

Vladimir Anderson

# HOMO LUDUS

action-packed philosophical novel



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18+

Vladimir Anderson  
**Homo Ludus (English edition)**

«АВТОР»

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## **Anderson V.**

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The faceless God of Memory is so humble that no one knows his name. The god of war, Huitzilopochtli, is so tired of war that all he does is seek peace. The goddess Kitsune, who received so many masks of other people that she forgot her own face. The gods are not perfect, but they are still gods, and they rule over people. And, of course, they share this world among themselves. The action-packed philosophical novel “Homo ludus” reveals complex issues of human awareness in the modern world and man’s relationship to himself as an independent person. "Homo ludus" by V. Anderson is our answer to "A Song of Ice and Fire" by J. Martin and "American Gods" by N. Gaiman.

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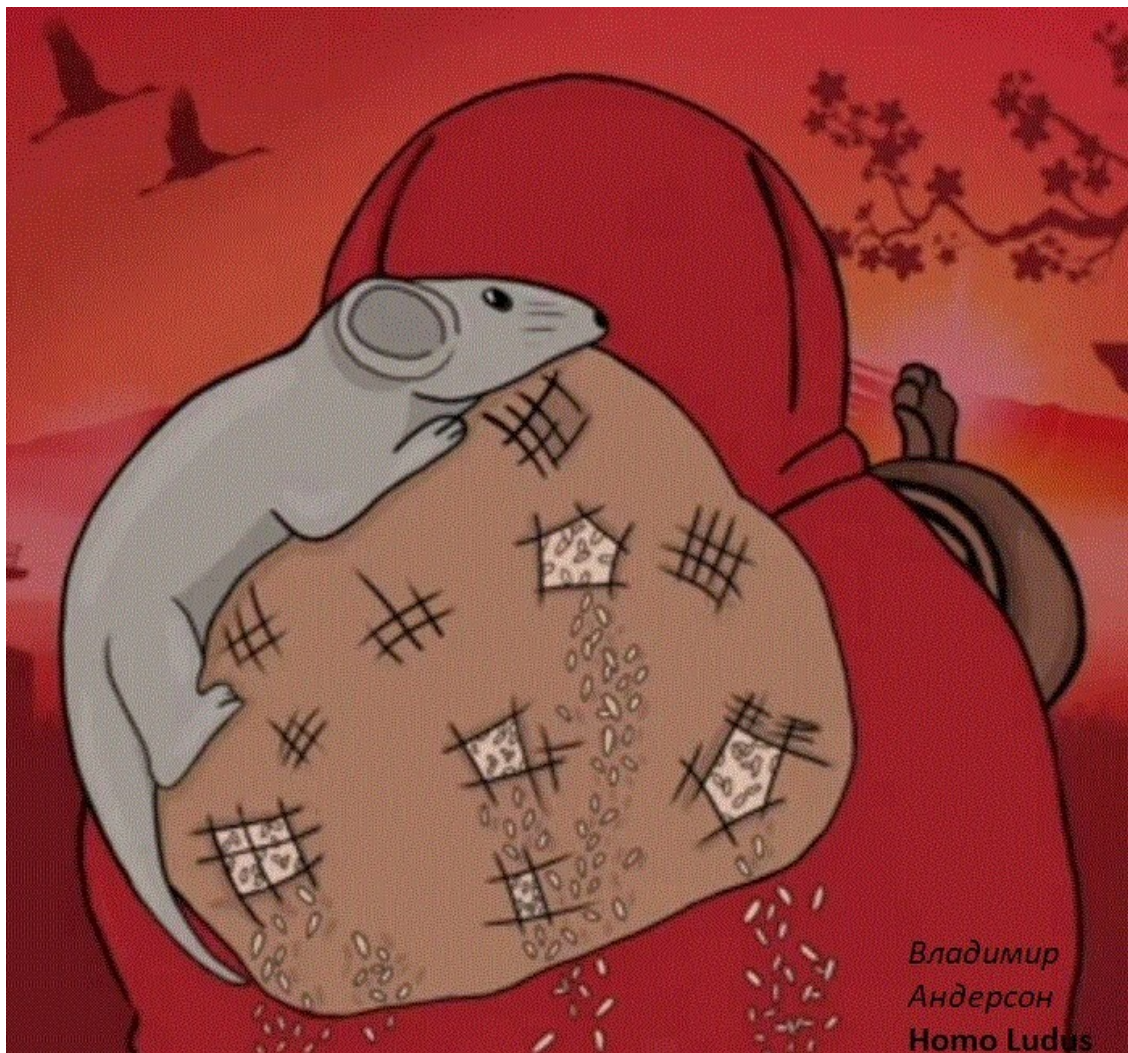
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# Vladimir Anderson

## Homo Ludus (English edition)

### Prologue

Daikoku, the god of happiness, for the first time in his entire life, found himself in a country where people were unhappy and happy to suffer in their lifetime, hoping to get what they wanted after death. This was very strange to Daikoku. In his native Japan, people knew that they were not entitled to happiness, but they also knew that some people did get it. Yet Daikoku himself was always walking around frowning disgruntled and miserable. No one should know how much happiness all people have now. After all, there is no more expensive item, and everyone will want to take it. And everyone will want more. And then he would need so many resources that he never possessed... That is why the god of happiness was known as the greediest of all gods.



But in the bag of magic rice he carried on his shoulders there was an old and wise rat, the main symbol of wealth. And it was this rat that gnawed holes in the bag of rice. And the rice fell to the ground, bringing people happiness they thought they didn't deserve. And no one but the rat and Daikoku himself knew that not a single hole had been chewed by accident, and not a single rice had

accidentally fallen – all the people who received the magic rice had been chosen in advance and very carefully. And not because of how much happiness they deserved, but because of how much they were ready to preserve that happiness.

And among Krakozhia's people, Daikoku saw very few people who wanted to be happy, and even fewer who were willing to cherish their happiness. But what surprised him most of all was that the tiny fraction that had happiness was soon to lose it as well. Such things Daikoku knew in advance of all the gods. Because he had seen how much happiness people would lose. Because happiness was easier to lose than anything else.

## Gustav

Gustav was almost a thousand and fifteen hundred years old, and in all his life he had never seen the likes of him living so long, and living off the misery of others.

He was born in Ireland, where the local people were once called Celts and worshipped the goddess Danu, the ancestor of the gods who ruled the island. He did not like the religion, where the people who believed in it did not believe in love as something omnipotent, but rather just considered it one of the manifestations of human feelings.

At first, Gustav killed more out of necessity than out of pleasure, and did not even feel that there was anything special about it. But centuries passed, and Christianity appeared, and then its offshoots, in the form of Lutheranism, and, most importantly, Calvinism, a branch of Protestantism in which God's main purpose was to glorify him. In Calvinism, God was not good and was not going to save everyone from the hyena of fire, He initially determined who is chosen and deserves the right to rule, and who is insignificant and must suffer misfortune and humiliation, and everything that happens, it is only then to glorify His great Will and Might. The chosen ones fulfill this Will.

Gustavus considered himself such a chosen one, following Calvin's tenets while exterminating anyone he could deem worthless.

When this movement was still in its infancy, Gustav traveled to Switzerland, took part in the trials of "heretics" (and who is a heretic, defined no longer the Catholic Church, but Jean Calvin), who were still burned at the stake, but for the exact opposite thoughts.

Gustav did not like to burn, but to talk to the condemned, to give them hope, even if it did not matter what it was – maybe understanding or sympathy, that life had not been in vain – and then to take away that hope by secretly reproaching them and making them feel guilty, thus draining them of life even before their death agony in the smoke from the fire. He liked this game of good and truthful much better than the simple accusations of dissent and spiritual error, the purpose of which was simply to consolidate the new anti-papal power and the new power's self-consciousness of its success in a single country.



Gustav thought that even these new inquisitors did not fully understand the significance of their position. They only wanted to accuse someone and condemn him, thus showing their power, not realizing that the man, while dying, realized that he was right and pure before everyone and, above all, before himself. But to squeeze all the juices out of him, to confuse him and force him to die in despair from the hopelessness and emptiness of his life – this is what Gustav wanted, and this is what he achieved.

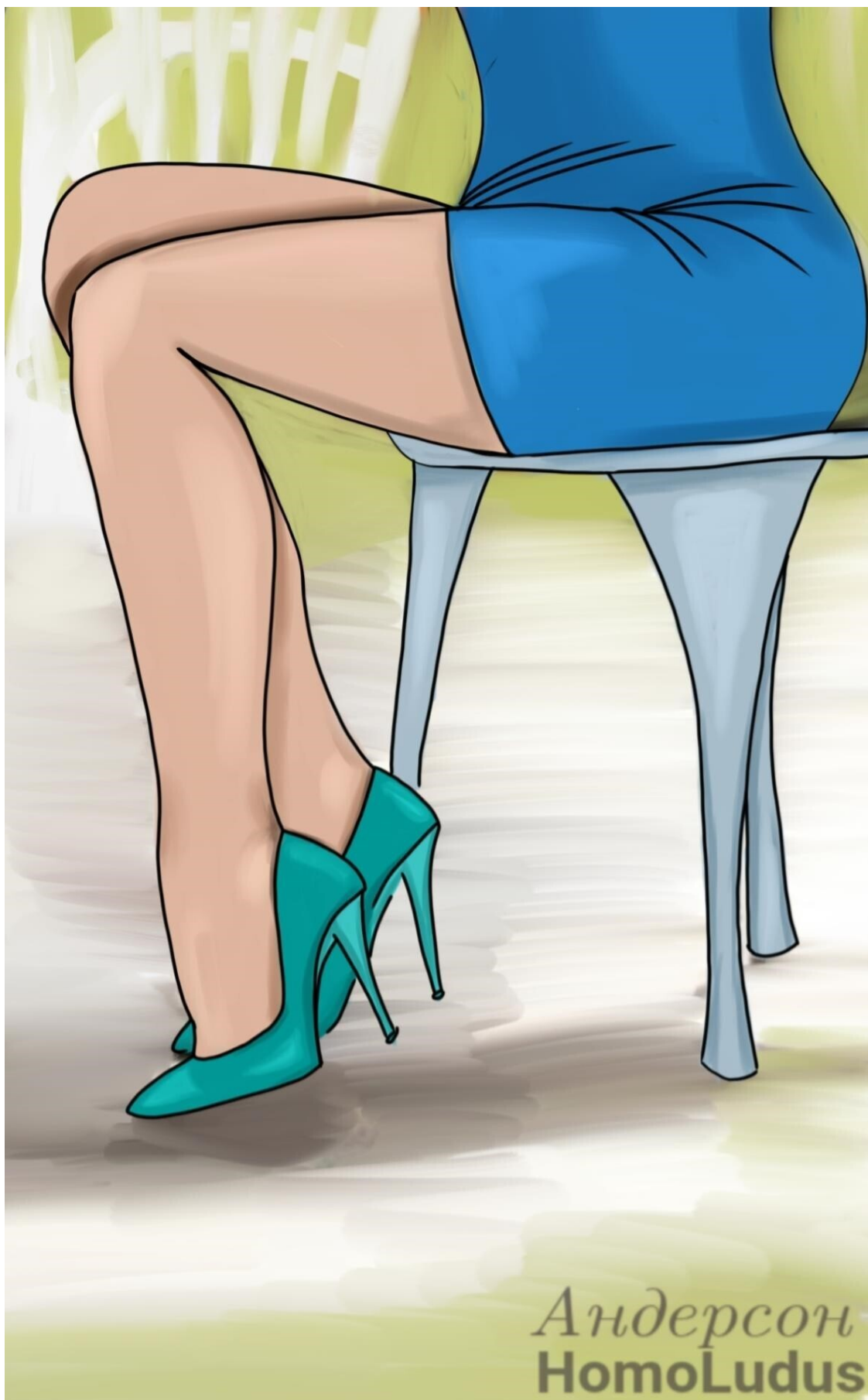
Soon, disillusioned with Calvin himself, he only became more convinced of his ideas, supplementing and reinforcing them. "Children are filth," Calvin said; the vampire disagreed: "Children are not filth, they are a gift. They are one of the sweetest gifts that can be given to a man along with indescribable joy, only to be taken away and given to the same man to cause him even more indescribable and impossible suffering and to drive him mad with his own newfound emptiness.

Gustav had an appointment with a new acquaintance today. Her name was Catherine. Her father was a French diplomat, so she had spent her entire childhood in a semi-closed boarding school where half the children didn't speak Russian. As an adult, Catherine began writing, and now several magazines in the capital published her articles about family, children and dogs. The latter was her favorite, and she loved dogs of all kinds, and, above all, for their real and sincere love for their master. So far she had raised only one short-haired dachshund, but in the future she wanted several more. She didn't know whether it was fear of responsibility for another living creature or indecision in choosing a second breed – there were many reasons, but in fact she just didn't dare to do it. This trait was very strong in her character – she was always afraid of making mistakes, and, apparently, because there were few mistakes in her life; there was no place to make them in vain. Her father was always there to make sure that her life was always full of the right choices.

This Saturday she was invited to lunch by a new acquaintance who had given her a wonderful interview the week before last on the subject of raising and training Labradors. She liked Gustav not only for his distinctive Western European appearance and courteous manner, but also for his amazing

knowledge of dogs in general and Labradors in particular. She had never heard so many new and interesting things in one conversation, and the editor-in-chief had already decided to put the article in the center column of the next issue. In addition to all this, Kathryn was fascinated by Gustav's lively and radiant attitude to life, which she thought he was beginning to imbue her with.

She was the first to arrive. She sat down at the end table and ordered a glass of water. Right now she was most worried about her shoes. All week she had been thinking about what she would wear for this meeting: a long, tight light blue dress with a small neckline and covered shoulders, the silk so thin and tight that the patterns on her bra could be seen from the cleavage, and sheer stockings that made her look stunning. She had done her hair in the morning so that she could look at the curls of her long black hair before she went out. Everything was flawless, but the shoes, turquoise high-heeled shoes, perfect in this case, slightly in need of repair. Catherine rarely wore them because of the very thin stilettos, and the last time she'd walked into a crack in the sidewalk, which had caused her to fall into a crack in her shoes.



the stiletto began to stagger, and when it was destined to fall off one could only guess.

It was too late to change again, so she just went out early, so that she could walk to the car and get to the café.

Now, as she waited, the water seemed like some kind of soothing drink. The water moistened her throat, cooled her a little, gave her patience.

Gustav showed up. Tall, handsome. He wore a suit and a red silk shirt that suited him strikingly, with little buttons that looked like magic rubies from foreign fairy tales. He was radiant.

"Hi," Catherine smiled and stood up for some reason. Her chest was tightening, and her heart was already pounding so hard it felt like it was going to come out of her ears.

"Hello, Katherine," Gustav's voice was confident, and his welcoming eyes seemed to be able to calm even a half-stricken, hungry lion that had just defeated a pack of hyenas. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it gently, noticing that the girl was numb.

"Will you sit down?" – Gustav smiled. – Get it right, there's no truth in feet, of course, but I just can't sit down before you."

"Ah, yes," Catherine laughed lightly, immediately sitting down and placing her palms together straight in front of her, holding the edge of the table with her thumbs.

"Been waiting for me long?"

"Well, how long ago... a couple minutes." – Her right hand absentmindedly flicked a lock of hair off her shoulder and down onto the table. Her right foot, which was wearing that same half-broken stiletto, lifted slightly at the heel and after a centimeter to her right went back to the floor.

"You know, I kept worrying I'd be late and make you wait."

"Uh, no. What are you. I almost just got here." – replied the girl, and then involuntarily glanced at the table. On it stood three empty water glasses, smudged a hundred times and on all sides by fingers and with lipstick marks on the edges. "What a fool! – she thought. – Now he'll think that I'm either lying or drinking water like a camel... And then there's that hairpin... I've already beaten off half a spit trying to get it to fit. I can't believe I forgot about that. Lipstick, too. Half of it's still on the glasses. It's so cheap. I must have wiped it off my lips. What am I supposed to do, make up in front of him?!"

"How's your article? Is it all right?" – Gustav asked. His whole appearance showed that everything was fine, and his every word was filled with calmness and confidence.

Catherine smiled, "That's all right... In fact, the editor was thrilled. They've decided to put it in the main section in the next issue... I've never met anyone who could tell me so much about anything in such an interesting way. How do you know so much about dogs?"

Gustav smiled back, squinting his eyes slightly. It looked very beautiful and appealing. It was as if he were sharing sunlight and warmth in a gloomy ice cave with people who had forgotten what joy was.

"Kathryn, it's a long story... But, you know, in a nutshell... A few years ago I was living in Canada, near Montreal. I had a small house right next to a forest, and right next to me a canine center. One night I couldn't sleep. I don't know why. I just couldn't sleep. I thought, well, I'll just go for a walk. Get some fresh air. It's better than just lying in bed... I got dressed, went out. And then I hear some yapping. I see a puppy. It's just a little puppy. It's lying on my fence. A Labrador puppy. It's a little girl, pale-colored. Apparently, ran away from this center... But I could not give him, or rather her, of course... But I had to go to them for advice all the time. And the specialists there turned out to be, you know, what kind. I've been doing it ever since.

The girl listened to him with her mouth open. It was so pleasant to realize that it had happened by happy fate. That it was by chance that a man had become engaged in the work that was really meant for him. And that this chance had finally brought her and him together.

"Where's that dog now?"

"Catherine. With me, of course she is. Where else... Oh, and I have a favor to ask of you..."

The phone rang.

The girl frantically reached for her purse. Halfway through the contents, she finally remembered that her cell phone was in a separate pocket. Talking would be unnecessary, but it was her father.

They began to speak, of course, in French. Catherine thought it was possible to make it an advantage, naively believing that Gustav did not know this language – in fact, she only helped to dig her own grave.

"Well now..... – thought Gustav. – You talk to your daddy and you'll get a little Trojan dog... Dream on. You've found the love of your life... You have no idea what you really deserve for what you've done. I'm sure you won't be thinking about the stiletto on your right shoe... You're so sweet looking, you've blown a lot of people away; it's a pity you can't call them to watch your finale – it would be much more effective... I'd do your father separately, but he's not worth my time. Such a beauty, he probably considers one of his main achievements in life: neither breasts, nor lips, nor anything else operated on – they are real. I would have noticed a fake right away...".

As if she felt a mental demand to hang up the phone and, telling her father that she was in a cafe with a guy she was madly in love with, and with whom she seemed to have already fallen in love, she turned the phone off completely. "It was daddy who called. – The girl spoke in an apologetic tone. – I told him I was with my friends. So he wouldn't ask too many questions right now. He knows my friends, they don't like to wait for someone."

"What kind of woman likes to wait." – replied Gustave, and thought. – "Why are you lying out of your ass? You could have just said you were in a café and busy. How many people think that lying makes the truth more convincing... Just ask about the request, and I'll be done with you for today."

"Yeah. You're right. I guess not at all... What did you say about asking?"

"Ah yes. Thank you for reminding me. That request doesn't like to wait either. She's in the car." – Gustav stood up and extended his hand palm upward to the girl. After a stage pause, Kathryn squeezed his hand in hers, stood up and met his eyes quite closely, no longer smiling. She had never felt so calm and good in her life.

"I deserve this man. – Catherine mentally decided. – All my life, I've had nothing but wusses, and nothing works out. It's all about him. I want him in my life. He'll be mine."

Throwing two large bills of money on the table, Gustav touched the girl's waist with the words "let's go" and directed her towards the exit and himself followed.

A little away from the exit, in the yard, was his huge black Cadillac Escalate. When he got behind the car, he opened the trunk, and there in a small animal bag was a small, dark-as-night Labrador, less than a month old.

"What a miracle! – Catherine whispered emotionally, covering her mouth with her palms.

"Yeah. He's three weeks old. He was the last of the five to come out. You could say he's my youngest grandchild. And, to tell the truth, probably the most favorite... I gave away the others to friends who had been asking for a puppy for a long time, and I decided to keep my favorite one. But now I'm on a business trip, and someone has to look after him. You can take care of him, right? It's only 7 days while I'm away.

"Well I have no words. He's so adorable. Are you kidding me? He's so adorable."

"Am I really going to tease you, Catherine. Of course I mean it. You would be doing me a great favor."

"What are you! Of course I agree! How can you refuse him!" – It seemed to her already that this was the happiest day of her life.

"Thank you, Catherine. I wouldn't have time for him at all right now. Too much work while I'm away."

Gustav offered to drive her home, and she agreed. Even though she would have to go separately to get her car, which was parked across the street from the café. It was important to her that she didn't come home alone that day.

During the ride, he told her about his time in Africa, in Zanzibar, about the local customs, and what the island was now, and that if the opportunity arose, it would be possible to go there.

Gustav was actually there in 1896. He managed to persuade Bargash, the local ruler, to come into conflict with the British Empire. He himself had long wanted something more, but his remaining intelligence had kept him from doing so until his weakness had been found.

"Look at what you're leaving behind. – "Gustav kept telling him. – You need power. Seize it, then expand it, and we'll help you with that... You know the whole point of an inheritance. What will you leave to your children?"

Bargash was only the Sultan's brother and had no right to the throne, and that suited him fine, but he had a favorite son, who was only two years old, but was worthy of much more than doing someone's bidding.

Realizing that Bargash would wait for his brother's natural death, Gustav poisoned him himself, and on the appointed day a coup took place, supposedly supported by the German Empire.

The British squadron stood in the roadstead off the coast, knowing full well what to do – Gustavus told them that if they had to fight, let them fire on the palace on the north-east side, the new heir would be there, killing him would avoid many casualties, as he was the only thing important to the new Sultan. The second volley buried the imaginary reason for war – the little boy was dead, and Bargash, having lost the most precious thing in the world, never recovered. Everything he had dreamed of was gone in 387 minutes of the shortest war in human history.

Gustav had several new estates in England and a disproportionately greater pleasure in his own importance and significance in life. He would not remember it now and would not tell Catherine about the beauty of the island of Zanzibar and its sultan's palace, but he wanted to enjoy inwardly again the abilities of the poison, which he poisoned the real sultan – no color, no smell, no symptoms after taking it; the man died simply in sleep, ceasing to breathe, and the time was easy to set the number of drops according to the weight of the victim. "A gift to the Sultan" was the name he gave to the substance.

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Gustav wasn't in a hurry to get this meeting over with for nothing. Then he had another.

Semi-officially, he was advising the owner of a real estate company, Mienkom, and today he had to oversee one very important policy change for that company. The fact is that this organization, despite its popularity in the capital, practically did not pay taxes – most of the income was derived from the hidden margin (the seller gave his object for the amount of N, and the buyer took it for N + Y, being absolutely sure that it is just N, and Y simply kept Mienkom), and most of the employees were not even officially employed in the organization.

Gustav, who introduced himself as the chief analyst of the American real estate broker BlackStone, had the task of increasing Mienkom's market share and solving the tax issue at the same time. The plan was already in place; all that was left was to give out some advice.

"Greetings," Vladimir Arkadyevich, Mienkom's "chief of chiefs," shook hands with the newly contracted new development consultant. Obese, massive, with rich experience, he was far from delighted that this handsome man had to pay 15 thousand dollars a week for 2-3 appearances in the office, but the few recommendations he had managed to give had already had an effect, and this on the one hand, of course, pleased, but on the other hand very alarming. He had seen enough in his life and he wouldn't say it had ever been easy: once he was a shop manager at a regional woodworking plant, then he became deputy director, then he got a place as head of the city executive committee of one of the cities of this region, and after 1991 he got a controlling stake in the plant, where he used to be a shop manager, then, persistently developing in business in the 90s, he became a member of the board of directors of Mienkom, and having come such a long way, he saw in Gustav, who looked 30 years younger than him, a man whose insight and foresight seemed much greater than his own. It was dangerous. He remembered well how he had dealt with those who were less farsighted than he.

How he had ruined those people's fates, framed them and sent them to prison or to feed the fish. His entire road of success, strewn with corpses and other people's grief, strangely enough not only gave him complete peace at night, but most importantly, kept him sane in the light of day. He realized well that he could be deceived in words, but never in calculations. Numbers will always tell the truth, you just have to know how to calculate correctly. And check your own calculations. "If you relax, you'll be eaten up by strangers. If you trust your own people, you won't even notice that you've been eaten" – that's what he thought long ago, when he took the owner's place. All these rules applied to people like him. He didn't know what to do with the stronger and smarter ones – for the time being he negotiated in such cases. But all these cases concerned people who had already lived their lives and had long ago lost their irrepressible thirst for profit. He had never done business with a strong, intelligent and yet young man. That was what frightened him about Gustav.

"There is one, some one good reason why this man is engaged only in counseling – thought Vladimir Arkadyevich. – And it's obviously not money. He didn't feel directly threatened by him, but something told him to be extremely careful.

"Good afternoon, Vladimir Arkadyevich," said Gustav affably. He had long ago grown tired of gaining trust here and padding his price with penny-pinching advice. At first he wanted to just take them to jail, but then he decided that would be too predictable for this kind of activity, and he wanted to be original. Mienkom had several projects of which the whole company was very proud: two elite cottage villages in the region and one residential complex in the Golden Mile area. They were to be developed, promoted, famous people were to live there, and then everything was to be ruined. Gustav had already made several recommendations for changes in design and materials, and had brought his connections to the PR of these objects among the "stars". The only thing left to do was to wait for occupancy, and then we could begin.

"I have one central proposal," Gustav knew he was still expected to do something new and unexpected and yet successful.

"Yes. And what is that?"

"All 3 of our main 3 properties should be occupied in the same week."

"But it's...?! Gustav, you know how it is."

"Of course."

"They have deadlines. State Commission, handover, keys, repairs. It's all been coordinated for a long time. It would be good just to be on time there, not to move anything..."

"Yes. But I'm talking about the future... Today, Mienkom is a serious big company. That's good. But not great... Or maybe it is great... One week. On Monday one unit moves in, Wednesday the second, Friday the third. Everyone will be talking about it. The company will rise to the top, become a monopoly. In a year's time, Mienkom will already determine the price of real estate in the capital, not some market".

There was a sense in what this young Irishman was suggesting, Vladimir Arkadyevich thought. The advertising campaign in such a case could indeed be built quite conveniently for himself: three objects of such a class in one week was something that had never happened before. And it was quite realistic to pull two of them under the general terms, but the third one, the one in the city... The state commission had just started there, and it would take 3-4 months; to reduce this term to 1 month would mean to give so much money to so many people that the risk became not so high, but fatal.

Payoffs were commonplace in this business, but it was one thing to pay off so that no one would bother and create unnecessary problems, and quite another to actually hire the same people to speed up the process to the level of approval in the Government House. If one of them refuses, instead of accelerating the terms of the state commission, you can get criminal terms, and who knows what the highest levels of the Ministry of Economic Development might get.

"No, Gustav. – replied the old man. – 'I suppose you know that LCD "House on the Embankment" won't have time to pass GC by this time. Three to four months.

It's too dangerous to accelerate. Let's stop at two objects."

"Okay. I only offered a suggestion. – Gustav nodded. – 2 out of 3 isn't bad.

Some sort of legacy will be quite bearable even with that."

Gustav knew what to kill in this man. He had a daughter, intelligent and calculating, to whom he wished to leave his empire. While she had been studying in England, and now she had arrived after the session; in six months' time Mienkom was expected to blossom, and the management of the company was to be handed over to her, even if nominally. And of course they wanted to hand over more than just a successful company. Vladimir Arkadyevich had been thinking about it for a long time, but there was nothing to make a breakthrough on, nowhere to make the leap that would take the company from the first among equals to the absolute leader. His new advisor had shown him such a chance a couple of minutes ago.

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In the evening Gustav had to go to Shambala, a nightclub in the southwest of the capital, where he had a date with Oksana, a former glossy magazine model and now a realtor for Smart House, an elite residential real estate agency. She sold apartments about as well as her body in the photos. And though most clients made deals through her because they wanted to talk to the smart hottie, it had to be said that she knew a lot about luxury housing, and could show an apartment as if she were going to throw a party in it with whatever was to follow.

She said openly that she had never slept with a single client, but only hinted at it. She loved the way men watched her stilettos, her long legs, her ass, wanting to please her, only to watch it further, losing their rational train of thought.

She herself was interested in men like Gustav: handsome, intelligent, and able to hold his own, not drool in the presence of a woman like her.

Today she expected to dazzle him. A bright red dress, fully revealing her shoulders and with a slash cut from the bottom of her knee to the top of her thigh. With her plan, he wasn't going to be able to resist.

She booked a private room for them on the second floor: a long couch, a table, glass windows with a view of the dance floor and karaoke.

It was just the two of them. Gustav was sitting on the couch, Oksana with a microphone stood right in front of him. She had said several times before that she wasn't ready to sing this song yet, but after she had almost completely drunk a bottle of Asti Martini, she turned on the song "Sun" by Ani Lorak.

"...it's like parting with your soul -

To live without you..."

Oksana sang. She thought she was perfect for the song. You have to be in the right state of mind to say those words. And her looks, too. She thought she was perfect, especially her legs. She often liked to say to herself, and sometimes out loud, that maybe she had a bad temper, but she had the most beautiful legs. She finished singing and sat down next to Gustav. He was completely calm, as if what had just happened didn't concern him personally, as if he were just evaluating an actress at a casting.

Placing his hand on the back of the couch and lightly touching her shoulder Gustav brought his lips close to her ear and said softly: "And do you often sing this song?"

"No." Oksana smiled slightly, not turning her head. – Very rarely... She's my favorite."

–

Only on special occasions? Or when you're in the mood?

"On special occasions when the mood strikes." – She nodded, smiled, and turned her head. Her eyes glistened with desire, as if she were ready to tear at that gorgeous dress, to cling to it, to cling to it and not let go until she owned it. "I liked it. – Gustav said affirmatively and calmly. – Tell me about yourself,

Oksan. Why do you like clubs so much?"

–  
I don't know... Here you feel free. You can do what you want... Everyone is your own... In general, I go to jump around.

–  
I guess my parents were always fighting.....

–  
Yeah! But they quickly got used to my personality.

–  
Which one is that?

–  
Angry. Yeah, angry. Everyone used to ask me why I broke up with my boyfriend. I'd say, "Well, would you like it when your other half comes home at 3:00 in the morning drunk?" They all said, "No." I said: "Well, he didn't like it either." – Yeah. Frankly.

–  
What's there is there.

She spoke from the heart. It was like a murderer in hiding who had found someone to pour her heart out to. But on the other hand, it was obvious that she was justifying herself with a view to the future. So that she wouldn't have to apologize for her behavior later, but just say, "I warned you, that's just the way I am."

Gustav hadn't met many of these, but he already knew what to do with her now, all that was left was to find out what he should do it against.

"What are you most afraid of?" – He asked.

"Thunderstorms. Thunder and lightning. I need someone to be there for me." – she sounded very serious. Clearly it wasn't the kind of fear that would paralyze her or make her lose her mind, but it was definitely the kind that would throw her off balance.

Oksana looked into his eyes again, her arms gently wrapped around his neck, the leg closest to him slowly and smoothly climbing into his lap.

"Why don't you sing something?" – The girl asked.

"No, but you know... We could go jumping."

She smiled and chuckled lightly, "Come on, Goose!"

She had told Gustav before that she knew a lot of people in clubs, and especially in this one. And this time she'd already talked to the manager, the bartender, the waitress, found out how things were going, who was where, who the DJ was, and then voiced it all out loud.

It turned out that the people she would have been happy to see were not here today. She didn't like Pablo, the new owner of the place, whose arrogance had made many people stop coming here, but she knew him well and had known him for a long time.

After dancing for a while, they sat down on one of the couches in the center of the room. After a minute, she called out to someone passing by, who came over, and they kissed lightly on the lips, after which he went on his way.

"It's Pablo," Oksana announced. It was obvious that she had had enough alcohol, and in such a state she could do obvious stupid things.

Gustav didn't bother to remind her of what she'd told him about the man five or ten minutes ago, about her attitude toward him and the epithets she'd thrown at him. It was too soon, but it was clearly a direction to go in, since she was setting herself up so cleverly.

"Ah, the owner." – Gustav said. – Why do so many people dislike him?" "Well he used to be one of his own. You know, when there was hardly any money, and everyone tried to support each other. They still do now. And he is. He just got lucky once in his life. It was an accident. He just got married. Lucky for money, I mean. He had a lot of money. Bought this club and started acting like he was better than them. And everyone remembers who he is, where he's from, what kind of man he

is, what he's worth. They are used to communicating with him on equal terms, so they don't come here now. In general, it's a fairly standard story.

–  
So he's switched.

–  
Yeah. I guess so. Or maybe he's just been like that all the time and now he's just showing himself more clearly... Has money changed you?

–  
Not at all. It's stupid for me. Changing for money.

–  
Why is that?

–  
Because, bitch, you deserve what I'm going to do to you. – Gustav thought angrily and said. – Because it all starts with the fact that a man wants money to achieve some of his goals, and in this case money is just a means for him. Even when a person, who does not have money yet, wants to get it, he really wants something else. He wants material wealth. And this is very remote from money. Even in this case money is only a means. But when they get this means, many people get lost. They forget about what they want, forget about the goal and start thinking about money. Just money.

–  
Yeah. I wish there were more of them. – Oksana nodded.

–  
Not to lose them. Actually, to not lose them... People don't want to go back in time afterwards. So they try to get more money. As if that will take them away from the time when they were short of money.

–  
And why do you say that money is very remotely related to material wealth? I don't get it.

–  
The whole point of the word exuberance... It's different for everyone. Less and more is equally bad. You need a two-room apartment – live in it, you need a onestory house – there you go. Cars, houses – it's like the size of clothes. Don't go on a ship with 20 oars alone – you won't be able to cope, better take a small boat. That's wealth. And when a man is in real prosperity, he thinks clearly, he knows what he needs. He's just in his place. And few people know how to manage extra money.

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How is that redundant?!

–  
You're confused by that word in relation to money, right?

–  
Yes, you are.

–  
It confuses a lot of people. For the reason that most people don't know how to spend it.

–  
I disagree. People just want more than they can buy. That's all.

–  
Yeah. "Want" is a very interesting word... It's a very capricious word. You see how many people are walking around with iPhones? With a \$30,000 salary? What do they need it for? It's just a toy. Or what they drive. 2 or 3 million, 2 or 3 million cars on credit. It's the same toy, only bigger. And they are not able to think how much they overpay for a loan or repair of an expensive car... They just wanted to buy "it". I liked the model... People always buy what they have enough to buy, and then try to justify themselves to themselves and others that they did the right thing.

—  
You talk like you see right through people. What if they didn't? What if they really wanted to buy it?

—  
Of course they did. That's the difference. The difference between "want" and "need." You notice it when you see it in large quantities. Then it's grotesque. I was once at an air show in France. I was paid to consult on military equipment, deals with it and, most importantly, to make sure that these deals were profitable. I had to help an Arab sheikh buy multi-purpose helicopters. He didn't hire me. In Saudi Arabia, despite the seemingly monolithic nature of the government and the system, they have their own groups inside. It's not that they're rivals, but they have different economic interests. They are of the same kind, but, conventionally, in different places, as if they were pockets. One of these groups was working with Lockheed Martin and was paying me to talk him into buying their helicopters specifically. You see, he was given the job of just picking the best ones, he didn't know anything about them. And I convinced him that Lockheed Martin was the best. And he agreed with that. But he wanted, he wanted to buy another one.

—  
So he didn't buy the one you recommended?

—  
He didn't buy helicopters at all. He liked the NURS, Russian-made unguided rocket systems. Just impressed. And he signed a large shipment for them. He only bought 10 LM helicopters instead of the 70 he needed.

—  
Yeah. That's weird.

—  
Yes, it is. But what's weirder is that a lot of purchases are stupidly made that way. Because they just like it. And the bigger the deal, the more they try to prove that it was necessary... Hence the distance between money and wealth. It confuses the mind. – Gustav, of course, didn't say the most important thing. That it was he who advised to perform the installation from Riyadh only nominally, to show everyone who is the master in the house. Upon arrival home, the prince was in disgrace, and his influence was taken by someone who was under the cap of the Irishman for more than a year. Thus Gustav got himself a share of the transportation and logistics market in another Arab country.

At that moment Pablo walked past them once more in the opposite direction and stood at the opposite wall. There was no doubt that he was looking at Oksana, and his beastly feeling, his desire to possess someone at that moment, was coming out, coloring his eyes with the acrid glittering color of those who feel like hunters. In Oksana's case, Gustav felt a vivid emotion – a drunken inertia to give herself to someone, someone who would take her now, and take her aggressively, so that there was no thought of resisting.

"Let's go dancing, Goose," said the girl.

Gustav didn't even look at her; as if he wasn't really interested, as if she should have suggested something else: "Dance, Oksan. I'll sit for a while. I'll rest a bit." It was noisy as a nightclub should be; everything was rattling, and the whole atmosphere called for nothing but shutting off your brain. Everything was so loud and foggy.

Oksana got up from the couch and headed to the dance floor. Her movements and her manner of being in the crowd to the constantly changing rhythm of the music showed that such an environment was not only familiar to her, but also very pleasant. She could dance in such a way that I wanted to hug, cuddle and feel her movements on me.

After half a minute, Pablo moved toward her, and with his arm around her back, he kissed her lips. As if he wanted to suck her emotions and the euphoria that made her jump on the dance floor. Then he just pulled his hand away and moved away, toward the bar.

The girl's reaction turned out to be nothing – from afar it was visible that she smiled, wiped saliva from her lips with the back of her hand and continued dancing.

"Ready beauty. We're good to go." – Gustav decided and, having put a large bill of money into the wine menu, walked leisurely to the exit. There was no doubt about the result of all the following actions – no matter what it all came to this night, the former model's mood in the morning would be disgusting, and, most importantly, she would blame herself for everything in the world: that feeling when you want to apologize and fix everything, but there is so much to do that you can't get your hands up to start with something, because whatever you do, you'll get all over it.

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A minute later, Gustav was already behind the wheel. When you find yourself not only in silence but also in your own car after such noise, a sense of peace comes along with a tremendous sense of self, as if you had changed out of someone else's clothes and into your own.

The time was 4 a.m., and it was not yet light; the city still felt like night. When he left the club, Gustav drove onto Southwestern Avenue and headed into the region, an hour and a half to his house behind the Small Regional Ring on the Southwestern Highway.

It was good to think at times like this. About what was, what will be, what is now.

He liked what was happening to people now. The era when mass society began to create one common stream of thought for everyone. Everyone thought in their own way, while thinking like everyone else. This game with the subconscious mind inside a huge number of people.

Twenty years ago, there was a consumer society where everyone just had to get a "thing". Then this thing was made old, and the hunt for a new "thing" began.

Now this is not enough. There is a crisis in the consumer society.

Everyone needs to be something, to be someone, to mean something to the world. Or at least to consider yourself as such, to believe that you mean something. Maybe it's because of the demand for complex labor. Maybe it's because things have become freer and more colorful in the sociocultural space. Maybe it was because everything became accessible to almost everyone through the information revolution made by the Internet. But the new subspecies of man was very different from all those that had preceded him.

Man playing. A post-materialistic basis of worldview, where the game concept of life does not just push a person forward, but makes him enjoy what he does. And it is not enough that everything works out – it is necessary to make it look beautiful, to create a creative image.



Of course, not without obvious disadvantages. And the new "Avgian stables" are a culture shock, where there is no outline of stability, the very stability that is simply a comfort zone in its essence; but there is zero competence, calling everything into question and the need for one's own trajectory, which requires constant reflection.

Having broken free from the shackles of his own limitations, once built to protect himself from his own stupidity, a man found himself in front of a mirror in an empty field, believing that it was better, and not realizing what it would lead to. Like those countries that possess nuclear weapons; with hysterics, blood and tears they have sought them until the very moment of obtaining them and with trembling and heaviness in their souls since the moment of their possession, having earned a huge responsibility for innocent people all over the world and a timid desire to return everything as it used to be for everyone, with the usual bloodthirsty all-killing wars and primitive understanding of human life as such.

All this led to the phrase "No knowledge now is knowledge in the 'old sense' where 'to know' is to be certain." And politicians especially liked it.

The world, consisting entirely of assumptions, allowed you to build these assumptions for yourself regardless of actions – in fact, you could do anything at all, as long as it was properly presented. Exactly presented. Twenty or fifty years ago, you had to prove or justify something, but now it was enough just to present it, to present it in such a way that it would be perceived as you needed it to be. Gustav was much more interesting in this atmosphere. People who are more responsible for themselves are much more difficult to destroy, to bring to a state of despair, to take away the last thing. After all, a person no longer has a single pillar of all things, as it happens with believers or nationalists. When a person attributes everything that happens to him only to his own zone of responsibility, when he knows the price of a mistake, when he is ready to correct this mistake as soon as he notices it, then he becomes not just a man, but a life-sustaining machine for achieving the goal. He becomes a goal-oriented willful hunter in life. And even with Gustav's abilities and centuries of experience, he had to act more and more unconventionally, as if clinging to the strings of other people's mistakes, and it was more and more dragging than before.

Katherine, for example, was the easiest to deal with, although she was initially supposed to be the tough nut, but she was simply let down by her attitude towards animals.

Natalie, whom Gustave had recently killed, lived up to expectations, showing a willingness to rely too much on a strange man, believing in some "signs" in her destiny, while constantly remembering how many people she had wiped her feet on before simply because she could do so with impunity, and did so with a satisfaction in her own beauty that was incomprehensible to her.

Vladimir Arkadyevich was experienced, but old. There was no need to "read" him or to invent combinations. One just had to wait for his mistake, like the one that forms in anyone if you don't sleep for a long time or do everything yourself. And his main enemy, fatigue, would never show up directly and remind him of himself. Such an enemy is always at the ready, and therefore always wins.

The only one of the latter with whom one could act according to standards was Oksana. But that's just luck with alcohol. When alcohol is involved, there is no longer any room for the person playing, or responsibility for one's image and ability to have a point. It's as if a person goes into the stone age of primal needs and comes back from there as if from a cesspool, unsure not only of whether he will be accepted back, but whether he himself deserves it.

"Requests" for such a return were expected by Gustav sometime in the afternoon or nearer the evening, but certainly on this day.

By five in the morning the Irishman had reached the regional center. His house was located in a dense forest on the road from the cottage village "Grafskaya Usadba". Initially he had considered the possibility of settling there, in the elite part, where the houses stood almost in the forest, separated by frequent trees and separated from the other part of the settlement by three ponds, but he was slightly shaken by the inevitable fact of being in the neighborhood with people. Having once been in France in the first half of the 18th century, he was living in a suburb of Paris. Opportunities for seduction at court were plentiful, and the romance of the time, was deeper and more refined in its essence. One of his lovers, left with a broken heart, did not kill himself at home poison or drown himself in the Seine, and hanged himself right in front of his house and so that it was clearly visible to all. Of course, there were no consequences for him, although a day later the girl's relatives, having found out what the matter was, came to his house, intending to tear him to pieces and hang him in the same place where she had hung herself. By that time Gustav had already left, having remembered well that in his case it was necessary to live separately from everyone else, or at least in a place where neighbors would be closed off from each other by concrete walls of a stone jungle. This time he chose the first option and was very satisfied: he had his own house with autonomous power supply and water purification system, only two floors with 4-meter ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows so that from the second floor you could look into the forest with a hunter's eyes. On the edges of the house were two outbuildings. Actually, they were the most important part of the whole complex: the first was a tower, the top floor of which reached such a height that from the panoramic windows you could see the tops of the trees going away like a green sea, sprouting in the wind – such a view inspired Gustav with new thoughts, new possibilities. Besides, it was here that Gustav could most enjoy other people's suffering, remember the right steps, the goals achieved, and the edges of the trees seemed to agree with him, nodding their heads and confirming every thought. The second building looked no bigger than a barn from the outside, but it was just an entrance. Underground there were two more floors, both black as night and full of all sorts of equipment. The minuscule second floor was a single room with a black leather chester couch in the center. It was a good place for solitude, when some process just needed to wait or think of something new, because dungeons gave the most exquisite and extraordinary ideas and ways of their realization, and sometimes it was even surprising how much difference in the course of thought could be only because of where this thought was born – the darkness made the thought richer, freer and allowed it to do anything.

And I also needed this bunker for treatment, and I had to treat it thoroughly... Headaches. When it happened, your brain would just explode and you could go crazy. And it could last a day or

several days in a row, or a week, and when it was over, it was hard to think or think about anything, to think at all, or to move from place to place, as if you had to learn it all over again.

The reason was the same as Gustav's need, only in reverse. He couldn't live without the suffering of others, objectively built on their own inner guilt, but that suffering didn't have to be too much. Like an overdose or alcohol poisoning, like an overabundance of vitamins or an allergy to a favorite food he once consumed inordinately. And it was precisely when Gustav's successes were out of proportion that he himself began to ache. Of course, it was not the soul, or the emptiness in his chest, or hopelessness, or the loss of the meaning of life, but this pain in his head became more real and natural than the sun rising in the morning or the freezing cold for a polar bear.

He noticed this peculiarity of his organism a long time ago: in 1648, when a German village celebrated the end of the Thirty Years' War, the first all-European conflict. Gustav alternately seduced and drove to suicide eight girls in just two days – the general rejoicing was so great that everyone wanted his own happiness, so everything turned out much easier and faster than usual. After a day Gustav began to have white spots in his eyes, that is, his eyes were all right, only in the place where they looked, there was a white spot. And a strange feeling of weakness, as if the body had weakened on purpose, about to surrender to the ailment. Then the former stains passed, and the pain began – it seemed that it was time to die, it seemed that the punishment had finally arrived, and everything would be over. And it was over – the pain was over, and Gustav realized that it was only the price of greed, of time to be reckoned with; that even for him there were limits and a certain line. He knew it well now, though he didn't know the exact boundaries of what was permissible – maybe someone else's suffering was deeper, or maybe the suffering of someone else's death was greater than the suffering of his own loss.

Gustav didn't know how to measure it, and sometimes he just wanted more, so he broke his own prohibitions, suffering from satiety himself. There was a bunker for that.

After putting the car in the garage built into the main building, Gustav went up to the second floor. When he saw his new Carlo Pasolini shoes, he remembered how recently the Labrador puppy he had given to Catherine yesterday had been lying in them, waiting for him. It was the first animal that had ever lived in the same room with him for any length of time. His attitude to animals was somewhat different than to people – animals always show their intentions directly, completely devoid of the concepts of truth and untruth, having only "given", that is, "as it is": to love, to hate, to attack, to defend, to want to eat or sleep, or maybe to play. Animals hide nothing and show everything, and only in proportion to what they are actually experiencing. For this the Irishman respected them very much. While he had been in the house, he had done nothing but try to please him, and during the whole time he had been away he had chewed only on the one shoe that had been set aside for that purpose, and had not touched anything else. Gustav knew what it was like for animals at an early age, what it was like when they were teething, their main weapon, and how important it was for them, especially at that age, not to be left alone. Especially since this chestnut-colored female puppy was the friendliest and most lonely Labrador in the world.

Outside the window, the wind blew, and a row of branches passed at the windows of the house as if to greet the returning host.

This movement of the trees immediately brought Gustav back to his thoughts – the "silent majority", nowadays it is called that. And this majority was formed by the fact that everyone began to reflect in communication, and to build their image in society; relativism in worldview, the very relativism when absolutely everything can be questioned, even that which was once set as a dogma. And on top of that, game semantics, in which any meaning has a game meaning that has to be guessed, but everyone can do it in their own way. And clip culture, in which the development of cognition goes hand in hand with the development of evaluative opinion, closely constructed by a multitude of short clips, colorful and rapidly changing.

Thus, the "silent majority" has chosen two interesting ways of its existence:

either a return to confessional culture, in which many things acquire bright outlines again, having formed a "safety cushion", or the revival of ethno-cultural traditions, within the framework of which it will be not only pleasant to model the new, but also to look at the old with interest and respect, which will give confidence and pride in one's own "I".

At this time, a new concept was even born – "emergence": properties of the whole system not as a sum. After all, it is also clearer and more logical when Indian chiefs go home in SUVs after performing all the rituals, which may be more than one thousand years old; or when a new smartphone of a student in the capital is painted with ancient Russian patterns, and when he drinks milk with honey instead of antibiotics of the 3rd or 4th generation; or when a country house of a newly minted businessman is made without a single nail as it was built 800 years ago. Everything else may look like modernity, but a piece of the old has turned out to be very pleasant to put into the whole, without attaching it to the whole, as if it does not complete the picture, but creates a new one, next to the existing one, but of much smaller size, which makes life more complete.

"The new toys turned out to be much more interesting, and, most importantly, more dangerous than the old ones. – Gustav thought. – Now it's not clear to everyone where the toys are and where you are. It's as if you've become a toy yourself.

These toys were much more fun to play with, and one of them was just now calling. Oksana.

Of course he didn't pick up the phone. What was the point of picking up the phone? She wouldn't tell him anything original or new anyway – it was easy enough to describe her train of thought in such a state.

First, alcohol made her think in terms of a constant "now-now", the frequency of repetition of which is as great as the duration of their existence, so that time ceases to have any more or less distinguishable intervals.

Secondly, the surrounding environment in the form of nightclub bacchanalia with unquenchable deafening rumble completely dissolves the personality and the desire to decide something – you just want to move in the seemingly from the look of it, but useless in its essence, the general rhythm of the raging wave on an empty place.

And thirdly, they did not set any visible or invisible goals and objectives when they went there. They just went together to look at each other. And Oksana showed what she was: unprincipled, willful and untenable as a person. The last one was especially galling, and it was the last one that was going to make her suffer now, especially when she sobered up.

She didn't call for long and only once. Apparently, it wasn't easy listening to the silent ringing either. I wondered if she wanted to apologize for something or just say that the guy wanted to fuck her.

It didn't matter, though it was interesting. What mattered was what she would hear from her the day after tomorrow. The day after tomorrow, when she wouldn't be suffering from alcohol intoxication and it would be time to think about her relationship.

Gustav climbed up to the tower where he had his favorite view of the "forest waves" and gazed into the twilight – the green crowns of the trees had taken shape, showing all the relatively strong wind blowing. If you looked at the tops of the trees in the distance, you would feel as if you alone knew how that tree felt, and even better than it did. You see how and what influences it, in what direction it will swing now, and what awaits it after that. All this was only knowledge, not influence – in the case of trees it didn't matter, but in the case of people, such knowledge gave real power. If you showed a man that you were interesting, he'd grow ears. It was only necessary to feed him a couple of good advice or just the right words, and he became your friend, forgetting that only another person and no one else can be his most dangerous enemy. If you approved of this friendship, he would open up, giving you undeserved opportunities for his own destruction. And most of all Gustav was surprised by two absolutely opposite features of the man: on the one hand his foolish naivety and trust, and, on the other hand, his ruthless cruelty and hypocrisy. These two qualities seemed to be recruiting each of them to the team of the surrounding reality, and the characteristics of such selection, whether in

a single individual or in an entire civilization, could change with astonishing speed and eagerness, going from one extreme to another.

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Vincent, a recent friend of Gustav's with whom they had occasionally discussed things that were in the back of every man's mind, was due to visit him that afternoon. They usually talked, looking out at the darkness of the forest from the second floor of the mansion.

"Vin, what would you say are the main distinguishing features of the current stage of humanity? Well, for society, for people as a society," Gustav asked.

Vincent, apparently not quite expecting a question about something general rather than about a person as a person, didn't even show any sign of being uncomfortable with such questions, but thought, "You know, you can't really tell. Maybe latency? Striving for balance. The ancient peoples didn't have that. Neither did the Middle Ages. No one thought about any kind of measure – they just took the maximum always. And it always ended badly. As time went on, there was less of this greed. And now, apparently, there is something that suppresses this greed. Latency. Apparently, both society and the state have it. It's just that they all have it to different degrees.

– That's a good point. It used to be really about making the most of things. At least in the example of colonies. In the ancient world, colonies were just part of a state with a special status based mainly on remoteness. In Modern times, it came to the point that a colony could even have its own conventional king, and that the order at the same time in different colonies of the same metropolis could be different. And when the colonial system ended, the system of global lending and investment came into being. Softer and softer, then only to hold on tighter. – Yes, I didn't really think of that... Although what you said about lending is, of course, brilliantly done. It's been working for more than half a century, since the U.S. started implementing the Marshall Plan – loans to those who would renounce communism. Here is a loan for you, but spend it wherever we want, on a factory that will produce what we need and sell it to us at a price we tell ourselves. And the loan itself – "How much do we owe? 2 billion? No money? Pay 2 and a half next year. No money again? Pay next year 3 and a half." Then someone comes to power who doesn't want to do as they say, and they tell him: "Pay now". The country has a crisis, defaults, then a new government. The new government turns out to be "smarter", and they also allow them not to pay their debts on time, just increasing them every year, until someone new and uncooperative comes in. I think it's very simple. And ingenious.

Gustav smiled. He liked this approach to things. Always liked it – whether someone suited you or not, always look at how they do something. Learn, not envy. It's much more useful and productive.

"You say that about Americans. – said Gustav, turning his eyes with interest from the treetops to his interlocutor. – As if you were counseling them on these matters."

The Spaniard smiled, his swarthy features gleaming slightly, yet retaining a certain masculine roughness; he was certainly popular with the women: black hair, almost as black as the earth, tactful manners, strikingly precise and quick in character, and very successful, giving no doubt about the legality of his illegal income.

"Gustav, you remember what I do... My father did the same thing for Franco – the dictator always had problems with his neighbors and with everyone around him, especially after he was the only tyrant in Western Europe, and he'd cooperated with the Nazis before that, not everyone was sure they'd want him in his place... But you had to survive..." Vincent waggled his eyebrow, as if trying to confirm his thought with more than just words, and then continued: "You can't survive without oil in the modern world, you know, and it's a very fast commodity, a tradable commodity – the livelier the economy, the faster it eats it up, nobody ever thought about the population... So that's what I'm getting at. From the outside, it looks very vague that you can hold on to some left transportation for a long and stable time, but it is not so. And it's everywhere "not so" – any thing, any process, seemingly impermanent, can actually become so. And, believe me, in time, when you work out and adjust everything, smuggling is much easier and faster than crowding and fiddling with

filling out declarations and going through customs inspections. And the best example is the flow of drugs from Latin America to the United States. It seems that they catch it in containers along the whole route and strangle it at the production sites, but it does not become less... Actually, what I am saying. Americans. They're hated all over the planet, I guess. It's like they behave defiantly, live at the expense of others. Well, that's true, of course, but it didn't just fall out of the sky. It all came from their system. System, that's what I'm saying. It's all done "scientifically", let's say. Like the Roman Empire used to be. Like McDonald's now. It's very simple, very clear, very well practiced. And, most importantly, there are general rules that have to be observed. For example, in the U.S. system of government, such a system is called "checks and balances" – one body does not let the other go beyond its limits, and the entire state apparatus is permeated in this way. And so is the legal system, and so are elections. Of course, everything is not perfect, but no one has ever thought of anything better. "Worthy," Gustav nodded. His interlocutor's monologue clearly satisfied him in the part of the answer, and it was evident that this answer had long been formed, thought over, corrected, but perhaps submitted to someone for evaluation for the first time.

"So, my father, when he started smuggling crude oil for Franco, had also heard enough that his volumes would accomplish nothing, because only large-scale government volumes, possible only by open means, made sense, and he said that anything systemic mattered. And he turned out to be right... Of course, his achievements did not cover all the needs, but it was enough to survive in those conditions, especially when his methods were applied in different directions". This time the Irishman said nothing. It was clear that he agreed. He only nodded – his interlocutor had given him some thoughts about what was missing from the whole. Just that systematicity. I mean, it was there, of course, on some level, but it was all grounded and developed empirically, after a number of mistakes and misconceptions. There was no doubting Gustav's skill and ability to manipulate people and provoke the right situations, but it worked on a case-by-case basis – there was no common goal or connection in all this... And it was worth doing.

Gustav looked inside the glass – bourbon, a radiant brown liquid, sweet corn. It had once been just moonshine. From Kentucky. Then it became Kentucky moonshine. Then it became seasonal Kentucky moonshine from Kentucky oak barrels. Then it was called bourbon. Systemic. That's the reason this liquor became bourbon, and booze from neighboring Virginia remained just one "of". "So the U.S. is so all about being systemic. – "said the Irishman in the affirmative. – And what explains such selectivity in them. Did it fall out of the sky?" Vincent smiled: "If it had come from the sky, my friend, I wouldn't have lived more than a generation... It's all very attractive, of course, when the best things seem to come from somewhere above, from the unruly peaks, so to speak. But it's the opposite in this life. All the achievements, all the successes, all the incredible accomplishments come from the pit. If you like, from the cesspool." – Oh, yeah!

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That's right. – The Spaniard smiled sweetly once more. – Where do you get your boxing champions from: Brooklyn or Disneyland? Nobel laureates, where did they grow up and establish themselves as a person, in the suburbs of Malmö? Do businessmen who create commercial empires from nothing come from Brussels and Hamburg? No. These people were overwhelmingly born and formed in some hellish asshole where, figuratively speaking, you can't even get sunlight if you get a visa. They grew up there and decided that they needed something more, and then they just got into the taste... Look at the biographies of great people – it's the road to death, not a descent from Olympus to people for demonstration."

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Not bad. It's not bad at all. What does the United States have to do with this? – Well, look at the beginning, it's the land of scum. When they were a colony, beggars, fugitives, felons, criminals, of course, prostitutes and just plain losers in life went there. To start a new life... as you can see, they succeeded. And for one simple reason – they have already been to the bottom to realize one simple

and only thing – they don't belong at the bottom. And also, as you can see now, they are already determining where the bottom will be. That's where systematicity comes from.

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From dirt to princes, then.

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It's a Russian phraseology. But look, even in this expression, there's something pejorative. Russians don't like such things. They need: if you were born in a palace, you live there, if you were born a merchant, you have to pull your own weight. All your life. A kind of voluntary fatalism. On the one hand, it's kind of gloomy to think that you will stay down there, and most of it is exactly there. And on the other hand – the soul is calm. You don't decide anything, so you die and go to heaven. That's the essence of Orthodoxy. In the West, they won't even think of such things. And if you have achieved something on your own, you are not "from dirt to princes", but you are a selfmademan – a man who has made himself. And there it causes respect, not quiet envy.

Gustav grinned: "You're a Russophobe!" and drank the bourbon in a gulp. Vincent finished his fourth glass: "I don't really care what you call it, to be honest. You can't change people, but you can learn to understand them better, or rather where-what comes from in them... And now the main trend is to be in the trend... The playfulness of the person playing. When the benefit of the game becomes an end in itself. The original goal was to find yourself in this game, to be yourself... But the tool turned out to be so sweet that it replaced the very essence of this game. Not the game for you, but now you are for the game. You're not yourself. You're always in something. Your family, or your job. Maybe your friends. Or maybe God. Or in your worries. Even if you're totally selfish, you're not in yourself, then you're in a bunch of little things that are for you: suits, cars, or your own face. Anything but yourself. You can't be in yourself. It would be a clinic, a madhouse... If you're in yourself... And why would you want to be in yourself?"

You're not the center of the universe, even if you want to be. You don't want to be, you just think you are. You don't understand what comes next, what it's for. And this stupid and unconscious "I wanted it that way" only ruins even the most selfcentered personalities. And it ruins not from the side of everyone else, but from the side of yourself. When you start to prove and justify your own actions, invented not by yourself, but only by yourself and made. And it would be good to prove it to someone – you will prove it to yourself, as if defending the fact of your existence. And the more you defend it, the less of you there really is. Gustav never thought of hurting this man. Or death. And it wasn't that he didn't deserve it. It was just that the man was a great conversationalist, something like himself. Destroying him would be like heating the stove with a book with his face on the cover: it might get warm, but there wouldn't be enough of the book to go around, not to mention the fact that there was plenty of other, more suitable material than the structured volume of clever thoughts stored on paper. And Vincent seemed to realize that, not so much that he was in no danger, but that his interlocutor was dangerous. And not to say that it was appealing in any way, but it added to the interest of the whole thing, and made him want to talk about things he wouldn't normally want to think about.

The biggest similarity they had was in their approach. They both looked at people as if from the outside. Usually you look at people who aren't in your life, people who are in the news, people who don't concern you at all. But they looked at everyone that way. As if they didn't have a life of their own, as if no one could be in it.

Yet there is much more power in gentleness. Even when it comes to inanimate objects – take your time, be as timely and natural as water in a stream filling a vast lake or even a river turning into a sea. The natural current never meets with any resistance, and if it deals with something sensible, that sensible thing considers it its duty not only not to hinder but to help it. Such an original natural law is to preserve and maintain the natural. One only has to pretend to be this natural, and one can consider oneself a winner. Whether you are a person, a state, a system, or an alcoholic beverage. Maybe even an insect – like the false queen of the ants, who only pretends to be a queen but does not fulfill any

of her functions, and the ants will feed her and guard her and do whatever is necessary to keep her alive, but get nothing in return. And all this only because she is natural, naturally occupying a place that is not her own and not meant for her.

It became necessary for Gustav to talk about the most unnatural thing about people – their willingness to give up their lives of their own free will. The need to talk about suicide. And the impression that Vincent knew so much about suicide, as if he himself had committed it more than once, and then came back and wrote his memoirs: "You know, there is such a thing in the world as suicide tourism... Well, some countries have the right to euthanasia, others don't. So you can come to a place where there is, well, and do what you want... Well, really, it's not so important where you die. And here there are also suitable specialists... Methods...

Everything you need".

"Where do they do this kind of business? Switzerland, by any chance? There you can collect suicides from all over the country for the national team..." – Gustav poured another shot of bourbon into his glass.

–

Yeah, and there. I don't even know where it started. But it's there. A lot of people were against it, and they organized a referendum. But nothing changed. It's everyone's right to send themselves to the afterlife. The only thing they won't understand is whose right it is to help them. It's a bit gloomy, of course... But in Mexico they didn't even think of banning anything. In fact, they don't care much about technology there. Well, service is still service, but, as always, reasonable... They poison themselves with pills. It's like a strong sleeping pill, you fall asleep and don't wake up. It's like you don't die, you just fall asleep. Penobarbital. Except they don't monitor quality in Mexico. A dead guy's not gonna write a review anyway. He's not gonna ask for a redo. And the fact that he didn't just fall asleep, but was convulsing and gasping for air... greedily gulping for air, looking for more, climbing out of the other world... actually trying to survive, having been so eager to die before... No one will ever tell..." Vincent took another sip of whiskey, then looked at the glass – a big, strong glass, like a block of moonlit ice that had never been anything else in its essence. – You know, there are still those iconic places, like high-rise structures, from which, conventionally speaking, people like to throw themselves off. Well, in Veliky Novgorod it was a tower of steel beams on the embankment near the Drama Theater. A bit of an apocalyptic place. So after a few incidents it was simply dismantled. But you can't do that with the famous suspension bridge in San Francisco. They're still jumping on it. What's my point? One of them survived. You know, a failed suicide. And then he said that when you've already jumped, the moment you're flying, you realize that all your problems are solvable. Except for one. That you're already flying off the bridge..." Vincent stopped talking, looked at the glass again, took another swig of whiskey. Yes, he obviously knew as much about suicide as the human mind was allowed to know.

Outside the window, the trees suddenly shook. Wind. Strong and gusty. It whipped the trees from side to side and raged with the fury of drunken Vikings, as if something he'd just said was about him. And Vincent felt it.

–

Don't take it personally. – said Gustav, not taking his eyes off the sprawling crowns dancing in unison. – People tend to take natural phenomena personally... It used to be, of course, more epic – eclipses there, and thunderstorms, any natural disaster... even the change of day and night. And it's all proven now. And with such frenzied certainty... I was talking to some Canadian Indians once. The tribe still lives in the woods today. On their own. And all with the same ideas... So, they believed that the Sun and the Moon are husband and wife, and they see them in turn because they pass each other to hold their child in their arms. Then I asked what happens at times when neither of the two of them is visible, such as when it's raining. "They both draw their bows," they told me, and when asked why they do it, they said, "How would we know?" Do you realize how naive that is? That is, up to some

point they are absolutely sure, after some point they don't know anything, and pretend that it is so. And although nothing really changes from their assumptions, it helps them to live, conditionally speaking.

–  
Why "conventionally speaking"?

–  
Just because up to a certain point. Then someone starts thinking, starts asking questions. And then it starts to get in the way... Natural phenomena don't need to be commented on at all. They're there and that's it. They don't express anything. They don't even have that ability. You want to study them, study them. But don't interpret what they do. Because they're not even actions. It's just a given. And not trying to make sense of it is as foolish as a Persian king a few thousand years ago thinking he was punishing the sea with whips.

Vincent drank what was left in his glass, "Good example. I have another one... In Egypt. Before every flood of the Nile. On which, in fact, the survival of that entire ancient state depended, the Pharaoh issued a decree on the Nile. That is, he gave an order to the river to overflow in order to be able to sow and harvest... It is more interesting to turn it the other way around – they believed that if there was no order from the Pharaoh, there would be no overflow of the Nile... Throwing a rolled-up sheet of papyrus into the river and thinking that something would change from it... Yes, it is stupid... But people have always been afraid of nature. And they've been even more afraid of people who cover themselves with nature, identifying it with themselves. And it's unlikely that anything will ever change. Too much man means nothing to her or to those who cover themselves with her. And it is peculiar for a man to be especially afraid not of the one who is strong, but of the one for whom he means nothing, as if he is afraid that he will be crushed like a bug.

With each word Gustav was once again convinced that it was not in vain that he had kept this man alive and not destroyed him. Two years ago, Gustav had traveled through southeastern Turkey, interested in ancient rock fortresses that looked like something out of a sci-fi movie. Through the same places Vincent bought smuggled oil from Iraq, not caring who it came from, where it went, or who would make money from it but him. And it was profitable for Islamist militants, who later founded an entire quasi-state. And, although the supply channels themselves were formed in the early years of Saddam Hussein's rule, when, after the failed intervention in Kuwait, international sanctions were imposed on Iraq, obliging it to sell oil for food at low prices, then these channels began to actually finance terrorism.

Vincent was buying from them and transporting them to Europe, selling the raw materials on the Rotterdam exchange under the guise of Turkish. Many people knew about it, both in the CIA and in the European intelligence services, not to mention the Turkish ones, and everyone was happy with it. But it didn't suit the competitors from BritishDutchShell, who ordered Vincent. He just got lucky that time. He met Gustave in the ruins of the old town.

–  
There are many strange things in the world. – Gustav said it with a kind of experienced interest, as abstruse biologists usually say about new species of animals. – One part of the planet, for example, is always trying to save animals. And if at first it all started with rare species, now someone is trying to save all animals, even, for example, those wolves that were raised in captivity to make a fur coat out of them... And once I was in Nepal. So there is a holiday there, when hundreds of animals – sheep, goats – are slaughtered as a sacrifice. Massively. It's not even dozens. It's hundreds. And for nothing. Not for some kind of hides or meat. Just for nothing. As a tradition... – Gustav's eyes were completely calm – with the same expression he could tell about children's holidays on New Year's Eve, and about the installation of drilling platforms in the ocean, and about Nazi concentration camps – just as a presentation of information, and then you could look at the reaction of the interlocutor: as long as you were sitting without emotions, you were open; if the interlocutor felt something, you would feel it immediately yourself. This was the way to understand others, and it was easier to manipulate them.

At that moment Vincent received a phone call. He really had to go. He was flying to Istanbul tonight for a meeting. It was worth bargaining about the future, and only a fresh head would do.

"Drunk again?" – It was not that Gustav cared, but rather wondered how much one could drive drunk on Krakozhin roads in an expensive car.

"Fate helps the brave," the Spaniard said, looking into the distance. And it was evident that for him it was not just words, and not self-confidence. To him it is the order of things in life. "A Latin saying," he added. – "The Romans knew how to win." A couple minutes later, Vincent was out of the house, heading for his Chrysler 300C.

The room got a little darker. But just a little. There were a lot of thoughts in my head. Gustav turned on his laptop and went to Facebook – there were 300 messages, but it was worth opening them, and it turned out that almost all of them had been written by Oksana alone, all morning.

She was offline now and probably passed out from drinking, but until it happened she had burst like a Venetian sewer. She was hysterical, insulting, apologizing, making excuses, professing her love and saying there couldn't be anyone else like him in her life. She was both ashamed and scared. And torn by the silence in return. And it was both easy and hard to write this. And wanted and didn't want to hear the answer. "So do you love me or not I SPARKS?????!!!" her last message.

Gustav didn't write anything back. She hadn't suffered enough yet. Let her believe in hope. People are so fond of that saying, "Hope is the last to die." Apparently, everyone likes to die, or lose, or maybe be disappointed.

Let him wait. At first it will be a pleasant wait, then it will become bearable, then difficult and finally unbearable. "Why doesn't he say anything? Where did he go??? Is he on purpose???" – these are the questions that await her. And further she will make up anything, as long as she does not think that he, really on purpose. After all, he wrote that he loves her. That must be so hard to write. You can't lie in such cases. I mean, he can see her condition.

"Stupid people," Gustav thought for the hundredth or thousandth time in his life. – Thousands of years of proving to each other that we should look at actions, and everyone keeps looking at words.

A couple hours later, of course, Oksana called. After listening to a few beeps to give her more ground for doubt, Gustav picked up the phone: "Yes."

Silence. Silence at first. Almost always. Silence, after all, always comes before actions.

"Gus," the girl's voice both expressed everything and nothing. Full of emptiness. The kind of emptiness that feeds hopelessness. Before calling, she thought for a long time, over how she told everyone about her purity and integrity with clients, not mixing personal life with public life. And in doing so, she lied. Lied to everyone, too. She'd slept with virtually every man who'd made a real estate deal through her. She even ingrained the phrase "real estate deal through her" in her soul. She believed that one day she would simply meet her man and say a resounding "no" to such an attitude and in an instant forget all of this. But that time never came. And such deals with men have long been a given. And when the moment of choice came yesterday, she had thought it was "just one more time that doesn't change anything." After all, Pablo had bought the apartment through her, too.

"Yes"-Gustav held a pause. As always. Man is his own best executioner.

"I called this morning... Did you read my messages?"

"Messages? No. I woke up a little while ago. Why, is there something urgent there?"

Silence. Silence again. And all because the answer was not what was expected. No reproofs, no moralizing, no idle chatter, but only indifference, stretching like a layer of clouds across the sky.

–

Gustav, I didn't mean to... I was drunk. I don't even remember everything... Or even I don't remember much.

–

What is there to remember? It's just the way it is.

—  
Don't say that. I'm sorry. Я...

—  
Sorry for what? You have nothing to apologize for. Just like there's no hard feelings.

—  
So... So you're not offended by me?

—  
No. Of course I'm not offended.

She sighed. She knew. There are men. Real men who know how to understand. They know how to take a punch. And they do it with honor. They say they're made of steel. And that's exactly what he is. And he is. And he's with her.

She sighed once more, wanting once more to feel the relief she had just felt when that pile of stones, that red-hot mass of iron, had fallen away from her shoulders. It was easy now. Now she could move on with her life. And now she would be with him. Only with him. Always.

—  
I'm... So glad... You have no idea what a weight has been lifted off me right now... So I'll come to you now?

—  
You don't have to.

—  
All right. Uh-huh. You're right. I should come to my senses. – she sighed again, this time smiling so she could be heard on the phone. – Tomorrow, then?

—  
No. You shouldn't come here.

Little doubts. Like a slight breeze. Like a slight darkening and you start to think you've only blinked.

—  
Not to you?... Why, Gus?

—  
Oksan.

—  
Yes, sweetie.

—  
Who needs a whore?

Something rumbled in her ears. Or maybe not in her ears. Somewhere inside. Her eyes went dark, and it felt like she'd forgotten how to breathe. How to breathe the air around her. She tried to cough, to push through whatever was stirring in her throat and ask "why?", "why?", "how do I fix it?". She tried to say it when the phone was already ringing off the hook, when her salty tears mixed with mascara rolled down her cheeks past her trembling lips. She tried to believe it wasn't her, it just happened. She tried to remember that things were different. She tried and tried, not realizing she was tearing her own stupid heart with her fingernails....

## Vincent

Vincent listened only to the click of his heels as he moved with slow, steady steps toward the car. It was especially nice to hear them after a conversation like this. He felt like a winner. The kind of man who would choose his own path, his own identity... And even his own death. To her he replied, "Another day..." He was reminded of a phrase from a famous saga where the characters said to death, "Not today," but he didn't like it completely. That's exactly what most people think. They recoil, they turn away, they seek to avoid – it's not a winner's road. And so I do not postpone, like a conscript, an unnecessary moment, but appoint it myself:

"Another day!"

The night is dark. And Vincent is drunk, though not too drunk. And once again, getting behind the wheel with a cloudy mind, with hands that are not steady, with eyes that close on their own, he simply said: "Another day."

Didn't care which one. This year or next year. Winter or summer. Sober or drunk. Just another one.

The turns were easy for him. As usual. It was business as usual. Him, his car, his body, his road. The road went on as usual. Tomorrow to Istanbul. Bashkurt's there. They'll definitely ask for a discount. He'll say times are hard and all that. It's so cliché. Times are never hard. Neither is it easy. It's all about people. Just like problems are only about people. It's as silly to say time is hard as it is to say time has problems. Time has no problems. It's just a given. And Gustav. Yes. He's really cool, isn't he? He's always listening, always learning. Always learning. That's exactly what you should learn from him. He's like an old man. Like an old wise man who absorbs the knowledge of the universe. I wonder if he's okay with women. I think he's had a few, but more details. I'd have to ask him. You'd have to ask him. If you ask him, you'll answer your own question later. I could learn that from him, too.

Cunning. Cool and sneaky.

The turn went sideways more than the previous ones, and the car went steeper, to the left, into the oncoming traffic. 140 kilometers an hour. There is no problem to go back, and even with such technique: 300C is strong on corners, the rubber is only run-in, you can participate in races on it. A little bit of cornering and you're back in your own lane. And, really, like in a race, just leave a small gap at the lefthand edge when you turn right. And then back into your lane.

Two white lights in the front. Headlights. Right in front of them... There's no point in braking – you can't go right.

Not a drop of nerves. Not a drop of fear. Vincent just sobered up instantly. Crashing is crashing. Not the stupidest death ever. And he chose it anyway. So it's worth confirming it. Just to be sure all the way. Shoe on the gas pedal.



He didn't really realize and couldn't remember exactly how he had gone around that car. It seemed to be to the left of the car, right on the edge of the road, even though he had skidded even more. I don't think so. They're all sort of–

Sort of– Sort of– Sort of–

And it's not like he's alive at all. He's alive, and he's not even hit.

Vincent glanced at the receding car in the rearview mirror and said. For the first time in his life, he said After instead of Before: "Another day."

## Catherine

Catherine didn't fully understand what was going on with this puppy – he just didn't want to eat. He wasn't doing anything special: he wasn't moaning, whining, barking – he just wasn't eating. And he looked at her. With his kind brown eyes, asking for help. From her.



She has already contacted some of the best vets in town. Then with her father, who has already contacted the best vets, known only to a small circle of individuals where money alone is not enough to get help. And then the tests. And then consultations again. And more tests.

And everything said one thing: the dog was completely healthy. Everything and everyone said that... Except for one "but". His eyes. Catherine saw death in them. Yes, she was young, but still a journalist who had been many places and seen many things. You can't confuse death with anything, death is the same everywhere. And now this death sat inside this beast and laughed at her.

She had to do something. That strange "something." Something else when everything was already done. When everyone had said there was nothing to do. She wanted to talk to Gustave. Her picture of happiness with him was threatened. He had trusted her. Trusted this puppy who just stopped eating on the second day.

It wasn't in her plan to call him herself, even this early. Men never lasted more than 24 hours. But not him. He was different. And that seemed fateful to her. Different and made just for her. And he must understand. It wasn't her fault the puppy wouldn't eat. She'd done everything she could. What she had to. And maybe it's not a big deal. But still. We should call him.

Gustav picked up the phone almost immediately: "Yes, Katherine. Hi"

The first thing she did, of course, was smile, "Gustic, I... How are you doing?" She didn't want to talk about anyone else but them anymore. Except their future. Except for the happiness that awaited them.

"Great. Just a bit busy. How's Dobby?"

She faltered. What's wrong with him? There was nothing wrong with him. After all, what she'd made up: a bunch of doctors with a lot of modern medicine for a lot of money hadn't found any cause for concern at all. Not that there were any ailments. And to give the puppy back to him in a week anyway. He's already asking for food.....

"Dobby's fine. I just don't know when he wants to eat... But fine. I consulted a couple of doctors I know, and they said it happens. So... I'll see you around?" – The final phrase popped out just out of breath after a full set of words and didn't fit well with Gustav's last sentence-it started to look like she hadn't been listening to him: "I mean, I was wondering if we could go for a walk sometime when you're free?"

–

Sure. Sure, we'll go for a walk.

–

And I also wanted to ask about the puppy.....

Gustav interrupted her: "By the way, yes. I was going to pick it up early. Almost finished with everything. Faster than I expected, and I'll pick it up... How about the day after tomorrow afternoon? 3 o'clock?"

Catherine exhaled a sigh of relief: "Yes, of course. We'll go for a walk then, won't we?"

–

Yes, yes, absolutely. What were you going to say about Dobby? Because I interrupted. He's all right, isn't he?"

–

No, it's nothing. – she smiled softly into the phone. – It's just that I think I'm starting to miss you already.....

After talking for a few more easy minutes and saying good night, Catherine hung up the phone and stood up from the table and headed for the refrigerator. A red dry Burgundy was on the door. Pouring a full glass, she drank it halfway and smiled. He'd be with her soon. Everything is going right for them. She knows how to take care of her other half and she'll certainly be able to take care of him too.

Just like he will take care of her.

Kathryn turned and met her eyes again with the puppy, who was lying in exactly the same position as he had been since morning. "There's nothing wrong with him. – thought the girl. – He's just sad for his master. Why did I get so excited. He gave the dog to me for foster care. I've been doing everything right. It's not like he's not eating. It happens. Other people wouldn't have done any tests, let alone seen the best doctors. I've got everyone on edge. And for what? There's no reason to do it. And the puppy's young. He's not gonna die on his own. The tests are normal, so he'll live. And in the end, even if he dies, it won't be in three days. And then Gustave will take care of himself. A man like that will figure out anything.

What do I have to decide? Too much responsibility for me, I'm tired of it... Although maybe I should have asked him why the dog stopped eating? At least he would know... Bullshit! It's none of my business. Did I do everything he asked? You did. The dog is alive and well, of course. Anyone can see he's healthy. And panic is hysteria, which is something you have to get rid of. And Gustav wouldn't like it if I worried for nothing. There's nothing wrong here. In three days, I won't care about any of this at all. He can take the puppy and let it die in a minute, it's not my responsibility... It's my responsibility to be happy. And Gustave will have to take care of that now. I have to be beautiful and keep him on a shorter leash. It'll all work out, just as it always has."

Catherine turned her eyes away from the dog and poured herself a second glass.

## Gustav

Outside the window the wind blew again, the trees swayed, danced and began to hug each other like old friends.

Now it was necessary to go to the nearest store, to buy alcohol for the realization of another interesting idea – Vladimir Arkadyevich had a daughter with two incomparable but not uncommon features of physiology: addiction to alcohol and diseased kidneys at the same time. She had certainly taken a liking to him two months ago, and she had made it clear more than once that she wanted more than just to admire him from afar.

By the time Gustav got into the car, it had already begun to rain outside the window, not heavily, but obviously it was beginning to last. The Irishman loved this kind of weather – it suited his meditations perfectly, and it suited even better the moods of people who were upset and distressed by it, assuring themselves that "the sky was now crying with them". A surprisingly childlike view of nature, often present in historical descriptions: battles, coronations of kings, inaugurations of presidents are described by different people with directly opposite weather, as if we are talking about different events, time and place. The tireless desire to confirm one's opinion, to predispose oneself, to create the necessary background, and it is so easy when there is such a powerful but mute force, so vividly expressing one's opinion, an endless source of confirmation of any ideas and thoughts. And, apparently, many people considered it a sin not to use it for their own purposes.

Once upon a time in Russia "blind rains", i.e. rains coming in the light of the Sun, were called "Tsarevna Crying" because the glistening drops resembled tears. There was at least some basis for such a designation. But it seemed hypocritical to make political propaganda out of nature.

"These are the sort of things that vividly reflect the lowliness of man. – Gustav thought as he started the car. – They deserve to die and nothing more.

It took about 7-8 minutes to get there, around a few turns there was a separate building, still from the times of the USSR, where the service, prices and the general atmosphere were not suitable to sell alcohol, including of illegal origin, and including during the forbidden time.

There was some sort of parking lot in front of the building. And now there was a gray Lada of the ninth model, all the doors of which were open wide. Two men were sitting inside, with their feet out on the street. They could see from their eyes that they had drunk a lot, and that there was probably just as much to drink. "Hear this, bro! – shouted one of them to Gustav. – That's a cool car. Give us a ride, say on... Beer." Even from ten meters away, the amber from the stoned and poured over the collar was quite vile and acrid, as if it had been layered on the skin for a long time.

Bullheaded, semi-hooligans. Hardly able to tell the difference between Einstein and Eisenstein. They haven't read a single book since high school, not just Remarque or Steinbeck, but any book at all. No ethics, no aesthetics. But a pronounced desire to imbibe alcohol and demand it from others, as if they owed it to them. After all, someone should occupy this niche, and if you don't want to do it yourself, then pay the one who takes this place for you. And pay so that he has enough to occupy it further. Or else he will drag you in, either at the same time, or instead of himself....

Uninteresting and useless prey.

"Sure, I'll give you a lift," the Irishman said and changed direction in their direction. Their faces were visibly pleased – apparently those who had passed them before had either ignored or denied them for various reasons.

The one in the back seat called out. He was more sober than the one in the passenger seat next to the driver's seat. Now it smelled even worse.

"Why the beer? – Gustav asked, half a meter away from them. – Vodka? Horse meat, better?"

"Bitch, yeah... I'd like some horse meat," the man in the front thought, though he'd had just enough.

Gustav reached into his wallet and pulled out a five-thousand-dollar bill and handed it to the man sitting in the back seat. The orange color of the money struck both of them in the eyes.

"Fucking hell, bro." – he whispered, looking at the money in his hands. "And for me... Give me one too," the other started, but the Irishman was already holding out a second bill of the same kind to him.

–

Well, just so you're not offended.

–

From the heart, bro...

The first one woke up a little: "Hey, what's your name, bro, come with us. We'll crush some horse meat..."

–

Gustave. Gustav Glisson.

–

Uh-oh. A foreign pahan, then.

–

Sort of... Have you seen any cops around?

–

They're asleep, bitches. Vasyana's out for a fucking walk. Where are they going?

–

So you're Vasyan?

–

He's the fuckin' guy. And that's Gray over there driving.

Gustav pulled a folding knife from his inside jacket pocket and stuck it under the first man's jaw, closed the door and stabbed the second man in the neck. Blood splattered all the seats, doors, upholstery. Vasyana even tried to cover the wound with the palm of his hand, a money bill, but it was useless: their brains were not working by this point. Their brains did not realize that death had stopped sneaking up on them, but had just come at once.

Gustav put the knife in Gray's palm, squeezed his hand, and headed for the store entrance.

It is a great honor, of course, for such drunks to die by his hand, but once they prevented him.

A couple of months ago, with their questions and innuendo, they had scared off one of his possible victims in this very same parking lot. The short, frail girl had obviously noticed Gustav, but she had gotten into her car immediately when she saw the two men. There was no point in chasing after her, she was not so beautiful and interesting from the looks of it. But the residue remained, and it was certainly not worth waiting for it to happen again.

Of course, there was no one in the store except the salesman. In fact, the salesman was not quite present, either – a short, full-figured woman of about 55 was watching TV, watching some program about geography, without paying attention to anything.

Actually, the last time he'd come into this place and asked what he could get from cheap but quality products, he'd gotten the final answer: "Buy and don't fuck around!", which came out like an advertising slogan. Now it fit as well as it could.

The Irishman looked at the shelves with alcohol: "I'd like some cognac... There's Stone land No. 5. 0.7 liter."

He had long known this brand with the inscription "We will change your attitude to Armenian cognac" placed in a frame. This phrase justified itself completely: the original product itself was of low quality, and it was often counterfeited, so that at the first sip there was nausea and a desire to spit it all back out, and under the tongue there was a very unpleasant aftertaste with a completely

inappropriate for this type of alcohol tinge of cheap chocolate. Compared to Ararat, which is of high quality made in Armenia, this cognac spoiled the whole attitude and, indeed, changed it, but only for the worse.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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