

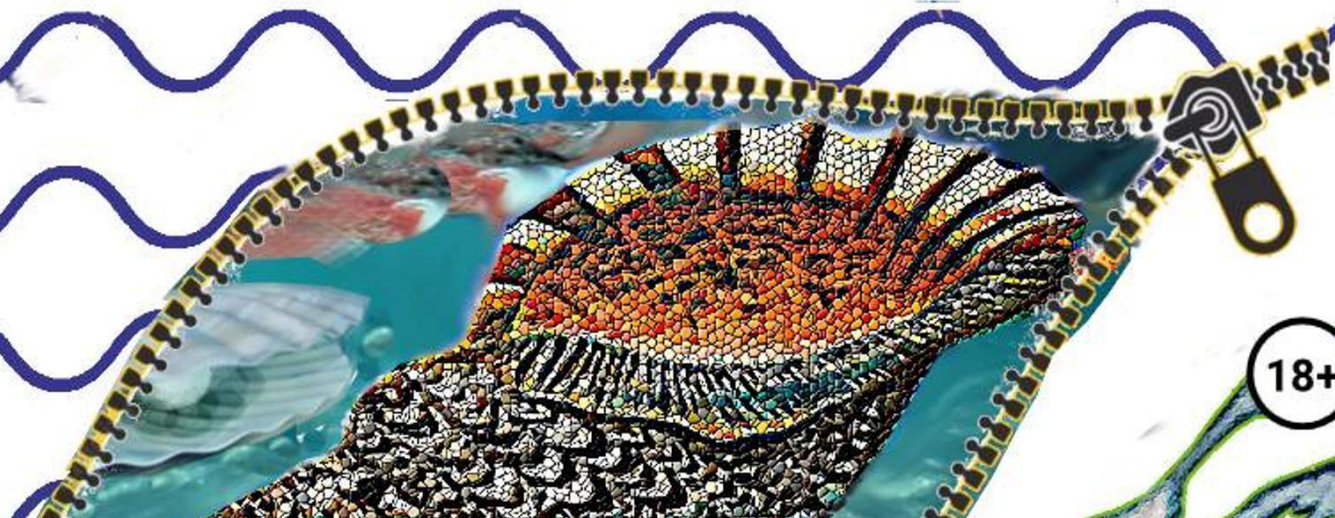
С. ОГОЛЬЦОВ

Making

for a Yonder



(5)



18+

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Making for a Yonder

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ОГОЛЬЦОВ С. Н.

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The fifth installment from The Rascally Romance concludes its charitable breakdown into convenient chunks for optimal digestibility (based on healthcare standards in the current historical period). Here, the protagonist, sensing the approaching end of the plot, prepares to leap over the Caucasus Mountains, at least to hide there, disguised as a carpet-bag foreigner. The naive fool couldn't foresee that being, like, at large does not prevent from However, that's another story.

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Foreword

The fifth installment from *The Rascally Romance* concludes its charitable breakdown into convenient chunks for optimal digestibility (based on healthcare standards in the current historical period).

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~ ~ ~

A lone barge hauler

My cheeky retorts to the judge presiding at the unwelcome divorce perked me up for some time, straightening my chest with a sliver of pride—the bastard got shown his place!—but only briefly.

Everything slid back into the routine of a crushed martyr's stupor, stuck in a looped rut : Why?! I loved her so much! I tried so hard...

And as a result, I only sank deeper into the clinging, languid dreams that one day Eerah would suddenly come and everything would be okay again, well, somehow...

The fact that by filing for divorce, Eerah was logically and straightforwardly clearing the way for her future life without me didn't free me from unrealistic hopes and fruitless aspirations like, well, anyway, somehow, some other day it will be okay...

--

Yet suffering, like any other feeling, no matter which, be it even joy, when there are no days off or smoke breaks, turns damn oppressive in its monotony. That's why there gradually crushed arose and grew stronger and stronger in me a health protective idea that it wouldn't hurt to somehow celebrate the divorce. But how?

No folk rituals for such an occasion came to mind, so I had to improvise. One thing was clear: a special day was needed, one that would stand out from the crowd. And so, for just such a day, I set off for the capital, Kyiv.

Indian summer had become so unchecked that fall that I set out in just a jacket, even though it was already the first week of November. Taking in account the calendar's disapproving view that such a light outfit hardly suits the depth of the current season, I wore a dark gray cloth vest (partially visible) under the jacket.

This detail had never been part of any three-piece affair; the vest hanged about me since school, the product of that same sharp-nosed seamstress in the atelier next to the bus station...

Of these dandy looks (not delving into the shirt, pants, and shoes samely appropriate), I emerged from the infernal depths of the Kyiv metro at Khreshchatyk station and took a leisurely stroll along the remarkably wide sidewalk of the street of the same name, under the arches of mighty Chestnut trees.

Having reached Red Army Street, with its cobblestones polished by traffic to a grayish sheen, I followed its slope toward the Foreign Book store. The sidewalk there was quite steep, but paved, so not interfering with the intention of giving myself a pleasant gift, a memento of the current celebration.

I'd had my eye on this souvenir for quite some time; lusting after it since my work at the reconstruction of a dairy plant or perhaps a plant.

But would it still be waiting for me?

I quelled the tides of nagging anxiety with idle contemplation of fragments in the disjointed events of sidewalk life. Just in case, since I had almost no doubt it would...

Ha! But I knew that!... The same bright red dust jacket of my beauty—'Chamber's 20th Century Dictionary'—happily beckoned at me from the same shelf in the store's spacious sales area.

The salesperson, glancing at my festive attire—(the open collar of my faded red shirt was visible beneath my vest)—politely asked if I was absolutely sure I wanted this particular book.

(... I wasn't surprised by his doubt—in that year, in what was then the current 20th century, the average person hadn't yet become accustomed to existence of oligarchs and foreign millionaires; they found it hard to believe that anyone could afford to shell out 31 rubles 60 kopecks for a book. Except, of course, bricklayers celebrating their divorces...)

--

I left the store with a thick volume tightly wrapped in their signature lavender-colored wrapping paper. The gift was to be dropped off in a locker at the train station, the only question was: which way? By metro again? No, that wasn't that kind of day. And I approached the bank of the motionless cobblestone stream, over which the tires of fast-moving flocks of taxis rustled past...

~ ~ ~

From the station, I also made a foray to the 'Angler-Hunter' store, at the address Grinya had given me. He had ordered some kind of super-folding fishing rod from there. Yes, it fit quite comfortably in the same compartment with the book...

--

After the shopping spree and the subsequent stacking of the commercial catch, the cultural part of the program began.

That evening, the House of Organ Music shimmered with vibrant chords of blazing sunshine glitter over the splashing waves of the sea expanse, as depicted in Debussy's 'Sketches.' Other works by the same Claude were also performed...

When I was little, my father told me that when listening to this kind of music (he didn't call it polyphonic, so as not to overwhelm a child), one should keep imagining some suitable images. All cultured people behave that way.

I've never been able to follow his instructions; the sounds are too insistent and jealous, too full of irresistible desire to subjugate, leaving no room for the inbred cultural norms...

In the post-concert twilight that descended upon me as I stepped out the doors of the Temple of Organ Music, the chill of deep autumn made itself felt. Besides, I felt I could kill a square meal.

Another taxi took me to the restaurant of the Golden Grain Ear Hotel.

--

To begin with, I tried to book a room for the night, but the receptionist, noting my unseasonable attire and lack of luggage, curbed my ambitions with the usual low-key question—about my reservation. Receptionists have long since become adept at dispensing with stray ronins wondering without forged armor. No armor? Don't drop the drawbridge for the vagrant!

--

In the restaurant, to get my bearings, I ordered a bottle of wine, and an older man wearing a beret immediately landed at the table.

(... if there's a beret but no briefcase, it means fate has paired you with an electrician...)

We hadn't even finished a glass when a fair-haired young man dropped anchor at the third end of the table. It's hard to imagine why the third man, who had joined me, began arranging his fingers in the sign 'I'll gouge you out!', accompanying this calisthenics with aggressive grunts. The electrician faded into the woodwork under his beret...

The celebration program didn't include any gladiatorial entertainment, so I stood up: 'Okay, young man. I leave this feast to you. Enjoy.'

Walking to the waiters, I paid for the wine and left the restaurant. The blond man dashed after me into the lobby.

However, not each of the three glass vestibules had doors leading out unlocked. He jumped into the wrong one.

Waving goodbye to the labyrinth prisoner, I stepped down from the porch to continue the party elsewhere...

Spending the night at the train station didn't look like a particularly festive prospect.

The next taxi driver took me to the Old Prague Hotel, near the Opera House. The young receptionist there began with the familiar bagpipe overture about advance reservations, but suddenly her mood thawed changing to mercy, and I finally found a room.

However, she warned me that it would be more expensive. The reason for this became clear when I got to the room itself, which also had a hallway with a lacquered sideboard and a plate set.

Having gotten a little more comfortable, I decided not to tempt fate with my attire any longer, and ordered dinner by phone—fish and chips and wine, white, please...

After dinner, a couple of young persons showed up; the waitress must have forgotten to close the door. I still haven't figured out what the young man and woman wanted. I'd already eaten the chips, there was only one bed, and I had no desire to share it.

Ah, yes! Some drugs stayed left in the bottle; the young man killed them, and they went off in search for refuge in another room. Maybe.

And when I was already asleep, the waitress came to collect back my plate and fork, and also the payment for dinner. But before it, I did have offered to pay in advance. She rejected though. Now she took it, only I had to go out in her presence to the hallway in my underwear, to where my pants lounged in the armchair.

I paid her exactly what she said, with handfuls of kopecks filling my pocket after the taxi rides. Well, once she left, I locked the door to exclude any more disturbance.

~ ~ ~

Waking up late in the morning, I left the kind and cozy 'Old Prague' for a stroll around the city...

As I passed the Golden Gate (a recently erected monument of ancient defensive architecture, accessible from the nearby sidewalk 24 hours a day), a fair-haired young man overtook me, breathing heavily as he ran. Clearly from the monad of yesterday's crazy redneck who had stuck his nose into the wrong glass entrance/exit box of the Golden Ear Hotel.

Looks like the whole monad had to work hard to somehow survive the streak of bad karma brought on by the gifted feast. But that idiot had asked for it...

-.-

On the way down toward Bessarabsky Market, it became clear the lunchtime had arrived, so I headed to the Leningrad restaurant, which turned up on the left sidewalk.

A file of Blacks had unexpectedly gotten ahead of me and wandered into the same establishment, but having never been a racist, I didn't change my mind. True, I didn't like the overly fat scruff of the man bringing up the rear. A self-indulgent Africa.

In the silent daytime twilight of the restaurant, I didn't notice where they had dissolved to, but there was no one else in the dining room except me, and I had it all to myself, celebrating.

I ordered some kind of casserole dish—the menu actually said something like 'casserole.' But they brought a ceramic flowerpot, taller than its width, containing potatoes and meat. Yes, there was also sauce. Brown.

Eating from the pot was completely inconvenient, and way too hot. I had to resort to shoveling some of the steaming culinary extravaganza onto a plate already on the table, then adding more from the pot as it dwindled.

After paying, I visited the restaurant's deserted, quiet restroom and emerged a completely different person. Not the same one I'd been when I'd arrived at the Leningrad restaurant.

Ivan Franko's lines slowly ran through my head:

'One by one tear away all the knots

Bounding to our bygone life...'

Without delving into the other works of the famous poet and novelist, the main difference between me entering and leaving the establishment's premises was the absence of my jacket, deliberately left hanging in the restroom.

That same wedding jacket that accompanied me at my marriage registration with Eerah at the Nezhyn Civil Registry Office. It later managed to survive my ill-timed attempt to forget it in the restroom of the restaurant 'Bratislava' in Odessa. That moment was clearly not ripe yet for our separation.

Was this item on the program?

No, it was an example of a surge of inspiration—an impromptu one. However, I liked it.

~ ~ ~

Free of the burden, I walked up Khreshchatyk, preparations for the November demonstration were underway there—a brass band played loudly, and troops from the Kyiv garrison marched.

Endless steps had already been laid along the sidewalk for spectators. Three, all in all, but they were wide enough for the citizens to stand upon them in a happy crowd and wave the balloons in their hands, en masse, to demonstrate their approval and collective joy.

(You never know, my neighbor from the landing said she once glimpsed herself in the evening news, holding a balloon. Actually, she never went there with anything but a flag. A small one. 'Peace to the world.' But the jacket was definitely hers. Pink. It used to be red. But then at the dry-cleaner's, as she came to collect it back, they told her it looked even better this way. It suited her natural blush so perfectly...)

-.-

There were two days left until the upcoming event, and the steps were still empty. I walked along the middle one, my heels loudly clicking on the thick wooden planks—a man in his prime, in a red shirt under a gray vest—and the sun winked cheerfully at me through the branches of the mighty Kyiv chestnut trees overhead.

The path to the metro and the train station stretched before me, and I was once again ready for trenches, walls, and partitions.

People certainly need celebrations, and brass bands too, to let themselves move through life at a more joyous pace...

~ ~ ~

When Panchenko—without considering for a split second whether he might crack someone's skull—threw a four-section cast-iron radiator through a fourth-floor window, seemingly for no apparent reason, his prank actually had a pretty sound basis.

With this homespun imitation of a bolt from the blue, he clearly signaled to everyone concerned that the gangster veteran's balls were still quite hairy, and under his cap of eight-wedge converged under the central rivet (a favorite style of gangsters in the late fifties), he was still quite a wild man.

The signal was addressed primarily to the foreman who drew up his work orders, as well as to the chief mechanic, who accepted and signed those orders for subsequent payroll, so that Panchenko would have the wherewithal to start a new, honest life. From another clean slate. And it was about time, after all, the man had waded into his well over fifty.

And he couldn't care less that after my second trip to Romny, I was no longer in line for the position of the visitant to hospitalized colleagues on behalf of the CAT-615 trade union committee.

-.-

This, initially pretty chaotic position, I managed to elevate to a level of impeccable perfection. Gone were the days of ashamedly drooping of ears when one of the loaders or carpenters, returning to work after a couple of days parked at the railway hospital, would voice loud reproaches about being ignored, passed over with the due consolation, while in the masonry team there are no omitted workers.

But what does this have to do with me? The foremen of the folks outside *our* team don't report to me!

And a radical solution was found to the problem: after each workday, I would call the hospital reception desk from the payphone bolted to the station building: did one of ours, by any chance, come to you? The workers there, by the way, quickly got into the swing of things and, without any further clarification like 'who are your 'ours'?', were clearly passing on information about the presence of patients from CAT-615. Even about abortions, which had nothing to do with me, since the hospital sent the patients home that same day to recover.

Then came the question of carefully segmenting the three rubles allocated by the union for visiting a hospitalized employee.

How would this amount be spent so that every sufferer received an equal measure of comfort, regardless of age, gender, or other inclinations?

It took a while, but even this conundrum found a proper and—without false modesty, it should be noted—a very clear solution.

One ruble was spent on drinks—the invariable three bottles: one beer, one lemonade, one kefir. Don't like beer? Give it to your ward-mates.

Paying for pastries, marshmallows, and/or anything else you could find at the 'Confectionery' store by the Under-Overpass was covered with the second ruble.

To spend the third and final ruble, a visit to the train station was made, where the ever-popular satirical magazine 'Perets', with its colorful, cheerful pictures for adults, was always on display from the wide counter of the Union Print (to the right of the restaurant's entrance). The second essential was the Konotop city newspaper 'Soviet Banner' (in local Ukrainian, 'Bunny-munny'), or, as my father affectionately called him, 'our little liar'. The remaining change went to the central periodicals—Labor, Locomotive Hooter, and the like.

(I didn't buy Morning Star for my colleagues, even though the quality of the photos there was far superior to the flickering rotoprints of the Soviet press.)

From the train station, with a full clip of comfort and consolation, I walked to the railway hospital.

--

Tensions arose later, at submitting the report for my three-ruble reimbursement. Union 'boss' Slaushevsky was downright hostile to a bottle of beer be mentioned in the document.

(Unions and beer are things incompatible... well, I suppose... or what?)

Finally, as a compromise, I offered him to write the report himself, and I would sign anything...

And now this system, perfectly calibrated to the last micron, was to exist only till the CAT-615 union's reporting and election meeting at the end of November.

Nevertheless, I did manage to feed Panchenko some waffles...

--

After listening to the receptionist's phone report about a certain Panchenko from CAT-615, I realized I couldn't wait—why the hell would I risk a sudden discharge?

I hung up and went to grocery store No. 6 for some waffles. First things first. Then more waffles, from the kiosk. And more waffles—worth a whole sweet ruble, in different wrappers, from different outlets...

~ ~ ~

Glancing briefly over my shoulder at the blurry reflection of the two of us in the pitch-black winter gloom beyond the unbarred window, I complimented the decor of the hospital lobby. The plastic bag in my hand made an invitingly seductive 'zing' as I handed it to the patient. He couldn't resist—like everyone else at CAT-615, he knew without looking that there was beer in there too...

Why was I laughing like crazy, scurrying through the snow of the dark backstreets, cutting from store to store as I collected waffles of various shades?

I can't explain it, but it was a laughter for survival, until my pulse was broken, until tears stung my eyes, until I was searching blindly for some solid support to keep from collapsing, convulsing...

~ ~

A couple of days later, Lida, a bricklayer from our team, asked me face to face: 'D'you visit Panchenko?'

'Yep. Sure.'

'Cakes too?'

'Nope. For the man only waffles—no variations.'

She knew I never lied, on principle. I fell silent and tensed, because once again I had to suppress a surge of inexplicably unprovoked laughter.

A minute later, Panchenko came into our trailer to get something. Carefully, weighing every word, Lida asked him if I'd visited him.

'Yes.'

'With a package?'

'Well, some newspapers, or something. I didn't even read them.'

Not another word was said. She poured out the rest at home, to her husband, Mykola. That he was already a family man and should stop hanging on lips of that waffle-gobbler Panchenko...

~ ~ ~

Somehow, it took me a while to get it why the divorce proceedings left a vague impression of incompleteness. Something felt strangely amiss.

(... my kind of slow-wittedness is remarkable in that I eventually manage to figure out things I wouldn't have thought of at first...)

Well, of course! That darn forgetful divorce applying judge didn't say a word about alimony! As if I were childless... The task of correcting this judicial error fell on my shoulders...

~ ~

Since December, I began sending 30 rubles a month to the Red Partisans. For this purpose, on payday, I used the post office across from the bus station.

But since you weren't my only child, I also sent the exact same amount to Decemberists 13. '30 to Nezhyn, 30 to Konotop' became my financial lifestyle and the most recurring line in my pocket notepad for several years.

Why this exact amount? I don't know. Taken together, the transfers made up half my income. From the other half, in addition to my expenses for the bathhouse, laundry soap, and toiletries, I sometimes bought books and ate lunch in the canteens every day.

At first, my mother tried to convince me that the Konotop '30' could be brought to Decemberists 13 and given in person, even though she had no use for the money.

I dismissed her insistence with arguments, saying so was more convenient for me. Of course, our team didn't miss the fact that I was a spawn fund payer—given my principle of answering direct questions without evasion, they only had to ask why I kept popping to the post office near the bus station every payday. And some female bricklayers also asked the same question: 'Why exactly 30 rubles?'

Fighting a wave of anger that suddenly surged at neither known at who nor from where, I replied that more wasn't needed, and were even my salary 3,000 rubles, the '3 tenners' to Nezhyn or Konotop would still remain '3 tenners'.

There were times when I couldn't send out spawn fund payments, and the line '30 to Nezhyn, 30 to Konotop' had to wait until the required amount was scraped together and the line in the mailing list be closed with the clumsy little bird.

Sometimes I only sent 15 rubles in each direction. One such period occurred when I accidentally overheard my mother and my sister Natasha talking. They were tearing Eerah apart in absentia for selling my sheepskin coat and keeping the money for herself.

Of course, I noticed the coat was missing, but I had no idea where it had gone, how, or why.

Now, to restore the reputation as Caesar's wife, I was forced to lower the alimony payment to 15 rubles, until the required sum of 90 rubles was collected...

--

I took the money to Nezhyn, and at the post office on Red Partisans Street, I asked a random customer to fill out the address on a money order form, as I dictated it. In the space reserved for personal messages, I wrote—with a clumsy leftward slant—'sheepskin coat'.

Why 90 rubles? Well, the market price of a new sheepskin coat with long skirts was 120 rubles. Mine was short, and older than me—dating back to the Object—the rest was pure arithmetic.

Having received such a large order, my mother was eager to ask me something, but by that point I was no longer on speaking terms with my parents, so asking dumbly silent me about 'sheepskin coat' was pointless.

(... it's worth noting here that the wisdom of strangers doesn't make us smarter. In one of his stories, about a young man who stopped communicating with his parents, Maugham notes that in our harsh and hostile world, people inevitably find ways to make their situation even worse.

I accepted the wisdom of the saying, but didn't take advantage of it. It took ten years of separation (four of which in a full-scale war) before, upon returning to Konotop on leave, I began talking to my parents again.

And I enjoyed saying 'mama' and 'papa'. Only this pleasantness seemed to be enveloped in a layer of felt, preventing me from feeling it, as if I wasn't addressing my parents; or maybe it wasn't really me speaking to them. Probably, because of falling out of habit, or else because we had all changed too much by then...)

~ ~ ~

Trade union and social activities, accurately fulfilling my expectations, got blocked for me completely, however, the right of carrying out my public duty remained with me. The right of any citizen to dutifully maintain and selflessly protect the order the safety within their communities can suffer no infringement.

(For those who haven't quite gotten it, don't worry; I wouldn't realize what's what seeing the above paragraph the first time, either, it's all about the monthly shifts in a voluntary public order squad.)

By seven o'clock, the male workers of CAT-615 would gather in a room marked 'People's Militia Detachment Stronghold.' The tablet on the only door in all the end wall in the mile-long five-story building that had long since replaced the squalid Department of Workers Catering barracks office near the Under-Overpass. That very building where you find, at the other end, Workers' Canteen No. 3.

The first person to arrive for the squad shift was usually the crane driver, Mykola Kot (no, not a nickname, and not some code name, but a perfectly innocent Ukrainian surname).

He'd sit down at a table propped against the wall and loaded with a stack of old newspapers. To enhance his comfort, he'd pull his cheap but elegant black rabbit fur hat down to touch his ears, and begin leafing through the piles of press news accumulated since our previous shift.

Then, one by one, we'd arrive, take our seats, and begin our manly, dignified conversations on any subject at hand.

Here, Kot, his eyes glued to the 'newspapers from days gone by and forgotten', would predict, from beneath the black fur of an innocently slain animal on his head, that even if we began our sophisticated conversation from the heights of the Salyut orbital station, it wouldn't cancel our landing on the cunt of Alla Pugacheva or some more accessible local slut, inevitably.

As a rule, the prophecy was accurate. And all because of the latecomers who missed his brazen, but on the whole right, forecast.

About ten minutes past eight, a cop—ranging from lieutenant to captain—appeared to contribute to our male ефдл ырщз and hand out red armbands from a drawer in his desk, bearing the word 'Vigilante' in bold black lettering.

In threes, we left the stronghold, maintaining public order in the evening sidewalks with our patrols: to the train station, to Depot Street, to Lunatic, and along Peace Avenue, but no further than the bridged gap in the railway embankment.

After a forty-five-minute stroll, we returned to the starting point (some trinities in a soft, emotionally sentimental mood) and, after a more lively piece of a parliamentary session, set out on our final rounds, before heading home by ten o'clock until the next shift...

~ ~ ~

A couple of times, KGB officers showed up at our evening matinées with their own briefings.

The first sighting occurred on the eve of the Great October Socialist Revolution, and we were warned to be especially vigilant and to suppress any provocative anti-Soviet behavior.

As soon as the KGB officer had left, a late cop showed up to mock his predecessor (who had already vanished without a trace), asking if we'd gotten it right that the spy who'd caught our eye needed to be immediately caught by the collar and dragged back to this here stronghold.

For the second and final time, a KGB agent (now younger) shared confidential information aimed at speeding up the capture of a former KGB agent who had disappeared AWOL and gone into hiding.

She may have changed her hairstyle and hair color, the KGB agent explained, showing us a black-and-white portrait of her, but she has a distinctive feature that makes identification easier: a contraceptive ring in her vagina. A Dutch-made production.

The men didn't immediately grasp what he was even there for, and when they finally did, they bombarded him with such leading questions that the KGB agent darted out from under the 'Stronghold' sign at the first cosmic velocity. After all, he was merely following orders, for the stupidity of which he bore no responsibility...

~ ~ ~

During one of my patrols, the men in my threesome gave me a hard time. Walking in a group of three vigilantes isn't exactly a bounty, but it's tolerable. However, when you look around and, in the light of the windows of Grocery Store No. 6, you see that among the passersby scurrying along the packed snow of the sidewalk, only your sleeve is tied with a red rag, you begin to feel a bit outlandish.

Maintaining a brazen, 'I don't care' pan, I walked to the station square. However, carpenter Mykola and driver Ivan were absent from the hurried silhouettes. Passersby of draft age glanced back at the strange phenomenon—the brazen vigilante loner.

It didn't take much intelligence to deduce with 100% certainty that my fellow patrolmen, having torn off their armbands, had grabbed a bottle of 'rotgut,' from one or another grocery store and that very moment, located in some quiet nook, were gurgling it down, in turn, to feel both warm and toned up, generally. Where? That was the question.

Most likely, in the quiet chaos of short lanes and dead ends between grocery store No. 6 and the high platform 1, in that jumble of warehouses, skin and venereal disease dispensary, a couple of private houses without gardens, and other wooden structures. That's where I turned, not because I had the slightest chance or desire to partake from the bottle.

Nope. I had a nobler objective of making the pair of sly asses feel ashamed and amazed at what deductive reasoning could do. Makes you able to so easily spot them in a forlorn alley under a streetlamp. Which only would do good the surprised bastards...

-.-

However, instead of a driver and a carpenter, in the cone of yellow light from a lamppost, I stumbled upon a genre scene.

The girl was walking with a young man when their mutual acquaintance, another young man—a huge brute—caught them in the act and kicked up a fight.

The appearance of a fourth wheel with a red rag on his sleeve (a matador?) slowed the plot, but only for a minute. Realizing that no more law enforcement officers were to pop up, the big man began to beat up his smaller, but more successful, rival.

The bantam fighter dropped to one knee, threw his fish-skin-lined jacket off his shoulders into the same snowdrift where his hat had rolled a second earlier, and rushed to a counterattack.

I remained an indifferent sideline referee with a rag. The girl gathered the jacket and hat to hold them, just as Eerah had once kept in hands my rabbit-fur hat in the main square of Nezhyn.

The odds were too unequal. When the lightweight collapsed again in the snow, the girl, without counting to 10, folded his belongings under a lamppost, took the victor's arm, and disappeared with him into the labyrinth of indecipherable alleys.

--

The fallen guy rose to his feet and, seeing that I was still there, launched into a passionate, rambling speech, extolling the power of the spirit, compared to which physical strength is nothing, because all strength lies in the spirit... In Konotop, every second person is a born Lord Speaker. Or have I already mentioned this?

To console the crushed Demosthenes, I shared my observation that while he fought his lost battle, the girl was holding his belongings, not his opponent's fur hat, which had also been tossed into the snow during the clash.

Hearing my words of encouragement, he shut up and hastily searched the pockets of his jacket to make sure everything was still there, because, despite their innate love of oratory, the main distinguishing feature of Konotopers is common sense.

~ ~ ~

And just like that, no one could stop me from giving the women of our team calla lilies every year on March 8th. One flower per bricklayer, because I'm not a millionaire, and the men in our team didn't always think to ask how much I paid and chip in a ruble each.

However, I wasn't too worried about reimbursement – I'd discovered that I enjoyed giving gifts much more than getting them myself.

First, however, I had to find the city greenhouse, which is practically in the middle of nowhere. You have to get off tram #2 one stop before its final stop. Then turn left and trudge half a kilometer through streets dating back to the Civil War. Like Youdenich Street or Denikin Lane. Of course, in reality, all the names remained faithfully Soviet, but the look was nostalgically White Guardian...

--

When I first visited the greenhouse, the manager led me into a long, squat building with a gable roof made of squares of cloudy glass, from which heavy, sparse drops of condensation fell.

She wanted me to see for myself the absence of flowers. And the plantings in those beds were calla lilies that hadn't yet ripened, they were 'unbloomed' (not flared up). That is, the white flowers hadn't yet blossomed into wide, flaring high boot tops.

Then and there all my tongue-tiedness vanished, and I delivered a sample of a Konotoper eloquence. On the topic of how, for her, who strolled every day among the greenery of the greenhouse beds, the calla lilies seemed unblown. But for the women of our bricklayers team, who saw nothing but crushed bricks, mortar, and icy hummocks of dirty snow, these calla lilies, even if 'unbloomed', were the most beautiful flowers in the world.

--

From that day on, and for as long as I worked on our team, I was never told 'no' at the city greenhouse on the eve of March 8th. And I proudly stood by the tram seat that carried a bundle of green and white calla lilies, which you wouldn't find at the 'Flowers' shop on the corner of Peace Square for at least two weeks more.

~ ~ ~ A flash-forward into a not-so-bright future

My decision was final and irrevocable—it's time to draw a line. The story I was translating now would be the last for the book. I'd had enough of Maugham. Even the fact that I had to translate the final story twice couldn't shake my resolve.

-.-

Tolik Polos forced me to echo the translation by lifting my briefcase. It had contained nothing but the notebook with the final story, which I was carrying to the railway station early that morning to leave in an automatic storage locker, to take to Zhomnir in Nezhyn after work.

There were no passersby in the Settlement at such a time, at least not along the tracks heading toward the railway station. At the very spot where the concrete wall of the KeLCeaR Plant begins, I remembered I'd forgotten to grab along money for the commuter train. I had to walk back, my briefcase left waiting for me by the side of the service passage path.

On my way to Decemberists 13, I met Tolik Polos, who had also graduated from School No. 13, two years after me, and was now trudging toward me, in the opposite direction. And being not actually from these outskirts, he was obviously returning from a romantic night. Too spent to say 'hi'...

Pocketing the forgotten rubles, I retraced to the starting point of the plant wall. The briefcase wasn't on the path side, or anywhere else. Only Tolik and I had passed by that particular spot. Or was there someone else?

The answer came a week later, on tram No. 3. Tolik didn't say 'hello', but instead, lounging on the seat, made faces at me in the cheeky manner of Slavik Aksyanov from the Dofinovka Mine dorm. But—most importantly!—his right hand was in a cast.

Do you need more direct evidence that it was Polos who disturbed the solitude of the briefcase peacefully waiting in the quietude of early hour for my return? Maybe for some folks – yes, but for me, definitely, no.

(... sometimes, along the life's flow, I not only see signs, but also easily read their explicit meaning...)

~ ~ ~

In fact, restoring of the translation, kidnapped together with the briefcase, was not a from-the-scratch job. The story of poor Julia, forced to betray her lover to the British intelligence service, was still vivid in my memory, and a month later I delivered my final milestone translation to Zhomnir, but no longer in the briefcase. So, albeit with a month's delay, the idea of quitting Maugham's translations became the tangible reality in a cellophane bag. But this reality was only a point in a larger plan of action.

-.-

Like all of my plans, it had no list of sequential steps or clear details.

Actually, my plans are not even plans at all, but rather feelings that it would be nice if it were this way, or, say, somehow different. The details are tacked on to the plan later, in the course of execution.

The aforementioned broad plan got felt distinctly because it finally dawned on me that Zhomnir would never 'match make' any of my translations. Nowhere, ever. And doesn't matter for which reason, the main thing is that it's so. Surely. So what does that mean?

It couldn't be simpler—I need to take the publication issue into my own hands.

That's why it would be a good idea to collect all my translations in thin school notebooks, 12 pages each, stacked somewhere among the other piles of paper on Zhomnir's shelves in his archive room...

~ ~ ~

I arrived in Nezhyn and announced to Alexander Vasilyevich my intention to take my alpha-beta versions. Zhomnir didn't object, nor asked any questions.

He threw a feast because these years have made me a relative in his house. A rather distant, poor relative, who is sometimes useful if, say, you're changing the wallpaper in the living room...

We sat at a square table pulled off the wall into the center of the room and ate whatever Maria Antonovna brought from the kitchen. We drank strong village moonshine. Zhomnir enthusiastically shared the news about a gold pectoral of great artistic value that had recently been excavated in one of the steppe burial mounds.

When the topic of excavations was exhausted, he asked about my relationship with Nezbyn, meaning Eerah.

I proudly characterized our relationship as fruitful, meaning you. Then I cautiously asked how Eerah was doing.

'What 'how' could there be?' Zhomnir replied. 'Slutting around the town.'

Of course, I was familiar enough with deductive logic to independently answer such elementary a 'how'. And it was quite within my grasp to rather vividly imagine details of the 'how', weren't I constantly distracted by some tangential thoughts like, 'Oh! Look at that strange little bird!', or 'Where did I misplace it? Damn my crappy memory... on Thursday, I think? I clearly remember I couldn't find something on Thursday, but what exactly?', or something else in that line...

In short, I avoided thinking logically in that direction. And now, for my naivety, I got a kick in the balls, from the paternally admonishing mentor.

Well, maybe not exactly in the balls, but half a meter higher.

The blow, in fact, hit me in the plexus, however, it didn't knock the breath out of me to the extent of Eerah's demolishing phrase, 'And I have Sasha now.'

She shared this with my sister, but Natasha held back the information until after my divorce proceedings. Probably saving it as a booby prize for me.

But more than that I got groggy by Zhomnir's answer's being a replica of the reply I got from the slob to my question about Olga at the Konotop brick plant... He literally copied it, word for word...

Even knocked out, I still tried to hide the simoom raging inside my indignant chest: They're all the same!

'And what am I to do now? Wander around the same desert my whole life? Am I a goddamn Moses here?'

'Comrade Sukhov, please don't yell. Gulechatay has just fallen asleep.'

'Sorry, Petrukha...'

(... despite all the differences in educational and intellectual levels, when we need to blow our neighbor's brains out, we grab a good old stone axe...)

As the time came to head out for the commuter train, Zhomnir packed my translation copybooks into a single plastic bag—it turned out a pretty thick, weighty load—and came out to see me off at the station. The moonshine was ahhh... damn strong, but I remember the commuter train clunking to a stop and hissing open the doors onto the platform.

I declined Zhomnir's offer of help, and headed toward the round tunnel of the train car vestibule, framed by the nickel-plated gleam of the strangely arched handrails by its swaying sides. Grabbing the one on my left, I climbed inside, walked to the opposite, locked door, and hung the bag on the handrail head there. The last thing I remembered was the sound of a door slamming somewhere behind me.

~ ~ ~

Slowly, I was returning to my senses, until surfaced into the confined space in between the iron walls of the car vestibule to realize I was still clutching the handrail head with my left hand, beside the closed door.

The train stood, silent and motionless, like me, at platform 4 of the Konotop Station. There were no passengers, as train 6456 was scheduled to depart for Khutor Mikhailovsky two and a half hours after arriving in Konotop.

The sight of the empty handrail beneath my clenched palm caused my abdominal muscles to stiffen, which cut my breathing off. The three other vestibule handrails in this cage were also presenting their emptiness.

Slamming aside the slide door, I stepped into the car. My gaze shot off toward the car's other end—racing along the empty luggage racks above the windows. It found nothing to stumble at across the entire distance: silent smooth emptiness... It returned to help me out into the vestibule, where I exhaled: 'Hoooooh!'

I didn't want to sink onto the leatherette seats of the empty train. Through the underpass and the station square, I walked to Lunatic Park, to a hard wooden bench.

There I sat for a long time, clear of any thought at all, only occasionally contemplating myself as a statue, dumbly frozen over the handrail while they peeled off the bag.

Who?!

What difference could it make, it doesn't matter... To them, whoever was it, the spoils brought no joy—utterly useless mess. The only use perhaps to light the kindling in the stove; enough to tide one over for several winters...

After sitting there for about an hour, shell-shocked, I remembered that it was CAT-615's duty day to maintain public order, and I wandered to the squad's stronghold to sit there—in silent, indifferent detachedness.

Only when the cop arrived did I understand what to do next: 'Comrade Captain, lend me three rubles until the next shift.'

'I don't lend rubles, only days of arrest. Will fifteen be enough?'

The asinine witticism of the asshole once again confirmed the wisdom of my plan...

~ ~ ~

The next day, our team lent me three rubles, and after work I went to Nezhyn. There, in the five-story building of the NSPI faculty, on the edge of the Count's Park, I found the apartment of the always sweetly smiling Nonna and told her I'd lost the Maugham translations I'd been working on for several years. Now, to restore them, I need the originals, all of which are collected in a four-volume set she has. Could she please?

With her usual sweet smile, Nonna brought the books out from another room, placed them in a plastic bag, and handed them to me. My heart forgot to beat from the overwhelming joy—thank you!

--

'How do you like that, Maria Antonovna? That rascal Ogoltsoff lost all his translations on the commuter train!'

'You shouldn't have gotten the poor fellow so drunk!'

Maria Antonovna also didn't know that all my sorrows, joys, and everything else have sprung from that unreachable bastard, in the unimaginably distant future, who's sprawled now on my back, stretched out in the Chinese tent for one, composing this letter to you, in the middle of a dark forest where the river named Varanda rushes on, through, and beyond...

~ ~ ~

'Habit's a heavenly gift

To substitute our happiness...'

These immortal lines from the great classic are a blunt hint in 2-meter-tall lettering that they nabbed me on my third trip purely out of habit. The bastards got completely hooked...

And this time, almost everyone in CAT-615 knew I'd be locked up any day now.

Two years later, during a chance encounter on a narrow, deserted path along the railroad embankment, behind the sports grounds of the engineering technical school, retired Major Petukhov, the then head of the HR department of CAT-615, shared this knowledge with me.

Without the slightest prodding or leading questions from me, Petukhov recounted how Deputy Engineer Vanya kept showing up at the HR department almost every other day to call psychiatrist Tarasenko on the office phone about my freshest deviations.

'He was singing this morning. Maybe it's time?'

'Let him sing.'

'He wrote an explanatory note in verse.'

'What note?'

'He lost his helmet, and I demanded he write an explanation. Will you take it back?'

'Too early.'

'He shoved his shirt into a hole in the floor bridging panel and filled it with mortar.'

'That's it! Make sure he doesn't leave.'

~ ~ ~

Though not every day, yet I did allow myself to sing at workplace, maybe, rather often.

Sometimes, especially when At-Seven-Winds construction lands was drowning in a cold, thick fog, and we sailed through it like a Viking longship in unfamiliar, winding fjords, someone from our team-crew would ask:

'Sing, Seryoga!'

'I had a wife,

She loved me so much,

And just one time she cheated,

And then she made her mind:

Eh! Just one time, then once again,

Then many, many, many, many more again...'

However, our team (almost unanimously) to 'Gypsy Girl' by Vysotsky preferred 'The Ballad of Gypsum Cast' also of his creation:

'I lay prostrate, all plastered over,

My every member's well pre-packaged!...'

However, my helmet hadn't been lost; it fell victim to my showing off the gentlemanly manners.

I was walking among the construction sites of the 'construction lands' and, near a large-block nine-story building, I saw a couple of plasterers from PMK-7. They were picking some kind of flowers in the fresh green grass. Most likely dandelions, judging by the yellow terry.

The plasterers asked me for a plastic bag, which I didn't have, and with a sweeping hussar gesture, I tossed my helmet into the grass at the ladies' feet, for them to collect, so to speak. Like in a basket. Then I had expressly pointed for them at our team's trailer of brown planks, so they'd know where to return the headgear. I saw them for the first time, which coincided with the last seeing of my hard hat...

Out of our entire team, I was the only one wearing a brimless plastic derby, so Vanya latched on to me with his demand of explanatory note about loss of the protective item. But calling the note I scribbled for him 'a poem' is brazen flattery; it was, at best, free verse...

As for the shirt, well, that's where I stepped into deep trouble. Incautiously, I let me indulging my penchant for DIY rituals because it was the first day of summer. How could you possibly not respond to the occasion? In the summer, even if you're wearing only a T-shirt under your overalls, you're still swimming in sweat. In the summer, a shirt is a redundant element...

I wore that green shirt made of some crinkly synthetic material for six years, and the bitch never wore out. But you sweat. Because it felt like any other synthetic crap, despite its crinkly nature.

~ ~ ~

And so, on June 1st, I emerged from the trailer, like a freelance artist from Montmartre, in his green cape, its sleeves picturesquely hugging my black overalls, which, in turn, were donned upon my bare torso.

I climbed up to the floor of the current grab in the rising wall and buried the cape in one of the still-unsealed holes in one of the floor panels, among the still unfinished walls...

There had never been trash cans on a construction site, and I couldn't bring myself to simply throw it into the hole of the wooden outhouse—we'd sweated together for so many years...

Then I went to the third floor in the next section, where I was laying the staircase wall, alone, with the ventilation ducts, until Pyotr Lysoon showed up to call me to the trailer. On the way, for some reason, he averted his eyes and talked on abstract botanical topics.

All these strange symptoms vanished from my mind when I saw a UAZ van in front of the trailer, along with a burly cop in his red-band cap, under the command of psychiatrist Tarasenko in a formal business suit...

Our team, along with Engineer Karenin and Deputy engineer Vanya, formed an uneven semicircle facing the visitors.

--

Tarasenko announced to those present that my behavior had always been abnormal, and today I had overstepped all conceivable limits with the unauthorized burial of my shirt in a hole in a concrete slab. Then he democratically asked the working masses what other anomalies had they observed in me.

The crowd kept silence... One of the women though tried to explain that the shirt was completely rotten, and Tarasenko, cutting short any pathetic digressions into abstract dirge, ordered me to enter the trailer and change.

As silent as my colleagues, I complied, and then climbed into the windowless van's back keeping in its hold some additional drunk. And we left the site...

--

During a brief stop nearby the Medical Center, the drunk began a passionate campaign for dashing in different directions—the cop wouldn't be able to chase two at once. I kept quiet, realizing that 45 days under the syringes was better than all of my lifespan on the run.

Then a young guard in plainclothes joined us, together with another drunk, and we were taken along the well-trodden way to the city of Romney.

En route, we stopped at a roadside village to pick up an additional load: a couple of old women in tragic black robes and a worried man who swore to all, one by one, that he didn't remember anything of what had happened the day before.

Upon arrival at the psychiatric hospital, we were separated in different directions, and, for some unknown reason, they X-rayed me in supine position. Perhaps to test the newly installed equipment...

I didn't see any more of the fellow traveler alcoholics; the Third department handles their cases, and I'm the material for the Fifth department...

~ ~ ~

And once again, the Grounds became the arena for my daily brainwashing-thru-ass, alternating with nighttime rest in an overcrowded ward...

Of my acquaintances, in all categories who hadn't achieved absolute freedom, I only saw Sasha, who knew my brother Sasha, but he was no longer waking up.

As a veteran and in the name of humanity, I appealed to the Head Physician to substitute my Aminazine injections with Aminazine pills. She promised to consider it and (ten days before my gate time) the third, final injection for good night was canceled. And for that, just now, her name surfaced in my grateful memory—she was christened Nina.

Nothing else of note happened, except that I learned how to administer first aid in the event of an epileptic seizure.

--

The epileptic must be grabbed by the legs and dragged from the Grounds into the shade under the canopy. There, too, he'll go on thrashing his back against the earth, however, gradually the pace will slow, the excitement loosing its intensity until it stops completely.

Some half-wits consider necessary to swat flies traversing his pan with their dirty paws. However, this has little, if any, effect on the course of the fit...

~ ~ ~

The only thing Petukhov didn't tell me on that narrow path under the high railway embankment was why I got under such close surveillance. However, there was no need; I knew the reason as well as any other CAT-615 employee.

All the story was flagged off by the renovation of the maternity hospital—a long, two-story building at the intersection of Lenin Street and the slope down from the department store. Each Konotop construction company was doing its share of the work. CAT-615's share embraced the partitions and a couple of bathrooms on the first floor in the right wing. Four plasterers and I got assigned there. We finished the job in one week.

--

When the women were already plastering the partitions I'd laid, a man in a clean suit and tie appeared in the corridor. At the sight of four yummy females, the visitor began to show off, both against the backdrop and at the expense of the wretch shoveling their mortar.

Politely, I asked him to tone it down and stop coughing everywhere.

'Do you know who you're talking to? I'm the First Secretary of the City Party Committee!'

'And I'm a fourth-class bricklayer.'

'Well, you'll get it!'

He left, and half an hour later, our chief engineer, dripping foam, burst into the same corridor—because he's also the chairman of the party committee of CAT-615—'How dare you curse the First Secretary of the City Party Committee?!'

The plasterers unanimously and loudly affirmed that there had been no swearing. This didn't console the chief engineer, but he left.

--

That's it. It couldn't be simpler—a male *рфмшртн* the levers of power, against a male in mortar-splashed overalls.

But what's offensive, painfully offensive, is the false accusation of using foul language. Throughout my career at CAT-615, I righteously refrained from 2-, and 3-, and 5-letter words—even in my heart of hearts!

Experienced loaders marveled at my ability to unload a carload of lumber, meaning, tack the stubborn slings suspended from a crane hook, without ever uttering a single 'oh, fuck!'...

~ ~ ~

Autumn arrived, and while lathering up in the bathhouse, I suddenly noticed that my belly had become as bulging as the hard superior wings of a May beetle and, like those, wouldn't pull the outward curvature back.

Soon, my mother also noticed that I was developing a double chin. After one of our late dinners on Decemberists 13, she put her hand on my shoulder and joyfully announced, 'You're getting fat, Brother Rabbit! And there's no escape—you're one of our kind!'

I didn't return the smile on her round face, beneath which—I knew it without a checking glimpse—an even rounder figure was expanding, and I stayed mum. Nonetheless, I absolutely didn't want to become one of those round creatures and turn into a fat man. I wouldn't give in to their Aminazine!

There felt urgent need for drastic measures.

To start with those same evening lunches and dinners on Decemberists 13, where my mother skillfully piled two servings of rice or potatoes on one plate. And everything was so delicious that, without even noticing, you'd gobble it all up.

--

Giving up bread was the first step in my fight for a slim build. Okay, I'll eat as much as you want, but I didn't sign up for eating bread, and I won't, 'cause I don't want to. So I cut it off from my diet. Even in the canteens.

Although the 'I don't want to' part is a complete bullshit. I've always loved bread, especially of rye, and even more so when it's warm. I could devour a whole loaf at one sitting without anything else, under replaying in my mind my father's saying:

'The bread is soft, the mouth is big, you take a bite, and the heart rejoices.'

A month later, convinced that the bread-free diet was a bullshit accomplished, I simply dropped out of going to the canteen at lunch breaks. This restored the imbalance. Breakfast in the canteen, plus two late lunches are equal to the traditional three meals a day.

At the lunch break time, as our team aptly put it, I munched 'VSESVIT', brought to the bricklayers' trailer once a month, to fill the break with reading. So, just before New Year's, in that same city bathhouse across Konotop Divisions Square, I proudly surveyed my belly, sunken like that of a healthy wolf. I'd always liked that particular shape...

Damn Narcissus with his concave belly...

~ ~ ~

(... there are a ton of words you kind of know—you've heard them, read them, and even uttered them more than once. But it's best not to be asked about their meaning. However, it's not every day that you encounter particularly picky bastards, so you interpret familiar (a kinda sort of) words based on your own vague notions...

The word 'asceticism' is one of the most curious examples of how people don't understand what they're saying when they speak out.

90% of the population, for whom the word 'ascetic' is, well, sort of clear, imagine a man worn out by self-torture, with wisps of unkempt beard around his glaring eyes. This is as wrong as using the word 'athlete' to refer only to sumo wrestlers.

In fact, the meaning of the root word 'asceticism' is nothing other than 'training'.

If, cherishing ambitious dreams of winning a beer tournament, you down three liters of beer every day—with the goal of training and maintaining proper fitness, then you're an ascetic.

Same as the girl next door who scribbles violin scales every single evening behind your wall. Damn your asceticism with all those goddamn G-flat... I mean... B-bonking-sharps!

So, the ascetic hermit, preparing himself for the life to come in heaven, is just a special case among other ascetics.

Asceticism can be protracted or short-termed, depending on its purpose...)

And what—please tell me—were the purposes compelling me to zealously keep myself as skinny as a mop and copy unfamiliar words from the Morning Star each weekday?

As I've already tried to explain a little, I'm a bit hazy when it comes to specific details and general plans—I just feel it's necessary, that's why I do it...

--

The Morning Star extracts called for keeping both a close eye and tight rein on sly sloppy slacks inherent to me no less than to any human bro.

Whenever I encountered an unfamiliar word of which I was absolutely certain we've had encountered before, I was tempted to skip it—yeah, I've met it, faith!

Ok. Tell me the meaning then, you backstreet boy!

Digging through a heap of scribbled notebooks is tedious; much easier is to look it up in the dictionary and write out what it means. Once again.

That's why I even came across words whose page number in Chamber's Dictionary I knew by heart, but not their forgotten meaning.

And that goes for memory by you, huh?... A kinda clogged sieve—I remember here, there but not everywhere. That's what asceticism can lead a person to, when you have no idea why you even need it. Like a robot, you repeat a certain set of actions, unaware why...

~ ~ ~

The incident of that evening didn't tempt me in the least, although it pretty stunned me. And on her part, it was sooner a try at manipulation than seduction; she was simply demanding that I fulfill my parental duty...

I was in Lenchka's debt, deeply: I've never scooped her up, never seated her on my lap, never ruffled her hair gently, never stroked her cheek, not to mention all the other 'never'.

I owed her. We just lived in the same khatta, where she was once told I was her dad, but what kind of father was I, really? Just a dry formula. A non-contact symbol.

Of course, I didn't push her away, and sometimes I could even get carried away by our talk, but for a child, that's probably not enough; and for a father, it's certainly not enough either...

However, that's just what my relationships with each one of my five children have developed into...

.-.

When Lenchka was born, I simply wasn't ready for the role of father yet. A dad at eighteen? With all due respect to the Swan of Avon, it's outright ridiculous.

Then the construction battalion and the institute separated us. When you were born, I was already old enough to be a father and loved you selflessly, but not for long—my reputation divided us.

I met Ruzanna when she was six years old. She always called me 'Daddy', and I loved her like a daughter, but it wasn't until she was leaving for Greece to be with her husband, Apostolos, that Ruzanna and I hugged for the first time, to the envy of the Stepanakert-Yerevan minibus driver:

'Բնի ա ձեզ, լի! Ուշաճնով ընթ'

The consequences of that same chronic, damned lack of contact...

I couldn't hug and caress Ashaut and Emma, who was born after him, because Ruzanna was there, my daughter who's received nothing of the kind from me; so it would have been unjust. Thus, the father to five children remained only a nominal dad. Poor children!

But to pity them alone is unfair! What about me, who lived a life deprived of a child's warmth and affection?...

Except for that one time, when four-year-old Emma cut her scalp in the courtyard of our unfinished house, trying to imitate a Chinese circus act she'd seen on TV.

.-.

Blood soaked her hair and stained the shoulder of my shirt as I carried her in my arms to the former regional, now republican, hospital, next to the maternity one.

A weightless, frightened chick, pressed against my chest, awaiting something terrible, she didn't cry at all, believing that with her daddy by her side, everything would be alright.

(... children that age look up to their father as if he were God, and then grow up and become atheists, because the Almighty, it turns out, is just a stubborn, wrinkled little morsel, and, what's more, doesn't understand a thing about life...)

The trauma nurse treated the wound, and the doctor on duty prescribed antibiotics. Two days later, when I brought Emma in for a follow-up checkup, he yelled at me for being a cheapskate—saving on medicine for my own child!

Idiocy has no cure, and no diploma will ever help.

The end of the month in the late 90s. A week and a half until payday. The bread, which I brought home from the nearest small shop, was given on my word of honor, and its owner, Razmik, didn't even list me in his notebook for indigent debtors. While pharmacies didn't sell medicine on credit at all...

.-.

After standing in line at the university cashier's desk, I'd first return my debt of honor, and the rest, every last cent, to Satik. What 'private stash' are you about, bro? By the end of month, I'd have to beg Razmik for bread, inevitably...

By the way, there's nothing easier than having a university. You take the Stepanakert Pedagogical Institute and name it State University, that's all...

I got a job there after I was kicked out of the Supreme Council. And rightly so, the war—officially speaking—was over, and the State Government had every right to find out who the hell was hanging about at the official position of analyst, with so insolent a pan.

But that was only on the surface. Inside, I was as scared as anyone else. I simply held back, and at bombardments, I didn't scurry to the basement shelter, but instead huddled in the corner of my office, far from the window. And at precisely 6:00 PM, I'd leave the former regional party committee building to stomp home along the empty streets, accompanied by the thunder of the cannonade and roaring explosions in the city.

Firstly, what difference did it make? And secondly, it's impossible to guess where the next shell, rocket, or bomb would hit...

~ ~ ~

I was hired as the analyst by Artur Mkrtchyan, the first Chairman of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh Supreme Council, before he was executed under the guise of suicide, so that whoever else disobeying Big Brother would learn a lesson.

Well, yes, it's like putting a bullet in your forehead, then hiding the shell casing and carefully cleaning the gun.

However, a more senior investigator flew in from Yerevan and explained how such a thing was possible. And Artur's wife retracted her testimony about the dark-haired guest who knocked on their apartment door two minutes before the tragedy, because she still had a son to raise, and that's difficult for a single mother.

Now, by the version revised from Yerevan, she claimed spending the entire day in her bedroom with a high fever, where she didn't hear a thing. Not at all.

Yes, residents in the surrounding five-story buildings saw her run out onto the balcony of her apartment screaming 'bloody murder!' after a KAMAZ truck, without the bed or license plates, leaving the common courtyard. However, there's nothing of the sort in the investigation file, because no one questioned the neighbors...

So, her son will grow up, get a degree from the local university, and then a cushy job at a quiet institution, like, 'Republican Department for the Protection of Monuments', or something. And then he gets married, and when his wife gives birth to a son, they'll name him Arthur, after his grandfather.

I think so...

~ ~ ~

I hardly had a chance to interact with Arthur Mkrtchyan; everything happened too quickly. He called me, an unemployed employee of the defunct newspaper Soviet Karabakh (later AZAT ARTSAKH), and gave me a job as an analyst-translator at the Press Center by the Supreme Council of the RMK.

From second-hand sources, I learned that he was a cheerful and slightly odd man; you know. He could burst into laughter out of nowhere, even without a fresh joke about Vartanik and Teacher Margo.

Stepanakert is surrounded, half the city laid in ruins, people are living in basements, Karabakh is under siege, and he's laughing out loud!

But still, I'm in his debt and still continue to analyze. For free...

Who Killed Artur Mkrtchyan?

The dark-haired guy from the KAMAZ doesn't count, otherwise we could end up blaming the alloy the bullet is cast from. No, the killer is the one who decides who to kill and puts the gun in the executioner's hands.

Version 1:

Before the war, in the village where Artur worked as a schoolteacher, he offended someone and, taking advantage of the chaos of the war of independence, the offended party settled the score. A showdown at district level.

(This is completely out of the question, given the efforts to make his death look like a suicide.)

Version 2:

The offended is a bigwig in Yerevan, with connections in the local National Security Service. A showdown at republican level.

(Not impossible.)

Version 3:

The offended has leverage in the Russian Federal Security Service, to which the Armenian National Security Service is not subordinate, but both are the same KGB under different guises. A showdown at federal level.

(Not impossible.)

--

At that stage in the struggle for Mountainous Karabakh's independence, which had its origins in the generous gift of this Armenian-populated part of Transcaucasia to Soviet Azerbaijan by I. V. Stalin, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), the Supreme Council of the self-proclaimed Republic of Mountainous Karabakh was housed in the building of the former regional executive committee, next to the circular '5-Kopeck Coin' square.

The Press Center of the RMK Supreme Council occupied a single room with one window, one door, and two hefty desks (yes, arranged in a 'T'), on the second floor to the right of the stairs.

The staff included Head of the Press Center, Gegham; his secretary, Agavni; the professional video camera operator, Benik; the PC's white Niva driver, Razmic, and the analyst/translator, Sehrguey.

The room was constantly submerged into thick cigarette smoke, with both lost in and adding to it multinational media, represented by compact groups and fearless individual correspondents with photo and video cameras, backpacks, and other equipment necessary for visiting the planet's hot spots.

They arrived primarily from the former fraternal camp of socialism, which had collapsed together with the fall of the Berlin Wall and transformed into the free states of Eastern Europe. They were eager to see if the Godzilla Cockroach, aka the USSR, was dead for good.

Although even from outside, it was already evident enough that the indestructible Union of Victorious Socialism with a Human Face (the authentically accurate nickname, to distinguish it from either the Swedish knockoff model or Chinese disgustingly cheap retail goods by Chairman Mao) had suffered a major stroke, collapsed, and properly fallen apart.

All that had already become common knowledge, but the Karabakh Armenians, who were the first to rise up against the Soviet terror machine, gathering in mass rallies on Stepanakert's main square in front of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, have not yet faded from the memories of news providers.

(Predominantly, of so retentive memory could boast the editors in Eastern European countries, it bears repeating. However, wise news mongers of any nationality clearly know that news from hot spots, where people are being cut to pieces by bombs, missiles, and even knives, is in demand constantly. The knowledge that there is someone worse off than you presents with a positive charge and motivation to go on wallowing in the muck of our best possible world. The war of independence, like any other, stimulated news tourism.)

Well, right at the beginning, the crowd filled Lenin Square. People chanted, 'We demand! We demand!' They held placards depicting a clenched fist. In addition, real fists were raised above the crowd to the rhythm of 'Demand!'

In order to comply with international norms for such situations, the Regional Executive Committee of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region adopted a resolution requesting Baku,

Moscow, and Yerevan to transfer Nagorno-Karabakh to the jurisdiction of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Daily rallies on the main square continued, but soon came to an end.

Neither water cannons nor tear gas were used to suppress the demonstrations in Stepanakert. This phenomenon, unheard of during the entire Soviet era, was met with a remote response—in a city 400 kilometers from Lenin Square, where people were holding placards reading 'Demand!'

The Sumgait Tragedy. Three days and three nights of pogroms in a city 35 kilometers (27 to 45 minutes) off Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Three days of murder, torture, rape, throwing people off their apartment balconies, dragging a strangled baby in the noose behind a motorcycle. You name it.

It was unthinkable; such atrocities could only happen in distant Rwanda or Jakarta, but not within the borders of our common and united Homeland.

Three days and three nights of genocide, when they break down the door of your home, commit the unspeakable against your family, before your very eyes, before killing you because your last name ends in '-ian.'

Moreover, there were '-ians' among the brutal gangs, because Sumgait, a city of young oil workers, was built by prisoners, and many remained there after their stretches were done; in the best traditions of Soviet urban planning: the Zone lays the foundations of future cities.

When the ex-convicts and 'chemists' were unleashed, many Azerbaijani citizens joined them, while other Azerbaijani citizens sheltered their neighbors of Armenian descent.

Humanity and nationality are two different things.

After three days and nights of marking time in full combat readiness, Soviet Army units restored order in the city...

End that year, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected the first President of the Soviet Union, which immediately imploded and disintegrated into numerous independent states because in too many places people picked up the chant 'We demand!'

~ ~ ~

In short, the USSR collapsed, and the Armenians of Mountainous Karabakh were forced to defend their land and lives in a war of independence. All sorts of international (mostly European) media correspondents arrived from Yerevan (the capital of the independent Republic of Armenia) to Stepanakert (the capital of the self-proclaimed, but never recognized, Republic of Mountainous Karabakh) by night helicopter flights, so as not to risk being shot down in daylight flying in between the tumbs (Karabakh Mountains).

They arrived at the RMK SU Press Center and handed their business cards to Gegham, who dumped them in his desk drawer, atop piles of the like pieces of paper.

Activists from various political parties and movements that had sprung up in the regions and capitals of the former USSR also arrived on the same night flights (with less regularity) to amass personal political capital useful when back home, like, 'I've even been to Karabakh!'

In Stepanakert at that time there were no hotels or restaurants, but there were plenty of artillery and rocket attacks and air strikes, so visitors of both categories did not stay long.

Except for the two-meter-tall, blond Viking from Holland, who got lost among the tumbs and captured by the Azerbaijani side, only to be brought back to the same forest a week later and shown the way to a nearby Armenian village because members of the international media and the global community had sent a vehement note of protest to the Baku authorities.

~ ~ ~

The champion in holding out became an engineer from Moscow, who came to visit relatives. He stayed in Stepanakert for 10 days.

His parents had taken him to Moscow as a child, and during his marathon stay, he would occasionally pop into the Press Center room to pull a chair from the wall to my end of the desk reserved for subordinates and chat in Russian, which had long since become his native language.

The rest of the Greek-Czech-Dutch-Estonian (or whatever) crowd huddled around Gegham's desk, smoking their cigarettes and chatting animatedly in Mass-Median lingo.

Oh! My apologies! The Dutchman turned out to be a non-smoker...

So, the engineer wanted someone without an accent, and his relatives didn't provide him with such a luxury. Although, perhaps there was a hidden agenda, too, namely, to find an answer to the nagging question:

Why is he here?

So he needed my help, as a specialist, so to speak. After all, an analyst's job description requires finding answers, right?

~ ~ ~

The case unfolded as follows: one of many engineers at one of many Moscow enterprises, an almost-native Moscow Armenian, peacefully leaves the plant through the gate at the end of the workday and receives an unexpected offer to get into a waiting black Volga.

They take him to the KGB (his tongue isn't yet accustomed to pronouncing it 'FSB'). In a very spacious office, they politely invite him to visit his relatives in Stepanakert. Travel expenses have been allocated, and his plant management has already signed an order granting him an indefinite leave.

And what's his assignment? No assignment, other than to stay with his relatives, whom he's longed for since moving to Moscow at the age of four.

And here he is, swallowing the foreign cigarettes smoke, looking me in the eye, and asking amidst the general hubbub: 'Why?'

Two days after Artur's murder, he came to say goodbye; he got the signal it was time to come back to Moscow. And so he leaves, carrying a puzzled look in his eyes: 'Why?'

~ ~ ~

For my strictly personal use, I gave him the working nickname 'Weather Probe.' There are these balloons equipped with a bunch of sensors for launching into the upper atmosphere to record current meteorological conditions in said layers.

When he returns to Moscow, he'll be given another free ride to a polite interview in a spacious office. A meaningless conversation about this and that, because a weather balloon has no need to know the data delivered by its recording device.

Or maybe the conversation will be very brief, a pure formality, you know. What's the point of delving into a completed mission? Good job, that dark-haired guy from the Armenian KGB! O, rocks! Again?... What was that? Aha! The NSS for the National Security Service of the independent Republic of Armenia...

~ ~ ~

A secret meeting of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh is underway.

Karabakh is under tight blockade. Azerbaijani forces, using GRAD rocket launchers are extensively shelling Stepanakert. Villages are changing hands in fierce fighting. They need fuel, they need ammunition...

Particularly alarming news: Azerbaijan is trying to negotiate the supply of surface-to-air missiles, the very same ones that kicked the USSR out of Afghanistan. Helicopter deliveries of fuel and ammunition are under threat.

(As it later turned out, the buyer was Chechnya in their first war with Russia, but two Chechen emissaries were killed in London by an Armenian NSS agent. British police managed to arrest the agent, but he poisoned himself in prison by potassium cyanide, received in a bread delivery from a visitor. 'I don't want my family to suffer; the KGB's reach is too long,' were his last words before successfully swallowing the dose.)

A 'road of life' is needed; a 'corridor' linking Karabakh with Mother Armenia is urgently needed, and for that, the city of Lachin must be captured; it controls the 50-kilometer stretch of highway to Armenia.

And then Artur laughed. Who needs Lachin? We have Iran right next door. Opening a corridor in that direction won't require human losses. That way, we'll establish communication with the outside world, with the Armenian Diaspora...

--

Two weeks later, Artur was gone. He wanted too much—to decide for himself how to fight for independence, rather than execute decrees from spacious offices that would inevitably lead thousands of young men to the slaughter.

But Version 3 is Version 3 in Karabakh, too.

~ ~ ~

That's why the next acting Chairman turned to the KGB, whose structures weren't buried in the debris of the collapsed USSR, but had become supranational (despite renaming its branches in the former Soviet republics). A single and indivisible Center and the incorruptible KGB archives remained.

So, the aforementioned acting head most likely got a slap on the wrist from Big Brother for such a careless approach to selecting analytical personnel for the Supreme Council of the completely independent Republic of Mountainous Karabakh. Or, to avoid presenting myself as effing Omniscience, the decision was made at the local level, based on good old xenophobia.

Especially since, as a foreigner, I should have shown more restraint.

Back then, everyone was really into creating state paraphernalia: ministries, legislative assemblies, anthems, flags, and all that crap. So, a high-ranking official approached me for advice from a professional analyst: 'Does the RNK have a chance of becoming internationally recognized?'

But I, naively, answered wholeheartedly, wanting the best.

Yes—easy! You, as a legislator, create such wise laws that all of Azerbaijan will spit on its rulers and come rushing, racing to ask you for Karabakh citizenship. And then the rest will follow, from Moscow to the very outskirts on the sixth part of the globe.

He was probably offended, but I wasn't joking. I believed what I was saying; I didn't imagine that independence would result in 35 ministries for 50,000 draft horses of working-age folks...

It's a shame he'd taken offense.

--

Be that as it may, I got kicked out. As a too extravagant an excess for peacetime conditions.

A week later, an analytical department of 35 female employees was created in my place, headed by a well-known local philatelist. Male. But a very smart one.

And, of course, the staff didn't stop at that, to keep up with the times, as not all relatives had yet returned from exile in Moscow and Yerevan...

Perhaps in England, a civil servant serves the public, but here, he's a bloodsucking nit on the people's body. And no way to pick off the biting bitches—they've been trained for that for ages...

~ ~ ~

All the glass in every window of the State University was, of course, shattered, after all those bombings. However, three windows in the Rector's office were restored, and all the rest covered with vinyl film.

The wind—quite predictably and easily—torn through all these translucent patches, and as soon as it picked up, the vinyl shreds enthusiastically applauded their hero from every window frame.

Tin wood-burner boxes were installed in the classrooms, with tin pipes led outside. Each morning, the University's Quarters Manager would hand out two pieces of cleaved wood to the group leaders from the shed in the yard. It was winter, after all.

By the middle of the second period, the boxes were ice-cold, idle, rusty tin chests of dead ashes, and the female students would start complaining they were frozen too. The male students, however, didn't complain, due to their absence. They were freezing in the trenches on the front lines, so what if the war was over?

And then I would give the girls the order: 'Form up! Walking in a circle... Forward, MARCH!' And they would march around the wood burner, chanting one or another exercise from a brochure, yellowed with decrepitude, published for Soviet universities in 1957. And when they started whining that they were getting dizzy from walking in circles, I commanded: 'Turn around! MARCH!' In the opposite direction.

They giggled, but obeyed and continued chanting... A kinda Sergeant Major Ogoltsoff's Peripatetic Methodology, but it helped them hold out until the hoarse from a cold ringing in the wind-swept corridors.

--

Damn! Where have I come to all this from?!

Aha, I remember—children are the flowers of life...

~ ~ ~

But enough of this, let's get back to Lenchka's attempt to correct my blatant inviolability and her lack of a normal father...

She entered the room and sat on my lap, wedged between the table (with an open dictionary, notebook, and copy of Morning Star spread out on its top) and me.

Turning her face upward, she raised her hand and placed her small palm on my each-morning-shaved cheek. She probably wanted to teach her ascetic father the way it's done.

(... what put me off? Fear of slipping into incest? Impossible, with my built-in robotic self-control.

Most likely, the pitiful smile on her face, which said 'Oh, you poor thing!', raised my fur...)

'Well, that's enough, Lenchka, I have to work.'

The smile gave way to an expression of sullen anger, and she began to jump up and down vengefully, still sitting on my lap.

'What?! Dreams of sweet pies? Isn't it too early?' And I rose to my feet, a soulless robot, destroying the launch pad and the possibility of further jumps.

--

A couple of days later, when I returned from work, I noticed a change on my shelves. A black hole had appeared.

The high cheekbone in Eerah's face (10 cm x 15 cm, an amateur photo in the middle of a stream) had been pierced right through. The instrument of this vandalism, or maybe even Voodooism, was a sharp pencil or perhaps a ballpoint pen. The question 'who?' didn't occur to me. What difference did it make?

'Lenchka, come here!'

'What?'

'As a father, I'm obligated to ensure your education, so you know what's what. Look at the photo on the shelf.'

'What?'

'That's called 'meanness'.'

'It wasn't me.'

'I'm not saying you did it. Just remember what 'meanness' is. And who did it make no difference.'

--

I had to take the photograph to the photo studio on Club Street across from Lunatic. The photographer, Arthur, a young Armenian who specialized in transferring wedding portraits to

ceramics, said it was fixable. I asked him to enlarge the restoration to the size of a wall portrait, leaving everything as is, including the stream...

For the restored and enlarged photograph, I bought a cardboard frame and put it back on the shelf.

Seeing the portrait in the same place, but significantly more prominent (20 cm x 25 cm), my mother gave out a mocking cackle, which was her only comment.

I didn't rise any follow-up pedagogical discussions, and the photograph sat there, completely undisturbed, in the quiet process of gradually accumulating dust...

~ ~ ~ Beware of your dreams' realization

Shortly before her firstborn Andrey's birthday, my sister Natasha complained about not being able to find a toy train set. If I remember that big circle of tracks with a tiny train running around it back at the Object...

Of course, I remembered the wonderful toy and took the complaint as an excuse to escape the daily grind of Konotop life. After all, I'm quite a doting uncle! It's only a bit awkward to ask Natasha: will Andrey be two or three?

—·—

For a starter, I checked Kyiv. The saleswoman at the specialized department store 'Kids' World' sat sullenly behind the counter, her arms crossed under a black padded jacket worn by laborers over her blue uniform of a shop assistant. She was mildly amused when I reported that my wish was a chuff-chuff. With a chuckle, she answered in a villagers' parlance, so that the churl of me would get it easier, 'Ain't a-having no chuff-chuffs here.'

Which didn't surprise me in the least—whatever Natasha says should be accepted as a solid fact of reality, without looking for loopholes or wasting time on fruitless doubts...

The next detail to pop up in the plan was the capital of our mutual Motherland—Moscow...

To Moscow! To Moscow!—led the caravan routes, trodden by brain-fogged consumers weary of in of chronic shortages in the semidesert on the bare shelves of retail stores...

At the All-Union capital's 'Kids' World' store, were found pinky-sized locomotives with carriages and rails, switches, and bridges for miniature trains powered by tiny batteries.

I took my loot to an automated locker at the Kyiv Station, and returned to the center to of culture, accessible only to visitors and residents of the capital.

At the Bolshoi Theater ticket office, they explained to me that you should hustle for a ticket to their grand establishment a couple of weeks before the performance. All cultured people do it that way.

Not alone, but accompanied by poignant disappointment, I left the hallway of the celebrated hearth of culture, saddened they provide no warmth for us, spontaneously loving uncles.

On the sidewalk next to the inaccessible cultural heritage site, I came across a glass cube. Its walls lined tightly from the inside with a crust of diverse advertisements of all sorts of shows on different days in overlapping posters, most likely paper ones.

This hut-on-chicken-legs had a window selling tickets to Moscow theaters and concert halls. For the upcoming evening, I was offered a choice: a pop star concert at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses, or a jazz band concert at the Central House of the Soviet Army.

Yeah, it's only one of the other, 'cause I can't split myself in two. Therefore, one of the suggested possibilities would be lost, and any loss however small is certainly a tragedy. Now, I had to decide which one would be bigger, bitterer?

Should I give up the one suggesting the rarest opportunity to visit the Kremlin and enjoy all that staple shit that gurgles from the Central Television sewers year after year, or... well, hell, what tragedy in that?

'Gimme Jazz, please!'

—·—

(... they say the Chernigov train station was built under the Germans, during the years of occupation. And I believe such hearsays. Why? Just because the sayers don't get paid for their talk, unlike the day laborers engaged in non-stop re-editing Soviet history textbooks.

And then there's the rumor that from a bird's eye view, the Chernigov train station looks like a Teutonic cross.

I haven't actually chanced to inspect the building from above, but I can testify—of all the train stations I've visited, only here can you get boiling water from an impressive copper faucet at any time of day...)

It's quite a clever ploy (Ain't it, buddy?) to share with the uninitiated that the building of the Central House of the Soviet Army resembles a five-pointed star for fleeting birds. As if our feathered friends have nothing else to do but following the fall of their droppings at what happened to turn up far below their busy wing.

Inside, it's a solid building, with a large auditorium on the first floor, and spacious galleries on the second floor, lined with exhibits on stands.

With meticulous attention, I indulged in the exhibition of postal envelopes and matchbox stickers produced during the Great Patriotic War. Because of arriving at the Central House of Soviet Army two hours before the concert. What else was there to do in unfamiliar Moscow surrendered to the winter?

The images on the envelopes and stickers, despite their naive primitivism, struck a deep chord with a warm, nostalgic note in me, as I grew up on the black-and-white humus of films of that era.

—·—

Then I went down to the hall, and soon the jazz musicians arrived to set up and test their instruments on stage—drums, vibraphone, speakers...

Having finished their preparations, the musicians unanimously attacked the bald Jew for being too smart and late again. Taking up a defensive perimeter, he drove a counter-hooey about the hardships of Moscow life, and went into massive offensive threatening to give up on this music altogether, because: well, really, who needs it, huh?

They moved bandying their counterarguments backstage, and the hall began to slowly fill. For the audience of a hundred of jazz lovers, the rows of purple plush seats were more than enough.

And then the concert began... A tall, plump girl in black hosted it, and she also sang occasionally. I absorbed number after number and wanted only one thing—for them to never end. What Dixieland the vibraphone produced! What riffs on the bass guitar!

In one of the numbers, the bassist with his long-necked instrument, and the tall girl were left completely alone, the three of them on stage, not counting the microphone. And they created blues of such frank sexuality that after that all mass porn became a puddle of slush at the gate to a kolkhoz cattle farm...

The Jew showed up only once; he was playing the bongos. Played?! The entire African continent will not produce the like delight on all their djembes and dunduns.

I forgave him for his bald head and stupid talk before the concert, because he became a completely different person. He forgot that he 'didn't need it anymore' and created rhythms getting you high to uncontrollable joy:

'Bravo! Bravo!'

~ ~ ~

Apparently, some kind of parallel event was being held in one of the star limbs of the CHSA pentacle structure, because many officers in full dress uniform, not present at the concert, were crowding by the locker room counter.

The cloakroom girl brought coats for two at once and lowered them on the counter top: a general's greatcoat – tight curls in Karakul fleece of the astrakhan collar, scarlet silk lining – and (so

then this dried honey agaric on my left is a general?) and the deme-season overcoat bought in the previous decade for 30 rubles from Alyosha Ocheret, a student of NSPI.

She left the pair on the sheen of polished wood and tarried over their exquisite contrast, letting out a barely noticeable sad sigh. Eternal sadness sounded in her quiet exhale.

(... yes, dear one, choice making was, is, and always will be tragic. The usual insoluble dilemma — either a hussar in the pink, but without a penny in his pocket, or a scruffy general, of a secure income.

Both have ways and levers to console a lady in her sighing mood, yet those means and levers take roots and spring from not the same beds; hence, the choice, and the tragedy inherent to it...)

—

Muscovite taxi drivers are way more professional than their Kyiv colleagues. In any case, the one who picked me up after the concert, appreciating my camel-haired appearance and lack of luggage, took me at the first try to a hotel, where they don't start the boring bullshit about pre-booking...

The Polar Hotel started from the sidewalk and was lost somewhere up there in the darkness of the night sky... The receptionist sent me by elevator to unimaginable heights between the twelfth and sixteenth floors.

The room turned out to be similar to the repose rooms at Ukrainian train stations, where people are always accepted just for asking, whenever they have on them the passport and a ruble for a bed. Only in the Polar shelter there were more beds – about twenty of them, on which the guests were already lying, having changed into their blue sweatpants.

I had only what I had on, and all there remained to do under the circumstances was to undress and – good-night...

However, my stomach started its mournful protests complaining of my forgetfulness, which left it empty after partaking in the feast of cultural life at CHSA. Egoistic egotism!

Besides, it grumbled about the earlier offenses in the course of the same day. Flared with the heat of hunt for toy railroad I never thought of taking a bite to give the poor wretch, my stomach, some, at least provisional, fill.

I had to ask the mate shelters where there was a dining room or some kind of buffet. To this, the imposing athletes, with something like gloating, explained that everything like that here is closed at seven.

The feeling of hunger and the growing desire to the neighbors to their proper place (and even so joyfully: 'but everything is already closed!') forced me to leave my camel coat at the stables in the common wardrobe of the room and wheeze down by the elevator.

—

In the night outside, on the meter-wide one-step porch covered with a centimeter-thick layer of fluffy snow, next to the hotel entrance there was also a high door to the restaurant. Locked, as predicted.

However, in the depths behind hits glass wing, light and some distant motion could be discerned...

I began pounding on the brown frame of the door panes. A man in a black visored cap, sporting wide yellow stripes athwart his jacket sleeves appeared on the other side of the transparent barrier.

At the sight of me, standing against the backdrop of the inky dark and downing flakes; no hat, a wide-open blue corduroy jacket over a white shirt...

Here, without starting your deduction engine, it was obvious that I had gone out to have my nose powder, or somehow otherwise enjoy the fresh snow in the open air, and now I wanted to go back.

He unlocked the door and I rushed into the hall.

~ ~ ~

The restaurant impressed with its vast dimensions. It was enough to host a couple of weddings, synchronously-parallel, but at the same time there remained a group of unengaged tables. About half a dozen.

I had to wait quite a long time until the waiter came up, to get informed about my desire to eat. Something simpler, no frills.

To pass the time until he returned with my Spartan order, I watched the dance of the just married pair from the wedding party closest to my table. At the end of their, so to say, tango, the plump bride in white freaked out for some reason, and surprised the frail groom with a mean elbow into plexus and returned to the banquet table.

The skinny man grabbed his tie so as not to collapse while his breath was restoring. His face contorted into a fake smile, revealing the absence of the upper incisor and canine together. (Lost at the registry office?) The foundation of a marriage relationship was laid right at the wedding.

Oh, boy! You've really stepped into some fu... Sorry, that was a wrong card... Aha! Here it is!. 'May the love and happiness you feel today shine through the years...'

—

I was one ruble short on my dinner bill. Or rather, I still had a ruble left, but I saved it for the next day's expenses. Without going into details, I told the waiter about the shortage, promised that I would definitely return it and asked his name. He identified himself and showed no persistence regarding the ruble.

I went up to my room full of both grab and benevolence, and to the room-mates' questions, I explained with a distracted yawn that the restaurant downstairs was still open.

~ ~ ~

24 hours later, I arrived in Konotop and proudly carried my birthday present to At-Seven-Winds. Natasha's family already lived there, in a large nine-story building built by PMK-7.

I knew the location of their apartment—to help the young family, I'd been writing philosophy and history test papers for Gena, which he'd been assigned by his correspondence institute in Poltava. A brother-in-law of drenched repute can sometimes be of use...

The elevator ride to the fourth floor seemed provincially brief, but no one opened the door for me. Gena might have gone for exams in Poltava, and Natasha visiting her gossip among the neighbors for whom I hadn't written papers.

—

On my way to Decemberists 13, I turned into one of the dead ends of Pirogov Street, where Gena's parents' house stood. His father was already asleep, but Natalya Savelyevna sitting yet with Andrey, her grandson and my nephew, in the living room.

I wanted to leave the box and go, but she asked me to assemble the toy; the boy's still awake anyway.

When the train, began to whir its loops on the living room floor, there were no uncles or nephews left; Andrey and I became enchanted souls of the same age...

~ ~ ~

It took about a year to restore the translations lost tracelessly at my inebrious catatonic stupor in the commuter train vestibule. I couldn't prolong the pleasure any longer—the vanished texts were still too fresh in my memory.

After the final period in the last of anew translated stories, I took Maugham's four-volume set to Nezhyn to return it to Nonna.

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