

С. Огольцов

The Tallest Story Ever!



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The Tallest Story Ever

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Аннотация

A good guy cannot recollect who he is. They persuade him he's a secret agent going on a mission. On board the airliner the bad guy was sitting next to him and all went wrong...

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Сергей Огольцов

The Tallest Story Ever

Epigraph:

To all lady whores who might be concerned

Wanna have it in a style? We're always out there to help you
make of it the affair of lifetime, your star hour!

Prerequisites:

4 able-body boy-friends of yours.

1 low-neck T-shirt.

Call us 66587 54645,

Happy to service you 7/24 Betun Evecutioner & Sons, Ltd

Vasiok_01

The fog shuffles off in wearily rotating curls. Looks like it's gonna grow thinner... Nope. Just a weeny whiff of a fleeting illusion. The sticky gloom is back again as thickly opaque as before. Still, some clandestine activity is felt within, a life invisible swathed in the coils of all-engulfing shroud. Who's cocooned under the wrapping cover? Why hiding themselves away?

And also the sea is there, quite nearby, for sure closer than at a literal stone throw. A low wave splash runs up onto the shore spread flatly, runs to reach the self-elimination, to fall and roll back mutely hushed... The clocklik slow breathing of a mighty giant who doubts not his strength even in sleep. The intake then flowing back to be replaced by the next exactly same wave in their Indian file, the wave delivering the inevitable exhale...

A seagull squeak pierces the hum of calmly breathing abyss...

Whoa! Slow down, man! Are you gonna invent a brand new Mobile-Dick or something? Had a nasty fall from too high heels, ain't it? Someone's landed on their head, for sure. Gulls are cute enough to shun blind flying. Both dark or mist would keep them safely home. Birds never developed a radar in their system and bats are domineering in that line, they find their way in the most raggy surroundings by catching echoes of the ultrasonic peeps which they produce.

[–]

An utterly unknown ornithologist Dr. Horst fon Holtzschnabel maintains that a number of winged species did reach the gray zone frontier about possessing radar-like equipment and some of them (i. e. Colibri) even crossed over and use the gizmo at their household in undercover manner. He argues the reason for the situation lies in the cocky attitude distinguishing the whole of Aves class. Enough to mention their ostentatiously pretentious aristocratism. Any commonplace sparrow would claim their kinship to Condor, the Czar in the Realm of our Feathered Friends. They would loudly chirp and swear with the most solemn oaths stating their kinship to the Royalty by their great-grand-auntie Blue Bird lineage...

(A between-the-lines note in the manuscript found in Saratoga, Saratov State, and lost irrevocably at the secret testing grounds in Tomsk-4.)

[–]

Basta! Enough of egg-head blabber! Open your eyes and view the boundless expanses of the sea. No more wobbling...

The mist peels off the rising eyelashes.

Surprise! Instead of oceanic vistas, my eyes got opened to the gullibility of my sense of hearing. This here couple of my ears, though never spurred in any way, was too quick at jumping to conclusion. Over-zesty tandem of two smarties. Quick does not mean right you, silly organs! Too shoddy an interpretation of the soundtrack.

But then it's my fault also, in part. Not fully awoken, I eased control and – here you are! – missed by a mile. Limitless horizons surely make a rare commodity hereabout. And no mistake.

Wherever directed, your glance gets parried off by one or another plane junction. Even Mr. Vius with his ability to watch the both worlds at any given moment would hardly account for all the details of the interior design. And here comes that big-big “if”: If he'd manage to unclasp and raise his 2-meter-long lashes. Some uphill trick in his state of eternal hangover. Moderation is the ticket to a healthy happy life, Mr. Vius, the obnoxious blood-sucker you!

As for the surf its sound was provided by the completely dry crowd. Except for perspiration drops condensed on this or that block in the multitude astur within the spacious architecture.

Seems like my agenda for tonight includes “sleepover at the airport”? Yoy! Who'd ever suspect any quirk to romanticism in me? Or had some petty deuce seduced me to tank up above my parametric limits?

Nope. The guess is turned down by the symptoms' absence. No sloppiness in none of the eyes. Neither Sahara-desert-like dehydration has invaded my oral cavity. Hence: I'm sober as a babe unborn and go under any name but Vius.

But what then? What makes me sleeping on this varnish? By the by, a rather prudently designed piece of furniture, this bench is. A well-thought-out gadget of the projected capacity up to 3 sitters. Handrail restricted sections for keeping each user

separately. The mankind's being broken in for the comforts in the future they are making for. No chance rubbing shoulders; not a glance away from your phone screen; you're held in your cell safely and with the utmost care. Speaking up to a stranger may happen only in old movies fragments: black-and-white, naive, nostalgic. But so what? The trade is real smart, you get relieved of that freaking load of Homo sapiens, you're freed from thinking!

The bench stretch allotted to a single sitter is generous enough to allow for the ongoing growth of weight as well as volume, globally, in an average bench user. The trend shows steady similarity in rate for both transit and stick-in-the-mud sitters.

However, don't count on a cozy sleep inside a personal closure over such a bench. Nope, M'am, no go. However tight you curl up and stick your nose between your knees. The galvanized handrails, aka armrests, would gloss with the indifference of distant stars and never let you stretch your legs into the neighbor's corral.

On the whole, the benches give you a righteous tip-off: there's no sleep like at sweet home or in your castle, a terminal would only provide you with a portioned rest in a seated position upon no more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of a bench.

Ahoy! Observe the gull who woke me up with her high-volume squeal over the fake surf. What a prominent plumage sports she! The copper-and-gold cloud of Afro makes a dandelion of her head. The hazardous flight thru the mist over, she's landed on the floor surface tiled in milk-white. Her back

is leaned against a bench-leg over the glossy tile stream. No attention whatsoever paid to the thicket of shanks hustling by. The heels of her shoes wedged under her buttocks to prevent slippage upon the over-smooth floor. So the knees have no other option but to stick up. Just so modestly. Completely submerged is she in a gaudy accordion-folder book put over her knees parted in quite decent way, discreetly. A grasshopper in orange hose. The picture-crammed book folds open full length hang down from over the two orange stalks waving in metronome-like motion to and fro.

Armadas of sundry footwear speed up in both direction, tramp the hard smooth surface past the pair of picturesque steamers made of the bright Afro-dandalion's book winking to me from the other side of the stream of legs never at rest, hasting along the milky riverbed between the banks of varnish.

Amid the tumult of milk striders there strikes a melodious PA gong splash demanding attention of all who might be concerned, to the unyielding dragonfly sputter.

But wait-wait-wait! Slower, please! What language is that? And where am I at all?!

By the looks of public around, neither Sherlock nor Holmes would deduce where exactly they got stranded. The usual mixture of transit crowds. Skin pigmentation in the throng is a wide stretch from glossy coal to albino glitter. A multi-racial mass of extras, where each nomad speaks their personal Mutter sprache.

Under the like circumstances, the question word "where?" just

doesn't click. Repeating it just grows the pool of "oops!" There-
there! No need to get upset, though. With an adroit turn of a steer
wheel we'll substitute the question word and ram the problem
from another angle/ Let us surprise it with: "what for" am I there
I don't know where?

There followed a prolonged pause and indistinct clapping of
the eyelashes. Soundless. However, the urge to scratch the back
of my neck was held in check successfully. Simply nipped in the
bud. Just in case. What if I was born and raised in a civilized
class of society? Ain't it a shame to let your side down? But
then who knows... I could as easily originate from among drifter
bums... Wild guesses are of no use for finding out the details of
the matter in hand.

And at that very point my toes curled up, the glutes contracted,
and I clawed the bench section armrests to gain a steady foothold
for self-defense. Because my enclosure got blockaded by the
necessity pitiless and having no mercy just as a pack of wolves,
the must to ask myself the main question stared squarely into my
face. No shilly-shally tricks would help out. Yes, I have to. The
moment when the shocking crash of my 2 fallen thru attempts
dies out would flag off the decisive try. Silly slyness doesn't work
in serious matters.

The chills sent forth by the cold-blood fingers of despair ran
over my skin. The epidermic cells were quick to understand that
the main question in any, however audacious, form would bump
into the same silence. Scornfully haughty. But try I must. At least

to try:

”Who am I?”

Bookoff

—

01

Bookoff was dying and he knew it.

The process drew not much if any emotion out him. In a retarded zombie-like manner, shuffled the irreversible stages by. He just carried on without making much song and dance about the nearing fact. Anyway, the skeleton like his was of no use for dancing. The SOB jammed too tight at every other joint.

Aging trains you in self-restraint. Gradually, various occurrences of all kinds stur you less and less, and are met equally calm, ‘Yes, and so what?’ And be grateful if your reaction does not trigger a sharp shoot. Especially in the sacrum.

Not quite indifferent, yet rather listless was Bookoff’s attitude to his own demise. Kinda a visit to the dentist. Willy-nilly, you have to, because it pains. Only the date and hour are not agreed upon, but it is soon already. And he knew that.

His awareness Bookoff shared to no one. He never looked for another guy’s ear to share gossip of his very own snags. It was not like him. The suffered heart attacks were survived on his feet. Even massive ones. Only later, many years after. He could let it slip. Maybe, because of sloppiness arriving when the old age got a say.

Secondly, there was no one to cater his consolations to

and prepare for the outcome. The shop-assistant boys at the supermarket were the only choice available to him. He patronized the retail shebang twice a week, buying bread, pasta, and some ketchup to put at home to his fridge and forget.

He didn't know the conquerors' language. The blonde at the supermarket checkout liked to stage a show for his opposite number buddies. The invisible rifle was pointed at Bookoff, the right palm edge struck across the opposite biceps: "pouf-pouf!". Dumb clown...

Tee fool's black haired buddy seized the moment in between distant shelves to ask Bookoff tete-a-tete if he knew Russian. The old man made no answer, even though heard the question with his already half-deaf ears. He walked to the checkout and put by the computer monitor the money, his monthly allowance from the Red Cross mission, printed in the language he knew not, collected the change and went away...

Changes in human life are predetermined for 100 %, thanks to the biological sciences. We know beforehand when a human would get ripe, reach their prime, get dry behind the ears and finally plonk into the Lethe, aka River of Oblivion...

(Employing poetic lingo here aids to mitigate the involuntary contraction of the sphincter at the thought kept deep in the dungeon of any human's conscience, which policy enables them to pull thru their daily tasks.)

To plumb a person's biographical clearway is a much more complicated operation. Too many factors have to be considered

for the purpose: marital status, their participation in social and political life, changes in geo economy situation and lots of other cats as well, always at ready to run across the unsuspecting guy's way. Effing jinxes!

And this here person was just an average common man who didn't care a fig about political analyses and the like trash. Otherwise, long-long ago he certainly would get a hunch of no other final to his biography. Such end was preconditioned by the dynasty schooling, which handed the skills of a strategic smiley to the guy at the rudder in the state inimical to the mountainous region where Bookoff had to live his days out. Plus an immeasurable superiority in monetary and demographic resources. Plus the army equipped with the most modern arms exponentially mightier than those possessed by the mentioned mountainous region considered by the formidable neighbor their hereditary backyard. Plus the corruption of the government and authorities in the "independent state" cobbled up in murky waters of the collapsing USSR.

And lots of other noodles would be added onto his ears by charlatans trained for claptrap TV shows. It's only that he didn't switch the damn tube on, not just never but absolutely never.

Bookoff was dying in a style. In a self-made mansion built for a big family. The family got swept away by capitulations and refugee stampedes. Only he stuck back like an old nail whose rust started roots in the wood. Easier to break off than rip out.

Now he was dying alone, silently, aware that he was passing

away and that the fact had to be carried on his feet.

From time to time, civilian citizens of the power that had achieved the unprecedented victory came to his house to measure it for their big families. The house was big enough and situated in a good location at the end of a quiet dead end. The garden was also good, even though neglected.

On a closer inspection, they left tsk-tsking their tongue in disappointment. The house sat on the edge of a sheer precipice. It was doomed to topple down there in one or another of future earthquakes inevitable in the mountainous country.

The South Caucasus mountains always were a zone of seismic instability. When building his house, Bookoff missed the point, he didn't know such words then. He was happy that the city council allocated a plot of land without a usual drag. And of course the house was built not on the edge. In decades the cavity crawled nearer, Together with the stream of open canalization, stinking rivulet along the bottom far down...

That's how Bookoff learned the words about seismic instability. But now he had again forgotten them. There was time, when crevices in the kitchen wall under the hood of the gas stove drove him into a dismal rage. Then he got used and stopped seeing them.

And now he is just sitting amid the huge silence of his big house, too big for him. He looks at the window whose blinds are never closed. He cannot see the garden thru the window, just as he can't make out where ends the nose and start the eyes in

the unfocused spots of faces by those shop-assistant boys at the supermarket.

Yet, even without looking, he knows that the garden gone grown with rangy grass up to the waist. The garden which turned his arms into accessory tools for the spade, scythe, rake, which farmed his back out to the incessant aches.

He had neither what with nor what after to take care in the garden... There lingered just one business for him – to die.

Vasiok

—
02

Scary silence reigned in the convolutions. Straining themselves to the utmost, logic and memory united their efforts in lost attempts to roll out at least a single one, however flimsy, reason for my appearing upon the bench intended for a set of three sitters. How to justify my presence in the boundless waiting room smack-bang in the middle of unknown MutterSpracheLand, whose PA system sounds so dissimilar to the all-purpose native to all Global-English-Mother-Tongue.

In futile confusion rushed heady vain thoughts hither-thither rubbing against the winding brain partitions like the tremulant mute school of fish caught with the narrow mesh-work wire cage: where am I? who am I?

In place of answer to their mute pleas there grew and widened emptiness so dense that you could feel it when pulpating thru the cranium and pelage. And only from somewhere absolutely

faraway, it's hard to say behind which bend or membrane in the dura mater, there came a ghostly, vague, and tiny echo echoing another echo. The indecipherable sounds added up into, like, "cockina malia" or something. What the hell?!

But then, if taken without quotes and capitalized, it looked like a family name and the first one put vice versa or< maybe, equally plausible, some African state from the same pod with Burkina Faso and other subjects of international law consisting of a couple of words. However, even the geographic aftertaste didn't attach much reality to the perversely convoluted echoes.

But soon, maybe, too soon, there appeared an undeniably visual sign.

It surfaced out of nowhere and watched me with a pinch of doubt. Reproach and mistrust were also admixed to its attitude easily discernible against the background of the bendy-screwy confusion of wrinkled furrows and rutted traces of routine mental activities imprinted in the cerebral cortex. Then it stuck to the wall on the left, like a decorative magnet in the fridge door. At the mentioned angle it acquired a striking resemblance to 2 letters, both capital: "K" and "M". At that point there remained no space for maneuvering, acting fool, playing for time, like, I know nothing, officer, seen none...

But not this time, smart Alec, no putting on – see? There is a sign for you big as a house, slip-splashed in rushy graffiti, white on gray, in a daredevil kid style who plunges headlong for taking the first spring swim across the ice-cold river.

Short rows of the shoulders-arms-head-elbows-palms knit by the united effort into a single body swimming thru the streaming icy ripples. Twist and turn, hither-thither – hooh... shi... hooh... it... hooh...

We two, the sign and I, watched one another with fixed stares. Face to face. In cheeky challenge. None of us needed any further tip there would be beating of crap out of the match. Tooth and nail. Till one of us would kick off. Or both...

For me to surrender or merely retreat was out of question. It's my last chance to get the main answer. And the rest – ho-ho! – scared out of their wits, would confess to everything even before being asked. Otherwise...

Stop! Damn you! Be gone all pessimistic “or else”!

Who am I?

No answer.

Who am I?!

No answer.

O, shi... Ahem, but it's a lousy turn... The effing terminal station. Just to think of it! Not even knowing who I am at all... But if I ran into and stopped by a patrol? What then?

Patrol? What patrol? What blithering hooley do I give out?

My thoughts whisked in all directions like batty Chiropteras, stumbling, colliding, redoubling the fuss in the darkness under the parietal bone. In so extreme a commotion, the head just had to go reeling.

Damn! That was some hell of a carousel. A Ferris wheel

seat emerged from somewhere down there. The clown sitting in it obscenely span his tongue within the wide red circle of lips painted in his face. The fool's cap drawn tight down his forehead bore 'amnesia' embroidered in clumsy stitches. It was drenched thru and thru, dripping huge coarse drops of... Oh, no!

No, no, bitch! I'm not your share! What darn amnesia could ever develop by a boy of 15? Well, I mean... How old am I, by the by?

Anyway, a chance checkup won't hurt. Especially when it's free... Now, let's go thru and see:

The year of the Battle of Asculum?—279 B.C.

Checked. What year is it currently?—A current year. A leap one.

Another check. How many times were done?—Three.

By who?—Old man Olkhoo.

Ha! 107 % – correct answers, amnesia is over horizon, as of yet...

And already on the crest of the wave of euphoria, as ecstatically as a giddy shaman from Ekibastuz:

'Hey, good guy, what's your name?'—'It's Vano in Georgian, and in Russian's Vahnia!; in Armenian I'm Ohanes, but in Russian – Vahnia!'

Not a bad try, sorcerer, this here hit from 50s' on the single marked 78 RPM. You still wanna convince me you're 15 years of age?

Whatever. No amnesiac would recollect, betcha.

Wait! I forgot to go thru my pockets! After the interrogation and cross-examination of those detained during the pocket-raid it would be easy to deduct and identify the bastard pretending to be me. The bastard has conspired not just a memory leak but a full-fledged drenching!

Okay, I see. Neither cigarettes nor a zippo. Consequently, I'm not a smoker and will go for a first-rate deceased in excellent condition. But for how long have I given up?

No answer.

Damn! With no amnesia there should be a response. Some freaking inconsistency. Forget it. No use in driving oneself into the mire of mind depression. I possibly never had a try. Keeping my virginity in this regard. That's why the question about the duration of my abstinence can't be answered. Or, to put it more exactly, the answer was given by its absence. Crisp and clear. Perfectly logical. Zero means nothing. No surprise there was so profound silence in the answer. Thus, I have nothing to do with nicotine. Never have had such an addiction.

And which ones have I got? Whoa! Let's don't consider it a question. There are more urgent needs. Although, it does contain a certain reason. An astrologess I knew once told me, 'Give me your friend's name and I'll make a list of his addictions'. Yet, about hers, Amalia kept her mouth shut.

But this is a crying sexism! I can recollect the astrolo-lady's name while my own... Wait-wait-wait! Here is some card too. And, by the by, in the pants' back pocket. The right one, as usual.

Oh! Not just a card but a golden opportunity, a second to none cue. An airline ticket. The transit flight 0244 from ZRH to TLV, the registration starts at 17.00, Departure gate D43.

And (the main part in it, rra-ta-ta-dah!) my name is Semyon Nulin! A damn nice to know who you are dealing with in your own person. Besides, I'm a MR. Good job, boy! Let's hope you're straight.

So, at five, right? And the huge digital clock in the waiting room wall shows 10 to 17.00. Doesn't matter. There's no passport any way. What do I look like? It wouldn't hurt to meet the hottie. Where's the rest-room? There are mirrors. Okay, Semyon. Tear your ass off this here bench. Let's go get acquainted...

'Don't jiggle, Vasia,' a disgruntled voice muttered in low volume to my left ear. They planted slues of foocking cams here. While the side pockets in your foocking jacket, are covered with the hanging flaps. Don't fidget, you foocking fashionista, let me slip your passport in on the sly...

A stifling horror seized me. Chills shot down my spine. Their intensity ice-coated my tongue, and it clanged awkwardly against the icicles on the alveoli and teeth behind the lips, hardened like glacial facing.

'W-who're you?' Only a superhuman straining of will power allowed me to curb the most natural reflex and eschew turning to the undercover speaker.

'Lost your scenting skills? Dropped to foocking recognize your own? It's f_ucking me, Tractor!'

‘And who am I?’

‘Oho, 0-7th! It was some drinking bout you have had! And again snacking on agarics, I bet! Look, if some bitch snitches you to the Center, you’d be pinched for another stretch. And over again I’ll have to cook fish soup on foocking Tuesdays and Thursdays to pass it to you in the special-use clink.

‘Petyikka! Is that you?’ Unexpectedly for me, all on its own, this uncanny malarky leapt forth from my piehole.

‘Ha! Whoever ate the fish soup trumped up by Petyikka would foocking never forget it!’

‘It wasn’t me... I just... it was... well, doesn’t matter. It’s only that you at first attempted to pass for a tractor.’

‘The Center’s strict directive: the personnel are to communicate exclusively by their noms de foocking guerre. Aha! The passport is thru and in, below the flaps. Keep in mind, 0-7th, in the mission at hand you’re Nulin, Semyon Efgraphich. Look! Your departure gate began to operate. Good luck, bro. Take care and don’t catch cold under the Abyou-Dabyou foocking conditioners...

Bookoff

—
02

First thing in the morning he had to rip-open his eyes. The past night left them filled with sand, not natural, but something like it, only finer. While under the cover, Bookoff began to scoop with his fingertips the weensy prickly fragments from out the

corners of his eyes, brushed the crusty specks from in between the dozen of still remaining lashes, and drew their mass from under the eyelid flaps. An attempt at raising the eyelids brought up a burning sensation. The eyes resorted to tear secretion in self-defense, and Bookoff stumbled into the corridor, where he blindly turned right, to the shower room. He didn't lean onto the walls, but his hands just checked his location on the route.

The water from the tap woke him right off and washed his eyelids. And then in the course of the day winking his eyes was not over-painful.

In the middle of the most spacious room of the big house stood an old chair, turned away from the black oval table at which Bookoff ate from another chair. Always that way only. Such cunning course of action cancelled turning the central chair to the table and back.

The black oval of the large table-top was surrounded with four chairs but only the mentioned pair was put in use by Bookoff.

Because of its dimensions the room allowed for giving place to both the kitchen and the living room at once. The invisible frontier between the two evaded the clear-cut guess at its line. An inhabitant could decide it following their private preferences as to what was what. Or according to their mood. One even could avoid the hassle altogether by calling the whole room “the kitchen” and that it was entirely. And if you named it “the living room” – so be it till your other moods. In short, whatever was the first to roll of the tongue. Anyway, the people who lived in

the big house got it at once.

When of all the population in the house remained only Bookoff, he turned one of the chairs about without moving it away. The item that had lived thru half a dozen repairs, leaned its back against the black oval and became the part of the living-room. That's where he always sat, waiting for the end of his stay in the room? In the house, and anywhere at all.

Before him, in the left corner from the window, there stood a rocking chair, which he never used. Getting seated or climbing out of it presented too many problems for him.

After finishing his meal, he accurately brushed the crumbs into a cupped hand from that part of the black oval he always ate at. Not that he could see them those crumbs, yet he knew they should be there. Then there remained nothing more to do, but to sit with his back to the table and the kitchen, that started across the border-line run over the table-top.

The motionless eyes in his head were directed to the green of the garden thru the wide window. The wind on the other side of the glass panes noiselessly moved the boughs and foliage in the apple trees, pear trees, and other plants habitually there, year after year. Bookoff's eyes directed outside from the middle of the living-room couldn't see what part in the mass of green belonged to which plant. Yet with his inner sight he clearly saw them as skinny saplings, and sometimes as trees waste-deep in snowdrifts, or in the white blossom canopy.

Besides those imaginary visions he could see little, he just kept

to his chair seat, waiting.

The garden went on living its usual life separately from Bookoff, unassisted by him. It got filled with grass, dropping into it round-sided apples, yellow pears, feeding the black birds, the rippers of soft King-apples' flesh innumerable hanging in all of their tree.

The stray dogs, who's packs returned to feral way of life, tread shortcut paths in the grass for their wild needs. He had nothing to do with that. Not anymore. His intention was to reach what he was waiting for. Otherwise, it would get dark again making him to go to bed to find out which of his sides was less achy to lay on. And the next morning would introduce another day of that same waiting.

There was a hope, of course, to die in sleep. Yet Bookoff didn't believe in being so lucky – the hell-bent bitch of life was too dogged.

Vasiok

—
03

My memory is flawless, which makes it so invaluable. Yep, I mean exactly that, it is just priceless, and no reservations. I easily can angle out of it the things unreachable for mediocre specimens from among the humans. Possessing such a faculty remains beyond the limits of a mere mortal.

For instance, I recollect the times when life consisted of just only pleasures. Some endless joy. An ocean of sweet bliss. The

cozy warmth, illuminated with pleasant twilight, the ocean of affection, wherein I splashed together with my constant playmate – Serpent.

We were inseparable – me and my partner. We played, tumbled, fooled around, did everything together in a world created just for us, full of soft rosy twilight. The world of comfort and caressing care. Ah, if only so would go on and on...

But all is over, that world is lost, it's no more there. The harbinger of the world end became the terrible, powerful tremors that shook it time after time. The prior epitome of pleasure, it turned hostile, aggressive, started to constrict me, as if preparing to strangle. A caustic poison spilled all over the ocean, unbearable, deadly, threatening to annihilate all life.

Seized with a horrid panic, my whole body a-shiver, like a school of fish caught in a net, I struggled for my life, kept looking for deliverance, some way of escaping this painful horror.

A never seen, raw, coarse light at the end of the appearing tunnel seemed a salvage, some chance to give a slip to this poisonous trap. The narrowing walls in the passage were squeezing my head so too tightly, but I continued to struggle for life, pushed thru and further, thru and further, pressing ahead striving only forward...

I was delivered into hands covered with overthin slippery rubber. And those very hands – OMG! – clipped off my partner, who, as it turned out, was part of me! I hollered, and the first air intake inundated my whole lungs.

O, yes, I remember all...

And I didn't forget what happened in half a year. It was dark late night about. Mom and I were lying on a dealboard bed. The yellow light entered thru the doorway from the next room to stick still up into the ceiling. Mom was asleep, while I sucked her tit with rapture. It was my favorite pastime, and I did it whenever I felt like that, which happened pretty often. I liked the taste of her homemade milk< but even more enjoyed I the yielding nipple of her warm tit.

The rubber covered hands scooped me away from Mom and her tit. I was ready to cry at the top of my lungs, but suddenly my mouth got filled with yielding rubber somehow reminiscent of her tit. My gums squished the tasteless counterfeit, and I withheld crying...

'The boy will make a good Janissary,' said a voice above my head. The sound was screechy, like rubbing rubber gloves against each other. 'How are you going to baptize the brat, Doc?'

'Nothing to rack one's brains about. The regulation is short and clear – to use the date. "March, 7" goes for "0-7th Marchiuk. "April, 1" becomes "0-1st Aprilian", and so on,' replied someone calmly from the immobile yellow light.

And then I never saw my Mom. Never again...

Bookoff

In his past lives, where he was a growing kid, a fair youth,

a dextrous man, Bookoff did not have a body. Well, that is, he never noticed it. His responsibility was only deciding: where to get, what to take, to hoist, to tump, and so on, realization of plans was his body's business.

Now everything, was turned over. His body became his jail, the of incarceration cell. He served his time under an extremely strict regime with the freedom of movement limited to the utmost. An abrupt sway, a sharp turn, or a too deep tilt were punished on the spot, severely.

In general, his body was holding him in an iron grip now. And though he behaved, it constantly tormented him with pain even for doing nothing wrong. It ached from the feet up to the small bones in the neck.

The body was taking its revenge for the callous exploitation in the past life. Get your payback, please, from the completely destroyed musculoskeletal system.

He endured – nothing doing, although, to quote a famous comedian from Hollywood – he had never signed for such a treatment. And the old movie star, after his sage statement, all of a sudden married. Probably, he wanted to drive the wedge of aging out with another wedge, the one which stimulated most, when the actor was a young man.

His fortune after a prolonged successful career on the silver screen also allowed for the stunt. However, before the honeymoon end, presenting no explanations to no one, nor even to his young wife, he hanged himself at his estate. Like, saying,

sorry for the slipup, babe.

The cute guy forgot to take into account that incentive stimuli also have an expiration date. The omission left his young life partner alone and inconsolable, right? Well, she knows better...

Under the yoke of his eternally aching body, Bookoff turned into a stern, unyielding old man. He didn't resort to the services of noose though, didn't dance jig in it to entertain idle jeerers. Nope, M'am, that's not like him. A sheer neatlessness it would be, and turning a laughing-stock for do-littles.

No, he simply switched to the mode of waiting for a natural demise and, in stern silence, dragged his pains on...

Vasiok

—

04

The passport dropped by Petyikka Tractor into the side pocket of my jacket, in spite of the silly fashion flap, did prove it was alright. Not even half a blip chirped at passing the boarding control for the flight 0244.

However, what's next? In a couple of hours I smoothly arrive by this here stagecoach, made of the best of the best duralumin in the market, into a block-lettered TLV, marked as my destination. Hippity-hip (3) hooray, (2) cheers, and (1) wow!

But – what then? No safe-house, nor contacts, neither cell phone. Not even a mission assigned! Seems like the Center went jogging after the March Hare or sniffing flowers together with that nifty railway carriage in gaily blue paint coat.

And here am I stepping out onto the gangway to suck in, with all my chest width, my just share of smog endemic to the TLV atmosphere: well, hello, my pleasure, TLV bro! May call me Senia Nulin! Where's the nearest municipal garbage bin? I'm pretty hungry, you know...

Okay, come what may. As my last resort I can always start a career of bouncer in any bar of murky repute. From Tractor's clue, I'm 0-7th, which implies being trained in at least some judo or aikido. The martial art details are still evading after the slumber in a bench stall, but no worry! I surely can rely upon the body memory. The stock of reactions stored in it are screaming for a tone-up! So I hope... All those deadly dodger tricks honed to automatism needful for a special agent at special missions, und so weiter...

Geez! What kind of automatism have I blurted right now out? The special trainer in special aikido arrived in our special Academy from Bad Bibra, Germany, and there's no doubt about it.

Ho-ho! Just stumbled at another of my assets. May come handy. When in need, I always can pick up the position of a teacher of German in this or that eine schule.

He's a good guy, Petyikka is, though under-educated to a certain degree. Never reads anything but comics. Fills his gray matter with only "Khrumps!", "Bzdyntz!", "Pizzzz!" and all that jazz. Yet, well schooled in terms of polite manners. Never forgets to add my honorific patronimic after my first name: "Vassilly

Ivvahnych! Take your shit stompers off! The foocking floors've been presently washed up! It is a special hostel for foocking special agents here and not a drifters' den."

Wow! They've started the best part in any flight – the demonstrative show by flight attendant gymnasts. Teaching the technique of puffing your life jacket up if drowning in the Sahara sands. What the hell! Which language do they use for the PA instructions? It sounds like some Zulu variant of English. Shucks! My special lingo instructors schooled me mostly for the Oxfordian dialect of Britons.

'It's Middle English, young man, the Northumbrian dialect of it before the reduction of adjective-verbal inflections on the eve of the Great Vowel Shift.'

I glanced at my fellow traveler to the left, in between me and the porthole, and got fu_ fully, I mean, shocked... fully, and unquenchably to the highest degree of comparison.

[–]

Most Briton-Oxfordians use mostly "most" for the purpose...

[–]

Yet, I was lucky, and the safety belt, already fastened for takeoff, withstood the crazy force of my involuntary jerk in an attempt to jet off to I don't know where just to be away from that... well... ghoulie, shaitan, werewolf, troll or whatever the hell it was...

A barrel within a sweater was sitting next to me. The abundant stream of salt-and-pepper beard disappeared into the low-cut.

However, not tacked in tight enough, it left a circular hair fold beneath his mug, a kinda nappy napkin or, sooner, a neglected Ruff collar around the neck of a bum aristocrat from the end of the Reconquista period. Which impression was immediately upheld by the flaming hew of alcoholic origin in his face.

In fact, of the whole face there remained only saggy-lidded eyes on the show framed with shaggy eyebrows and a gray tousled mane. The balaklava-hat-like opening in the hair around the bird's eyes contained also a pug nose of a lively monochrome color.

As for the beard, it was obviously looking for adventures – the end, or rather the rest of it, sticking out from under the edge of his sweater stretched on the protrusion of his belly, crawled on between his jean-clad thighs to somewhere else under the seat. How does he tame it, when facing a urinal in the restroom, that jerk?!

‘Ghoulán Jerkych Uncleton-Blackseasky, an expert in Linguo-Mystics. I take the liberty of introducing myself, so as to avoid unnecessary irremedial cases.’

‘Nom de guerre, 0-... Ahem... that is... How have guessed I don't know about the Great Shift?’

‘No sweat at all. Everything is written, Vassia, in your face. It wouldn't be a bad idea to somehow screen the stupid bazaar-rap within your head, so as not to traumatize the decent public with naked text. Why not to grow a beard, like a more intelligent sapiens?’ I mean, if you're not looking for extra problems and a

bumper short circuit across a not too long lifespan, already. Here, take a look at your stark naked thought-texting!’

The thick blunt fingers dived into the hair-stream beneath the Ruff hair-collar. His move triggered off the reflexive stance of my body, trained to snap trap a pistol with a silencer pointed at my face. Come on, bastard! I’m ready!

However, from his hair-covered bosom, the fellow traveler jerked out a circular mirror, whose mercury gloss bore a sharp-angled zigzag crack, and thrust the whole contraption under my nose.

‘Easy, you kooky windmill... Wow! So that's me? Well, hello there, Vassilly,’ streamed down my reflected cheeks toward the hung jaw before flawing into my mouth open like widely amazed “O”.

Luckily, the textual flow did not glow in the manner of light-up running ads luring film-goers to a forthcoming blockbuster. The letters sooner resembled shadowy rows of insects, trotting, yet not breaking their formation, into the grotto... Oh, damn! I mean the mouth which I hurriedly slammed shut.

However, the shadow theater did not stop. The critters switched over to running over my cheeks in circles. While the most vulgar words floated leisurely across my forehead, from temple to temple. Like in the ribbon of a kamikaze on his last visit to a geisha’s house. It's free for him. Paid by the state at war. His last time on the dry land. The next orgasm against the starboard of an aircraft carrier...

‘See? Got it now, young man? Lucky you, it's written in Etruscan, which is unreadable to the untrained eye. Except for the swear words in the forehead, one's roots are sacred; they can't be masked.’

He grabbed the mirror back and drowned it under the waves in the streaming beard.

Full of dull disbelief, I once again ran thru the pockets in my jeans and jacket checked too many times for one day. They were as empty as expected.

Only the left inside pocket contained 2 items: the passport; the ticket. The rest of containers beggarly queuing in the dole line. Frantic plans of buying a nose-rag at the first antique shop I came across rode a jerky carousel in my head.

Oh, yes! Hiding the face! Like an under-liberated Orient woman. Beneath the burka or inside the anti-Covid muzzle propagated by WHO the prostitute (nothing in common with the famous band). Finding a hanky became as problematic as zeroing on holy grail these days. The global community has switched over to paper tissues; even the zoo inmate primates gave up blowing their noses into anything shorter than Scarlet and Cleopatra's Nest. For the wind to have something to blow playfully away...

Meanwhile, the rubber in the landing gear tires rattled dryly over the concrete runway, and the Airbus took off. There started the nastiest stage in any flight: the climb. A gigantic swing carried me forward and upward, irrevocably, to hurl into the following lap there ready for the next climb.

It's when the body's memory went loose in unwelcome recollections. How motion-sick it had been in my early childhood. Just an hour's train ride along the smooth iron rails was enough to turn it into a non-transportable sack of sickness.

Dry land rats are not denied a chance to get see-sick too.

Antihistamines and anticholinergics don't work on me. Yes, I could fly in synchronous autonomy mode, plunged in a flight of my own, strapped to my seat just to conform to the environs, because of my inborn politeness. Yet, the Center got into a mean habit of having express blood tests zeroed in on substances in the inner world of the special employees.

The dearest care, of course, for those who managed to come back alive after a field job. Or from a vacation.

Only total wankers could come up with such a mean thing.

For that reason I ward off the nausea with a remedy demanding a bit of individual customization. My home-made invention substitutes for imported analogue goods. Keeps you afloat, when overseas buccaneers brandish their cutlasses of sanctions at this here side stiletto sporting pirates... The objective is not to let the bitchy nausea realize I even feel it.

Through the entire relay race of climbs replacing each other after the takeoff of flying machine, I sit keeping a blank kisser referred to among professional preference players as "frying-pan".

Even when your ears feel plugged no one would guess about your current state. A nice side effect bonus for your gambling

addiction. After learn to sit tight and keep the appearance of a dead insect letting no one know what a crappy hand was dealt to you.

Now, coming back to the bloody body memory, I block it out with a fixed gaze at anything in the surroundings. Anything at all. That black dot on the endless ceiling light stretched endlessly tail-to-nose in the airliner's passenger cabin above the travelers' heads, would also do.

The engine hum floats following a sine wave shape: from infra-roar to ultra-squeal in the half-plugged ears. At any rate, the dammed off hearing average is not above 92 %. That doesn't matter much when having this here pretty dot, which I'm staring at to keep on the safe side.

Gimme me a single dot plus a foothold, and all the world wouldn't turn my stomach. Go fly a kite, nausea-bringing climbs and swings! I hold on bravely, like Icarus in his famous test flight...

For Petyikka's sake! But that's not cricket. No! It's a darn mean low blow. My supporter dot moved suddenly and went into crawling spirals. Oh, dang it! That was a fly all the way! Son of a bitch fly... Freak you! Freak you! Cheater fly!

Without the dot to fix my stare at, I'm forced to change the strategy, to retreat and take defense position in a deep trench of meditations on the unloyal dot, aka fly.

The trick isn't new, but it just works. And I don't know why. I haven't yet Googled properly to get a clearer idea – what the

heck meditation is. Still, I've cutely noticed that anchoring your thoughts to some object helps. Even if you concentrate on a spiraling travel fellow fly, though in essence it's a stowaway, more of a jumper than a fly.

Without a ticket, ignoring any registration, it trots the globe, from one end of the world to the other. Today it's buzzing by the heap of melon rinds in an Oriental bazaar, tomorrow enjoying the cool breeze from Scandinavian fjords. On Wednesday, it's on a date with the Times Square flies in New York, then off it is to the straight-jacketed, toeing the orthodox line Talibanstan to lay there its godless eggs on the sly.

Along the way, it pulls off any prank popping to its mini brains. Right now, if you please, the cocky fly switched over to flying in circles within the straight-line-moving airliner. And that presents such a mess of relativity that Einstein himself would hardly puzzle it out. The fly's aerobatics combined with the plane's zipping thru the skies...

Shplumbzz!

All of a sudden, like jack-in-the-box, an old hag from across the aisle darted up in the manner of a surface-to-air missile. Her uniform – a gray, straight-cut, sleeveless dress (!) – modeled to increase the range of missiles effective radius.

My meditation crashed into pieces, the deep trenched defense's gone. Just a single slap, and the hit fly corkscrews downwards under the heart-rending howl of the fly's engines. Here you are – another Junkers downed by a Spitfire machine

guns,

[-]

M1919 Browning, special modification for the .303 caliber used by the British RAF.

[-]

but I can't hear the falling Junkers with my plugged ears – our airbus continues to gain altitude.

The air defense missile specialist proudly stroked her bob haircut helmet, henna camouflaged with deep, dark copper color. The wretched dot plopped to the floor, kicking her right hind paw. Could the fly still wake up?

But no way! Vain are all hopes. The wide as the tracks of Mark I,

[-]

that lovely unforgettable hunk of metal that was the first to iron out the battlefields in the world slaughterhouse number one

[-]

heel on an-like- endless, like by a basketballer, foot of the flight attendant clanged on the floor squish-ending the fly's final agony.

A control stamp in passing, like a control shot in the brow, is a humanitarian act of mercy.

Game over. The bitchy insect's flights are done with. No more smuggling of subversive eggs that inspire dissenters and threaten the very foundation of police states.

The balled fist crowns the arm, triumphantly thrust high into

the air; the wrinkly tight skin, alike both to old parchment and dried date rind wrap the gesture of the witch-winner . She withdraws to her firing position behind the rows of seat backs across the passageway.

‘Good job, Nemesis,’ mutters Uncleton-Blackseasky. ‘Fit as a fiddle, the Kuril archipelago population have all the right to be proud of islanders like you!’ The visible bit of his countenance shined from under his shaggy eyebrows hanging over his face with the sham delight of a bootlicker.

My ears don’t feel like plugged any more. It seems our celestial craft has climbed at last the altitude assigned for its air corridor, and we’ve settled into cruising speed.

‘My respect, Chronosovna!’ He still went on with his unaddressed praises.

To whom? About what? I wondered. There were just three of us there: the praiser, me, and the porthole, but none of us female.

‘The interception, I mean,’ explained the Linguo-Mystic, without waiting for me to repeat my questions aloud. ‘Clean job, two moves – snap! – and the bastard’s gone. As the whore nonnarias at Colosseum used to say: “Do ut des,” meaning, “give it to me, and you’ll get me”’.

‘You mean, she’s a prostitute or something?’ I didn’t get it. ‘That jumping old junk? Or are you talking about the flight attendant?’

‘Shut your yap!’ Hissed the fellow traveler, without moving a hair about his lips, ‘And pray to the immortals she’ll never know

about your brainless sputter. Otherwise, it'll be the end of both the one who blurted it out and everybody else been within the earshot.'

I could respond with just a shrug – damn lucky, I was flying with a lunatic on his run from the madhouse. However, I shrugged with only my right shoulder, saving the left one for judo, which I couldn't recollect, even at that moment: my neighbor wasn't just crazy, he was barking mad.

A barrel-shaped, sweater-clad torso rolled in abrupt jerks to and fro across the seat next to me. The eyes in the hairless quarter of the face kept firmly closed. Something like a death mask made of crimson plaster span in counter direction to the barrel, emitting senseless cries:

'Chronosovna, please! Come on, Okeanovna! Don't! I and your dad... Even with both of your dads... It's not my fault! A random ticket from the box office... Seeing this half-wit, for the first time in my life... Fate was bribed!' He started shrill shrieks, his eyes still shut, then grabbed the roots of the beard oozing from his scarlet cheeks and howled in a register inaccessible to human vocal cords. 'No! Anything but that!'

My ears felt plugged again. The roar of the turbine engines outside the Boeing interior swayed to the squeal of circular saws. Gigantic ones. Rasping shrilly, at times in unison, then each one at its own pitch.

The worst news though the sways of immense swing were back. However, this time in reverse: back and down, back and

down... And faster with each sway...

The Boeing obviously fell out of the flight allocated corridor...

Bookoff

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04

A shadow from the other side of the window pane flitted across the iris of Bookoff's frozen gaze. His eyes, on this side of the pane, blinked, losing their stillness. He fell out of being a part in the old chair. He winked.

Bookoff missed catching what exactly had interrupted his furniturized state. The twinkle had been too brief for the flank of a cloud to accidentally touch the sun's disk. However, its duration overshot that of a random hoopoe flight, their family were the largest birds that had taken up residence in the neglected garden.

Possibly, another of the measurement visits by civilian citizens of the state that had won the upper hand in the hang-fire armed conflict.

Leaning forward, Bookoff planted his hands upon his knees and helped his body get up from the sitting position. On leaving the kitchen, aka living-room, he turned right, toward the door leading into the garden, where from the tour group – the real estate appraisers – would come in to wander around the big house. He didn't care, but it was still unpleasant. It would be better they wait until it'll happen, what he waited for.

His ears were bursting with a noise that only Bookoff could

hear. They'd got plugged from the morning, and he'd be half-deaf all day long, carrying the ringing hum within his ears. Bookoff didn't beef of it before anyone, like of everything else. And had he even someone to complain to, he wouldn't. What's the use?

The fact of the outside span about the backdoor being paved with fragments of marble tiles had to be known beforehand and kept in mind. Tufts of tall weeds, breaking through the seams between irregular pieces of divers thickness hid it with their lavish growth. A stray throwaway piece of paper dropped by the wind lingered atop a goose-foot stalk to the right of the door.

Bookoff didn't know why he took those three steps to the throwaway. Of course, it was not a premeditated move, just an instance of mistake resulting from absent-mindedness which no one was there to blame for.

The steps were taken not by Bookoff from the past life, but by the old man with his head half-switched-off in endless waithing. However, the body used to serve Bookoff, the knit-picking Bookoff, tilted and reached for the paper piece to take the trash from before the door to the trash bag in the kitchen.

Pain sliced sharply across the spine of both Bookoffs: the neatness upholder and the absent-minded ruin.

[—]

Absence of guilt does not exclude punishment. Especially for those immediately nearby the scene of wrongdoing. And it does not matter aware or otherwise they were then. Bad luck, Mrs. Surratt, yes, you were in the kitchen and the conspirators in the

living-room, yet, the gallows at ready, the public a-waiting for the show, follow the hangman, please...

[—]

Bookoff and his state of waiting broke up. He was rudely woken up. And his body simply fell to its knees. A reflex, triggered by the fall, thrust his hand forward, toward the thick rebar pole, to grasp it. The knees didn't reach the marble rubble under the grass. The man froze in a semi-squat, waiting for the wave of pain to whoosh off.

The pain did not subside, and Bookoff began to carefully straighten up his back. The muscles in his strained arm helped the knees to heave the body...

The pole had been planted by Bookoff many years ago. Driven into the ground at the request of his wife. Next to a bush of climbing roses. Though the plant hardly deserved to be named a bush – just a trinity of grass blades stuck out of the dirt.. The support looked an overkill for them.. Bookoff said, 'For their future grows, I've got no other darn thing to hammer in.'

Now a mesh of wiry stalks braided the iron pole up to the top. From there, hanging from the attached linen cable, a gigantic openwork tube of lacy walls braided of impenetrable twigs and leaves reached the next support. In how many years it followed the first one, Bookoff could no longer remember.

Still later, along the following steely cable, the tube crawled farther, around the corner of the big house to where it had its blind wall of no windows.

In summertime, for half a week, small roses of tenderest shades set the openwork of interwoven stems abloom. It created the effect of a rozy cloud whiff puffed out across the garden at about 2 m height from the vegetable beds.

In those weeks, even the boor knit-picker happened to stop on a paved (in those days cleared of weeds) marble span, and murmur under his nose, who knows who to and what about: "Well, sure"...

The remaining 350 days, he simply tolerated the openwork model of a prehistoric anaconda in the backyard, and annually trimmed its scales with garden shears. When reminded by his wife, it should be done...

The ungrateful plant scratched his hands, but he didn't want to spend on welding gloves for a couple of days a year. Besides, the shears were unWhieldy for thickly gloved hands...

Bookoff finally straightened up. He took his hand off the rebar pole.

‘Age brings no joy, eh? Old man?’

Those two were not appraisers. Both in light shirts with short sleeves. The one with a big stomach wore even a necktie, plus rimless cheaters.

Apparently, they descended into the garden by the side stairs from the gate, along the blind wall.

Without a wince, Bookoff indifferently plucked a flat thorn from his palm. Crooked like a guirza viper's tooth, it was green. One of the mature stems had turned up under his hand as he was

grabbing the rebar.

He dropped into the grass the souvenir from the bush. The blood from his hand was wiped off with the piece of paper he still managed to collect while standing up. The smeared, crumpled throwaway was stuffed into the hip pocket in his jeans. Then Bookoff answered to the fat-guts with the nasty rasp of his voice, which had long since got unused to speaking.

‘Live on and check it. If not burst with fat on the way’.

"You old stump! You don't know who you're yapping at!" Yelled the one without much of a belly, but whose beefy arms bulged out of his shirt sleeves, the bullish neck started all at once from the shaved back of his head.

Bookoff sighed slowly through his nose, but continued to stare at the fat man. He'd silently endured the kid's antics at the supermarket – that was the winner's territory, but here, albeit neglected, was his garden. The civilian appraisers had behaved with restraint here; it was obvious the man had invested his life in these six hundred square meters and the roughly built, yet big house.

‘Call your dog off,’ screeched he.

‘Well, bastard, that was the last of your...’ exploded the muscleman.

‘Oghrush!’ tamed him with a master’s air the tie-dandied fatty, ‘I am who does the talking here. Better go polish your steering wheel, we're leaving soon.’

Left alone with Bookoff, the fat man asked:

‘Are you alone in the house? Was there a man asking for a hideout? An eye-missing man?’

‘I’m bored to death with all of you,’ Bookoff replied listlessly. ‘Both with or without eyes.’

He turned toward the backdoor, but by the time he reached it, the nudnick in cheaters had already disappeared around the corner, from where started the side stairs along the blind wall, leading up to the dead-end lane beyond the gate.

Bookoff returned to his chair in the living room to his waiting.
Vasiok

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05

The rubber clad hands that kidnapped me off the dealboard bed moved no longer. The squeaky voice had also fallen silent. It was comfortable enough to lie there, but I didn't feel like sleeping and opened my eyes.

No, my memory didn't fail me. Not even by half a micron. The back of my economy class seat holds me in that very position as the anonymous hands years ago after separating me from my mother. Once and for all.

Now, having since long been big and strong, I lie on my back at the exactly same angle to the absolute horizontal that everyone feels even with their eyes shut.

Yes, of course, the angle's matched perfectly, which is probably why I feel the whiff of sterile, slippery scent of alien hands. The back of my head is 2.5 cm higher than my tailbone,

just like it was that midnight hour, although everything else not exactly... Yep, the surroundings have changed drastically.

There remains nothing of the yellow swath in the dark ceiling, painted with the light from the table lamp in the next room. Instead, I have a visual impression of a well mouth magnified to a much wider circle plumb upward above my face.

The night sky peers in thru it, hung with ample festoons of stars aglimmer. I can't recall any like them; by the size they surpass any of those stored in the casket of my long-term memory, LTM. And they're not like pin-pricks or dots winking leerily, but sooner resembled smallish balls of yarn, or glossy billiard balls affixed to outline contours of constellations never seen. A kinda vinaigrette of gleaming combinations spread over velvet brick-red space.

[—]

Vincent, a multiple world champion in carom, lowers the well-worn butt of his cue, while the Dutch challenger van Gogh carefully rubs in rosins in the end of his...

[—]

Clews of dissimilar starlight shimmer in the wide well mouth above. Where did flight 0244 ZRH TLV take me? How? And why?

Once again, I've rammed into a mound of unanswerable questions. Whoosh! Like a pod of whales in some lost latitudes, with noisy snorts, splash-breaks to the surface, blows up a-cackling sprays. The calm of the latitudes is broken, stirred,

tossed with unexpected currents in the whirled surface.

What's the point? No answer... Silence is the only response to them...

Inhale as deep as will keep your lungs, bro whale, and dive back into the sea abyss. The program laid out for you and your kin by Creator remains precise and clear: graze, graze, and graze some more of top-tier plankton brimming with beneficial effect on proliferation. I'd eat it myself, were I not busy to so extreme an extent – there's so much more else to do!

No answer again? So be it. Even the silence of a soundproof chamber won't frighten me anymore. Besides, from plentiful experience, I've long since learned – you'll jolly well find a comprehensive answer you seek. And that's a 100 % fact. Perk up, don't get crest-fallen, spare no selfless efforts. Never give in and sooner or later you'll find the answer! Of which you'll bitterly regret. As always.

Yes, the answers pop up inevitably, provided you've wiped off your worldview and mental makeup the trite, obnoxious, irrational, and opportunistic formula: "Why the hell did I even need it?"

Of course, no one is immune from creepy trends in their private life. Especially those, who've ever tasted Petyikka's fish soup. However, posing the question in such a way deviates from honest logic. The answer implicitly sits in the first argument. "Bitchy cheating and freeloading," Petyikka would say.

Whereas, if you adhere to the rules of building syllogistically

balanced statements, you come to the unequivocal conclusion that the pop-up pod of marine mammals to represent "hows?", "whys?", and other question words is the evidence of seriously weak short-term memory, STM. More evidently, when compared to its counterpart, LTM, retaining both feeding tits, and the umbilical cord, and the light at the end of the tunnel, preferably not within it (you don't care for a rendezvous with a hungry primeval tribe, right?) but from the outside.

However, I don't see any particular problem here. In 20 years, which stretch inevitably turns into STM into LTM, I'll recollect everything – ha! my long-term memory always was the second to none. And then I'll know in minute detail what happened there, in the passenger cabin of the flight 0244, under the screech of circular saws...

And also, why and how the airliner got squatted in penguin-like attitude, tail down... And where – donnerwetter! – had half the fuselage gone, together with the nose and the crew cockpit?

Quite a lot of things I would have asked my STM about, whose testimony breaks off at the moment filled with the screech of circular saws along the backward swaying of the Airbus, tail-first and dropping down like a sack of hammers.

Yet, as said, it'll take another 20 years for STM to fully mature and swap its S to L in the anti-alphabetical sequence STM → LTM.

For someone, it's "O-o! 20 years!", while for some other one, it's "Ha! 20 years!" All depends on your precise location. If

your short-term memory has just waved after your spaceship at the launching pad, then, traveling at the speed of light, you won't even notice your separation with STM. But when, the space voyage at the cruising speed of 300,000 km/sec is taken not by you but by your STM, that's a different kettle of fish. The roles are swapped, as well as the locations.

You're scrolling through the entire twenty-year stretch in slow motion, from jingle-in to jingle-out. Yeah, bro...

And you may safely throw all your backup "plan B's" on the scrap heap. They're useless trash, when from a shitty yet partly understandable situation you land into a planetarium of strange stars.

The tour guide is off work, so there's no one to introduce us, and I, as a refined gentleman and impeccable, in my opinion, personality don't pester strangers with queer inquiries until they give a wink. They do seem to be winking, but, unfamiliar with the rules and criminal etiquette at this little joint, I am not particularly keen on looking like a slob in their opinion.

More so since the night sky hue remains firmly stalled in the orange-reddish range of the spectrum. And that quite possibly, goes for "whoa!" signal in terms of aboriginal astrology.

In short, if you suddenly find yourself flat out (no matter what's underneath you: mats, tatami mats, or the synthetic upholstery in an economy-class passenger seat), the best course of action is to relax and obtain as deep satisfaction as possible. At least from the depths of your LTM casket, since no trace of

STM is there...

The twinkling starlight tempts to meditate on other tits that became frequently available after the puberty completion, when milk determined their attraction no more. The present situation prompts to audit the deposits in LTM... while stretching on my back... No, not what some sad sack could have imagined but hands off. Moreover, since the treasures out there stay ghostly intangible. And that's a shame, really – such a wonderful illumination wasted to no gains.

Glancing at the wordless though generously promising kaleidoscope, I felt eager to share my impressions. My head turned to the left, until the same side ear pressed against the faux leather seat back.

Nope. Uncleton-Blackseasky was clearly not the type to let himself be pinned. He simply slid away from that defeated stance. However, the back of his seat is far from being empty. A vague resemblance of a pail made of, half a dozen coiled rope rows. The coils rise around a dark, hole in between of the pail's walls built up from that same rope spirals wound upon each other.

The rope pop art bears an aspect of a bucket belonging to a long-established group of fishing enthusiasts.

[–]

Bucket, considered as an object, is a sure sign of a cohesive fishing group, and also a hint at their rich collective history. Myths, tales, and endless group yarn might spin forever. But unless you're Brothers Grimm engaged in the field of folkloric

exhumation, then the practical side of the matter – specifics about the bucket – is, of course, more important and dear to you.

Now, the object is used when cooking fish soup for all their legendary shobla-vobla mob. Noteworthy that plastic or tin bucket can't withstand the heated courtship of fire, its licking tongues also combined into grouped flames.

That's why experienced fishermen cook their fish soup in a cauldron: cast iron one stays the constant choice of seasoned fishermen, copper would do for novice wet behind their ears, and an aluminum thing is for the complete idiots...

But let's get to the recipe!

The first stuffing to put into a water-filled cauldron are small fish no larger than a middle finger, which is also a handy tool used to gut the catch. Once the boiling has reduced the small fish to flakes, the broth is strained into a group bucket (yes, the legendary one), then poured back into the turf rinsed cauldron: cast iron, copper, or aluminum, depending on the status of a particular group.

The broth is touching stone of the fish soup perfection, namely, by the stickiness of it. (Firm adhesion is the key to the cohesion of anything.)

The broth glueyness is readily enhanced by adding chunks of larger fish.

The over-boiled ide-carp-perch-&-Co are simply scooped away (attentive cooks have already figured out what into and how far). The mentioned carp-at-al. ingredients are ousted from the

cauldron to be replaced with sliced carrots, onions cut up to half-rings, black peppercorns, and salt to taste.

For the next half hour, make sure the licking fire doesn't get overly excited under the cauldron hanging above it. Let the brew simmer tamely, without excessive splashes or scenes of ecstasy...

And finally, the most crucial stage in the process – the concluding 30 minutes, when the cauldron cools off on the ground, and the fish soup pricks its ears to the tall stories the men around it know by heart already.

And... (the timpani roll, the lid is off, the fish soup sniffed at from all the quarters) – Enjoy!

[–]

However fleeting, my glance did notice a certain hairiness in the walls of the pail-shaped contraption. The hoary growth didn't allow me to classify the coiled boa constrictor as a subspecies of Jungle Kaa Kiplinganus. (The scruples of a self-made scientist, you know.)

No, it rather looked like... Ha! I recognized the beards of Uncleton + Blackseasky, none of who was anywhere near there.

A thin leather strap interweaves the salt-and-pepper curly coils to form the round walls, whose rim is fixed with that same strap bearing a plastic suitcase handle.

The trick of the fakir-faker exposed! The bugger obviously After pulling his beard down under his sweater, and letting the end, exit at about his crotch, the bugger pleated a kinda travel bundle to haul around as carry-on luggage. Like, here's my ticket,

please, but this is just a bag woven from a piece of hoary Manila rope. Handmade, by the by. A note to those willing to support third-world manufacturers.

What's more, the beard is removable! After all, going thru boarding security, baggage and passengers are scanned separately. And once on the Airbus, he slips his contraband under the seat and perches on it like a hoopoe on the spotty eggs. Oh, what a cunning beaver! And a very strange fellow indeed, this Middle English Lingo-Mystic.

Alerted by the deductive discovery, I involuntarily listened up, just in case. A steady ticking sound came from the hairy nest. The stars, above the well-mouth hole left by the missing part of the fuselage, wide opened their multicolored eyes framed with the tangled fuzzy prominences in their crowns.

0-7th's reflexes, honed by endless special training for impossible special missions, told me at once: 'Vasya, it's better get going!'

Tearing off the steel buckle of my seat belt, I darted upward in crazy leaps of a panicked chimpanzee. Without any safety cords or vines, to and fro across the aisle, zigzagging thru the air from a slippery armrest to a seat back in the otherwise side...

In an eye-blink, I sprinted outa the well mouth onto the thin-lipped orifice produced by the transverse section of the giant fuselage tube.

Oh wow! It's not an only well here! A similar tube pressed affectionately to the one whose orifice I erupted thru. The

nose part of the airliner, cut off by the cross-section, stretched vertically downwards fringed with its duralumin rim like a bottomless well, revealing the back view of the cramped, diminishing rows of passenger seats, empty and silent.

The situation left no time for a detailed study of the perspective to the bottom of the gloomy tube. There wasn't even time to ponder more deeply the incredible discovery of ultra-short-term memory, USTM (!), made just a moment ago.

Eureka! Memory has three types! Who would have thought... But no... The ominous "tick-tock!" sounds incessantly in my ears. The bloody reflexes tripped my mind. Prevented grasping in full the epochal significance of the USTM discovery. Yet, who, if not the ultra-short-term memory, drives and spurs me to further the armrests jumping, down, and down, and down... . And even in the business class parts, there's no safety cords, not a single vine in view...

Through the overhead hatch for emergency escape of pilots from the cockpit, I hung out at arm's length and unleashed the grasp of my fingers to pass over into free fall. The flat surface, barely touched by the nose of the airliner, looked thru the hatch so close.

The moment, when my shoes' soles made contact with the surface, the trained body flawlessly fell on its side, and a split-second later jumped up to dash away, just in case.

My body and I don't need unnecessary risks – there definitely was a ticking sound from the shorthair beaver's hair Manila

purse. I can swear, it tick-tocked. An old good C-flat in the second octave. That sound is still fresh in my memory.

And when if you doubt your own perfect pitch, and USTM, who else can you trust then?

Bookoff

—

05

The evening had already become a night, but Bookoff was in no hurry to go to bed. He still sat in his chair, even though it had turned clear already that one more day of waiting was spent to no avail.

The light in the living room was on, reflected murkily in the pitch-black pane glass. The back of the chair got to his skinny sides and shoulder blades, but Bookoff somehow gave in to it, not wanting to let them ache or disturb any other bones by rising on his feet.

He wasn't particularly keen on going to bed. It would be his usual, boring, known to the last detail routine. He'd squeeze into the space between the wardrobe and the nightstand, pull down his jeans, and lean his butt freed to the trunks onto the stand to pull the jeans completely off, one leg after the other. They would be hung over the back of a chair put nearby. The vest knitted by his wife would cover the jeans and in its turn be covered with a shirt.

Then he'd make for the bed in the corner by the door, next to it there stood a chair with a light bulb clasped to it. Beside a plastic pin, the bulb had a long flexible neck. The thing was

borrowed from his daughter's room some time ago to be used as a pin-clasped long-necked night light. His daughter kept, when she lived in the big house. Some time ago... But, maybe, long stretch back...

From his bunk, for a couple of minutes he'd watch the spherical, shade woven of linden splint rind dancing under the ceiling. The lamp in the shade was too bright and Bookoff left it unlit, so the dancer was watched in the light shed from the chair by the goose-neck fixed with a pin.

And he was perfectly aware that the rind ball hung motionless, and the otters' dancing was nothing more than an illusory game of his completely ruined sight. Yet he continued to watch the ball's twist-and-roll to no music, like a topsy-turvy top swerving up there.

But Bookoff refrained from looking at the large puzzle in the center of the opposite wall. There loomed an ancient castle in the dark brown tones of the Middle Ages, and the frame around the puzzle also moved and quacked in ripples, matching the dancing shade. However, the towers, walls, and embrasures in the gloomy structure were making goddamn ugly faces at Bookoff. And all those evil critters were itching to break out of the over-strained wavering frame...

There was more than enough room for everything in the big house; he could have moved the puzzle to another place, but Bookoff didn't make changes about there, saving his strength for the wait. Even removing the castle and turning the evil spirits

face to the wall required strength – he'd have to climb onto the empty marital bed, grab the puzzle, and slide it down the wall, making sure it didn't crash.

The masterpiece was rather sizable; his son spent half a year assembling it. It was before he got married and left. And there's no point in yielding to idle superstitions about all sorts of things haunting his worn-out eyes.

So, after getting a bit warmed under the blanket, Bookoff turned off the nightlight, and the whole fuss drowned in darkness, and a long night awaited him with awakenings when something went completely wrong with one or another of his bones...

All that was still ahead, and for now he was just sitting in the living room opposite the darkened window when there was a knock.

It sounded quite abrupt. Just one knock on the garden door. But in the silence of the empty house, even one was enough to bring Bookoff to his senses.

He shuffled out into the corridor and moved toward the misty figure moving toward him in the wide pane glass of the euro-door which kept the night out.

Yet, even approaching him, the reflection remained a vague, blurred figure.

Bookoff turned the doorknob and didn't let it go, but kept leaning on it as he stepped out into the darkness of the night garden. Meanwhile, his left hand felt about the outside wall for the switch to the lamp above the entrance.

But he never got the chance to snap. Two black ball lightnings exploded in his eyes. One for each.

And Bookoff was gone.

Vasiok

—
06

From a distance, the twin halves of the wingless airliner resembled the tight embrace of two roofless silos, stripped of their roofs by a tornado or, perhaps, those were cast off by the two in an equally violent gust of mutual passion. Of course, the details were caught by me in a fragmentary jumpy way, over my shoulder, on the run to get as far away as possible. But even then, the view struck me with its oddity: what did the towers need those vertical rows of portholes for? Though, their irrational surrealism somehow fitted in alongside my frantic racing.

Yes, I ran quicker than a worthless quirit who, having dropped in panic his shield and sword, runs fear-blinded, not seeing where to. Yet, cowardice shouldn't be confused with prudence. Especially when you have no idea about charge power in the eggs ticking from the nest of Manila rope.

And so, the moment I felt the firm ground under my feet, all my energy shot into the dash performed at once, no waiting for them to bring me the leader's yellow jersey...

Catching breath at a considerable distance, I recalled the former purpose of the giant pop art of coupled silos, now half a kilometer behind. It's undeniable that in the act of running, the

flow in the stream of thoughts becomes somewhat jerky, a bunch or two of not sticky enough would even drop out. And it might take them quite a while to catch up with their cabby.

The run was easy and even pleasant, free from the unnecessary burden of those lagging thoughts, and so I went on across an unusually smooth plain that stretched to the very horizon. Above its line there grew scatterings of already familiar multicolored stars. Their seedlings thickened, turning into clusters, climbing from the nadir to the zenith, and from there down to all the other nadirs in the circle of horizons from all 4 sides of the surrounding world...

When my running gave way, of its own accord, to a sluggish jog, the thoughts left behind at my abrupt start began to catch up with me. A rather motley crowd and, I should admit, rather incoherent of themes.

Ahead of the rest, and almost not even puffing, was an excuse for the lack of wings on the silo towers. (Their pair was gradually disappearing over the horizon.) Without the wings, pop art was much more optimistic, but put them back on – and you'll have a grave cross. No, not for you personally, but when viewing from outside the grave.

And not necessarily the St. George's Cross or the Iron Cross. You'd get an impression of a simple, nailed, white-birch-bough cross from the countless row multitudes in adhoc cemeteries by the battlefields of Slaughterhouse Nr. 2, otherwise named WW II...

The second thought to reach the finish line made me regret the brevity of my interview with Petyikka. I certainly would like to ask him about my service record. At least in general terms... Until my own memories return to be stored in the LTM casket, where they'll always be at hand. Till then, I'll have to figure out my past deeds all by myself, through guesses and deductions that strain brains, leave lines in the forehead, and sweat drops all over your brow, you know.

Say, where from is so solid grasp of Latin by me? Because of it, I just can't stand those Figla-Migla Latin incantations of Harry to Potter and back. Or the instance, when I just rattled off a quote from Linnaeus's Animals classification. About that anus of that Manila Kipling, eh?

Bet your bottom dollar, I had some special agent's special mission at some or other special university – to steal top-secret files, or, conversely, plant them there. For disinformation purposes. Truly hard to sort certain things out without Petyikka nearby...

As for the presence of 4-letter-word layer in the strata of my vocabulary, it is as clear as day. Two or three stints in a maximum-security can for special agents serving special time take their toll. The guards there won't pick up on your communications if not interspersed with lots of ef's and sh's. Without those fricatives, their auditory sign system just can't function...

When the towers disappeared already without a trace over the

horizon, I scanned the plain on all sides in search for directional landmarks. But no such luck! In vain kicked my gaze around: not a hill, neither a tree nor even the slightest mole mound.

The flawlessly smooth surface stretched everywhere, and you feared for your gaze midst the sterile, uniform terrain of ironed out wrinkles, pimples and heat-spots. Were your gaze to slip and accidentally get shattered, what would you substitute it with?

However, the thought did not stop me; I bravely headed toward the faint yellowish streak of dawn that scarcely started breaking.

The constant walking gave way to fatigue. I had to sit down on the ground to hopefully get some rest.

There wasn't even a hint of earth there, though, neither a blade of grass, nor a weeny wormhole. The plain, across which my feet had comfortably paced not leaving any trace of path, was smooth, and smooth it felt to the touch, too. I ran my palm over the hardened surface of tropical calm in the motionless sea, with a bottle-green tint in the glassy depths. Not a single pebble, not a speck of dust to be found...

I'd like to come across a stone here, so that I'll have what with to become the first to throw it at any dummy who dare say that lying with nothing to put your head upon would pass for rest.

"A mole mound! Half kingdom for a mole mound!" This poetic line brimming with sage experience proves, that the author knew life not from school primers and pirated PDF's.

I had to use brute force to have 40 winks...

The forty-first never showed up and for quite a time I kept

turning from side to side in a vast and albeit clean yet overly flat bed.

In view of the nearing dawn, I alerted the Built-in Body Clock to wake me up in sharp an hour, and not a second sooner.

[—]

BBC is a built-in gizmo wired by Nature into the subconscious of any man. It became a corporate gadget in the milieu of special services around the world because handling of the implement requires special training.

[—]

After each turnover in the too hard 'bed' I added a sheep to the flock drawn for that particular purpose by my imagination. When there collected 1024 sheep, I had another 40 winks until BBC woke me up.

By my accurate eye trained for sniping, I discovered no changes in the dimensions nor in the intensity of luminosity of the darn dawn streak on the horizon.

What the heck? My BBC swore on health of its mom and other sacred things that it kept time okay. The limitless flock of sheep in my imagination baaed in favor of BBC too. But my accurate eye? Who am I supposed to believe, damn it?!

Following the advice of an ancient proverb, I took the initiative into my own hands and moved toward the retarded dawn.

My eye somehow adjusted to the scarce pre-dawn twilight and noted a certain strangeness in the surrounding expanses: not a

single horizon kept straight, being slightly arched. Each and every one!

Yet, sternly continued I my way, wondering to the sounds and rhythm of the march being played in my brains: what the phuck is going on here anyway?

Under the like sort of conditions, it's a hard sort of task not to feel yourself an ant on the very top of a hot air balloon. But we, hardworking ants, were never spoiled by having too much of a choice in our actions. The only hint at the right direction remained the lingering dawn, illuminating from the level of dress train the canopy of fuzzy stars, midst which – for all you know – there wasn't a single Load Star.

I walked and walked and walked and walked and walked and walked and walked and walked... At times, just for a change and healthy recreation, I paced and paced and paced and so on...

The dawn kept growing, but too leisurely. "What a lazy dawn!" thought I and swapped pacing for walking. And then – instantly! – it dawned on me! Hey, dude! It's not the dawn rising from behind the curved horizon, but I myself am submerging into it, and disappear beyond the irregular horizon!

The rather unusual discovery introduced a knotty dilemma (hi! Nice to meet you! – O! I pray< the pleasure is mine!): stay lying in the semi-darkness on the hard sheet glass of an enticing bottle-green shimmer in its depths, or, despite the growing fatigue, keep going where it is light and – betcha! – clean.

After all, in the entire still life drawing around me, ominously

silent and sterile, even a willing ant wouldn't possibly find a fleck of dust to trip over.

And it's not easy to imagine that the doctor (who, by the by, is also an ant), would give him a sick note together with a signed prescription for a codeine pill. Now, just compare the ant's mass to that of the pill in question and scale, proportionally to the average mass of a special agent, then, with so ample amount of codeine I would... eh... What was I about?

At that point I had to tighten my grip on the reins of my thought-steeds, too eager to gallop clattering their hoofs over the beer-bottle green terrain echoing their joyful neighs...

Good heavens! Is there really not a single living soul mid all this sterility? Am I so utterly alone, putting aside the vaguely luring fantasies of insect life and the innumerate baaing sheep left behind over the horizon?

Whether it's scary is the wrong question. I'm not supposed to be afraid. 'Cause I'm a legend: 0-7th, unofficial nom-de-guerre "Turret Lost Tank" And the Center always knew that. They value me for my weight in gold, even though sentenced to four prison terms. Not at once. Sequentially. And, in fact, for nothing, just for my being me in wrong surroundings.

After all, I'm the one they send where there's a complete snafu and no chance to come back. They throw me into firing embrasures. Drop into active volcan craters on an expired rope.

And clearly, from the mission you're coming back one bundle of raw nerves, like, 'I don't give a damn about all of you...' Then,

in a state of weakened adaptation to peaceful life, you splash a glass of vodka into some idiot's mug. But there are stars in the idiot's shoulder straps – wow! – each one the size of three figs put together. Then, of course, there's another special closed trial, followed by one more special vacation.

Each hitch ends samely – early amnesty. They know well that where Vasiok is, there is victory and mission completion 122 % clear. Countless safes cracked, sheikhs blown up, worlds saved, top-secret technologies stolen! Any world, from the first to the third, bears marks of the sign known to all: "Vasya was here!" My hand is steady, my funk ruthless, revenge spicy, and risk in the name of the mother-phucking-land is sacred by default.

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