



DEATH AND THE EVERYDAY

СОДЕРЖИТ
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ

BY DANIL GRISHKO

18+

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Death and the Everyday

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Nastya works at a factory, lives in poverty, and believes that one day she will create a painting that will make her entire life worthwhile. But exhaustion, humiliation, and an insistent voice in her head gradually turn that dream into an obsession — one that reopens old wounds and draws other lives into its orbit. Death and the Everyday is a dark psychological novel about the attempt to escape the burdens of ordinary life — and the price that escape exacts not only from the person seeking it, but from everyone who happens to be around that person.

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Данил Гришко

Death and the Everyday

Dear reader!

Thank you for deciding to read my book. I am very grateful for this, and hope that you will enjoy this experience.

*This is the first complete story written by my hand, created for many reasons, including entertainment, self-determination and, most importantly, **a warning** to any of the creators and artists out there throughout the world and times that will pass.*

I wish I could leave here the names of many friends and family members for you to read, but the truth is there is none that I could mention. There were of course those who read some of the chapters, and gave their criticisms and comments regarding this story, and I thanked each and every one of them in person. The reason I even mention this is not to receive pity, or to express any inner pain, but to remind to everyone that very often, we have to learn to overcome the trials on our own, or face the negligence and betrayals from those we care for. The important part is to never surrender, and divert your focus to other things and other people, because no matter what, there is much good in the world around us.

That said, I wish you a good fortune and pleasant time with this book and beyond it!

I hope you enjoy the book. Danil Grishko

Obsession.

*Control over chaos,
Solitude through pain,
Determination over surrender,
Life over existence,
Obsession...with the dream.*

Chapter 1: Sleepless Night

Through the fogged-up window, lights are visible, flashing before my eyes one after another. An empty bus hurtles through the night city, completing its final route. I can barely keep my eyes open, my legs feel weak and my hands refuse to obey altogether.

“Keep it together, girl,” I whisper to myself. “Focus. Do not fall asleep. Do not fall asleep...”

It is always like this in the evenings. On top of it all, blindness sets in — a consequence of a hard day's work. This shift took longer than usual, thankfully, my employer gave me money for the bus, and a bag of food, so that I would not have to cook when I get home. A kind gesture, but I doubt that I will get a chance to eat, before collapsing on the bed. The most important thing right now is not to fall asleep, because no one will give me a ride back, and to hobble home on foot means arriving late in the middle of the night, not getting enough sleep, and waking up in the morning with savage fatigue, guaranteeing myself a horrible work day.

Finally, through a wiped-clear part of the glass, a bus stop comes into view. I look at the driver who lazily glances into the cabin via the rear view mirror, and seeing the last passenger getting ready to leave, he begins to brake, gradually pulling off the road. Jumping out through the door, I almost land in a dirty puddle, but luckily miss, and wet shoes do not get added to the list of tomorrow morning's problems. This night feels especially cold, made worse by fatigue and hunger.

I walk the street, barely moving my feet. Drizzle hits my face. But it is of no trouble, because I am nearing the apartments, to my lovely neighbors – either silent and apathetic or loud and unruly. The only friend I have here is Uncle Vasya, who must have gotten drunk – his armchair on the street is empty, and in the evenings, he either drinks in his apartment, or gazes at the night sky, sitting in his favorite chair, so it is clear which one he chose today. That is one of the many reasons I hate cold weather. People shut themselves in their holes, alone with themselves, their own thoughts, pains and failures. These are the last days of the autumn. Within the week, it will be winter, and it will get much colder...

Entering the building, I feel a surge of helpless rage – the elevator is out of order. I climb the stairs to the eighth floor. The anger pushes my legs forward. The climb lasts an eternity. Finally reaching the apartment door, I unlock it and go inside. I close the door and leave the keys in the lock, so I will not have to look for them in the morning. Tossing the bag with food and my work clothes on the floor, I take off my shoes and slowly drag myself to the bedroom, where an unmade bed awaits me. Cool and rumped, it promises blissful, dreamless sleep. I spend the last of my strength on a trip to the shower. The hot water washes away the industrial smell, the layers of dust mixed with oil, and the flakes of dead skin. All that filth flows down the drain, yet tomorrow, it will find its way back onto my body.

Looking in the mirror, I see a bloated body. I was thinner once, with better proportions – my face was thin, my breasts were smaller yet better shaped, and I had little fat on my belly. The organism adapts to hard labor far too quickly, and as a result, folds of fat appear. Ah, and not so long ago, I could look into it and feel pride, for myself and that time spent in the gym. But that was a different time, the time of student years, a time of expectations and hopes. I cut my hair short long ago, to adhere to safety regulations, dying at the factory was never the peak of my ambition. But I miss the hair, long, black as a crow's feather. They were beautiful and fitting to my blue eyes. And now, there is grey in my hair and bags under my eyes.

I take my old bathrobe with flowers and walk out of the bathroom. My back, as always, is wet, because when your muscles hurt, it is difficult to dry it properly. Today's shift was truly hard, leaving behind this terrible exhaustion that frightens me. Naive youngsters often believe that fatigue leads to sleep, unaware of the trials of adult life, when overworking can hinder sleep, or rob you of it entirely.

As I walk into the bedroom, my eyes immediately fall on the canvas standing in the dark corner. “*The Masterpiece*” stands hopelessly dormant, and its hibernation resembles a coma. I cannot even remember the last time I worked on it. The brush and palette have long been covered in dust.

“*Dreams, covered in dust,*” the voice in my head whispers.

I lie down thinking about all that has been happening. I began to work when I left my family behind. I wanted to devote myself to something grand, something that would allow me to claw my way out of this abyss of poverty and achieve my dream. But in time, the work began to take its toll, and my sketches brought me no pleasure whatsoever. I could not subject imperfect creations, brought into life without proper work and inspiration, to the world's eyes. And just like that, the idea of *The Masterpiece* was born. It was meant to be my first ultimate work, one that would shutter the critics and impress all who would gaze upon it. Something that would bring me money, fame and recognition. Something that would give my life meaning, turning mere existence into something more. Something to be enjoyed and celebrated, instead of clung to. Yet, over time, even that idea was not strong enough to fight the exhaustion of flesh, and the weariness of spirit. And just like so many others, I was drawn into working my fingers to the bone, neglecting my dreams in favor of “reality”...

Just like my parents wanted me to.

If there was any strength left in this body, a wave of laughter would have washed over it. The times were difficult, and I had no other places to go. No other places where money, even if little, would come in the same amounts – if it would come at all. Many simple workers were cheated, their salaries stolen, while their work and time were irretrievable. I tried to run away from such a life, and I never wanted to be in sport or to become someone's secretary. I wanted to be more. Yet if I were to return to painting, I would have to abandon my work at the factory – something I have thought of many times, yet never gone through with. Because it is impossible to create when your mind is muddled by the long day, and your body trembles even at simple movements. Still, it is even more difficult to paint when you have nothing to eat. I remain at the failing production facility that once brought money to everyone connected to it. Now wages were delayed, foremen and shop managers are quitting, and all the former directors are constantly looking for ways to make money quickly and disappear into the sunset.

Sleep will not come. This is one of those nights where you must toss and turn, feeling the heat on a crumpled pillow, until you manage to sleep for one or two hours. Tomorrow is the last day before the weekends. Maybe I can pretend to be busy with intense work activity. Stepanych – the foreman of the factory will surely be drunk first thing in the morning. The main thing is to bother him first, pester him with questions, and he will stop bugging me with his useless tasks himself. In my mind's eye, I can see his fat unshaved face, wrinkles on his face since he turned fifty, the stench of garlic and alcohol, his lustful smile. Oh, how many times he has tried to get me in his bed, with promises of what a good lover he is, of how it might affect my envelope with money. I remember the anger and disappointment in his face, when I tell him...

“If I wanted to sleep with men for money, I would have chosen someone richer and better looking.”

The old bastard never got over it – the anger and desire for me were still eating away at him. Even after two years of hard labor, after my body became what it is, he still yearns for it.

“*He despises you because he is unhappy, and because he doesn't know the value of labor.*”

The Voice is quiet. It sounds like my own, but it is not. I must not answer. Otherwise, the neighbors will hear.

“*They managed to get drunk before you showed up and can't hear a thing anymore. That ugly hag, with her drink-sodden face, is snoring loud enough for the whole apartment block to hear.*”

Loud snoring is indeed coming from the next apartment. It is her, because her latest “intended” is a scrawny guy unlikely to have such large lungs.

“And the quiet old lady downstairs is sleeping like a baby. She never makes any noise. Doesn't even watch TV. I wonder what she does at home all day? Stares out the window? Watches how happy others are, while trying to feel at least a fragment of their joy?”

“I need to sleep,” I say quietly, so that none will accidentally hear the conversation.

*“No,” the voice responds, harshly. “You need to think. You're tired and sleep won't come. Why is **It** standing there abandoned?”*

“What are you talking about?”

*“You know **What** I'm talking about. The Dream. The Way Out. The Promise of Paradise. **The Masterpiece**. You think about it every day, and yet you do not act upon these thoughts. How much suffering will this existence provide before you see that only through work, through emotion, can you break these rusted chains of slavery?”*

“I'm tired. I need to sleep. Please, let me sleep.”

“You want to rest before work, where you are a nobody, where they pay you scraps of what they make, where you must endure a despotic alcoholic, who has you naked in his filthy sweaty head. You need to wipe the canvas and brush, buy new paints, and show everyone what you're capable of. But most importantly, you need to free yourself from the shackles of poverty that bind the unworthy! Look upon it! Look upon your work!”

I sigh and get my feet on the cold wooden floor, taking a few steps towards the painting. There is so much missing here. It is merely started. Yet, here is passion, an idea, the colors of red that are reflected in the moonlight that is coming from the window that is behind me. This painting is beautiful.

“It has such promise. Just like you.”

“Yes. But it needs more work. Lots more work... And I'm not ready. My mind is dulled and swelling with anger.”

“EXCUSES. You keep running, but is death in poverty really better than falling from the skies?...”

“It's not,” I admit quietly. “But what can I do?”

“These weekends. This is your chance to start again.”

“I wanted to rest from it all. I'm so tired. After all, it is my...”

*“Is it more important than The Masterpiece? Is resting and celebrating all by yourself more important than your **LIFE'S WORK**?”*

I go back to bed and fall upon it.

“...I need to rest.”

These were the last of my thoughts, before I finally fell into the darkness of my tired and wounded mind.

Chapter 2: Just Another Day

Upon waking, the first thing my eyes see is “*The Masterpiece*.” In the morning’s dim light, it seems somewhat mysterious, as if a landscape surrounded by fog, or an ancient beast in deep slumber. I wish I could dispel the fog, I wish I could awaken the beast. The Voice begins to cackle in my head, as if to mock me for my inaction. Anger fills me, driving away the last remnants of sleep.

The alarm hasn't gone off yet, but that moment is not far away, and an unpleasant anticipation hangs in the air, preventing true relaxation. Images from the past flash in my head: tea parties with friends, watching movies, a picnic by the river with meat and guitar... Things were so good back then. There was laughter, and simplicity. People cared for each other, when they had no obligations and no families. We dreamt together.

Not anymore.

The alarm rings. The workday is waiting. I get up, put on the work pants that are stained with black, oily spots, a t-shirt, and the sweater that is still wet from the washing – but with this cold, it is still better than nothing. While making myself some hot, cheap coffee, I hear something. An unintelligible whisper. Perhaps it is time to think about restarting the course of pills, or I will go insane. I don't want to consume them. They are expensive, and aside from the intended effects – quieting my thoughts, distorting my artistic abilities, twisting my thoughts and memories – they would bring me some measure of peace. And wash away that ever-present feeling that everything is lost.

I leave my apartment and step out into the cold street. Getting to work in the morning is quite the adventure. The path leads through an abandoned park and railway tracks where wild dogs often run. Seeing them, I always remember Bublik – the dog I grew up with. He always wagged his tail and ran to greet me, even when he got very old, when his hearing dulled and his sick paws wouldn't let him run. Even through the veil of senile weakness, every dog remains a curious and kind puppy. Tears well up in my eyes, and I start muttering under my breath.

“My friend. My *only* faithful friend...”

Climbing up the hill, I finally reach the road where the enterprise is located. Nearby is the pharmacy, and it is open. Making sure that no one else is in sight, I run forward, basically storming in. No one saw me, I think. The young girl who stands behind the counter looks at me with her eyes wide. I smile at her to soothe her fear that I might be some drug-addicted filth. Her disposition changes once she sees my smile. I wish her a good morning and ask for the medicine I need.

“Yes, we do have them,” she answers politely, with the same smile. “Could you please show me the prescription?”

I nod and show her the prescription from my pocket. The piece of paper is a bit torn from previous use. She looks at it, then nods, and gives me the pills. I also ask for water, then I pay, and immediately take my pills – those meant to quell all dark thoughts. It will take a couple of days before the blessed silence returns to my head.

*“And then what? There will be headaches, the lack of thinking, the inability to finish **The Masterpiece**. Is it worth it? This life that does not bring you joy or happiness?”*

I walk into the large grey building, and walk through it, reaching the dressing room. As I change and look at my body once again, I feel disgust. The anger starts to build within me. When I go out, Stepanych is waiting for me outside, and starts boozing first thing in the morning.

“You better get to work, come on. You come here and wait until it strikes eight? If you started now, you'd get more done. And then you talk about some salary... If you laze about, I won't mark this shift.”

Anger fills me, and the Voice in my head sneers.

“He walks home along the tree line. There are no cameras there. No witnesses. Scuff the soles, wear shoes a size bigger... THEN STAB HIM! AGAIN, AND AGAIN! MAKE HIM CRY, MAKE HIM SCREAM!... Then take his belongings and go home through the night. No one will know it was you. Another robbery in the times of desperation and need.”

Stepanych is missing a couple of teeth, and those that remain have plaque on them that comes from cigarettes and cheap coffee. He desperately wants to think that he is a man, but in my eyes, he is a pathetic clown and alcoholic who beats his wife and kids, a cheating bastard who would copulate with anyone who'd spread their legs for him.

I walk away from him in silence, and from what started in my head. I will get some water and get to work. Welding is not something I wanted to do in life. Many welders have problems with vision, and that scares me enough to always use the welding helmet, no matter how quick the process might be. I cannot risk my sight – the sight that allows me to paint. And yet there is always a risk here. So why did I choose this? Why do I risk my dream for this? Is it even worth it?

“Those are the best thoughts you’ve had today. Perhaps you will see the error of your way.”

In the welding helmet, I can speak to myself freely.

“I need the work. To eat. To live.”

“This is not living, but existence. You are dying. A slow and rather painful death. Is that what you wanted when you abandoned those who did not believe in you? Is that why YOU were abandoned by those who did not believe in you?”

During the break, I chat with the men from production. At the meeting, the question of raising wages comes up. The classic lines sound: “times are tough,” “no shipments,” “no clients,” “we'll definitely raise it next year.” Then they ask for more loyalty, in response to which Valentin Viktorovich, who works here as a mechanic, shakes his fist, chanting:

“If you want loyalty, hire a dog!”

“Yeah, yeah,” the grinders support him. “You can’t eat loyalty, damn it! We've been waiting for years. How long can this go on? I’ve got a family to feed! My kids need new boots and jeans!”

The scariest thing is that in this city, you can count the enterprises on the fingers of one hand, and the conditions here aren’t the worst... The management knows this, but they also know that a collective revolt is quite likely, because here – there's a real brotherhood of workers, which, despite many attempts, no one has managed to break. Finding a replacement would be problematic, because Stepanych already tried that, and those he found were beaten in the night. Badly. The workers here are strong and desperate men. They carry the factory on their shoulders and will not let anyone else take their place. And so, the management has no choice but to make concessions: paid days off, and other joys. The proletariat resumes work, and the bourgeoisie retreats into the shadows, into their high offices, probably thinking about how to save more money.

Being an assistant at the metalworking bench, I had to learn little by little what Uncle Lyosha does. A gray-haired man in the sunset of his years, he drills, cuts, and shapes metal into a great many pieces of machinery. Even though his hands and face are covered in industrial oil, he feels no discomfort. On the contrary, he laughs, jokes, tells anecdotes that inevitably bring a smile to my face. Respect for him and the other men appeared almost from the first day of my work here. A sense of brotherhood, and the fact that each possesses a set of unique skills, gives at least some meaning to being here.

“Here, where? In that place where you are not valued? Or on this Earth, where you are also not valued?”

It has been going on for half a year now. The frustration grows, and the Voice is getting louder. And all these six months, I refuse to go see a doctor. The patient rarely admits that he has a problem, but I am afraid of something else – a certain diagnosis could cost me my job and my life. Being locked up in a medical facility, where I would be made into a vegetable and a toy for the staff. Or

if the diagnosis is not that bad – becoming homeless, wandering the streets, because no one would want a “crazy” person at their workplace.

“You are correct. People don’t forgive. They don’t seek to understand those near them. And the ‘correctional’ system punishes and tortures. They don’t have patients. They have victims. Want to know what else is funny? They don’t even promise healing.”

“Indeed they don’t.”

“You saying something?” asks Uncle Lyosha.

Get a grip, you fool! These people are not your friends. They will betray you the first chance they get! Focus, Nastya! Breathe in, breathe out. These are just your thoughts. The others do not hear them.

“Nothing, Uncle Lyosh. Just thinking out loud.”

“Ah. Well, get on with it, I’m basically done already. You can clean up the place and go get changed.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help?”

“I’m fine, dear. Go home and have a good nap, alright?”

Uncle Lyosha is a good guy, and I do need to clean up. A workstation is a reflection of the person and the worker. But why then do I feel anger? Not at him, but... At what?

“You were deceived with promises of a better life. Deceived by the necessity to study. But even after going through that path, you ended up in the same place as these wretches. You are similar, with one exception: you cannot accept it. You cannot hide or run away. This understanding is always with you. It devours you along with your rage.”

The hour passes, and it is time for another break. I never liked smoking, never tried doing it, yet I stand there, breathing air tinged with cigarette smoke. I feel Stepanych’s look on me, thinking of what to say. Why do fools always rush toward death and conflict?

“He sees you as a lonely girl. His wife is passive. He’s lost all interest in beating her or mating with her. You are a refreshment to him. A new body, to slam. A new spirit to break. He doesn’t know how far he missed...”

“So, Nastya, when are you going to leave? You’re a painter, right? Go paint something.”

I remember the day I spoke of this to them, and I regret it still. Most of them didn’t care at all, never sought to ask me about it, as if painting is something that anyone can do. And then there was Stepanych...

“Leave her alone, asshole,” Uncle Lyosha’s words are sharp. “Or I’ll bash your head with a wrench.”

“Yeah? You actually like working with her? I know a dozen boys who would do anything to be in her place.”

I feel my heart squeeze and my muscles tense. And yet I look at him and smile.

“Does your wife know about them boys, *Stepushka*?”

The men laugh, and the foreman’s face becomes red.

“I’d wash your tongue with soap, you lazy cow.”

“Maybe you should wash yourself. Then there will be more of them boys you like so much.”

The men laugh again. Stepanych becomes erratic. He cannot hide his anger, like I can. He may be a man, but he is weak. A drunk who got his job only because of his friendship with the factory’s owner.

He doesn’t relent.

“Look at Vasya here. He’s got the same salary as you, and he is overseeing this entire factory!”

“That’s his problem, not mine. And how would you know about our salaries?”

“If you don’t want to work, then get out! You’re useless in any case! Worthless painter.”

I jerk uncontrollably, and then lunge forward. My fist is tight, and white knuckles crush his red, veiny nose. He steps back, trips over the bucket of water, and collapses onto it. I feel the need to claw out his eyes, but suddenly remember that we are not alone here.

“Soon...”

He touches his nose, and seeing the blood, his mad eyes focus on me.

“You bitch, you’re done! Hear me?! Done!”

He gets up, fueled by the same anger, and moves toward me. Fear grabs me by the throat, and I take a step back. But before anything happens, the other men step in between us. Uncle Lyosha screams at him.

“Are you out of your mind?! Gonna hit a woman?”

“She hit me first!”

“Should’ve kept your cockhole shut,” the oldest of them all says, spitting on the floor.

Stepanych looks me in the eyes.

“This isn’t over.”

He storms out and into the offices. Uncle Lyosha turns around and looks at my hands. Concern is visible on his dirty face.

“He’s going to the director. Wash your hands with cold water and keep your fist under the stream for as long as you can. Maybe there won’t be any bruises.”

I nod, but I know that the impact was good, and the consequences of my actions are now rushing toward me with each passing moment. So why, instead of fear, do I feel... relief? Did lashing out make me feel what I need, or is it because I just ensured that soon I will no longer have to work here?

I go to the restroom and start washing the blood off my hand, hoping that the cold water, which somehow burns my skin, will prevent a bruise from showing. Why have so many people in my life hated me? I know how to work, I always come on time. I never drink during working hours, I produce what is demanded of me. So why? Why does evil reign? Is it inaction? Was I supposed to hit him earlier? I look in the mirror. The sound of running water drowns any thoughts I have. It feels good. Suddenly I hear a voice calling out to me. It’s Uncle Lyosha.

“Nast’! You alright in there?”

“Peachy! Why?”

“The...director is asking for you.”

“The bravest are the snitches, huh?”

“Ah, to hell with that guy! Don’t worry, girl, we’re on your side. I already spoke with him, though the conversation was brief. Still, I think he’ll listen. But if anything goes south, we’re with ya!”

But does it really matter? And what can you do? These are but words. If you wanted to act, you would have already put them into action, as you did when it was your paycheck on the line. So, these are empty promises once again. The truth is that I’m alone. And I’m about to get fired because of some degenerate drunk who wanted me in his bed, and instead got his nose broken by my fist.

“*WE ARE ALMOST FREE.*” The harsh whisper passes through my mind, and I shake it away.

“Now is not the time,” I whisper. “Focus. The director can’t see this. Can’t fathom the idea that something is wrong with me. Because if he does, then...then I’ll get fired.”

“*And what is wrong with that? The job you hate with people who will never stand up for you if there is risk to them.*”

“Because I must eat. And if I don’t eat, I die.”

The voice is silent now. Apparently, there is some semblance of sense even in madness. I wash my face once again, making sure that it is clean, and then go upstairs, stepping on the old, rusty ladder to the head office.

Viktor Vasilievich – the director of the factory – is a bald man, dressed in a clean white shirt and new jeans imported from Western countries. He has never looked at me like a hungry dog at a

piece of juicy meat, but rather with curiosity – a woman in a factory, one capable of doing a man's job. Perhaps he even respects me, as much as a man of his position can respect anyone.

"Anastasia, good day. Please sit."

"Good day, Viktor Vasilievich."

He looks at me with his blue eyes. They seem cold, and perhaps there is darkness within him, but not toward me. He gently shakes his head.

"What were you thinking? The guy is a rat, and he is the nephew of the local officials. That is the only real reason why he is here."

"I didn't know that," my response is calm and detached. "I thought he was your friend."

He laughs, but not in amusement.

"No, I have better friends. You should have come to me and asked for help. I would have spoken to his uncle, and he would have backed off. But now that this situation is out, I can't risk tangling with the law right now. I have too much going on as it is."

"I understand."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to fire you. Well, not really. See, I have other places you could work. You could be an accountant, or maybe my assistant. And before you think anything, I'd remind you that I have a wife whom I love. I just don't want to see you go out into nothing because of that dogshit."

The proposition surprises me. Another job in these times of need, and after a scandal? Does he see something in me?

"You will work a full shift, and the hours might be longer, the pay will be the same, but you won't have to feel the pain in your muscles or wash oil off your skin."

*"What he means is that **The Masterpiece** will never be finished. You'll drown in his papers, fulfilling his dreams, while forsaking your own. THAT'S HIS OFFER."*

It is likely that I would abandon painting. And then what? My time wasted? My talent discarded? No. It won't happen. I know why I came here. I've prepared for this, and I won't beg or accept some scraps from the table.

The choice is made. I shake my head.

"I wouldn't want to embarrass you again."

He nods, then looks at me again. Something is in his eyes. Not desire. But something I do not like.

"Anastasia, do you perhaps need any help?"

"How do you mean?"

He shrugs.

"Anything, really. You've worked so hard and never asked me for anything. Most people do. And I want to help you."

"Does that irritate you? That people don't come and beg for scraps?"

Somehow the man in front of me does not seem offended. Instead, he narrows his eyes just a bit.

"That sack of shit also said that you were jumping before you struck. Can you tell me what that was about?"

"He's lying. Exaggerating. I hit him after he insulted me numerous times, and he started the entire thing!"

He slowly nods.

"Okay. I trust you more than I do him, be certain of that. It's just that you are a human being, and I care for your well-being."

I feel somewhat relaxed. Then my mind bursts with my recent words. I shouldn't have said what I said. He is not my enemy. He is just a man who wants to do good by his family.

"About what I just said..."

He waves his hand and smiles.

“You’re upset, unnerved, I get it. And if I’ve learned anything, it is not to fight, nor to argue with a woman. You never admit you’re wrong, so what’s the point?”

“There is none.”

“Exactly. Listen. You leave of your own desire, that way you’ll be able to find another job. And if you change your mind about accepting my help, my door is always open. I won’t fire you immediately. No one can make me do that. You keep coming, work, and if you need extra time to find a new place or speak with potential employers during work hours, I’ll of course allow it.”

“Thank you, Viktor Vasilievich.”

“It’s nothing. I just wish it hadn’t happened. You’re a good girl. Never drunk at work, always came on time, did exactly what you’re paid for and even more. Speaking of which...”

He reaches into a cabinet and puts an envelope on the table.

“It’s a bit early, but maybe you’ll need a new set of clothes for your interview.”

I nod, accept what is owed to me, and then go out. He says something to me, but I no longer hear him. What I do hear is laughter in my head. I don’t stop at my workplace. Uncle Lyosha nods solemnly but offers nothing more.

Walking on the rails, I wonder at the time I now have. Being unemployed wasn’t something I yearned for. But it was better than enduring the constant looks of drunk pigs or injuring my hands on the faces of those who would insult me.

Chapter 3: Re-birthday

It is the day off. I stretch and cover myself in a blanket from head to toe, from side to side, as if I were a shawarma. Time passes, and in my mind's eye, I start to see strange visions. Dreams have long eluded me, but seeing something is still a possibility. The images are few, though I dream of *The Masterpiece*. It is no longer a project, no longer a dream, but a reality. Cameras flash in my face. People seek to ask what inspired me, and I wonder if I should mention the love of my youth, who inspired me. If inspiration is the catalyst, then does that mean that he takes at least some of the credit for my work? Perhaps not. The work was mine throughout the years of struggle, and he was never there for me. My heart knows that he is out there amongst that big crowd of artists and journalists, looking right at me while being with another woman whom he loves, as he never loved me.

I wake with a strong headache, wondering if I should have ignored the visions and tried to sleep instead. The evening before was uneventful. I got home, stared at the wall while my eyelids fell from time to time, and without any thought, I fell onto the bed and into dreamless sleep. The headache begins to assault me even stronger. Thankfully, I have the pills that can help with that problem.

I remember the pills that I bought a day before and now need to take my morning portion. They are meant to quell my mind, and yet I wonder if I truly need them. Raising my head, I see the canvas and wonder how much longer it will take for me to finish *The Masterpiece*. How can I say “no” to the only true dream that I have had for most of my life? What will I be if I relinquish it?

“Nothing. You will be nothing. Just like the rest of those at that factory. You will be another miserable drunk, with no dreams or ambitions of your own. A broken, shattered person who will not be living, but slowly dying.”

I shake the Voice away. I want it to be silent now. All it does is sprinkle salt on my wounds, but at the same time, it is the driving force that pushes me toward finishing my work. In that moment, I feel the ache in my stomach. And I haven't bought anything to eat. Great. Putting on my clothes, I walk out into the world yet again.

The cold is fierce, and so the street is empty. As I walk, trying to ignore the hunger, I see the first person, and a smile touches my face. It is Uncle Vasya. He stands by the children's swings, inspecting the scuffed metal and damaged wood from which they are made. A man in his sixties, he is one of the few decent people around here, the only person with whom I am willing to communicate. Spotting me, he smiles, and I walk up to him, extending my hand in greeting.

“Good morning, Uncle Vasya.”

“Hello-hello, dear,” he answers, shaking my hand. “Though it is not morning, but rather the end of the day. Were you asleep all day?”

“Yes. These last few days were rather...long.”

“I can only imagine.”

“What are you doing there?”

“Ah, the swings... I'm thinking about giving them a fresh coat.”

“Seems a bit late for that. The snow is already here. Too cold for that kind of work.”

“That's true. I'm thinking in the spring. Just need to save up the money first, then buy the paint. Better to buy it in winter, otherwise the price goes up.”

“Don't their parents have money for it?”

The old man smiles again.

“They do. Though apparently not for this.”

“Fancy some tea?”

“Oh, that’s always a yes.”

“Just not at my place, if that’s okay? It’s a circus of freaks over there right now.”

“I understand. Only, my place isn’t exactly tidy...”

“Ooooh, well that’s it then. We’re not friends anymore, and I’m going to go tell all the neighbors about what a slob you are!”

The old man bursts out laughing.

“Point. Let’s go then.”

Despite what he said, his one-room apartment is quite tidy and rather cozy. The old furniture, the ticking clock – they are like relics from another era, when life was not as cold and empty as it is now. The kettle boils, and as I pour the tea, Uncle Vasya brings out some sweet buns. I sit down at the table and begin to chew on them to sate the hunger, sipping at the hot tea to push it all down. But even in my state of hunger, I cannot help but feel and appreciate the tea’s aroma.

“So what’s with those swings?” I ask when my mouth is free of food.

“I want to oil them up, put on some new paint. Maybe it would be good to find some sand, you know, so that the kids could play.”

“Yeah. I merely don’t understand why it is you who is worrying about their well-being and not their parents.”

The old man shrugs.

“Maybe it is I who need the kids to be happy more than their parents do.”

“You mean the people that fear and discuss you behind your back?”

“The same. You think me a fool for doing that?”

“Not a fool. It is a good thing you are doing. But what is the point if you are hated and unappreciated?”

“The point is to give the children the childhood they deserve, and through example, show them that to be kind affects the lives of others. They will see me improving the things they love, and they will remember it. That memory will become the foundation of who exactly they will become.”

“So you take on the role of the caring parent, but without reaping the rewards. They will not care for you. They won’t help you.”

“This isn’t about gratitude, but about spreading kindness and selflessness through the minds of the young. This in itself is beneficial. And even more so, it calms me, soothing my mind and soul.”

I nod solemnly. There is no point in going further down that road. Uncle Vasya never talked about his early years, before prison. Though the “loving neighbors” did their best to spread rumors about him murdering two people – his wife and her lover – with an axe. Despite the act of killing and the reputation it brought him, when I met him, I saw a kind soul, filled with regret. Day by day, we began to simply greet each other on the street, and as time passed while others feared and ignored him, I became his friend and confidant, and he became the same to me.

“Did something happen?” he asks suspiciously.

“What do you mean?”

“You seem a bit grim.”

“Aren’t I always?”

“I mean more than usual. Did someone wrong you?”

What is the point in hiding something that is not much of a secret anyway?

“My boss – the scumbag. Not the director, I mean. The foreman.”

The old man chews on the bun, pushing it down with tea, thinking about what to say next.

“Did he... hurt you?”

I understand what he means, and for just a moment, I want to say yes, but almost immediately, I shake the thought away. How can I even think of lying to this man? He is my friend, and he does not deserve to be used and deceived. It is clear to me that emotions are clouding my judgment, that the anger seeks to break out and lash out at anyone close to me.

“Not in *that* sense. He's just... Well, to be short, he began to insult me, and I punched him in the nose. Managed to break it, actually. And then, as the brave man he is, he went to the director's office and filed a complaint. And since he is a relative of a big-certain-someone-I-do-not-know-who, I must look for a new job.”

Uncle Vasya seems to consider this, staring at the table and taking a sip of the warm, strong tea. Then, as he sets the cup down, he looks at me again.

“What a bastard. Pushing up a girl then complaining like a little bitch. His sort does not last long, you know.”

“Let me guess. You're going to tell me that God is going to punish him?”

“I wouldn't presume to speak for the Lord. No. I'm speaking about the fact that people like him tend to find problems, and one day, they do not have the strength or the ability to defend themselves from the consequences of their actions.”

I am not sure that this is true, but decide not to argue with a man who seeks salvation and peace in the arms of God.

“Maybe. I just do not see it much.”

“Well, believe it. Eventually people like him tend to find trouble from which they can't recover. Anyway, what did the director say to you? Did he fire you right away? Or did he try to defend you?”

“He couldn't defend me. But he gave me some time to find a new job.”

“And did you?”

“I was fired just yesterday. Didn't have much time, you know.”

“Right. Sorry. So, what's next?”

“I don't know, Uncle Vasya. Truth be told, I'm very, very tired. And not just from work, but from life in general.”

He frowned.

“You should stop even thinking such things. The only good girl around, and you're talking about dying. And over what? Some fools from a factory?”

“It's not just them...”

“To hell with all of them! Are you trying to say a girl like you has no reason to walk the Earth? Come on, I'm not telling you to endure or to go find someone. But there's always a reason to live. I should know.”

I look at him as he speaks and think about how much I wish we were the same age. He is smart, handy, respectful, and empathetic. It doesn't bother me that he killed his wife, because she had been promiscuous. Uncle Vasya is a good man, just with a crippled soul and a broken fate.

“I'm thinking of finishing the painting.”

“That one? What was its name? Remind me. Masterpiece...”

Uncle Vasya is the only one who knows about *The Masterpiece*. Moreover, he has seen the sketches and even asks about it, often enough to show interest without being annoying.

“*The Masterpiece*. Yes.”

“Well then, go for it! Or are those neighbors-freaks bothering you?”

“They're calmer during the day. So, no.”

The old man breaks off a piece of his bun, dunks it in the tea, quickly pulls it out, puts it in his mouth, then continues.

“Look, if anything, you know that my house is your house, right? If you need to paint in silence, I have the space here.”

“No, Uncle Vasya, thank you, of course, but I don't want to be a burden.”

“You're not a burden to me. You're the only friend I've got.”

I enter my apartment and hear the drunken pig of a neighbor wake up and start shouting at her family. It would not do me any good to talk to her. I tried that once. She is not a reasonable person. It

is interesting that our lives are similar; we are both living in the same building, none of us is rich, but she's lazy, and the only things she loves are vodka and beating her children. Perhaps I should avenge myself by setting the proper services on her. But what would that accomplish? Would the children be better in an orphanage? No. And the children themselves – the two brothers – are already tainted. They killed a hedgehog for fun, beat up a homeless dog, and bullied some kids before those kids banded together and beat them, until the brothers never bothered them again. These people are evil. Irredeemable. They are a little spot of filth in the pool of sentient life. But to me, they are more: the ever-present distraction, an obstacle to be overcome. But they are not the only problem I have.

For the last ten years, I have tried desperately to learn how to paint. But I do not want to just paint for fun. Money is not my main motivator. I want to change the perception of the masses. To show them that art can be something more. Art – any art – should have meaning behind it. Modern art is becoming decadent, despite being at its peak. Great movies, music, paintings, and texts of all sorts are created for all to see, but the flood of quality begins to drain, while the quantity continues to grow. The world will need better art in the future – new creators who will inspire and entertain. The only downside of my ambition is perfectionism.

I fall back into the memory of the past. It is so vivid, so bright, I remember many details of that day and the starting point of it all...

I was at a children's sports camp. It was a sunny day. The sky was blue, and the clouds were few. Thin yet tall trees surrounded me. The birds chirped, adding to the atmosphere of bliss. I walked on the concrete slabs past benches, toward the boy whom I liked at the time. In the times of youth, love came much easier. Especially when the young man was tall, had black hair, and eyes of a color that seemed both brown and green. He sat on a bench, his feet crossed in the lotus pose, a notebook in one hand and a pen in the other. His eyes were closed, and his head was lifted toward the bright sun. Not wishing to intrude, I stopped and stood in perfect silence for a moment, waiting for him to open his eyes. The wind shook the branches and leaves on them, creating a soothing sound. Thankfully, I did not have to wait for long. He opened his eyes, put some words into his little notebook, then looked at me and smiled.

"Good morning, Nastyusha. I heard someone coming, but you waited. Thank you."

"Sasha! Good morning to you too. Can I sit?"

"Of course, of course! I almost finished it."

"Finished what exactly?"

"A poem."

"I wondered what you were doing there. What is this poem about?"

He smiled gently.

"Love. What else?"

"Wow... Can I read it?"

The young man anxiously pulled the notebook toward himself, hiding the rhymes and notes from me.

"It's... It's not ready yet. I want it to be perfect. Catching."

"You seem to take this seriously."

"Of course I am. I want to be a poet."

"Really? Seems a bit... ambitious."

He smiled a cunning smile.

"You mean impossible?"

"Difficult."

"Well, what isn't difficult in this life? Besides, what is the point in living without even trying to do what you want? There must be something you want."

"I always wanted to paint, but no one seems to believe in me. My parents sent me here because they wanted me to become a sportswoman. But that was not my wish."

“Well, they may see that you are capable. However, if painting is what you really want, why should it matter what others think or want out of you? Is painting illegal? If you wish to paint you should do that. We have this gift of life, and we must treasure it, by doing something that is beautiful and good. Painting is certainly goes with that category, don’t you think? And what if your paintings were to catch the attention of many people in the world? Think on this.”

And I did. For many nights I lay awake, comprehending Sasha’s words. He went back home, and I never saw him again, but his words stuck with me, reinforcing my need to achieve my desires instead of working to please my parents who spat on my wants and dreams. My head is splitting from the pain. All this stress seems endless, and I wonder when the last time was, that I felt something good in my life. Something aside from this gloom, unhappiness and madness...

Today... is my birthday. And I didn’t even remember it. Is this a sign that I’m falling through the cracks of sanity? Perhaps a celebration is in order? A little drink to calm my nerves, open up a good bottle of red wine... Ah hell, the pills! How could I forget? The Voice appears screeching in the back of my head.

“You don’t need them. They won’t relieve you of stress. So why use them?”

“To keep YOU in check.”

*“By forsaking me, you are forsaking **The Masterpiece**. And what will you be without it? Are you prepared for the consequences? The Old Crow would be glad if you did that. Do you think she still lives?”*

Irina Alexandrovna – or “The Old Crow” – was the art teacher in my school who gave me a C, for my drawings, because she did not like me, managing at the same time to convince my parents that I had no talent for it. All of this despite the fact that my works were much better than the works of those “gifted” kids she preferred, who in truth were mere sycophants that licked her ass, every chance they had. And even while seeing my potential, she would not teach me anything at all, as if her job was to receive fake compliments from the other kids. And my parents, whom I tried desperately to explain it all to, did not care that she was deliberately pushing me down. They did not believe in my abilities either.

What would this woman say to me now? Perhaps she would not be able to speak. Perhaps, her blood could become my new paint. But the blood wouldn’t be crimson, as I would have loved it to be. But then again, it is old, probably sticky, and dark. Unfit for my glorious creation. Yet taking her life, right before that painting... would have been something marvelous indeed. But these are dreams. What I need is to see it become reality. Not the killing part, though. At least I do not think so. I merely wish for her to regret, and to be bitter, as I am now. I wish that I were not chained by the past.

“Perhaps you should take the brush and free yourself from all those chains?”

Empowered by the darkest of my thoughts, I rise from the stool and go to my room, to see **The Masterpiece**. It is there, standing in the center of the room, on the white sheets on the floor, that are covered with drops of dry paint. I walk up to it. During the nighttime, my inspiration was always on the rise. I knew that trying to go to sleep would be a foolish notion. And so I stand and go back to my room, clean the brushes, grab a cup with water for the paints. Looking over the canvas with the red and black colors all over it, I see a spot from which I can continue my work. I see **The Masterpiece** before my eyes. I see what it is, what it is supposed to mean and represent. I see the colors, aggressive as they are, yet captivating, nonetheless. I work, without a thought of the day that is to come. Today is my birthday, and I will celebrate it by painting my wish into existence!

Chapter 4: Release

Before starting to work in the dim of night, I decide to create an atmosphere for myself. *The Masterpiece* has become the work of my life. Working on it feels sacred. I grab some candles from the small drawer and place them around the room – on the floor, on the windowsill, and few near the canvas itself. The paints are not as dry as I feared they would be, and so with the first stroke of the brush, the process begins. Time goes on as I move my hand in an attempt to feel the inspiration, and suddenly, it comes, flowing into my mind, washing away the stillness and the doubt. I mix the colors of red, shifting tones, creating the contrast of the seemingly same color. The canvas must appear as if it were alive. When the time comes for the darker colors, my hands begin to feel numb, and my eyes grow weary.

I go to the kitchen to hydrate and to wash the brushes before applying the new color. I do not light the room, performing everything in the cold darkness. The paints that go down the sink with water, seem to be black – in the light of day they would be red, but in the night, everything is the same. It is something interesting to behold, something otherworldly...

While the burner begins to warm up the kettle and everything around with the stream of fire, I try to fight off sleep and to think on *The Masterpiece*. The pace at which I work seems rather fast for the work to be perfect: however, I cannot ignore that unexplainable power of night fuels my artistic nature.

The kettle whistles, and I turn down the burner. While the tea is brewing, I look outside the window to see the falling snow. It is the 2nd of December, and I cannot remember the last time it snowed this early. When I was a young girl, perhaps it occurred more often. The last winters, however, were not so beautiful, there was filth and cold. Could this be a sign, a message of hope, a warning to stay home and continue my work?

As I go back with a cup of strong tea, I look over *The Masterpiece* and do not see any problems, or things that require fixing. For the first time, quality and quantity go toe to toe, and the progress itself inspires me to continue. Taking up the clean brush, I soak it in the black paint, then begin to move my hand along the edges of the canvas, creating the ground, the clouds, and the many shadows that are present in this sea of red.

A sense of importance fills me as I inflict changes upon my work. *The Masterpiece* stood here for months, and now I am making such progress. The paints are fresh, the picture renewed with more details, and its meaning becoming clearer to the viewer who has not yet come by that vision. The roots of life from which we come, and the ground in which we go.

My heart begins to beat intensely, and it is getting difficult to breathe. The inspiration and strong tea are not enough to help me make it through the night. These limitations pain and anger me, and I understand that I cannot go on. Not like this. Because art is only as good as when you are willing to work on it either through effort or inspiration, but not through frustration. And so, with two more movements of the brush, I decide that this is enough for today. I take a step back to marvel at what I have painted: the colors of red and black that are visible in the light of the candles are captivating, the message imprinted on the canvas is becoming clearer and deeper. I smile at the beauty, at the progress, at myself. Pride and joy fill me up – emotions and feelings long forgotten. Oh, I will show them... show the world that art, TRUE art still lives, and that they were wrong. ALL OF THEM WERE WRONG!

As I set the brushes aside, I fall onto the bed, still wearing the bathrobe, covering myself in a blanket, thinking of tomorrow and hoping that the artistic flow will remain as powerful as it was today. My heart keeps beating heavily, and for a moment, I wonder if I have finally spent too much

strength, that when I close my eyes I will die of exhaustion and endless stress. It surely feels like it, and I'm afraid, but then the certainty comes back, in a form which I did not expect.

*“You cannot die. Not when **The Masterpiece** is so close to completion. Not when the dream is almost at hand.”*

As I open my eyes, I feel the hit of a headache, no doubt from a long sleep. There were no dreams in that black void of my mind, and I do not feel any strength or inspiration either. The body feels numb, and the hunger makes my stomach echo with pain. I could keep lying in bed, ignoring the desire to eat and increasing the pain, but tomorrow my workweek begins, and if I sleep now, then I will not be able to sleep at night before the shift starts.

“What does it matter? You’re going to leave soon anyway.”

Moving out of bed, I walk into the bathroom, removing the bathrobe with flowers, and turn on barely warm water to accelerate my awakening. As I step into the tub, it turns out to be cold. As the water falls, my body shivers, goosebumps covering it, and the headache partially fades away, allowing thoughts and memories to flow into my mind. The screams of my mother and father, their constant demands, their lack of faith in what I was and could be. The water begins to feel a bit colder, and so I turn the tap, and it becomes warmer, and the steam begins to cover the little bathroom. I do not want to leave this place, this...warmth. Could that have been different? Could I have persuaded them somehow to see that I was born to be an artist, that the words of the Old Crow and their own plans for me faded in comparison? As my hands touch the wet hair under the stream of water I squeeze my jaw in anger. NO, IT WAS THEIR FAULT, NOT MINE. I SHOWED THEM MY EARLY WORKS, MY POTENTIAL, MY WISHES. IT WAS THEY WHO DID NOT CARE. IT WAS THEY WHO DEMOTIVATED ME. IT WAS THEY WHO SOUGHT TO BREAK ME AND TWIST ME INTO WHAT A PERFECT DAUGHTER MUST BE – OBEDIENT AND BEAUTIFUL, YET ALSO STRONG AND RESILIENT. THEY DID NOT WANT A DAUGHTER BUT A PERVERSION OF A PERSON, WITH NO DESIRES OF HER OWN.

THEY WANTED A LEGACY BUILT ON TOP OF MY DREAMS.

The water is becoming slightly hotter, and I feel relaxed, somewhat. I touch my skin, clean and fresh. In my mind's eye, this body is as beautiful as it was years ago. Soon it will be so. Once **The Masterpiece** is complete, I will be free from this pain, from the fears and anger. My life will turn around and change for the best. Putting on the bathrobe, I walk out of the bathroom and immediately feel the cold of the apartment freeze my legs and chest. Despite the uncomfortable feeling, my eyelids feel heavy, and so I go to the kitchen to make some strong, invigorating tea. I stretch my hands toward the warming kettle, hoping that the inspiration will come as I taste the hot drink. It is not as strong as I need it to be to keep me awake, but the longer I wait here, staring at the wall, the more doubts and fears will cloud my mind.

I move out and go back to the room. The icy floors and the chilling wind from the wooden windows infuriate me, hastening my awakening. I must harness these emotions, these feelings and thoughts. I must use the desperation and jealousy as fuel for myself. Once **The Masterpiece** puts me on the map, I will leave behind this rubble, these neighbors that defy soberness and sleep as a concept, instead preferring loud music and outbursts from alcohol and all other intoxicants. I wonder if I could use their decadence to get rid of them...

*“They ain't worth it. These people can't be fixed, can't be reasoned with. They are standing in our way, but if we interfere, we might not be able to elude the fight. And if we did something we wanted, then WE WOULD BE SUSPECTS. Our dream, our **Masterpiece** will be at risk. We can't act now. Perhaps later. Perhaps never. Their path is degradation, which will eventually seal their fate – and that fate will be to drink themselves to death, or to be killed in the process.”*

The Voice is offering some solid advice, and I accept it. As I walk into the room once again. I gaze upon my work, trying to feel the inspiration. But there is none. I feel spent. Tomorrow comes

another day at the factory. The last of the few that remain. Freedom is at hand. The chain that binds me is about to be broken...

I wake from the sound of the alarm clock. It rings relentlessly, the buzzing of the metal echoing in my ears. Turning it off, I immediately get on my feet, eat my breakfast consisting of porridge with pieces of apple, then put on my boots, jeans, and a coat. Because of this choice of clothes and the shortness of my hair, few would understand that I was a girl, not a man, especially from a distance. It is a strange feeling, but it is for the best. When I go there, I let my mind drift away, somewhere that is not peaceful, but distant and quiet. I venture deep into my thoughts, into the whirlwind of doubts and fears and things from the past, and then time elapses as I find myself near the factory. The walk takes a while, and I just got on the road, and now I was here. An interesting trick of the mind, but I do not know if I should welcome it. To be so deep in yourself at the expense of all that surrounds you is dangerous, and I cannot risk my life when my work on *The Masterpiece* is near completion.

I change into the robes and begin to weld the pieces provided by Uncle Lyosha. We do not talk much. The day feels uneventful and passes by rather quickly. I wonder why it all feels so hollow. Why does near success numb me that much? Why am I not celebrating? Is it weariness that holds me down? The doubt that I am capable of creating something great? Or am I scared that all of my thoughts and perceptions are wrong, and that I am a hack, that I am lying to myself, that I have been lying to myself all this time?... Definitely the last one.

The voice of Uncle Lyosha awakens me from that inner turmoil.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“Well... Your face was rather strained.”

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

“Damn that injustice, dear. You know, I actually asked a buddy of mine about work. And he said...”

“**I don’t need work,**” my voice is harsh, and the old man recoils a bit. His face is a mix of surprise and concern. Despite the anger, and the fact that he is trying to meddle, I cannot hate him. He is trying to help. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m just tired.”

He nods but does not say anything else.

“*He’s scared and offended, But that should not be your concern. You didn’t beg him to find you work. And what is it that he offers you? To waste your life at another place, that’s what he offers you. You do not need it. All of it. The workday is over. Change and go back. The Masterpiece awaits...*”

Adhering to the Voice, I go out to the changing room, discarding the work clothes soaked with spots of oil and put on my everyday clothes. Going out of the large, grey building, I am greeted by the falling snow and the darkness that dims over everything. The long day has worn me out, the snow has buried the road — so I turn towards the railway tracks. Looking at the night sky, I can see the moon surrounded by black clouds. It guides me through the darkness, because there are no streetlights along the railroad.

There is a sound of a footstep behind me. I turn around to see a male figure trying to catch up to me. He is moving a bit sluggishly, and yet I feel fear gripping my heart. We are alone out here, so screaming for help will not do me any good. But I am not defenseless. There is a knife in the pocket of my coat. I grab it tightly, feeling my nails sunk into my palm and the bony crack in my knuckles. I do not turn around. I can’t. Not now. I hear the steps becoming louder. Closer. They are uneven. Lousy. The person following me is either as tired as I am or... *drunk*.

“*The prey thinks itself a predator. KILL HIM. FILL YOUR BOTTLES WITH HIS THIN BLOOD AND USE IT AS THE FUEL FOR THE MASTERPIECE.*”

Whoever is stalking a woman in the dark deserves no pity, no compassion. I feel anger beginning to turn into rage, and fear makes my body tremble as never before. Seconds later, I hear the steps

are close. Too close. Then I turn around and see Stepanych. The old bastard, the reason I was fired, the man who always tried to step on my toes. His eyes are so black in the dark, full of hatred and menace that has never been there before. I understand what this is. He does not want me in his bed anymore. He wants me deep in the dirt. And in that moment, as I understand the magnitude of the situation, he launches himself at me, and I hit him with the knife on the face. The sound of metal edge cutting flesh and bone is terrific, and I feel the shaking of my body. But even after being hit, and taking a step back, he tries again, and this time I find myself lying on my back between the rail tracks. He tries to get his hands on my throat. They are longer than mine, and he succeeds. The smell of alcohol envelops us as he begins to shout.

“You bitch! Think you can insult me?! Me?! You are filth! Slut! Ugly nothing!”

The rails begin to shake slightly. The train is approaching, but the fool is either too drunk or does not care. I try to strike him with both of my hands: my fists become paws with claws. The shaking of the ground grows stronger. Will I die here from the hands of the old drunk without finishing *The Masterpiece*? NO, I WILL NOT!!!

I scream and try to scratch the hell out of his face.

“GUT HIM! GUT HIM! GUT HIM! GUT HIM!”

I am starting to see the lights. The train is nearing the place where we fought. And then it begins to honk, but the train itself did not even try to stop. Stepanych lifts his head, and the grip of his hands on my neck weaken. In that moment, I hit him right in the neck. He coughs, and I begin to hit him at the jaw again and again until he falls to the side. Then I get on my feet and jump to the side, away from the rail track, into the snow. And there it was. Just twelve or so meters away from where we fought. Stepanych tries to stand, desperately trying to get away, but he falls on the rail and cannot get up again. The ground begins to shake near him, and the sound of honking and metal grinding drowns the scream when the wheelset cuts him in two pieces, and the bottom of the train tears his legs apart.

It was over. Stepanych – the pathetic excuse of a man who lusted after me and tried to kill me – was no more.

“It killed him.”

“NO, WE KILLED HIM! HA-HA-HA-HA-HA! THE FOOL CAME TO HURT, YOU AND NOW HE IS DEAD! How does it feel to kill the one that plagued you?”

I could not answer that, nor could I understand my feelings, because the train began to stop, and my relief turned into fear once again. There were people inside the wagons, soon-to-be witnesses. The machinist in the head car probably saw what I looked like. And so, I try to run, but then remember...

THE KNIFE!

I run back toward that bloodied spot, find the knife, grab it from the snow, and start running away. The tears from choking freeze my cheeks, and a part of me wants to fall into the snow face down and cry. But as I run against the wind, hearing the distant voices behind my back, I know that I cannot do this. *The Masterpiece* awaits me.

I get home quickly, and when I do, I close the door, leaving the keys inside the lock. Then I go to the bathroom. Removing the bloodied clothes and tossing them to the floor, I look over my naked flesh in the mirror: there are bruises on my neck and shoulders. Stepping into the shower, I begin to wash it all away. Instead of hot water, icy water splashes all over my body. I shake and shout, cursing it all: this day, these events, this fear that rises within me, and the fact that I cannot just turn it off, that I must wash of the blood from my face and from under my nails. The cold brings me pain, and I clench my jaw to prevent my teeth from chattering, but I cannot stop the rest of my body from shaking.

The surge of adrenaline starts to pass, replaced by the pain that is crushing down on my mind and senses. I turn off the freezing water and walk out to immediately wipe myself with a towel. It brings me a semblance of comfort, but that is not enough. Once it becomes soaked with water, I put

on the bathrobe with flowers to get warm. As I am about to go out, I notice the clothes on the floor. *The bloodied clothes*. Once again, my heart skips a beat and I toss them into a bag.

I want to go out, to throw the evidence into the trash, but then I hear these *animals* outside the door. They shout and swear at each other, accompanied by the music from that cheap player, and that crap they listen to rings in my ears. I do not remember the exact moment when it started, was it there all along and I did not hear it? I go back and sit at the kitchen. If they see me like this, they might remember it, and they will surely rat me out to the authorities. I should think it over and decide the best course of action. How to get rid of the clothes and... What did it matter? I could not go out now. And perhaps I would not even need to. To be seen throwing out the trash in the night would be suspicious in itself, and I felt something I have not felt in years – a sense of strange easiness, or better yet, *a sense of release*. I wonder if it were hate and anger that stopped me from painting, that it wasn't the work, but the irritating people who stood in the way of my creation.

I slip into the depths of my mind. There I see Stepanych's death over and over again. It was a hollow feeling, yet in the moment, it felt...

“Liberating.”

All of my hate, pent up over the months was just gone. And I felt another thing – a flicker. A push of emotions and feelings that pushed through the fog of desperation and self-loathing. Not only had I finally taken out the one who had bugged me, who insulted me, who saw me naked in his filthy head, but I had also released a portion of the weight that had been pulling me down. The event gave me so much energy. For the first time in a long time, I actually *wanted* to paint. I understood that what came to me now was *true inspiration*, something brought by emotions and experience so vivid that I could not ignore the call. I went to grab the matches and lit the candles placed around the room, feeling the sanctity of the moment, knowing that today I would be one-step closer to finishing the work of my life. Then I prepare my tools: paints, brushes and palette. Finally, the work begins: I move the hand wielding the brush over the canvas, mixing paints, cleaning brushes and going at it again and again. It felt like minutes, but was it so? My legs are not feeling well, so either I have grown weak – this body is more decadent than I thought – or it has been hours. The curtains revealed a light of morning.

“I was painting the whole night...”

I shut the curtains and go back to look at the work. The light from the candles was enough to see what was on the canvas: there was so much red here – bright red, dark red, the tree and root of red, the river of red, and black earth with shades of red. Yet... it isn't perfect. Not yet. There is still one matter to take care of – the coloring. *The Masterpiece* was not only about uniqueness, message, and beauty, but it also needed to attract the eye, to call the attention of those who would wander into the gallery seeking something worthy. Suddenly, I feel that there is nothing left to give. No inspiration, no raw emotion. I decide to take a shower and have a good rest. And then try to paint tomorrow morning and perhaps finish this quest.

Going to the shower, removing the bathrobe, I wonder at the choices I have made these last few days – abandoning medication, being forced out of the job, killing a person, and more importantly I was nearing the end of my path as a aspiring painter. Do I really need to heal? If I can evade the troubles, such as the one with Stepanych, I can retain my ability to paint.

“It wasn't you who sought him out. It wasn't you who sought revenge. HE WANTED TO HURT YOU. But you were stronger in will and spirit. He had nothing. He had given up, because he didn't even try to crawl out of the train: he only cried and screamed, like a coward who attacks women in the night.”

“True enough. It was his fault, not mine. In so many ways...”

“He should have given up on trying to have you months ago. Should have let you work as you did. But he was a creature of lust and petty. He was a tyrant in his own home, a person despised by all the factory workers. But filth like that always has friends. Remember? We will have to hide our involvement.”

“And how do I do that?”

“By acting nonchalant. The militia will come, and they will learn of your dispute, there is no way around it.”

“If they know, then what can I do?”

“Do not hide your disdain for him. But do not be emotional about it either. You left. You do not care. Do not drop them hints. Do not try to do these things. Manipulating the militia is a fool’s game. You simply must get through anything, without giving them a reason to suspect you.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Your life, your freedom, and **The Masterpiece** depend on it.”

“I understand...Thank you.”

“Now. Back to work. Time is not on our side.”

“I’m tired. And I have to go back to work. Or have you forgotten?”

“Indeed. Being absent is not the wise thing to do today.”

“DAMNIT,” I say with a heavy breath. “My clothes. There are blood stains...”

“You must get rid of them.”

“I can’t. This is my only jacket. Damn it, this is it...What should I do?”

“If you could get to the factory first, avoiding the eyes of others, you could spoil the clothes with oil, and so no one will notice the blood.”

“Good idea.”

Chapter 5: Concealment

It was supposed to be my last work shift today, so I had to come in order to avoid suspicion. I came in the bloodied clothes and covered them in oil, concealing the evidence. The absence of Stepanych brought whispers to the lips of other men, and some of them spoke in soft whispers about the body found on the rail tracks. Few dared to link it all together. Uncle Lyosha shrugged, saying that he did not give a damn about the fate of the guy, since he was eager to try to cut off his pay for no other reason than out of spite, and he even wanted to extort the other working men when they would do something with their skills for their own benefit – for instance, using the factory machines to craft small pieces that they could sell on the side. I could not blame him. In fact, I understood his feelings better than he knew.

Later during the shift, the director went out of his office to greet a man in a leather jacket and led him into his office. I knew the type of walk, the dress, just as the others did, and the disposition of the director merely confirmed our suspicions. Now everyone was certain of Stepanych's death. An hour later, during the lunch break, Viktor Vasilievich came and announced that the head of production was dead and that the militia had questions for us. Some wanted to go; some were skeptical about how the questioning would be conducted. As the shift went on, the workers would go to the office and back, each spending a different amount of time there, appearing drained and thoughtful. They would say very little which to me, was an indication that the man who came here was no fool.

Uncle Lyosha went there a few hours later, and I knew that it would soon be my time to walk into that office. I felt the others looking at me. Were they suspecting me? Did they know what I had done? No. How could they? How could they know that I fought that bastard on the rail tracks, that I used his death as fuel for *The Masterpiece*? No one knew. So the eyes that I felt, the whispers that I heard were not about me. This was just fear.

As soon as I managed to calm my nerves, Uncle Lyosha came back, smiling at me with a tired smile.

“The last day at work isn't what you expected, huh?”

“You got that right.”

He scratched his big, white beard.

“Look. It's your turn to go now. He'll start small, but then will ask some things. Be calm and do not lie. Everything will be okay. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Laying aside the wrench, I walked through the workshop, once again feeling the eyes on me, wondering at the indication of the looks. I could not help but remember my classmate who became a militiaman and used to tell me about his work before moving to a larger city, so I knew what to expect. The man inside the director's office would try to question me, to find out where I was, what my relations with the victim were like. Of course, he would also know much by now. I was not the first to come to him. And given the fact that I was not warned of what exactly was going on meant that the militia suspected some of the workers. And with the recent conflict, I was probably a suspect.

As I entered the room, I was greeted by a young man with blonde hair and blue eyes, dressed in a white shirt, jeans, and clean, shining black shoes. He stood up and, with a smile, extended his hand.

“Good morning, Anastasia Sergeevna. I'm Lieutenant Pavlenko.”

He seemed kind, but his eyes were cold and hungering for an indication of guilt.

“Hello, Officer.”

“Have a seat, please.”

The chair he indicated was right in front of him. I sat there, letting some of my nerves come to the light for him to see.

“Do not worry. You are not in any trouble. We are just questioning the workers to understand what could have happened to Stepan Stepanych.”

He was piercing me with his look, observing my behavior. I nod and decide to begin with the truth.

“I have never been questioned by a militia officer before.”

“You do not need to worry. I swear on my honor, I will not cause you any discomfort. Can we start with your full name and date of birth?”

My surname. I do not like even speaking it. And yet I must feign...*normalcy*. I say what he asks of me and banish the thought from my mind. He keeps asking his questions.

“And how long have you been working here?”

“For about two years. Two and a half.”

“Do you intend on staying here long?”

His blue eyes are seemingly gentle. Yet they are staring at me. He knows. And yet he asks this. I am clearly a suspect. The truth is the wise course of action here.

“I decided to leave, actually. These are my last working days.”

“Okay...And why have you decided to leave?”

The truth.

“Because of Stepan Stepanych.”

“Could you elaborate?”

“He was...unkind to me.”

“How so?”

I let out a heavy breath, remembering the various situations that occurred in these last months.

“He would insult me, question my work, try to...No. Forget it.”

“Go on. He tried to do something to you?”

“He is dead. It is not right. The others never witnessed it, so...”

“I see. And what about the men? Was he in good relations with them?”

“Every guy wanted to beat his ass, but none did.”

“Why? Was he strong? Or was it because of his position?”

“Because he would go and whine to you. And no one wanted to waste their time instead of working.”

The man in the leather jacket looks me over, making notes in his little notebook. He writes small letters, and fast. He is not some layman. The lieutenant knows his job. He rotates the pen in his fingers, looking into his little book. It takes some time. He stares at the small letters in his notebook. Is he really reading it all, or is he thinking? Or maybe he seeks to unnerve me? If the latter is the case, then it is working. Thankfully, a minute later, he focuses his attention on me again.

“Hm. Is it possible that someone went out and decided to talk to him for you?”

He wants me to place blame, to “name names”. But this is still a game that he plays very well. He tests me, wanting to make certain that I am innocent. I must choose truth yet again.

“Why would anyone bother? I was fired. It didn’t matter anymore. If there was a reason for someone to do this, they would have done it before, no?”

“Interesting point. Tell me, how do you usually get here? Do you have a car, or a friend from work who would give you a ride?”

He must have found out my routine. He had the time and the chance to ask. And even if he did not, he eventually will. Foolish man, you cannot outplay the artist. Armed with imagination, I WILL ALWAYS WIN.

“I take the bus, or walk by the railroad.”

“You mean the railroad where the victim died?”

“I don’t know *where* he died. This morning the men talked about a body found by the railroad.”

“And what were they talking about exactly?”

“That the found body was in pieces.”

“Hm. So you had no desire to kill Stepan Stepanych, even after all that occurred between you two?”

“I hoped that he would get fired, but nothing beyond that.”

“Nothing else?”

“Why would there be anything else?”

“Perhaps you felt cheated. That he was to stay, and you were forced to go. Wouldn’t you want the roles to be reversed?”

I never said that I was forced...

“Life is full of injustices. You know that better than I, Lieutenant Pavlenko.”

He takes a second to respond.

“That I do. Still. Didn’t you want to do anything? Anything at all?”

“To be honest, I just didn’t have the strength for conflict. My main concern remains earning money in order to eat food and pay my rent. And the director, being the kind person that he is, allowed me to stay for a while, but that time expires today.”

“What about Alexey Alexeevich? Your partner at the workplace. He seems to care for you. Why didn’t you ask him to do something? The thought had surely crossed your mind.”

I take a moment. No. Not the whole truth. If he even catches wind of my perception of this place...

“I don’t know. I don’t think that I would ask anything like that of him. Yes, he cares for me, but that is because he is a kind man. And he has a warm heart.”

“Is he a drinker?”

“He drinks, but who really doesn’t these days?”

“Do you drink?”

“Sometimes. I try not to, but there are moments, you know?”

The man nodded slowly and was reading passages from his notebook. Or merely pretending to do so. Time felt slow, and now I was certain that this was another tactical move, to see if I would get nervous. So I breathed, with exaggeration, and put one leg over the other, as well as hands on my chest. Then I looked at the window, where the production was going. That fool Stepanych was dead, and yet nothing seemed to have changed. He was not a good man, nor was he a respected leader, so why did anyone care that he was gone? Why do people always care for the lives of such useless trash?! All the workers and the director and that man in front of me: “Oh Stepanych! Poor Stepanych! Who could have killed him? What monster did so? He was such a good man!” THE FOOLS! HE WAS THE MONSTER – an alcoholic and despot, a tyrant to his own family! The sack of meat that tried to...HE DESERVED HIS FATE. TO BE TORN APART. TO BE FORGOTTEN. I feel my face contorting, and then I hear the man again.

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