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# Honest Moose

From the Tribe

Of Hooey-  
Prickers



(4)

СОДЕРЖИТ  
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ  
БРАНЬ

18+

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**Honest Moose From the  
Tribe Of Hooley-Prickers**

«Автор»

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**ОГОЛЬЦОВ С. Н.**

Honest Moose From the Tribe Of Hooey-Prickers /  
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The latest research in the field of serious literary critics as well as scrupulous investigations by the appropriate agencies and organs are gradually bringing it to the light that the widely known facts from the protagonists adventures, taken for their face value, are all lies. He is a goody-goody boots, deep inside. Perhaps (in very rare cases) a tiny bit forgetful of tying his shoe strings, as yet.

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**Сергей Огольцов**  
**Honest Moose From the**  
**Tribe Of Hooley-Prickers**

**Глава**

## Глава

### Preface

It takes a careless person to think there only are things they know first-hand by their sense or two. That was the case with the main character in this here book 4 before he had to know otherwise...

The latest research in the field of serious literary critics as well as scrupulous investigations by the appropriate agencies and organs are gradually bringing it to the light that the widely known facts from the protagonist's adventures, taken for their face value, are all lies. He is a goody-goody boots, deep inside. Perhaps (in very rare cases) a tiny bit forgetful of tying his shoe strings, as yet...

## Глава

~ ~ ~ The Planets' Parade

On Day D, aka the departure day, everything hung by a thread, or rather, by a cobweb. This became clear to me immediately, as soon as I went out into the entryway to mellow out, because in the apartment I didn't smoke even plain Belomor.

The web hung from a gnarled beam above the entryway's door frame, and it managed to do so quite vertically, being assisted by a burnt matchstick at its end. It hung upside down, its charred head down, while the preserved end had got caught with a web noose.

Despite its invisibility, it sure was there. Otherwise, the fire victim wouldn't have found anything to hang herself on... But that's not even the question, the real question is:

How long would the web last?

The gap between the beam and the layer of crudely whitewashed plaster was a personal dumping ground for used matches. That's where I, a proud neat freak, stuffed them in. Yes, I kept the entryway tiny vestibule clean, and it had never had a trash can, and would never ever see one.

After Tonya's kid caught me red-handed and did his nice display of canary food on the stool in the center of the kitchen, I had nothing left to lose in the eyes of the apartment's population. And the opinions of other residents on what they whiff at my smoke in the neutral waters of the vestibule didn't bother me, remaining in the lilac-violet part of the spectrum...

But that match clearly demonstrated that the crevice-like dump above the beam isn't bottomless. Moreover, it poses a threat to the cleanliness of the entryway vestibule under my supervision...

Will the noose hold the deceased until I leave?

Searching for some reassurance, I peered out from the shade of the overheated entryway into the courtyard.

A squadron of black ravens floated soundless across the heat-melted sky. They kept heading southwest flat—no swerving, wing to wing. Each one, without exception, glides on motionless wings—who wants to bother with flapping in such heat? The black feather flaps are frozen, spread wide, to allow air to pass through. Hot air rustles between...

There still remained the question: will I make it?

~ ~ ~

Eerah saw me off to the station. As we approached the bus stop, Pugacheva burst into tears after me, singing from the nearest five-story building, her recent hits:

'Please come some day, even for just an hour!...'

My luggage is quite wieldy and not heavy: a briefcase with a collection of Maugham's stories in English (pink softcover, Moscow Prosveshchenie Publishing House), along with a stolen copy of Hornby's 'Learners' Dictionary'; a school notebook, lined, 12 pages, two of which covered with a draft translation of the opening paragraphs of the story 'Rain' (a pencil try full of multiple corrections); a work record book (the first entry dated September 13, 1971, made by the HR department of the Konotop Locomotive and Carriage Repair Plant); the passport; the military ID; shaving kit.

Accompanying the briefcase was a blue sports bag with a shoulder strap. It contained one pair of underwear, two tank tops, a pair of shirts, jeans, and a geologist's jacket, sewn by my mother from thick green canvas.

... .

Climbing onto the EMU train, I tossed my luggage onto the thin tubes of the luggage rack, which stretched along the length of the car above all the windows, and returned to the platform. Eerah was nervous that the train doors would slam shut, the train go without me. I climbed one step into the vestibule and stood there, clutching the slippery nickel gleam of the entrance handrail in my palm. 'I left something on the windowsill in the bedroom. Let it stay there until I get back.'

'What is it?'

'see for yourself. I'll come pick you up in exactly a month.'

'Call me as soon as you get there.'

It was the last train car. An old woman ran up the platform, asking me something, but I wasn't listening or hearing, only staring at Eerah until a loudspeaker screamed from the train: 'Careful! Doors closing!' They hissed, and with the first bang, they cut me clear off from Eerah.

With a clang, the train jerked, pulled more smoothly, and went into full gear, clacking along the rails in the direction of Kyiv...

... .

On the evening before the launch, Eerah and I went out to do some shopping. The department store was closed, but the glass kiosk next to it was still open. Inside sat a plump, middle-aged gypsy woman, from whom I bought a new razor, a shaving brush, a standing mirror for the same purpose, and a couple of nose-pieces.

Across the field of each, thin blue sine waves ran, symbolizing the sea, and in the center was a circle drawn with an equally thin, but red, line. One circle contained a small boat with a sail, and the other nose-piece presented a slim anchor.

The sailboat traveled with me, in my pocket; the hanky with the anchor lay on the windowsill. When I return, I'll put the circle on the circle. The boat—to the anchor. This will be the rite of return...

~ ~ ~

We came back, and when it got completely dark, my mother-in-law suddenly panicked, anxiously mumbling me there was no need to go anywhere at all, and it's not late yet to return my Kyiv-Odessa train ticket at the advance ticket office, tomorrow, at the station.

I almost afucamuzza... well, anyway... of what ticket return was all this! Eerah and Tonya also joined the conference, and the only thing missing was my father-in-law, urgently summoned to the emergency situation at the Bread Factory.

Her gaze stuck to the oilcloth under the TV set on the table, but Gaina Mikhailovna, forgetful to set it free, kept rambling on incoherently about the gravity of the present state of affairs, when even Vanya didn't manage to get through...

A week earlier, Ivan, Tonya's husband, had left for Transcarpathia, his homeland, but for some reason, he never arrived there, returning a day later from Kyiv—I still couldn't figure out what was going on. Now he was holed up in the confines of his bedroom, along with both of his young children.

... .

By then, I'd already realized that the world had hopelessly stuck in a mire of never-ending battle—but between whom? That was the question!

The quagmire of confrontation was, of course, concealed by life's camouflage net, a distraction. But through the superficial veneer and smokescreen of everyday routine, I gradually began to notice gaps, inconsistencies, hidden signals. More and more often, I'd sense someone nearby suddenly blurting out (without even realizing it) something transcendental, something beyond the boundaries of the mundane, something they insist on selling us—clung like a leech—as the truly real, the only possible reality.

What kind of indiscriminate interceptions? Who did I catch them from? Am I sure, it's about people?

Well, let's say so. So far, I haven't managed to understand enough to find the right term to dub them...

So, they let things slip? About what exactly? How?

About things, we're always taught to see only this way and no other, within certain boundaries—from here to there, and not a micron deeper.

... Vanya was sent as an emissary... he failed to get through... and whose side are you on?... (the fire at the Bread Factory is just an episode in a universal battle)...

Who's on whom? What are they fighting for?

The most urgent task is to collect the fragments of slips of the tongue, the crumbs of the scattered pieces of the puzzle that hold together the latently hidden reality, the real one. To assemble them into something comprehensible, and most importantly, to stay on course, not to get lost in the half-hints of what really is. In that fundamentally hidden, shebang, which precedes all superstructures...

~ ~ ~

An unprecedented thunderstorm broke outside the blackened living room window. The roar of the water rushing through the night was drowned out by the cannon roar of all-shaking thunder and flashes of lightning's blinding blades. The unbearably white column of fire struck the center of the yard, precisely on the transformer box. Pitch blackness closed in around everything.

Tonya groped her way to the bedroom to calm Vanya and the kids. She soon returned, holding a burning candle.

In the flickering light, it suddenly became clear that I was opposing the Mothers. Yes, yes! The very ones mentioned too briefly and with wary apprehension by Goethe...

The three Mothers—there they are: the old but mighty one; the middle-aged but experienced one; and the very beginner—Eerah. I can't count on her, she's one of them.

I have to convince them, otherwise nothing will work.

With the storm raging outside, heedlessly exposing my profile to the candle's reflection's flicker in the solid black, opaque glass, it only by pure miracle I managed to beg their permission to set out the next day...

And finally, their eldest spoke somewhat haltingly: 'If something happens, if it goes wrong... in the worst case... contact the Chief...'

. . . .

That night, I had a prophetic dream where I was lying supine on a gurney, trying to be completely inconspicuous in the chilling fluorescent light pouring from everywhere: the ceiling and the walls... Perhaps it was pouring from the floor either, but I can't say for sure, since, in an effort to blend in with the surroundings, I kept my eyes tightly closed, trying to conceal myself, doing my best to hide...

There were no lamps at all, but everything around was drowned in a luminous grayness that erased every shadow without exception, not allowing them to fall even in the slightest direction...

Some figures were standing around, a tight group in white... One of them, behind my head, so it was impossible to see who exactly, said confidently: 'When rid of the fat, then maybe it will work...'

Even without looking, I knew that the one who said it was me... Inconspicuously, so as not to give myself away, and therefore still not opening my eyes, I glanced at the stomach of me lying on the gurney, where a thin layer of something softly yellow was visible through the translucent skin—the very fat I had just mentioned...

~ ~ ~

Stepping out into the swaying vestibule of the train car, I blew up the joint. A herd of seahorses floated across the dusty sky in the automatic door glass, their tails tucked under their bellies, each under its own. They were strictly ordered, in a single file—from the seasoned sea mare to the little foal that rounded out their line. They were as fond of systematicity as the white figures of elephants lost long ago.

The train accelerated, breaking into a thundering gallop, but was unable to break away from the herd of seahorses...

A man with a row of medals on the chest of his jacket emerged into the vestibule. A war veteran, he certainly knew who was on whose side.

We chatted for a bit, not making any particularly clear points, just showing mutual friendliness, until a younger man stepped toward us from the next platform, carrying a tall bundle of slats.

He separated us with this bundle of rods, like that carried along by the ancient Roman cops to beat the ancient troublemakers, without leaving the scene of their disrupting public order, and strode inside the car.

The vet suddenly fell silent, his frightened gaze fixed at the top corner of the vestibule behind me. I knew for a fact that the corner was empty, but if he saw it, than there it was. Leaving the decorated soldier alone with his find—let them sort it out for themselves—I followed the lictor into the half-empty train car, because the outskirts of Kyiv were already rolling by in the windows beneath the luggage rack...

~ ~ ~

At the station, I carried my things into the cool of the underground luggage storage labyrinth. Emerging to the surface, bathed in the heat of the station square, I circled it to the right corner, where I slipped through an inconspicuous passage to long flights of stairs descending into a deep ravine, where at the very bottom stood the canteen where Lyokha Kuzko had once brought Olga and me.

But the protracted descent down the stairs finally ended, and I blew the joint, yet very soon stopped dragging, because a platoon of cops, having just finished lunch, was stomping toward me from the canteen. So I had to modestly walk through the gauntlet of law enforcement, the joint smoldering between the fingers of my idly hanging hand.

After the lunch, I returned to the station to make my rounds. The glass-eyed there were not as many as during the night patrol in Nezhyhyn as a single warrior in the field. Perhaps the time of day was a factor. However, there still were some. At my approaching, these at once pretended they were just so, like everyone else, like, ordinary passengers on their way somewhere.

I went up to the third floor, to the mother-and-child room, and explained to the guard that I'd be passing through their station in a month with my wife and infant daughter, so I stopped by to check out the conditions. Well, yeah, I see the corridor here is pretty clean, thank you...

Near the toilets on the first floor, a young cop with a richly purple black eye persistently averted his gaze, even though we both knew that each of us knew, without being told, that he'd been punched because of the joint sneaking through the cop's squad ranks, and he, a victim of the universal battle, would never forgive me for it, from now on, until his deathbed.

Then, for quite a long time, I stood rooted to the spot in the waiting room on the second floor. The vast UnionPrint desk stretched out before me, covered in thick layers of newspapers, magazines, and stationery. But throughout my entire stay, I stubbornly kept my eyes fixed on the same postcard depicting a deep blue sky.

I had to wait a long time before I finally heard footfalls behind me. The reverently hushed hum of the vast station hall accentuated them with a distinct, audible clarity.

I kept my eyes down on the sky. The footfalls stopped. A dark coin, the diameter of an iris, dropped on the bright blue. Only then did I turn around and walk away without looking back—from now on, no causal genes will be able to change the color of your eyes...

Already in the middle of the hall, the station's PA loudspeakers finally managed to reach me:

'The Kyiv-Odessa train is departing from platform three. Those seeing the travelers off, please leave the carriages.'

~ ~ ~

It hardly needs a special emphasis that in those artlessly simple days of communicational virginity, not a single of the bravest minds ever had, in the thick of their however feverishly immodest dreams, even a fleeting fantasy of installing surveillance cameras in public places.

What then (given the underdevelopment of relevant technologies at the period described) caused the inexplicable scene that unfolded that evening in the line of passengers standing at the bus stop in front of the Kyiv bus station?

There can only be one answer: the vigilance of the taxi driver.

(... in the current context, the term 'cause' is used without delving into the heap of its multi-layered meanings. Here, we apply the meaning established in traditional usage, which is still used by 'scientific minds' (yes, in quotation marks — it would be more correct to call them 'crappy ones') in their representation of the phenomena of the surrounding reality, conventionally and orthodoxly arranged by them in a linear sequence of a schematically standard chain-continuum — 'cause-effect'.

However, during the period in question, I had already left the confines of the outdated etiology, due to an excessively deep absorption in tracing the intricacies of the intermittent and incompletely articulated sequence of transcendental signs-symbols of varying volume and content, which appeared to me in unexpected bursts of revelation, which inspired to daringly go on with the search for new, elusive, but such enticing levels of comprehensive understanding of the adjacent, genuine reality, buried in the alluvial of false and inert careless lightness, in order to achieve, through prophetic insights, a true understanding of the world and my role in it, because 'at times the edges can be lift, briefly, and we see what we were not supposed to...', quoting the illustrious American transcendentalist...)

. . . .

So, let's return to the taxi driver at the taxi stand, next to the entrance to the underground luggage storage hall at the Kyiv Long-Distance Train Station...

At 5:06 PM, a young man of about twenty-five to seven years old, six feet seven inches tall, brown-haired, straight hair, and a trimmed mustache, emerged from the underpass. He was wearing a gray jacket and gray trousers, a clashing shade. Under the jacket, peeked a blue summer shirt.

Visibly upset, the brown-haired man got into a taxi, where he offered driver to go to the luggage storage hall for him and fetch his briefcase and bag from the automated locker, the number and code for which he would provide.

The taxi driver, naturally, declined.

The man seemed lost in thought, twirling a burnt match in the fingers of his right hand. Then he sighed, broke the match with the same fingers, asked for a moment's wait, and disappeared down the steps of the overpass. Five minutes later, he reappeared with his things and a request to be taken to the Kyiv bus station.

Having been delivered to the said location, the passenger paid, slung his bag strap over his left shoulder, and, grabbing the handle of his briefcase with his left hand, slammed the door. Synchronously with the click of the door lock, and seemingly by accident, he wiped the nickel-plated door handle with the right side hem of his jacket, erasing his fingerprints, as is typical of crime films. After these manipulations, the brown-haired man disappeared through the doors of the intercity bus station.

What else could the taxi driver do?

Naturally, he called (on a nearby pay phone) the operative with whom he secretly collaborated under the code name 'Traktor'.

What did the line of passengers I had joined witness, upon my return from the bus station, after visiting the men's restroom and standing dumbfounded for five minutes in the middle of the lobby, staring fixedly at the multi-meter smile of the flight attendant in her blue uniform cap, depicted on a gigantic poster: 'Fly Aeroflot!'

A bright red, freshly washed Zhiguli slammed to a stop near the bus stop. A dark-haired man wearing sunglasses got out, approached me, and, handing me the ignition key along with a bunch of other keys, said, 'Get in the car, we'll be leaving in a minute.' I turned away, remaining silent. The man walked into the bus station building.

Soon, two young men appeared from around the right corner of the building—one in a police uniform, the other in civilian clothes. Both took a position on the right side of the line. From around

the left corner, the same man in dark glasses appeared, accompanied by a short companion wearing a cloth cap. They stopped on the opposite side of the line.

The man in the cap (obviously a drunk and a slob) mingled with the line of passengers, approached me, and began rubbing his front against my behind. The line observed the dry-hump act in confusion. I stood there indifferently, one hand clutching the strap of my bag slung over my shoulder. My other hand, meanwhile, gripped the handle of my briefcase.

The disgusting scene was interrupted by the arrival of a bus with the word 'Flight' written on its side.

... .

On the way to Boryspil Airport, I ignored the puzzled looks of my fellow passengers, my mind's eye returning to what the CCTV camera (which hadn't been invented yet, hence its absence) hadn't captured in the empty men's restroom at the Kyiv Intercity Bus Station.

I approached the long tilted trough of the communal urinal on the wall opposite the stalls and poured into it the mustard-brown dust of all the dope I had on me. The packing paper was crumpled and tossed into the trash. As French crime dramas starring Belmondo had taught me.

(... this demonstrates the ability to program me not only with text but also with cinematic means of influence.

For the rest of my life, right up until this night in this here forest on the banks of the Varanda River, I lived as a disgustingly mulish abstainer...)

... .

At Boryspil Airport, I didn't use the automated locker system, but instead checked my luggage into the general storage area: let them search my bag and briefcase and see that there's no point in rubbing provocative drunks up against my ass...

A ticket to Odessa on a passing flight from Moscow cost 17 rubles, which didn't exceed the 20 rubles I had stashed to tide me over until my first advance payment at the construction sites of the satellite port city...

~ ~ ~

I couldn't see the Odessa airport in the darkness, and took a city bus to the bus station, where the ticket office was already locked, but the locker system worked round the clock, and the waiting room had benches for sitting overnight.

Of course, yes, I felt like a winner, having managed, against all odds, to break through Kyiv. The dizziness of a triumphant assured me of my personal complete invulnerability. The return to the real status quo wasn't exactly pleasant, when a small flock of passengers filed sleepily through the station's rear door into the early morning light, catching the first bus.

In the initial light of dawn, they shuffled past my seated figure, my head thrown back in a drowsy half-slumber (still with the same demonstrative brazenness of a victor), over the back of the bench, my neck exposed to any, even malicious one, attack.

The pain from the needle piercing to the right from my Adam's apple made me clutch the skin about the carotid artery. Of course, my fingers didn't catch any needle there, but the distinct sensation of a needle being stuck in, or rather, hastily pulled out, didn't go away. I spent the next half hour wincing, occasionally pinching and rubbing my empty neck...

The ticket office opened, and they told me there were no services to Youzhny, and I needed to take a local bus from Bus Station #3, located near the New Market.

... .

Having arrived at the designated point, I studied the bus schedule, where the line 'Youzhny' kept repeating itself till evening hours. I decided to take a walk before leaving, because this—oh my God, damn it!—this is Odessa-Mama! I'm in Odessa! Ahhh... holy shit!

At the end of the small hall (or rather, just a spacious room) of the bus station, there were only a couple of sections of automatic storage lockers. All of their lockers were locked, except for one—

in the very top row of the upper section. I stowed my carry-on luggage, created the code, inserted a 15-kopek coin into the slot, and slammed it shut.

The lock didn't click, which is why the locker waited for me unoccupied.

Transferring the documents from my briefcase to my inside jacket pocket, I quietly closed the door to prevent it from swinging open. On the crest of a euphoria wave, rising like a tsunami, I left the station to enter Odessa...

~ ~ ~

Not everyone, in their entire life, is given the opportunity to experience complete happiness. I managed to get it free of charge. Moreover, I can pinpoint the time and place of absolute happiness that befell me. Those brief hours of my first stroll through Odessa.

... .

The joyful light of the sun spilled over the streets which I walked. Or rather, I was no longer there, I had dissolved, become a part of everything around me, and everything was an extension and a part of me in this unfamiliar city, where everyone I met recognized me, where everyone had had to wait so long for my arrival. The thoughts of those I passed were transmitted to me, and I, in turn, thought my thoughts to them...

Here walks a woman joyfully, proud of her beauty.

... wow!... what a cool chick!

And she blossoms triumphantly.

... but I have Eerah...

And the woman, sadly faded, bows her head, and passes by.

To the middle-aged Caucasian man, standing bored on the corner, looking around with a yawning gaze, I tossed in a thought: 'Hey, Javad, I remember your dagger strike!'

Boredom—gone! It rolled away down his sorrowfully slumped shoulders. The mustache tip twitched, stunned by the sudden memory of treacherous attack by Javad, a jiffy ago a completely unknown cat. Javad, who are you?!

... Okay, let's not think sad things...

A fleet-footed flock of pioneers in scarlet ties and white shirts hurries past to the celebrations marking my arrival. Finally, you're with us!

I enter a large bookstore to make a list of future purchases, chatting with the sellers and customers without opening my mouth.

I walk up the steps of the movie star stairs, reminiscent to quite a few of extras, past the monument to Richelieu, who was never a cardinal in his life.

In a green grove nearby, there are more pioneers, but this time a different group. They were too engrossed in considering the ordinary freight cars carrying goods for the port.

'Pioneers!' I shout to them. 'ships are more beautiful than railway cars!' They look around, wave, and smile. They recognized me!

The taxi driver takes me to the Bratislava restaurant, explaining, in a brotherly way, that on weekdays it's a cafeteria. But today is a celebration—my arrival, and he, too, knows that this is me, the so-long-awaited-for I...

~ ~ ~

After washing my hands and face with water from the restroom tap, I went upstairs to a huge dining room to serve just me. A single waitress appeared out of nowhere for me to have someone to order soup from.

She walked away, and suddenly a wrinkle on the white tablecloth caught my eye—the mark of clumsy ironing. I just had to place my palm on the tablecloth and move my hand, just so slightly. The wrinkles were gone...

...well, of course, I had so many diapers to iron—I could remove any wrinkle with just a touch, easily...

The waitress approached and then left again, not disturbing the silence in the shadowy room. I started on the fish soup, made to recipes of the port city. On the low bandstand nearby, the speakers and amplifiers of the absent restaurant group stood silent in reverently solemn awe... so, what should I listen to?... something light... okay, let it be The Smokie...

I snap my fingers.

Not a sound.

... what?! Am I not omnipotent?! Or are they switched on differently here?

And then it hit me, crushing, like an unexpected blow to the plexus, the feeling of miscalculation. Somewhere, an irreparable mistake had occurred. I'd made a terrible error.

I can't eat this soup at all. The rice has turned into shells, ground to powder, and they've settled to the bowl bottom in a layer of tiny mother-of-pearl shards.

... something is catastrophically wrong somewhere... something's been missed, or misinterpreted... but what?!

Thoughtfully, I begin pacing back and forth between the tables. I explain to the waitress who approached that I can't eat, that I've forgotten something.

'What?'

My jacket's in the restroom,' I say, the first thing that comes to mind.

And that very moment, the door to the hall swings open to let in a neat pensioner announces that my jacket is downstairs, in the cloakroom.

I go down to the cloakroom barrier, where a woman with the inimitably rich Odessa accent hands me the jacket the old man brought her from the restroom.

'But the pockets were full,' the cloakroom attendant comments with a bitter reproach that we both understand. She meant that Sunny City after a long wait had seen me, after all, and bestowed every possible gift upon me, and I had lost those gifts because of an unforgivably stupid mistake, though I don't know what it was. I trudge upstairs dejectedly to pay for the ground mother-of-pearl soup...

~ ~ ~

It's like that board game—you climb higher and higher along a winding path of numbers, and then you fall into a pipe that runs all the way to the bottom. Wheeze!...

From the pipe end, I rolled out of the Bratislava restaurant, where I'd deliberately left my jacket in the restroom because it had my documents and money in its pocket, and I'd already reached and found myself in a shining new world, where neither money nor documents are needed, not necessary anymore, not even remotely so.

. . . .

On the way to the bus station, I notice a long rip in my pants. From the hip. The seam has split downwards from the right pocket, over the thigh. I continue walking, covering the hole with my removed jacket, the pockets empty—I've spilled all, unable to keep the priceless gifts...

The wide-open locker where I left my bag and briefcase is void as interstellar space.

I bought a ticket to Youzhny with my last ruble and, along with the change, stuffed it in my back pocket.

The bus is packed, passengers standing tightly in the aisle. My seatmate sighs silently and rubs and rubs the indelible stain on the fabric of her skirt. But no cleaning products from Arabia will be able to remove it...

I know—it's stained because of my mistake. Because of my unknown fault.

The stuffy bus slows to a stop in front of each and every traffic light, red with anger. Then he gets stuck waiting for a long time on a trench-ridden street, letting an endless line of dejected pioneers pass, trudging through the dust along mounds of earth... It's all my fault – I've ruined the holiday...

Little by little, the bus finally makes its way out of the city. At the stops, passengers abandon it forever. But I waited and got off at the second-to-last stop — it wouldn't be right to show up in Youzhny with a hole like Spartacus's spear wound in his thigh.

. . . .

On the outskirts of the village, I respectfully greeted a boy of about twelve, then asked for a needle and thread. He understandingly led me to a secluded thicket of weeds, behind a fence made of unevenly large parallelepipeds of light stone in a wall with thick mortar joints.

He ran off to return with a friend who was carrying a needle and a long piece of black thread.

The boys sat up on the fence, their backs to me. Taking off my pants, I began to mend the split seam. On the other side of the stone wall, brakes squealed, engines roared and rumbled along the difficult roads of the endless cosmic battle...

My buddies sat there, pretending they had nothing to do with it, and it wasn't behind them, in the thick weeds, that a member of the Revolutionary Military Council was mending a thigh wound...

With grateful, undisguised gratitude, I handed over the needle, still with a fairly long piece of thread.

Alone, I descended under an Apple tree, pulled out a Belomor cigarette, lit it, and drove the used matchstick, half-burned by its own flame, into the ground, so it goes out completely.

Oh! How she howled! With a heart-rending, desperate cry—that piebald cow under the neighboring tree, raising her muzzle to the heavens in protest and complaint...

But I didn't know! Everything was so intertwined, so fused!

~ ~ ~

Then I wandered through the dense willow spinney, and high above me, a bird as large as a stork hovered in the sky, wings outstretched. It hovered there, unmoving, in the same place, almost motionless. A retinue of smaller winged escorts, also motionless, clung to the firmament on either side of the stork...

... so that's where the Supreme One is... God or the Devil, or whatever else—I can't tell... the chaotic world is woven into an all-too-incomprehensible tangle... and here I am—stripped, just documents, a pocket notebook, a pen, and a handkerchief with a small sailboat... it's time we made the contract, isn't it the tradition?

I take out a pen and a bus ticket. Having no idea how to draw up such contracts, I simply signed under the column of numbers punched out by the cash register at Bus Station #3. I put the pen back in my pocket and leave the ticket on the leaves of a flexible willow fork. I turned my back on the document—we're playing fair, no peeking.

A breath, like a rustling gust of wind, stirred the bushes... When I turned around, the ticket was still lying in the same fork, but turned over with the back, clean side up... So, that's your signature? Clear! You can't forge one like that...

I emerged from the undergrowth to a tall brick building that resembled the central warehouse of the KLCR Plant, and there I began asking people where the HR department was. I was told everything was already closed, but after the second shift there would be a bus to the city, and I needed to wait.

~ ~ ~

I had to wait a long time, then rode through the night on a small PAZ bus. Fellow passengers, in twos or threes at a time, climbed out on the dimly lit streets, until the driver ordered me to leave the now-deserted PAZ at the corner of a spacious, empty square.

Ahead, the yellow light of a streetlamp flowed along a narrow street, and I walked between its fences, then turned left, repeating my choice at the next fork in the road. The dry click of claws on the asphalt followed me, keeping pace. Judging by the sound, the dog was a large brute, but I wasn't at all afraid and didn't look back, continuing to walk slowly.

But then the same wide square opened up ahead, and I stopped, about twenty meters away, because that was my post. The yellow light of the streetlamp held its lonely pole within a translucent

cone-shaped cap. But I remained outside the yellow circle, vaguely spread across the asphalt... It couldn't reach my feet.

From the black silhouette of a five-story building on the left, a cat trotted stealthily across the road, disappearing into the dark courtyard of the house on the right, with its wooden fence, where it was greeted by the delighted clanking of a dog chain. A rendezvous of opposites. At times, even slaves get their share of effing boinking...

. . . .

The night wore on, and I stood motionless, pretending I had no idea, no connection to the unbearably grinding chaos beyond the horizon, where, with a screech of metal, the giant gears of the universal mechanism were stalled—because of my irreparable mistake...

~ ~ ~

When a dump truck slowed behind me, I turned around but didn't give way, merely raising my right hand, because this was my post.

The people in the cab were headless; the impenetrable blackness had cut their heads off at the shoulders, bathed in the light from the yellow cone of the streetlamp.

When the driver climbed down from the cab, he still had a head, even wearing a cap. He gently led me aside. I didn't resist. Having cleared the road, he got back in and drove off, carrying the other one, with a slate-black darkness on his shoulders.

The tire tracks were etched black on the road. I couldn't leave it like this—the universal darkness would begin to spread, following these black milestones. I began to rub the waymarkers with the soles of my shoes.

How long would my shoes last?

In response, a wind picked up, and a wide spread-out newspaper came running from the square, rubbing against my leg. I made out the headline: 'The Prince's Tomb'.

'Took you a long time, hon, getting here, huh?'

She rustled farewell and glided on, dancing along the street's asphalt.

The sky turned gray...

Exhausted by the dog, but content, the cat carefully crossed the road, back to her five-story building. To her aristocratic daily life, in the attics of high society. A plaintive whine of despair and the sobs of clanking chains echoed after her.

A new day dawned, but I still stood at my post until a woman in white walked along the far edge of the square, from right to left, toward a corner out of sight from my post.

Soon, an old woman in black hobbled in the same direction, pushing a baby stroller. But I knew there was no baby in it. She was pushing eggs. White, round like billiard balls. Eggs. In clusters.

It became clear to me that I could leave my post, and I walked into the deserted square...

Further and further I walked, not disturbing the silence of the empty streets, until I turned into the open door of the checkpoint.

In the cramped duty room, I asked a tall old man in a black robe, glasses, and a cap, for water. He gave me a glass of water, and together we watched closely: would I swallow the black speck floating in circles on the surface?

I drank it all. The speck stuck to the side of the glass. The black old man told me how to get to the Employment Bureau...

~ ~ ~

The Bureau was locked, but then a woman arrived with a key and opened it. I told her I was looking for work, and she replied that I needed to wait for one more Bureau employee who would be arriving soon.

Not far from the office, I found an open milk cafe. I bought a large bottle of milk with my remaining kopecks, but only drank half. As much as a tall, thin glass could contain. Over it, I repeated Romeo's parting words, spoken with the poison in his fist: 'I drink to you, love!' And then I drank it.

By the time I returned, the second employee had arrived. At the very first glance, one could see that she was Death, and the one who had arrived with the key was Love.

Death checked my documents and irritably announced that I had already been divorced, but Love only smiled, replying, 'So what?' Then she went into another room to make a phone call, leaving me with a disgruntled Death, who bore a certain resemblance to Olga. Probably the color of her hair, though longer.

On coming back, Love informed there had been found a job for me at the Odessa Mine Administration, and now I needed to go to Polar Explorers Square and find the chief engineer there. And also remind him about the car, as she'd forgotten to mention it over the phone. A car for Maria. Okay? He knows...

... .

The chief engineer said there was no place for me at the Administration, only work in the mine as a timberman. But I did have a higher education.

Rather hastily, I assured him that my education was flexible and would in no way interfere with my underground duties, that was for sure!

Then he sent me to the back of a truck, which was waiting silently next to the administration building in the square.

I jumped into the back as a skilled combatant trained for the exercise twice a day for 2 years. Chief liked it and ordered the driver to start the truck.

Soon the city floated away over the horizon. The dense network of utility power and communications cables disappeared from the air overhead. Besides me, in the back was a tall, white refrigerator, clearly weathered and well-worn. And a pair of black chains. Similar in design to chainsaws, but more powerful and longer.

They looked like a pair of snakes mating, inexorably creeping toward me along the floor of the wooden truck bed, jittering in excitement from constant jolts and hops on the potholes.

In a village called 'Vapnyarka', the truck turned into industrial-looking territory. The chief engineer leaned out of the cab and told me to throw the chains out of the truck bed.

Relieved, I tossed the predatory, lustful creatures into a wide puddle, though there was plenty of dry space nearby. 'What the hell are you doing?' the chief engineer yelled, though he clearly liked my reprisal.

The truck driver dragged the drowned couple through the open warehouse door. Then we pulled into a residential area of the village, where we moved the refrigerator into one of the cottages in a group of summer houses surrounded by a low picket fence. The chief engineer plugged the power cord into the outlet to make sure, and the refrigerator hummed contentedly.

'I almost forgot,' I said. 'Maria asked you to send a car.'

Actually, I'd been remembering that phrase the whole way, I was just waiting for the perfect moment...

... .

The chief engineer explained how to get to the street faucet. I went there, took off my jacket, washed my hands and arms up to the short sleeves of my shirt, as well as my face and neck. A couple of policemen with stars in their shoulder boards stood to one side of me, and on the other side were also officers, just as many, but wearing army uniforms.

The four of them waited patiently while I splashed around, because I was with Chief, and after this lavation, no needle could pierce the skin of my neck.

Then I turned off the tap and wiped myself with the tiny hanky, which instantly became soaked.

After leaving the village, the truck continued on its way, carrying only me in the back. The highway plunged down a steep, straight slope, and suddenly, to the right, an endless void opened up. Immeasurable nothing.

Confused, I couldn't figure out what it was. However, a moment later, the space stirred, came into motion, the white crests of long waves rushed toward the shore. So, it was the sea! I took out my notebook and, after checking the square dial on my wrist, wrote on the inside back cover:

'July 20, 1979

1:30:15

Eerah

Sehrguey

Liliana'

The highway tilted up. Having conquered the climb, the truck turned left onto a dirt road and, through the outskirts of a village, drove into a field, where the dirt road continued right next to a forest belt. After another two kilometers, at the end of a long descend, two or three barrack-like buildings appeared.

The road passed them, and a hundred meters further on, it ended in a wide quarry depression. At the bottom stood a small house with a sign reading 'Dofinovka Mine.' The narrow-gauge railway tracks stretched past the office windows to get swallowed by the dark muzzle of a tunnel cut through the sheer wall of the pit.

~ ~ ~

Three of us sat in a trio of shabby but durable chairs (thanks to the sturdiness of their armrests), behind a pair of tightly curtained windows.

Closest to the curtains of the corner window sat the mine foreman, a man with a reddish mustache, approximately of forty-five years of age, the fact confirmed by the rather thinning hair on his crown.

From the chair by the opposite wall, the chief engineer, chuckling cheerfully, shared the news of my throwing chain snakes into a puddle. The storyteller's boisterous mirth, meeting no response whatsoever, subsided, and he stopped his tries at creating unnecessary excitement.

His on-tip-toes, wary attention to the man sitting opposite him made it clear, without any preamble, who was really in charge here.

From the chair to the foreman's right, under the second blinded window, I, at his request, handed over my passport, feeling awkward at the rather shabby appearance of my ID.

He opened the red-skinned booklet and, without touching it, moved his right palm over the pages.

Literally before our eyes, the document's paper lost its seediness and was filled with a crisp, clear life, as if straight from the printing press. It even began to emit rays of ectoplasmic glow, a dim light from the depths of the paper's structure.

Mesmerized, the chief engineer and I stared at what was happening—we weren't up to work miracles. Now there was no room for the slightest doubt that I had indeed managed to reach the supreme Chief...

(... having long ago abandoned the firmament of heaven, He assumed the guise of a foreman at a backwater mine. His name? It's better not to mention in vain. I can only announce that He chose 'Yakovlevich' as His patronymic...)

... .

Then I said that my things had gone missing at the bus station in Odessa, I had no money, and I needed to call my wife; she was worried.

Instantly handing me a dark-blue five-ruble note, the chief engineer simultaneously announced that I would be living in a dormitory at the entrance to the quarry pit.

I didn't need any further explanation that the dormitory, like the mine itself, was merely a deceptive illusion for gullible simpletons and otherworldly fools, in which one must be constantly on guard. So I plucked a brownish fluff from a folded banknote and, with a technically unobtrusive

gesture, smoothly transferred the soft mark onto the scratched armrest — we all understand each other here, don't we?

## Глава

~ ~ ~ As If A Mine

Beyond my immediate duties—first as a timber worker, then as an assistant of stone-cutting machine operator, not to mention shorter-term jobs and assignments—I was constantly searching for an answer to the question: what lay behind the visible facade of my nearby surroundings?

The desire for at least a modicum of clarity never abandoned me in Odessa as well, where I came for often calls to Nezhyn from the long-distance phone communication point on Pushkin Street. Where the money from? I borrowed from Slavik Aksyanov or his wife Lyuda in the dormitory to tide me till a payday.

In that, so called, dormitory, converted from what had supposedly been a cow farm, there were four (well, let's say four, to keep things simple) rooms, on either side of a long corridor that ran from end to end through the single-story barrack-style building. One of the rooms was occupied by the young, childless Aksyanov family. In the next room there dwelt the Bessarabian family with a one-year-old child. An elderly electrician, single loner, occasionally appeared from behind the door down the hall.

I was assigned a room on the opposite wall of the corridor. The bars on the room's only window, as they repeatedly tried to convince me, were necessary to protect the radio. Which, of course, was missing.

Before doing anything else, I removed the iron frame with its welding-fixed bars of the same metal from the window and placed it outside, in a thicket of rank grass that reached the outside window ledge. Then I whitewashed the walls and spent the entire evening waging ceaseless battles with myriads of vampires disguised as gnats. My melee weapon was a rolled-up newspaper.

The next morning, Slavik Aksyanov, looking extremely exhausted and battered, asked what I'd been doing all evening after finishing my whitewash affair.

'Safari,' I answered briefly, without going into detail. His appearance, even without explanation, suggested that the poor guy (one from among those myriads) was barely alive after yesterday's newspaper.

. . . .

The rest of the corridor doors were locked like in the Bluebeard's Castle, except for the first one to the right of the entrance, where the shower was located. . .

Mine workers arrived in the morning on one truck through a couple of villages: Vapnyarka and New Dofinovka. Driving past the 'dormitory', they hooted and whistled like devils in the truck back, though they called themselves Makhno's bandits.

Every other day, a pair of Makhnovian devils filled the shower's capacious tank with water hauled from a small shack in a ravine about thirty meters from the 'dormitory'. The structure concealed a deep well with a bucket chained to an iron crank. Electric heating elements heated the contents of the tank long before the end of the work shift.

. . . .

Slightly off to the side, down the slope from the 'dormitory's' barracks, the top of a one-user latrine with tin sides could be seen among the tall grass. The door was missing, so the one in need of the facility had to whistle when approaching, lest they catch the current user in a perched eagle attitude. . .

Through the missing latrine door, a breathtaking view opened onto the surface of the estuary and its steep bank opposite.

~ ~ ~

(... the concept of 'stream of consciousness', put to use a hundred years ago, still exists today, suggesting that a person is capable of making mental comments (i.e., silently) on what's happening

around them, or of random thoughts about something unrelated, seemingly, to what's going on closely to them.

The first writer to use the idea of 'stream' is generally considered to be an Irishman named James Joyce. Although he himself attempted to frame a certain Frenchman, from whom he supposedly adopted the technique. However, long before that, albeit on a smaller scale, 'stream' thoughts were noted in the head of Prince Myshkin's would-be mother-in-law, in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel 'The Idiot'.

Thus, 'stream of consciousness' clearly belongs to the category of discoveries that must be made repeatedly and in different places, just in case, to ensure they won't get lost. The 'stream' itself, in short, brings to consciousness of the human race, that a person is capable of exchanging thoughts with a slightly reflective self.

What I experienced during that crazy summer of '79, which turned out to be the most wonderful summer of my life, can hardly be called a 'stream of consciousness'. Stream? Good heavens! Not even close! A flood swept over me—uncontrollable, refreshing each of my five senses, keeping them in a constant, sleeplessly tense alertness.

The circle with which I sociably exchanged thoughts included not only myself but also everyone I met, up to a small pebble on the dusty side of the road.

Once, instead of a pebble, there was a domino piece kicking idly back in the dust (plastic, from a white domino with black pips, the blank-to-three one).

'Well, who would have doubted it!' I told her. 'Nothing comes from anywhere and nothing disappears. The law of conservation of matter. From Binkin's lessons.'

Sometimes I even pestered the night stars, shimmering wetly in the dark purple sky.

'Hey, but have you ever seen anything like this?'

And they, with haughty indifference, responded, 'We've seen worse, and not just here.'

And they continued to blink, like millions upon millions of years before our era.

And I wasn't the least bit bothered by this volcanic eruption of incessant thought flow. After all, the human brain only utilizes 10% of its natural potential. So let it stretch its legs and sweep away the cobwebs and dust accumulated in the remaining percent!

Naturally, during work hours, the intensity of my solitary brainstorming diminished somewhat—the workplace seemed more static and stable compared to the constantly changing circumstances of life on the streets of a big city. However, I can proudly state that even at the depth of 38 meters below the Earth's surface, the intensity of my mental activity significantly exceeded the measly 10% standard...)

~ ~ ~

The Dofinovka mine produced 'cubics'—three-dimensional stone blocks measuring 20 cm x 20 cm x 40 cm, cut from underground limestone deposits. For this purpose, the central tunnel, also known as a shaft tunnel, descended steeply, but not vertically, from a pit formed by a long-depleted quarry. From this tunnel, below, beneath a 38-meter-thick layer of other strata, adits radiated—also tunnels, but lower and narrower—like branches from a tree trunk.

At the end of each adit branch stood a stone-cutting machine, which cut the 'cubics' out of the wall before it.

This is the overall picture from a bird's eye view, if, of course, you can see right through to the aforementioned depths of the earth's crust...

... .

Well, delving into particulars, the mentor who taught me the intricacies of the timbering profession bore a resonant princely name from the times of ancient Rus-Mother—Rostislav.

However, he didn't respond to it; the name sounded too foreign even to him personally. To everyone, he was Charlik, and no one called him anything else.

First of all, he took me to the adit of Machine No. 3 because he was in awe of its operator, whom Charlik invariably called by his patronymic, Kapitonovich. Being a petty fiend, Charlik fawned and toadied to Kapitonovich in every way possible. The Machine 3 operator was a distinguished horned Old Scratch who had once served a ten-year sentence.

Charlik and I walked with lanterns in our hands. Before descending into the mine, the lamplighter, Lyuda Aksyanova, gave everyone a lantern in her cave, to the left on entering the shaft tunnel. Down below, without light, you find yourself in such pitch darkness that it's impossible to discern the thin narrow-gauge rails on the occasional sleepers. One stumble, and you'll have a nasty fall ending in terrible trouble. The human body isn't equipped with reflexes for falling in the dark.

That's why everyone in the mine wears plastic helmets, and before descending, the workday begins with you signing a logbook stating that you've just been briefed on the safety rules and now understand what you're getting into. That's tradition.

The temperature in the mine is consistently above zero, even in winter. A constant calm and a deep, unfamiliar silence fill the adits, unless someone is talking to someone else, or there's a noisy machine engaged nearby...

... .

We walked and walked along the cramped, narrow gallery. The right wall was solid stone, nicked by a stone-cutting saw, and the opposite wall was hidden by dry-laid brickwork. The bricklayerry was quite high, about neck-high, just half a meter short of the low ceiling, which in the mine is called the 'roof', but more on that later...

A couple of white-insulated 'Gooper' wires, carelessly strung across the bricklayerry, accompanied us the entire way.

Finally, far ahead, a dim yellow light showed up, penetrating the thick dust crust on two light bulbs. The stone-cutting machine stood motionless in front of a blank wall, and Kapitonovich sat, in the silence and windlessness, on its open seat, waiting for us. He managed without an assistant because of his dream: to one day earn 300 rubles a month.

The stone wall of the tunnel in front of the machine (4.5 m x 2.5 m) was already squared with the grooves of the 'sketch'—deep parallel cuts from one side wall to the other intersected by similar vertical cuts, from ceiling to floor, thus, forming the ends of the future cubics. Now you drive a digging bar into a gap sawn in the center of the 'sketch' and break out a cubic. Then a couple from among closely cut cubics until a niche is formed large enough to break out the rest with a sledgehammer.

Kapitonovich was waiting for us, because over the past couple of days his machine had advanced far beyond the point reached by the narrow-gauge railway.

By extending the railway with two pairs of 4-meter rails (delivered the day before), Charlik and I made it possible to move the mine carts 8 meters closer—to load them with the cubics broken from the 'sketch'. However, there are no 'wagonettes' in the mine; they're called instead 'wagonkas' or 'kapelevkas' there.

(... I wouldn't rule out the possibility that it's named after the White Guard General Kappel, but I can't vouch for reliability of the hypothesis...)

A derailed 'wagonka' cart is called a 'bored-in bitch'. To clear such a situation, two or three workers manually re-install the cart on the track, after removing its load, straining with all their might—in mining parlance, this method is called 'farting steamer crane'.

Subsequently, a small-sized mine locomotive will arrive from the quarry and pull the restored and reloaded cart up to the surface, hooking up on the way the 'kapelevkas' that are waiting at the exits of other adits.

... .

The cubics cut in the tunnel wall are not breaking out evenly, so (before sketching the next, deeper section) any protruding pieces of stone are knocked down with the same sledgehammer.

These fragments, as well as any defective pieces—cubics that broke too short or split lengthwise due to cracks in the rock—serve as material for continuing the dry bricklayerry under the side wall of the adit. Without this partition bricklayerry, there would be nowhere to collect the sand.

Where does the sand come from? When the machine, mixing the strained whine of the electric motor with the clank of a chainsaw cutting through stone, makes a cut in the wall, a long stream of sand, not sawdust, gushes from under the chain. A metal and glass shield protects the operator from the shot out stream, but not from dust. The high sand dune grows and expands around the machine, and unless this pile is shoveled into the 'pocket' (the space between the bricklayerry and the adit wall), there will be no room for the narrow-gauge railway.

. . . .

To commemorate our labor victory in laying the track, Charlik removes his helmet and sits down, placing it under his backside like a potty under a nursery school child who's doing their poop. It's more comfortable than sinking onto the floor, or the sand, or a rock fragment, aka 'boot'.

Lighting a Prima cigarette, borrowed from Kapitonovich, he asks with cautious fawning—what could that wide, blood-red stain in the stone wall to the right mean? Kapitonovich, with an air of potency, offers an explanation: when the sea was here, a steamship burned on it, and when it sank, it was deposited in the rock as red. Charlik readily giggles, and I am waving away the unnecessary thought that 'a ten' is the standard sentence for murder; because I like Kapitonovich.

. . . .

Before heading off to the rest of the stone-cutting adits, aka galleries, we secure the roof. To do this, Kapitonovich fires up the machine to cut a series of short horizontal slits just under the ceiling of the side wall. By breaking the membranes between the slits with the digging bar, we create a deep niche with a square entrance (20 cm x 20 cm).

Another niche, exactly the same, is made in the opposite wall using the same method. Now Charlik and I push the end of a moderately thick log into one of the holes, as far as it will go. We lift the other end to the opposite niche and insert it inside, but not all the way, so as not to pull the log out of the first one. This log is called a 'pleshchak'. We support the 'pleshchak' with two shorter logs—'risers'—pressed against the side walls. The gallery roof support is complete.

. . . .

Where did the three logs come from? It couldn't be simpler—we retreated about thirty meters back into the darkness of the adit/gallery and pulled out one of the previous supports. Where else could it come from?

During my entire tenure at the Dofinovka mine, exactly three logs arrived there. I personally stripped the bark off them in the quarry with a 'planer' device (like an axe welded to the end of a digging bar, point first) before Slavik Aksyanov hauled the logs—bared to the white of a wedding dresses—on a kapelevka into the shaft tunnel. So the roof in the adits was supported by the saved materials...

Sometimes the roof starts to 'drip' or 'rain'. A cracking sound is the symptom, and chunks of rock break off from the ceiling and fall to the floor. Like a cave-in, but not completely.

Charlik got caught in such a 'rain' right before my eyes while he was pulling out another 'saved' piece of wood.

He was lucky to be lying in a 'pocket' between the wall and the bricklayerry, on a high pile of sand, almost reaching the ceiling. The stone slab that had fallen from the roof had no room to run and no choice but to land softly on his chest. It wasn't a particularly large piece of stone, too, just half a meter by half a meter and ten cm thick.

He crawled out from under the slab and immediately found his own Prima by him. Lighting a cigarette, Charlik sat comfortably on the helmet pot and immediately began remembering Alik the Armenian.

When it started 'raining' over him, Alik had to back away sixteen meters, backwards. Running, of course. There was no time to turn around. The roof was cracking and crumbling—the 'rain' was catching up. So he ran, heels first, screaming at the top of his lungs, 'Fuck the mine! Fuck the money!'—but in his haste, he couldn't quite articulate who exactly.

Without a name, the specifics were lost. Yes, morphologically, it's possible to guess that the acting person was male and unassisted. However, overall, the information remains vague...

Basically, the mine roof isn't a roof in the traditional sense...

~ ~ ~

Besides the active adits, the mine also has abandoned ones, where the usable rock layer has been exhausted and further extraction is futile, or even too dangerous. The entrance to these adits is sealed with defective stone cubics (the aforementioned 'rubble/boot'). When the adits are sealed, the bricklayerry is no longer dry-laid, but put on mortar joints, to prevent possible drafts.

However, not all abandoned adits are sealed. One day, the foreman showed me an emergency exit. One such unsealed adit leads into a former shaft tunnel, where, in the past, the carts were pulled along the rails by horses. The former shaft also originated in the quarry wall, but way higher than the current one.

And, of course, the mine of yore also had its adits... When Charlik went on vacation, and I was left as a lone timberman, I procured ploshchaks torn from those adits.

One time I returned to the new half of the mine, to the adit of Engine No. 4, all proud and pleased – well, of course! I'd hauled a log all by myself. I even quipped with the blunt end of my tongue: 'For Engine No. 4, on a special order, straight from Rio de Janeiro!'

I dropped the log from my shoulder, and the bitch – crack! – snapped in two, it right in halves. The material turned out to be too ancient.

. . . .

But all those rumors about me wandering around abandoned adits without a flashlight are complete lies.

The impetus for such speculation was my habit of turning off the flashlight if anybody else was shining one nearby.

I don't understand why, because Lyuda would put it for recharge anyway—after the shift.

The black cord from the flashlight's bulb goes into a canvas shoulder bag with a strap. Nothing inside but a battery box with a handwritten number. The flashlight with a clumsy '16' on the box—that's mine.

. . . .

However, in the abandoned mines, I never turned it off, and once, an unearthly beauty shone in its beam. From afar.

I look, and I can't figure out what that white thing is, gleaming below the roof, midst the deafening underground silence.

It's impossible to describe. Well, maybe, like a patchy alien structure of twiggy turfs, pure white; Or from the depths of the ocean, where bathyscaphes cannot dive. And in the nodes of its structure—tiny sparkles like crushed diamonds. Shimmering in the circle of light from the torch. Beautiful—even eerie.

And I had an axe in my hand, to check the ploshchaks for rot. The axe whistled in the darkness, above the beam, and the whiteness fell to the floor. And—instead of inexplicable beauty—I stood over a wide spit. Only then did it dawn on me that it was a garland of mold.

Later, I came across more similar garlands, but all brown—punishment for having destroyed pure beauty.

. . . .

Soon, Charlik returned from vacation, and Vasya joined the mine. He became a timberman, and I was transferred to the assistant of stone-cutting machine operator. Of course, it's not as romantic

as wandering through ancient adits without a headlamp, the machine roar keeps filling your ears, and a mask is the need – to keep the dust out, but—wow! Familiar faces! The gang are inseparable: Digging Bar, Shovel, and Sledgehammer!...

~ ~ ~

However, all of the above only seemed so at first, uninformed glance. What did the Dofinovka mine actually produce under the unspoken supervision of the Chief of all Chiefs, aka Yakovlevich?

It varied. To each his own... Jedem das Seine.

Pugachev, the mine engineer, with his pyramidal nose, which appeared under the earth for about five minutes once a month, was only interested in gold. Or rather, gold sand. He would click his fang in its gold cap and quietly ask the machine operator, 'Much of the sand today?'

When I (inadvertently) heard him say this, I started emptying the pockets of my spetsookha robe after every shift. You can't buy me with gold! Especially since I have no idea how to process the sand into unworthy pelf... Tolik, the operator of Machine No. 2, was dumbfounded when he saw what I was getting rid of.

But they definitely made gold out of it there, and then, disguised as aluminum castings, they piled them up in the weeds next to the 'dormitory'. Just like bank gold bars, only aluminum-colored, for camouflage, of course.

The foreman told me (almost bluntly) as much when we were passing by, one-to-one: 'Such valuable things, and no one would think to pick them up. They're just kicking around here.'

And where, and for what purpose, would aluminum ingots come from at a stone mine?

~ ~ ~

As for the cubics themselves, there's no question—they're souls. Machine No. 5, for example, whose operator was Hitler or Adolf (well, at least no one called him anything else, only Adolf or Hitler), churned out human souls.

Ivan, from Machine No. 1, complained loudly that when his wagonkas were rolled up in the open, many of the cubics were rejected, while Adolf's—even cracked ones, or short ones, in short: every 'rubble-boot'—passed!

But if you think about it, that's right—after all, many people have flaws in their souls. And, paradoxically, his namesake (Hitler) destroyed so many souls, while this one here underground churns them out, and even makes fun of Ivan.

For whom the other machines saw up souls, I can only guess. Archangels? Demons? Titans? This was what depressed me most—my ignorance. Yes, I certainly felt being the chosen one, but at the same time, I remained a pathetically ignorant chosen one, like a pawn in a game whose rules were known to everyone but you.

. . . .

Progress toward understanding was made by trial and error, by groping, by intuition. Sometimes there happened revelations, like the time after my shift I climbed the truck to New Dafinovka to get groceries for tomorrow's lunch.

Among the workers standing in the back of the truck was an elderly woman wearing a headscarf. The truck was just pulling away from the 'dormitory', when the Bessarabian woman appeared in the doorway holding her child. 'Oh, what a beautiful little baby!' With these words, the woman untied her headscarf and tied it back again, but somehow differently...

Returning home through the fields along the forest belt, I went into my room, but I couldn't rest – the Bessarabian family's one-year-old daughter was choking with a shrieking scream, and her mother, unsure how to calm the child, was carrying her up and down the corridor, rocking her in her arms, chanting 'aa-aa ah!' to no avail.

I don't tolerate babies crying well, but a dorm isn't like an EMU train where you can walk out into another car. And suddenly I remembered how the fellow traveler had re-tied her scarf, praising this then-silent child.

Stepping out into the corridor and silently but persistently looking at the baby's mother, I took my handkerchief out of my pocket, unfolded it, and folded it again, this time on the other side, after which I went to the ravine to get water from the well. Upon my return, I was greeted by the joyful gaze of a Bessarabian woman—the girl in her arms was completely calm, and a kerchief had appeared on her head, tied in a knot on her forehead. Bingo!

... .

But there were also misfires. The rooster, the cock of the walk strutting pompously at the entrance to the 'dormitory', did not accept my good intentions. He turned away with disdain from the grains of linen blueing I offered him, forgotten by someone on the wide bench by the entrance.

My attempt to add variety to the bird's diet stemmed from good intentions, based on newly acquired knowledge: that day, it was revealed to me that the combination of blue and black is a sign of strength. A peck of blueing would have turned the rooster, in his black feathers, into a rooster-Gordzilla!

~ ~ ~

Confirmation that I, as the chosen one, was actually being protected came when a glass-eyed stalker snuck up on me. And with the most undoubtedly malicious intentions...

... .

There are glass-eyed and glass-eyed ones; they differ from each other and can be easily divided into three distinct categories.

Let's start with those whose glassy organs of vision are combined with a pronounced whiteness of the eyeballs. Such ones are harmless. They are undoubtedly possessed, but they remain merely a tool, a means of collecting information—how does land lies today?

This variety is merely a kind of spyglass, but nothing more. Whereto does the information get transmitted? Who's the recipient? A naive question—to the former inhabitants of Olympus in their current incarnation, of course. They've mastered metamorphosis since ancient times; they can change shape as easily as peeing on their two fingers... and so on.

The distinguishing feature of the glass-eyed of the second category is a cloudy sheen spread across the whites of their eyes. These serve to themselves, looking for a chance to have 'a sip of blood' or otherwise recharge at your expense.

'There'll be an underground passage for people, but we can use it too,' one of them told me, clearly taking me for one of their own in an unfamiliar and poorly lit area of Odessa at night.

Before that, I'd asked for directions to the bus station—their favorite feeding ground. It was precisely these bastards who were waiting for me, prodding the cloakroom attendant at the Bratislava restaurant to cut chatting (but it wasn't idle chatter, but a conversation imbued with deep meaning, understandable to both of us, although not each of us understood the gist of the conversation equally and completely), and to quickly set the game—me—out the door with the lacerated thigh...

... .

And when I went through the medical examination for employment (retroactively, two weeks later), I was dropped off at the Vapnyarka's medical center for a blood test.

Entering the office, I found there (besides a nurse in a white uniform) a plump woman in civilian clothes, with the aforementioned mist in her cloudy eyes. (Second-category glassy eyes.)

She sat, you understand, on the couch, and from the corner of her lips dangled a long, flexible, khaki-colored sting. Then the nurse rushes to assure me that the tube is just a probe, and the woman won't be in our way.

As if I couldn't see in her eyes what kind of woman she is, and what exactly she wants here.

Then, as usual, the nurse pricked my finger, squeezed it, and bam! Instead of the usual drop of blood from the punctured pad, my finger suddenly produces a miniature fountain! As thick as a needle, like at pumping the nipple of a nursing mother. But it's not the same color as milk. I've never seen anything like it in my life!

And I wasn't the only one amazed: the woman's jaw is wide open, and this supposed probe is about to jump out. Just like a drunkard who begged for a hundred grams, and then, into his shot glass, an entire three-liter jar of moonshine... Wham! So much goodness wasted in a splash!

. . . .

But as for extracting blood by fang drilling—that's just old wives' tales for little kids. They get the fill discreetly, using an effective (though not fully understood by me) technology...

~ ~ ~

That glassy-eyed hunter from the second category, who wanted to feed on me, pulled up to the 'dormitory' in a Volga, as his boss's chauffeur. There was also a rarely unlocked office in the corridor, where those who wanted to negotiate with the engineer about taking cubics from the pile by the mine office side at the bottom of the former quarry came. And this visit became the background to the subsequent incident.

That day, as usual, I went up to the surface to have lunch in the 'dormitory' and washed my hands at the washstand on a pole right next to the entrance.

The glassy-eyed one didn't know me, being just passing through. And he was heeled, sneaking up on me with a weapon at the ready—an artifact made of what appeared to be aluminum wire of a strange configuration, the total length being approximately twenty centimeters.

Noticing the cloudy glassiness in his eyes, as well as the hunter-like softness of his gait as he stalked me, I knew I was screwed.

He closed the distance to the barest minimum, and just as he was about to raise his whachamacallit, a gray kitten suddenly jumped out of the grass and rubbed its scruff against the black leg of my spetsookha.

The glassy-eyed poacher instantly lost all interest, lowered his weapon, and, disappointed, returned behind the wheel of the car. The unknown kitten, the one I'd never seen—before or since—in the area, disappeared back into the grass...

. . . .

But mostly I had to rely on my own discretion. Like on that narrow pebble beach beneath the Chabanka cliff...

I wanted to swim in the sea and had already entered the calm, slow waves, but... I stopped.

Two fishermen, in swimming trunks and with fishing rods in hand, stood on a pair of separated boulders, between me and the sea.

The distance separating them was wide enough to swim between. However, I realized that the rods were a barrier, blocking the way into the vast expanse of water. I had to wait until they both raised their rods in sync (the fish were striking quite well!), and then dive under the oncoming wave, and swim unchecked away from the beach.

. . . .

I swam for quite a time, lying, at intervals, on the surface to rest, and wondering why my father had said that the salty seawater supported a swimmer. No difference from floating in a river or lake...

Then I began swimming again, mostly on my back to keep the straight course, squinting against the heat of the sun shining in the bright sky, until I felt a nudge on my shoulder.

Looking back, I saw just below the surface the whitish-transparent body of a jellyfish, as wide as a basin. I swam around it and continued on, but then the jellyfish became more and more frequent—skirting one out, you bumped into the next.

Rising up out of the water, I looked ahead and saw an impenetrable swarm of them, their translucent bodies turning the calm, sun-drenched waves into a kind of jellyfish jelly.

I didn't have the nerve to push through, shoving through their mass, so I took a U-turn and swam back to the already-hazed-by-the-distance shore...

~ ~ ~

Chabanka Beach was covered with multicolored, fairly large pebbles, but there were also stripes of wet sand. On one of these stripes, right at the water's edge, I wanted to write 'EERAH', but the waves wouldn't let me.

They washed in and smoothed out the furrows in the wet sand before I could write all the letters, and I only bloodied my fingertip in vain on tiny shell fragments before I gave up...

... .

My first encounter with the sea took place on New Dofinovka Beach, where I went after work, along the shore of the estuary that stretched all the way to the 'dorm'. The water was smooth and very clear. I walked until I saw some bald truck tires in it, some idiot had rolled them down the bank.

I had to take off my pants and wade into the shallow water to pull the junk out. But around the next bend in the estuary, I saw there was a complete dump—it would take a lifetime to haul it all out, and it was already evening.

After the dump, there were thickets of reeds all the way to the highway, beyond which – only sea...

When you walk the dirt road from the mine to New Dofinovka, you sometimes see enormous ships hanging over the fields. These ships, of course, aren't hanging there; they're moored in the sea, whose horizon blends seamlessly with the sky. So you look—a field, and above it, a ship, and just touching its bow, the enormous orb of the setting sun shimmers red. These ships, due to their enormous size, don't fit in the port, so they're forced to stand amid the sky and the sea...

~ ~ ~

My relationship with Slavik Aksyanov remained even at first, one might say cordial. Although even a cursory glance revealed that in his previous life, he had served as a Nazi officer in a death camp, if not the head of a transit camp in Kolyma, and in his current life, he was overly inclined to draw attention to himself by needless twaddle. But despite all this, I helped him saw boards for the family trestle-bed...

... .

The distance between Chabanka and the mine was about two kilometers. About the same as to New Dofinovka. However, the road to Dofinovka passed along a dense belt of trees, while in the middle of an empty field near Chabanka, flies inevitably closed in on me—a whole swarm. They buzzed, flew around, and followed as I went on.

And I didn't want to lead a 'tail' and thereby reveal the location of the supposed mine. I had to devise a precise way to shake the followers off my tail. Because the grocery store in Chabanka turned out to have a wider selection of food.

Twenty meters from the mine 'dormitory' stood a long building of another former farm, unreconstructed. It became my 'disinfection airlock', the first necessity on any spaceship arriving to explore an unknown planet.

I entered from the far end and—accompanied by an escort of flies—walked to the end facing the 'dormitory'. Catching the whiffs of manure from days gone by, the swarm became confused and scattered in all directions, in the active search for the same thing, but fresher. Meanwhile, I freely emerged outside, with food from Chabanka, without a single nagging buzzer behind me...

~ ~ ~

Slavik asked the office for permission to rip a few boards from the air-lock farm floor, relics of a kolkhoz husbandry, to make a trestle-bed for himself and his wife. They were expecting arrival of Slavik's mother-in-law.

So we plucked material from the farm for the upcoming piece of furniture. The boards turned out to be quite sturdy, but hammered in place with overly long nails, yet we had a digging bar.

On solving the question of prerequisite requirements, he wondered about the dimensions of the planned piece.

By that time, I already had a well-defined, clearly structured system of numerology, which brought the meaning implicit in the numbers to undeniable clarity. So, for example, in the aforementioned system, '22' means 'death', '24' means 'wife', '10' means 'sex', and so on. Everything is tested by personal existential experience. All that remains is to simply substitute values, based on a current situation.

Taking into account the intended purpose of the product, I suggest Slavik the most optimal length: 2 meters 10 centimeters, that is, '10' for two—perfect for a young family.

But he's stubborn!

'I want 2 meters 30!'

Well, you know best what namely is your want...

He got hold of a sawhorse from somewhere, the kind used for sawing firewood, and we got started. A board on the sawhorse, two marks with a tape measure, and off we go!

And when we stopped for a smoke, Lyuda, his wife, walked past on her way to the 'dorm'. And, pointing her finger at the sawhorse, she declared to Slavik with obvious disgust: 'Don't even think I'll ever lie down on that ugly thing!'

And she left, completely indignant, and I was finally convinced she was part of another world. What normal woman hasn't seen the thing?

Plus, Lyuda could read minds...

... .

I once walked into their room, and Slavik was glued to the TV and putting borscht away. 'Thanks, I'm not hungry,' said I and sat by the door, waiting for him to finish his grub.

Behind him was a refrigerator, and on top of the refrigerator was a mirror, face down, and the mirror had two plastic feet on the back of its frame so it could stand up when it wasn't lying down. And from the chair where I'm sitting, this is the scene I see: Slavik stubbornly staring at the TV, shoveling borscht into his belly with a spoon, while two green legs, shaped like curved horns, protrude from his hair, like a lyre, only without strings—a mirror, of course, wouldn't need them.

That's when I thought (entirely to myself): 'Aha! As it turns out you're not only a Nazi, but also a horned one!'

To which his wife responded, with a more than eloquent look, 'Who the hell are you, to count the skeletons in our family closet?'

Then, demonstratively, she walked over to the refrigerator and smoothed Slavik's protruding horns down to the flat surface—the legs are articulated, after all.

So he finished eating, hornless. Thanks to the marital care of Lyuda, a mind reader.

... .

Now, when Slavik dragged that floorboard airstrip into their room for test flights, something must have gone wrong. Three days later, he was shortening that runway in the weeds with a hacksaw. That's what they call trial and error in action.

'What's he monkeying around?' one Makhnovist asked another as they passed.

'It's like you can't tell—a boinking deck, of course.'

'A-ah...'

What else can you expect from villagers? They don't know how to present things gracefully—using numerological terms. No, they just blurt it out as is

And when his mother-in-law arrived, he went completely berserk. He came into my room and made faces. The intent of his grimaces was clear. He wanted to make me insane...

~ ~ ~

One time, Ivan, the operator of Machine No. 1, invited me to have lunch with him and his assistant in their adit. Ivan's wife worked in Odessa, in the mess hall of some military academy where Negroes from the countries of awakened Africa also studied. Well, these Afro-Africans, when half-asleep, aren't exactly hungry, judging by the amount of provisions she brought home.

When Ivan removed the lid from the aluminum pot, it was just brimming with rib meat, though without any side dish. The three of us—Ivan, his assistant, and I—spent a good deal of time finishing off that hecatomb. A whole heap of bones formed. On the sand, next to the empty 5-liter pot.

And then Slavik came to ask for some spare part, and the sight of that gnawed still life of cannibals sent the poor guy into a frenzy. His face contorted, without any pretense. He must have remembered the soup by his mother-in-law...

Perhaps due to this stress, even a few hours later, when the 'dorm' residents were enjoying the cool of the late evening on the wide hand-made bench by the entrance, he charged at me like a lout.

For some reason, he even snatched a gold bar from the weeds, raised it above his head with both hands, and hurled at me.

It was a beautiful picture—the full moon casting silvery light on the arcing trajectory of the bar, glistening white, like aluminum, against the velvety darkness of the luxurious seaside night. (Or was I wrong? And the mine did produce platinum, after all?)

Now it was my turn to run hells-first like Alik the Armenian. Slavik's wife, Lyuda, took her Cyclops home from the demonstration performance area...

... .

On my next visit to Odessa, I stopped by a legal aid bureau, which I hadn't planned at all; it happened so spontaneously. The sign just caught my eye. There, without revealing names or geographic coordinates, I asked for recommendations for when a dorm roommate is bothering me.

'Contact your company's Komsomol committee.'

Well, damn, these guys are from another world too. I'm telling y'all—they're everywhere already!

## Глава

~ ~ ~ Whose Side Are You On?

Yes, but if Yakovlevich is Chief over the chiefs, both en masse and separately, then who the hell is the Chief Engineer?

It's not hard to guess—who is Creator's antithesis? The Prince of Darkness and the master of personnel in the devilish cohort of fiends, in all his glory. Who else?

This was immediately noticeable even in the relationship between the two—a respectful, yet armed neutrality.

I remember how they stood in the shaft tunnel, talking face to face—the epitome of polite correctness! The foreman, in his black overalls, and the chief engineer, in a motley summer shirt, with a wide handkerchief tucked around his collar to keep out dust. He should have had a pith helmet instead of a plastic one, and—a ready-made picture of 'I'm the boss here!' Although, of course, the underground world is his domain.

(... you might object: is contact possible between such diametrically opposed entities? Don't forget, it was the twentieth century, when everything was so intertwined and confused that elementary Geometry was no longer helpful...)

~ ~ ~

I took a sympathetic stance toward Foreman. I liked him just so, without any propaganda or gimmicks like sharing fish and loaves, and such like magic. A single miracle—when he rejuvenated my passport—was practically enough for me.

By the way, the Chief under Chief also presented his credentials. As if anyone hadn't gotten it yet!

. . . .

He showed up during lunch break, to hold a union meeting for the workforce. (Oh, sure! What hell could exist without a trade union!)

The assembled group settled under the trees around the farm, which was inside the dormitory. He sat down on a chair in front of everyone, took off his shoes, and his socks too. Like, well, that's just stupid, huh? All this gossip about my hooves! Do I have them? Nope!

But you can't fill my head with bullshit! No way to feed me this illusory nonsense.

Those Makhnovist fiend-bandits stretched out in the grass in their black overalls. Only I was wearing a white nylon shirt, worn by me under my spetsookha overalls and daily washed after the shift night when I showered.

(... nylon's ideal for washing—you rub it for six secs flat, and it's clean, and it dries even faster...)

As a polite, albeit sarcastic, retort, I took off my helmet. Wordlessly. Like, are you trying to show off your hooflessness here? Well, then admire my hornlessness! And the others who came from the mine—everyone has his helmet on. Especially Slavik Aksyanov.

And so the unionists spent about ten minutes twaddling, when suddenly, out of nowhere, a rooster crowed.

Good heavens! In a split second, the boss, who isn't Boss, has his socks in his pockets! He slams his bare feet into his shoes and—off he goes! And out of nowhere, a biker stops by him. All in black. Leather jacket, pants, and even a black leather helmet, like on the miners in the newsreels of the first five-year plans period.

Wheeze! They disappeared toward New Dofinovka. Not clear? Who runs away at the rooster's cock-a-doodle-doo?

. . . .

It's not that I was picking a fight with... well, say... the chief engineer, but there were frictions. Like that time, at the back of the 'dormitory'.

A dump truck had poured a pile of coal for the winter, and I shoveled all that anthracite into the boiler room. And already at the end of the day, he shows up from Vapnyarka and asks, but so haughtily, 'Well, what's your want? Is three rubles enough?'

I saw red—after toiling away in the scorching sun for half a day, and here he was, like, offering a handout to the lowest drunk. Okay, you're the prince of darkness, but I'm still the chosen one, even if so hopeless slow learner.

'No!' sez I. 'Let them pay my due according to the standard.'

'Then you won't even get as much.'

... .

I had no faith in him, and the next day, taking the day off I went to Polar Explorers Square in Odessa. In the hallway, they showed me the chief accountant's door, with the name on it: Witzman.

And as soon as I stepped into that office, the phone on the chief accountant's desk dinged. He picks it up: 'You're being listened to.'

(... yes, literally, word for word, 'You're being listened to.' Clean, smooth, impersonal. No chance to pinpoint a fault. Wow, that's some Witzman!...)

I explain the gist—he catches it instantly, and pulls out a thick, soft-covered book, 'Unified Standards and Rates,' looks up the details of loading and unloading bulk coal, and hands it to me to read.

There it is, in black on white, that if I were shoveling in the Arctic—to be paid at the highest, northern rates), and carried each shovel around the entire 'dormitory' three times before hurling it into the boiler room window—thereby increasing the distance traveled—then, according to the rates in this standard bible, I'd still be entitled to 1 ruble 20 kopecks.

(... and was it revealed onto me, who hadn't grasped the truth before, that to the foremen, the superintendents, the engineers, and so on and so forth—you, working people, should bow low, touching their feet for the sham they scribble in work orders. Without their padding, the working class would have died out long ago, together with their innocent families.

Pray for your benefactors, giving you your daily bread, O proletariat!

But what afucamuzza bastard drew up all those tariffs? I'd share my shovel with them, brotherly...)

... .

Another time, the advance payment was delayed, and I visited the chief engineer at home in Odessa. Since it was Saturday, I didn't need a day off.

His diggings are near the Hunchback Bridge over the railroad tracks. A pleasant own house. He also had a wife there and a fifth-grader son. He told his wife to treat me to a glass of homemade tomato juice. (Ahem!...)

It was just as it should be—a red, thick, salty liquid. How could you refuse? Margarita drank too, at the annual ball of Satan in Moscow.

(... but I still brew tea exactly to the recipe he shared...)

That evening, he also shared memories of his work in the Arctic, where after work he'd lay a couple of bricks on the electric stove and seated his wife on top to get it ready for the night...

~ ~ ~

One time, the force of evil attempted a coup—they wanted to amend the order in the world's stratification. The day before, engineer Pugachev showed up in the 'dorm' and opened one of the locked doors in the hallway, under the guise of distributing food supplies to tide the folks on till the payday.

I was walking down the corridor when Slavik Aksyanov shouted from that room: 'Come on in, get some too!'

Five Makhnovists in the middle of a bare room, and a crate of Prima cigarettes on a table without a chair. Pugachev hands them five to ten packs each.

Food, right? Ha! Nothing else but ammunition!

'No, thanks, Belomor is my smoke.'

As I was leaving, I heard Slavik motivating the devilish bandits behind me: 'No fear! Youth will write everything off!'

. . . .

The next day in Odessa, not a single traffic light worked. It was complete chaos. Strangers were yelling at each other. Trolleybuses were jumping like crazy. Of course, there was no gunfire, because the coup itself was on a different level.

However, in my estimation, the Red Devil Kids didn't pull it off, since I managed to buy 'Atlas of the World,' a thin booklet depicting both hemispheres, in a soft, light green cover.

~ ~ ~

In Odessa of those days, the most established and commonly used expression of approval was 'that's what you love!'

'So, what do you think of Sonya's latest fiancé?'

'That's what you love!'

And instead of 'no' they'd say, 'Mom had a fuck!'

'So, what? Did the Blacksea footballers win or what?'

'Mom had a fuck!'

But since Odessa-Mama was all around, it sounded even patriotic.

. . . .

In the park on Deribasov Street, unusual trees grew, as if they'd shed their own bark. Were they a grove of nudists, or sycamores, after all?

In the evenings, a brass band played there, almost like in the days of Johann Strauss, only less frequently.

And in another park, this time during the day, I dove into the pool from the five-meter-level platform, head-first. The wind whistled in my ears as I flew. A little later, two guys also jumped, holding hands, in the 'bomb' manner—heels down. One of them was wearing black socks. That's how they covered my trail from unwanted 'tails'...

. . . .

At the long-distance phone communications point down the Pushkin Street, I was once pranked in full. On placing the order I walked out the door, which was open flush with the sidewalk, and the very moment I lit a cigarette, the speakers inside blared, 'Nezhyn! Is anyone waiting for Nezhyn?'

The cigarette thrown in the trash can, I jump in: 'I am! I'm waiting!' And the operator behind the barrier shouts into her microphone: 'Well done, then just wait!' The whole point room went nuts... They were saving me from something again.

There was a man standing there. They connected his number. 'Chelyabinsk is on the line! Booth number 5!' And before going where indicated, he says in disappointment, 'Bummer!'

Now that's the enlightened! Just from the booth number alone, he knows already how the talk will end.

. . . .

I learned Odessa quite well, mostly on foot. I found Public Library No. 2 was found as well as Privoz Bazaar, where the porters push station trolleys, shouting 'Legs! Legs!' to get the crowd out of their way.

And there at Privoz, an old gypsy woman cast a spell on me abiding by her own rules while I was eating a bunch of grapes. I didn't even understand why, but she knows better, or maybe I just happened to be in her crosshairs at the wrong moment...

'Gastric Juice Factory.' Who would have imagined such enterprises even existed?!

The bench encircling the old tree next to the white, from his pate to shoe toes, Lenin in the park after his name used for a quick one-night-stand dating which I had got seated upon to repose my tireless legs before guessing the purpose of the facility. No, thank you, I'm a faithful family man...

When I walked through the courtyards of five-story buildings, the men who always play domino 'goat' game there would start banging their bones louder against the tabletop to scare away the cats in ambush to cross my path. Also, a bunch of allies...

~ ~ ~

To Odessa I usually got by bus, walking no more than a couple of times. It's only 20 kilometers there, or so.

I once took a walk from Vapnyarka to New Dofinovka along the cliff above the sea. At one point, there was some kind of military installation, behind a barbed-wire fence. A guard yelled at me, it wasn't allowed to go past them, neared the fence, began demanding from within my documents.

I showed him my handkerchief through the wire, with the sailboat. He immediately realized I was from a different level: 'Okay, go ahead but quick.'

The view from that cliff is very beautiful. The sea is calm, almost smooth, but sparkles and glitters in the sun. Sometimes the wind picks up and ruffles the water, creating a galaxy pattern. Spirals, mostly. The wind copied those from the clouds hanging in the sky above the sea...

~ ~ ~

On tram #5, going to Arcadia Beach, I met Gray, who used to act a big shot pakhan master-thief in the construction battalion. The only surprising thing is that four years have passed, and he is still so young, and for some reason he is wearing the uniform of a naval cadet — a sailor cap, ribbons hanging down the collar on his back.

I stood next to him and quietly asked in his ear, 'Gray, is that you?' He didn't react, didn't even move, though he must have heard me; cadets are undergoing medical examinations, after all... Maybe he plans to lie low among the midshipmen.

. . . .

And another time, it was my father, while I stopped by a newspapers-magazines kiosk. He looked nothing like my father; I only recognized him by his voice. It was the same voice he used retelling about a murderer made kill an innocent soul by the law-abiding Zone Chief.

When he spoke to me, I acted to be too absorbed in looking at the portrait of the psychiatrist Burdenko on the cover of OGONYOK magazine. It was hanging behind the kiosk glass wall. So the clerk answered my father's questions for me.

(... the like encounters would force anyone to ask: what's going on anyway? However, without a monad, one cannot figure this out.

A monad is a German-made gadget for helping philosophers, which everyone understands in their own way. For one, it may be a singularity from a collective multiplicity, and for some other, a multiplicity from collective singularities.

For example, when a dude asks a girl: 'Am I one in the crowd for you, or in the crowd one?' Well, here, precisely, the second 'one' in his question is that very monad, although, perhaps, the opposite is true...

In one Indian Bible, there is a colorful picture of a child crawling through the grass, and a boy runs one step ahead of him, a man pacing in front of the runner is about to catch up with the bent old man, beyond whom, there is only green grass again. The picture is called 'The Circle of Life.' In other words, from nothing to back to nothing.

And those drawn in it—all together—constitute a single monad, since they are all the same person.

Now all that remains is to assume that monads can be composed based on other characteristics, say, such as voice timbre, and everything falls into place. It depends on which of the monad's ends

is facing you: here is your father, there is a bum who addresses you by the kiosk where the clerk has hanged Burdenko.

Of course, this is a little more complicated than learn by rote: 'When you trip on your left foot, everything will go swimmingly, but if you trip on your right, don't even try, immediately turn the shafts back.' Yet the monad, which even the average German knows nothing about, explains a lot...)

~ ~ ~

One preference player from Odessa was part of the criminal underworld in his youth. Then he reformed and began collaborating with the Odessa television studio as a commentator on the hot crime news. He even wrote a book about the experiences he gained during his gangster past. In it, he claims that the year of your birth, and especially its summer season, was marked by a critically turbulent crime situation in Odessa.

This is a rare case where a printed text failed to convince me, because of my being there in person that summer and marking nothing of the sort. Which fact supports the theory of parallel worlds.

The Reforged Commentator and I each lived in their own of the parallel worlds, and the situation experienced in one world was at odds with that in the other. The only thing we had in common was the number of a current year.

However, it's not worth dismissing the possibility that these two separate worlds could (despite their parallelism) occasionally intersect, which explains the presence of a couple of episodes with criminal overtones in the otherwise completely calm summer of '79.

. . . .

Yes, I must admit that during my wanderings around Odessa, I did witness two instances of contact and interpenetration between our parallel worlds.

The first occurred on the morning bus 'Gvardeyskoye - Odessa', when a young slob in the second seat from the left scolded the driver for a minor route deviation on the city outskirts.

Upon arrival at the Bus Station 3 near the New Bazaar, the driver ran from his cabin into the bus with apologies and technical (somewhat overly obsequious) explanations. He was forgiven thanks to the intercession of a young female passenger in the same seat, who softened her easily excitable companion...

The second instance of interpenetration took place at the train station, where I approached a random cop with a question about the population number of Odessa. For an answer, the law enforcement officer sent me to the police station on the first floor of the station.

The on-duty lieutenant, on hearing the same question, told me to wait.

In observance of his instruction, I leaned against the counter separating us and watched as his red lips lasciviously squeezed, wiggled, and caressed the filter of his unlit cigarette, accompanied by sharp cries and heavy blows behind my back.

My quick glance in the direction of the noise noted the wide-open door to the next room, where a woman in a gauze headscarf and a janitor black robe was skillfully using the heavy wooden handle of her mop kicking shit out a drunk draped in nothing but his red underwear.

I was wearing the exact same red dressing item, with a pattern of blue tennis rackets, under my pants, though perhaps less faded, having been purchased only a couple of months earlier. So I wasn't inclined to watch his inevitable defeat in the current match.

Turning away, I meekly lowered my gaze to contemplate the surface of the high counter separating me from the lieutenant...

When the officer had received his due (appropriate for his service and rank) quota of pleasure, he finally lit the cigarette, announcing that the city didn't have a million yet, but maybe 600,000...

So, on my next visit to the city, having missed the last bus to New Dofinovka, I chose to spend the night in a small park inside the ring road, in front of the train station.

~ ~ ~

It turned out to be completely deserted due to the lack of lighting in the underpass beneath the ring road. Having chosen the bench furthest from the lamppost, I lay down. It was so hard that I remembered Edgar Allan Poe, stabbed to death on a bench in Baltimore, Maryland, for the \$40 literary royalties he had just received.

So I partially pulled the advance I'd been paid that day at Polar Explorers' Square out of my shirt pocket, like a coquettish boutonniere of three-ruble notes—an exercise in personal courage, for self-improvement purposes.

Traffic on the ring road had almost died out, and the bench had become even harder. But I kept my eyes closed on principle, because night is for sleep.

So I was wide awake when I heard the soft sounds of cautious footfalls on the asphalt. He came up and for about a minute stood over me, stretched out on the bench, wearing an Edgar Allan Poe mustache, a blue short-sleeved shirt, and the skinny stack of Soviet banknotes partially stuck out from the breast pocket. Then he left, as quietly as on his arrival. For principle and the sake of training, I didn't open my eyes to see who it was.

In the morning, I woke up in the same position, quite chilled and extremely stiff, but, unlike the great American Romantic, alive.

I stood up and tucked the money deeper. A flock of ravens, croaking and flapping their wings, flew across the dawn sky. Apparently, the same squadron that had soared over Nezhyn the day I left for Odessa. Their flight here clearly was not mapped in a straight line.

A feather fell from the wing of one of them, heading in grotesque twists and turns toward the greens. Tilting my face back to better follow the feather's zigzags, I moved to intercept it, ignoring the poorly dug beds of stunted marigolds... I caught it in the capped palm of my hand, returned to the sidewalk, and gently dropped it into the trash can, saying, 'Not in my presence, please!'

(... a not widely known German poet of the first half of the 20th century once lamented his mediocrity; otherwise, he would not have allowed the suicidal global self-slaughter of human race.

Few venerable poets rise to such a profound understanding of the poet's responsibility for the fate of the world. They inertly cling to the generally accepted concepts and rituals of their time, but if you think about it closely...)

However, thinking alone is not enough; one has to also invent something, as Valentin Batrak, aka Lyalka, put it. Somewhere...

## Глава

~ ~ ~ The Beautiful Defeat

When the agreed-upon deadline arrived and it was time to pick up you and Eerah, there was practically nowhere to take y'all. Yet, the word given, I had no choice but to show up and at least explain the reasons for the delay.

I was critically short of mone, as was everyone I'd tried to borrow from for travel expenses. The desperate nature of the situation prompted the idea of exchanging my wedding ring for banknotes at a pawnshop.

. . .

By the time I found one in the city, the pawnshop was already open, and the line began on the sidewalk in front of the entrance...

Inside, the establishment consisted of one long room with partitions along three walls. The sheet metal partitions had small windows, and one, at the very end of the room, even had a grating. That was where all of the line was crowding to because behind the other two partitions and windows, a dark-haired but rather dejected young man was carrying out cosmetic repairs with a foul-smelling nitro paint.

Before closing for lunch, when everyone was asked to leave, I had reached to about four meters from the finish window.

In the breast pocket of my short-sleeved shirt lay the ring I'd torn off my finger the previous evening. Even soap and water from the washstand (on a tree next to the 'dorm' ) had done little to help. As I tormented my poor finger, I recalled the projectionists' booth at KeLCeaRP Park and once again felt sorry for Olga.

. . . .

The pawnshop reopened, and after standing in the line for an extra hour, my blood circulatory system anxiously throbbing, I handed the ring through the grates. The earrings brought in by the woman in front of me couldn't prove being valuable enough, and she'd left empty-handed. My pawn had passed muster; I'd received 30 rubles plus the receipt slip...

~ ~ ~

The next morning, I arrived at the New Bazaar and bought a plastic blue shopping basket, along with four kilos of apricots to fill it, though those weren't quite ripe yet. Then I went up to the flower booth and said I needed three red roses.

On the flower girl my request worked like a watchword. From a hidden spot behind her, she produced small-size roses of dark-red, three all in all with a half-meter, sturdy stem each. Then she sounded the conspiratorial countersign, ' Meant these ones?'

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