "What are you, some kind of patriot? Just don't ask me what my nationality is."

"I'm not asking," Yegor calmly replied. "I see it."

"Did you go on IPO already?" the billionaire changed the subject, sensing tension. "I half-heartedly started work on the peat bogs; the Siberian landfills I did a little bit better. In October I plan on bringing the Rhyazhsky ravines to IPO, get a few yards there."

"What's with the ravines?" that photographer quipped again. "What're those few yards gonna do?"

"China is growing, India is growing, and they love raw materials. Just give it to 'em in any amount and they eat it up." clarified the Brioni-clad gent. "And the ravines . . . Well, they have sand and clay . . ." He paused in thought, as if scouring his logic for why these crude resources needed to cost at least two billion dollars to potential buyers, which he knew would be the bare minimum, and finished his thoughts out loud so as not to seem absentminded to his conversants. "Clay, water . . . A sunken tractor at the bottom, alloys, minerals, things like that. China is growing, and they put a lot of their money into this business, as much as they do into their cuisine."

"I get it, I get it," one of the fifteen-year-old women marveled. "We went to Zhui-Tzi on Thursday. It just opened, yeah? They eat, like, everything, like grasshoppers, lychees, weird plants and stuff; and the really modern dishes, the ones they made just for the Olympics, it was literally like sneakers marinated in sweet and sour sauce. Did we try it? Well, it was, like, good, you know? Tell them, it was good! The Chinese chefs are brilliant. So they'll definitely know what to do with your sand and stuff. Clay, too, and even dirt, they'll do something with it. Not like us, sitting on piles of natural gold but still, like, dirt poor." She blushed and shut up, fiddling with her ten-karat pendant.

The billionaire, now also silent for some reason, headed for the bar, followed by his women and photographers.

"So where do you vacation?" Before Yegor could take a breath, a beautiful woman also wearing Bui attacked. In one hand she carried a diamond-encrusted clutch; in the other, a large, pedigree-bred brown boxer also not lacking diamonds. "When are you going on IPO?"

"After I'm done vacationing, I'll go on IPO." Yegor answered.

"You should know that this is all gossip and slander," whispered the dame confidingly, for all to hear.

"What's slander?"

"My ex is writing a book. He's publishing it in Agora with that asshole Khomyakin. All the other publishers rejected it, but this bastard . . . So, I call him, like, 'What do you think you're doing, idiot, they'll put you in jail for slander and defamation, like Lurie,' but he was like, 'Just you try to write a tell-all in response, I'll get you. Bitch, you just want my money.' He said all of this to me." The dame murmured into Yegor's neck, tugging gently on her dog's ear, who was inspecting a small promotional bottle of Blue Label tucked into a waiter's back pocket.

"Don't listen to what the book says," she continued, "He writes some extraordinarily one-sided bullshit. Like in one chapter he writes that I'm a frigid bitch, but in the next, that I'm easy and I fuck everyone. Why would a frigid bitch need to fuck everyone, tell me? Makes no sense. And if I'm this frigid bitch, why would I have lived with that cheap impotent scumbag? Listen to this: he tells me, 'I'm the world's biggest importer of casino chips.' And I tell him: "You're no big importer . . . you're just a big impotent.'" The beautiful woman was now almost pressed against Yegor's nose, her breath smelling like vodka and caviar. "I also didn't give him back the Mercedes Maybach that Chuma, the hockey player, gave him to give me for our anniversary. Chuma gives these to whomever he wants, and whenever. But I lost it. The Maybach. I left it somewhere, and I got distracted. When I come back to look for it—it's gone. Not in the driveway, or the garage, or the gym, or the datcha, or the other datcha, or the home in Corsica, or the flat in London. I mean. Shit happens. This asshole, though . . . anyone else would've bought a replacement, especially for someone they love, but ughhh, Chuma, Chuma . . . It's all just vile gossip . . ."

Without hearing the rest of her ramblings, Yegor ran for the men's room, loitered there for a bit, and, seeing that it was almost time for the screening to begin, cautiously walked out.

"Where shall you be vacationing? Listen, how did you go on IPO?" Yegor hadn't been out of the men's room for a minute before a dashingly handsome silver fox with youthful charm and excellent posture started bothering him. He was Kirill Lavrov, the brilliantly talented actor whose type of thespianic skill had not been seen on screen for years. The gentleman had with him a gentle-lady, who called her sweet billionaire by several endearing pet names, so romantic and saccharine that it seemed almost cartoon-like.

"Brioni?" Yegor pointed to the man's tailored blazer.

"Indeed!" the silver fox answered brightly. "How do you like the movie?"

"Well, I haven't seen it yet."

"Nor have I. But still. You don't have any thoughts about it?" the gentleman narrowed his eyes. "In this day and age, one can't be without an opinion . . ."

"It's kinda tough to say, you know, not having seen the movie," Yegor said, confused. Then, seductively coughing into her sparkling arm, the progressive gentle-lady explained:

"The director Alber*t Mamayev, in his forty-five years, is considered the premier Russian avant-garde auteur. He picks up where the greats left off: Dziga Vertov, Eisenstein, Yuhanov, Tarkovsky. He is too severe even for the masters of 'extreme filmmaking' like Pepetkin and Zhistiakov. If they were still alive, Maquis de Sade and Antonin Artaud would have loved him. That's why critics deride Mamayev." After her recitation, the young aesthete looked momentarily blinded, as though within her tiny brain was a galaxy of beautiful but meaning-

* Translator's note: A "datcha" is a Russian summer house.

less words.

"Good girl," the billionaire praised, looking to Yegor as a witness of her smarts. "Hey, isn't she just a clever girl? Brilliant, right? Tell her she's brilliant!"

"Brilliant," Yegor repeated.

"You know, she may look like just some blonde, but once she starts going on about one thing or another, you just get lost in her words. She's just a little . . . a little Zarathustra!"

In another energetic monologue, the little Zarathustra backed up her initial argument with even more fervor: "The first film by Albert Mamayev, The Child Slaughter, made in 1997, garnered a violent response from cultural critics, unprepared viewers, and even the Mafia. The Church also hated it, even though it was shot in a kind of evangelical premise. There were forty-eight rape scenes, many other scenes about the murders of infants and young children, in very bloody and torturous methods, at that. These scenes outraged even those who liked gory horror movies or sexually repulsive art house films. And you know how the director responded? He said to the critics: 'If your ethical codes could be shattered by a low-budget film, then your ethical codes are worth less than low-budget trash. My films don't destroy morale, they challenge it—they press it, shake it, quake it—and in that way they make it stronger and more resilient. You know, they awaken and activate a different ethical and moral code, and that is how a movement gets started . . .'"

As she was speaking, Yegor noticed a strange spot on her extraordinary face. Looking closer at her full upper lip, which was talking a mile a minute and occasionally flashing professional-quality white teeth, he noticed a large, curly gray pubic hair.

"Excuse me," Yegor interrupted, "you have a . . ."

"What?" she was caught off guard.

"Uh, over here . . ." Yegor pointed to the lip.

"Here?" the little Zarathustra swiped her hand over her mouth.

"To the right, like, there . . ." Yegor explained.

"Here? Is it gone?"

"Higher."

"Is it gone now?"

"Almost, almost, not quite," Yegor was almost ready to unstick the damn thing himself.

"Shit, what is it? Darling, help me out, would you? Don't just stand there," the blonde turned to her gentleman.

He bent down to look at her face, and, with his finely manicured fingers, unstuck the pesky hair from her glossy lips in one swift, delicate move.

"That's all, my angel," he said, still holding on to his trophy.

"What is it?" demanded the blonde. The silver fox showed her.

"I've been walking around all night with that thing!" she quietly screamed. "For a long time! Since I got out of the car . . . Till now! And we . . . But you introduced me to Sheckelberg . . . What will he think of me? I noticed that his bimbo was giggling at me . . . And we talked to Kamarinsky and Irina . . . And Elena . . . oh my, what will sweet Elena think! Why didn't you tell me? Gosh, didn't you see it? Don't you pay any attention to me at all? You ass . . ."

"Nadia, I'm sorry, Nadia, come on, it'll be fine." As the silver fox chased after his inconsolable little Zarathustra, Yegor seized his chance to escape and blended in with the crowd walking into the screening room.

XXV.

After the seats filled, the room darkened and the movie began to play on the screen, starting with the production logo:

KAFKAS PICTURES PRESENTS

A film by Albert Mamayev

Ghost Things

Starring Ilya Rozovachev, Efim Prorovsky,

Then few others Yegor didn't recognize, when, finally,

and introducing Crybabe.

The title of the move seemed somewhat familiar, but perhaps Yegor was imaging that. He straightened his tie (Crybabe was very particular about the way he wore his ties), sat up straight (Crybabe hated when he slouched), and waited for Crybabe to appear, his eyes glued to the screen.

It wasn't a long wait, but a dull one. The film was shot in vivid, glossy colors that illuminated boring, gray reality into a celebratory visual pop that looked and moved like something straight out of an otherworldly hallucination. The film bloomed in a vibrant, formless, plotless rainbow, foaming and bubbling about. It took place in Switzerland, other parts in Massachusetts, each new setting subtitled for the clueless viewer. There was a Main Character Man, whose name Yegor either forgot or missed completely, who reads and writes. He then shifts from reading and writing to making luxurious Swiss, American, and, for some reason, Arctic posters, accompanied by a voice-over. Sometimes the Man stops reading and writing to eat or drink. Occasionally he talks about what he wrote or ate to a random, episodic character who would fumble some insignificant one-liner before disappearing from the film. One day the Man receives a letter, which, in close-up, reads, "Mr. R. finds any mention of Miss Moore and her mother unpleasant." This close-up loops and thrashes in the viewers' eyes for no less than ten minutes. Still no Crybabe.

Yegor, bored, began to fidget. A gentleman sitting to his left, clearly an "extreme art house film" expert like the little blonde Zarathustra, condescendingly encouraged Yegor that "if you wait a little more, you'll get it. Mamayev always shocks. He saves the crazy stuff for the end, keeps the audience waiting."

Mamayev kept the audience waiting for almost forty more minutes before revealing Crybabe. Yegor straightened up and adjusted his tie. She was fantastic! Her character walks into the same train car as the reading Man. She is also reading something. They talk about the book for a little while. Her character mentions that she likes reading about rape, violence, and Eastern philosophy. Then she and the Man get married. Then they go to bed together in some obscure hotel. He has sex with her for an hour without taking a break. It seemed to Yegor that she didn't really like what he was doing to her.

"Now it begins. I told you," the pretentious gentleman to Yegor's left squealed to himself.

The stars of the film fall asleep in the bed. The Man wakes up first and starts to choke his woman's neck from behind and carries on for a long time. The cinematographer pays more attention to the heroine than the hero, showing in close-ups her crooked mouth, stiff neck, limp arms, bulging eyes, and discolored face, which turns from red to blue to white.

Crybabe seems about ready to perform death, but then Mamayev lets her go. She tries to figure out what is happening to her, she doesn't understand, she can't believe it, why is this happening? Then there is a montage in which their voices are muted in favor of some distorted "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da." He appears to console her, assuring her that he was just playing around, tucking her into bed under the covers. Then he starts again, choking her through the covers, and just when it looked like she is about to give up the ghost, he lets her free. This pattern repeats seven times. The seventh and final time, he chokes her to death. The dark "Ob-La-Di" melody pauses. Fade out. Fade into flames. There is a subtitle, "10 Years Later." The Man wakes up alone in the midst of a fire burning throughout his room. He is burned alive; extreme close-up; nightmarish details; tortured cries; "Ob-La-Da" somewhere far away. Roll credits. The Man and some furniture are now burned to crisps. "Song performed by the Beatles." The screen goes black. "The End."

Yegor, who throughout his career had seen some ghastly killings and done some vicious ones himself, was chilled to the bone by what he had just witnessed. The other patrons of Club Svoi, though they shunned violent dirty work in real life and hired quick shooters like Yegor to do it for them, were bravely and brightly praising the film. "Awesome!" "Yeah, so cool man, totally rad!" They went on and on like this as they migrated towards the banquet hall, and with a ravenous appetite devoured barbequed shrimp, quail eggs, red caviar, and tall glasses of champagne.

XXVI.

Yegor ran stumbling through the disarray of moviegoers. He thought for a second that he'd spotted Sara, or maybe he hadn't, maybe just someone who looked like her, whatever, he didn't care, didn't bother to look twice. He ran the hell home, where for three days straight all he did was wash his hands. He didn't eat, didn't sleep, finally took a bath to try and forget the screening. He then scoured the Internet for any trace of Crybabe. He found barely anything. There were some images from Ghost Things but nothing that pertained to his search. Some Albanian bloggers had written an article blasting Mamayev, but that was four years ago; and a virtual protodeacon called his films anathema two Aprils ago, after which he found no mention of Mamayev. No mention of Svoi. No mention of Crybabe. On Saturday, the day of the online date they'd scheduled to discuss the screening, she never logged on. No matter how much he paced, stomped, sighed, moaned—no sign of her. He started to look for her again, first on websites of major movie studios and high-quality film critics' blogs; then on mid-level independent blogs and production company databases; then lower still in the deep corners of the dark web, where alongside pirated videos and rare snuff films one could encounter well-protected links to kiddie pornographers, Nazis, hired assassins, narcotics dealers, perverted psychos, and similarly deranged types, along with an entire galaxy of spam. No one had heard of Crybabe. She was nowhere to be found online.

It wasn't just the movie that nauseated him, although it indeed made him feel violently ill, but his ominously fruitless search.

Yegor was an experienced professional; for years he had honored his job, perhaps even loved it, at least until the past few days. In his line of work, he had often observed the severity of death—of leaders, their wives and children, their livestock, their staff, even unfortunate bystanders in the wrong place at the wrong time, unplanned casualties. Yegor knew how they felt and how they looked: at the time of departure, before, and after. He knew how their faces behaved, how the eyes and mouths and skin and hearts and entrails and legs and arms betrayed the signs of passing. He knew what happened to blood sugar and adrenaline; where the thoughts went uncontrollably; where the blissful submission began; where the signs of life fading began; where the agony ended and life was gently wiped away, disappearing into the midnight streets. Yegor knew that what happened with Crybabe was impossible to perform—not that precisely; not in big-budget gangster films or blockbuster horror flicks with esteemed makeup artists and special effects coordinators operating under the hands of maniacal producers and psychotic executives. Outside the movies, it really happened like that: the way that people cried, yelled, coughed, choked, nearly regressing into animalism. To Yegor, Crybabe had really been raped and strangled, her shame and suffering and possible death caught on camera, followed by the true burning of her attacker. Yegor's guess was reinforced by the fact that Crybabe didn't log on to their online date, like she promised.

Yegor, overwhelmed, picked some clothes from the floor to make an outfit; it turned out to be the same suit from three days before, now crumpled. He put on the suit that he'd worn to Club Svoi and headed back there, in search of something but unsure of what.

2A Ordinsky Street had grown by a floor and a half since he'd last seen it, which was normal for an office building in the middle of an economic boom.

Yegor found the same security guards by the door that he'd seen three days before, a little chubbier and more blinged out, which was normal for security guys in the middle of a consumer boom. Except this time, the guards barked rudely at this unkempt, disheveled guest, insisting that they knew nothing of any Club Svoi or of "Evrobeisky." Of the fourth floor they also knew nothing, except that "the new business owners moved in yesterday, they deal with some kind of ADR but they plan on moving on to OAO, and before them there was a company moving ZAO, but their business busted and they closed down. What's it to you? Go on—mind your own business."

XXVII.

Yegor called Igor. Chief was still technically his boss, although they hadn't seen each other in a long time, every man for himself, keeping their bounty to themselves. Yegor learned to more or less survive without Chief, but with a case this extreme, he couldn't fathom how. The same way that children play together and when they start growing up, one gets into Spider-Man, one gets into Star Wars; they can go across seas, jump through mountain ranges, encounter giants—and destroy them; man-eating beasts—annihilate them; likewise prevail over evil robots, serpents, and vampires; but then Spider-Man suddenly bumps into the couch, recoils and sprawls on the floor crying; looking at him, Star Wars starts crying too; they call mommy and daddy, though a minute ago they hadn't even registered that mommy and daddy existed, so wrapped up they were in their play, too mighty to admit that they needed someone to wipe their tears.

Igor lived in the apartment where he cut Yegor's hair, initiating him into the Blackbookers. Over the years, he used his money and threats to resettle at least a third of the building's tenants, mostly old farts from the Stalin era. Chief's aggressive apartment uselessly but uncontrollably spread in all directions, like some wealthy, abandoned, reckless county of 14th-Century Burgundy, a three-floor palace comprising exclaves and enclaves of new and newly conquered territories. Igor Fedorovich did not know the exact dimensions of his habitat, nor did his staff or his lawyers. Many parts of the apartment were under lawsuits: several tenants who had been displaced but not yet legally evicted were watching the property. Many of the rooms were unused or drowning in never-ending renovations. Tajiks hung around carrying buckets of asbestos or hunks of furniture. Lovers and distant relatives lost in the apartment annoyingly fluttered about; as did small time thieves, bodyguards, people's dogs, and even an old parrot, who didn't want to move to Zhulebino, like many native Moscovites.

The set-up of the apartment looked the same as it did years ago, like a warehouse slash office slash brothel. The antique junk was more trendy and much more expensive, but loomed larger, in piles and piles. It was reminiscent of cities, towns, villages, and homes all over Russia, as though the people had just moved in and hadn't started arranging or living properly. Or the reverse, as though they were so sick and tired of living there that they'd pack their bags and luggage, live out of a suitcase, and wait for years to move somewhere, staring like alien visitors at their strange, unpleasant, profitless, and gloomy households. The houses were garbage; built too quickly and half-assed. The tenants were too stingy to build playgrounds or anything socially useful but spent their pennies on cheap moonshine and stale food. Cross-eyed and walking diagonally from drunkenness, they gazed at their garbage houses, unfinished playgrounds, and fallen fences revealing holes into the abyss. They'd curse and sing and cry to themselves, on their side of the fence, as though prisoners on the Babylonian rivers.

Chief was home and, hearing that Yegor called, invited him over. Of the original seven Blackbooker brothers who lived together, there were only two left. The rest, including Yegor, quietly did their own thing without reporting to Chief as the boss, but still considered themselves part of the brotherhood. The boss turned a blind eye to these things.

On one hand, he didn't want the brotherhood to seem weak and to provoke any attacks from rivals—the Crocodile crew, a bloodthirsty and greedy wild bunch from the department of legendary satirical writing, who held one hundred percent of the profit from biology textbooks and enviously sniffed around the markets controlled by the Blackbookers; or also the Yasnopolyansky village bandits, with which the Blackbookers waged a war over the profits of Russian classical literature from forgotten times, a brutal war that had recently calmed down and that no one wanted to start again. On the other hand, like any former boss, in his heart he was sure that his runaway vessels wouldn't survive without him and eventually would come running back. Hence, he was not surprised by Yegor's visit and welcomed him into a room furnished by bay windows, trendy mahogany bookshelves, a pair of psychoanalysts' chairs, singing Tajiks, and a marble-malachite table covered in random valuables including rare cigars of the 60s, bottles of exquisite scotch, platinum watches, gold watches, silver watches, pocket watches, tie pins, overpriced pens and pencils, malachite statues, chess sets, globes, ash trays, little Eiffel Towers, little models of the Kremlin, etc. Igor Fedorovich had not aged a bit; quite the opposite, as five thousand dollars worth of hair plugs now covered his bald spots, purchased from the same doctors in Hollywood who treated Clooney and Demi Moore. He dressed casually in his home clothes, a stained Prada robe and badly worn chinchilla slippers. He was still a little sad, holding Shakespeare's Hamlet in his hand, from which he read to the disheveled Yegor:

". . . in an unbuttoned camisole, without a hat, in undone stockings . . . looking like he had been crying, straight out of hell released to tell of the horrors he had witnessed, he came to me."

"Hello. From hell. About horrors. Exactly like that," answered Yegor.

"What's with Hamlet?"

"I'll tell you, brother, what's up with Hamlet. Lean here," Chief showed Yegor to one of his psychoanalyst's chairs, got comfortable in the other one, lit a cigar, dipped it in scotch, and started his story for his guest, who was now nervously nibbling on foie gras cut with a nephrite knife. "Yeah, sit, make yourself at home. Listen. You remember Fedor Ivanovich? My stepfather? Well, then. When I was six years old, a neighbor's kid had just come back from a trip somewhere on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and one of his relative's gave him a large balloon crocodile, just like Mimino. The neighbor, of course, raised up his nose and refused to let the kid even hold the balloon crocodile. I wanted one like that so badly that, after I saw it, I never wanted anything else in life that badly. So I began to pester my stepfather: buy me one like that, buy it, buy it, buy it! My stepfather, either out of pity or insanity, promised me one just like that for New Year's. Okay, easier said than done. My mom, seeing his confusion, offered to take me to ride the Minsky bikes, or to the rocket ride in the amusement park. But I was adamant—imported balloon crocodile, you promised. My stepfather grew uncomfortable, sighing and falling into silence.

"New Year's came around. My stepfather covered my eyes, and when he opened them, I saw a bike, I aw my mom launching model rockets, I saw a decorated holiday tree, but I saw no imported crocodile. I cried through New Year's Eve. I cried the next day and the next night. My stepfather asked for forgiveness, but I couldn't forgive him, so hurt beyond my years I was. I didn't speak with Fedor Ivanovich, and I got mad at my mom for taking his side.

"Well, I couldn't stay mad forever. I eventually forgot all about the crocodile and began to dream of getting an all-new football uniform—I particularly liked the boots and socks for some reason. One night at the end of January, the doorbell rang, and my mom went to answer it. I followed her down the hall. My stepfather as at the door, freezing, snowflakes collecting on his hat and coat and shoulders, shining like stars on a winter night, holding in his hands an orange inflated crocodile, the prodigal balloon, no worse than my neighbor's—yes, much better than my neighbor's. In a fit of joy, filled with gratitude and euphoria, I ran to embrace my stepfather, who radiated January freshness, friendly chill, and clean air. The snowflakes melted into my tears. 'Give him space, let him change his coat,' my mom ushered my inside, laughing; my stepfather cried with me.

"I will never forget that winter scent. Winters don't smell that way anymore. Perhaps it is because of global warming, but are winters really winters, nowadays? The snow is weak, lame, misty, moldy, like it came from a basement and not the Russian celestial freeze. It's child's play. These kinds of winters couldn't even defeat Hitler. I've heard that they had to increase the budget for rockets and missiles this year, since they couldn't count on the winter anymore.

"The past few weeks, at least two or three times a week, I wake up because I'm freezing. I see that the door is wide open, and there stands my stepfather, blue and transparent from the cold, holding a crocodile in his arms; not a balloon one, though, but a real live one, slightly wriggling. He stands and stares at me silently. The snowflakes that have fallen on him don't melt as the reptile writhes in his grasp. A chill emanates from him, like before, this time with the aroma of something unpleasant. He stands and stares silently. The crocodile thrashes. The cold keeps coming and coming until the whole room is enveloped and I am shaking, shivering, nearly blue from hypothermia. Seeing that I'm about to wither away, that I'm this close to passing out from the cold, he leaves; and I can't get warm till the morning, my teeth are shaking, I'm deathly cold.

"The previous night the ghost left me alone and didn't come to me. But I think he'll come again today. And so I decided to re-read the story of Prince Hamlet, to gain some experience in what it's like to talk to ghosts."

"Alas, he's mad," thought Yegor.

"You must think I'm batshit crazy," registered the sharp-minded, clairaudient Chief. "No, brother, I'm not. Well, to my knowledge, having a conscience means you have a healthy soul, does it not? Listen, you came here for some reason, right? I told you about my nightmares. Now you tell me about yours."

Yegor told Chief about Crybabe, the movie, Club Svoi, and his theories about what happened.

"And what?" Chief didn't seem to get it. "What do you want from me?"

"Like I said, Erdman and Chepanov were there, people like that; you know them, I don't. I mean, you know quite a lot of people, you have so many connections in high places and in the media. Find out what the "KAFKAS PICTURES" studio is, who Mamayev is, and what the hell is happening there."

"What, you really believe they actually killed Crybabe while shooting the movie? Bullshit. Who cares about that, no one needs that. Special effects. Whether it's done too naturally or not naturally enough, what do we know? We're not film experts, we work in books," grumbled Chief. "You're talking about something extremely unlikely."

"Extremely unlikely things like that always happen to me. It's not very scientifically probable, and I don't live my life by any science, so . . . Look around: the whole universe is a cruel and severe place. The likelihood of life and survival at all, in this emptiness, is almost at an absolute zero, almost impossible . . . yet we live, something lets us live and survive and sometimes thrive. Following that, out of six billion people, it's much less likely to end up in a small community of those who smoke vintage cigars and eat caviar by the spoonful than to end up as a prisoner in the Astrakhan barracks or a plebian in a Parisian suburb or a worker in the Chad Republic. Much less likely, but here we are. Isn't it strange, how two myopic Wallace Stevens nerds like us could go from quiet editors to assassins ready to kill for foie gras and high fashion pants? Unlikely, almost impossible, but here we are. It may be unlikely that Crybabe was killed, but what if she was? If they didn't kill her, they could have made her into a slave for their sadistic and perverted desires, holding her with threats or psychotropic drugs; she wouldn't have agreed to a cruel shoot like that, you know that," insisted Yegor.

"All right, presuming it was as such, what's it to you?" asked Chief. "Who's she to you? She has her own life, makes her own choices. Don't be mad, but that girl's put you through hell—she cheated on you with all sorts of lowlife actors and wannabe auteurs. Think about this instead: there's a new wave of Corinthian literary trends: early, contemporary, classic, the works. Hoping to be a lucrative prospect. We'll get right on it, do a quick turnaround, and make so much money off the leaders of contemporary lit criticism, and you can do whatever you want with it. You hear? This is the time to get right on it. Molotko, Drantzev, Pletskaya. Get on it, Yegor. You have a lot of experience. You know that Chekhov and Bace will go out of style eventually; people are gonna be reading the Molotokos on the subways, and the Chekhovs will be left to the history books and senior theses."

"I'll think about it," Yegor turned away.

"Think about it! Don't think, just do," growled Igor Fedorovich. "So you've started thinking, huh, old man? I bet you weren't thinking when you shot Fedor Ivanovich in this very room."

"Was it really in this room?" Yegor asked, stunned.

"Dostoyevsky, Quevedo, Chekhov, Takamura . . ." Chief continued, almost to himself. "If only the Dostoyevsky experts and Chekhov scholars knew, if the nerds and aesthetes and literary intellectuals and lovers of theoretical discourse only knew by which pathways they attained their knowledge. Say right now some kid is studying, nose deep in his biology textbook, trying to figure out

what differentiates the composition of mosses and lichens from the structure of ferns; he has no idea that, for a copy of that textbook, the Crocodile thugs beat up our Pasha, remember? And the Yasnopolansky guys kidnapped one of theirs, a Gogu Gugenotta, tied him up for three days in a garage, and killed him in a national park. Two of our guys killed as well, Valta and Tralshik. You remember the war over Nabokov's last original manuscript? Seven dead. The retailer wars over Tyutchev's stuff, that too? Between the Yasnopolansky and the Solnzavsky. Two stores were bombed in the middle of the night, but I don't think there were any deaths. But how many there were when we sparred with the Crocodiles! Eleven! A record! There you go, all the great and amazing and brilliant junk—religion, politics, the beet harvest, whatever; that's where it comes from. I hear that you now want to live a good, proper life, without shooting anyone. I thought, shit, he lies, but now I see—it's true, isn't it?"

"It's true," Yegor echoed quietly.

"Did you forget the secret of the Black Book?"

"I didn't forget. The Black Book has only four words written in it: 'gold comes from lead.'"

"Good. You remember well," Chief praised Yegor. "So how are you going to make your money, if you're not gonna shoot anyone?"

"I've already gone six months without shooting anyone," whispered Yegor.

"Oh, no, brother. You make money because other people such as myself do the shooting for you."

"Are you suggesting that I owe you?" Yegor looked at Chief suspiciously.

"Brother, you fool. Go now, our meeting is over. I'll find out what I can about Crybabe and the studio. Give me two weeks. I'll call you. Stay in touch."

XXIX.

Two days passed. “There are two types of people—users and losers,” thought Yegor, “Users use and losers crawl. Users are few and far between, losers a dime a dozen. Am I a pathetic loser or a haughty user? Did they kill Crybabe, or did they not—what do I care! Maybe she’s just fine, and that was all really good special effects and excellent acting? Yeah, most likely that. Why bother digging? I’ll look like such a fool when I go on some wild goose chase stressing and sweating in a hurry to rescue her, only to find her safe and sound in some dingy but harmless warehouse under her next lover with a fat wallet, burning her tongue on artisanal coffee and foie gras, laughing at me and calling me an idiot.

“But what if she really is hurt? What would you have to respect yourself for? What would your self-respect stand for then? It would be for . . . I don’t even know—can’t fuss over those who won’t fuss over you, shouldn’t love those who don’t love you back. Don’t degrade yourself for a woman who has degraded you so many times that you’ve lost count—pass her by. Refrain from jumping off the bridge for her. Let others deal with her. You could still respect yourself for the generosity, gratitude, and clarity of judgment that you showed to her despite her deceit; your endless unrequited devotion and near-perfect courage. Not to Crybabe per se but to the practice of virtue and love in all forms: love for her, love for humanity, love for love’s sake, and self-love, the latter of which is slowly dying and crying out for help . . .”

Yegor contemplated and turned on his side.

“On the other hand, you’ll turn around and see—nonsense! Bullshit! Or worse, a trap, a cleverly placed snare! Why do I need to save Crybabe? So what, I’ll find her and her captors, and then what? I’m gonna read those novellas by Mikhalkov? The thirteenth chapter of the Corinthians? None of that will work. Will I forgive them? Or her? Why bother even looking for her, then? Forgiveness can be granted from a distance. I don’t need to bother Chief for that. And if I don’t ask for help, then what? Shoot them? That’s no better . . .

“This is the exact kind of thing I gave up shooting and violence for. Gosh, how hard I tried, how much self-control I had to muster. Life without death seems so chill at first. You don’t kill, I don’t kill; you don’t die, I don’t die. But now a huge deal is starting up for such a little bitch. Maybe it will all start because of me; maybe it’s finished before it even started. Maybe it’s hopeless. A lost cause. All I know is, if it was just me who renounced killing and violence, the economy and balance of life would improve tenfold. I mean, I kill around ten people a year. Well, in my defense, if those people had stayed alive, they’d be killing upwards of fifteen per year, each. But is that really for me to judge?

“No, I can’t kill, I shouldn’t allow myself to, especially not for this broad. I remember when we went to a party at the late Chachav’s place; she, in front of everyone, danced with him in a foul, unmentionable way. I was so mad, and she was so happy I was so mad. A vicious cycle. I went outside to cool down, and by the time I came back, someone told me, “they’re upstairs”. I go up there and hear their voices coming from the bathroom—both of them—I knock the door down and of course there they are, doing it . . . And for this woman I should take action? Get revenge? Seek answers? Go off sinning? I need to do the opposite . . . relax, take a vacation . . .”

Yegor picked up his phone and dialed the number of his travel agent. “Arthur? Yeah, this is Yegor. Hey, I want to go to Norway tomorrow. To Bergen. The same hotel I stayed in last time. Yeah, the same suite, with the view of the fjord. I would like a boat, too. Ten days. I want to go fishing. Cod fishing. They were biting so well last time, and ere so tasty cooked. No, not the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow. Come on Arthur, do me a favor, please? I need this. Thanks, man.” Yegor hung up the phone, lay back in his bed, closed his eyes, drifted off . . .

The phone rang.

“Arthur? Have you booked the trip?” sleepily mumbled Yegor, “Oh, wait . . . Chief? Is that you?”

“Listen to me closely, Yegor,” Chief said sternly. “Were you sleeping?”

“No, no, I’m awake,” Yegor sat up. “I thought you said two weeks.”

“Everything turned out to be simpler than I thought. And worse. Listen to me, Yegor. First of all: it’s better if you don’t get involved in this. Second: if you decide to get involved in this, go to the Diamond at 19:00 sharp; someone will be there to give you the information you’re looking for. This individual works for state security; there will be no bullshitting around. But you don’t owe them anything, I will take care of all that. Third: don’t get involved, man.”

“How will I recognize this person?”

“They’ll recognize you. Your job is to get there on time and sit at a table. Go alone. And dress nice, for fuck’s sake, not like . . . you know. Like you usually do. Bye.”

“Wait,” piped up Yegor, “Igor, how can I repay you? What do I owe you?”

“Bye,” said Chief and hung up the phone.

XXX.

Yegor arrived at the Diamond exactly at seven. He would have tried to identify the lettuce-chewing faces of the famous among the crowd, but a wheelchair, in which a thin, long-faced man of about thirty-five years wearing a tricolored throw sat, appeared through the front door and headed his way. The man did not move at all—neither did his wide, unmoving black eyes—and in build he resembled a stiff, crooked haloxylon tree.

The wheelchair came to a sudden stop right before him, and the beautiful lady pushing it said, "Hello, Yegor, I am Captain Warhola."

She wore a stunning border patrol uniform, tailored with incomparable stitching and silhouette work on its inseams. It must have been custom-made by Yves Saint-Laurent, at least. It had fantastic epaulets, stars that were clearly a jeweler's work—platinum, nothing less, not even gold. The SWAT team had clearly benefited from the invisible hand of the newly booming economy, and showed their taste for high fashion. The gorgeous Amazon sat across from Yegor without invitation in a chair pulled up by a waiter. She turned the waxy-faced, immobile invalid towards herself and began to dazzle Yegor with her blinding beauty as though she was preparing him for interrogation. It was Sara. He couldn't believe it. He narrowed his eyes in disbelief, tried to cover his face with a serviette, but still he understood—it was Sara.

"You are Warhola? The KGB captain? Bullshit! I'm going to call Chief right now—I have no time for games. Who's the living dead you're with? You've been lying to me this whole time, you bitch. Spying on me for Chief, or for your own firm," Yegor would have gone on and on, but Sara interrupted him.

"This is no living dead. This is my husband, Abdalla. He is a citizen of Russia and even a hero. He is from Yemen, he fought against us in the South. I took him prisoner and turned him. He fought for our side. He was badly wounded. Now he looks like this. He feels nothing, sees nothing, says nothing. Only cries every once in a while. I didn't have anyone to watch him today, so I took him with me. He won't bother us. Order me a pineapple juice, why are you just standing there like a tree, not asking us what we want? No, we don't need a menu. I'm not Sara. I'm really Yana Nicholayevna Warhola, a KGB captain. Abdalla became a Catholic. Not Greek Orthodox, because I am a Catholic. Why are you making that face? I don't understand why you, a Russian, looks at Catholics as strangers and Muslim as scampish relatives?"

"I'm not making that face, I'm just surprised."

"My great-grandfather was a White Czech, and then became an officer of the Cheka."

"Red Czechs," retorted Yegor.

"That's how our family became part of it—Cheka, KGB, NKVD, MGB, FSK, FCB . . . I didn't spy on you. Well, maybe a little bit. I just asked Igor to find me a guy, and you fit the description. I like being with you, really. I've known Igor for a very long time. My father was his curator back when he worked at the publishing house. He visited our house and brought me these disgusting candies. Dad is still his protector. General Warhola. Have you heard of him? I help them out every so often."

"For a captain of the KGB, you are too young and you talk too much," said Yegor, pissed off by the duplicity. He didn't understand who and what to believe, or not to believe, which fueled his anger.

"I'm a good officer, Yegor. I have three war medals. I didn't earn my title because of my dad. I worked hard to get it. Don't get too worked up about me supposedly talking too much—you didn't get any important information from me, just useless data. You don't even know, there are so many things in this world that distract from the deeper meaning. Ninety-nine percent of the things we witness—it's just nothing, it's all bullshit and nonsense." Her husband almost burst out sobbing and, either way, was about to start drooling when Yana wiped his mouth and corked it with a pacifier that she took out of her purse. Abdalla calmed down, sucked on the pacifier, quiet again, like a stone.

"All right, Sara. Just let me call you Sara. I did not come here to listen to your homeland honors nor to find out that Chief was a rat in the office," the anger turned to frustration turned to fury and reached a climax, his every word a solid state. "You were at Club Svoi, and I wasn't mistaken that it was you."

"It was me," Yana Nicholayevna sipped her juice, "Igor asked me to help you. I know what's bothering you. Club Svoi doesn't exist. You were there yesterday, you saw yourself. What exists is a group of extremely rich, famous, and influential citizens who love extreme spectacles. Not even extreme spectacles, but those beyond normality. The studio 'Kafkas Pictures' shoots movies that look like legitimate films. However, the rape and torture scenes in their films aren't just realistic—they're real. They shot a version of Hamlet where all the characters—Hamlet, the Queen, the King, and Laertes—were actually killed. The actors were all killed during the filming, in their costumes and on set. Two of them, Hamlet and Laertes, were terminally ill volunteers who requested their next in kin to be paid in full. They gave their permission to be fatally wounded on camera. But two were tricked; they thought till their last breaths that they were just starring in a movie. I saw this movie. Gertrude has this strange and frightful look on her face when she realizes that the poison is working for real. These films are only available in private screenings, where they are advertised, albeit narrowly, as avant-garde snuff. Trendy assholes go to these screenings without knowing that the murders are real. For the filmmakers and the organizers, that's part of what makes it so pleasurable."

"That means Crybaby is . . ." Yegor couldn't bring himself to say dead or murdered or killed. "She is gone?"

"We can't be sure," answered Warhola. "Sometimes they let them live, and they resuscitate and rehabilitate them after the shoot."

"Why?"

"To make other movies with them. Sometimes they have a shortage of new actors."

"Who is this director A. Mamayev?" asked a horrified Yegor.

"We don't know for sure. Kafkas Pictures is located in the South, somewhere in the mountains. He works somewhere there."

"Can this studio be found?"

"In the South, money can find you anything." Yana Nicholayeva said.

"Listen, Sara. If you are the agent you say you are, you've known about this group of rich perverts for a while. Now you assure me that this studio, where they rape and torture people, could be found for the right amount of money. So why don't you and your Cheka take them in, all at once? What's stopping you?" Quietly, so as not to disturb the lettuce-chomping VIPs, Yegor yelled at Warhola, "Maybe you don't have enough money? How much do you need? Tell me!"

"Don't yell, cool down you fucking honey," laughed Yana. "First of all, you

are also part of the Cheka. Your Brotherhood of Blackbookers—to people on the inside, you are Cheka. We know all about your group—more so than about Kafkas Studios, but here you are, free."

"Then why am I free? Why don't you arrest me!"

"Cool down, chill out," said Yana, turning Abdalla away from them and patting his back like an overgrown, taxidermied cat. "We know the whole truth about you, but we can't take it to court. The court needs proof and evidence, not truth. We are true government power. Our power is like a nuclear weapon—we can wear it like a symbol of fear, but we cannot use it to intervene. Like the Chinese say—power is a dragon in the fog."

"I don't know about the Chinese and the 'dragons,' but we certainly have a lot of 'fog.' You don't intervene because you know you are tied to us," Yegor bitched. "With money, with blood, and now, as we find out, with sex."

"Don't be rude, darling. Our intervention would be disastrous. We know so many embarrassing secrets that, if they were revealed, the higher governments of this and not only this country would fall apart, deflate, and explode, releasing all the dirt and grime. And with that, the entire state and even society would disintegrate. As tragic as it sounds, the government's corruption and its relationship with organized crime is a social construct like that of schools, police, and morale. If you take it away—chaos will begin. So you go ahead and be free, Chekist."

"Where is Mamayev? You smoke? I didn't know. Where is Manayev?"

Yana Nicholaevna lit a cigarette and, in a singsong voice like Sara's, replied, "Yeah, I smoke. Mamayev lives partly in Moscow, partly in St. Petersburg. But three or four months out of the year he spends at his studio in the South. Now I will tell you a government secret. I'm doing this because Igor asked me to, and because I really like being with you."

"Sara . . ."

"The South is controlled by the Khazar Khaganate. It has been for almost a hundred years. All of those national republics, parliaments, courts, presidents, puppet ministers, municipalities, elections, police officers—it's fiction, imitation. The Soviet Union also used that kind of political imitation, party organizations, Lenin busts, committees. The truth is, then and after, the people in power in the South are the Khazars, a small secret nation residing on the other side of Mount Elbrus. They create borders, solve arguments, divide their money between their ethnic clans. They are so cunning and tricky and brilliant that even the Chechens respect them. Still, they are not so strong that they can ignore Russia and figure everything out for themselves. Two hundred years ago, Khazars and Russians signed a secret treaty: in exchange for a donation of arms and finances, the Khaganate pretends like it's part of the Russian state/republic/empire and does not support Russia's enemies. The Khazars know everyone and everything in the South. If you find a way to get along with them, they will give you Mamayev. He is indebted to them, otherwise he would not be alive."

"What kind of Gumilyov bullshit—" croaked Yegor. "You give him to me. He comes to Moscow, you said so yourself."

"For five hundred thousand to a million. Dollars. A small price to pay. You can scrap it up somewhere. Where and when in Moscow, we have no idea. So your best bet is the South. The Khazars."

"How do I find these wonderful people?"

"You will fly to Karagly, Uzbekistan," Captain Warhola answered.

"I'll give you the phone number of Mayor Strutskov. He lives there and knows all the major players. Tell him I sent you. He'll take you where you need to go and will set up a meeting with the Khagan. This character is like Putin to those people in the South. If you are successful in your delegation, Mamayev is yours, and if not—you'll come back here and have a ton of things on your plate. Think it over carefully. You may not need this in your life. Those cinephiles are dangerous people. Big people with bad manners. The South is not a vacation resort—they will shoot you to death. It may not be my place to say this, but Crybaby ran away from you not too long ago. The last time I saw you, you brought me flowers. So I thought, well, maybe we could truly have something between us, and this is the beginning of a good thing. I mean, you had never brought me flowers before, you'd only considered me a dumb bimbo and a sex object. I'm not a bimbo after all, am I?"

With that, Sara pushed Abdalla off to the side and leaned in closer to Yegor.

XXXI.

Sara's beauty and warmth washed over to him, so familiar to him, pouring over his shoulders and collarbones, flowing through his back and stomach and down below, boiling his blood and raising the temperature of the hidden parts of his body, and coming back to once more overflow his heart and cloud his mind—a reminder of the hottest sun in a long-awaited spring.

The air became joyful, as though something pleasant had returned to balance his life, as though a truth was revealed and broken ends were pieced back together. His mind, swirling in confusion, had approached the very edge of destruction, and it now felt possible to climb down to safer ground.

Yegor gave a speech—for himself and Yana, and "for all those who wished to listen."

"It's really good, Sara, that you just mentioned the flowers. You're right. It is like that. I didn't give you any flowers. I gave you a drawing of flowers. I have never given flowers to anybody, Sara—and now I understand why! Bring champagne, I don't care what kind," Yegor told their bystanding waiter before continuing his speech.

"Sometime in my childhood, one July, in the heat, I heard the silence of the world. But I'll talk about that silence later. Right now, I'm talking about the flowers. Back then, even beneath my childhood, I unlocked the mysteries of life and death. Death was slinking all around everything like a slippery, black, vicious comet way up in the sky. It radiated grimness and made no sense to me. I was young, but for some reason immediately guessed that no matter how I prepared my body or protected my mind—death would come for me, it would come for everything and take it.

"I couldn't reconcile that, and life became a huge disappointment. Every morning was a poison one, each love was a misery, and no matter which angle I viewed it from, I could see the black comet of death descending ever so slightly with each perceptual shift. It seemed strange to me that people don't abandon their families, homes, careers, fishing trips, theatres, books, wars, loves—all of these distractions—and commit themselves to cheating or at least prolonging death. And if that turns out to be impossible—a mass euthanisation. Most people were reluctant to talk about these things and just continued their stupid battles with one other. They surrounded themselves with meaningless tasks and trivial pursuits—it's like a waiting room at the dentist's or proctologist's, where everyone's feeling terrible, but the longer the wait time, the more enthusiastic the conversations about who vacationed where, or whether there will be a war with the Eskimos, or whether tonight will be a good night to go to the clubs and tomorrow a good morning to go on IPO.

"But still—irrelevant, that's not what I mean—I'm talking about the flowers, the flowers! Shit, I can't even articulate. Anyway, I started to live my life in the opposite of how most people live, as a sign of protest. Like, most people give women flowers because it's a pleasantry, so I won't do it. Marriage is another thing—the husband patiently plagues the wife, and she him, and the kids plague the parents, and the parents the kids. Of all feelings associated with marriage, the most prominent one is guilt. So I thought, no, as soon as those signs in a marriage begin to appear—divorce. And no normal job, either. No childhood friends. No trendy books. No popular opinions, no toasts, no prejudices. Between you and me, the first time I killed a man, it was an old guy, just to differ-

entiate myself.

"I lived so many years in this opposite lifestyle, only now I'm figuring out that protest doesn't matter, and this business of counter-living is driving me to confusion. In all honesty, I finally understand that all paths, ways, trajectories, methods, orbits—they all lead to death. Undoubtedly. Lawyers, politicians, soldiers, plumbers, writers. People who like luxury living, people who like Saturdays, football players, vacationers, businessmen. People who worry what their aunt Maria Aleksevna will think about their mistress. People who at twenty are eager students, at thirty young professionals, at forty energetic bosses, at fifty respectable leaders, at sixty quiet mentors, at seventy venerable pranksters, and at eighty something else decent—those people are fortunate. If something bad happens to people who are part of the system, then they are considered unfortunate. Regardless, fortunate and unfortunate people are going to die equally. All known paths lead to death.

"I didn't want to be like everybody else because if I live like everyone else I'll die like everyone else. And if I don't follow traditional ways of living, maybe there's a chance I won't have to follow traditional ways of dying. It's not a fact, of course, but one can only hope. What if the road less taken, or not taken at all, leads to a way of cheating death? What if nonexistence is just a pit that you can step over, or a mountain that you can climb over, or a comet that can reach a different sky? Perhaps each new generation will set out to remake the world and live not like their fathers, but set off in completely unknown directions. Don't go where everyone else does, or you'll surely be gone. Go where few go, or none at all—perhaps it will take you to a place beyond time. Where light is eternal and infinite.

"That is why I never brought you flowers. And that is why tomorrow I'll be off to Karagly, to your Mr. Strutsky, straight to the Khazars. Quia absurdum.

"Crybaby left me, I mean, she never really loved me, she always cheated on me. I hate her and sometimes I mistake that hate for love—it's that strong, my hate for her, my love/hate thing that I have. There is no logical reason why I should be risking my life to save her or avenge her. It's like that, but it's exactly why, tomorrow, immediately, I'm going to Karagly!"

Yegor fell silent, mainly due to the ringing echo that could be heard throughout the whole restaurant from his last sentences. All eyes were on him: the red-faced and blushing Yana Nicholayevna; the celebrity diners, posing with their exquisite meals and cocktails for the paparazzi shooting through the window; the waiters and staff frozen in place after hearing Yegor's toast, some carrying trays or menus, others signing checks, others caught mid-sentence; the sommelier, holding a cup of wine; the bartender, putting ice, mint, and lime together in a cocktail for a well-known radio host, suddenly remembering that he probably didn't wash his hands after using the restroom; young teachers discussing how to start a thriving small business, who arrived in colorful make-up and skimpy clothes, figuring that, if their first business plan failed, they could go on to start an underground escort ring catering to law school grads; and all the other patrons of the Diamond, who in unison turned their heads to stare at Yegor, still chewing their food, frozen in surprise.

"Look at that dude go off," said a stranger to Yegor's right. A small, awkward applause broke out at the bar. In a far off corner, a laugh exploded in an Armenian accent. The sommelier's clients refused a cup of wine. The servers unfroze and continued their tasks. Abdalla wept. The radio host, drink in hand, sat at

the young teachers' table. Celebrities and models chattered about who vacationed where and which nannies were best for their fancy children and whether they should take their bodyguards to the Caribbean/Sardinia or hire local ones, or which is cheaper, even though money is no object, yet also not a source of happiness.

Yegor and Warhola stepped out of the restaurant, nearly running, out into the street, panting with desire. They got to the elevator already sweating and undressed right there, just enough to begin making love. Sweaty and stuck together, they reached Yegor's apartment. He clumsily found his keys, opened the door, and they fell to the floor in his hallway. Stripping their clothes entirely, they shoved against each other so passionately for so long that Yegor thought there must have indeed been a reason for bringing those flowers. When they finished, he almost told Sara something along the lines of "I love you," but she suddenly sprung up and declared, "Shit. We forgot Abdalla at the restaurant."

"Not 'we.' You did. Relax, he's not going anywhere, I'll call them now." Yegor dialed the number of the Diamond. "Okay. So he's there? Just sitting there? Okay, sorry." Turning to Sara, he said, "They can bring him if we provide an address."

"No, it's okay, I'll get him myself."

"Your address?"

"They don't have keys, and no one can open the front door. I told you, I had no one to watch him today."

"Why doesn't the waiter bring him here, and you can give them the keys to your place, and they'll give you back the keys afterward. It won't take an hour."

"No, no, that's enough. I'm going." Yana dressed quickly, military-style, and wiped her tears and snot in a very un-Captain-like way on her sleeve. She left. Yegor went online to find out what the weather was like in Karagly and how best to get there.

XXXII.

From the depths of the quick, warm, and very black darkness surfaced the voice of Antonina Pavlovna. With the same voice every summer evening, forgetting to put Yegorchek to bed, she chattered with her neighbor. Kerosene lamps would turn off, and within the dark rooms a tasty odor of kerosene wafted. The countryside's trademark stillness and silence filled the air, so clean and pure that city folk visiting the village had a hard time sleeping, nearly driven mad by the silence.

A voice rose up to the surface of the dream, changing density and color. It was unrecognizable in the light. It turned out to be a booming bass voice, stinking of sausage and tobacco. It belonged not to his grandmother but to a truck driver who barely fit into his vehicle, hanging his left side, arm, shoulder, and ear from his window. His right side shielded Yegor from the blinding sun.

"Here drive the partisans of the full moon. I belong here. Here come the partisans of the full moon. Let them . . ." sang the bass, and, when Yegor woke up, added, "recovered, there it is. Its all good," and finished his song, ". . . let them drive."

He took a bottle of bootleg kvass from the glove compartment, took a swig, and offered it to Yegor.

"Where? Who? Where am I? Who are you?" refused Yegor.

"I am Vassiliy, your freelance driver. And who are you, who the heck knows. Two trashy looking girls brought ya here on my exit from Perm. From a diner on the side of the road. They said you were drunk and drugged. And something like, you got into a fight. Asked me to take you to Moscow. Gave money. And themselves. They assured me that you're a quiet one, you just got drunk, that's it. So I took you, idiot, and I'm driving you."

"Where?"

"I told you: Moscow, where else? They gave me so much money that I'd even take you to Berlin, had you the passport. And who are you, is the interesting part. Although, for this much money, I shouldn't give a fuck. You don't have to say."

"Yegor."

"Ah, Yegor, you should've said so from the start. Now I see. There's so much information that it'll take all day for a fool like me to process it."

"Why Perm? This is Perm? The same Perm that's the municipal administrative center?"

"We only have one Perm. The same Perm where Permites live and die."

The truck was hot as a fever in the summer. Yegor wiped the sweat from his forehead and groaned in pain. On his hand was a two-kilogram bandage soaked in blood. He looked at his other hand, astonished—it was covered in a bloody bandage, as well.

"What's happened to me?"

"Told you, you got drunk, got beat up in a fight. Hang in there, we'll reach Moscow in five hours or so."

Yegor tried to remember what had happened. He looked into his memory, but his memory was bloody and bandaged as well.

Suddenly something passed in the window, something that for a moment filled his heart with adrenaline before it disappeared behind the truck. He couldn't tell what it was beyond a feeling, that it was a piece of his soul that hadn't been used

in ages, that he thought to be dead. Something pushed him to scream, "Stop! Stop the car! Brake!"

Vassiliy jumped a little and hastily stopped the vehicle; only afterwards did it occur to him to yell back at Yegor.

"Why the heck are you screaming? Haven't sobered up yet, huh? Why would I stop the truck?"

"You already stopped, now help me open the door—my hands are bandaged. Thanks," Yegor jumped out to the road. "I won't go any further. Thanks, Vassiliy, thank you."

"Why won't you go with me? They told me to take you to Moscow, that you're a Muscovite. What're ya gunna do in the middle of nowhere with no money and no hands?"

"I don't know yet. I don't know why, but I need to." Yegor started walking in the opposite direction that the truck was heading. The fuck away from Moscow.

"Hold on, you poor thing. Have a Twix. All right, you can't use your hands, but I'll put it in your jacket. And here's another thing—those trashy girls asked me to give you this gadget when we reached Moscow. Take it, even though you didn't get to Moscow. They gave me so much of your money that I don't need this old thing."

XXXIII.

The truck drove off to Moscow. Yegor, with the Twix and the gadget in his pockets, slumped off to the opposite direction. Three hundred meters later, he found what had made him brake. A signpost stuck out from the ground, pointing to dusty fields and village farmgrounds. “Lunino,” said the crude text on the sign. That was the name of his grandmother’s village, the flame of his childhood, the call to the light.

When Yegor, as a youth, went away on vacation, he would stand by this signpost. His mother had filed a request to make it an unofficial bus stop so that Yegor could stand there, wave down the driver, and hitch a ride to the capital. From this signpost weaved a flowing path more like a river than a road. It would have been easier to swim through its dirty, muddy, dusty terrain than to traverse its five kilometres to Lunino. Where, oh where, did that path take Yegor, even forty-something years ago? And just like those forty-something years ago, the sky reflected in its endless abyss the boundless fields; angels seemed to appear in psychedelic incarnations through the atmosphere; martlets glided through the sky seemingly frozen.

Here, forty-something years ago, was this exact same pit (or one just like it) with a round, almost moon-like black puddle in its center—a moose appeared to him here, walking out of the overgrown wheat fields. That moose, the size of two horses stacked on top of each other and multiplied sideways, was the biggest wild animal Yegor had ever seen. Back then, Yegor and his buddy from the village, a kid named Red, ditched their bikes and ran, ran, ran all the way to the other side of the field where they exited through a village called Zimarov, panting and spooked to near-tears. Zimarov was home to the only functioning church in the area. They ran into the church at full speed and headed straight under the cupolas, the biblical blue sky hanging over their heads like a canopy, a sky painted before the Great War by traveling iconographic painters. Yegor froze, hanging in the blue sky amongst these two-dimensional saints and saviors (pardoned, reincarnated, reanimated, resurrected, sanctified, transformed, transfigured), and floated, with no sense of gravity, seemingly in suspended animation from worldly physics. He read, with difficulty, ancient letters: “If there is any God for us, who is on us.” He understood, and stopped crying. Father Tychon entered wearing civil clothes, not his holy garment, and asked, “Who are you?”

Yegor, still staring in space past the Father, hadn’t landed from the blue sky yet, but Red blurted out, “We are from Lunino. We got lost.” Remembering where he was and what his grandmother had taught him before, Red added, “We are peasants. Faithful peasants.”

“That is good,” the Father smiled and brought the boys back home in a wheelbarrow. He even took their bicycles on the journey, still lying in the road, unharmed.

The signpost, too, straddled by giant steel columns and telephone poles carrying dangerously high-voltage cables far away from the ground and its inhabitants, was the first place where Yegor had ever kissed a woman. A girl of seventeen, to be exact: a whole year and a half older than he was. He kissed her, unable to stop after only one. Without any romantic breaks and full of curiosity, he reached into her with his own high voltage instrument, thrusting like a ray of light in darkness, or a machete with which he parted the sea.

He still remembered the afterglow, where he felt like flowing water, his eyes darkening. But they couldn't rest in the grass like youthful lovers in a bucolic movie, since immediately after, without any romantic pause, their naked bodies were bitten by cruel, bloodthirsty mosquitos. He was itchy for a week after, a reminder of his inglorious initiation into manhood. Olya, that was the girl's name, was there for the summer to visit Red and his parents; she was his cousin from Tambov. That was their last summer in Lunino.

Yegor managed to get to the fork in the road. To the left was Lunino; to the right was the cemetery where people not only Lunino but also from Rzhevsk and Urosovks were buried. Corpses from little villages who were neglected by God, by the Czar, even by contemporary democracy. Instead of nice plots of soil, there was only mud and mixed sand, barely enough for a proper burial.

Antonina Pavlovna would take little Yegor to a little lake in Urosovsk where they would fish for little crucian carp. Once, Yegor tripped so hard running down one of the roads that he scraped his leg bloody. The babushka screamed, dropped the fishing poles, and carried Yegor to the closest one of the nine houses in Urosovsk. Nobody in range of her screams came out. No one from the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth house. In the sixth house was a curly haired man chasing a chicken in his yard. He wore only the pants of a fancy officer's uniform, stained and dirty, as though he'd just returned from a war. No matter how the babushka screamed and cried for help, he continued to vigorously chase the chicken. Twenty minutes later, he finally caught it, grabbed it, and, brandishing an axe pulled from seemingly out of nowhere like an elderly magician, cut its head off in one fell swoop. Only after that did he slowly meander over to the gate and say, "What do you want?"

The headless chicken suddenly resurrected and started running deliriously through the yard and towards its murderer, drenching his pants in blood. The man bellowed and kicked it aside; the chicken lay dead for real. Yegor paled in horror and disgust while his babushka lowered him to the ground and started bargaining with the chicken murderer. Yegor caught only his last words: "You need to go to a nurse. Go back to Lunino."

Antonina Pavolvna, spitting in his face, carried her pallid grandson back to Lunino. The man swiftly ran after them and produced (again, from seemingly out of nowhere) an unusually large plantain leaf.

"Here, put this on the wound, it helps." He put it in Yegor's hand and went back home, his unfinished business with his dead chicken clearly on his mind.

Passing Urosovsk, Yegor asked his grandmother, "Ba, why are they so mean?" She, instead of answering him, leaned down and wiped his lips with dust. He licked them and spat, confused.

"Well?" she asked.

"It's sour."

"There you go. That's why."

XXXIV.

Yegor became confused near the fork in the road, unsure of what he was doing. He thought at first to go to the dead Lunino to visit his grandmother at the cemetery. But, feeling thick and murky with melancholy a sorrowful pain, he understood that if he were to go and experience the graves and headstones of the cemetery, he'd surely die himself.

He turned left, to the Lunino that was still alive. He expected everything to be as large as he remembered from his childhood and could not believe how small everything actually was when he got there. The river—in which he'd nearly drowned, as a child, more than once, the river vast enough for swimming sessions, fishing with nets and bait, adventures to secret islands and shores, drownings—this great river, his Mississippi, as he'd referred to it after reading Tom Sawyer. He didn't need to cross it with any trepidation—he simply walked over it. The village kiosk, which had sold his favorite candies and biscuits and fizzy sodas, was barely taller than him. The club, where dances and movies and romances and stabbings happened, was also significantly smaller than he remembered. The apple orchards were half his height. The homes looked like dollhouses. The motorcycle with a sidecar, so badass and enormous to Yegor once upon a time, now looked like a toy—Yegor doubted he could even fit on it now, much less drive it comfortably. He shuffled over to where his grandmother's house was, looked at it from above, down into the darkness of the chimney. Still, he was too exhausted to be anxious or shocked. He felt, in a twisted way, quite clean, merry, and fresh. He was just about to crack open the door to his own childhood home when, from the neighboring barn, a fat-headed and uniquely shaped man emerged. He was short and mustached; he had a watermelon-sized belly, smooth and round at all sides. Yegor recognized the man, dressed in a quilt jacket and a newsboy cap covering his fleecy ears, immediately.

"Uncle Kolya," exclaimed Yegor, "Hi! Do you remember me?"

"Of course I remember you," Uncle Kolya answered, with a hint of insincerity.

"So, how are you?"

"All right."

"Wait a moment: if I'm over forty, how old are you now? You've got to be around seventy! You look good for your age! You've held up nicely."

"What could possibly happen to me? I lay around at home, don't bother anyone. Nothing bothers me, no one harms me, why wouldn't I hold up well? In another hundred years, I'll still be lying around like this, brand new."

"Hold on, Uncle Kolya, I remember now—they told me you died. For sure, that you died."

"So maybe I did die. What of it? Every day someone dies and no one notices. Makes no difference. Maybe I did die. It just looks different from your side."

"But do you remember me?"

"I think I remember you, but I forgot your name."

"Yegor Kirillovich."

"So, Yegor, why did you come here?"

Yegor, standing in this strange Lunino, in which everything was so small (even Uncle Kolya was half his stature), couldn't tell who was wrong, or misremembering, or even alive. But he had a sudden epiphany about why he'd come.

It wasn't his nostalgic desire to see his hometown that had torn him out of the car, but unbearable thirst. It was so humid in the back of the truck, like a dirty frying pan, the trucker nearly boiling in his own sweat. Yegor must have had this epiphany when he saw the trucker drink his dirt-black kvass. He desperately wanted a drink, and there it was—Lunino flashing by the landscape as the truck whizzed past, magnetically attracting Yegor, who, in spite of pain, thirst, and the leftover pieces of his soul, trudged towards this image of the Yegor's Spring. "I'm thirsty," he told Uncle Kolya. "I came for a drink of water."

The scarily clean and burning ice cold water of this spring, which the bubbling sand breathed through its sedges, covered the clearing like a wide, thin sheet in the greenish dusk. One had to kneel to drink this water and, when drinking, one had to be careful to blow the golden dust and sand from the reflection of one's face in the shallow, shiny water. Sip by sip—gently, patiently inhaling the cold water so as not to accidentally swallow a mouthful of sand. Drinkers had to admire the miraculous image of their reflection in the spring, the god of the clean water staring back at them.

This spring was, for a long time, Yegor's own little secret. The young boy could listen for hours to the dance of sand and water bathing in sunrays, to the silence colored by solar reflections and the crisp rustling of trees. And even when he shared this wonderful secret with Red and Olya, even with the whole town, no one bothered to widen and deepen it. It was far away from the village, and they had decided to leave it as it was. Besides, they took water from the wells closer to their homes. So the spring was called Yegor's Spring. There is remained in his memory through all these years, shaped and polished by various mnemotechnologies until it appeared to him as a glossy picture—unusually beautiful, a sweet, shining, coolness over which stars, winds, and airplane trails hovered.

"Should I bring you something to drink?" asked Uncle Kolya.

"Do you know Yegor's Spring? I think I remember which direction it's in from here," Yegor gestured with his bloody bandages towards the early sunset, "but I forget exactly where."

"I know where it is, but it's far. You look pale. Will you get there okay?"

"I need to go there," muttered Yegor, shifty, unsure if he would make it.

XXXV.

They walked for almost an hour—one of them becoming weaker with each step, the other disadvantaged by his small height and short legs. While they trudged, Uncle Kolya told Yegor all about how the previous chairman of the ruined and reformed farm collective, who started concocting crazy ideas to fight poverty, decided to market Yegor's Spring as a miracle, using the name St. Gregory's Source. The name was chosen because of the similarity of the names, and, during the Chechen War, he spread the rumor that the water stopped bullets and healed the wounded. Over the four or so months that followed, mothers from around the area brought their lop-eared soldier boys to drink from the spring and sprinkle them with the blessed waters—they also washed their boys' clothes in the spring and packed the water into bottles which they sent to army stations in the South. The chairman would charge a small fee to use the water, which he used to pay the tired old ladies and drunkards laboring at his farm. But soon there came news of funerals—no miracles had saved those mothers' sons from dying in the first battles of the war.

St. Gregory's Source changed. They attached an iron barrel to the spring, built a crooked wooden bridge for easier access, and screwed in a ceramic cup hanging by a bike chain to the tree branch nearest to the water. The place became dirty, the water rusty and ridden with dead flies. It didn't help the moms and their boys. It betrayed them, so they stopped coming.

The moms and those sons who had survived, crippled, went to the chairman's house. They planned on interrogating him as to why, for their last wages, there was no sign of the advertised healing or salvation or resurrection. Before they had the chance to question him, the chairman jumped from a window and hid in his gooseberry garden. Instead, they caught his agronomist roommate idly watching television. The "questioning" was long and brutal—the moms with their logs, found on long walks in the forest; the cripples with their crutches and prosthetics. The agronomist yelled for help and screamed for the police. The moms left, the agronomist recovered, but the chairman was so upset that he never showed in face in public again. He secretly sat in the gooseberry bushed and ruled the county from there. The agronomist brought him bread and milk for nourishment and documents to sign. He signed one document that relinquished the name St. Gregory. Now he was occupied with the export of frogs and earthworms. He wanted to export the frogs to France, the worms to who knows where, and enthusiastically drafted the papers, but the bureaucrats paid his efforts no mind, so the chairman shifted his focus to the oil industry. He received a bank loan and hired geologists. The geologists boozed through half a year, but as far as important underground discoveries went, they found nothing. No oil, no clay. What they found was more earthworms and old bones. The chairman emerged from his bushes and took the bones to the nearest museum. The museum curators acknowledged that they were indeed ancient relics, but the Bulgarian-seeming bones were of little value to their exhibit. The chairman, disappointed, walked into the nearby movie theatre. Halfway through the movie, he jumped out of his seat and ran out into the street, excited. When he returned home to his bushes, he announced that he would be investing in the film industry.

Yegor found his spring very dirty and awfully dead. Still thirsty but unwilling to drink, he lay down to sleep in the burdock grove. When he woke up, cool

evening dew stuck to his eyelashes and bandaged hands. Three large gentlemen stared at him from above, while Uncle Kolya pointed his fingers. The citizen in the middle stood in jeans and a light jacket, looking like a well-fed, well-off adult version of Red. To his left and right was a pair of equally well-fed twins with fake-looking weapons. The one on the left was in a military uniform; the one on the right, judging by a first look, was a bona fide, prison-hardened gangsta.

"Yegor?" asked the one in the middle.

"Me," said Yegor, realizing that the man in the middle didn't just look like Red, it was Red. "You're Red."

"Help him up," commanded Red.

The twins gently brought Yegor to his feet. He walked closer to Red. They embraced carefully, slowly—even though they were childhood friends, neither had any idea about who the other had grown up to be. They got into a Jeep, drove to Red's big house, cleaned up Yegor, and sat down for food and drink.

"I went to Moscow after graduation, to a technical trade school. I was at the mahogany tree factory. A capitalist. I began to sell furniture, then houses, then land. But I visited the countryside often—my mom is over here. There were only eight old people left here, and even they were taken away in the winter by their families. One such winter, when there was nobody here, our chairman sold Lunino to some film industry guys. They were shooting an action film. Chapayev 3. They needed to film a scene in which the Chapayevs burned down a village. Like a contemporary view into the old war. So our village became a production prop. That's what they called it. They burned it for the movie."

"Chapayev 3? That means there were two more before it. I haven't heard of them."

"Fuck them, Yegor, who knows. I didn't see them, either. I came back in the spring to bring my mother here, and as we got out of the Jeep we noticed that there was no more village here. Only stoves—the old stone ones, like Khatyn. Should have written to someone about it—the fuckers. Although, whom to write to? There's only cemeteries around. We went to the central property but couldn't find the chairman. We, my driver and I, only found the agronomist and beat him up, because there was no one else to take our anger out on. So then I bought this land. To sow and plow, I imported some tractors and caterpillars, put some Chinese workers on them, and now I grow seventy hundred centners in one hectare. So there!"

"Good job."

"I restored Lunino, but it's only half its size. The club, the houses, the store, the barn, the trees—it's all there the way it was, but about half the size. I imported dwarf chickens, horses, cows. I even hired midgets from the neighboring philharmonic, some of which even look like the citizens of our Lunino. You saw—Uncle Kolya looks almost real. I feel bad for the village, but this way is cheaper. Lunino has no real business to bring in, and even half is enough for the illusion of nostalgia. I restored my house, with its prerevolutionary paintings and photographs. I'm just finishing up the park. You can see it in the morning, the alleys I'm working on, with little linden trees imported from Germany, contraband. They don't even have them in Unter-den-Linden, and the ones in Baden-Baden are terrible compared to mine. But these are real, one by one, with a matching size."

"How much did he sell Lunino for?"

"Fuck, Yegor, you wouldn't believe it—for a hundred dollars."

"Yeah, right."

"I swear to you. The chairman must have been promoted during the old regime—he either had an IQ of -20 or just didn't know the value of money. He was certainly not a businessman. He would've sold it for fifty, or even five, but we had no smaller bills. Now he labors in my gooseberry farms. He's not even a loser, he's a gullible fool, like the type the Gypsies trick out of their money at the train station."

XXXVI.

Finally, the ambulance they called for arrived from the city. They undressed Yegor and took off his bandages. It turned out that his right hand had lost a pinky and ring finger, and the left all of its fingers. They cleaned his head, abdomen, and hips, and found that one of his ears was missing. Underneath a clump of dirty bandages, where there should have been the auricle sticking out and listening, was instead a dirty black hole. His back was covered in cuts, his stomach and chest in burns, and, above his veins, track marks from needle injections.

"There's not a living space on you—you're like the Battle of Stalingrad in World War II," whistled Red, "Who did this to you? Where? I heard you're a key member of the Blackbookers. Is this what your gangster interrogations are like?"

Red hired the whole medical crew with all their equipment to take care of Yegor for the week ahead. Twice that night he sent the paramedic to the city for medications, and his personal driver to the city center. By the evening of the next day, the entire master bedroom was set up like a medical ward and filled with caregivers and two of the brightest doctors. Scientists from Moscow were on their way.

Red's wife and kids, upon waking up, got scared of the bandaged ghost living in their bedroom but by the end of the day had gotten used to him. Yegor slept, ate, and accepted medical help. He was dead but didn't show it so as not to spook the children and disappoint the scientists. On the third day he began to liven up, but still felt terrible, like a newly shaved dog. Red came in and placed a chocolate bar and a gadget on Yegor's ottoman.

"Found these in your jacket."

Yegor refused the Twix but took the mysterious device. It looked like an iPod but with only one button. Getting used to navigating tasks with only three fingers, Yegor turned on the device. The display flashed, from top to bottom, slow lines of red text.

"Perhaps, friend, you are in shock. And you don't remember what went down. It happens. The memory sometimes blocks unpleasant things. It blocks shame and horror. But you need to know the truth, friend. You had your fingers shot off, one by one. You screamed and cried. They cut you and burned you. When you lost consciousness, they brought you back. And then tortured you again. And you screamed and cried and even licked my boot. Where is your pride, your dignity? You embarrassed yourself and you embarrassed the Brotherhood of the Black Books. They will know the truth. They already know. You were injected with a number of substances. Some caused unbearable pain, others unbearable fear. Or cold. Oh, chemistry! Chemistry and life! You were also injected with truth serum. You revealed all of your most deeply embarrassing secrets. You talked such things of people you knew! We also wanted to shoot off another appendage of yours, you can guess which one, but decided that you would probably feel worse off still having manhood, so that you wouldn't forget about Crybabe and about her shame and disgrace. So that you would still want her. It's more fun that way, you see. My guards wanted to sodomize you, but were disgusted to see that you'd already been worked on by a knife and soldering iron. You got lucky, man, lucky! They left you three fingers on your right hand. Use them and remember how kind we were. If you train yourself, if you practice, you can shoot a gun with three fingers. Kill me, friend, or kill yourself.

Or live as much as you can after what happened, knowing you'd been had like this. What kind of miserable douche you are, caught on video. We'll send you a copy. Watch and learn all these new things about yourself. This movie, starring you, will be shown at private screenings in closed clubs. You'll have your fifteen minutes of fame. Be well (just kidding)."

The device shut off and Yegor couldn't turn it back on. It was disposable on purpose. The author of the message had achieved his goal—Yegor suddenly began to remember.

XXXVII.

He remembered:

The little chartered plane, flying like a wounded bird in the sky, landed in the Karagly airport. There, Yegor found himself amongst has-been soldiers, wartime aircraft, and brave invalids who were wounded in Angola and Afghanistan but called to duty again after having already lived through a civil war, several local bombings, and conflicts in the obscurest parts of outer Russia. These folk didn't smell like war: they gave off an odor of grandma's kerosene lamp, all burning and old. They emanated a summer dusk and the sad comfort of mature years—sad, mature years after the fall of the empire.

An abnormally calm taxi driver, who looked like Al Pacino, took Yegor to the central square, an area where abnormally calm citizens were desensitized by daily explosions, human flesh splattered on billboards, protests and gunshots in broad daylight, shootings of federal employees and innocent bystanders and children by the military and otherwise. Yegor immediately felt like a hedgehog in a trap. His anxiety had even paralyzed him into wanting to pray. All around, minarets and mosques were being built. He was so anxious to pray that he even considered going into a mosque; however, remembering that shoes were taken off inside and realizing that he was either too petrified or too weak to take off his shoes, he abandoned the idea. Nor did he want to get on his knees and crawl around a sacred space. Nor did he rush to call Strutsky. He figured eating something would calm him down. He went into Macshashlik, a fast food joint filled with aggressive salespeople pushing kebabs and kutabas. The tile floor, faux-gold wallpaper, and plastic mirrors were surprisingly clean, but the atmosphere was foggy and humid. It was filled with people, but there were many empty seats. The salespeople were proud and arrogant. They were quick to sell and had sly, shifty faces. They watched with contempt and did not give honest change. While monitoring their restaurant, they turned shish kebab on a roast and distributed it on paper plates. The majority of the people here looked like Al Pacino, even the Slavs. There were no soldiers here, but many people were armed. A diverse collection of facial expressions: there seemed to be looks of brotherhood—that is, a desire for brotherhood—but at the same time, there were looks of desire to shoot.

Yegor chased his shish kebab with a deliciously fake Borjom soda and noticed the liberal bomber Krisavin among the crowd of armed citizens.

"Yegor, how come you're here?" yelled Krisavin across the whole room.

"I wanted to hunt a little bit," replied Yegor with a shout, not moving from his spot. "How are you? What's up?"

"Not much. I'm only here for the day, to get explosives. These kids sell some good explosives," he gestured to his companions. "It's almost pure. In Moscow they'll rip you off and for twice the price you'll get 70% soap or clay or window cleaner. It's useless after an explosion, it's just smoke and zero quality gas. That's why I stock up here . . . it's far out of the way and sketchy, but the stuff is good." Krisavin yelled over the hall. Nobody paid him any attention.

"Do they even know who you blow up in the Moscow markets?"

"They know, they're aware of my beliefs. They know I blow up coloreds."

"Seems to me like they're not the lilywhite type."

"This is business, Yegor, no ideology involved. They also don't have their own war plants or military factories. Our army provides arms for them, which

they've used for the past twenty years. Globalization is peace without borders, and war without borders," Krisavin bellowed to the whole café, his milky pale face in stark contras to his companions' dark beards and black eyes. One of them picked up a phone, its ringtone an ethnic folk song. He stayed silent on the line for three minutes, then left the café without saying a word. The rest of the companions went with him. Krisavin followed suit, not declaring any reason why, not saying goodbye to Yegor.

Yegor started to think, "How embarrassing and shameful! This fat sack of crap, this little professor's boy, whose life should be so peaceful and good if he'd just follow his daddy's footsteps and stay in the charity of his academic department. Not a single reason to despise his destiny, his world, himself. And here you go, for no reason but chasing bullshit and fame on a despicable ego trip, in an effort to be different from everybody, from an unexplained hatred of non-Russians (even though he was married to a Georgian)—this Krisavin goes to do the devil's work, straight in the face of danger where there is terror and war. He goes to buy explosives from local scumbags and imports it halfway across the continent. He can sit in jail for ten years after that. If not more! He's gonna go off with his KKK compatriots, blow up a few kiosks and run away, leaving a bunch of people buried. And that's a life sentence right there. And it's all, if you get to the bottom of it, quite simple.

"And me! I stall, I curse, I weep, like a woman. Maybe they killed a woman that I loved, that I love. Most likely they did. Most likely I do love her. And they showed it to me on purpose. And me! Here I am thinking—I don't love her and she doesn't love me. She isn't worth avenging. Here's a thought, and when you get to the bottom of the thought, it's one-fourth truth and three-fourths cowardice. To not do anything at all, to not even live, to play dead from fright—it is the lesser path. Which, in all honesty, is better? To calm down and smile as you get fucked in the ass by everyone and their mother? And to believe that it would be better that way if the so-called better person were to stop avenging, stop killing, stop hating. To reconcile with yourself and refuse death. Or—no! No, take a gun and shoot all this bullshit to hell! Look at Xerxes, who obliterated a sea—perhaps in vain, but damn it was inspired . . . What does it matter, anyway? A life sentence? A death sentence? Death is like falling asleep, it's good. Although . . . What do the dead dream of? Who knows? Doubtful that it's worse than our daily nonsense. Here you're between a rock and a hard place. So you start to think. It's always like this—the more you think, the less you understand. And accomplish even less. Release me, stupidity! Go away, fear . . ."

Having gotten this far in his train of thought, Yegor, for some subconscious reason, went out into the street and dialed Chief's number. Igor Fedorovich picked up the phone immediately.

"Hello, Yegor."

"Hello, Chief. I just want to know, it wasn't you that killed Crybabe, was it?"

"This is Yegor?"

"The very same Yegor. And you lured me to the South using this KGB agent, left me to die at the hands of your local animals."

"Why would I do that?"

"I killed your father."

"Stepfather."

"He raised you since you were three years old, you told me yourself. These past few years I distanced myself from you and didn't share anything about my

life. It must have been like a betrayal to you. You couldn't forgive that. You did so much for me, you basically put my whole life together, and I never even thanked you properly."

"What? That's a load of crap. Empty words. Petty thoughts. I—forget it. I would never sink to your cowardly level, Yegor."

Chief hung up the phone. Yegor regained his consciousness. He called Strutsky. Soon he was at his house, where he explained himself and paid. And a little bit later—in his Jeep, approaching the worn boot of the cracked and disfigured Caucasus Mountains.

XXXVIII.

Strutsky, a Russian officer, was a volley of the war. He held thirteen years abroad, as was the cultural norm, and quickly became at home amongst strangers. Dipped in the characteristics of his environment, beginning to believe in Allah so that he wouldn't have to travel far to find God, he even physically changed his lilywhite snub-nosed physiognomy into that of the local character. He thought and talked local as well; he had forgotten almost all of his native language except for a few curse words, which he'd developed upon having two contusions: one in battle, one in a land mine accident. Because of this he took a while to get what people wanted from him. The stairs did not completely reach the attic in this man. Only when Captain Warhola's name was mentioned, he suddenly remembered everything and said, "Let's go."

In half an hour, already on their way, he added: "I'll take you." He didn't speak much on the road; only a reluctant smile when he was asked questions.

Occasionally from his burka-looking beard would come the whistle of a catchy Arabic folk melody.

The highway was worse than Moscow's, but better than most other places. The traffic moved freely, aside from an incident where they were cut off by a gang of Wahhabi bikers. This gang of fearless snobby cows refused to let anyone or anything go ahead of them. A few BTR cannons skirted their path. A shot from the cannon rang out and swiped Strutsky's ear. He took a large band-aid from his pocket, with no more urgency than swatting a fly.

"Are you okay?" Yegor asked. Strutsky just reluctantly smiled. Yegor, to pass the time, told Strusky a story, even though he didn't ask for it:

"Savin is an engineer. We used to go to school together. He has a cute wife. Also an engineer. Cute, but no more than that. Not my type. Savin was my friend. Was. I'll explain. One Saturday, as I often did, I went over to the Savin house with a bottle of vodka. They have a one-bedroom apartment. Me, a bachelor, destined to live in a communal apartment for good, took every chance I could to visit a loving home. That evening was ordinary: quiet and cozy. We ate and drank. Savin lazily scolded the Democrats, sometimes calling them Jews. I respectfully engaged him in scholarly debate. They let me spend the night at their house. I spent the night often, sleeping in the kitchen on top of some old blankets. Later, Savin woke me up. He was heating up a tea kettle on the stove and making a racket. I was barely conscious when I saw Vera, his wife, sleeping next to me. She was snuggled against me with her head on my shoulder. I was dumbfounded and frozen still; if I had been standing, I'd have fallen to the ground in shock. Savin didn't even look at me. At us, I mean. He left. The face he had on him—it was better that he didn't. I jumped up and ran after Savin to try and explain the situation. His wife did the same. It was a mess. But no one was at fault for anything. Savin remembered how, on one of their vacations last year, Vera got up in the middle of the night and stared wandering around their hotel. In the morning, she remembered nothing. Somnambulence. I explained that in my childhood I also suffered similar episodes and even scared my poor mother. To clear the air and forget the incident, we sat down to eat breakfast. The heavy silence was only interrupted by all of us desperately trying to convince each other that no one had done anything wrong. We laughed uncertainly. It was a savage breakfast. After the second cup of tea, I fled home, locked myself in my room. I began to feel flattered by the incident. Maybe Savin's wife

was in love with me, secretly, or so subconsciously that she didn't even know it. Maybe, in a way, I loved her back, or loved the way that she, deep down, loved me. It was raining, that Sunday night, and I was exhausted. I decided to go to bed early. I took a volume of Proust to read—my favorite sleeping aid. After reading a few chapters, I fell asleep. I woke up in the middle of the night because I was freezing cold. The rain had reached biblical proportions. I was dressed in my only suit. It was so wet that it seemed to be sewn from water. Besides that, I was sitting on a bench on some boulevard. Vera was sitting next to me. She was sleeping. I was embracing her. She was dressed in a pure white wedding gown, disfigured from the rain, barely recognizable. While I was processing this, she woke up. I was still embracing her. 'It looks like we're getting married,' I said to her. She was quiet. I continued making small talk: 'Where are the guests? Did they leave already? Or are they about to arrive? How was the cake? The drink? Did we say our vows yet? Or are we about to do that?' She said, 'I do not love you.' 'Me neither,' I answered. 'It's cold,' she said. 'I'll walk you home,' I said. We were on Gogol Boulevard. We had to walk a long way. That night, I caught a terrible cold."

It began to get dark. The winding highway narrowed, the mountains higher and nearly closingthem s in. Strutsky stopped the car; we got out.

All around them, the legendary Elbrus Mountains roared towards the sky with their pearly white peaks nearly scraping the stars. A serpentine pathway had replaced the highway and disappeared into the mountain's huge sides.

"Five thousand," Yegor whispered, remembering his school's geography atlas. Strutsky took a yellow briefcase out from the Jeep and dropped it on the wet rocks of the floor; it contained all kinds of knobs and wires, cables tangled up in lamps, resistors, transistors, tumblers, antennas, funnels, nails, speakers, microphones, even an old and useless-looking speedometer. Strutsky shone a lamp on this ungodly pile and got on his knees to mess around in it. He cursed for about ten minutes, taking out a few things he apparently needed. Finally, the pile began to shake, whistle, and shudder, like a radio circuit board without its outer body. Parts and dials stared moving. Little lights illuminated.

Strutsky smiled reluctantly. He wrangled out a pair of headphones from the pile, put them on under his officer's cap, and yelled indistinct words into it. It seemed by his intonation that he was trying to communicate with someone or something. First he yelled, then went quiet, then yelled again. Then quiet again. Listening. Satisfied, he shook his head: "Waiting. Close by. Go on the path. Then you'll see. Behind Elbrus."

He hadn't spoken that much Russian in a long time, and he paused to marvel at his hidden knowledge of the language. He kicked the mess of wires and tools back into the yellow suitcase (on which Yegor saw a sticker belonging to the Ministry of Medium Machine Building), and hauled it back into the trunk of his Jeep, and got into the driver's seat.

"You don't need to. Go there," he said, satisfied with his Russian, and quickly drove away.

XXXIX.

Yegor followed the path even though he knew it was trouble. He was sure now that his anxiety was real; it wasn't a phantom or paranoia. He knew absolutely that someone had been plotting his demise for a long time and had caught him in a trap. It had begun. He wasn't uncertain anymore whether Crybabe was worth it; he knew she wasn't. And so he walked on and on, driven by stubbornness and eerie obedience, soldiering on towards a war whose origins were forgotten but whose consequences remained.

The Elbrus Mountain threw him around its terrain: sometimes into its freezing cold waters, as cold as Yegor's Spring, and other times onto piles of crushed stone. One time he dropped his bag of money and had search through barbed bushes to find it.

He walked towards the dark; then he walked within the darkness. He got to the other side of the mountain and was greeted by three short, fat, long-haired men wearing machine-gun belts.

"The Khazar, the center of the universe," Yegor announced, as taught by Strutsky.

"The Khaganate, the superpower of the world," answered one of the fat men. "You Russian, Yegor?"

"Yes."

"You search Kafkas Pictures?" another fat man asked in a thick accent.

"Yes."

"Give money."

Yegor handed over the bag of money. The fat men, one by one, took turns counting the money. Then one of them took out an invoice from his machine-gun belt and apathetically filled it out while his two colleagues looked the disheveled Yegor up and down. They spoke with one another in the same language that Strutsky used to yell at them from his assembled radio device—clearly, the Khazar language.

After the invoice was filled out and each fat man had signed it, one of them declared: "One billion manats."

Finally, after all of this bureaucracy was finished and the finances were settled, the Khazars led Yegor through the highlands, where on a small rocky field was a sunlit helipad. They blindfolded Yegor, put him in a helicopter, and lifted off.

When they landed and took his blindfold off, they were in a large village located on the precipice of a large and dark ravine. Instead of the sky, the area above their heads was covered by an enormous cracked surface of a deep azure shade. Below, between the white- and red-bricked houses, was a madly winding river, mirroring the cracked mountain above. They walked on the natural bridge of the white stone paths and did not see a single living soul.

"Where is everyone?" asked Yegor.

"War," answered one of the Khazars.

"Always war," cracked another Khazar. "Man go war. Woman go basement."

"Where are the children?"

"There with woman."

One of the houses had a crooked neon sign which read, "Macshahlik." The restaurant was empty except for a German shepherd and a giant fly, who were chasing after each other and bumping into shit.

The fattest fat man yelled at them; they calmed down. They walked through the hall and opened the sticky door to the kitchen. There, in the middle of the piping hot pans and steaming stoves, women cooks in dirty aprons were cooking smelly food. The fattest man yelled at them; they skedaddled. Through the heavy mist of garlic and fried onion, the hellish smoke from the stoves, the shoddy lighting of the fluorescent lamp, it was impossible to see anything. The Khazars then sang out in unison:

"Khagan, oh, Khagan!"

"Yes?" answered the Khagan in a voice as wide and smooth as the roar of thunder after a bolt of lightning. He was unseen behind the curtain of smoke in the kitchen.

"Russian Yegor. Billion manats. Director Mamayev doomed."

"Yes."

"Kafkas Pictures."

"Aha."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah. Aha."

The Khazars nodded, bent down, and took Yegor by the sleeves to the exit. Their meeting was over. They led Yegor to the second floor of the building and into an annex containing only a "bed" made out of sheepskin that smelled like rotten lamb stew.

"Sleep bed," advised the fattest man.

"Where is Mamayev? Where is Kafkas Pictures?" Yegor demanded.

"Sleep. We talk later. When night. Now go sleep."

XL.

Yegor lay down and obediently went to sleep. Expecting a dirty trick, he was not surprised wake naked and bound by rubber belts to an operating table in a large, windowless room, clinically lit and clean. There were medical cabinets full of knives, tweezers, scalpels, needles, and syringes. There were also tubes full of strange, brightly colored liquids. Amongst these medical tools, a handful of Berettas ruined the harmony of the room and betrayed the fact that it was not a hospital. He winced under the brightness of the overhead lights, and his naked body was being ogled by the large eyes of movie cameras.

"Good morning, Yegor Kirillovich," someone's cheery voice ran into the room. "I am Mamayev, director. Welcome to Kafkas Pictures! Glad to see you here. I know you've wanted to see me, as well. So let's talk—you know we have a lot to talk about . . ."

A young man with the classically beautiful face of a thespian, who had probably played on the stage the likes of Dorian Gray or Griboyedov's hero Chatsky, stood above Yegor with a pair of sparkling tweezers in his slim, delicate right hand.

"Well, why did you come look for me, tell me?" smiled Mamayev, a sneakily life-affirming smile. "Then I will tell you why I am so happy to have you here. So, so, so happy."

"Is Crybabe alive? Where is she? Did you kill her?" Yegor thought he'd roar the phrase, but his weak voice mooed instead.

"Why are you addressing me so informally? We didn't ever drink in Bruderschaft, did we? I prefer you address me with more formality, that's just what I'm used to," giggled the director. "What's your deal with Crybabe? Who are you to her? Neither of you love each other."

"It's an important matter."

"I can't tell you what's happened to her. So you watched this movie that she was in and dropped everything to go look for her, knowing the risks. But what makes you think that she is suffering?" Mamayev looked at Yegor judgmentally, a dark optimism behind his eyes.

"The scene in which she was tortured and killed was too real," Yegor muttered his idiotic reasoning. "It wasn't a game."

"Special effects! You have an antiquated view on art. The computer can com posite anything without the need of actors. Soon, we won't need actors at all."

"She was suffering. She was hurting, it was obvious by her face. That face . . . people make that face when they are dying."

"Here I won't argue with you. You're experienced, after all, in knowing how people look when they die," yelped the artist. "You know better—you have killed people. You should know, technically. So here's a few versions of the story for you. First version—this is a movie and nothing more. Just an extreme, avant-garde, special-effect-laden movie! Right now Crybabe could be somewhere in Sardinia lying on a beach and shooting the shit with some producer. But this version doesn't satisfy you. Or else, why would you be here? You're looking for a tragedy. Here's a tragedy for you. Like I said, no one killed Crybabe. She is my new lover and is sitting in the other room right now, having a good time watching what I'm filming through monitors. So? Are you happy now?"

"Then she should come in here and show her face. And then no problem,"

said a hopeful Yegor.

"You don't believe me. Well, you don't have to. And why do you even need to know, anyway? Knowledge is only knowledge, but in the unknown is hope. Have I not convinced you? How about a third version. The comedy: there's a club of people who like to watch the deaths of others. How the dying lose their humanity and plea pathetically for the stupid little lives. And not only do they like to watch, they like to watch obnoxiously, brazenly, ceremoniously, in a room full of people. They like to watch this in a crowd, their audience within the audience, who see this as an ultra-cool, avant-garde game—just a movie. Naturalism and realism is their aesthetic. Perhaps even their ethos. Of the hundreds of people in this crowd, only ten or twelve of them know that it is, in fact, a real movie with unstaged rape and death and torture scenes edited in. A documentary, you can say, or guerilla filmmaking, live scenes. Live and dead. If that is possible, of course . . . but then again, what isn't possible in the world we live in? So what if Crybabe is dead? Raped and tortured and strangled. What are you going to do about it now?" the director turned away and walked over to the medical equipment. He forcefully sorted through the scalpels, syringes, and knives.

Yegor began to realize that he was screwed; not just screwed, but royally screwed.

"Why am I here?" he asked.

"You wanted to come here," joked Mamayev, "The Khazars took a million US dollars' cash from you, a sum that you put on my head. They sold me to you. But then they sold you to me for ten times that amount. Not because they value me more than you, per se, but because money talks—they were called 'unwise Khazars' by the great Russian poet Gumeliyov, but they've turned out to be quite wise indeed. You see, why have a million dollars when you can have ten million? We bought each other from them, paid in cash, but which one of us finishes the other first is our business, not theirs. In their own way, they made an honest deal."

"Honest deal," Yegor repeated mechanically.

"And now I'll tell you why I'm so happy to see you. May I?"

"You may," repeated Yegor, feeling beyond faint; he felt his soul escaping.

"We've met before," said the director, fiddling around with steel tools, "But you don't remember. I was a nobody. It was 1988 in the Plakhanovo dorms. Room 56. A party in memory of John Lennon. You were a shining star, an intellectual poet. You could recite Ginsberg's poems and Tim Leary's essays almost word for word. You had long hair and a head full of ideas. Beautiful girls paid attention to you like you were a bodhisattva. You don't remember? You had many nights like this. Here I was, a lame, invisible idiot from the bookkeeping department. Stella was there from the Moscow State University, what an enlightened babe she was. Your Crybabe was nothing compared to her. Sorry, but it's true. Stella looked at you like you were a god. And you treated her like dirt, like she was a filthy common rat. You don't remember. So one day she comes up to me and asks . . . Oh man, I spent a whole year trying to figure out how to talk her, much less get her to notice my existence. She was my dream girl. There was no one else like Stella. Tried to put myself in her line of vision at every opportunity, to no avail. And then, that one night, she looks at me, notices me, and actually sees me for the first time, and asks, 'What do you think? What's your name?'

"'Albert—you can call me Alec.'

"'What do you think, Alec, is it a metaphor, like Yegor says, that the comparison between the Japanese and European poetry just muddles and messes up our idea of beauty altogether, or is it just me thinking aloud . . .'

"I never got to hearing her finish her question—well, to be exact, part of a question, because then you, Yegor Kirillovich, interrupted me and declared, 'Stop, Stella. Mr. Albert cannot judge us. He is biased. Just the other day I saw him buy some albums at the record store: Golubie Gitari, Plamya, Leisa Pesna. He's not on our level. Talk to me, instead.'

"Your words, Yegor Kirillovich, I remember to this day. And hers. She only turned to me and asked: 'Is it true, do you really listen to those pop groups?' And she turned away. She turned away forever. The whole group, twenty or so of your intellectuals, laughed at me that night and continued making fun of me for a whole week. You don't remember."

"I don't remember. And I don't understand what that means or how it leads to this," said Yegor, who truly did not remember.

"There must be revenge. Retribution. You will pay for humiliating me that night. I have seen so many things, so many horrible and crazy things in my life, dear Yegor Kirillovich, but I cannot forget that night. It is beyond me. I wanted to forget so badly—it's child's play, it's bullshit and balderdash and nonsense and stupid. But I can't for some reason. When honor's at stake. That thirst needs to be quenched," Mamayev almost sang out in a clear baritone.

"What do you mean, quenched? Retribution how? In what way? Are you sure you aren't mistaking me for someone else?"

"I'm not mistaking you. I'm going to torture you, dear Yegor Kirillovich. I will edit you properly. I'll torment you and your soul. I have been watching you for a long time. I'm not in a rush. It was me in place of Crybabe who talked to you online and invited you to the screening."

"I guessed that already," said Yegor.

"And your Crybabe, I won her over. I put her in my movie and showed it to you and waited for you to come look for me. I'm going to take my time with you today. I want to torture you for a while. Here, look, this is a pair of pliers." Mamayev turned back again to face Yegor and showed him the glossy steel instrument. "These are for ripping things out. Teeth, I mean. With no anesthesia. In this tube is a liquid that, when injected into the vein, makes one feel as if they are burning from the inside slowly until the pain makes them pass out. Then another is injected to wake them up. Why am I still talking? Talk, talk talk . . ." Albert gestured dramatically with his hands. "I can't satisfy you with words . . . talk is cheap. Let's begin, Yegor Kirillovich."

"Why don't you just kill me now and get it over with?" Yegor panicked.

"No, no, nonsense, dear, you'll live the rest of your years. Although . . . You know, I am an artist of whims. Perhaps it will be my artistic choice to torture you to death, or my aesthetic interest to let you go after a while. We'll see . . . And maybe I'll cripple you so bad that living life will seem worse than death, because I hate you so much. Ah, how unpredictable, impossible, unreliable I am!" again in a faux-dramatic manner Mamayev batted his eyes and flailed his arms. He added, in a grand voice, "Let's get down to business, Yegor Kirillovich. Lights! Camera! Action! The rest is violence . . ."

XLI.

What happened afterwards was clear from the gadget that Yegor received from the trucker. Yegor didn't want to think about the details: how he got from the South to Perm, from Perm to the Caucasus, whatever . . . that was a tertiary concern.

Yegor went into the living room, where in one corner of the room the man of the house was studying a boring and weakly transmitted football match, eyes peeled to his television set. In the other corner, amongst photographs of Red's relatives and children hugging him, shaking his hand, posing with their taxidermied animals and fish, was an old black and white picture of young Red with a young, laughing, and vulgarly good-looking physiognomy of Albert Mamayev hamming it up for the camera. This photograph was clearer and larger than the others. Close-up. Albert and Red, old sergeants—tan, with self-satisfied post-war grins. Army medals emblazoned with the letter "M," and other medals with ambiguous symbols.

"Who's this?" Yegor asked into the photograph.

"Where?" Red, instead of the photograph, answered from the other side of the room. He got up and walked towards Yegor. "Oh, this guy. Alec Mamin. Nicknamed 'Mamay.' We served together in Afghanistan. Weird dude. He dreamed of going to the Moscow State Cinematography Institute to be a filmmaker. We started a business together after the war. But we couldn't make it work. Actually, no one could make it work with him."

"How come?"

"He was too tough. He killed unnecessarily. Even in Afghanistan, he would shoot innocent civilians. Shooting was okay in combat but . . . Other than that, he was smart and brave. He read books and poetry in English. A bright dude on one hand, but also a cruel bastard. Why do you need to know? You know him?"

"Yes. I know him now. When was the last time you saw him?"

"Three or four years ago. Don't remember. Why?"

"Do you have his address?"

"Yeah, I should have it somewhere. At least a phone number if not an address." Red gave it some thought. "Why do you need it?"

"You know," Yegor said, grinding his teeth. "Just because. Whatever. Let's watch some football."

"All right, yeah, football."

Red pointed to a comfy chair and gave Yegor a bottle of imported beer. For about eighty minutes the home team puttered around in formation, kicking the ball into knees, chests, and arms before scoring a final goal that sealed their victory. Red yelled something about the Battle of Kursk and Gagarin, and Yegor began to feel such an excellent and happy buzz that his euphoria brought him out to the garden on a bench where he sat within the most wonderful collection of linden trees. The sun was setting in the most beautiful way between the symmetrical trees (truly, Red had planned a spectacular landscape). There was a strange black spot moving over the sun in the distance—in a few minutes it got a bit bigger, as though a small planet was coming out from the sun towards Yegor. He looked closely and realized it was a human silhouette coming swiftly towards him, but he was too happy and euphoric to think too much about it.

As the human got closer, it became clear that it was a monk, dressed in black robes. Yegor was still too euphoric to be surprised at this visitor. He knew from

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the classics that monks were encountered more frequently than common sense would have it, and every so often he'd spot one out in the world. The black-atired monk arrived at Yegor's bench and said, "Hello," in a clear, female voice. The voice of a nun.

"Hello, Sister," Yegor replied cheerfully, "You've come to visit us?"

"Depends on who you are," said the Sister.

"I'm Yegor."

"No, I've come to meet someone else. But it was nice to meet you." Her voice sounded so familiar.

"Nikita Mariyevna! It's you!"

"Was," said the journalist, who he hadn't seen since their meeting at the Diamond. "Now I am Sister Epiphany."

"But you were always going to the synagogue?"

"Yes, and it was at the synagogue, Yegor, that I had a realization. A vision. A voice, actually. From a chandelier. It told me to cut my hair and find Jesus. Find the truth. Get to the ultimate destiny."

"Ok, yeah. Wow. Not everyone can pull that off. So where are you traveling to?"

"I walk all around. To sacred spaces. Nearby, there is a sacred spring. I have come here for a piece of bread to eat."

"Sure, sure, Red will give you bread. I saw the spring. It's very dirty."

"You saw not the spring, but the dirt."

"Hmm, okay, yeah, perhaps. You must be fearless and unafraid of death to go off like this. I understand—no, I don't—no, I do. I understand you."

"There is no death, Yegor."

"How do you know?"

"Knowledge only leads to more knowledge, nothing else. The unknown leads to hope, faith, and love."

"Then you need to destroy science, technology, civilization, and culture. To not know anything."

"What are you saying, Yegor! Cities and books were burned by those who knew what they wanted, who had the audacity to know how the world works."

"Then why, Nikita—I mean, Sister Epiphany—why can I see the roses and lindens through you? Or am I seeing things?"

"No, you're right. Don't eat anything, don't read anything, don't listen or consume anything that is a human effort. Then you will become enlightened. Stop thinking about death and start thinking about love—you will feel the light, become like light."

"It's easy if you try."

"Easy, easy. Indeed. Say hello to Sergeyevich and Chief."

Nikita Marievna glided away quickly in the direction of the house. Yegor was still so euphoric that he did not notice how her feet hovered above the ground, and realized that he hadn't gotten a good look at her face.

"Hey Yegor, I'm sorry, but who are you talking to?" Red came up to Yegor and woke him like a sobering alarm.

"With Nikita?"

"Which Nikita do you mean?"

"The nun."

"What nun? Brother, you're totally fucked up."

"I'm not totally fucked up, but almost there. My brain feels like it is covered

with a straightjacket, but a few normal thoughts can still get out. Take them while they are still coherent . . . Look, all around, it is not life, but a scale model of it. A vulgar, useless imitation of life. The inside is bottomless and empty, while the outside is pieced together with whatever materials happened to pop up—ash, bone, dirt, rubble, whatever's left after death. Just as the citizen of the forest pieced their huts together with dead trees and branches, and the citizens of the desert did the same with sand and fertilizer, we too put together life from local death so that we don't need to move far for it. The most important part is not that we can make eternal life from death, just as we can make light from dust, but that eternal life itself exists. This is the most important part; the one we model our own life after, the one we imitate. This means that we see it, that it's not as far away as we could imagine, just beyond our event horizon. We just need to stop using death to attain it. We should at least stop killing and torturing each other. It would be good also if we would stop lying to one another, and being sketchy, or cowardly, or judgmental, or envious, or greedy . . . After that, it's all petty. Mainly, not to kill and not to torture. It shouldn't be that hard. I, for one, thought that without a gun, you can't make any money. But it's not like that—you can do well for yourself and come to power without using a gun. You can, you can. We need to stop. We need to live a new life. Right now. If not everyone—then at least me. How can one attain immortality when they are a dealer of death? Life should only produce more life. How is it that we want eternal life, but we cause death."

"What the fuck, Yegor, man?" Red asked after a minute-long pause. "Hang on. I'll be right back. Keep yourself together. For five minutes, don't go crazy." It seemed to Yegor that Red was gone for quite longer than he said, and he began to feel that happy euphoria when he saw a dot coming from the sun again. But then Red came back and the dot was gone.

"Here, this is for you. This is for what he did to you. I figured it out. Mamay did this to you. It's in his style. Even back then, he was shooting people's fingers off. They kicked him out of the army for brutality. Even in Afghanistan! We had some crazy motherfuckers in our station, but he was the worst. Here, this is his address, phone number, and those of his closest friends. It's from three years ago, but it should still be good. Get him. You have the right. He did save me from an exploding helicopter in Afghanistan, but you are still in the right. Kill him, man. He is, however, a pretty savage guy, and he can kill you first. Maybe that would be for the better if he did kill you—how can you live now after what he just did to you? Here is Mamay—you go get even with him and then wrap up all of this death and shooting business and then live your life without it."

Red put a folded sheet of paper next to Yegor on the bench and covered it with a cooked lobster—to protect it from the wind. He left to go walk around his alley of lindens. Yegor looked around shiftily and, when Red was a safe enough distance away, quickly snatched the paper like a little thief and hid it in his pocket. His head cooled down and the blast of euphoria faded. He began to feel the same way he felt, calm and warm, as when his grandmother would gossip on the terrace with her neighbors about their other neighbors. The evening was as gentle as a summer breeze, cozy and warm. Peaceful. He soul calmed, too. It untangled and took its place in a crook of the line of destiny. He was charged with melancholy and nostalgia. Mamayev had to die.

The next day, Yegor was in Moscow.

XLII.

Half a year, perhaps a year at most, passed. Yegor came into the role of a cripple and outsider, and felt awkwardly misplaced in it. His wounds had healed but his body was still covered all over with scars and bumps. Before he went to sleep, he touched them while praying and cursing.

The same way his body was crippled, his soul turned crooked, torn, upside down, and inside out.

Nastya, seeing her three-fingered, one-eared dad, fled in horror from him and sobbed wildly in his former wife's arms for three days, after which she was sent to a rehabilitation center in the Swiss Alps using the last of her dad's money. Yegor would receive text updates from her psychotherapist in German and would attempt to translate them himself. The only cure for her hysteria, the messages read, was to not see her dad. Even pictures and videos of him were not recommended. The doctor insisted that the girl was required to refrain from not only seeing her father but also having any contact with or about him, period. It should go away with time, in a few years, maybe ten if it was an extreme case.

Captain Warhola, who started living a new and empowered life for herself, decided to cut off Abdalla's artificial feeding mechanism of life support. In black funerary garb, she asked somebody up there to take care of his soul and to take it to the farthest places it could go. Then, dressed like a civilian, she went to see Yegor. She knew that he'd returned from the South not completely right, but she interrupted him on the phone, declaring that she could love him no matter what had happened to him. She insisted he doesn't know her as a woman, doesn't know her physiology. Women love old and ugly and crippled men; even Stephen Hawking's wife was with him for a long time. When she first saw Yegor from the doorway, she continued to repeat those same words. However, when she got up close and really looked him up and down, she had to run to the bathroom and throw up. After that, she left completely, couldn't love him no matter what.

Sara's father had printed pirated versions of the official Russian translations of the Harry Potter series at his publishing house but had refused to share the income with Chernenko Igor Fedorovich. The Chief watched as all the markets, legal and illegal, made obscene amounts of money off of the series, and he knew what he had missed. Their friendship was ruined. Considering the likelihood of Igor's vengeance, General Warhola had the Chief imprisoned. The Brotherhood of Black Books had it coming: all of its members were, one by one, locked up as well. Yegor understood that, any day now, they would come for him.

The Elder Warhola did not enjoy his billionaire status for long. Someone in high-ranking circles snitched on the corruption. Bribery, extortion, blackmail, retainers, threats; state investments in their wives, families, and relatives; arresting the people in power, betraying the old system, getting rid of all the people who worked for them; control over streams of income; commercial justice; patriotism; all of the old system had become meaningless and antiquated. Something new was replacing the old. The KGB generals, frightened though they were as the elections approached, knew that this new-wave regime was just as corrupt—their money and power could mean only that. The generals decided in a meeting not to jail all of their opponents' VIPs at once, but one by one, to show that their battle against corruption would be constant.

They decided to turn in the men in alphabetical order, so that it would be fair.

Eventually, they reached General Warhola. He ended up in the same cell with Igor Fedorovich, whom he'd locked up in the first place. The Chief had already achieved a level of respect and authority in the prison. As was his habit, he formed gangs in the prison, not only comprising his fellow inmates, but their family members, their lawyers, their guards, even the prison chefs. This way, Igor Fedorovich and Warhola could schedule a fight without worrying about the guards. They fought in the prison warden's room. Crowds came to cheer for their respective sides. On Warhola's side were military generals; on Chief's side were former members of cultural, educational, and economic advisory boards, as well as the writer Molotko. They took bets on who would win the fight.

After mauling each other for some time, they became friends again. Other inmates spread rumors that they were more than friends, but the wardens of the prison were so touched by Warhola and the Chief reconciling that they punished anyone who tried to ruin or besmirch their friendship, a rare union of two tender, imprisoned hearts.

But not everyone had a happy ending, even on the outside. Sergeyevich, the Governor, fell in love with an eighteen-year-old friend of his niece, and left his wife and three mistresses. He exchanged these fine, full-figured, and sober-minded Miss Piggies for a barely legal, public, and tacky wedding. He went to his county less and less; more and more he went to Ibiza and Paris. His new wife demanded money before becoming intimate with him, and she only accepted Euros. Sergeyevich's tender, aging heart, though, had grown soft, and he understood that he was old enough that this love would be his last. He paid without arguing, even as she told him that he smelled like her grandpa and that he was wrinkled everywhere. Pressured, Sergeyevich went for plastic surgery. Even though he set her up with cars, wines, gowns, artwork, jewelry, homes, and trips, he was still taunted by his new wife. His spending increased. He pawned his favorite chemical plant, robbed his country treasury, and borrowed money from criminals. Of course, he had no money left for poetry when it all went to the maintenance and satisfaction of his marriage. Thus, Yegor lost one of his major clients.

Even Ktitor failed; he overheated in a sauna after drinking too much and went into apoplectic shock. He and his legacy, gone. All of his criminal businesses went into the care and leadership of his assistant, Abakum, who had no taste for poetry or literature. It was over.

XLIII.

That disaster was followed by an economic crisis. The happy-go-lucky American financial sector had collapsed, and vicious millionaires from every country came to feast on it like baby birds at a feeding, mouths open to gorge on the remains of Wall Street. The Russian elite, brought to power by pretentious thugs and billionaires, also deflated. The beautiful models lost their charms, their sponsors and sugar daddies lost their finances, their homes, their cars. In this unfortunate time, people skimped on everything: basic needs, bells and whistles, cocaine and designer drugs . . . poetry and prose were far from their thoughts. Pirated Mallarme or legal Lermontov did not sell. The markets fell, and the sources of Yegor's income disappeared.

Already considering his new life without violence, disinfected and sterilized by righteous destiny, Yegor saw that his time to transition into a peaceful future had come. By the time he decided to try to become a property manager, he had just stopped having nightmares about his murdered partners and annihilated competitors. Alas, anyone that Yegor encountered had reverted back to the gangster lifestyle of gunshots, interrogations, tortures, and murders. People stopped saying "futures" and started saying "fuck this." Russia had picked up its weapons again in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The nation became melancholy. The churches, mosques, and synagogues were filled with vehement prayers that the cost of Russia's natural oils would go up.

Yegor, who had lost his usual income, was all the same unable to find any unusual ways of income. He rented half of his home out to a manipulator of financial pyramids from Chicago, Illinois, who was hiding from U.S. Marshals with two suitcases and a duffel bag full of American dollars. Since this American, Mr. Dow, eventually became unreliable with his rent payments, Yegor was forced to find money in robbery.

Given his remarkable aptitude for literature and reading, he most often robbed bookstores and libraries. The profit was very small, so twenty-five-year-old habits started coming back to him, like smoking unfiltered cigarettes, drinking bootleg vodka and impure spirits, spending fifty dollars on sex, eating canned beef from China, wearing the same clothes for days in a row, sleeping in until noon. At night, if he didn't leave to rob a library, he'd stare at the TV in the kitchen with his fifty-dollar girlfriend, or with Mr. Dow, who would come into the kitchen and steal a few pieces of cheap sausage or freeload on Yegor's shitty liquor.

Now looking older, dimmer, and dumber on the outside, Yegor recognized his downhill path, but tried to focus on what business he could get. He stopped listening to the silence. His soul bubbled, grumbled, grunted, like a bloated belly; his heart and brain were torn, as well, by cold and frightening and viciously hungry forces that he could barely see or grasp. Heaven and hell were fighting over him, angels and demons deliberating over where Yegor was to stand.

Yegor came back from Lunino swearing revenge on Mamayev. But his bodily wounds took a long time to heal and, during that time, his desire for revenge cooled. He thought instead of making peace, of jumping away from the wheel of Samsara, of prolonging death and fighting for eternal life. Of course, he would not forgive, but he would try to forget and avoid any further sinning. As long as he refused to answer a torture with another torture, there would be one less torture in the world. Thoughts like that made him feel calm and light.

His enlightened state dissolved one night when he dreamt of Nastya, Crybabe, and himself. Nastya, with her arms outstretched, was handing him the bill of her Swiss psychiatric treatments. Crybabe was weeping in his arms, her hair mopped with tears. Yegor's hands were crippled and he was ridden by grotesque disfigurements.

The dream called to him in a mysterious, intangible voice: "Are you a coward? What are you going to do with us? What are you going to do about yourself? Should I call you a gangster expat? An illegal immigrant doing dirty work for no money? Should I cut off you ballsyou're your remaining fingers and ear and throw them in your face? Take away your Mercedes? Shut your mouth with coins! Shut your thoughts about making peace with bills! Ha! You might even endure this, you disgusting dummy! You're no turtledove! Wake up! Feed the crows with your dirty liver and go kill Mamayev! Wake up and kill him!"

That morning, Yegor started looking for Mamayev's residence. He approached the chief of his district police for lessons on how to shoot a gun in self-defense with his remaining fingers. His fury no longer consumed him; now, it motivated and embraced him. Yegor readied himself for war. He was inspired by Saint Michael and the angel January, by Batman and Robin, by Antonina Pavolvna and Father Tychon, who praised God to be merciful and deliver him from evil. Yegor dreamed of getting delivered far away from evil, but he had nightmares about Nastya and Crybabe almost every night. Then he repented and fell into the peaceful lessons of Lev Tolstoy. It was on and off for him: to kill or not to kill. That was the question, and its fluctuations bothered him.

He was going through extremes: hot and cold, but never fully immersed in either one. He was left in a lukewarm stupor. Not evil, not good, just weak. He rushed and paced between dark and light, good and evil, but in each place his conscience bothered him, ghosts attacked him, nightmares tormented him, shadows spooked him. He tried to find solace in the center and avoid making a decision. The golden middle evaded him: no matter where he went, he was thrown by an invisible force into a different corner.

In order not to be annihilated by his own thoughts, Yegor organized his personal battle by the days of the week. From Monday to Wednesday he would hunt for Mamayev, learn to shoot with his invalid hands, train his muscles in case of a physical attack, light candles for Saint Nicholas and Saint Maria, and ask them for help in killing Mamayev, visualizing his long, sweet, scary victory.

Thursday through Saturday he begged in agony for the same Nicholas and Maria to free him from Satan's grasp and help him reconcile with his peaceful self. He would go to holy Krishna temples, eat only grains of rice, sing chants, meditate, take care of elderly men at the hospice, and send positive vibrations to Mamayev, his spiritual brother.

On Sundays he would rest from the whole thing altogether. He waited and hoped that during one of these resting periods the answer to his problems would reveal itself to him and tell him what to do and which side to be on.

XLIV.

Yegor's search gradually yielded results. He got closer to finding Mamayev: he'd discovered his routine of visiting summer house villages northwest of Moscow, how he sent five rounds of idiots to scout and rent for him, careful not to get caught. He'd rent three homes at once and sometimes visit them without a guard as not to arouse suspicion. He'd live in a one for a few days, another for a different weekend, another still for a week or a month. He'd move as soon as something displeased him; if he had an ominous dream, he'd change homes. Sometimes he'd live for months in Moscow with no problems. He was both obvious in the public eye and untraceable. He'd pick his actors and actresses, negotiate with film distributors, organize secret screenings, make trouble, burn money. He was right under Yegor's thumb . . . almost there. Almost dead.

Yegor was close, a few steps away.

But the closer Yegor got to his nemesis, the farther off his dream seemed.

One Sunday afternoon, while eating a customarily quiet supper, he received a flood of telephone calls and e-mails. The search was over: these were the last fragments of the map of his last battle. He saw for certain where this beast slept and lived, how to get to it unnoticed, how to trap it quietly. He saw the floor plan of the beast's den, saw its various routines and daily habits, saw when it would be defenseless and open to attack. He decided which gun he would use and where to throw away the burning barrel. He memorized the words that Albert needed to hear before his demise, the words with which he would torture him until a merciful bullet ended him for good.

The path was clear; the job was easy. He knew that he wouldn't be able to do anything or go anywhere. He finished the rest of his lukewarm penne, then watched SpongeBob Squarepants on Nickelodeon late into the night. He did not get enlightened; quite the opposite, he descended into dimness. He did not feel any better, didn't feel anything, actually, except for apathy and an inability to kill, to torture, to hiss with hatred, to poison with disgust, to burn with cruelty. He did not become a saint. It all ended quite quickly. It was not his conscience that stopped him and shielded him from sin; instead, it was his plush and sleepy laziness, which covered his brain like a comfy film.

The future did not forecast love, nor did it foreshadow death. No one died. Mamayev was alive. Revenge was nowhere to be found. Light and love triumphed.

After laughing along with SpongeBob for a while, Yegor calmed down and, for the first time in many months, fell asleep peacefully and quietly, like a child.

XLV.

The next early morning, before waking, Yegor had another strange dream. In this dream was a nameless dwarf, who accompanied Yegor to his parked car, in which Chief sat. The car was parked by the pharmacy where Yegor had first become a Blackbooker, the day he shot Fedor Ivanovich and walked around Moscow with blood on his Adidas sneakers. Back then, Yegor was young and healthy and handsome.

This gnome orbited around Yegor, following him and chasing him through streets and squares and plazas and pavilions. He cried, "Sir! Sir! Don't kill me, I won't do it any more!"

"The king's son doesn't have to stoop down and talk to some SpongeBob, much less kill him," answered Yegor.

"Take you me for a sponge, my lord?" the gnome complained.

"Exactly! Get lost!"

"Don't kill me! Please have mercy!"

"Get lost!"

"How can I get lost when I haven't convinced you not to kill me yet, o sir, don't kill me!" The little man caught up to Yegor.

"Get lost!" Yegor picked up the pace only to notice a gun-shaped heaviness in his distorted hand.

"Don't kill me, please!" mumbled the director Mamayev, crawling into the luxury carpeted stairwell of a grandiose suburban home. Yegor found himself chasing after Mamayev, shooting him in his athletic back while dressed in nothing but silk underwear printed with airplanes and yachts. Mamayev's eyes and mouth twisted with pain and suffering. Killer and victim ascended the stairwell to the master bedroom. After every shot fired, Albert would claw at the new wound and giggle manically, howl like a devil, beg for Yegor not to end his life. He was followed by a viscous liquid trail, and Yegor, careful to not slip and fall in it, held on to the stairwell railing with his nub of a wrist.

Yegor regained his consciousness and thought, "Holy crap! What am I doing? I don't want to do this! I don't want any of this!" He remembered the sleepwalking habits of his youthful self, and the Nabokov story where the protagonist strangled his wife while they were both asleep.

"It's just like Nabokov, Yegor Kirillovich, this is just like in Lolita!" Mamayev crumpled, sliding into bed and getting lost in its fancy pillows, sheets, robes, blankets, curtains, and comforters.

"No, it wasn't Lolita, Albert, it was a different novel, I can't remember the title, but the protagonist's name was—"

"It was Lolita, it was definitely Lolita, my dear Yegor Kirillovich," the director insisted, "In that novel, Mr. Humbert and Mr. Quilty are fighting in the bedroom—"

"Oh, you meant the setting, the bedroom, well, sure, that's correct," said Yegor, continuing to shoot.

"Crybabe, save me, tell him to stop shooting at me and leave me alone!" screamed Mamayev, digging a snoring sleeping beauty out of the bed.

"Leave me alone, Alec, and stop making a racket in the middle of the night. Can't you see I'm trying to sleep? Have some decency." Crybabe rolled over on her other side and snored even louder.

"It was a special effect all along," Yegor told himself. And he shot Mamayev, who attempted weakly with his useless body to hide under the foot of the bed, in his cold, green, frog-like heart. It was done.

His mind was now free of Mamayev, free of Crybabe. He felt he had relapsed, like an alcoholic away from drink for months who has suddenly decided to leap from sobriety again.

"It was the last time. I won't do it again. Why did I do that? What the hell kind of coward am I?" thought Yegor.

"Albert Mamayev, are you all right?" whispered Yegor. Albert did not answer, either because he was dead or because he was mad and didn't want to talk.

"Maybe he is still alive. I have to see. Maybe it is not too late," Yegor, talking to himself, grabbed the nearest phone in the room and, with his three fingers, dialed 911.

Yegor felt like his troubles were over, and he sat on a corner of the bed. Then he decided to leave. In the doorway, he lingered, turned around, and looked at Crybabe and Albert. He looked at himself. Walking out the front door, he bumped into two giant EMTs. They didn't even notice Yegor, just ran right through him and up that grandiose stairwell to the master bedroom.

Immediately upon exiting the door, a sea of wavy and boundless light beamed in all directions, into eternity. It swayed, like a tall overgrowth of sleepy wheat against the Lunino sky, flowing from the very edges of time to the very edges of space. No shadow was cast in its presence. Before entering its illuminated waves, Yegor reached out and touched the light—it was tangible, warm, and silky.

The first person who Yegor encountered within this light was Nastya. She took his hand, half a head taller than he. He understood that he had regressed into the form of a five-year-old child, and that his regression into the dimensions of eternity would go even further back.

Yegor and Nastya walked around the whole world, encountering children everywhere. They saw the ones who were to become Red, Olya, Antonina Pavolvna, Yegor's mother and father, the kerosene man, Nikita Marievna, Crybabe, Igor and his stepfather, Sergeyevich, Albert, Sara/Yana, the Khagan, Ktitor, Nastya's mother, Musa, Savin, Zaleha, and everyone, everyone, everyone . . .

Everyone was alive. Everyone was well. Everything happened once more. Everything was reversible.

A Note on Chronology

The present-day events of *Almost Zero* are interrupted by time jumps that the author introduces abruptly and often splits across several consecutive chapters. To aid the reader's experience, the editors of this translation have included, below, a brief explanation of the story's chronology.

Chapters I through V take place in the story's present.

Chapters VI through XI flash back to Yegor's ancestral history up to his initiation into the Blackbookers.

Chapters XII through XXXII return to the story's present, picking up where V left off.

Chapters XXXIII through XXXVII move ahead in time, occurring after an incident that is missing from both Yegor's memory and the novel's narrative.

Chapters XXXVIII through XLI flash back to reveal this incident.

Chapters XLII through the end return to the story's present, picking up where XXXVII left off.

Nino Gojiashvili is a freelance translator and editor working in Russian, English, and Georgian. She is interested in cultural and social implications of totalitarianism, as well as its linguistic influence over a given language. Her research focuses on Joseph Stalin's persecution of 20th century Russian poetry, specifically, poet Osip Mandelstam's lethal struggle to maintain an independent poetic voice amid the specter of Russian social realism and repression of the 1930's.

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"Vladislav Surkov remains one of Russia's most influential political officials . . . A brilliant tactician with keen survival skills . . . He has worked to solidify Russia's political system primarily through his manipulation of the national political party system, regional politics, and media . . . Surkov's complex personality affects his two-pronged view of the U.S., which consists of envy mixed with contempt . . . Surkov appears to maintain a high regard for his intellectual capabilities [and] view[s] himself as an unrecognized genius."
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Seizing on a climate of instability and a ruthless new capitalist economy following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yegor Kirillovich has turned the manipulation of truth into a public relations enterprise. A gun-toting member of a literature-obsessed gang, Yegor reprints forbidden books, hires desperate poets as ghostwriters for corrupt public figures, bribes critics and journalists, and spins fake news from the real. But Yegor's ambitions, and his conscience, are thrown into chaos when his ex-lover invites him to see a new film that may or may not have captured her murder.

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Vladislav Surkov, born in 1964 to ethnic Russian and Chechen parents in Lipetsk Oblast, is Aide to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin. A student of theater and economics, Surkov served as First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office and writes fiction, poetry, theory of art, and song lyrics, often under his alleged pen name, Natan Dubovitsky. Widely considered to be the Kremlin's chief propagandist and the architect of its "managed democracy," Surkov is currently banned from entering the European Union and the United States of America.

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