

Василий Авдеев

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Lost Souls



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«Автор»

2026

Авдеев В.

The World of Lost Souls / В. Авдеев — «Автор», 2026

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The World of Lost Souls

Глава 1.

Death.

I suppose it really would have been better to call a doctor to the house rather than sit in this stuffy, overcrowded hospital in agonizing anticipation of my turn. Of all the times to feel unwell — right on the eve of the holidays. My head was simply splitting apart, it was already unbearable to endure, and there was no time at all to wait for an ambulance. So my turn finally came.

The hospital corridor was long and narrow; its walls, painted a faded pale green, pressed upon the consciousness. The fluorescent lights hummed monotonously and irritatingly, their cold light reflecting in the linoleum polished by hundreds of feet. People sat on uncomfortable plastic chairs, pressed close to one another, each occupied with their own pain. Someone was coughing, someone was clutching their stomach, someone simply sat with a dull gaze, staring at a single point. The smell of medicines, sweat, and old linoleum blended into a heavy, suffocating cocktail. I sat clutching my temples with my hands, and it seemed to me that my head was about to burst like an overripe watermelon.

"Come in. What are your complaints?"

The doctor's voice was tired and indifferent, like that of a man who over a long working day has seen hundreds of the same sufferers. He didn't even raise his eyes to me, continuing to write something in the chart.

"I'd like to say 'with life,' but for now — with a severe headache."

I tried to smile at my own joke, but it came out pathetic. The doctor showed no reaction.

"Let's examine you now. So, blood pressure is elevated. Pulse is not great. Pupils are dilated. Take this medicine. Nurse, give the patient some water to wash it down."

The nurse, a middle-aged woman with a tired face and thin hair gathered in a bun, silently handed me a plastic cup of water. The pill was small, white, unremarkable. I swallowed it without even tasting anything.

"Doctor, so how is it? Everything all right?"

"Everything is fine. Don't worry."

But something in his voice was alarming. He said it too quickly, too confidently, as if he wanted to get rid of me as soon as possible.

"Doctor, I'm feeling dizzy. I'm getting worse."

The floor began to sway slowly, as if I were standing on the deck of a ship. The walls of the room floated, losing their outlines. The doctor's face blurred into a murky spot.

"The medicine will start working now, and everything will pass."

"It doesn't seem to be helping, my head is splitting, do something quickly, I can't take it anymore..."

The words came with difficulty, my tongue was tangling. The pain grew, pulsing in my temples, radiating to the back of my head, filling my entire being. I grabbed the edge of the examination couch, trying to hold on, but my fingers were slipping.

"To intensive care, urgently, a gurney... the patient... too late..."

The last word sounded somewhere very far away, as if from another world. And then silence came.

The pain in my head was gone — seems I really did get a good doctor after all. A sense of peace spread through my soul, everything became good and calm. My body relaxed completely, every

muscle, every little cell filled with a pleasant languor. Warm rays of sun were breaking through my closed eyelids. Somewhere a beautiful melody could be heard. It seemed someone was practicing on a flute. The melody was simple, yet remarkably beautiful; it rippled like a stream and carried me somewhere far, far away.

I open my eyes. Above me — blue sky. Clouds. What I see puts me in a stupor. I look around. I jump to my feet. There is no hospital. Not just no — there is no room, no building, and judging by all appearances, I'm not even in the city.

Perhaps I would have panicked, but the state of calm I was in simply wouldn't let me. A strange, unfamiliar feeling. As if someone had switched off that very toggle inside me that is responsible for fear, anxiety, worry. I stood and looked around, and inside me there was only silence.

All around, as far as the eye could see, stretched a field covered with fine multicolored grass. The grass seemed alive; under the influence of a light breeze, it rolled in waves from side to side, forming beautiful grassy patterns that constantly changed color and direction. Now it would become emerald green, now suddenly flare up in all shades of blue and violet, now become covered with golden and pink patches. It seemed the field itself was breathing, living its own special life.

"Is anyone there?" I shout, peering intently into the distance.

My voice sounded hollow, as if it had drowned in this boundless silence. But an echo did respond somewhere far away, rolled across the field, and fell silent.

As soon as I uttered those words, several small little men immediately appeared beside me — little angels, I couldn't even come up with another name for them. Their cute little faces, devoid of any emotion, turned toward me, seemed to show their indifference to me, but the desire to look into my eyes, it seemed, caused bewilderment in all of us. They hovered in the air, their little wings fluttering quickly, and their eyes, huge and transparent, looked at me with some strange expression I didn't understand.

What kind of medicine did that doctor give me? They really do hand out diplomas to all sorts of charlatans. The medicine clearly causes hallucinations. When I come to my senses, I'll file a complaint against him, let him know what it means to give dangerous drugs to people. But somewhere deep in my soul I understood that this was not a hallucination. Everything around was too real, too genuine.

There was a clap of hands.

"All right now, shoo."

The little angels scattered to the sides. I turned around. Behind me stood a girl of about seven.

Dressed in a short white dress, long white knee socks, white sandals. The girl's hair was the same color as all her clothing. She stood looking at me with a smile, and in that smile there was something that made me uneasy.

"You weren't scared? They're so annoying, always getting underfoot."

"No, quite the opposite, they seemed to me very sweet creatures."

"Well, that's good. It's just that strangers rarely turn up here, and they're curious creatures, so they keep poking around."

"Are they angels?"

The girl laughed such a ringing laugh that it seemed hundreds of silver bells rang out. Her laughter was pure and bright, but at the same time there was a certain sadness in it, as if she were laughing at something that was sad.

"Of course not, they're souls. The souls of infants who never got to be born. They can't speak, they never experienced emotions and never saw their parents. And they still hope that someone will recognize them, and they will find peace."

The girl laughed again.

"True, in all this time that has never happened. The chances that one of their loving parents will turn up here are extremely small, let alone that he would recognize his unborn child."

A chill ran down my spine at these words. I pictured these little creatures flying around here, in this strange world, waiting, waiting, waiting... Waiting for someone who will never come. Waiting for someone who maybe doesn't even know they exist.

"Tell me, where have I ended up — is this heaven or hell?" I asked a quite conscious question. She laughed again.

"That's hard to say. Here are the souls of those for whom no other place was found. For Hell you have too few sins, and for Heaven you were loved too little in life."

"But I'm not an overgrown embryo, unlike them — I lived quite a long time, I knew my parents and experienced feelings. I can't be here."

"If you think that what you see here now is the whole of this world, then you're mistaken."

"What do you mean? Is it bigger?"

"This is only the beginning, the first part. This world is much bigger. I've been assigned to guide you through it. We'll try to find your place here."

"Who assigned you?"

"That doesn't matter to you."

"Is it God?"

"Possibly. Just do as I say and everything will be fine."

"Let's go."

She held out her small hand to me. I took it, and we walked. The field parted before us, the grass bowed down, forming a path. And ahead, somewhere far beyond the horizon, something large and bright could be seen. What it was, I didn't know. But I walked. I walked because there was no other choice. I walked because I wanted to understand. I walked because somewhere deep in my soul a hope was glimmering — the hope of finding my place in this strange, incomprehensible world.

Глава 2.

It's hard to say how much time had passed. It seemed we had been walking all day, though the very concept of time here seemed to have long lost all meaning. If the sun was moving across the sky at all, it did so imperceptibly, as if it too were tired and had stopped hurrying. It hung at the same point, blurred, pale, as though drawn by someone's careless hand. I had long since stopped counting my steps, stopped peering into the distance in the hope of seeing at least some landmark. I simply walked because I had to walk, because stopping here seemed even stranger than the movement itself. The vegetation began to change gradually. If at first we came across soft, almost weightless grasses with tender, pale stems that sprang pleasantly underfoot, now we increasingly encountered plants that were tough, dark, with dense leaves and prickly tendrils. They seemed to warn: beyond here begins a different land, not so welcoming. Their stems were covered with tiny thorns, and when I accidentally brushed against one, a sharp pain ran across my skin, immediately replaced by a dull numbness. The color of the plants had changed too—from tender green it had become dark brown, almost black, as if they had absorbed all the shadow of this world. On the horizon, a blue haze of fog began to appear. At first it seemed a light veil, almost transparent, but with every step it grew denser and more tangible. It spread along the ground, wrapped around the stems, hid what lay ahead, and created the feeling that we were approaching something important and irreversible. The little angels that had been constantly circling around us began to fall behind. Their silvery wings flickered less and less often, and their ringing chirping gradually fell silent. At first they still tried to catch up with us, circled above our heads, peered into our eyes as if asking us to stay. But then, apparently, they realized we wouldn't turn back, and began to lag behind. They had probably simply grown bored with us, and flew off to look for something more interesting. Or perhaps they sensed a boundary they were not allowed to cross, and were saying goodbye to us in their own way ahead of time, lightly and without sadness. I watched them go, and felt a little wistful. These small winged creatures were the only thing connecting me to something bright in this world, and now they were disappearing.

I decided to pass the time by talking with my companion. And to find out about local life along the way—after all, I still understood almost nothing about this place, and questions were piling up with every step.

"We've been together so long, and I still don't know your name. And how did you end up here?" I asked, trying to make my voice sound as casual as possible.

"Call me Sveta. I like that name. I've been here so long that I've forgotten my real name, the one I was given once."

"And I'm Valera."

"Well, now we've been introduced," she smiled, and in that smile there was something both warm and infinitely ancient, as if she had been smiling like that for thousands of years and couldn't stop.

"Who lets you, so small, go so far away? Maybe you're looking for someone too?" I continued, trying to understand at least something about her past.

"I'm not as small as you think," Sveta answered with a sigh. "I'm a couple of thousand years older than you. As for searching—I don't know for sure myself yet. Maybe I'm searching, maybe I'm just walking because I have to."

"You look very young for your age."

"People don't age here. Because there's no time. No one counts years or time here. Here you can walk forever and not notice that an entire era has passed."

"And what do you do here?" I pressed on.

"Well, I guide people like you. One has to pass the time somehow here," she answered with a slight smirk.

"Do people like me come often?"

"You're the first of your kind."

A strange answer. It seemed guests were a rare occurrence here. Or maybe not guests at all, but something else, something I couldn't yet name. I wanted to ask something more, but we had already reached the edge of the clearing and come up against a wall of solid fog. It was so dense that it seemed alive, breathing, slowly rolling. Some shadows, some movements could be discerned in it, but the moment you looked closer, they vanished, leaving only the feeling that you were being watched. The little angels, as I had nicknamed the cute winged creatures, no longer followed us, though even in this fog it would not have been difficult for them to catch up with us. Apparently there really was some invisible line they were not permitted to cross.

"So the little ones don't want to accompany us any further? Maybe they got scared of the fog or tired of flapping their wings?" I joked.

She smiled, but there was no mirth in the smile.

"They can't go further. Everyone here has their own place. Where they were left, there they must stay."

"I see. A pity—at least it was more cheerful with them."

"The fog is very thick here. You could get lost. Give me your hand."

Hand in hand, we moved on through the fog. Its damp wisps clung to my face, slid across my skin, and it seemed we were walking not on the ground but through some soft, shifting nothingness. I heard only my own breathing and Sveta's steps, which were surprisingly confident, as if she knew this road by heart. Svetlana moved quickly even in such poor visibility. I could barely keep up with her, trying not to let go of her hand, which was the only landmark in this white, silent space. Her palm was warm and dry, and that warmth seemed to me the only thread connecting me to reality. To my good fortune, the band of fog turned out not to be very wide, and soon we emerged from it.

Another clearing opened up before my eyes, but unlike the previous one it was entirely covered with all kinds of flowers. The variety of flowers and their colors was simply off the charts. There were bright scarlet, tender lilac, golden, almost black, and translucent blue ones, as if woven from morning light. There were so many that they seemed to cover the ground in a solid carpet, and among them, like snowflakes in winter, you could not find two alike. The fragrance was thick, sweet, slightly intoxicating, yet surprisingly pleasant. It made my head spin, and for a moment it seemed to me that I heard someone's quiet whisper coming from the flowers themselves. I shook my head, driving away the illusion, and walked on.

After walking a little further, I noticed the first inhabitants of this clearing. Among the colorful flower buds, children's heads suddenly appeared. The children, mere little ones, barely taller than the tallest stalks of grass growing in the clearing, moving with difficulty on their short legs, looked at us with a smile on their charming faces and an enchanting gaze. They did not run toward us, did not wave their hands—they simply stood and looked, and in that gaze there was so much purity and warmth that for a moment it made one uneasy. Their eyes were large, clear, bottomless, and they reflected something I could not understand. They were dressed in simple light shirts, and their hair fluttered in a nonexistent wind.

"Here, if anywhere, the expression fits that children are the flowers of life," I said, smiling back at them.

"Possibly—if only you didn't die at an early age, like them," Svetlana answered sadly.

She certainly knows how to ruin the mood. She could have just kept quiet. Everyone here is a dead person anyway. I felt my smile slide off my face, and a chill ran down my spine. We walked on, and the children just as silently followed us with their eyes, and in that silence there was something far deeper than mere quiet. I caught myself thinking that I was afraid to look them in the eyes, afraid to see there something that would overturn my entire understanding of life and death.

Approaching closer to the center of the clearing, I noticed a person who resembled neither a child in height nor in age. He also noticed us and waved his hand in greeting. He was a tall, elderly man dressed in an old-Russian shirt and loose trousers. His long gray beard made him look like Ded Moroz, only without the red coat and staff. His face was kind, but in his eyes lurked a deep, long-settled sorrow. He stood surrounded by children, and the children held on to his shirt, his trousers, his fingers, as if afraid to let go.

"Greetings, good people. I haven't seen anyone but the little ones in a long time," he said, stroking the head of one of the many children who surrounded him in a tight ring. "At least you, Sveta, visit me sometimes."

"And good day to you. There's just never any time—we're looking for a place for Valera," Sveta smiled and nodded in my direction. "Maybe we should leave him with you?"

"I think he'd find it a bit dull here," the old man answered, smiling. "The children are small, and the old man is grumpy. This is no place for a young man."

"Well then, we'll go on. We still have a long way to walk," and she waved to him.

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