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Snegirichka
Fairy-tale



Winter came. In the morning, the yard where Kutya The Puppy lived looked transformed. At first, he thought little doves had appeared in the skies. Their ruffled feathers trembled and their bright whiteness sparkled as they landed softly on the branches, benches, and pathways. Oh, no! Had white sheep been shorn somewhere far away? And these were their curls, wavelets and hairs. . . Or maybe these were butterflies, shivering with cold. Kutya sneezed, waved his paws. This was his very first winter. He'd been born in summer, when the grass was green and the ground was warm.

"It's cold!" he complained to his Momma.

"You're just not used to it," Momma disagreed. "You have warm fur, and the frost can't hurt you. In winter, one should run around and jump more, and not sleep in our dog-house, like you enjoy doing."

True, Kutya liked to sleep and laze about, with his nose stuck in fragrant hay. It smelled of summer: flowers, frogs, and berries. His dreams had been bright and sweet before winter crept into their red-roofed house.

"Who can I play catch with? Or hide and seek? Momma is busy, as usual, she left to run her errands."

Kutya approached the big house where the Master lived and called out, raising his head, "Pussy! Come out!"

The face of his bosom buddy Pussy The Kitten appeared in the window instantly. His was shaking his head sadly, which must have meant "no."

"Sissy," the puppy grumbled. "How can I be friends with him if he never wants to come out side to play? First, he's afraid of the rain, then of the snow."

Kutya wandered into the garden. The air was dry and crackling. White, fluffy butterflies were teeming around.

"Step aside!" a tinkling voice rang out. Kutya jumped aside, startled, and hit his forehead against a white hay-stack. A bit of rye hay rustled and fell away. It looked nothing like the hay they used to sleep on back at the dog-house. The puppy looked around...



A pretty girl wearing a silver cap whom he initially mistook for a butterfly was standing on the footpath. She was airy, translucent, and had unusually expressive and shining eyes. She also had crystal white wings.

"Who are you?" Kutya asked. "I've never seen you before."

"Of course," the girl laughed, showing her straight white teeth. "I wasn't here before. I'm a Snowflake. We always arrive when winter comes."

The Snowflake's eyes were big and deep blue. Her eye-lashes were long and thick, and she was wearing a blue dress. She was very pretty.

"Do you have a name of your own?" Kutya asked. "Or are you all called Snowflake?"

"Of course, I do. My name is Snegirichka."

"And I'm Kutya. I also have a friend, Pussya The Kitten. But he's afraid of the cold and is staying home. Why were you yelling like that? Were you afraid of something?"

"I was afraid of landing on your nose. I'm still very little, and it's only been a week since I learned to fly."

"It won't hurt me!" the puppy said, proudly. "The next time you can land right on my nose!"

"No, I'm not allowed!" the girl said in a serious tone of voice and batted her silken eyelashes. Her eyes turned dark blue and were as transparent as colorful crystal.

"Why?" Kutya was surprised.

"I'd melt because your nose is warm," Snegirichka explained.

"Melt? What does it mean?"

"I'd turn into a drop of water and seep into the ground. I wouldn't exist any longer.

"What a shame!" the puppy got upset. "We just met, and you'd disappear. We haven't even had time to play. Do you like playing?" Kutya wondered.

"Of course, I do. A whole lot!"

Kutya was sitting in the footpath and Snegirichka was flying around him. Her dress, braids, and eyes sparkled in the sun and shimmered with colorful lights. She shone and smelled of the deep blue. Kutya was beyond himself with joy that he now had such a great friend. Or, rather, a girlfriend.

Kutya jumped up and twirled among the blue snow mounds. He tried to reach Snegirichka and jumped higher and higher. He'd never been this happy! Everything around him plunged into a dance! Even the trees were dancing!

"Snow! Snegirichka! Sun!" Kutya sang.

"Winter! Sun! Kutya!" Snegirichka tinkled.

The snow creaked and the air smelled of freshness. Kutya brushed against a tree branch and snow flowers that looked like apple tree flowers but were very cold fell on top of him. He stayed quiet. Snegirichka swept handfuls of snow away with her small, deft hands. She unearthed the ears that

looked like wrappers of a bog chocolate bar, then the eyes that squinted happily in the bright sun.

Finally, she dug the puppy out. He sneezed loudly, and Snegirichka clapped her hands. The puppy barked joyously, and the girl laughed because she'd never heard a dog bark before.

And Kutya had never had a snowflake for a friend. She made him happy. Her palms were made of crystal, and her fingers were very thin...

Dusk settled on the snow mounds. Night time was coming. The moon and the stars appeared in the sky.

"This is beautiful," Snegirichka whispered. "But it's time for me to go home."

"Home? Where do you live?" Kutya asked.

"Winter is our mother. At night, she covers us with her fur coat. Look up!"

Kutya raised his eyes and saw a multitude of Snowflakes, floating in the same direction. Fluffy little girls were streaming across the magical night sky in the same direction, laughing joyously. The Snowflakes sparkled in the light of the lanterns. The golden stream of light trembled and sparkled in the folds of their dresses, in the lacey frills. Tiny beads and ear-rings clinked, their free-flowing hair glistened, their wings clanged and fluttered in the wind... The Snowflakes turned into a light mist, an imperceptible fog ...



"It's time for me to go," Snegirichka sighed and flew after her sisters, trying to catch up with them. Her lace dress, velvet bows and feet in crystal shoes sparkled and disappeared...

Kutya stared at the skies until the white glow dissipated. There were no more Snowflakes in the sky.

"She didn't even say if she's coming back tomorrow," he thought wistfully, trudging back to his red-roofed house. "And I never asked because she flew away so fast. What if Snegirichka never comes back?"

The tops of the trees disappeared in the darkness. Kutya dug himself into the warm hay and fell asleep.

In the morning, loud, wonderful and tinkling laugh woke him up.

“Get up, lazybones! The sun’s been up for hours!”

“ Snegirichka!!!” the puppy yelled and jumped out of the house.

He saw yesterday’s Snowflake, a round-faced wonder-girl with sparkly eyes. She was tender as a forest flower, washed with rain in the rays of early morning sunshine. Her shining hair was swept, and there were new silk bows with crystal beads in her braids back. Sea-blue flowers covered her dress.

Kutya drank in the fresh air. It had never tasted so delicious and clean to him! He felt happy.

“You are saw blue and white,” he told Snegirichka. “And so is the sky. Is this done on purpose to make it hard to spot you?”

“I don’t know,” Snegirichka laughed. “We, the Snowflakes, have always been this way. And you are red. Has it always been this way?”

“I look like my Momma. In winter, my hair becomes thicker to keep me from getting cold. And hares go white in winter to avoid being caught. In summer, they are grey. Do you change your dress in summer?”

“No,” Snegirichka sighed. “I don’t know what summer is. We go far away, where it is always Winter.”

"What a pity," Kutya got sad. "I'd like to be friends with you in summer, too. You could wear a red dress."

"That's impossible," Snegirichka replied. "This only happens in fairy tales."

And then she saw Kutya's eyes fill with sadness.

"That's it!" the girl clapped her hands. "Today we shall fly!"

"Fly!" the puppy was caught unawares. "How can I fly if I'm not a bird?"

"Listen carefully," Snegirichka shook her head. "You can't fly. But the sky is so strong that it lifts you up. Do you believe that the sky is strong?"

"Yes," Kutya agreed, after pondering this for a moment. "It must be really strong if it can hold all those clouds and birds."

"And the planes, and the helicopters, as well," Snegirichka added.

"It must be very powerful," the puppy said.

"Then let's go!" Snegirichka yelled and grabbed his paw. Kutya didn't even understand how they ended up in the air and whether Snegirichka raised him up or the powerful sky. They flew above the trees, and the world was dancing again. This dance was magical and endless. The wind rustled Kutya's fur, and his tail fluffed out. He was weightless. Snegirichka drew him higher and higher as her frosty skirt rustled and her blue eyes shimmered.

They danced and flew above the trees until the first evening star appeared in the sky. They saw it and felt happy, forgetting that it was time to go to bed...

In his sleep, Kutya kept flying. He shuddered and moaned with pleasure. The tender tinkle of her voice gleamed in his heart.

With the first rays of sunlight, Kutya awoke and peered outside. The fair Snegirichka was skipping and running in front of his doghouse. Like a little bird, she was leaving tiny footprints on the ground.



This looked so funny that Kutya erupted in a happy bark.

"I'm learning to walk like you," Snegirichka pouted, so the puppy had to apologize.

It was a beautiful winter! There was so much snow that even a slight breeze would bring up a cloud of sparkly dust.

As soon as he'd wake up, the puppy would rush into the street and always meet his Snegirichka. He felt protective of her because she looked so fragile. Her arms and legs were like stalks of white grass...

They danced carelessly in the skies and skated gleefully down icy hills. Kutya would glide downwards toward the river and Snegirichka yelled, grabbing at his ears. Her blue eyes sparkled like polished stones, her white cheeks became crimson red, and her silk braids came undone. The days flew by fast like flocks of birds. Neither he nor she realized that one day Winter would end.

Once when they were gliding down a high hill, Kutya crashed into a passer-by. The man hit him with his foot and swore.

"What an idiot! Get out of my way!"

Kutya rolled into a snow mound. He hit a piece of ice, wheezed, got up and licked his wounded paw. He looked around for Snegirichka, and then saw her... She was lying in the middle of the road, looking dead. Blue shimmer was dripping off her, like water off a piece of glass. Tears were hanging on her cheek. They froze and poured down, like icy peas, dripping onto the ground... Kutya froze in

terror, staring at Snegirichka: her dress, face and hands that looked so beautiful not a minute ago turned into dried up dirt.

Without wasting a moment, the puppy rushed towards her and lifted her up. She became see-through and was growing darker by the second...

"Snegirichka!" Kutya yelled. "Don't die!"

She opened her eyes, but they were empty and dull. In their bottomless depth, the light was turning to stone, and this frosty greyness was all that was left of the Snowflake. She had nothing in common with the girl he knew. This was her pale shadow that was diminishing by the moment. Through the transparent dress and tiny crystal bones, he could see her heart that was covered with black veins.

"I love you," the puppy whispered, pressing her close. "I love you. How can you die if I love you?"

He didn't know what to do to help her. He walked around, whispering these words and thinking he was going to die together with her...

Carefully, he touched her fragile head with a paw as if it were treasure... He pressed his cheek to her body. It was light like a bit of cotton wool. In desperation, he licked her. Nothing happened...

And then she started coming back to life: her eyelids trembled, her lashes fluttered. Then her eyes turned blue and her lips became similar to a drop of pink dew. And her dress became crimson red and incredibly beautiful.

"Snegirichka," Kutya said, surprised. She was

already standing in front him, in the festive glow of a red shimmer, like a new bright star.



The little star's hair and eyes shone even brighter than before. Kutya lost his breath because he was just so happy that she was alive and healthy.

But Kutya was not the only one to be amazed. Snegirichka also stared in bewilderment at her dress. She was touching it with her hands, as if finding it impossible to believe what she was seeing.

"Didn't you say this could only happen in a fairy tale?" Kutya rejoiced. "But what happened? I saw that the passerby didn't even touch you."

"I forgot to tell you our legend," Snegirichka said, and the silver streams of her voice came alive and clinked once again. "It's the legend of the Water. We are made of Water and Water reacts to words. Whatever the words are, the Water and the Snowflakes will become, too. And everything that's white easily adopts any color. Do you understand?"

"No," Kutya confessed. "I don't understand anything."

"See here. I will pronounce words and you watch how the snow changes."

Snegirichka said "bad" to the snow mound. And the snow grew visibly darker, as if dirty Water had been splashed on it.

"I'm sorry, so sorry. You are beautiful," Snegirichka hurried to say. The snow mound became very white, just like whipped cream. Wonderful bluish lights shimmered on it."

"So this is how it works!" Kutya was amazed. "That man's words almost killed you. He almost

caused your death. So how do you survive in the cities, among all the people?"

"Snowflakes don't live long in the cities," Snegirichka explained. "Cities are soaked through with bad, mean words that make Snowflakes' hair turn into smoke and leave burn marks on our bodies. And then the Snowflakes never come back home. Words come up like hissing rays. They burn through our clothes, melt in the skies, and fall like black water-drops onto the streets, houses, people. There are words so mean that they stab us straight in the heart. This is why there are so many dirty puddles and the snow is always grey or black in the cities."

"Why did your dress turn crimson red?"

Snegirichka stared at her dress in amazement once again. It was made of red sparkly silk decorated with swan's down. She loved her new outfit as much as the puppy did.

"Nobody said such beautiful words to me before. Nobody told me I was beautiful. I didn't even know such a wonderful transformation could happen because of this..."

"And what about your mother? Hasn't your Momma Winter said nice things to you?"

"Momma Winter says nice things to us before putting us to bed. She even tells us fairy tales. But there are so many of us that each gets just a drop of her love. This is why we are all the same color. We fly around holding hands and never make friends

with people or anybody else. That would be very dangerous."

"What about me? Why did you become friends with me?"

"I trusted you," Snegirichka responded meekly. "Now my dress will let everybody know that somebody loves me."

It was true. She really stood out against the white snow.

"Your words smelled so good," Snegirichka confessed. "I never thought this could happen. Listening to them was like drinking blackberry juice."

"What do you like to eat?" Kutya asked. "I like a good bone, for instance."



"We eat water drops. Clouds sprinkle them up in the sky. Right at the top, drops are aromatic and transparent. They are very tasty and they smell of blue milk. We put our hands under the clouds and drink until we are sated. When it's cold, we fly next to the tops of pine trees, waiting until drops of ice-cream start flying our way. This happens when clouds touch pointy branches with their bellies."

"So blue clouds are like cows? Then why is Rain never sweet down here?" Kutya wondered again.

"As the water descends, it absorbs everything it meets: iron airplanes pass by, roaring, factory chimneys release clouds of grey smoke. Also, people have lost the habit of greeting Rain with joy. Children don't run around barefoot in the puddles. Once upon a time, people composed songs in its honor, and that's why it was so thick and aromatic. It was also colorful because water drops absorbed all of the beauty of the rainbow that floated in the air..."

"When I saw first snow, I thought there had to be little sheep up high, in the skies. They must have been shorn and their white wool was dropping down," the puppy said. "And then I decided that somebody must have poured a lot of milk into the deep blue sky... And added pieces of marshmallow into it..."

"We have a sweet tooth, too," smiled Snegirichka. "In the Forest, the needles of fir-trees are covered with thin sheets of ice. We break off the ice taking care not to harm the branches. These lollipops smell

of pine, and you can chew them like wet grapes. We call them mint sticks. Or pine pies."

"It's fascinating," the puppy was amazed. "You live in a completely different world. It's so mysterious and so unlike ours. Let's go into the Forest! You can show me your treats, and also, let's paint the snow there!" Kutya suggested.

This game was even more exciting than flying in the skies! They would approach a snow mound and tell it the most beautiful words they could think of. And soft snow would glow with clear crystals and multi-colored lace. They covered trees with word ornaments, braiding them up to the tops with green bows.

A muted tinkling spread around the Forest. Ice flowers opened like fistfuls of colorful needles, smelling of honeydew and freshness. Rough branches bowed and moved under their weight. It was as if golden bees were about to appear, buzzing. The Forest came alive and transformed, shimmering with precious stones...

"Do you recognize me?" it seemed to ask.

It was all so surprising and unexpected. They were drawing a real live Forest as if painting a picture. Only instead of a brush and paints they had simple words, reflecting a new ornament, and every one of these words would bring a light cloud of snow dust that flew away as emerald, glowing Snowflakes. White flakes, silvery down, everything was brittle and blue, and everything tinkered, laughed, shone...



“Hroum, hroum,” the snow said under the paws.

"Din din," colorful icy crystal clinkered.

Kutya's whiskers and the chocolate red fur on his face were covered with ice that didn't melt under his breath because of how bitterly cold it was.

Sparkles of laughter beamed out of Snegirichka's shiny eyes. Her white wings rustled as she glided between juicy green boughs, looking like a lightning-fast blue-eyed firefly. Up and down, skip and jump, over and beyond the snow mounds. Crystal shoes, skirt, hands, wings, braids! Another skip and a somersault! Here is the white doll once again, soaring high above into the skies, her wonderful blue eyes glimmering. Even the sounds of her voice sound like porcelain beads and diamond streams, forming complex and meaningful ornaments.

Just a moment ago, Kutya saw her right next to him, right here, on this bow, and now he is looking everywhere and wondering where she could have gone.

A grain-sized snow ball hits him right on the forehead and the fidgety tomboy is twirling and dancing right in front of him, clinking her silver bracelets and beads.

I'll get you! But in the time it took the irate Kutya to make a snow ball of his own, she disappeared from sight!

Snegirichka is up high, swinging on a bough, laughing out loud and making fun of the puppy, with her pearly teeth sparkling. Forget-me-nots shine from the bottom of her eyes, and bunches of

glimmering eye-lashes tremble around them. Plop! Plop! Snow dust falls off her lashes.

Snowflakes were twirling around, creating cold colorful clouds and touching each other with their elaborate crystal skirts. Some of them were lilac-colored, while others looked like the petals of a tez-rose. An old Tree Stump creaked, opening his crusty eyes, and winked at them playfully. The Snowflakes laughed, batting their long blue eyelashes. Ash blond curls and pony-tails that looked like streams of golden rain escaped from under their porcelain caps. As the evening approached, their light and tender aroma intensified...



Snegirichka and Kutya treated everything to their kind words, all of the paths and trees, covered with fluffy fur coats. They didn't miss a single thing. They even ran to the most faraway Bush with its snow cap askew, and its cap erupted in a glow of aquamarine diamonds. Feeling smart and dandy in his new hat, the Bush straightened himself up and looked around proudly. Under the feet of the little friends, the starry snow and ice creaked and sang, like a bell...

"Look," Snegirichka wondered, "see the shadows? The color has entered them, too..."

A hundred yellow, red and golden shadows were streaming in diagonal shadows from the tops of the pine-trees to the road. Sun beams touched them, and their heat made the shadows sparkle even brighter.

"Nobody knows about this," Kutya whispered, "and nobody will ever find out... There's just the two of us in the whole wide world who can see it..."

He sat by the side of the road and whispered in an even quieter voice, lost in admiration as he looked at Snegirichka who was dancing in a scarlet glow, "And I would have never discovered all this had you not come into my life." She grabbed the silk lace of the skirt with her tiny hands and started twirling in the air, spurred on by the strong wind. Her transparent shoes shimmered and when their heels clicked, raising clouds of glittering dust from the road, a thin, lily-white sound could be heard.

Skip, jump! She twirled on one foot so fast that she started looking like a snowy flower in bloom, a broom, and then a pointy little whirlwind... It contracted like a thin spiral and then soared upward, flying away and making silvery circles... It was breathtakingly beautiful!

Soar! She reached even farther up like a twisty and swift bit of fluff. The wind rustled her velvet bows and the silver threads with crystal balls that held together her braids. A soft thin curl that looked like a blue spider web shivered next to her. A flowery tiara made of ice drops crowned her head.

“Silverichka!” he yelled in her wake. “I have figured it out! If you say these words to even the most desiccated old Tree Stumps they will begin to flower! Those who don’t understand this will never see this magical Forest!”

That’s what Kutya said as he started running down the road which was as long as a ray of sunshine and as wide as the sky. Twilight crept upon the Forest but inside it there was still a bright sunshine that made it look like a golden palace. The puppy left the Forest and saw the trees and the snow mounds standing there as if surrounded with starry shining braids. The air itself shimmered with a multitude of colors. The red-haired sun licked the tops of the pine trees in the same way as dogs do when they lick their puppies before putting them to bed...

“I will never forget this” ...

He ran along the road strewn with moonstones that glimmered like burnished silver. Kutya the Puppy and a tiny little girl who hugged him tight, burying her face in his thick fur. Her lashes spread like a bluish fan on her pink cheeks. Sniffing softly, the Snowflake slept...

One early morning, they sat on a birch tree stump next to the house. Snegirichka was rocking in the air, while Kutya was examining a sparkly and clean piece of ice. Both were taking mint sticks that smelled of pine needles out of a packet and nibbling on them. Snegirichka had already been to the Forest before Kutya had a chance to wake up.

"Talking about Water," the puppy suddenly remembered. "Water is so dirty in our rivers. And the flowers die. I thought it was always like this. But Grandma, who is very old, told me that there was a time when Water in the rivers was so clear it was transparent. Water was emerald blue, can you believe that, Snegirichka? When you stood on the river bank, you could see fish at the bottom of the water stream. Flowers grew in the water, lilies and lotus flowers. They were red and white. Can you imagine how beautiful it is when flowers float down a river?"

"They can also be blue," Snegirichka said dreamily, twirling her hair.

"Flowers that are blue like your eyes will float down the river," Kutya said. "They will be bluer than the sky and the water, brighter than the sun

and the moon... This is what these flowers will be like."

"Let the flowers that are blue like my eyes float down the river, bluer than the sky and the water," echoed Snegirichka in a sad voice, lowering her lashes that were longer than the petals of forget-me-nots.

Days flew by, and the sun was shining brighter every day. Once Kutya peered out of his dog house and saw icicles hanging from the rooftops. One was very beautiful and had golden bits of sunshine sparkle inside it. Water slowly dropped from it. Water drops looked like clusters of sparkling stars...

"Snegirichka!" Kutya called out, looking around. "Look, this is a miracle... You've never seen an icicle like this one!"

But nobody responded. Kutya was worried to death and started circling the dog house, sniffing the air. Nobody was there...

He rolled down the hill and rushed to the Forest... In the Forest, he ran from one tree to another, throwing himself against the ground in desperation and digging through the snow mounds without sparing his paws...

He looked for her until he ran out of steam and realized that she wasn't coming back. Spring had arrived. He wasn't going to see Snegirichka again. He found a tiny footprint next to the dog house and understood that Snegirichka had visited him during

the night to say good-bye. He pressed his snout to the footprint and growled...

Days passed by. The tired snow melted and it was time for the greenery to bloom and for the birds to sing. Buds opened, emitting a sticky aroma. The entire garden turned green but Kutya saw nothing. He stayed by the dog house, guarding her footprint. Even Pussya the Kitten came into the garden and sat by his side for hours. Momma came from the neighboring yard and tried to cheer him up. She'd just given birth to little puppies, Kutya's new brothers and sisters.



"They are so cute," Momma was telling him. "They are chubby and sweet like kewpie dolls. You can play with them."

But Kutya wouldn't even open his eyes.



While he could feel Snegirichka's scent that came from her footprint and could go on guarding it, he could pretend she was still there, by his side. Water streamed down his face. He licked it and realized it was salty. These were the first tears he'd ever cried. He wept and inhaled the scent coming from the

ground. He kept sniffing and grieving as if watering her scent with his tears could bring her back and make her talk joyously. But could there be any life in a footprint?

“You can’t hear me,” the puppy mused. “Even if I spend the rest of my life weeping, you won’t see it. The clouds are too thick. Where are you these days? You must be far, far away, at the other end of the world. You are so small and defenseless. And if something bad were to happen to you, I wouldn’t be able to help you...”

The puppy worried so much about Snegirichka that he often thought he could hear her scream that sounded like the clink of crystal breaking against the stones. It was her voice, she was asking him to come and help her...

Apple-trees were covered in flowers and then lost their bloom. A spring Rain sprinkled. Birds flapped their wings, passing by. Still, the puppy stayed on the ground, sopping wet... He didn’t feel anything when the Rain soaked his fur through and through or when the Sun dried it. He didn’t turn his head when there was a sound of footsteps approaching or when boughs creaked. There was nothing he cared about any longer. There was just a single time when he lifted his head and strained his hearing. There was a sound of silk rustling and something white whispering. But that was just a hackberry tree dropping its petals. Diminutive flowers touched the ground slightly and glided downward, but they only pretended to be like snow...

At night, he wheezed quietly and moaned, staring into the sky. After the beautiful snow girl left, the overwhelming feeling of joy abandoned him, too. She'd turned everything into magic. Even though she was so tiny, she could make everything - the forest, the wide circle of the sky, the swollen clouds - look enormous and feel mysterious. Kutya had never imagined that taking care of somebody would be so pleasing. Because there was so much love in it...

"The Water is so warm. Let's go look at the kids bathe. It's very close," Pussya called to him. His voice was sad because he knew that the puppy would refuse. Seeing his friend cry made him teary-eyed, as well.



But the word "Water" suddenly attracted Kutya's attention. He opened his big sad eyes.

"The River where the kids bathe," Pussya explained.

"The River..." Kutya suddenly remember how he and the Snowflake dreamt of flowers floating down the River, flowers that looked like her dove eyes.

He jumped up and told the kitten, "Let's go, let's go, it will be dusk soon."

Feeling surprised, the kitten rushed in his stead, incredulous of this unexpected joy. Kutya has come alive! Kutya is running towards the River with him!

There was nobody by the river. The kids had been brought back home. Kutya touched the Water with his paw. It was warm but dirty, filled with sludge, cigarette butts, and wrappers. Nobody but him heard the Water moan and struggle to breathe as if a heavy net had been cast over it. He walked into the River and slowly swam along the bank. Pussya followed him. He was afraid of swimming on his own. The kitten didn't notice that Kutya was whispering into the Water. He was whispering for a long time.

But he did notice the Water shudder and soar like a bird that was caught in a net. It freed itself and continued its transparent blue flight. One could see colorful fishes moving at the bottom of the River.

"Kutya!" the kitten yelled. "Look how beautiful this is! The Water is so clear. I had no idea this was even possible! The wind must have chased away all the dirt..."

But Kutya didn't hear him. He was looking straight ahead. Flower buds were floating towards him from afar. They exploded with a slight crackle, turning blue. These were lilac and lotus flowers. Many more flowers were opening, sea blue and aquamarine ones that looked like stars. They were brighter than the bluest blue, like Snegirichka's eyes!

The sky dropped warm clusters of raindrops. Furry night bees covered the thick blossoms sprinkled with dew and either kissed them or sucked nectar out of them. White stamens were hanging from the blossom of the largest flowers. They looked just like Snegirichka's bare feet.

"Glop!" a pearl-white tip of a fin glided by and disappeared like a silent shadow. Fishes splashed, reflecting the moon in their scales.



Kutya was looking around mesmerized. There was such a multitude of crackling flower petals in full bloom!

A warm mist came off the Water. The lotus flowers showered sparkles of golden and blue clink-clank. The infrequent night birds passing above the river were lit by the bright glow and then lost themselves once again in the darkness. The shimmer of the Water and the splashing of the fishes made the stars want to come down lower to see what was happening.

"They are dusty," Kutya whispered, raising his head. When the stars come so close, they look like a molten mirror, rusty at the edges and dim. These stars have been left behind by everybody... This means nobody is admiring them any longer..."

He wasn't amazed by everything that was happening, like Pussya was, because the puppy already knew *the secret of words* that Snegirichka had confided to him.

"Now I will be able to survive the summer. And even the Fall," he thought, swimming slowly among flowers and moving aside the long, resilient stems "Until she comes back. I believe that she must be seeing this Water and the lotus flowers. She sees them from the white clouds up above because it's always cold there and Snowflakes never melt. From up there the flowers must look like floating blue beads."

Look, Snegirichka, blue flocks of flowers are swimming downstream. The petals are like feathers

you dropped from your wings. These lotus flowers remind me of you. It is as if you were swimming in the Water, my Snegirichka. All summer and all Fall, every day, until the river freezes, I will whisper to it how beautiful it is. And the flowers will never wither. They will keep burning, like candles.



I have so many things to do before you come back. There is the Water, and the flowers, and these abandoned stars... The skies are covered with a thick coat of dust. When you come back, you won't even recognize this place"...

*This was the first story about Kutya and Snegirichka.
To be continued...*

Drawings by Tamara Alexeeva
Translated by Olga Bezhanova



Olga Bezhanova

Olga Bezhanova is a professional literary critic and scholar. She was born in Kharkov, Ukraine, where she graduated from Kharkov State University, Department of Foreign Languages.

After relocating to Montreal, Canada, she graduated from McGill

University, then obtained her PhD degree at Yale. Prof. Bezhanova teaches Spanish literature at the University of South Illinois in Edwardsville, USA. She writes in English, Spanish, and Russian.

The Russian Store

An old Jew sits in the corner of the Russian store in St. Louis.

In emigration, "Russian" always means Jewish. If you want to say that somebody is an actual Russian, you say "He's Russian Russian," to which the reply is always, "Like, Russian Russian?" And you have to answer, "Yes, Russian Russian."

The old Jew at the store is the owner's father.

"Young lady, look at your husband," he tells me. "He is wandering round the store, he looks sad. I know what he needs. I will tell you what he needs because you are a young lady and you don't understand these things. He looks like he needs a cake. See? He is nodding. Let's go get him a cake. Wait, why are you taking that old thing? Put it down, put it down, I have a fresh one hidden right here behind all this old, stale stuff. Here it is. And you see? It's cheaper! Ah, what did I say? I know what you need!"

The old Jew's daughter-in-law emerges from the back room.

"Father, do you want tea? Sofa is making tea. Do you want tea?"

"No, I do not want tea," the old Jew replies.

"Father, think, just think about it. Do you want tea? I think you want tea."

"Ah, leave me alone, I don't want tea."

"What am I going to do with this man?" the daughter-in-law exclaims. "Sofa, Sofa, did you hear this? Father says he doesn't want any tea. Sofa, where have you gone and hidden yourself? Come here, you need to hear what father is saying."

Sofa comes out of the back room.

“What did you say, what? You want tea?” she addresses the old man.

“No, leave me alone, I said I don’t want tea, I don’t, what have you come out here for?”

“Have you thought about it?” Sofa asks. “I think you need to think about it. Basia, have you told him to think about it?” she turns to her sister-in-law.

“Yes, I told him to think about it,” Basia responds.

“And what did he say?” asks Sofa.

In the midst of this exchange I push the overwhelmed “Russian Russian” out of the Russian store to spare him a culture shock that would be too heavy.



Danil Posazhennikov

*Danil was born in 1964 in Novokuznetsk, Siberia, Russia. Presently, he is a student of the A.F. Muranov Music College, Department of Violin. His first Russian book of prose, *The Artist*, was published in 2009. Daniil has won several literary competitions and taken part in various conferences as well as in an international social and political forum in India.*

Before Their Time

I had a feeling that during the nights I descended to the river. A sense of otherworldly anxiety was being communicated to me by the sharpness of stones under my feet and the brightness of stars in a mix of black and dark-green. The air felt like I could grab it with my hands. I could see everything really clearly, and every rustle was heard perfectly well. I was part of the night, slithering downwards, towards its black river like a rattlesnake.

When you get close to the water, it is as if it became completely silent. All of the sounds in my stead disappear altogether. Then you can see several people on the other shore. You can't make

them out for sure but I feel, I just can't help feeling a calm and potent stare riveting me to the cold cobblestones in the sand. They make signs in my direction. A small boat appears upstream. It starts turning towards me very slowly, gradually appearing at the same level. I recognize these eyes, I know them... The boat floats past me, and I rush back in order to put down in writing the thoughts that the silver of that wordless stare communicated to me.

In the morning, I will read that those who arrive before their time cannot turn the key in its lock and that the one who chooses flight to save himself will only encounter an eternal wait.

But I'm not fleeing. I have simply chosen to walk farther than others and I will not come back without a solution. Anyway, when I find my answer, there will be no need for a return. The answer to my question will carry me across the river. Oh, how strange being here is! It is as if I floated in a vacuum, holding a ladder, a worthless, useless ladder in my hands. And I remain, I remain here to fight the forces that is preventing me from getting to my goal. My place is on the other side of the blue frontier.

I

At dawn, I would find a lonesome fisherman on the shore. I knew him since I first appeared here but I had no idea who he was or where he was from.

"What is it that you want more than anything else in the world?" I asked.

"I'd like to tear my heart out of my chest and throw it in the river," he said, and his eyes flashed.

"Why didn't you do it?"

"I once found fishing gear on this shore. They had been damaged quite a bit by the moisture but they were still good. And I decided that fishing gear called for a fisherman. I couldn't find one, so I figured that I was needed here and that the gear had been left here for me. In the evenings, I share my catch with you and with other wanderers. And also with an old pelican that comes here from behind that sharp cliff. That's why I'm here. But I'd really like to tear my heart out of my chest and throw it in the river."

"But what is it that you can catch in this river? Have you ever shared anything with me?"

"Oh yes, my nets catch the most cherished thing. They catch time."

"Time is the river."

"The river is nothing but a state of eternity."

Maybe the treacherous water harbored for each of us what we most desired but when I took a gulp all I felt was a painful sense of outward and inward emptiness. My very being was a transparent icy jug that was spilling it all over the world. We were all under the spell of something we couldn't even name.

I said "emptiness", but the fisherman felt an enormous burden on his shoulders.

I said "nowhere", and his stare sank in the flow of a blue flame.

The river was surrounded by green forests. The foot of the mountains was aspiring to the west and bordering dense thickets. I was looking at my wriggling reflection. That man was quite old. returning made no sense but crossing to the other shore was impossible. The river was too fast and dangerous. It was too wide.

Once I saw a walking stick on the shore. But there was no wanderer around.

II

I kept thinking about what made me come to the river and stay next to it. I found many reasons. Or was there just one?

God that had left me after a flash of a gleaming snow-white cloak. God that kindled an eternal flame in the stone of a mummified soul. The God of forests and mountains, the elusive God of the river. The same One where all of my ideas, joys and sorrows drowned. Where all of my grief became part of an equation. Where I was one of God's numbers, stamped on a million faces and glimpsed by me in life's every movement. The God of love and light. Infinite and unattainable! Manifested and mortal! The One that was looking at me with Your eyes. The One looking at You...

But even this thought faded whenever it occurred to me that I was here because of You.

You have the capacity to understand me, even if just for a second, and for that second you can liberate me from carrying the weight of the skies on my collarbones. Your tear and Your smile could save me. I made no distinction between a part and a whole. I thought that only You could lead me to the Light. I fell lower and lower in my searches. Where was this thing that was tormenting me so? Was it in the water's reflection, the lines on my palms, the darkness of my pupils? My past, where is it? I'm removing knife blades from the remains of my soul. There is nothing except the river here.

Except the fisherman.

Except the heart that I want to tear out and throw into these condescending waters.

Indifferent waters.

Eternal waters.

I have to return or I would have found a boat instead of a fisherman on the shore. I have to return because I'm not ready to cross the river. If there is fishing gear, there is a fisherman. If there is a deadline, there is the need to meet it. I have to return. There is a walking stick, so I have to go but I don't want to rattle my chains again. Let me go free...

III

I wandered. I walked as close as possible to the river and finally realized that with this kind of movement I was simply not there. I didn't see my

reflection in the turbulent flow. The stones didn't let me leave footprints. I wasn't there. My name was forgotten, and there was nothing but a monotonous splash of water.

I turn towards the forest. Who am I? Even if I saw that reflection, I wouldn't have recognized myself as something definitive, well-expressed. Just like water, I have my own velocity per a specific period of time. I overcome the distance allotted to me, which to me means making circles among the trees. They stretch their gnarly arms towards me but don't manage to grab me. A whole world of ghostly creatures tries to approach me and snatch me. They look into my face and ask me - who are you? These bodiless shadows confined at the crossing didn't reach the other shore and turned into grass and leaves. They ruffle my hair with a gust of wind, they tangle my feet with the roots, they try to convince me to stay with an alluring glitter. But first they ask me - who are you? And an unknown dim light weaves its web in the tree tops that are agitated because of my presence. It descends to my palm, revealing the still visible lines of fate on it. The flowers give me their unexpressed sadness, their very last treasure, and then they wilt in my hands. A fallen tree with broken arms is moaning and whispering to me - who are you? And I'm losing, losing, losing myself.

Somebody will pick me up like a button that was torn off from a coat. He won't recognize me,

and the wind will pick me off his open palm and carry me along until... until.

IV

It's time to leave the river behind. It doesn't accept those who came too early. The waterman doesn't descend on my side of the river. If I throw a stone, will it reach his boat? Or will it come back, hitting me in the chest? In the night I still catch his glance that speaks to me...

"Bread satisfies hunger. Water satisfies thirst. You reach the river and demand everything from it and expect to get it at once. But the water can't feed you. Catch a fish in these waters, and that will be food. And it isn't your food, either."

"I'm this river's son. It has to give me everything. It must save me!"

"You are more of a tree's son, just as immovable. Go back to the people, and they will give you everything you need. Everything from the same source. Don't ask water to turn into bread... This is all just a part. You should turn to the whole..."

The tree rustled, throwing handfuls of earth into the muddy water, and the washed away edge of the cliff fell into the water. The crown with tired drooping greenery turned over, and the tree fell in its stead, spreading its branches. I follow it as if pierced by someone's arrow. The moon is playing on the body's red stroke. On the blue channel of the

soul. The pierced body falls into the water. It's time for me to return.

*Where are you, my dear?
Are you far away from here?
Where are you, my dear?
Maybe you are close to here
But I just can't see you?*

I start a fire, a useless fire, fearing guests. In the fright of the leaves, I fall into an anxious sleep. The river rustles somewhere, far away. Its waters are timeless.

While I sleep, You will come to share your doubts. And yet again, I will find out that everything is different from what it seems. And all we can say about this "different" is that we know nothing. Nothing but the existence of this "different."

V

In the morning, fog seeps through fingers and blades of grass and creeps towards my face. I breathe in the humidity of ravines and wake up. The forest came closer to me. I was now a continuation of its dark leaves and the branches that were frozen every morning. Yesterday's silver in the sky turned to lead and threatened with collapsing, filling the thin threads of plants with moisture.

"It's time. You can't stay here any longer. It's time to go," a voice buzzed in my head. I got up to take a look around and heard the ringing of a brook.

It enunciated the words and it was Your voice. Right at the edge of the glade I found this transparent thread of unbreakable crystal. It was eternally hurrying forward. It seems like at the next turn it will break into hundreds of shards and will not merge in a swift arrow again. It was a way towards You. And having taken a step in that direction, for the first time I felt joy. I experienced the road and my step. Whether it was the right one or not, it gave me a sense of direction. It made me feel Alive. No longer was I a mirror of the eternal forest and the river's blue streams. I was a movement towards You.

In the darkness of remote trees, where the light didn't reach, I saw, yet again, those who were still by the river. Their souls had almost completely melted and were looking at me imploringly. They wanted to move ahead, take a step, and clearly felt that I was still alive. And I, in turn, felt the emptiness that had been torturing me for so long recede. Yes, I knew nothing of their roads. Yes, I knew nothing of life either on this side of the river or on the other one. But I realized that, just like I did, they considered themselves abandoned and lonely. They, too, were dying because of their ignorance. They perceived that enormity, that ocean for which the river was just a small tributary, and they felt lost and had no idea what to do. And I didn't feel like looking for somebody to blame for everything that was going on, even though I wasn't abandoning my search for the reason. This was the

very first and the oldest way. But I was no longer pushing them away, taking them for props. They were actors in their own right. They were suffering in their search for a soul. And I was leaving my emptiness just so that their lot would become lighter, even if for the tiniest little bit, the smallest share. I couldn't help but I could find the courage to be alive and leave the castle I had built. I could have the courage to substitute pictures drawn in the sand with pictures made out of real stone, the hardest kind. I had the courage to fling the doors wide open and experience the strength of the approaching water. I walked alongside the brook and whispered to them, "I'm alive..."

It seemed like the forest heard me and the faceless surroundings filled with life-giving power. It might have been for just a moment, but I heard real birds and was enveloped in the rustle of real leaves. Tar buzzed under the heated bark of the trees. Insects buzzed like released golden springs. Life turned out to be everywhere. The moment I turned inside myself the treasured mirror that maintained a connection with this world, the moment I reached in its direction, it gave me a hand. I looked for magic, and my search led me to a desert. I dared to look at beauty and found magic. I spoke to the brook and it carried me away. It became wider, the water played louder, water trumpets flowed, and the wind barely had time to extract sounds from them. I heard You in everything. And I started to understand that it was

as if I were submerging myself into the blue waters and seeing a glimmering stone at the bottom. I submerge myself and swim in its direction. I almost touch it but the bottom is moving away, it falls through, and the stone glimmers far away, even deeper. And everything repeats itself. Your world widens inescapably, it grows inescapably. And I open one door after another but each one of them becomes just a prelude to You.

New arrows come from nowhere, and the brook turns into a stream. Behind one of the trees I encounter a curve of the river. That's where the waters merge. The cliff towers over them, and You are right there, bending over a flower.

I scream but it's all in vain. You sleep, Your eyes are closed. You don't want to see the river or this forest. But how did You end up here? How did You manage not to lose Yourself? I spent a long time staring into nowhere, sitting on the flower carpet, next to You. And it seemed to me that I started hearing a song. I started coming over every evening... I started making out words...

Among all of the twists of my way along the mountain crags, steep cliffs. In the grass, heather, sand and dust tangled by the sun and the wind. Among water lilies in the swamp mist and bright bluebells. Among all of the threads of my roads, I started seeing You. My heart chased ships down red rivers, and Your sign was on every one of their flags. My sky sent out sailboats down blue rivers, and they fell onto Your arms as blue raindrops. I

took a brush and threw paints onto the canvasses without mixing them.

I wasn't an artist any longer. I was his clay.

The sky opened as a treasured jewelry box, and I was no longer alone. I wasn't speaking to life any longer. Life was questioning itself.

I wasn't an artist any longer. I was his canvass.

The lock turns with a cherished click and the door flies wide open.

The Artist comes in.

I see You and He Paints.

He absorbs my light, and shadows disappear.

The Painter paints a Painter.

The reflection is pulsating in the eye. Looks. A look. Breath.

The Painter paints a Painter.

Your Song is about You.

VI

I came to visit Her in the nights, and during the day I kept roaming around the river. The evenings were filled with magic. It was as if She would awaken from a long sleep, offer a sudden smile, and even start speaking to me. Time would come for us to leave, and I have to be ready for the journey. I have to carry no load, and my step should be light. If shadows are so overwhelming here and everybody who came before their time seem to melt

under the winds, let my load melt as well. I have discovered the sky, so what do I care about the stones in my rucksack? I carried it for as long as I had to. I carried it to the place where I was going to be able to free myself from it. Let the way to the opposite shore be closed to me, but who said that this eternal river will not take all of those "I"s that have already died and that are pressing on my shoulders with their heavy load?

With these thoughts, I was walking down to the river when I discovered a sleeping youth. A crow was sitting near his arms that were splayed across the crumpled grass. He wasn't scared of my sudden appearance. He was like a frozen replica of someone's mysteries.

The man opened his eyes and said, "All of the birds have to come here but only the crow visits me."

"He has become my friend."

He was strange, just like everything in this world.

I called him the Bird-catcher.

Later, I started thinking that I had already seen him, that in my former life I'd had just this kind of friend but with young eyes and surrounded with a great variety of birds. Different roads had taken us to this river but there was the same kind of load weighing down on our shoulders. Here, we both turned into shadows but in the place where we were before...

Back there, he could have become the hero of every story. He could have been imagined in any movie. In any novel, his words would have carried weight. He is an actor, and inside him there is a mysterious workshop. But he is a sincere actor, and in his workshop he is trying to transmit his present using paint and brushes.

This man plays hide-and-seek on an enormous field and reads his past to me in verse. We put scraps of newspaper together, search for surprising lenses in order to find all of the world's colors and throw them off. We become reborn in destroyed worlds, telling apart the lizard on shards of brick. Anxiety bends us over, but that was our own choice. Just like the search for freedom and permanent happiness.

While we were here, we talked in snatches, hurling a heap of cooled feelings into every word. We spoke in our minds, not aloud. Once, as we threw rocks into the river, we felt some almost weightless load, the one that was part of the load we had brought with us from our former lives and that had made us want to die. Having felt that, we started doing something absolutely senseless. As often happens, it also turned out to be extraordinarily hopeful. We started building a dam.

It was funny and clumsy but suddenly it became the most crucial thing for us. Maybe it was our first real task on this shore. The Bird-catcher started smiling and telling about those who had been in love with him in the former life.

We carried stones, threw them in the water, and the tide carried them away. They didn't have the time to touch bottom. And was it even there?

It was as if they contained all of the heaviness hidden in our souls. Every day brought liberation. In the evenings, as I listened to the voice of the One who sat by the ravine, I would start feeling how my entire being opened up and the burden splashed out in a wave of sand, disappearing in that same river.

My friend's eyes started flashing, his breath became deeper. Life started visiting him, filling the enormous halls of his soul with the whimsy moods of the sky and the woods. The crowns of the trees whispered their blessing with the voices of a thousand souls. We had to leave behind everything that was superfluous and be light on the way. That was the only way for us to return.

The river lost its deceptive flow, and the fisherman stopped casting his net. There was no need for his time. Now we were really ready to die. There was no need to put aside things that would disappear on closer examination and would turn to eternity on realization. This eternity was with us and we were with her. There was no need to cast the net. There was no need to borrow somebody else's bread. We were ready to die. We were light and free. What we didn't know was that those who were ready to die would have Life open to them.

Epilogue, or the very beginning.

When the last load swam down the river, I was visited by the One who sang songs over the water and the flower carpet. When my very last stone disappeared in the water, each of us took a small and magical one to remind us forever of this great lesson. We disappeared in the green roads, lost our way in the fields and once came out to the place where we found all of you, working at your usual tasks. we walked along, smiling and looking into your faces.

We have returned, we will exist, we exist.

P.S. I never encounter this river again...



Bronislava Volková

Bronislava Volková, born 1946 in Děčín, Czech Republic, is a Czech-American poet, writer, semiotician, translator, essayist, collagist and member of both Czech and American PEN club. She is a Professor Emerita of Indiana University, Bloomington

and author of more than twenty books, many articles, stories and essays. She was translated into ten languages and received a number of literary and cultural awards.

Stone Houses

Stone houses with green balconies reflect themselves against the clear blue sky. They remind of secret farewells and exude the heat of the Mediterranean countryside. They breathe with intimacy, unheard of in Northern countries. At night, when the balconies open, old women come out from behind the wooden doors to lean on the green railings and to watch the processions passing in front of their eyes, ringing with laughter and buzzing with teasing whisper of the young couples. On the corners of the streets in small taverns, the men drink red wine and the sea returns to the shore in regular thrusts to console the heat of the lava.

Seafood delicacies and busy talk entice behind the windows of the bars.

She didn't come then or later. Once, they simply saw each other for the last time and who knew that they were parting? Their parting, after all, happened a long time ago, as an outburst of a volcano that no one will ever heal. Except, then they only just met. The fate of stones is dark and impenetrable.

He only said a few initial sentences and his voice incomprehensibly carried itself over the whole surface of her body. The painful meaning of this fact, however, then still belonged into the sweet area of unawareness. Still, from the very first moment, he awakened in her a strange and mysterious sadness, which spread itself in her as the eye of the future. She respected nothing so much as integrity of a personality endowed with the gift of a penetrating intellect. Moreover, she felt attracted by his allusive, gauze charm of innocence, full of flirtation and dignity simultaneously.

He was totally charmed by her awakening womanhood - half-woman - half-child-- and by her inquiring and serious intellect. There was a bow of passionate intellectual friendship between them with pseudo-ethical implications. Both were dreaming about something higher, better, new. They were bonded by desire for innocence and nobility, by the strength of high ideals and by foolishness.

From the moment he saw her for the first time, he could not speak about anything else but her. He didn't even realize, how, unnoticed, she slipped into his world. He had to see her. He had to see her at least once a week, in order to breathe her as a fresh air. She, too, was obsessed by him. True, she didn't talk about him, but lying down and getting up, she didn't think of anything else but him. It seemed they knew each other forever, they were interested in the same things. Because they had so many theoretical questions to "solve", she was somehow ready to accept the fact that he was not willing to dance with her in dance halls, but rather wanted to spend the time in discussion with her. She liked the dancing equally well. He was bored by it. Instead of getting offended, she allowed herself to be hypnotized by his intense gazes and philosophical style. Later on, however, she started to get tired of his impersonal ways, of the absence of something earthy in his nature, of his egocentrism. And so, before he worked his way through to ask for her hand, she simply lost interest in him. So that her father's, "only over my dead body", which was very justified, came when the relationship between them moved into quite different trails and stopped being pleasant to her. His constant need to vent his theoretical and practical problems in endless conversations with her and her mother, instead of taking her to a movie, to dinner, for a romantic walk, gradually started to nauseate her. Even though she was substantially younger than he, she

felt pushed into a role of kind of a teacher or a willow tree and that's not what she needed from him. Therefore one day, when he finally confessed his love to her in his nebulous and uncertain way, she pretended she didn't know what he was talking about in order to revenge herself.

The less he could be certain of her, the more grew his panic. He suddenly realized, that this charming girl, with whom he played a non-committal game for so long in his mind, had all that he dreamed his future wife would have. But he didn't have the courage to grasp it and he completely turned her off by his laxness and self-centeredness.

She suddenly got reminded of all this by the green balconies and by the sounds of Eugene Onegin, pouring from the local radio station. Even here, they listen to that romantic shadow-play! She remembered, how George stylized himself once into Eugene Onegin and her into Tatiana and that's how their story ended. When he finally started to show serious interest, she was long involved with somebody else. Then she remembered that the other favorite hero of his was Petr Bezukhov from War and Peace, but to be like him, George did not have enough substance.

She got up from the bed, prepared the swimming suit, it was only seven o'clock in the morning, so she watched the sea from the balcony for a while. The sea returned with regular motions to the old shore. She changed a station, she caught

one, from which Caribbean rhythms were pouring, so she improvised a dance and ran down for breakfast.

In the dining room, the sights of men turned after her. They eagerly tried to possess her at least in their dreams. Donna pretended not to see them, she already knew her irresistible charm and her sex-appeal and she decided not to use either today neither to her advantage nor to her disadvantage. She hummed some merry Southern song and felt that she was the best companion to herself. She felt sorry for the women sitting with men, who turned their heads after her everywhere and she remembered how she felt when George considered it his duty to devote his attention to some lady sitting next to them in the theater, for which she moreover got the tickets. Suddenly she realized, how happy and free she was. The sea offered itself to her with its limitlessness and desire, which was unambiguous and powerful and did not leave any doubts.

When she was done swimming, she went for a walk into the little town and she smiled at this strange spectacle of a world. She imagined the various souls of the passers-by and she drowned in the heavy Mediterranean air, the sensuality of which could be born by a transoceanic ship, which was anchored close by in the harbor.

Suddenly she made up her mind. She will leave the white stone houses and let herself be hired on the ship as a cook. Donna liked to cook and

cooked well. She will have a new adventure for a few weeks. She can take her books with her, after all she won't be cooking all day.

She was glad that she left her native city and the prison regime and that she has had a chance to get to know the whole world. Or at least as much of it, as she will desire. She remembered her girlfriends, who let themselves be imprisoned into one unsuitable relationship after another and who never left the native Central-European city and so got to know only one way of doing things. Donna had already had behind herself full complex lives filled both with games and serious issues and now finally the gate to silence was opening for her. The universe burned in her heels and rolled itself as the clouds in endless variations. Donna swallowed it eagerly and attentively. She really felt sometimes as a swallower of the fire. But then, on the sand beach, she let herself be taken by the tenderness of the mellow air and the squeezes of endlessness.

In one of the harbors, she ordered a luxury room and in the restaurant of the hotel, she ran into the unavoidable. Into her past. She knew she escaped feelings of meaninglessness and depression when she broke up with George, but that he will become a blown up bourgeois in spite of the ideals of his youth, she still had a hard time believing. She was shattered. Behind him slowly walked an adoring and timid little woman while he was talking in a self-satisfied manner with some tall guy. She recognized him immediately. Should I go to

him? - she thought. But then she was swept by a desire to dance, so she decided to pretend she didn't see him. He probably will not want to talk to me anyway, she thought and she asked a young man standing by the bar to dance with her. He eagerly agreed and Donna was turning in the magnetic rhythm of the rumba.

George suddenly looked up from his table and saw her. His breath stopped for a second. He had an overwhelming desire to go to her, to address her, but suddenly he realized how his jealous wife would respond to it, that he would have another spoiled night. He did not want to get a divorce, it would be already for the third time, and so he decided to pretend that he did not see Donna. Donna noticed his hidden maneuver and was relieved. They really didn't have anything to talk about and he spared her an embarrassing conversation full of arrogant compliments and insincere interest this way.

The stone houses slowly cooled down in the shadow of the cypress trees and Donna went to have a talk with the old women, who just came out to breathe the cool night air. The stories she heard told here were saturated with life force and kindness.



Michael Blehman

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Smell

'But if one admits the reality of the supernatural, the possibility of its intrusion into real life, then let me ask you what the role of common sense is.'

Ivan Turgenev, 'Dog', 1864 (translated by Michael Blehman)

'Do you like Borges?'

'Well, as a matter of fact...'

I didn't hear the end of the sentence because of the noise produced by a jet plane flying by.

Michael Blehman

I don't know whether it's good or bad, but this story is absolutely true. I mean both the story and its being good or bad.

Michael Blekhman

1

The city was waking up slowly and lazily. It looked sleepy and unwilling to hurry, the more so that there was no reason to make haste. Actually, there is never any reason for hurrying. "Just think of this from my point of view", the city was begging the people who, as usual, jumped out of their beds just to rush to something of no real importance.

The city didn't seem to care about the people's petty problems. It remembered so many things, he had so much under his invisible belt that hurrying looked ridiculous. And not only looked, the city thought... Looking is much less than being.

The city remembered times out of human minds, which now, centuries and generations after, seemed golden, when hurrying was not only mauvais tone, it was impossible, physically and, what's, morally. It remembered slowly moving carriages, people walking slowly along its young streets that looked like sleeping beauties, ships docking slowly in its young port...

Nobody hurried - except time.

Time never depended on the people and on the city, though they always depended on it, hurry or no hurry. Time will fly away much faster

than an automobile that, once and forever, took the place of the carriage...

The new port grew older, people began hurrying. The city felt older and older with every new century. It looked at the people with cold sympathy trying, in vain, to explain them the uselessness of hurrying, but they knew better. Or maybe they just thought they did. The city had to agree that, sometimes, it's better to be sure that you know better than just to know.

Meanwhile, time kept flying away from the people, who were still sure they knew better. It kept flying away from all those people, who tried so hard to catch up with time.

Catching up with time? "I wish I were so naive!", the city thought and sighed...

And the rain began tapping at the city's sidewalks and old pavements like old-fashioned high-heeled shoes.

"Women rarely put on high-heeled shows today', the rain tapped.

'Now I see how old you are', I said, meaning nothing personal in fact. 'Both of you, my friends. However, for you to be old is as nice as for those hurrying people to be young. '

The rain only didn't shrug its shoulders because it had none.

"I always say that you are not my author', it replied. 'So feel free to say whatever you consider necessary to say, it will change nothing. '

'That's right, buddy', I agreed. 'Besides, I

wish you knew how many people say that I am not their author.'

'You can call me old', the city said and maybe old I am, but it really was quite different many years ago. It was different, that is better. '

And it sighed again.

Carole's first thought was that she heard a deep sad sigh, but then she understood, if only such things are easy to understand, that it was nothing more than rain, which started out of the already blue morning sky. Or nothing less...

The rain hurried, too. It hurried to start, then to stop, just to start again, later. It had no time to look back, simply because it had no back, just as no shoulders... It had no time to look around and maybe, just maybe, to end forever, or maybe to never end. It depended on time, just as the people did. And time depended on no one and on nothing...

2

Mike, Carol's husband, took Carol to work in his car. They lived in a small cottage in one of the city's suburbs, and it was a long way, so she had never been late. You are only late when the way is short, so the more you hurry the later you are. That's a rule, and what's the use fighting with a rule. Isn't an exception just another rule, not better or worse than the rule itself?

The familiar group of people made of

light-yellow stone were walking, motionlessly as usual, towards Carole's building, their leader pointing somewhere over Carole's head. Those people, as someone had explained her many years ago, symbolized human sins. 'If those are sins', Carole had asked her or him, she didn't remember the details, then what does the leader symbolize? Or maybe leaders never symbolize anything, except symbolic leaders of course'.

The huge modern-looking building where Carol worked was shining happily though rather coldly. 'Cold happiness', Carole thought approaching the entrance door, 'is, in a way, like jealousy: both feelings are kind of incomplete.' She went on thinking of her unexpected problem: they had to buy a new car for her because hers was too old to repair. They could not afford another brand-new car, and, even more so, they could not afford a cheap old one. Carole asked herself what kind of problem was worse, expected or unexpected, but the question definitely had no answer, so she preferred to abandon it.

She also asked herself how many times she had entered and left that building, and whether numberless 'times' made up that single, solid, incessant 'time', and she abandoned that question as well since it had an obvious answer.

Instead, entering the elevator, she began wondering how on earth she would get back home as Mike, early in the morning, and right now, kissing her goodbye, said that, unfortunately, he

would not be able to pick her up. There are women, Carole thought, even among her friends, who would find nothing unfortunate in such a situation, on the contrary, but she and Mike - yes, Mike as well, found nothing fortunate in that kind of misfortune.

All the way to the God knows which floor Carole was thinking of whom she would ask to please give her a lift home. It would be an hour-long drive, even longer in the rush hour, so asking about a favor of that kind was no fun...

And all her friends, who were not too numerous, lived anywhere but not close to her...

Well, there was Johanna. She lived close by... well, not quite close by, one should not understand this expression literally, but, at least, not in a different part of the world.

Johanna had a problem, however. Well, not Johanna, of course, but her car...

3

Three weeks ago - or maybe it was four weeks, who remembers details if they don't really matter Johanna told Carole something odd about her car. Well, the car was not old though not brand-new, but the problem had obviously nothing to do with the age of the car. The problem was the smell.

'It smells awful', Johanna had said. 'And it's all because of that dead mouse.'

'Oh, my goodness!', Carole had exclaimed

absent-mindedly and looked out of the window at the human sins and their nameless leader, wondering if bad smell was one of those sins. She had told herself that it was not because a dead mouse was not human while the sins were.

The day was as long as any working day is. Days off are quite shorter though much less numerous. 'And what', Carole thought, 'if all the days were days off, no working days at all? Would that make them long enough? "You will let me know if they are when you retire', Mike said and kissed her - condescendingly, Carole thought. 'But that won't happen any time soon.'

'Of course I will give you a lift, freundin!', Johanna said joyfully. If she had written that sentence instead of pronouncing it, she would have capitalized the word: she still remembered her German grammar. As to 'friend', it was OK, too, but 'Freundin' sounded warmer, didn't it?

'It's still a bit smelly inside, if you know what I mean', she added, 'but the car is not damaged in any way, and I drive it safely every day!'

4

Unexpectedly, the day ended. They always do, and the longer a day lasts, the more unexpectedly it ends. One good evening, you begin to understand this rule, so you don't consider all the following evenings very good - unless you are fond

of unexpectedness.

'Well', Carole said getting in Johanna's car and almost fainting because of the smell that was more terrible than anything one could or could not imagine, 'so you say you found a dead mouse inside?'

'Ah, yes', Johanna replied in an airy way and started the car. 'That was the reason I think... A small one, but smelling like a herd of mice.'

Carole rolled her window down, then looked at the sins: they seemed to be wincing at the incredible smell that definitely couldn't help reaching them. 'This deserved suffering will turn them into virtues', Carole thought. 'No sin, even a deadly one, can even compare with this smell... But why me? Am I a sinner to be punished like this?'

'It's OK now', Johanna added in a firm tone although arguing with Carole. 'It was much worse at the beginning... The smell is now almost gone... Can't you see the light, you jerk?!', she yelled at an old man trying to cross the busiest street in the city, named, hundreds of years ago, in favor of a saint lady...

Johanna honked so loudly that the man was scared to death and almost jumped back to the sidewalk.

'These old idiots are the reason of all the troubles!', Johanna roared. 'What's the use of them, I ask you?'

'I wish I knew', Carole thought, but then corrected herself and told herself that she was glad

she didn't. She took a flask of an odor depressant, or how do they call it, out of her bag and began smelling it greedily. Trying to depress the smell made her feel depressed. 'It's always the case', she thought: a strong desire to kill something, to say nothing of someone, kills you, even before you kill the object of your vicious desire.'

Well, the most unexpected thing, even more unexpected than the smell, was the word 'jerk' pronounced by Johanna. Not that the word sounded quite strange to Carole, she had heard it so many times from so many people, those she was acquainted with and those she was not. Hearing it from Johanna, that's what made the difference. Although no one considered her an angel, everyone at their company was sure that she was closer to an angel than to a demon, even much closer...

'Why should you keep smelling that stupid thing like if you were a drug addict?', Johanna exclaimed having in mind Carole's deodorant. 'Yes, it did smell badly, but it was 3 weeks ago!'

After saying that, she rolled up all the car windows.

'It's recommended to keep your windows closed on a highway', she muttered, and Carole felt as if dying.

Yes, 'dying' was the right word.

5

'Are you OK, dear?', Mike asked her with a lot of concern in his voice.

That was one of the three questions Carole could not understand and bear. Well, if a person looks as pale as a white towel, isn't it clear that she is far from being OK? Once an old man collapsed right in the street, and everyone considered it necessary to come up and ask the man if he was OK. He couldn't answer though, and she called an ambulance immediately instead of asking the necessary question.

Question number two in that series was 'How are you?' If you are really interested in knowing how the person is, be so kind as to ask that directly: 'Could you please tell me in detail how you are, dear. The more details the better!'

And the last but not the least was 'Are you sleeping?' For goodness sake, can one answer 'yes' to this question? So why should you ask a question that has a single answer?

Carole went in the bathroom for a minute or two to get rid of the smell.

'It's no fun to smell like a dead mouse', she told Mike severely. He was surprised to hear that as he was sure he always smelled well.

After Carole relaxed in the bath and then told Mike the whole story, he said, choosing words carefully,

'Do you think, darling, that a little mouse

can make a big car smell like that?'

'Come on, Mike!', Carole exclaimed and clapped her hands. 'Do I look like a specialist? Have I ever smelled a mouse, dead or alive, God bless me? If the vehicle owner tells me the car smells like that because of a dead mouse, what reason do I have to doubt what she says?'

Mike thought for a while, then muttered, half to himself, half to Carole,

'But how come there was a mouse in the car?'

'Well', Carole replied thoughtfully, 'it must have gotten into the car in some way... Then, for some reason, it died inside.'

'Why did it die, I wonder?'

'Who knows', Carole said. 'Maybe it was sick...'

'Or maybe it got suffocated for the lack of fresh air...', Mike supposed.

The phone rang.

'Hi!', Johanna said in the most cheerful way possible, even more cheerfully than that. 'How are you, freundin?'

'Why not ask me if I am sleeping', Carole was going to say, but thought better of it and decided not to aggravate the situation.

'Johanna, dear, are you OK?', she asked one of the three questions.

'Oh, absolutely!', her friend assured her. 'Just can't be better! You won't believe it: I have found a dead raccoon in the trunk. Just imagine: a

dead raccoon! And as dead as dead can be.'

'Oh!..', Carol exclaimed and placed the receiver against her other ear. 'So it wasn't a mouse?..'

'Do you think I am so old that I can't tell a raccoon from a mouse?', Johanna replied sounding as cheerful as in the morning. 'I tell you it was a raccoon, and a dead one, indeed.'

'Do you need help, to get rid of it, dear?', Carole inquired with a lot of care in her voice.

Johanna laughed triumphantly, 'I have already done it! Just bought a pair of special gloves, and removed the poor 'damn thing forever!'

'Thank God!', Carole sighed with relief. 'Congratulations!'

'Please don't tell about it at work!', Johanna asked her strictly as if Carole was known as a person fond of telling everyone other people's secrets. 'It's between you and me!'

Johanna paused a second and asked, 'Do you want me to take you to work tomorrow morning?'

'Oh, well...', Carole mumbled, 'you see...'

But hurting her friend's feelings was something she could never do. Instead, she agreed passionately and thanked Johanna so many times that Mike asked, with some concern in his voice,

'Are you OK, darling?'

Carole chose not to tell him about the raccoon, otherwise he would have asked her how

the animal had managed to get in the car and the talk would have been repeated.

6

A metaphor visited me unexpectedly, as they always do, those metaphors, and slipped off my tongue, or, like a golden fish, it slipped out of my hands so that I didn't even tell it a single wish, to say nothing of three... But I did manage to remember my unexpected metaphor, and here it is:

The city yawned by the light morning wind and opened its numerous window-looking eyes peeping through the eyelashes of blinds and, less often, curtains. Some of them were wide open though, which Carole didn't like at all: she and Mike preferred old-style curtains. 'Without curtains', she said once and forever, 'I feel kind of naked, even when I am dressed. But with curtains I feel dressed even when I am naked.'

'Do you want me to take you to work today, honey?' ' ', Mike offered his help again.

Carole kissed him and replied, in one of her airiest ways,

'Don't worry, sweetheart! Johanna will take me to work and then back home. She says she would be just happy to.'

'Are you sure she is OK?', Mike inquired carefully. 'Yesterday evening, when you were talking to her on the phone, you sounded... well, a

bit strange, if I can put it so...'

'That's what I call men's logic!', Carole laughed, almost joyfully. 'Why do you ask about her if you say that it was me who sounded strange?'

'Well', Mike kissed her and sighed - or smiled, 'I asked you yesterday about yourself... So, today, it's more natural to ask you about something else.'

Carole nodded, kissed Mike goodbye, and went outside to wait for Johanna. The cottages kept opening their sleepy glass eyes as the sun was already climbing the sky, slowly but steadily. And, far from their bedroom township, the old cross set up ages ago on the top of the majestic hill, or, rather, royal-looking mountain, turned off its lights for the day.

7

The smell wasn't gone. Actually, it was even stronger, if, Carole thought, a smell like that could get stronger. 'The superlative degree can have no comparative', she said to herself but didn't dare to use her odor killing flask or roll down the window. That would have hurt Johanna's feelings, which she could never afford.

'Yes, it still smells', Johanna said.

'So you think it wasn't a mouse?', Carole inquired cautiously, thinking that 'smell' was too soft a name for the effect she had been witnessing for 2 days now.'

'A raccoon', Johanna nodded firmly. 'I have buried the poor thing, that's all I could do for the damn son of a gun. Please don't tell anyone, OK?'

Carole felt that she was getting accustomed to Johanna's new way of expressing thoughts. 'On the other hand', she tried to explain the phenomenon to herself, 'new things require new ways of expressing them... this is a general rule.'

'Of course I won't', she promised.

'The problem is', Johanna went on, 'that the damn animal kicked the bucket, I mean passed away, on the bag of garbage I had put in the trunk on the day before. That's why the trunk got kind of saturated with that smell, so I had to throw the raccoon away, I mean bury it. And it's not fun to bury a raccoon I tell you!'

'Oh!..', Carole gasped, 'It must have been so sad, I believe...'

'No, I mean that it took me ages to dig a hole large enough to put the beast in. And it kept stinking while I was digging.'

The smell was so heavy that Carole didn't see the nice old-fashioned houses the car was passing by, the old university campus with prevailing green color, the majestic mountain behind it. All she did manage to notice was the group of yellow-colored sins led somewhere by their smart leader. 'But to have so many sins', she thought, 'you don't have to be extraordinary smart. Sins will do it all for you...'

She didn't finish her thought as Johanna

said, driving the car into the huge inside parking of their beautiful office building,

'The stupid idiots refused to wash the car!'

'Who do you mean, dear?', Carole asked her and got out of the car with great relief.

'The guys in the damn garage! Just imagine: they told me they wouldn't do it because the car was stinking. Preferred to lose a client, the jerks!..'

Carole felt so weak and exhausted after the trip that she wasn't even surprised that Johanna didn't let a serviceman drive the car in and park it there as they used to do. She pulled herself together though and concentrated on pushing button '18' in the elevator.

Their 18th floor looked as busy as usual, although the working day had not even begun yet.

'Hi, freundin!', Johanna greeted the receptionist. 'How are you doing? Just imagine: I have found a dead raccoon in my car, in the trunk!'

'Oh, my God!', the receptionist squeaked opening her eyes as big as if trying to see the raccoon. 'How did it happen?!'

'I have buried the poor creature', Joanna answered a different question and then got back to the initial one,

'Will ask Bob - Bob is an old friend of mine, a cop, to investigate the whole thing. Let the cops do it! I mean you don't find a dead mouse... I mean a dead raccoon in your car every day, do you?'

8

There was nothing memorial about that day, actually, even nothing special, but working was too much for Carole. She fixed her eyes on the sins following their sinful leader on the opposite side of the square. The sins looked so small, almost non-existent if looked at from the 18th floor.

'It's always the case with a sin', Carole thought. 'Just close your eyes or distance yourself from it, and the sin is gone, you feel sinless. To avoid a sin, simply keep your eyes closed, or, at least, rise high in the sky.'

Yes, sitting as high as the 18th floor made Carole feel quite safe, but the question was not gone, it kept teasing and challenging her as if it was quite sure that she would never be able to answer it. But an answer, Carole might have thought, rids the question of all its attractiveness. It's better, of course, if a question has several answers, at least two. As to a question having a single answer, the situation is simply trivial, she might have added.

The question didn't leave her alone, didn't let her concentrate on her work. It seemed to be mocking her, giggling and laughing as if saying, "Come on, try to answer me! Use your thinking facilities! Apply your imagination! Or give up if you can't, just call a spade a spade and say frankly that this nut is too hard for you to crack. Ha-ha-ha!'

Carole had never experienced a similar challenge in her life, except maybe long ago, when

Mike proposed to her. Well, she didn't have to find an answer in that case as the answer was obvious. The dilemma was in either saying 'Yes' immediately or after a minute or two of thinking it over. It took her not less than two minutes to solve the dilemma, after which she answered 'Yes' of course.

This time, the challenge was different, and two minutes would not be enough.

The dilemma was also different now: to keep being tortured by a question full of attractiveness, or to make it lose the latter by finding an answer? Or even **the** answer - which would kill the question though.

Carole looked out at the sins, especially at one of them, and made up her mind to kill the question.

9

First she called Mike and asked him to pick her up. She also told him that, at last, she was ready to buy a new car. Well, maybe not a brand-new, but newer than her old one, which was too old to be repaired. Mike agreed as usual - of course he did.

'The guys in the parking garage want to wash the floor, dear', Carole peeped in Johanna's office after she saw a customer walking in.' They ask you to come and move your car... Oh, sorry, sweetheart, you are busy!.. Could you please give me your key? They will move the car themselves if

that's OK with you. I'm awfully sorry, I can see how busy you are are...'

Johanna shrugged her shoulders, 'I am always busy, don't they know?'

The client gave a tense polite smile but kept waiting patiently.

'All right', Johanna said without much joy in her voice. 'Here are the keys. Please tell the j... the guys to make it quick. Thank you of course.'

The customer coughed as politely as she smiled. Carole nodded and hurried to the elevator.

10

'Hi, Martin!', Carole waved her hand with the keys to the servicemen. 'How is everything?'

'Hi, Carole!', Martin replied. 'Saw you getting out of that awful car this morning. Are you OK?'

Carole thought that it was one of the rare cases when the notorious question sounded quite reasonable.

'Not quite OK, if you know what I mean', she said. 'Frankly speaking...'

She made a pause, not dramatic at all though. It was, rather, quite natural: anyone would make a natural pause under the circumstances, Carole thought. 'Where is Jimmy? I haven't seen him for quite a while. Does he still work here?'

Martin shook his head, looked around, paused, and then said,

'The guy is in a hospital...'

'Oh!..', Carole exclaimed sympathetically.
'What's wrong with him?'

She should have asked the same in a different way as they usually do: 'Is he OK?' but, of course, she understood that if a person is in a hospital, they are not quite OK, otherwise.

'It happened three weeks ago', Martin said.
'Jimmy got in that car...', he pointed at Johanna's car, 'to park it, but...!', he paused again.

'Come on, Martin!', Carole insisted, 'Do tell me what happened!'

Martin sighed deeply and went on,
'Well, you know... You see, he got in, closed the door, and... and...'

'Martin, dear', Carole begged, 'you are scaring me. Please go ahead and tell me the whole story!..'

Martin sighed again, even deeper this time, and replied,

'The kid fainted... Got pale in the face and kind of closed his eyes... I thought the guy was dead... I mean dead, you know.'

'Oh, my goodness!!!', Carole sighed out and tried to catch more air, without much success though. 'But why?!..'

She definitely knew the answer, but she wanted Martin to confirm her thoughts.

'I called an ambulance immediately. When the paramedics were taking him into the ambulance car, he opened his eyes and whispered, 'Smell...'

Then he closed them again... It's been 3 weeks now, and he is doing better. But he is still in the hospital. Something wrong with his psyche, the doctors say... They also say that his imagination is too rich, you know. Well, we men, are weaker than you women... On the other hand, your imagination is even richer, you know...'

Carole nodded and said, 'I have asked Johanna to give me the keys to her car. Here they are, Martin! Could you please...'

'Does it still...?', Martin muttered, 'I mean does it still stink?'

Carole sighed, 'Well, you see... The smell is not quite gone... But maybe we could help Johanna get rid of it if we... know the reason?..'

Martin looked bewildered.

'Do you want me to open the car?', he asked in a low voice.

Carole nodded several times in a row, 'Yes, yes, please do it, Martin! Please open the trunk!'

'Why the trunk? Do you think... Do you think it's there?..'

Carole nodded again,

'I am sure it is!.. But I don't know what.'

They looked at each other intently and went over to Johanna's car.

Martin put the key into the trunk keyhole... looked at Carole with awe in his eyes, took as much air as possible in his lungs, and raised the trunk lid.

The smell was almost unbearable, and Carole and Martin were about to faint...

For a minute or two, they stood dumb, staring at each other, not daring to look inside.

Carole pulled herself together and managed to overcome the awe. Slowly, carefully, her hands trembling, she turned her head and looked into the trunk, trying to think of Mike and how they would be drinking tea together tonight, and travel to the seaside on vacations, and go to a hockey game although she didn't like hockey at all, and how they would walk in the mountain park and pass by the ancient cross, and then sit in a cafe in the street named after an old-time saint woman... And she also thought that the woman whose name had been given to Carole and Mike's favorite street, ages ago, would not be afraid of looking into that trunk...

So she did make herself look inside.

'Oh, my God!!!', she gasped in a second or two.

'Oh, my God!!! Why... Why on earth?..'

She ran to the elevator without even looking at Martin, who also looked into the trunk and said almost the same,

'Why the hell...'

Carole flew as quick as a lightning to her office.

There, she grasped her bag, snatched a cell phone out of it, and dialed Mike's number. It was ages until, at last, Mike took the call.

'Hello, honey!', he said merrily. 'How are

you?'

Without saying a single word, Carole kept trembling like a thin, innocent birch tree in a gusty wind and breathing heavily.

'Are you OK, darling?', he asked her.

Thank God, Carole thought, he didn't ask her whether she was sleeping.

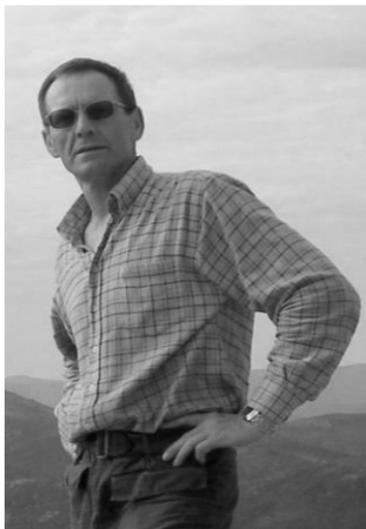
'Mike', she said at last in a hoarse voice, 'Mike, just imagine...'

I failed to hear the rest as a jet plane flew by, very close to the city's tallest roofs and the cross on the top of the magnificent mountain. Even the human sins turned their stone heads up for a second to look at it, but it was already far away...

Because of the noise, I didn't hear what Carole told Mike, so all I am left with is just a guess. But are you interested in my guesses? You have ones of your own, don't you?

The good thing about it though is that I didn't kill the question. A question without an answer is much better than an answer without a question, right?

I thank my daughter Marina for telling me this story. As mentioned above, it's true to life, except for the names. But who cares about names in a situation as dramatic as this one?



Boris Ishkov

A Russian geologist, who lives in the Kolyma region and searches for gold. He also writes prose.

NANNA NINA

(What I remember from her stories)

Part 2. War

Evacuation

The first night after the declaration of war, Nazi planes flew in to bomb the railway bridge over the Sheksna and the Yagorba rivers. Gunfire and anti-aircraft guns and bomb explosions rumbled for several hours, accompanied by heart-rending cries of almost uninterrupted sirens. The villagers stayed awake, fearful that the bombs would start falling on their houses. There was a bomb shelter but it was

for the train station workers only. Everybody else had to stand at the windows, looking into the glaring sky.

My brother came running and said that it was a war with Germany. He also said that he was on his way to the district military commissariat. After that, he didn't appear at home. His wife Vera took some food to him and said that there were so many people there that it wasn't easy to find Ivan among them. She was waiting for him at home till midnight, but when bombing started, Vera understood that her husband was not coming back, put some food in a little bundle, and went to the commissariat again, overcoming her fear. Nina stayed alone in the big house with her daughters. They sat on the bed. The girls huddled up to their mother and started looking at the sky which was now a source of danger. Nina was doing her best not to show that she was scared to death, but, as she stared at the sky behind the crowns of the trees, she was howling quietly,

'Stepan, Stepan...'

She understood very well that the biggest troubles were still to come, and felt absolutely unprotected. That's why she was calling her husband desperately, as if she were a little child,

'Stepan, Stepan...'

When the night was over and the siren stopped, boys started running down the street yelling that the bridges had not been destroyed. Vera came back from the commissariat and told them excitedly what she had learned there. Our anti-aircraft gunners didn't let the German planes get closer to the bridge; they were forced to drop the bombs from a great height, and they all fell down, though far from the target, without doing any harm to the bridges and the anti-aircraft batteries. But the rest of the news was just terrible. The Germans were attacking across the whole border, bombing the border cities without cessation. Leningrad was suffering a lot. The recruitment offices accepted the volunteers, but they didn't know where to send them. In Cherepovets alone, several hundreds of volunteers gathered at the commissariat and at the railway station. The telephone connection was being interrupted constantly, and the military officers were quite frustrated as they had no idea what to do. So far, everything looked very bad, but, hopefully, the situation would eventually improve.

Every night, Nazi planes flew in to bomb the bridges, and each subsequent raid became more and more violent and prolonged. In cloudy weather, the bombing was particularly scary. The fog was ripped under sirens by the beams of the searchlights, and dozens of enemy aircraft were seen coming from the west. Nobody even saw our planes. The anti-aircraft

gunners lit fireworks in the way of the aircraft carrying the bombs, and the planes, not daring to go down, just dropped the lethal load off. Powerful explosions shook the ground near the bridges, which, miraculously, remained unharmed. The good news was carried around the city every morning. But the joy faded amid the reports from the front, which were just awful. The disaster seemed to be absorbing the country.

By the end of August, the gunfire was heard louder by the day. The front was approaching. The war was coming closer as an inevitable threat, although the city was not bombed yet. But the bombing was heard round the clock, and they realized that death would soon be there, in all its horror.

Ivan spent all the time at the commissariat. He only came home twice in two months. Before the war, our aged parents had gone to the countryside to visit our old grandfather and help him with the apiary. The bees were his only hobby, and he kept taking care of them, no matter how old and weak he was. None of them could join them since then because the war cut all the roads off. But it would be better to spend the terrible time at the apiary, deep in the swampy area.

The kids got accustomed to the nighttime bombing and the roll of the war thunder, so they

slept through the Nazi aircraft attacks and played outside joyfully with their friends in the daytime. As to Nina, she knew that awful things were coming, and felt deathly cold inside.

And those things did come when the leaves started falling.

Suddenly, they started bringing a lot of wounded soldiers to our city. They filled the hospital, the schools, and many other buildings were turned into hospitals. People talked about the soldiers' awful wounds and the tragic situation at the front. One day, Ivan came and told them about Nina and her children's evacuation. He replied curtly to her silent question,

'The families of the communists will be the first to evacuate, otherwise they will be in a big trouble. Vera will start working at the military hospital tomorrow and will be evacuated with it. Pack your stuff, you will be evacuated tomorrow.'

'Where are we going to, Vanya?'

'I am not sure, Nina. All I know is that you're going eastward. I have already told Vera what stuff should be taken.'

The women looked at each other and burst into tears while the girls were outside. They cried embracing each other. Ivan was touched and came

up. They nuzzled close to him. He was hugging them silently.

‘And what about you, Vanya?’

‘I am waiting for the instructions, girls.’

He said that and left hurriedly. Vera and Nina started packing their bags as quickly as possible, choosing the things they were able to carry. Later, in the evening, they tried their winter clothes on to make sure they weren't too tight. At night, they sewed shoulder bags for all three of them. On the next morning, they put their stuff in the bags. Vera brought thickened honey bars wrapped in cloth and pieces of dried fish and elk meat cut into strips. Ivan, a great hunter and fisherman, had brought them last spring. They put the food in the bags and burst into tears again.

When they stopped crying, they washed, got dressed, woke the girls up, fed them, and went to the train station.

It was a warm October day. The afternoon sun was caressing the colorful leaves still decorating the trees and shrubs and lying on the roadsides and in the gardens. Somehow, the war was not heard in the early morning. The surprising silence was something they had almost forgotten. Above them, the sky was blue with rare white clouds. The air

was filled with the scents of the decaying grass, the late flowers, and the river. The nature seemed to know nothing about the war. Warmly dressed people were walking along the streets as if it were winter, while flocks of birds were flying eastward high in the sky. The clouds were also flying to the east. The people were walking in that direction, too, towards the train station. It seemed as if the whole world was moving eastward in complete silence.

It was noisy at the station. The girls were clutching their mother's sleeves following her through the crowds of people. After they submitted the notice of evacuation, the ushers allowed them to the platform. Then they parted hurriedly with Vera. Nina and her daughters found themselves shortly in front of the train car. The situation there was quite hysterical. But they had a lot of traveling experience, which helped them get in easily.

Actually, pushing and frustration were unreasonable. When all the people were already onboard, the train didn't move for a long time. The military men were checking the documents against the lists of evacuees. Finally, the train started. People began to get acquainted with each other and talk about the route. When they passed the railway bridges, everyone glued to the windows to see the target of the fierce Nazi attacks. They did see numerous large craters made by bombshell close to and at a distance from the road. Especially

wounded was the land around the large bridge across the Sheksna river: even on the bottom of the river, one could see craters made by explosions. We wondered why the bridges had not been destroyed. We tried to see the cannons protecting them, but they were hidden from view as if they didn't exist. There were sentries at both ends of the bridge, so they understood that the crossings were well protected.

It was the beginning of the long journey away from the war. There were long standings at little stations and even in the middle of the forests and steppes. The traffic depended completely on the army schedule. We often saw long freight trains with cannons guarded by sentries. The evacuees were carried to Moscow in passenger cars; there were no young men among them. The women treated each other very well, helping each other and taking care of the children. There were no babies, and all the kids behaved very well, they were playing quietly. Once a day, the female conductors brought dry bread and army thermoses with porridge. All the food was given to the children, so the adults didn't have enough food and stayed hungry.

The daughters behaved well despite the inconveniences, always asking for their mother's permission. The 10-year-old Deya would gather younger kids to tell them long stories in the

twilight. Nina noticed that her daughter's voice had Stepan's intonations. Milya was like that, too. Nina called her husband in her mind,

‘Stepan...’

They saw real marks of the war when they were passing Yaroslavl early in the morning. The city was on fire, and they saw buildings destroyed by Nazi bombs. The train passed the station slowly, without making a stop. Several days of the trip brought them no news except what they saw in the train windows. They felt they were on the biblical ark and hoped that they were on their way to rescue.

It took them a long time to pass Moscow as the train had to make numerous long stops. The night sky over the country's capital was illuminated by searchlights. Sirens wailed and, from time to time, bombs exploded. They saw numerous military vehicles carrying cannons; barrage constructions were being built everywhere. The adults and children shared their impressions of what they saw, feeling happy that there were many soldiers, which meant that the country had an army to defend them.

After having left Moscow behind, the train stopped at an unknown platform. They were waked up early in the morning and told that they would be placed to another train, while theirs would be used as a mobile military hospital. Soldiers came and

helped them get off the train. A short time later, they found ourselves sitting on the wooden platform together with our stuff. There was a piercing wind. The sky was covered with grey clouds ready to pour rain upon them. The ground was brown and wet from recent rains, with dirty patches of grass and faded discolored leaves. All of them were cold. But Nina had no idea that she would have to freeze for a long time. She, like the others, was waiting for the promised train to keep going eastward. Hugging the girls, she was suffering the cold and hoping to get on a warm train car.

The train arrived 2 hours later. It consisted of freight cars. The only thing of any help to the people were the iron stoves, but there was no wood to heat on them. When the passengers were placed in the cars, they realized that it was not much warmer inside than outside. Many women entrusted their belongings or children to their companions and poured onto the platform. Asking the soldiers desperately, 'How?..', they received one short answer,

'It's coming.'

They were asked to get back to the cars. The most desperate ones rushed to collect twigs and sticks near the platform and by the road as the mound under the rails was very low and the area

around was flat. Although the women were afraid of missing the train, they kept gathering wood and even breaking off some tree branches. An hour later, the locomotive warned them of the departure with the horn and clouds of steam. Everybody rushed headlong to the cars, where the stoves were giving the first heat. The train gained speed quickly, and the gap was warmed by the stove as well as the people's breath. But soon, the wood burned out, and people began freezing. They swarmed and moved to the places where the draught was not too heavy, hugged each other, put the warmest things on, and covered themselves with anything warm they could find. A child cried, then another one, the women swore at the soldiers who had put them on that train. But the cold and despair forced everyone to calm down and hide their faces in the rags to get a bit warmer by breathing inside the clothes.

The train flew swiftly for the rest of the day, and the darkness replaced the twilight in the crevices between the boards of the walls. The people didn't move, waiting for a stop and thus warmth and food. They didn't even try to take out their food as they were afraid of getting cold. They believed that the train would stop soon and they would warm up. Nina was hoping, too. She was cuddling her children and listening to them keenly. They were freezing although they were dressed more or less well. It was only natural, the more so that they were hungry.

Once Milya whispered,

‘Mommy, is it because Daddy is dead?’

Tears rolled down Nina’s face. The darkness made them invisible, but her soul was crying, even yelling,

‘Stepan!..’

‘The war is everybody’s trouble, sweetheart’, she said aloud.

But somehow, she thought that the world had turned upside down after Stepan’s departure.

In the middle of the night, the train stopped and stood in the dark for a long time. As soon as the dawn broke, the door opened and the military loaded the cars with woodpile and kerosene lamps and lit the stoves. The stoves became crimson quickly and warmed the people, who first whispered and then began talking. Soon the soldiers brought large thermoses with pea porridge and, besides, everyone got a quarter of bread. A boy of about four was holding a piece of bread, and tears of joy were flowing from his eyes. His mother was feeding him with porridge from an aluminum bowl, and he was swallowing the food mixed with his tears, still clutching bread in his little hands and

opening his little mouth to the spoon.

Nina remembered that episode for the rest of her life every time she saw a quarter-bread. Much later, when she and her daughters almost starved, the boy never disappeared from her memory.

Kazakhstan

After about ten days of ordeal in the cold and hunger, the evacuees found themselves in the Kazakhstan steppe. The train stopped at a dead-end railway station, in the middle of an endless steppe covered with dirty snow mixed with sand. It was cold and windy. The flat space and steep hills without a single tree or bush stretched as far as the horizon, where they disappeared in a shroud of drifting snow and whitish sky. From the shifting space, trucks would appear from time to time. The freezing people got onboard with their belongings. They were taken away by the truck drivers, who could hardly speak Russian, in different directions as if to nowhere.

It was Nina's turn at last. Climbing into the back of the truck, she felt incredible weakness. Her hands and feet disobeyed her, and she was feeling dizzy. She was embarrassed that she could not climb into the truck, and she wept desperately. The other women helped her get onboard, and she squatted down to the board. Milya and Deya

huddled to her, and the truck carried them to a new life.

Frost and wind were coming from everywhere while the truck was jumping up and down.

After a long drive, at dusk, the truck stopped. The driver swore loudly and told the women to get off, unload their belongings and go. They followed the driver in the piercing wind, fearing they'd fall behind and get lost. Fortunately, the destination was not far away, so, an hour later, they found themselves among squat houses with unlit windows. The women were quite alone, but after a while, local residents began to emerge from their homes and take one or more people into the darkness of their households.

Nina and her daughters were taken to a house that belonged to an old woman and her daughter-in-law. The woman's husband and son had been drafted into the army a few days earlier.

'They will die there', the old woman snarled.

'Don't bury them, mother!', her daughter-in-law yelled and rushed out, crying.

Suddenly, Nina felt dizzy and fainted.

Shelter for the refugees

Consciousness returned to Nina, but she was worried because she didn't hear Deya. She heard the voices of the women who gave them shelter as well as Milya's voice, but her eldest daughter was not heard. Rather, Nina felt that the girl was there, but why was Deya silent?

Why was Deya silent?

Nina was not able to open her eyes or at least move. At that time, she could hear all the sounds of the house, understood them, but could do nothing. The question why Deya was silent was bothering her even more. She heard the girl's footsteps, but she answered, apparently, by gestures.

'Her father won't let her in. He'll make her get back to you', she heard the older woman's voice.

'Stepan!..', Nina's soul sobbed or sighed.

After that, Nina heard all the people going out. She stayed alone.

Her eyes opened and filled with tears. She turned her head slightly to one side. Tears flowed like a stream down her face. Nina had not remembered anything about the night when she entered the house. But now, she looked around and saw a small hut with brown clay floor and walls and ceiling covered with yellowish clay. The light penetrated through two small window panes with greyish wooden frames. The door was wide and low, with a high threshold, and covered with a curtain of coarse cloth rags. Nina was lying on a

bench by the wall opposite the door. She was feeling a straw mattress under her back. Nearby was a stove, which was a peculiar combination of a Russian stove and something else. It was not clear what exactly it was. The stove occupied about a quarter of the room, and it had a loft covered with sheep's clothing. Probably, her daughters slept on it. Nina remembered that she often heard Milya's voice from there. There was nothing else in the house, except for a low bench. In such huts, other belongings are usually stored in the mud room or in the barn.

The door opened, and Deya came in, pushing the curtain aside and bringing in a cloud of cold air. She looked at her mother and shuddered as she met her gaze. Then she ran over to her and plopped down on the bench near Nina's head, smiling. She pushed her hat back, took her gloves off, and undid her coat buttons quickly.

'Say something, sweetheart', Nina uttered quietly.

'I don't feel like it, Mom.'

And they smiled at each other.

It took Nina a long time to recover. First, it was even hard for her to sit in her bed; then she had to learn how to walk again. She felt really bad because of being so weak, and she was ashamed of not being able to walk and having to depend on the women

who had given them shelter. The women worked hard in the kolkhoz, did a lot of homework, and took care of Nina and her children.

The daughters helped about the house. They were ready to take on all the work around the house and in the backyard. They took care of the sheep; besides, there were a few hens, a dog in the backyard and a cat in the mud room. The girls learned how to milk the sheep, and when they were trusted to do that, they were very proud of themselves. Their lively voices were the only thing that made the house look joyful.

Masha, the daughter-in-law, was the only person who was suffering as she wasn't even sure that her husband would come back from the war. When the girls were playing noisily, Masha would lower her eyes, hold her sigh and go out trying to do something, although she and her mother-in-law never stopped working. When she did something good for Nina and her daughters, she tried to do it in such a way that nobody would notice. Even later on, when they lived in a different place, she took care of Milya and Deya.

Everyone in the house depended on Antonina. The elderly woman was the boss, and she never stopped working. She didn't sleep more than five or six hours a day and worked the rest of the time. Her mother was from the Voronezh region, and her father was one of the local Cossacks. Her speech bore a charm of the South Russian and Kazakh dialects. Her voice always sounded dry and hard,

but at the bottom, there was such a warm tone that everyone knew the true kindness of her heart. Masha and Nina's daughters would smile gently at her severe shouts. But Antonina's word was the law in the house, and, actually, no one was against it. On the contrary, everyone waited for her instructions.

Nina slowly began to come back to life. At first, she learned to cope with the stove, which was heated with dung and firewood, and cooked some simple dishes. They lived on barley, oat, low-grade flour, some potatoes, turnips, onions, and sheep milk. Sheep milk and fat made up the bulk of the diet.

Once Masha brought a jug of milk from the kolkhoz. She put it on the table and said,

'They have given it to the refugees. The girls will go to school soon.'

'What are you talking about? The teacher went to war together with the other men', snarled Antonina without any anger.

'But their mother is a school teacher', Masha said and pointed at Nina.

Nina blushed.

'The chairman said today that he had received an instruction to prepare the school for the holidays

and start the classes (meaning the November holidays).'

Soon the school building was heated and cleaned. A lot of dung and firewood was brought to the schoolyard. A room was prepared for Nina and her daughters to live in. Antonina checked everything carefully and brought all kinds of things. She only calmed down when she was quite sure that everything was OK. When Nina and the girls' belongings were moved to their new place of living, Antonina touched her on the shoulder and said,

'Good luck, Nina.'

'Thank you for everything.'

'God bless you.'

Nina stood crying in the middle of the school. Antonina frowned, wrapped her face hastily with a shawl, buttoned her jacket, and stepped over the threshold into the darkness to cry outside the school building. She carried her tears to the door of her house, where she wiped her face with the edge of her shawl and went into the house looking as bustling and severe as usual.

In the evening, after her daughters went to sleep on the loft of the warm stove, Nina walked around the whole school, came back, sat down on the bench covered with a sheepskin, and whispered quietly,

'Help me, Stepan!...'

Living in the rear

On the next day, 30 students came to school, aged between 9 and 16.

Nina was teaching them according to their ages and knowledge. Deya and Milya were her assistants, and they worked with the youngest students while Nina had to pay more attention to the older ones. In the evenings, the younger children would come to school again, and Nina would teach them painting while telling them all kinds of stories. She would also tell them about the places she had visited so that they would know more about the country they lived in.

The school was a big 5-wall hut. In the large school room, there were a few benches and desks, while in the small one, Nina and her daughters lived. They worked together and thus coped with everything. The kolkhoz gave them food they had grown accustomed to when living at Antonina's place, so they were not quite hungry, just a little bit. All the people helped them as much as possible. After classes, the older students used to chop branches for the oven, put them down by the porch, and then run back home. Each of them, just as the adults, had a lot of things to do about their houses.

That's how they lived for six years.

All women, a few old men and teenagers who

were twelve and older worked on the farm. The kolkhoz was mainly engaged in breeding sheep. Also, there was a dairy farm for twenty cows, and they also grew some potatoes and vegetables on the barren steppe soil. Everything that the farmers made was taken on trucks to the railway station. From there, it was taken to the front.

The war was very hard, but living in the depth of the country, they knew very few details, mainly from the printed sheets of paper brought to the farm by trucks. There was no radio. When the chairman got the reports, he would come to the farm and read them out to the farmers, who then shared the news with the rest of the people.

For Nina, however, just as for the others, the war was far away and wasn't the most important thing. If a death notice was brought to a household, women living there would burst into tears. But the most important thing was working as hard as possible trying to overcome the hardships. They did their best to work and give everything, collect every splinter and blade of grass, overcoming malnutrition. Every year they had to give more and more, while there was less and less food. By the end of the war, even the number of sheep diminished markedly; the people lost weight and looked haggard, they were more likely to get sick and die. It seemed that the people would soon disappear and leave the village empty. Even the good front-line reports didn't make them happy anymore. The people were so tired that they even stopped talking

about what would happen after the victory.

In the first two years of the war, the peasants would help Nina, but later, they simply could not as they were too weak and simply had no physical resources. Nina spent a lot of time every day gathering fuel and feeling awful because she didn't have enough food for her daughters. The foodstuff received from the kolkhoz was not even nearly enough. In the middle of the war, they had no bread at all. In the summertime, Nina worked at the collective farm but got next to no food, just some vegetables. In 1943, Deya started working with her. The girl would carry water and milk on an old horse harnessed to a cart. She was happy because she received some cow's and sheep's milk for that, and she shared the milk with Milya. The girls were lean and exhausted. Nina could hardly walk, too. She felt quite desperate, and used to talk silently to Stepan,

'Stepan, darling, I am not sure I will overcome this...'

Granny told me she didn't remember the year 1944 well. The cold steppe winter and hunger were so hard to withstand that people could not recover in summer. They were only thinking about heating the stoves, finding food and putting some of it aside for the winter. That was all they were able to think about and do.

In the spring of the victorious year 1945, just a

little more than a dozen children came to school. The children had died or were too exhausted. Those who came could only listen, curled up and half-dead. Nina would tell them in a weak voice what she knew. She kept talking and talking...

The kids would go back home, and Nina would feel overcome by despair; tears would flow, and her hands would droop. It was awful to see that her daughters and pupils stopped laughing or even smiling. Their eyes faded.

They lit up with joy and hope when she got news of the victory. Besides, it was springtime. The women started talking about the return of the men, saying that even the few men who were alive would help them greatly on the farm. Even a maimed soldier who was working as a truck driver was a great help in many cases.

But living was still extremely hard, and the people still went hungry. 1946 wasn't better than 1945. Nina was quite exhausted, Milya fell badly ill. It was cold in the house, and there was not enough food. The child wasn't able to speak; all she could do was just move her lips.

Nina was scared to death and, when her daughter fell asleep, she rushed outside the village in the steppe and screamed,

'Help me, Stepan, dear!.. Help me!..'

When Nina was quite exhausted, she came back home almost crawling. In the dark, it was hard to

find the school building. She warmed up a little, and sat down to write a letter to her brother. She decided to send the letter to the old address, although she knew nothing about Ivan and his wife. Like a drowning man clutching at a straw, she clung desperately to the hope that her brother was alive, she would hear from him and he would help them out.

On the next day, Deya gave the letter to the truck driver. When the man went to the railway station, he took it to the post office. Nina and the girls kept thinking about Ivan and Vera, having no idea whether they were alive. But then they started forgetting about them because all they wanted was food and rest.

Milya was getting better, though very slowly. In June, she went out on the porch, under the sunshine that warmed up her face and almost blue little hands. Nina was not much stronger than her daughter. As to Deya, she was now conscious of her seniority in the family, so she did most of the work by herself. She worked on the farm every day, and, besides she collected wood for the stove and food for the whole family. She also comforted her mother, taking care of her like a grownup person. Nina had no strength and willpower anymore.

Getting back

Suddenly, at the end of August, in the evening, the chairman came to the school. The man looked

exhausted and weighed down by hard work. He wheezed as he walked. He came in, sat down on the doorstep and was silent for a few minutes, trying to catch his breath. Then he pulled out an envelope and handed it to Nina.

It was a letter from Ivan!

The letter said that Ivan wanted the chairman to send Nina and the children to Moscow by train and then to Cherepovets, with all the required documents. Also, Ivan wrote shortly that he and Vera were alive, waiting for them at home.

'I have been instructed to send you and your daughters to Moscow. Doesn't the letter say so?'

'It does, Petrovich. The letter is from my brother Vanya...'
Nina said and cried.

Petrovich coughed, pressing his hand to his heart, smiled through a grimace of pain, and said in a choked voice,

'So much the better. There will be fewer people to shed tears over. Keep living, girls.'

He stood up and added,

'After the paperwork is done, I will come around and tell you the details. Get ready.'

He went back, stooping and looking down. Granny remembered him like that.

She started kissing the envelope, whispering,

'Ivan!.. Stepan!..'

She told Milya that they were going to Cherepovets. When Deya came back from work, she told her the good news, too. They started getting ready, which didn't take much time as they had very little stuff.

Nina cried at night. Tears rolled down her cheeks, giving her relief she had not experienced for all the past years of the evacuation. She felt warm under her heart.

'We are alive', her heart was telling her. 'We are alive, we haven't died!...'

A few days later, they were taken to the railway station by car and put on a train. It was warm in the steppes, it was warm at heart.

It was warm!

Translated into English by Olga Bezhanova and Michael Blekhan.



Konstantin Kovalskiy

Konstantin was born in Ukraine and now he lives in the USA. He was the author of the first magic show in Ukraine and, after its successful premiere, was invited to Hollywood to the World's championships on performing arts, where he won the silver medal.

Kovalsky writes action novels in Russian and is well known in the Russian-speaking communities across the world. Wind City has been translated into English by Olga Bezhanova.

WIND CITY

Novel

While investigating a string of mysterious disappearances of patients from a hospital for the mentally challenged, Alex Smirnov, an FBI agent, encounters a suspicious religious sect. . .

Andrzej Novak, a policeman, is on the trail of his brother's vicious murderers when he begins to realize that they are not human. . .

In an abandoned house, an immigrant finds the diary of the famous illusionist Harry Houdini and immediately starts being persecuted by certain mysterious forces. . .

All of these people are trying to find a connection

between these strange events. They don't even suspect that the solution to the mystery will be more horrifying than their scariest suspicions. . .

Prologue

"I'll give you a million dollars."

The twilight that reigned in the study thickened around the desk, as if the man sitting behind it somehow attracted the darkness. Actually, that was exactly what he did.

"In cash."

Alex Smirnov, a special agent with the FBI, felt that his nerves were stretched to the limit. His Glock danced in the spasmodically clenched fingers. His heart was beating against his chest like a claustrophobe who'd been locked in a coffin.

The Alchemist reached under the table with one of his hands.

"Don't move!" Alex yelled.

"Calm down, agent. . . I just want to demonstrate to you that my intentions are serious."

A leather briefcase appeared on the table. It was black, with a handle that had been worn out by constant use. A lock clicked, and a pale yellow light on the inside of the lid rescued tight wads of green banknotes from the darkness.

The gun that Alex was holding tight with both hands lowered indecisively. "Take it," the voice whispered. "Take it and leave. . . while you still can."

"And then what?" Alex asked just to play for time.

"First, you'll put your gun away," the man behind the desk said. "Then you'll take the money and leave. It's as simple as that."

Alex shuddered. The Alchemist could leave the room and disappear once again. This time, for good.

"It won't work," he was so nervous that words barely managed to squeeze through his parched throat. "There are police officers stationed in the hallway."

The Alchemist leaned forward. His eyes flashed in the dim light of the reading lamp. The unblinking lids, the dark, widened pupils. They sucked the interlocutor in like a black hole. The agent's throat was constricted with terror, the knees buckled traitorously; all he wanted was to ditch his weapon and run, just run!

To resist the hypnotic influence, Alex had to gather every shred of will-power he had left. He shook his head that felt very heavy and forced an unbending finger to release the safety catch of his gun.

The Alchemist got the hint. He half-closed his eyes, leaned backwards in his arm-chair, and formed a smile with his lips, "The cops are none of your concern. Well, have you made your choice?"

The gun that was being held by shaking, sweat-drenched hands once again was raised to the eye-level.

"Yes. You are under arrest!"

The man behind the desk shook his head with compassion.

"You are either a total fool, Alex, or a consummate idealist."

"And you are a monster!"

"Oh, all this high-flown talk. . . I'm giving you one last chance. Make up your mind already. We have little time left."

"How so?"

"Just listen closely and you'll hear."

Silence. The sound of blood beating in his temples.

"I can't hear anything."

"THEY are on their way here already."

Alex's jaw dropped.

"But the police. . ."

"Do you really believe that a few policemen with their puny little revolvers will be capable of stopping THEM?"

The Alchemist lowered his eyelids and softly uttered a phrase in a language that was unknown to the agent. Alex started. Why did the Alchemist do this? Nobody was going to hear him through the thick stone walls anyways.

THEY did hear him, though. The resounding silence of empty hallways was broken by an inhuman wail that made blood freeze in the veins. Another wail followed. And then one more. . . The agent's mind was teetering on the brink of insanity. God, how many of THEM were around?

Alex pulled the door handle but the electronic lock had been blocked by the study's owner.

"Open the door immediately."

"I can still stop THEM," the Alchemist wasn't smiling any longer. His pale face reminded Alex of a vampire's mask. "In a moment, your helpers will be torn to pieces."

"Stop this madness," Alex exclaimed in desperation. "The policemen will shoot!"

"Don't you get it, agent Alex? *You can't kill those who are already DEAD!*"

Part One

"THE KING OF FLIGHT"

Chapter 1

The Homeland of Gangsters and Skyscrapers

Denis raised his eyes from the notes, lifted his head, and looked at Al Capone. The famous gangster glanced from the photograph at his ratty jacket, his disheveled hair, the exhausted look of the twenty-year-old guy, and smiled, "So have you come to conquer America, lad? Go on, try your luck, kid! Just don't forget to pay your taxes and use condoms, or you'll rot with syphilis in jail! Yes, yes, believe this old gangster. I know what I'm talking about!"

Alfonse was holding an enormous Cuban cigar in the plump fingers of his right hand and looked very dapper. With his carefully parted hair, an expensive suit and a tie, and a small rose in his buttonhole, he was the legend of Chicago's underworld!

If one were to believe Frank, Capone had had a heart of gold. The famous gangster had assisted the authorities in Chicago's construction, donated huge sums of money to charity, helped the poor and the elderly. Even his bootlegging activities during the Prohibition had been nothing but yet another way of being useful to people who were being prevented from imbibing alcoholic drinks by a selfish government. In short, he had been a fatherly and kind benefactor. It wasn't for nothing that he'd been placed on the cover of the *Times*, was it?

There were no reasons to doubt Frank's words. Frank was an Italian, after all. Of course, he'd been born in America but that changed nothing. Besides, he owned an Italian restaurant built in the twenties. He'd inherited it from his uncle. In spite of numerous offers to sell his plot of land and build a fast food joint there, Frank used to state that he'd sooner shoot himself in the head than transform a historic building into yet another McDonald's.

The restaurant did look like a museum. Everything in it remained exactly like it used to be in the twenties and the thirties: the massive leather furniture, the mahogany bar stand, the walls made of well-polished brown brick. Even the menu remained the same. If one so wished, one could

order the same dishes and drinks that Capone himself had been consuming here in the company of the gangsters whose photos were now decorating a significant chunk of the brick wall.

Denis moved his glance from Al Capone to other photos: here were the members of the “Cosa Nostra”, celebrating something with a customary Italian flair. In all probability, they’d just managed to make a good sale on a shipment of bootleg Scotch. And on this photo policemen were smiling by the side of the racketeers they’d just arrested. Everybody was embracing everybody else, looking like members of a loving family at a wedding. And here, framed and glazed, was a check for seven dollars and twenty-five cents signed by Capone. In those times, that was a significant amount of money for many people. But for Capone, whose fortune was rumored to be around a hundred million dollars, it was a mere trifle.

Antique objects like wicker baskets, coal irons, and other household items that people used in those times stood around in the corners.

Denis wondered if the American gangsters of that era had used flat irons for the same purposes as the post-Soviet racketeers of the early nineties. Namely, to torture people.

The only incongruous object in the restaurant was a plasma-screen TV that muttered under the ceiling. It wasn’t like Frank had been forced to agree to install the TV. No, the Italian did it of his own free will. He did it for the sake of the news and the

sports channels which he often commented on, drowning out the newscaster's voice with his typically Italian boisterousness.

The establishment was empty today, which suited Denis perfectly. He chewed on the cap of his ballpoint pen and went back to his notes: ""Abattoirs leave their mark. After working at one, you'll either become a vegetarian or will learn to kill people calmly when the movies stop entertaining you." Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1925, Chicago."

Denis reread the epigraph. There was definitely something to these lines. And they transmitted the essence of the script perfectly, too! The only thing. . . Hmm. . . Will the other people in his class understand what the famous revolutionary poet had been trying to say with his description of the Windy City? The teacher will, in all probability, ask, "Why did you have to complicate everything, Denis? Your assignment was to write a script based on a short story, not exceeding five pages in length. And you came up with something more like a novel. Who is this Mayakovsky, and why are you quoting him? Are you trying to become an actor or a writer?"

Denis circled the phrase and drew an interrogation mark next to it. This sign reflected the most recent years of his life as an immigrant perfectly. He sighed.

It wasn't easy to find an establishment where one could just sit calmly and relax. Or bide one's time by writing a script. Not a real one, of course. The

real scriptwriters were in Beverly Hills. This was nothing but homework.

Denis's dream was to be a movie actor. This was why he'd signed up for the drama school called "The First Take" that was located on Grand Avenue and had already paid a thousand dollars as the first semester's tuition. There was just one problem. In spite of his great knowledge of English, Denis never managed to get rid of his Russian accent. Hollywood, however, only welcomed the British accent. Or, at most, the Australian. In any case, what mattered was that he had a goal, and the future would show what he was worth.

Sometimes, when there weren't any clients, Frank joined him at his table and shared stories of the old times. It wasn't like Frank really remembered those years because he hadn't even been born yet. But Frank loved telling stories. And Denis was a good listener which got him preferential treatment. Besides, he was a regular patron and a future actor, as well.

Denis closed his notebook. It was time for a smoking break. Frank allowed him to smoke inside if there were no other customers in the restaurant. Still, if the weather was nice, he preferred not to abuse the owner's hospitality and went outside for a smoke.

Denis opened the door and emerged onto the empty pavement, breathing in the cool October air. He took out a pack of smokes, drew out a cigarette with his teeth, and used a gas lighter to light up.

In spite of being located close to Downtown – the central area of the city whose skyscrapers aimed for the skies like spaceships – the restaurant's neighborhood was very obscure. On the one side of the street, old three-storey brick buildings with boarded up windows were living out their last days. Rusty automobile carcasses whose tires had gone flat and grown into the asphalt a long time ago stood next to the houses. Denis found it easy to imagine their wet rubber roots sprouting from the damp ceiling of the sewers. On the other side of the street, one could see a huge wasteland with prickly tall grass. In the distance, there were blackened ruins of an old factory with dilapidated walls. The remains of the rusty metallic structures stuck out like broken fingers of a defeated Titan.

It was not surprising that so few people frequented Frank's restaurant. Around it, there was an abandoned territory, a moonscape, an eerie film set for a Hollywood movie about the aftermath of a nuclear disaster. Only a failed script writer and a hopeful movie actor could enjoy such a post-apocalyptic landscape.

Denis let out a waft of smoke into the rapidly darkening sky against which one could see the lights of Downtown with its black Sears Tower, the tallest skyscraper in the USA. On a clear day, one could see three neighboring states from its top. Antennae on top of the skyscraper shone with an eerie red light. The Halloween was approaching, which was why the antennae were red. For

Christmas, the lamps in the powerful projectors would be changed, and the antennae would shine with a more peaceful blue blaze. Each of the antennae was as tall as a fourteen-story building. The height of the antennae made them even more similar to the tower of the Dark Lord, the master of Mordor in Tolkien's novels. All that was missing was a huge fiery eye with a black pupil in the middle.

Loud footsteps suddenly approached. Denis was still mesmerized by his thoughts about towers and monsters, so he almost had a heart attack when he turned around. Real goblins were approaching him with a bellow, and the one in front was already reaching for his throat! A rotting muzzle with tufts of hair sticking out of the top of the creature's head, bared fangs that revealed a long tongue, covered in pestilent sores. . . Sheesh, these losers!

Denis grabbed the goblin by his shirtfront with his left hand and smacked him with his right hand.

"Have you gone nuts? There are still two weeks to go before Halloween!"

A kid of about thirteen years of age (he was either a Colombian or a Mexican) took off his mask and offered a self-conscious smile, "I'm sorry, sir."

"Are you a psycho? What if I were an old lady, or something? I almost peed my pants!"

The kids laughed contentedly since this was precisely what they'd been trying to achieve. Denis breathed in deep and smiled - what could one do with these kids, anyways?

“Go home, it’s late already.”

The pranksters ran away and Denis went back to the restaurant. He didn’t feel like writing any longer. He gathered his notebooks, waved Frank good-bye, went out into the street, and headed towards his rusty 1982 Ford. In spite of being almost of the same age as its owner, the rattletrap ran surprisingly easy. Taking into account the state of American roads, though, that was not surprising. All one had to do was change the oil on time.

The engine emitted a welcoming burr and, having blinked the run signal, Denis drove onto an empty road. It was time for his nightly ritual: a shower, a cup of tea, a book, and then, sleep. He had to go to bed early because on the next day he had to go to work. Silly, hard, boring work. While he, like any other young man with an imagination, longed for adventures. Any kind would do!

Denis had forgotten the ancient Chinese saying about the need to be careful with what one wished for because wishes might come true. And the way they came true was never like we’d envisioned.

Chapter 2

FBI Agent

Alexander Smirnov was truly happy. Which was not surprising, given that this was his last day at the Academy. His dream had come true. He was now a

special agent with the FBI. A member of the operational staff, one of the total of (get that!) thirteen thousand. It isn't like being a technician or a linguist. And, of course, it's nothing like being just a regular cop.

Before going outside, Alexander lingered in front of a hallway mirror. He looked around. Once he made sure that there wasn't anybody around, he proceeded to study his reflection.

The guy who was staring back at him from the mirror was wearing a dark suit, a tie, and a white shirt. He had dressed formally for the director's reception. Truth be told, he'd been longing to dress formally for a while. Sasha believed that it made him look older than his twenty-four years of age. If only it weren't for his face. . .

It was a complex he had and that he could only confess honestly to himself. When he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, he looked eighteen, at most. He had a trim figure, light-brown hair, an open boyish face with hated freckles, and a lack of stubble that refused to come. Girls considered him a nice and cute guy but he wanted (especially now) to inspire his interlocutors with a completely different kind of feelings.

Alex frowned sternly and squinted, trying to give himself a menacing look. He even moved his jaw forward, like his combat training instructor used to do. The result did not impress him and he sighed.

He squared his shoulders, inhaled deeply and went outside, reminding himself that looks did not

matter all that much in his line of work. It wasn't like he was a model, or anything. He was a special agent with the FBI!

Now Alex had become part of a serious, powerful organization that was respected and feared both in the US and abroad. What's more, now he was authorized not only to investigate the violations of the country's federal laws, but also to ensure the security of the nation and the President. As the current Director of the FBI, Robert Mueller, said when speaking before the House of Representatives, "At this point, our agency's resources are spread evenly between protecting the national safety and fulfilling our "old duties," namely, fighting crime."

There was no hidden meaning behind these words. FBI had assumed a new range of duties. And what did that mean? It meant that its sphere of influence was expanding, the staff was growing, and, as a result, the Counter-Terrorism Department was receiving extra funding. This was where one could really rise through the ranks!

However, the freshly minted special agent had no interest in counter-terrorist activities. He wanted to leave his mark in the field of fighting crime. This was precisely why, as soon as he'd been admitted, Alex had declared his wish to work in the biggest of the fifteen departments of the FBI - Department of Criminal Investigations.

Feeling some sort of a childish glee, Alex ran down the stairs of the administrative building. He

cast a glance around and started walking more slowly lest somebody would notice him behaving like a kid. Clutching a brand-new ID in his hand, Alex went to the dorm. On the way, he studied the buildings of the Academy that he was going to leave on the next day.

The main learning center of the FBI was located at a US military base located in Quantico, Virginia. The core of the Academy consisted of three dorms, a dining hall, a library, a learning annex, a research and training center, a lecture hall that sat a thousand people, a church, administrative offices, a big gymnasium, and a stadium.

In addition to the main learning center, a mini-city called Hogan's Alley had been built at the Academy. It imitated a typical American town and had been created specifically to practice the responses of the employees in a variety of tactical situations. The buildings of Hogan's Alley were used to train beginning employees. Inside, there were classrooms with audiovisual laboratories. Close to Hogan's Alley, there was a training track that was about two miles long.

For training in shooting and firearm handling, eight firing ranges, an indoor shooting range, as well as four flying target ranges had been created. All told, the training of new employees was handled very seriously. It wasn't only the beginning FBI agents that the Academy trained. Refresher and staff development courses for experienced

employees were provided. There were also programs for training the police cadre.

Learning was not the only activity conducted here, however. Inside the Academy, research was effectuated with the goal of improving methods and techniques of operation and investigative activities. The staff of the Academy consisted of one hundred special agents who worked as teaching instructors and thirty employees who were responsible for technical and administrative services.

“Alex!”

Steve Stravinsky, a combat training instructor nicknamed the Maniac at the Academy for his fanatical attitude to work, approached him with a firm step. For several months he'd tortured the students: at the firing range, he made them shoot until they had boils on their index fingers, and at the gym, everybody had been knocked out by his throws and socks on the jaw. In terms of appearance, he looked nothing like Rambo. He was short, had a slim body and long thin arms. By the look of him, nobody could have ever guessed that during Desert Storm he had destroyed over a dozen terrorists. And there was a lot that cadets didn't even know.

“So, can I offer my congratulations?”

Alex proudly showed a brand-new ID and his tag.

“Where are you off to now?”

“Home. Chicago.”

“To fight the local Al Capones?”

“I hope so,” Alex smiled.

“Good luck. And don’t forget what I taught you, or these shitty mafia guys will off you before you get your promotion. The saddest thing is that if this happens, you will lose your pension.”

Alex chuckled. Stravinsky’s lessons were hard to forget. . .

“Remember,” the Maniac would say, looking with a watchful eye over the cadets dressed in identical track suits, “when encountering the enemy in a close combat situation, the time of decision-making plays a crucial role. To attack or to defend oneself? Do you even know how your nervous system works? Are there any geniuses here who know the answer?”

Everybody remained prudently silent. Steve continued, “So I will explain. Your brain receives information from the visual receptors about the changes in your surroundings. Then, the brain sends a nerve impulse to the muscles that, in turn, contract and impact the joints and the bones, thereby moving your body parts.”

The instructor walked down the line with a predator’s elastic step.

“I hope you managed to keep up with my explanation. This entire process takes time. Besides, your retarded brains also need time to evaluate the threat itself. And you can’t solve this problem simply by working on speed, irrespective of what kind of a karate master you are.”

After these words, one of the cadets received a flash-like punch in the stomach and fell to the floor

with his eyes bulging out. The Maniac continued without even looking at him,

“Got it? You need to identify a threat in advance and strike back in order to neutralize it. Don’t rely solely upon your reaction and technique. Think! To resume, what is it that acquires central importance? Right you are, it’s the effectiveness of surveillance! You need to notice what others don’t. In order to do that, you need to accustom yourselves to a constant search for danger in your surroundings.”

“One can become a paranoiac this way,” murmured Dan, a pudgy guy from Minnesota.

The Maniac moved close to him in a lightning-fast move, and his cold gaze bore into the bridge of the cadet’s nose.

“It’s better to be a live paranoiac and complete the assignment than to kick the bucket before one’s time! Do you get me, cadet?”

“Sir, yes sir!” Dan yelled, stretching himself to his full length and looking at a point above the instructor’s head.

“How do we achieve that?” Alex asked, trying to save Dan’s stomach from another visual demonstration.

“Very simple. You need to develop the capacity to feel your opponent. Pay attention to his facial expressions, tone of voice, how he talks, how he acts, how he moves, what he wears, could he be hiding a weapon underneath his clothes, what he holds in his hands, where he is looking, and a hundred of other signs! This will allow you to

minimize the possibility of being unexpectedly stabbed in the stomach or shot in the head!"

Many of the cadets protested, as they rubbed their hurt cheekbones and stretched muscles, that the Academy wasn't supposed to be a Navy Seal base or a training ground for the Green Berets. Alex, though, took all of the lessons very seriously, and combat training was no exception. And neither were shooting lessons.

As usual, Alex hit all the targets and froze, expecting the next command: a weapon inspection that would be followed by the instructor's words of praise. The Maniac, however, was in no hurry to offer encouragement.

"There is nothing to be happy about, cadet. A target doesn't shoot back at you. Do you know what the first requirement of a firing combat is?"

"To be the first one to shoot?"

Stravinsky gave him a crooked smile, "What, like in the Wild West? Are you a gunfighter, or something?"

Steve himself was used to acting precisely that way. But that was in action, during special ops. The happy streets of American cities couldn't be compared to Iraq and Afghanistan, even though the danger level often made them look alike. He couldn't teach that to his cadets, however. He could have been fired from the Academy at the spot for something like that.

"No, Billy the Kid," the Manic said reluctantly. "The main requirement sounds as follows: 'When

faced with the enemy remove yourself from the line of fire and survive.' This is the first thing a shooter needs to do in a combat situation. Step aside and find shelter. First, you need to survive and only then - do you hear me, cadet? - do the rest. Prepare your weapon for combat and strike at the enemy. Is that clear?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"By the way, I suggest you wear your weapon on your waist, on the right, like police officers do, instead of in a shoulder holster on the left, like our agents. This will help you avoid making needless moves one makes when cancelling out the inertia produced by drawing the weapon out of a shoulder holster. Or from behind your belt."

In a lightning-speed move, Stravinsky drew his gun and, almost at that very moment, a shot was fired. Alex didn't have to turn around. He knew what he was going to see - a clean hole in the middle of the target."

The Maniac locked down the safety catch of his weapon.

"In short, a holster should promote the following capabilities: a fast removal of the weapon, a concealed carrying capacity, and a reliable attachment of the gun. Now let's practice a combat encounter with several enemies at the same time. . . "

Alex drank in every word his instructors said. Because of this and of his tenacity and perseverance, he was one of the top five graduating students of his class."

"Thank you," Alex said, shaking the instructor's dry, calloused hand. "If you ever find yourself in Chicago, come visit me."

"Good luck, Alex."

Steve winked at him, turned around sharply, and, with a spring in his step, walked towards the playground where a rookie was wriggling like a worm on the horizontal bar.

Alex went back to the dorm. He still had to pack his stuff. A ticket to Chicago was already in his pocket.

* * *

The plane landed at Midway Airport. When he entered the terminal, Alex immediately turned on his phone and dialed a familiar number. In spite of himself, he started to smile. Vika must be waiting for him by the exit. With some trepidation, Alex looked forward to seeing his girlfriend. But Vika wasn't picking up.

He frowned a little and dialed the number once again. The result was the same. The smile faded from his face completely. His third attempt was successful.

"Hello-o?" her voice meowed.

"Vika, I've landed!"

"Already? Why didn't you warn me?"

This meant that nobody was waiting for him by the exit. Sasha started getting annoyed.

"What do you mean, I didn't warn you? I called you yesterday and asked you to meet me."

"Oh, right. . .," Vika faltered for a second but then immediately went on the offensive. "Then you should have called back and reminded me. Do you know how busy I am?"

"Called back?" her insolence baffled him. He'd thought she was waiting for him impatiently. And what was it that kept her so "busy"? An appointment with her manicurist?

Alex breathed in deeply. It wasn't a good idea to start fighting as soon as he came back.

"So you won't pick me up at the airport?"

"Sasha, dearest, I'm out shopping with the girls. We took Angelica's car. . ."

"I get it, Vika. OK, bye."

"Are you upset, or something?"

"No, everything is fine."

"Did you bring me a gift?"

This was when Alex exploded.

"Do you have no idea where I've been this entire time?! I haven't been on a cruise!"

"Why are you yelling at me?" the young woman said resentfully. "I just thought that you could have found some time to buy a gift for the woman you love."

Was she really not getting it? No, it was more like she didn't want to get it.

"OK, Vika, your friends must be waiting for you."

Vika must have heard anger in his voice, which was why she changed her tone of voice, "I will come by in the evening."

He hung up without responding. For a while, he just stood there, staring at the arrivals and departures board with unseeing eyes. How did she manage to do this? Tenderness, anger, defensiveness, attacks. . . Mood swings? No, this felt more like make believe. She was an actress. He'd imagined a very different encounter with her.

Alex sighed and dialed a different number.

"Hello?"

"Grandma, I've landed! I'll be there soon."

"Of course, dear Sasha, of course. I'm laying the table."

"I'm nod hungry, gran."

"How is that possible? You've just arrived and you are not hungry? Is everything OK?"

"Everything is great, grandma. I'm on my way."

He called a cab and went outside to wait for it. In ten minutes, Alex sat in the backseat of an old Honda.

"Where to?" the Indian cabbie of about fifty years of age asked him, turning on his GPS.

"Devon."

"Oh, in that case, I don't need the GPS," the driver said. "That's where I live, too."

Alex would have been surprised if the Indian cabbie didn't know the place.

Devon Avenue - or Divan, as Russian-speaking immigrants called it - was truly unique. One could have hardly hoped to find another such gathering of warring nations in all of America. Arabs lived next to Jews here, Serbs coexisted with Bosnians, Indians with Pakistanis, and Chinese with Koreans. In any other country in the world, this kind of a mix would have long ago ended in massive bloodshed.

In spite of such an explosive mix, however, there were no ethnically motivated occurrences on Divan. This was not surprising to a person who had lived for a while in the United States. In spite of freedom and democracy, law enforcement worked very well in the country. The police would arrive in a flash and arrest anybody who'd have dared to disturb the peace. After that, all one could hope for would be either to spend a while in an American jail or to be deported to one's own country. Want trouble? Go ahead. Just do it away from the American land.

So if a bearded Hasidic Jew ran into a similarly bearded Arab in the street, deep inside they both might have been seething with anger. However, they dealt with each other with the help of the standard American "How are you?", instead of with the aid of Kalashnikovs, like they would do back in the Middle East.

The cab left the highway and, ten minutes later, turned onto Divan. The car stopped in front of a Russian grocery store. Alex paid the fare, took his bag out of the trunk, and looked around. Finally, he was at home.

This was precisely where the last wave of the Russian emigration had been born thirty years ago. Immediately after coming into existence, it turned into a huge headache for the local law enforcement agencies that had barely had time to breathe easy after the trouble with the Italian mob.

Divan. This was where the newly arrived immigrants settled down. The first Russian stores and restaurants opened around here. People partied, drank, traded, got married, cheated, stole, helped their neighbors, loved, and killed in this area.

This was all in the past, though. Having figured out how things worked in the US, the new generation moved into more prestigious areas. Many people started their own businesses and bought houses. Nowadays, Divan was mostly populated by immigrants from the East. Still, one could hear Russian around here. For the most part, it was spoken by retirees, many of whom never managed to learn English. They had stayed in the area because it was what they wanted or, sometimes, because it was what their adult children wanted instead of inviting their

parents to live with them in their huge new houses.

Alex lived with his grandmother, Anna Nikolaevna who, together with the grandfather Aron Moiseevich, who'd died two years before, had been in charge of bringing him up. The old apartment on the second floor of a three-story building included two tiny bedrooms and a living-room which was filled to the brim with ancient furniture and books that had been brought over from Moscow thirty years ago.

They were a little cramped but Alex didn't mind. For the moment, he was fine with how things were. Of course, if he decided to get married, he would need more spacious living quarters. On the positive side, there was still a long way to go before that. His career came first!

Alex had realized a long time ago that it made no sense to expect any help from his parents. He invested all of his energy into his studies because he knew that, in this country, it was the only way to succeed. His father was Russian, a true Muscovite, who'd married his Jewish mother in order to emigrate from the USSR into the US. Many people did things like that in those years.

Alex's parents didn't stay together for long. They divorced right after Sasha was born, and his father moved out. He didn't manage to succeed in his new country and, a few years later, he went back to Russia. At first, his father

would call and ask him to come visit him. Gradually, however, the calls became less and less frequent until, four years ago, they stopped altogether. Alex tried locating his father, but the phone number was out of service. There were other people living in his old apartment. His father had forgotten to provide him with his new phone number.

Alex's mother was only interested in her own personal life. This wasn't typical for a Jewish woman like herself who was expected to dedicate her entire existence to taking care of her children. Unfortunately, Alex's mother was an exception to the rule. She hardly had any time for her son. Last year, she divorced her third husband, married a fourth, and moved to Canada with him. As a result, Alex was only close to his grandmother and grandfather. Now, only his grandmother was left.

He hardly had time to knock on the door when it opened. Alex realized that gran must have seen him from the window.

"Sasha!"

He kissed a tiny, gray-haired old lady with bright eyes on her dry cheek. She was wearing a dressing gown and warm slippers. Alex hugged her.

"Hello, gran."

"And where is Vika?"

"She couldn't come."

"Oh, I get it. She must be very busy."

"Granma!"

"OK, I won't say anything. . . Why are you so skinny? Did they not feed you at all?"

She still saw him as her little grandkid who needed constant care.

Alex left his bag in the hallway and went into the kitchen that was filled with the delicious aroma of home-cooked food. There was fresh rye bread on the table, next to a bowl of borscht. This was Alex's favorite bread called "Borodinsky." Next to it, there was a pan filled with boiled potatoes and dill. Fresh cucumbers and carefully diced tomatoes with water drops on their red skin lined up on a plate, like soldiers at a military parade. There was also some pickled cabbage. Brown cutlets were heating up over a slow fire on the stove.

"I'm not skinny, I'm just grown up!" he shouted. And, unable to help himself, he grabbed a juicy, hot cutlet straight from the frying pan. He hardly had time to take a bite when he heard a strict voice behind his back, "Have you washed your hands, our grown up? Go to the bathroom, right now!"

"Then I'll take a shower."

"The borscht will go cold."

"No, it won't."

After a quick wash, he put on a clean T-shirt and tracksuit pants. Then he went back to the kitchen and sat down at the table with peeling

white paint and wobbly legs that was standing in front of the window.

Anna Nikolaevna sat at the other side of the table, resting her chin on her hands, and observed, with great tenderness, her grandson devouring the dinner she had cooked.

"So are you all done with studying?"

"All done. Now I'm a special agent with the FBI!"

"An agent, imagine that. . . And what will they pay you?"

"They'll pay me well, grandma, I'll be fine. Tell me better what's new around here."

"Yes, I'll tell you because it's best that you don't talk as you eat. What's new? Fedia has been arrested again."

"He really should stop driving drunk," Sasha commented with his mouth full.

"No," Anna Nikolaevna shook her head, "this time he got into a fight. In this new restaurant. . . I forget the name. Gosh, this is what happens when you get old. What else? Eva Israilevna came by yesterday. She was asking about you."

Sasha put down his fork and gave his grandmother a look that was as serious as he could manage.

"Grandma, promise me one thing. I need you never to talk to anybody about my job. You know where I work now, don't you?"

"What's so wrong about it? Can't I brag about my own grandson?"

"How can I make you understand this? FBI is kind of like the KGB. I mean, it's just as secretive," he added rapidly when he saw Anna Nikolaevna's scared face.

"I haven't told anything to anybody," the old woman waved her hands at him. "Do you think I don't understand?"

They stayed silent for a while. Sasha saw a procession of Hasidic Jews walking on the opposite side of the street. The suits, the earlocks, the hats. Even children looked this way. And they were all wearing eyeglasses. Was it because they relied on candlelight to read Torah? Or did eating kosher mess with one's eyesight?

"So when does your job begin?"

"Tomorrow," Sasha turned back to his food and speared some juicy pickled cabbage on a fork.

"What do you mean, tomorrow?" Anna Nikolaevna asked, surprised. "When will you rest?"

"There is no time to rest, grandma. I need to work."

The old lady smiled sadly. She had been hoping to spend more time with her grandson.

Vika didn't show up that evening.

* * *

Next morning, he woke up early to get ready for his first day working for the Chicago office of the FBI. After a quick breakfast, he put on a white shirt, a tie, and a blue suit that had been ironed at a Chinese dry cleaner's. Alex was nervous. How would he be treated? Who would he work with? What kind of cases would he be put on?

Anna Nikolaevna made the sign of the cross over him as he stood on the threshold.

"May God be with you, Sashenka. I will pray for you."

"Grandma," the grandson smiled and kissed her like he always did before leaving the house. "I'm just going to put in an appearance. In any case, I'll just be a paper-pusher."

In reality, he was hoping that his job would have nothing to do with tranquil paper pushing but he wisely decided not to share these hopes with his grandmother.

"Still," the old lady said, "a prayer won't hurt."

He went into the backyard, but before he had a chance to reach his car he remembered that the day before he hadn't checked his Toyota. The battery must have died while he was away. Alexander got very nervous. He couldn't afford to come late to work on the very first day!

He turned the key in the ignition and the car responded with a nasty screech. Yes, just like he thought. What should he do now? Call a cab? Alex started getting his cell phone out but then changed his mind. The traffic would get really heavy before the cab had time to get all the way over there. The subway would take him there faster.

He hurried to the subway station.

The carriage shook to the tune of the wheels clanking against the rails. Alex looked out of the window and remembered the Moscow subway that he rode as a child. The memories were very vague but that made them even more beautiful. He felt that the Chicago subway didn't even deserve the name. To him, a subway represented tunnels and escalators that traveled deep underground and gigantic high-ceilinged stations that looked like palaces with colorful paintings decorating their walls. The platforms were lined with bronze and marble statues illuminated by the lights of gigantic chandeliers. This was what the real subway should be like.

The half-empty carriage was filled with students and employees of the companies whose offices were located downtown. Alexander looked at a young woman who was sitting in front of him.

She was holding a big folder in her left hand. In the fingers of her right hand, she was clutching a pencil that she used to underline the

writing on a sheet of paper. She had to be a student, too, doing her homework before classes. She was beautiful: big blue eyes, long lashes, tender velvety skin. She was biting on her lower lip. There was a blue knitted cap on her head. Blond curls escaped from under it. A thin neck was covered with a high collar of a colorful sweater.

The girl glanced at him and returned to her notes. Sasha decided to stop staring and turned to a darkened window. His grim reflection looked back at him.

The train rushed past buildings as he plunged back into his unhappy musings about Vika. Why couldn't she come meet him at the airport yesterday? Was it possible that she'd really forgotten? Then why didn't she come by later at night? Did she forget to do that, too? No, this was just him trying to make excuses for her. He was so reluctant to fight with her. . .

The train stopped, and the passenger who had been sitting in front of him got up. Alex raised his eyes to look at her. The girl smiled. She put a sheet of paper on a seat next to him and left the carriage.

What could that mean? Sasha turned the sheet over and saw a drawing. Or, rather, a portrait. His portrait. Precise, sharp pencil strokes had rendered the grim expression of his face. The accuracy of the drawing was outstanding. Instead of the signature, there was

one word written in a bold handwriting, "Smile!"

Alex jumped up and looked out of the window.

The girl winked at him, waver her hand, and, with a light step, walked in the direction of the exit from the platform. The flaps of her white raincoat billowed in the wind like two swan wings.

His first impulse was to follow her. But before he had time to make up his mind, the doors closed, and the carriage jerked ahead. Alex looked at his watch and sighed. If he had followed her, he would have been late for work for sure. As a philosopher said, "Beware of your first impulses. They tend to be sincere and, hence, ill-considered."

In spite of this consoling wisdom, Sasha felt sad for some reason. As if he had let something very important escape him.

Philip Anderson, the director of the Chicago office of the FBI, was a stout man with a red face and short limbs. He invited Alex into his office and sat down in an armchair.

"Take a seat, Alex."

Sasha sat down. He placed his palms on his knees, straightened his back, and looked around the office. Behind the director's back, he could see the FBI seal with its motto: "Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity." On the opposing wall, there was a black-and-white portrait of the legendary

John Edgar Hoover. As a director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations in the twenties, he literally created one of the most powerful agencies in the US. Then, he managed it for almost fifty years. This man's name had become a synonym for national security.

A pudgy man of about fifty years of age with slightly bulging eyes, a long nose, and a few remaining curly hairs at the back of his head came into the office. He put some papers on his boss's table and glanced at Alex.

"Meet Alex Smirnov, our new employee," said Anderson. "Jean Dubois, a crime expert."

Alex shook the expert's dry hand and looked at Anderson who was leafing through a thin folder with his personnel file.

"You graduated from the Academy at the top of your class. I'm happy that such a talented new agent has been sent to our office."

The freshly-minted agent, who at the beginning of the director's speech had proudly straightened his shoulders, tensed up. The last words sounded somewhat sarcastic. No, Alex must have made it up.

"Sir, I'm not afraid of difficulties and I'm prepared to tackle the most challenging assignment."

Dubois snickered behind his back. Anderson gave him a strict look and drummed on the table with short fingers as he studied his new

employee, deep in thought. He sighed and put the folder aside.

“Then let’s get straight to business. I will now introduce you to one of our most experienced agents you will be working with.”

They left the study. After they walked several steps down the narrow hallway, Anderson suddenly stopped. Alex almost bumped into him. There were several people by the window. Two huge African Americans dressed in the SWAT team’s black uniform stood with their massive arms crossed at the chest. An old man sat in front of them in a chair. Or, rather, he looked like an old man to Alex. When one is twenty-four years old, everybody over forty looks ancient.

The old man looked like an alcoholic. He was dressed in a worn gray trench coat, black trousers, and worn-out shoes. His thinning gray hair was combed back. Long white brow hairs bristled over light-green eyes. The old man’s hands looked like they were cuffed since he held them behind his back.

Alex realized that the man was a suspect that had been detained recently.

“Do you want to know another reason why I detest New York?” the suspect was asking in the meanwhile. “Then answer the following question. Why is it that when you come to Delaware, there is a billboard saying, “Welcome to Delaware, the first state to ratify the

Constitution,” and when you come to New Jersey, there is a billboard saying, “Welcome to New Jersey, the first state to ratify the Bill of Rights,” but when you come to New York, there is billboard saying, “Welcome. You owe three dollars”?

The black SWAT agents laughed happily.

“Allow me to introduce our new employee,” Anderson interrupted the conversation and all three men turned towards him. “This is Alex Smirnov. Mike. Riddick.”

Alexander shook the hard palms of the black giants. By their side, he felt like a tiny little critter, in spite of all the unarmed combat training he’d had at the Academy.

“And this, Alex, is your new mentor,” added the director of the Chicago office with a cryptic smile. “He is the most experienced agent around here. Henry Miller. He will get you up to date on the case you will be handling together.”

Anderson slapped Alex on the back, turned around, and left. The man Alex had taken for a suspect slowly smoothed down his thinning hair. It turned out that he was not cuffed.

“Hello, cadet,” Miller said in a raspy voice, without even bothering to get up and shake Alex’s hand. “Are you ready to save America? I have just a case for you.”

Chapter 3

The Daily Life of Immigrants

A phone call unceremoniously interrupted his deep sleep, knocking on his eardrums with tiny hammers. Without opening his eyes, Denis reached for the nightstand and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Get up!"

"Getting up. . ."

This short daily dialogue had been taking place for over a year. Since the day when Denis first met Valera and started working with him, laying gas pipe lines in homes and offices. Sometimes, however, there were variations on the usual conversation.

"Hello, so what, do you feel like working today?"

This meant that Valera himself did not feel like working.

"No, I don't!"

"You, lazybones! Who'll work then? Pushkin?"

"That's right. Pushkin."

"Then go back to sleep."

This didn't happen too often, though. One had to put food on the table. Only people who never worked in the US thought that dollar bills practically grew on trees here instead of leaves and all one had to do was tear them off, fill one's basket,

and head back home to sleep. Yeah, right! Keep dreaming, pal.

Still, he was dying for a good night's sleep. Only after he came to the United States, did Denis realize that he had never worked before. Or, rather, that he had never really worked.

Just like the majority of other young immigrants he ended up in construction and immediately learned that in this country it isn't enough to just work. Here one needed to sweat. . . Moreover, one had to plug away.

He also discovered that the expressions "working one's fingers to the bone" and "dog-tired" were not simply a hyperbole. For the first few months, Denis would come home, fall onto the couch, and doze off instantaneously, even though he was sweaty, dirty, and still had his work clothes and boots on. He had no energy left for anything else. Of course, after a while he got used to the crazy pace of life in America, but he still never managed to get enough rest.

After washing up and getting dressed, Denis went to the kitchen and put a kettle on. He could hear his next-door neighbors who shared a small apartment. In America, they were called "roommates." Two of them were Ukrainians from Ternopol, and the third roommate was a Pole from Rzeszów. Renting the apartment between the three of them made a lot of sense economically but was extremely inconvenient in terms of keeping the place clean and orderly. The roommates were in the

habit of getting hopelessly drunk over the weekends. This was the favorite pastime of most Soviet immigrants whose only wish after a week of hard work was to get inebriated and forget about everything. On top of that, Denis's neighbors managed to finish a bottle of vodka between the three of them every evening after getting home from work. They drank vodka instead of a good dinner and some sweet tea. They'd come home from the construction site, all dirty and exhausted, and would render themselves comatose with the fiery beverage acquired on the way back home at the nearest supermarket and wrapped in a paper bag.

Of course, they never got a chance to clean the apartment. Their impossibly dirty place was filled with unwashed clothes, tools and dishes that were strewn around everywhere. The stench of unclean bodies and old cigarette butts scattered all over the place was mixed with the alcohol fumes that had been absorbed by the walls was so strong that it could bring tears to one's eyes. The place looked like it was inhabited by cockroaches, rather than by human beings. When the neighbors offered Denis to share the apartment and the costs in order to save money, he refused adamantly. No, he'd much rather find another way to save.

After grabbing a bite and downing a cup of tea, Denis went out. He was right on time. A white Ford truck approached him. Denis could see the imposing outline of his coworker's body behind the windshield. Valera, a huge forty-five-year-old man,

had come to the United States from Ryazan. With his square shoulders, prematurely white hair, a buzz cut, smallish eyes, and an insolent way of talking, he looked like a gangster.

"Get in," he gave Denis his customary greeting, bent over the passenger seat, and opened the door. As was his habit, Denis took a step back to avoid being hit by the door and jumped into the car.

"Come on, hustle!" the man from Ryazan said to get his coworker to speed up, as if Denis could compensate for Valera's half-hour lateness by getting into the car a fraction of a second faster.

"The boss has already called, let's put a move on it."

Saturday. It was the favorite day of all gasmen, plumbers, painters, lawn mowers, roofers, and the representatives of a multitude of other professions. The end of the work week! Tonight, Mexicans will have a little tequila as they stay at home with their numerous families. American managers will have a shot of whiskey. In the meanwhile, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and other immigrants from the late Soviet Union will consume great quantities of Russian vodka as they listen to the live music of Russian restaurants.

As was usual on weekends, an on-demand music program was playing on the radio. When Denis got into the car, a singer was belting out the words, "All right! Everything will be all right!!"

"Some people will be all right but others won't," Valera growled as he cut in front of somebody's

Lexus. His driving style remained the same as in Russia. "We'll catch hell for arriving late."

They stayed silent for a while, listening to another song request. Then Valera grinned.

"There is a job. An acquaintance brought it to me."

This meant that there was some work on the side. No fees to the company, no taxes, all in cash!

"What do we have to do?" Denis asked.

"A house in Northbrook. We'll remove the garbage, the Mexicans will do the repairs, and we'll lay the gas pipes. There are many spots, it seems."

"How much?"

"We'll leave work early and will go see what the place is like."

"How much does it pay?"

"Don't you worry. Uncle Valera will not take advantage of you. So what, have I made you feel better?"

"You sure have," Denis smiled.

This was good news, indeed. A job on the side made them several times more money than their regular gig. Valera inserted a CD into the audio system and in a few seconds the car was filled with Andrei Makarevich's voice, "Don't let the ever-changing world change you. Instead, just let it change for you."

"Yeah, like it's going to change for us," Valera murmured.

The car crossed the intersection just as the yellow light was about to change to red and entered a maze

of clean narrow streets. There were beautiful white houses and carefully manicured lawns tended to by Mexicans. The fences that one would see in Russia were absent.

Right in front of the houses, there were dead bodies with protruding tongues hanging from the trees. There were tombstones on the lawns and the limbs of the corpses were sticking out of the ground.

"What a stupid holiday," Valera grumbled, rolling down the window and spitting at the face of an Egyptian mummy with bulged-out eyes that was bandaged like a victim of a horrible fire. "Who invented it?"

"The Celts," Denis explained. "The Druids. Then, the Irish and the Scotts brought it to over to America."

They passed a house that had sticks placed in front of its entrance. The sticks looked like a fence made of stakes used by a cannibal tribe to exhibit the skulls of its victims. On top of each stake, there was a carved pumpkin that had had its insides removed. The pumpkins glared with their grinning mugs and sinister half-closed eyes. At night, when the owners light candles inside the pumpkins, they will get a very eerie look.

Maybe this happens because Americans work so hard, but they really go all out during the holidays. However, unlike in Russia, this takes the form of a general merriment and a festive environment and not a mass alcoholic binge.

As a result, Halloween turns into a veritable satanic craze where witches, dead corpses, and all kinds of demonic beings are worshipped. The streets are filled with maniacs with bloody knives, their victims with axes sticking out of their backs, witches in pointy hats, trolls, gnomes, and other characters of myths and fairy-tales. October 31 becomes a real Devil's carnival. Children dress up as monsters and walk from house to house trick-or-treating. Teenagers and adults organize parties where everybody wears an original costume.

"These Americans are all weird."

Valera disliked Americans. Of course, he also had no love for the blacks (lazy layabouts), Mexicans (thieves), Indians (their food smells), Jews (sly), and Ukrainians (greedy). He didn't like Russians all that much either, "What is it that our Russian Ivan needs? To have some vodka and go to sleep. Anything but working." All told, Valera liked people a lot less than he liked animals. Even when he was running late for work, he would stop to feed a deer emerging out of the forest or a squirrel jumping down from a tree with the sandwiches he'd been planning to eat for lunch.

When that happened, Denis always remembered Pushkin's unforgettable novella *Dubrovsky*. To be more specific, he thought about the scene where the serfs burn their master's mansion, and one of them rushes back into the flames to save not a human being but a cat.

They approached the office and saw that the vehicles of other workers, loaded with black iron and red copper pipes, were already departing. The company's employees were Poles, Bulgarians, Russians, Ukrainians, and even a Mongol called Jamba. The boss, as one could have guessed, was Jewish.

They quickly loaded the pipes of varying diameters into the truck and took some extra pipes with them because the job on the side also required materials. Then they were given the address of the new house and went out for their morning coffee because they had no desire to start working. At the coffee-shop, they saw a couple of Bulgarians from their company who were holding plastic cups filled with hot tea.

Half an hour later, the partners approached the main site of the day's work. The wooden frame of the house had already been completed. The plumbers were puffing and huffing as they strained to drag the bathtub onto the second floor. There was a pleasant smell of wood shavings and new wooden planks.

"So, shall we start working?" Valera asked. "We've got a short day today."

Denis realized that his partner was eager to go to their side job.

"Let's take some measurements and drill a couple of holes, at least."

"Then get out the toolbox. Let's leave it here for the boss to see if he comes by. And I'll walk around and see where we'll lay the pipes."

Valera picked up a pencil and sauntered around the house, looking like a real architect. Denis put on his cotton gloves and started taking out machine oil bottles, coil, the saw, and towels that he put down carefully. Once the pipes were unloaded and the pipe threading machine was placed on a tripod and powered, Valera went outside.

"So, what's up, Rastrelli?" Denis asked.

"Let's see. There are two boilers here, a furnace, four fire-places. . ."

"Four?!"

Drilling holes in stone fire-places took a lot of time but paid the same as any other work.

"What are you going to do? Let's go downstairs, see what's there."

It turned out that the staircase to the basement hadn't been built yet. Denis swore dutifully and jumped down there. And immediately hurt his foot on a nail that was sticking out of a broken board. Moaning and swearing through his teeth, Denis threw the board aside.

"Valera!"

"Huh?"

"Get the first aid kit!"

"What, again?"

"Yep!"

"Look where you jump! I'll be back."

Denis crawled through the basement window and got outside. Trying not to step on his wounded foot, he scrambled up the mound of loose earth and sat on a bucket that was turned upside down.

Valera grinned when he took out iodine and a band-aid.

“Did you know I was a paramedic in the Air Force?”

Denis took off his sneaker, removed the sock that had a small bloodstain, and started examining the sole of his foot.

“Is there a job that you haven’t done? OK, paratrooper, let’s have a smoking break.”

“Enjoy your poison.”

Denis took a crumpled cigarette out of his work jacket and lit up with a Zippo lighter.

“Tell me about the first time you jumped with a parachute. I get asked to try that. Were you scared?”

“Of course, I was. But things are simpler when you are in the army. They give you a kick in the ass and you jump without whining.”

They didn’t feel like working any more. Having dragged things out lazily until lunch, they ate the sandwiches they’d brought from home and at noon were already speeding to their side job.

Denis was the one who had to talk to Paul Marchevsky, the owner of the house. After living in the US for eight years, Valera still couldn’t speak any English.

The tall and wiry American looked like Stephen King. The famous writer's twin squinted suspiciously over the square frames of his glasses at the new employees.

"Can I see your driver's licenses?"

"Of course."

"What does he want?"

Denis knew that it really bugged Valera when he couldn't understand what was being said. Even though he only had himself to blame for it.

"He wants to see our IDs. He's probably afraid we'll swindle him."

"So show him the papers. They are in the glove compartment."

The American studied the papers carefully, took out a notebook, and wrote something in it. In all probability, their addresses.

"OK, guys, today you'll remove the garbage and calculate the amount of money that has to be spent on buying the pipes. Oh, and don't forget to leave me your phone numbers."

"What does he want now?"

"He's asking for our phone numbers."

"He's very distrustful. OK, let him write them down."

Valera dictated the numbers in a proud voice. He knew his numbers in English, even though he pronounced them in a horrible accent. The client wrote down their cell phone numbers in his notebook, got into his brand-new SUV, and left. And they went to examine the building.

The two-story house had been built two centuries ago. It looked its age, too: an old dying asthma sufferer, drowning in the filth of dirty rooms, rotting walls, and the dreary stench of approaching death. The house stood at the end of the street, apart from other, newer houses. Like a decrepit, lonely old man whose stories were of no interest to the new generation.

The verandah at the entrance had sunk. The black hole that remained in its place looked like a warning to any guest who was planning to disturb the gloomy peace of the ancient mansion.

The partners walked around the hole, keeping to its edges. Valera turned the handle and gave the unlocked door a strong push.

They immediately recoiled as the house breathed into their faces the dust that it had collected in its rotten lungs. The door slammed shut as if refusing to let them in. Denis shivered. It was a real haunted house that guarded ancient, mysterious enigmas. It looked like it would be a very uncomfortable place at night.

Valera, however, was not in the least impressed by the gloomy look of the house. He sneezed and said, "Drat. . . OK, let's take a look at that garbage. Maybe we'll find something useful."

Next to the house, there was a huge metal container on wheels that was patiently waiting for the remains of the dying house's innards to be placed inside it. Valera turned the handle once

again and the door squeaked, surprised at the people's insistence.

They walked around the rooms. The house smelled of rotting wood, old plaster, and mold. The furniture was bashfully covered with old rags. The curtains that had suffocated on dust were hanging in the windows.

"This should all be razed to the ground instead of repaired. I'm sure the place is infested with rats."

Valera sneezed once again.

"It's so dusty here. We'll need to put on masks when we remove this stuff."

On the walls, there were black-and-white photos of people who were long dead. They followed the visitors around with the strict glares of their bright eyes. Denis stopped to get a better look.

In the first photo, there was a group of men in tuxedos. Under the photo, there was an inscription: "*1818, the opening of Chicago's first bank.*" OK, what else. . . "*The birth of jazz in Chicago, 1909*". . . "*Library*". . . And this had to be the first owner of the house. A young man was smiling as he stood in front of a new mansion whose ruins they were wandering around now.

"This is a real museum!"

Valera approached, holding a stack of magazines that looked ancient.

"Look what I found! "Playboy," an issue from 1954. How much do you think it can fetch?"

"A hundred bucks, or maybe more," Denis replied thoughtfully and continued studying the

photographs. "Hugh Hefner started publishing his magazine in that year. There was a picture of Marilyn Monroe on the cover. Is it there?"

"Let me see. And what are you looking at here?"

"Old photos. I'll take them home, hang them on my walls."

"Do you have nothing better to do? Oh, who's this? I think I recognize the face. . ."

1926, *Chicago*. There were two men in the photo. The owner of the house, wearing a dark overcoat and a top hat, had put his hand in a friendly gesture on the shoulder of a man wearing a dark suit, a white shirt with a tie, and a hat. Denis thought he recognized the second man's face, too, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen him. Was he an old-time actor?

"This is Houdini!" Valera was glad that he made the connection first. "I saw his photo when I was on vacation in Las Vegas. Do you remember me telling you about that? The museum of magic tricks, remember?"

"Sure," Denis said.

The most famous and mysterious magician of the last century was looking at him from the photo. The unsurpassed king of escape stunts, an illusionist and sorcerer.

"I'll take this photo, too," Denis said.

"How much is it?" Valera asked immediately.

"Who cares? This is Houdini! Of course, if somebody offered me a good price. . ."

Denis grinned.

"Come on, let's rummage around some more!"

It took them an hour to search the entire house. As a result of the search they found the following objects: a rocking chair, another stack of magazines, a revolver without a drum, a broken watch on a chain, a model of an old train, and a trunk. In the trunk, they didn't find a treasure consisting of gold coins, diamonds, and rubies. All they found there was an ancient stage costume that, as Denis supposed, had been used by the house's owner to assist Houdini in his performances. There were also several small mechanisms of unknown purpose and a tin box.

Denis opened it. Valera looked over his shoulder.

"What's in there?"

"A notebook."

A thick leather cover opened with a creak like the door with rusty hinges at the entrance to the house. Inside, there were sheets that had yellowed with time. They were covered in neat handwriting. Denis noticed the dates that appeared in the margins on a regular basis.

"Looks like a diary."

"Whose?"

Denis opened the notebook at the first page.

"Somebody called Ehrich Weiss."

"Another Jew! Just get rid of it," Valera decided and looked around. "Hell, where is this revolver's drum?"

Denis studied the notebook that looked like a book and put it back into the box.

"I'll take it, as well. I'll figure out what it is at home."

They spent the next four hours cleaning. In the evening, they went home, covered with dust and exhausted.

When he returned to his apartment, Denis took a shower, stretched himself happily on the couch, and dozed off without even noticing how that happened. At about nine p.m., he was awakened by the sound of his cell phone ringing.

"So, partner, are we going out?"

"Come fetch me in an hour."

"Fine. . ."

An hour later, a car honked outside. Denis had already donned a fashionable shirt and a suit. He slid his feet into the brightly polished shoes and went out onto the landing. Loud voices were coming from the next-door apartment. It looked like his neighbors had once again decided to spare themselves the trouble and celebrate the end of the work week at home.

Half an hour later, they approached a typical Russian restaurant that bore a name which was not very typical for a restaurant, "Tavern." They went inside. Almost all of the tables in the dining room were occupied. A live band was playing, and a blonde singer with a tired face but a beautiful voice was singing a song about love. A few couples that were still sober were stomping around the dance floor.

The tables creaked under the weight of an enormous number of dishes. Russian-speaking immigrants enjoyed their food and expected it to be plentiful. Very plentiful. However, no matter how much food there was, the Russians would still find it too little. Even though if a Hindu, a Chinese, or an African American ate this amount of food, he'd drop dead even before the dessert was served.

A gray-haired Armenian with a smile on his dark-skinned face and dark circles under his eyes approached them. His name was Erik and, as he always pointed out, he'd spent the greatest part of his life working as a waiter.

"How do you do, my friends?" Erik asked with a distinctive Armenian accent. "Would you like me to show you to a table?"

Valera shook his head.

"No, it's too cramped here."

"Let's go to the bar," Denis said. "There is almost nobody there."

Valera didn't argue, and soon they sat down on tall revolving stools next to the bar. Denis waved hello to the barman who recognized him and nodded in response.

Techno music was thundering in the room. The basses flapped against the listeners' ears, making their brains vibrate. The only person in the room didn't seem bothered by the music. It was the fat DJ who's prudently made his eardrums safe by putting a huge pair of headphones on his head.

Denis ordered a cognac. But he put the glass aside without drinking. A half-formed idea was bothering him. He took out his cell phone and accessed the Internet.

"What kind of music is this?" Valera winced. "Why can't they put on our Russian bands, like Time Machine? Or Lyube?"

"We listen to them at work every day," Denis responded, entering a search term into the Google engine.

"What are you looking for?" his partner downed a shot of tequila. "Yesterday?"

"I'm looking for something a lot earlier than even the day before yesterday."

There were more than twenty-five thousand links that mentioned Harry Houdini.

"Wow!" Denis finally took a small sip of his drink without looking up from the screen. "Interesting. . ."

"Harry Houdini, the man who walked through the walls. . .", "The champion of escaping from prison cells", "The Handcuff King became famous by denouncing charlatans and as a result of complex tricks involving escaping and setting himself free. . .", "He died under mysterious circumstances on the eve of Halloween."

"Get that, Valera, Houdini died right before Halloween. It will be an anniversary of his death in a week."

"Seriously?" his partner said and suddenly perked up. "Want to bet there will be a scuffle tonight?"

"Huh?" Denis looked up from the screen of his phone and cast a wary glance around the room.

Next to the entrance, there stood several tall blond Lithuanians. They were aggressively questioning a Ukrainian who barely managed to stay on his feet. They pushed their victim a few times. The Ukrainian was smiling drunkenly. It was obvious that he had no idea about the dark clouds that were gathering over his closely cropped head. He even tried explaining something. The Lithuanians didn't want to listen to him, but his frowning burly compatriots were already emerging from the depths of the room, ready to offer him assistance and provide the Lithuanians with clearer explanations.

A fight seemed inevitable. The voices became louder by the minute, as tends to happen when the interlocutors have no wish to understand each other. The Russian swear words could be heard very distinctly. The inhabitants of the former Socialist Republics preferred to address their grievances in Russian.

The restaurant's security guard turned to the wall and was speaking rapidly into his walkie-talkie. One had no need to know how to read lips to figure out who he was talking to.

This was a regular occurrence at the Russian restaurant, and Denis went back online. The next article attracted his attention with its unusual title, and he read aloud, "Even after his death the great Houdini managed to perform a stunt."

"What do you mean, after his death?" Valera asked staring with his narrowed eyes at the group whose members were waving their hands at each other. "Just hit him already!"

"Listen: "Even as he prepared to depart from this world, Houdini couldn't help but play a trick on everybody. Shortly before his death, he placed a thick envelope into a safe box of a bank in New York in the presence of witnesses. Inside, there was his diary that described all of his stunts, many of which, by the way, haven't been explained until now. The safe box was supposed to be opened on Houdini's one hundredth anniversary, that is, on April 6, 1974. As the date approached. . ."

"Say what, jerk?!"

A harsh sound of a slap was followed by the noise glass makes when it breaks. One of the participants of the international dispute had been thrown outside through the glass doors. A police siren responded immediately with its, "Oop, oop!!! We-e-ee!!!"

The officers of the American law and order that had been invited by the far-sighted security officer were rushing to the entrance, clutching their batons. In a moment, there will be five police vehicles. Or possibly more.

"Let's clear out!" Valera ordered.

They marched briskly into the kitchen, passed by the Mexican bus-boys who had been put on their guard by the sound of police sirens, left by the back door, and got to their car. Like the Mexicans, Valera

didn't have a green card. It would not only have been annoying but also dangerous to end up at the police station because of somebody else's fight. The police could either let him go or call the INS, which was one institution that Valera didn't feel like meeting.

"So," he said, "shall we go someplace else?"

"Nah, I don't feel like it anymore."

"Then let's go home."

A half an hour later, Valera dropped him back at his building.

The noise of a broken toilet flush could be heard in the empty room. Denis cut off the water supply, opened his laptop, and found the article he didn't finish at the restaurant: ". . . as the date approached, the excitement surrounding the long-awaited event intensified. However, when the safe box was finally opened, it turned out to be completely empty. Almost fifty years after his death, Harry Houdini, whose real name was Ehrich Weiss, once again managed to demonstrate his talent of an unsurpassed illusionist. . ."

"Incredible!" Denis exclaimed. "How on Earth did he manage to do that?"

He put on the kettle and continued reading.

"Amadeo Vacca, an elderly illusionist who used to be Houdini's assistant, had the following to say about his mentor's last joke, "I wouldn't be surprised if the sealed package contained an invitation to open his grave and make sure that it is empty. Maestro was full of tricks." This is how, as a result of the mysterious disappearance of the diary, the last hope of figuring out the secrets

behind Houdini's stunts, some of which haven't been solved until today, vanished."

Denis reclined in the chair and stuck a cigarette in his mouth.

"That's impressive. Doing a trick after his death!"

The lighter froze in the air. A shudder passed through his body. *Ehrich Weiss*. This was precisely the name written on the first page of the notebook they had found in the abandoned house!

Denis tried to chase away this unexpected idea as something completely impossible. No, this just can't be. He rocked in his creaky chair, then stopped and stared with unseeing eyes at the cracked ceiling, trying to bring his thoughts back to reality. He failed.

Denis jumped up and ran to the bedroom. He took out his work bag and grabbed the diary in a thick leather cover he had found in the abandoned house. Then, he stopped dead in his tracks, afraid to open it.

"No, this isn't possible. . ." he repeated aloud, caressing the grainy surface of the cover with trembling fingers.

Denis went back to the kitchen, swept the dried crumbs off the table, and put the notebook on the table. He did that carefully, as if it were an explosive device that had failed to detonate. Then he remembered that there was a cigarette in his mouth and clicked his lighter. The beginning actor and screenwriter filled his lungs to the brim with smoke and let out a thick cloud. He followed its

flight with a vacant stare and slowly reached for the notebook. The kettle emitted an accusatory whistle behind his back as if trying to warn him against a rash move that could change his fate.

Denis turned off the heat under the kettle, threw a pinch of loose-leaf black tea into a cup, poured some boiling water into it and approached the window, postponing the moment when he'd be disappointed. His fingers were trembling.

In the semi-darkness outside the window, naked trees swung their branches. They looked like the only live beings in the empty street. The wind howled like a dog that had been whipped.

Until he verified whether the diary was genuine, it was OK to dream. If this was really Houdini's missing diary, his life would change in an instant. It was scary to imagine how much this notebook could cost. A hundred thousand? Two hundred? A million? He'd be able to ditch the construction site, the heavy pipe threading machine, the gloves that reeked of machine oil, the alcoholic neighbors. He'd move to Hollywood and go to an acting school. No, first he'd organize an auction and invite the world's best illusionists. Yes! This was a great way of making himself known. Even if he made less money, he'd be able to meet useful people. And then. . .

His inner voice laughed at him contemptuously, "Keep dreaming, you idiot! You've really got a screw loose! Miracles don't happen, and even if they do, they don't happen to you. And now read

the first page, forget about it, down a shot of vodka, and go to bed, you fool."

The tree finally managed to reach the window and hit it with a sharp branch. Denis started, scared for a moment. Then he turned around and came back to the table.

The diary awaited him patiently. For a moment, he imagined that the old notebook was an ancient book of spells from the horror stories of Howard Lovecraft. Manuscript Fetched from Behind the Ridges of Insanity. His inner voice, which now was fearful, whispered, "If you open it, you will let demons out."

"Demons. . . How silly. . ."

Surprised that he'd said this out loud, Denis gave a nervous laugh and opened the diary. The handwriting was careful and quite clear.

"In year 1893, quite a few fascinating events took place: I began the career of a professional illusionist, made the love of my life, Bess, and encountered the greatest enemy of my entire existence. His name was Asmodeus. He. . ."

In any case, it seems important to describe those events in greater detail. The night before my first performance at the fair seemed like nothing out of the ordinary. It started when I bought a book. . ."

Chapter 4

Miracle Fair

1839

Twilight descended on Chicago but gaslights chased away the darkness in the streets. A short guy of about nineteen years of age stood under one of them. He held an open book in his hands. It was a battered copy that he'd just bought for twenty cents at a used books section of a bookstore. Having counted his coins, the boy had decided that he could afford to spend this amount and add this volume to his small collection.

In the bookstore, he carefully picked up the book that had the title of *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin, an Ambassador, a Writer and a Magician, Written by Himself* on its cover.

"Can I help you, young gentleman?"

Ehrich turned around. The owner of the bookstore, an old man with a huge nose and bushy sideburns, approached him.

"Tell me, sir, does this book talk about magic?"

"What is your name?"

"Ehrich Weiss, sir."

"Are you interested in magic?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you made the right choice. This is a book by Robert-Houdin, a great magician. He performed

in his show titled "Fantastic Evenings" in front of two monarchs, King Louis-Filippe and Emperor Napoleon."

Ehrich's face lit up.

"Was he the one who could catch a bullet with his teeth?"

"Yes. He'd give a gun to the spectators and ask them to pass it around to make sure that the weapon was real. Then he'd ask somebody to load the gun and fire it. I was at one of his performances once. . . The thunder of the shot! And suddenly, Robert-Houdin emerges from the smoke, completely unharmed and holding a bullet between his teeth.

Ehrich realized that he could never allow this book to slip out of his hands. But will he have enough money to buy it? The old man pulled out his heather pipe, filled it with tobacco, and soon clouds of smoke were floating around the store.

"Also, Houdin would make an orange tree grow right in front of his audience. It bloomed, and its branches became covered with ripe fruit that anybody present could try."

"How much is this book?"

"A dollar."

When he saw the boy's crestfallen look, the old man asked, "So how much have you got?"

Ehrich took all of his money out of his pockets. He counted it, trying to conceal his disappointment. "Twenty cents?" grinned the old man. He puffed

with his pipe and slid the coins into the drawer of his desk. "Take it before I change my mind."

Ehrich still couldn't believe his luck. He pressed the book to his chest and ran out of the store, terrified that the owner of the bookstore would change his mind. At the threshold, he turned around and yelled, "Thank you, sir!"

Ehrich anticipated coming back to his room at the fair, settling into an armchair, and beginning to read. But curiosity got the better of him. He stopped under a gaslight and started leafing greedily through the yellowed pages.

"The orange tree. . . Finally, I'll find out how this trick is done."

"Ehrich!"

It was his younger brother Theodore. He was disheveled and his bright-colored overcoat was opened on his chest. He approached, loudly stomping the cobblestones with his boots.

"Where have you been?"

"Look," Ehrich proudly showed him his purchase. "What do you think this is?"

Theodore's eyes bulged out, "I see two bowls of soup and hot German sausages. But why do they look so strange, Ehrich?"

"This book contains the secrets of Houdin, a great magician."

"Well, you are a lousy magician. You transformed our supper into a battered book. This kind of tricks will not help us survive."

Ehrich shook his head in reproach, "What matters is that we keep improving ourselves."

"Oh, brother. . . OK, let's hurry back. A new troupe has arrived."

"Do they have a magician?"

"No, what do we need the competition for? But there are some pretty girls who dance."

"Oh, Theodore, I'd rather you thought up some new tricks."

"That's what you are for. In any case, we only have one night to walk around the White City. Because tomorrow the performances start, and we'll have other things to do. Got it?"

Ehrich sighed. He'd been hoping to spend the evening with his book. He didn't feel like disappointing his brother, though.

"Let's go. But remember that tomorrow a new life will begin for us."

They headed towards Lake Michigan. There, on Navy Pier, an entire city had been built for the World's Columbian Exposition in celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the Americas. Millions of electric lamps of Nikola Tesla illuminated it.

Ehrich's career, like that of all beginner magicians, started in pubs and country fairs. And even that kind of gigs took effort to get because the unwashed drunken audience preferred half-naked variety actresses to the representatives of original artistic genres.

During his first performances, Weiss Jr. introduced himself with a modest pseudonym, "Ehrich the Great." In spite of such an impressive name, however, his tricks were anything but great. He just dreamt of learning some at the moment. Whenever he had a chance, Ehrich stood in front of the magic shop window displays that exhibited glittering machines used by professional magicians and admired them. He had no money for this kind of props. But he hoped that this state of affairs was not going to last for long.

The decks of cards, however, cost little, and so did pieces of silk. This was why Ehrich's first performances consisted mostly of card tricks and tricks with silk handkerchiefs.

After the first few gigs, Ehrich decided to try his luck at Coney Island. There, he worked for a short while alongside Emil Jarrow, a strongman who could write his name on a wall with a pencil he held in an outstretched hand while a six-pound lead weight was hanging from his arm. That was when Ehrich first had the idea of combining the art of illusion with the unusual capabilities of a trained body.

Every time he got back home after his performances, Harry practiced the trick of liberating himself from ropes. He did it on the roof of his house on East 69th Street. His younger brother Theodore, nicknamed Dash for his love of dashing clothes, enjoyed spending many hours in Harry's

company as he bound him. And Harry spent hours trying to untie himself.

The boys' mother didn't know what to make of their exercises. Never before in the history of the Weiss family (that gave the world several generations of rabbis and Talmudic scholars) and in her own Steiner family did anybody allow himself to be tied with clothesline robe for no discernible reason and for no real purpose.

"Are you planning on making your living this way, my son?"

"Don't worry, Mom." Ehrich would smile. "I'm practicing. You'll see, soon I'll make a name for myself!"

He did have an idea that later would transform into an original trick titled "Metamorphosis." The trick involved a trunk from which the artist had to escape in spite of being handcuffed and bound with ropes.

At the age of nineteen, Ehrich was getting ready to begin his career of a professional magician. He was relying on the World's Exposition in Chicago to help him do that.

When they approached their home at the fair, a wooden building for circus and theatrical performances, Theodore suddenly stopped in his tracks

"I haven't had anything to drink, but I see strange visions. . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Look," Theodore pointed in the direction of the lake. "Do you see what I see?"

Next to the shore, a real Viking boat was rocking on the dark waves. Whether it emerged from the fogs of the past millennia or from the books by the young novelist H.G.Wells, it was an impressive sight, to say the least. It seemed like aggressive bearded Scandinavians in their horned helmets would jump off the boat, clutching hatchets and axes in their hands. Then, they would proceed to destroy the Chicago Expo, attacking the demonic achievements of science and technology before anything else.

Of course, as it became known later on, this was simply an attempt by the Norwegians who'd arrived in Chicago to cast doubt on Columbus's role as the first person to discover the Americas.

The Weiss brothers entered their tiny room at the fair. Theodore took their last five dollars from the hiding place. When he saw Erich shake his head in disagreement, he shrugged off his brother's concerns, "Tomorrow we'll start performing and getting paid. And today we'll have fun!"

The brothers went outside and joined the crowd that was moving in all directions. Every day of the Exposition brought tens of thousands of visitors from all over America, as well as from Europe and Asia. Hundreds of temporary pavilions that had been built for the Exposition were white, which was what earned them the name of the "White City."

All of the wonders of the modern world were gathered in this city: the above-ground railway, the moving pavements, the lighted fountains, the ice mountain, and an entire "street of pleasures" filled with theaters, zoos, and bazaars. Above it all, stood the biggest technological innovation, the world's very first observation wheel. It was a Ferris wheel that had been constructed by the engineer called George Ferris.

Theodore raised his head and stared in admiration at the lit cabins. This was America's response to the tower built several years ago for the Paris Exposition by Gustave Eiffel. The Ferris wheel was seventy-five meters in diameter which made it taller than the sixteen-story Chicago skyscraper, considered to be the tallest building in the world. Many large cabins for sixty passengers each were attached to the Ferris wheel.

"Let's take a ride," Theodore suggested.

"The line is so long, we'll spend all night waiting for our turn."

Theodore sighed in disappointment but, in a second, a smile came back to his face.

"In that case, let's have a bite. And don't even try to get me to change my mind!"

Ehrich wasn't planning to do that. He felt his stomach rumble, as well.

"Chinese?"

"I can't eat when I have no idea what ingredients went into making the food. Besides, I always fear that it will crawl out of my plate."

"Then we can have hot dogs."

"That's a brilliant idea."

They approached a stand that emitted a tempting aroma of grilled sausage. The technology of cooking the so-called "hot dogs" had been imported into the United States by German immigrants. But it was in Chicago when the idea that sausage could be placed inside a bun first emerged. A local vendor called Anton Feuchtwanger gave his customers gloves to avoid burning their fingers. Many people forgot to give back the gloves, however. So Feuchtwanger's wife suggested that he cut small buns in half to serve not only as garnish but also as means of protection from the heat. The sales soared immediately.

"Leff go, I'll fow you the danfers," Theodore said with his mouth filled with food.

Ehrich grinned, "Swallow your food first, Casanova."

He noticed a poster in front of the nearest pavilion. Huge letters next to the entrance announced that inside there was, "Benz Victoria Automobile!"

"Let's go inside," immediately said Ehrich who was always interested in technological innovations. His curious mind always required new experiences in everything that could later be of use in developing new magic tricks. What a pity that, for now, these tricks only existed on paper!

The people who gathered inside were standing around an outlandish carriage. Some of the visitors

were arguing with a knowledgeable look that it could move around without horses. Theodore winced when he heard something this silly. He couldn't bring himself to believe that such a heap of metal could move on its own. At the same time, he had to admire the shiny metal of this chariot of the new century.

"*This really moves?*" Theodore asked.

"It doesn't surprise you that a train moves without the help of horses?"

"A train is a train," Dash objected.

"It moves all right," Erich said. "I read in a newspaper how, four years ago, Gottlieb Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach built their first automobile that was presented at the Paris Expo. This year, they brought a new model to Chicago. And here is Daimler himself."

"How do you know?"

"I saw his photo."

A respectably looking gentleman of about sixty years of age was leaning against the hood of the car. In his hand, he held a glass of champagne. A young man who was a little older than Erich stood by his side, talking to him. Erich listened closely. Daimler asked the young man, "Where do you work, Henry?"

"I'm a chief engineer at the Edison Electric Company."

"That's a great career for somebody your age. But, as far as I know, Tesla managed to stick it to your boss yet again by winning the government

contract for mounting the lighting of this Exposition. I heard how on May 1, during the opening ceremony, President Cleveland pressed a button and turned on several hundred thousand lamps that, according to the journalists, "turned night into day." Tesla's lamps. In the meanwhile, Mr. Edison was tearing his hair out in desperation."

"You are right, sir. I don't really care about their feud these days. I have other plans."

"And what are they?"

"My dream is to make automobiles."

"What are you saying?"

"Moreover, I'm now finishing the first sample in my shed."

Gottlieb looked at his interlocutor with a new-found interest.

"If that is true, you are a true talent, Henry. If Edison lets you go, you know where to look for a job."

"Thank you, sir, but I'm hoping to start my own company."

Daimler almost choked on his champagne, "Well, hm. . . good luck then."

The young man hesitated as if doubting whether to ask his next question.

"Tell me, given that your automobile is very expensive and many people cannot afford it, have you ever considered making cars for regular folks?"

Gottlieb scoffed, "That is impossible, young man. An automobile is not a bullet casing. You cannot manufacture it on an assembly line."

Henry froze. His face reflected a flurry of thought. Suddenly, his lips spread in a wide grin.

"What did you say, sir? Hmm. . . That's actually a brilliant idea, Mr. Daimler!"

Daimler choked on his champagne. After he stopped coughing, he asked, "How do you imagine this, young man?"

"It will be something like a huge industrial assembly line. . . I don't know yet. . . But thank you for giving me the idea, sir!"

"You are welcome. This is nothing but a fantasy," Daimler smiled. "Although, people also reproached me for fantasizing too much. Remind me what your last name is, young man. Maybe I'll hear it again."

"Ford. Henry Ford, sir."

"Well, I wish you the best of luck, Henry."

They shook each other's hands.

"Let's go," Theodore pulled his brother by his jacket sleeve.

There was a short distance to go until the building where, according to Theodore, pretty dancers awaited them when Ehrich's curiosity once again made him veer off to a pavilion called "Tesla Electric Light Company." A strange buzz as well as terrified screams were coming out of it. He dragged his exasperated brother inside and. . . they both froze at the threshold, riveted by the sight in front of them.

A tall, slim, well-dressed man was standing at the podium in the middle of the exhibition hall. Nobody could have failed to recognize his

moustache and his penetrating stare. This was "The Genius Madman," Nikola Tesla.

Bursts of real lightning danced around Tesla even though there was no storm. They lighted up the room and then plunged it into darkness. Blue, snakelike charges penetrated both the air and the body of the great inventor.

"He let two million volts pass through him!" one of the journalists who formed a crowd around the podium with their notebooks and photographic cameras exclaimed in admiration.

An especially loud crack could be heard, and the crowd staggered back from the podium in fear.

"This is impossible!" somebody wheezed.

Ehrich shifted his gaze to a stout gray-haired gentleman dressed in an expensive suit, a white shirt with a stand-up collar, and a bow tie. The heavy chin of this middle-aged man jutted forward in defiance. Gosh darn, Ehrich thought, this is Thomas Edison in the flesh, the world famous "king of electricity"!

To his annoyance, the beginning magician was not the only one to recognize the celebrity.

"Mister Edison!" a journalist yelled gleefully. "So you came? You decided to watch the. . . What was it that you called him? I remember you saying something about a *crazy Serb*?"

Edison muttered something incomprehensible in return.

"Was that really what you said?" asked in his unflappable manner Tesla who had heard the last

words. He came closer, and Ehrich saw that the genius inventor was wearing thin cotton gloves. "Why did you do that, my dear Thomas?"

Now he could afford to ridicule the man who had tricked him a long time ago and stolen many of his ideas. He could joke at the expense of the man who envied him and stated that an alternating current poses a mortal danger. According to Edison, "the crazy Serb" should have been reduced to dust by today's experiment. He should have burned down to death! Tesla, however, just smiled calmly in spite of this grim prognosis, offering definitive proof that he was right.

At that moment, Edison realized something else. If companies transitioned to the alternating current, this will augur his financial defeat because a great portion of his profits came from patent royalties.

As if Tesla hadn't had enough standing there surrounded by bolts of lightning, he demonstrated yet another miracle. A light bulb was burning in his hand. The most annoying thing for his competitor was that this was *Edison's light bulb*. Without any wires attached. It seemed to be powered by thin air!

"It's isn't voltage that kills, Thomas. It's the strength of the current," said the Serb, emerging from the buzzing lightning bolts. "You should know something like this. And you also should know that a high-frequency current only passes on the surface."

Edison wasn't listening to him, however. With a mesmerized stare, he looked at the light bulb that,

for some incomprehensible reason, continued burning in Tesla's hands.

"How. . . why does it. . . God!"

A long-nosed man with a thick moustache ran into the room. This was George Westinghouse, an important American industrialist and the founder of the company called "Westinghouse Electric." He was also Tesla's friend and business partner.

"Nikola," he yelled from the threshold, "we have won the tender to build an electric station at the Niagara Falls!"

It looked like Edison was about to have a stroke when he heard these words. He got himself together, though, turned around in a dignified way, and left, paying no attention to the journalists who pestered him with questions. Ehrich, who left right after him, managed to catch a glimpse of the heavy silhouette of the "electricity king" disappearing in the crowd.

Finally, the brothers got to the place where the buildings of the fair stretched for more than a mile. This was a world they knew well and were used to. Besides the fair, there were also temporary circus arenas. They consisted of tall central beams and side stands where tarpaulin canopies were attached.

The members of the public who came to visit the exposition could head over here and take a break from the stands that housed the technological innovations. There was a huge selection of entertainment here: dancers, clowns, acrobats,

magicians, tamers of wild animals, mimes, jugglers, and ventriloquists.

Some of the artists performed in the middle of the street. In front of the nearest tent, there was a rope stretched between two stands, and sinewy tightrope walkers sauntered and jumped on it. By their side, a half-naked fakir with an Indian turban on his head was blowing fire. A little down the road, a bald strongman in a tight striped tricot was lifting huge weights.

"Look, there are the pretty girls I was telling you about," Theodore's face lit up.

Erich followed his stare. In front of one of the tents, there was a large poster with scantily dressed young women whose appearance was enough to make one blush. In front of the entrance, there was a mustachioed man in a black tuxedo. He was wearing a shiny top hat on his head.

"Only here!" he yelled, slapping his thigh with a long whip with a short handle. "Hot girls from the Midwest! The mysterious Carmela, the charming Lolo, the stunning Coco, and the shameless Chocolate!"

"I like them already," Theodore announced. "Especially Chocolate."

"This is just advertisement," Ehrich grinned. "Just like you can hear all about the "unheard of miracles of magic" next to our tent.

"But it's the truth, brother."

"Let's take a walk. It isn't like we have any money to spend on other people's acts."

Theodore sighed in disappointment and Ehrich tried to make him feel better, "I promise you, as soon as we get paid, we'll immediately make the acquaintance of all the shameless girls of the White City."

Ehrich noticed a sign over the next tent that said,

"The freak circus of Magister Asmodeus. Magic and
Horrors"

Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate.

It took Ehrich a while to find out what the Latin phrase meant. When he did, he was shocked by Asmodeus's unrepentant insolence. This was a sentence from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and it meant, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." In the opinion of the medieval poet, this phrase was written at the entrance to Hell.

Under the inscription, there stood a midget, dressed in a green frock-coat and a top hat. He was sturdy, with short limbs and a big head. A real Irish leprechaun. Even though the leprechaun's head barely reached Ehrich's chest, one could see that he was physically strong.

"What are you staring at?" the midget asked and spit on the ground. "Buy a ticket or make yourselves scarce!"

"You won't find many spectators this way," Ehrich frowned.

"That's none of your business. We are on holiday today."

"We are artists, too. We work together."

"What are you, inverts?"

"What did you just say?!" Theodore moved in the leprechaun's direction but Ehrich raised his hand to stop him. He had noticed the word "Magic" on the sign over this tent. He wanted to meet the local illusionist (because that's what the word "magic" had to mean, right?) and was unwilling to leave without doing that. But he wasn't going to let the insolence of this creature go unnoticed.

"Mr. What's Your Name, I suggest you try to be careful about what you say."

The midget jutted his chin forward with an impertinent look.

"Or what?"

"Or we'll pull your top hat down to your ass," Ehrich said without raising his voice.

"I can see you are very tough," the midget bared his teeth in a smile.

His eyes shone angrily. Dash made a fist and stepped towards him. The midget grew tense but then suddenly waved his hand, "OK, never mind. What kind of artists are you?"

"Illusionists," Ehrich said, drawing a breath. The midget seemed like he could be a dangerous opponent. "My name is Ehrich Weiss."

"*Ehrich*? What kind of a weird name is that? I can only imagine how it sounds being announced before your performance. Like the master of ceremonies had somebody step on his throat."

"I like my name."

"You need to come up with a different one."

Ehrich decided to change the subject.

"What kind of freaks do you have performing here?"

"Buy a ticket and you'll see for yourself," the midget replied. His phrase had an eerie sound.

"And who is Magister Asmodeus?"

"The owner."

"He is the one who does the magic tricks?"

"You could put it that way," the leprechaun grinned, as if he had heard something funny.

"Can we meet him?"

"Not today. Come back tomorrow."

Ehrich nodded without saying anything and turned away. Theodore bore into the grinning midget with his stare and then followed his brother.

If at that point in time Ehrich had known what was going in "Asmodeus's Freak Circus," he would have stolen all of the petroleum that Daimler had intended for the miracle automobile, poured it on this horrible tent, and burned it to the ground. Then he would have stood in front of it with a revolver to make sure that not a single creature belonging to Asmodeus could escape. And most importantly, Asmodeus himself. However, an entire night still separated him from the Master of the Freaks.

An hour later, the brothers returned to their tiny room feeling exhausted. Ehrich stretched himself on a tattered mattress and said, staring at the ceiling made of crumbling wooden boards, "You know, the midget was right about one thing. I need an

impressive pseudonym. How do you feel about the name Harry?"

Theodore shrugged his shoulders and said in a pensive tone, "I don't know. Sounds good, I guess. . . Harry what?"

I looked at the cover of the book I had bought earlier that day. "*Memoirs of Robert-Houdin*". . . *Houdin, Houdin*. . .

"Got it."

"Well?"

"*Houdini*. How does it sound?"

"*Sounds fine*."

I repeated much more decisively, "*Harry Houdini*."

Chapter 5

Those Who Disappear

"Here is where we will work. Take a seat."

The office looked very modest: a coat-hanger, a steel safe, two office chairs on wheels, and a big map of Chicago on the wall. A desk strewn with papers stood by the window. There was an open laptop on the desk.

Alexander had almost recovered from the shock that the tattered appearance of his partner had initially caused him. He carefully placed himself in a chair and looked around.

"I can see that you are bothered by the way I look, am I right?" Miller asked, moving the pile of papers that were lying on the table out of the way.

"Erm. . . Is this a disguise? Were you on an assignment?"

"Yeah, right, a disguise," Miller nodded and sly wrinkles gathered in the corners of his faded eyes.

"Want some coffee?"

"Sure."

"Then let's go."

"Where?"

Miller put on a gray coat that looked as tattered as its owner. In his new business suit, his white shirt and a tie, Alex looked very dapper by his side.

"There is a coffee-shop close by. It's right across the road."

"Are we meeting somebody?"

"An experienced, wise agent will be meeting the new and talented generation."

"Why can't we talk here?"

Miller pressed his index finger to his lips and whispered loudly, "Here we are under surveillance."

Alex thought that Miller had a very strange sense of humor. They went outside.

"Let's go to the bookstore first," Miller suggested. "It's close by."

Alex's cell phone rang.

"I'll wait for you over here," Alex yelled. "Hello?"

"Hi Sasha."

"Vika? Hi."

"How is everything?"

Her voice was warm and happy. She was unbelievable, behaving like nothing had happened the day before.

"Listen Vika, why are you calling me?"

"What do you mean, why? Aren't we going to see each other today?"

"See each other? You didn't even come by yesterday!"

"Then I'll come by today. Don't be upset, Sasha. Please?" the young woman lowered her voice. "I waaaant you."

"Well. . . OK," Alex said.

"Oh, that's great!" Vika sounded happy. "I've missed you so much! OK, I'll see you tonight."

"Bye."

Alex hung up. He hated his own weakness which could only be justified by how long he hadn't had sex. No, even this didn't justify it.

Miller came back from the store soon enough. He was carrying a package with his new book under his arm and he looked very content.

"Now we can have some coffee."

Five minutes later, they were at the coffee-shop. The barista was standing behind the counter, looking at the TV screen with an unseeing stare. Miller chose a table in the corner and stretched out in a worn armchair.

"A cozy little place. It's a pity they don't serve any alcohol here."

A chubby waitress of an uncertain age approached them. Miller asked her to bring two cups of coffee and some pastries.

"Where are you from?" Henry asked.

"Chicago."

"And where did your parents come from?"

"Moscow. Do I have an accent?"

"So you are Russian," Miller said without answering the question. "That's what I thought from the start."

"Why?"

"Because of your eyes. You also have a good last name, Smirnoff. It's a good brand of vodka. Are you a relative, by any chance?"

Alex frowned, "My last name is *Smirnov*."

"Whatever you say," Miller raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture, but his eyes were laughing.

"If you are interested, at the Academy I was in the. . ."

". . . top five," Miller finished the sentence for him. "I read your personnel file. It's OK, don't pay any attention to me. At the office, everybody says I have a lousy personality. And you know what?"

"What?"

"They are right."

The waitress approached the table and placed two small cups and a plate with pastries in front of them. Alex finally smiled.

"I'm sorry. At first, I thought you were making fun of me. The boss said you were on a case that mattered to the entire country."

Miller sipped his hot coffee and winced, "That's the only kind of cases we ever get."

Alex lowered his voice, "Mafia?"

Miller leaned back in his chair and raised his bushy eyebrows which, in Alex's opinion, needed trimming.

"Why mafia?"

Alex gave him a condescending smile, "I thought you read my personnel file."

Alex thought he knew everything there was to know about the mafia. Or almost everything. He had been interested in organized crime even before starting his studies at the Academy. During his training, he had even written a thesis on the way ethnic factors influenced the emergence of new gangs. His personal experiences back at Devon, as well as the stories or, rather, the legends of his neighborhood, had allowed Alex to make a few valuable observations that earned him the director's praise. He knew how his fellow Russians used every means at their disposal to make some money, open restaurants or offices, and move to more affluent neighborhoods, letting the new immigrants from the Middle East take their place. This was how things always were everywhere in the United States but on a larger scale. Alex based his thesis on two cities, Chicago and New York. Or, rather, the ghettos of these cities.

In the nineteenth century, for example, all of the gangs in America were Irish. The fear of a typical white American of becoming a victim of a crime

was a response to the “Irish threat.” After the Irish gangsters had moved up and left the horrible ghettos, the Italians and the Jews took their place. These guys really knew what they were doing. The two most important organized crime bosses of that time, the Sicilian Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky, a Polish Jew, successfully merged different gangs into one National Crime Syndicate. This was when *organized crime* was really born. Three factors coincided to make this possible: the Prohibition, the Great Depression, and (as Alex was forced to acknowledge) the lack of decisive actions on the part of the FBI.

The Cosa Nostra did not disappear with the passage of time. To the contrary, its influence grew from one year to the next. Neither the arrests of the famous dons nor the revelations of corruption in the highest echelons of power managed to destroy the mafia. The organized crime bosses rose so high that street gangs only made them scoff. But life does not tolerate a vacuum, so nowadays African American and Latinos took their place in the streets.

More than anything, Alex enjoyed learning about the Italian mafia. He knew the history of the Cosa Nostra, the methods it used, its customs and traditions. He was familiar with the biographies of the leaders of crime families, the nicknames of famous gangsters, and a lot more. This was precisely why Alex thought that his first case would have to do with the Italians.

"So you consider yourself to be an expert on the Cosa Nostra?" Miller grinned, taking a huge bite out of his pastry.

"Feel free to check for yourself."

"Really? OK then. What was the name of the enforcement arm of the Syndicate that was created in the thirties?"

"Murder, Incorporated."

"And what was the name of the main psycho and the executioner of this organization?"

"Albert Anastasia. This maniac considered murder to be a solution to absolutely any problem."

"How was he killed?"

"He was shot to death at a barber shop in Manhattan."

"Hmm. . . And what's Chicago amnesia?"

"It's when witnesses refuse to testify in court. In Chicago during the twenties. . ."

"Stop, I believe you. Are you going to eat your pastry? Can I have it? Great. One more question. Who played young Don Corleone in Godfather II?"

"Erm. . . Robert de Niro," Alex frowned. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"What do you mean? You have to know such things."

"Was I right? About the case?"

"Almost. We will investigate," Miller paused, "the disappearance of a crazy old lady and also of a guy who is even crazier."

"Excuse me?"

Alex thought he had to be imagining it. A moment later he decided he knew what was going on.

“Aah! The mafia must have kidnapped important witnesses!”

Miller started laughing but soon stopped. As often happens with inveterate smokers, his laughter was cut short with a bout of coughing. Once he stopped coughing, Miller wiped the tears that had appeared in his eyes with index fingers of both hands and said, “No, they wouldn’t make good witnesses. The only thing Melinda Hamilton can probably testify to is that she saw Abraham Lincoln alive. If she remembers it, that is. And the guy barely remembers what happened two days ago.”

Alex kept silent. He knew Miller wasn’t lying. But he still felt like he had been duped.

“I don’t understand.”

“What is it that you don’t understand?” Miller licked the finger that was covered in whipped cream and wiped it with a napkin.

“But how about. . . I thought. . . You are so experienced and so. . .”

“Brilliant? Amazing? The investigator who has solved many cases in the course of his long career? Yes, that’s all me,” Miller stopped smiling and gave Alex a tired look. “But that’s all in the past. Today’s state of affairs is as follows: you are an inexperienced noob. And I’m an old alcoholic who only has a month to go before retirement. This is precisely why we were given the most stupid case

ever that, in reality, should be investigated by the police.”

“Then why did the FBI get involved?”

Miller sighed and pushed back the empty plate.

“This was because of the guy. He’s special.”

The agents returned to the office. They went back to the office. Miller gave Alex his chair and stood in front of the window. He took out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Smoking in the office was prohibited but Miller didn’t care.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Alex. You must have thought we would call in a SWAT team and go arrest Don Vincenzo, the head of the wise guys.”

He kept silent for a while, waiting for Alex to react. But his partner felt so confused that he didn’t say a word. Miller continued, “OK, let’s go back to our whackos. You are wrong not to take this case seriously. Do you know how many people disappear each year in this beautiful country of ours?”

“I don’t know,” Alex growled. “Five thousand or something like that.”

Miller gave a gloomy chuckle, “According to the official data of our organization, each year over a million people goes missing in the United States.”

Alex raised his head, “How many?!”

“You heard right. And you say five thousand. Besides, recently this sad statistic keeps growing. For instance, twenty years ago, less than one hundred and fifty thousand people went missing.”

Alex was stunned by the number, "A million?! And they all disappeared without a trace?"

"Of course not," Miller lit up and opened the window. "The good news is that about sixty-five per cent of missing persons are found within a week of their disappearance. For the most part, these are people who forgot to inform their relatives and friends about going away on vacation or a business trip.

"How do you mean?"

"Let's say a guy gets a great last-minute deal on a vacation package, leaves for a resort, and people who know him start looking for him at home."

Miller released a cloud of smoke and coughed.

"You smoke a lot," Alex said carefully.

"Listen, kiddo, after my wife left me and my mother-in-law died, nothing good is happening in my life. Do you want to deprive me of the last thing that brings me joy?"

He spit out of the window and continued, "There is any number of this kid of disappearances: people who decide to change their lives, victims of abuse, children mostly. People who suffer from mental disorders, amnesiacs. Lonely people."

Alex was now confused, "So how many people actually disappear without a trace?"

"About fifteen per cent of missing persons in the US are never found. That's about one hundred thousand people per year. Their fate remains a mystery not only for their relatives and friends but also for special services like ours."

"But how does it happen? What about witnesses? There are always people who have seen or heard something."

Alex never encountered anything supernatural in his life, which was why he couldn't conceal his skepticism.

"Not always," Miller objected.

"A person can't just disappear in broad daylight, though."

"Would you like me to give you a few examples? Be my guest. Ethan Killbane from Nebraska went to pick his sixteen-year-old son Stephen at school in his car. On their way home, they stopped at a convenience store. Stephen went in to buy a cup of coffee while Ethan waited for him in a car. After waiting for twenty minutes, he went looking for his son.

"And?"

"And nothing," Miller shrugged his shoulders. "No traces of the kid and no witnesses. Since then, Ethan Killbane has been looking for his beloved child. It's been over twenty years. He still haven't been able to figure out how his son could have disappeared. He bought his coffee, left the store, and disappeared into thin air."

Alex tried imagining how Ethan Killbane had to be feeling. For two decades, the father had been trying to understand what could have happened to his son. One could lose one's mind after something like that.

"Is that an isolated case? I'm talking about *mysterious* disappearances."

"No, Alex. Unfortunately, it isn't. The relatives of missing persons say that many people - both children and adults - disappear in strange circumstances."

Miller chewed on his cigarette, staring at the ceiling with unseeing eyes, and continued, "An eleven-year-old girl disappeared in Los Angeles while her mother was loading the stuff she bought at a supermarket into the trunk of her car. The woman let the girl out of her sight for a few seconds but she couldn't find her in an empty parking lot."

Alex felt his skin begin to crawl.

"In San Francisco, Evan Jacoby walked into the high-rise building where he was renting his apartment . . . and disappeared. The surveillance camera at the entrance to the building showed that the man never left. But he wasn't found at home either. The police officers searched every inch of the building but couldn't find a trace of Jacoby. Nobody knows what happened to him. His relatives have been searching for him for over six years."

Miller put out his cigarette in an empty pack and looked into Alex's eyes, "In Ohio, ten minutes before midnight on New Year's eve, Gregory Ackroyd, a father and a husband, went out to a nearby store to buy a bottle of champagne. He promised his wife and children who were gathered round the table, ready to celebrate, that he was coming back sic and a half minutes later.

“And?” Alex already knew what he was going to hear.

“As of now, Ackroyd is fourteen years late,” Miller joked grimly. “And there are thousands of similar cases. People disappear in the streets, in restaurants, stores, movie theaters, their own cars, at work and at luxurious resorts.”

This sounded very mysterious but it was all true. Which was what made it even more terrifying.

“But people have theories of what happened?”

“Unless we take into account stories about little green men and time travel. . .” Miller crossed his arms on his chest. “More often than not, these disappearances have to do with the international slave trade and the black market of human organs. This is one of the most profitable industries in the world. Many of the missing persons are victims of organ harvesting.”

Alex remembered how a few years ago he was at the hospital having his appendix removed. What if somebody had knocked him out and cut him up for organs? Who’d have known that a crime had been committed? They would have concocted a believable story for his grandmother. Something about his heart stopping during the operation. And after that, they would have given to their clients his body parts in frozen jars.

This possibility made Alex wince.

“But hospitals keep records. Besides, somebody is bound to notice sooner or later that people are being . . . taken apart in a hospital.”

"Not necessarily," Miller shook his head. "Taking into consideration today's developments in medical technologies, a successful organ transplant does not have to be conducted in a hospital. The most important thing is to find a jerk of a doctor who will agree to kill a person in order to save somebody else. Criminologists estimate that eighty-five per cent of people who have gone missing in the last seven years and who haven't been found had perfect health."

Alex thought for a moment.

"Out of our two missing persons, at least one is retirement age. What kind of organ donor would she make?"

"Right you are," Miller nodded. "The old lady's organs can be of interest only to archaeologists. Now let's go back to what really matters. As I said, there is a *special* missing person in this case. Aside from the old lady, a boy with the Down's syndrome disappeared from the mental health clinic. His name is Robert."

"That's sad," Alex said. "But why is the FBI handling his disappearance?"

"He's the son of a senator."

"Which senator?"

Miller told him the name. Alex gasped.

"Exactly. God forbid the media get a whiff of this. We'll be flayed alive. That's nothing to you because you'll grow yourself a new layer of skin. I'm an old dog, though. My wounds don't heal any

longer. They'll find a pretext to throw me out without my pension."

Miller kept silent for a while. Then he took the binder №999 out of the safe and placed it in front of Alex. He looked at the cover and noticed that, upside down, the file number read as 666 and acquired a completely different, sinister meaning.

"Read it here," Miller swore silently and tried to forget this unpleasant coincidence that he'd never noticed before. "We are not allowed to take paperwork out of the building."

He looked at the three sixes once again and smoothed his thinning hair with a puzzled look.

In the photo, Alex saw an overweight guy in a white sweater decorated with a picture of Christmas reindeer. Robert McCanley. His age was difficult to determine. If the photo didn't have the words *23 years old* written under it, he wouldn't be able to guess.

Short arms, a thick neck, a flat face with an opened mouth. Small eyes with a pronounced squint looked serious and offered a visible contrast with the childish expression on his face. Who could have wanted to kidnap this inoffensive sick boy?

Alex leafed through the binder. Pages that bore official stamps alternated with pages filled with careless handwriting that probably belonged to Miller.

"Slave trade, transplants. . ."

"There are also serial killers on the loose," Miller added.

The abundance of possibilities made Alex's head swim.

"Sir!" he jumped up. "How will we be able to work all of these directions between *just the two of us?!?*"

"Scared?" Miller offered him a good-natured smile. He reached into the drawer of his desk and took out a new pack of cigarettes.

"No, sir, only. . ."

"Call me Henry."

"OK. . . Henry. There is enough work here for an entire division!"

"Don't worry," Miller slapped his shoulder. "There are other people on it. Besides, I believe that sooner or later they will be back on their own."

"So in your opinion, they just went out for a walk, got lost, and will soon come back?"

"I don't have an opinion," Miller snapped, suddenly turning serious. "We have our assignment and we have to operate based on facts. And as of now, we have no facts."

He looked at his watch.

"Tomorrow morning we'll go to that clinic. And now you can go home and have a good night's sleep. For the next twenty years, you will not get a chance to do that."

"Do you have any other useful advice?"

"This is the most useful one. And I have words of encouragement."

"What are they?"

"May the Force be with you, young Luke Skywalker!"

In the subway car, Alex kept remembering Henry Miller's stories about mysterious disappearances of people that reminded him of *The X-Files*. There was just one difference. Everything Henry had told him was true. It seemed like great changes awaited him, not only in the way he lived but also in his way of thinking.

Somebody softly touched him on his shoulder. Alex turned around. The young woman-painter he had met that morning was standing in front of him.

"Hi."

"Hi. . ."

Alex felt a little confused. It wasn't every day that such beautiful women approached him.

"Are you going home?"

He nodded.

"I can see you are very talkative," the young woman observed.

Alex felt his neck and cheeks blushing.

"I just. . ."

"I liked you when I first saw you this morning."

The girl gave him his hand, "Nicole. You can call me Nika."

"Alexander," he gently shook her long cool fingers. "You can call me Alex."

"Maybe we'll go out one day?"

"Why? Or, I mean, where?"

She threw her head back and give a quite laugh. In the penumbra of the car, her eyes sparkled like two blue topaz stones.

“You are funny.”

The girl took a notebook out of her handbag. She wrote something rapidly, tore out a page, and gave it to Alex.

“This is my phone number. OK, this is my stop. Bye, Alex.”

“Bye.”

When the young woman was about to leave the car, Alex shouted after her, “Thanks for the portrait.”

She probably didn’t hear him. Alex looked at her walking down the platform. She had a light tread, and ideal posture, slim legs, a narrow waist, and small breasts. A gentle flower that concealed a considerable strength. He wondered whether she was a gymnast or a dancer.

He put the piece of paper with her phone number in the back pocket of his trousers.

A half an hour later, Alex reached his neighborhood. He went into a grocery store to buy a loaf of bread. Once inside, something prompted him to look out of the window. On the opposite side of the street, he saw Vika. She looked very sexy in the mini-skirt that showed her long legs and in her tight jacket. She must have dressed this way for their date later tonight. He smiled. Maybe she wasn’t all that bad. A second later, the smile faded off Alex’s face. An older man with a mustache came up to Vika

from behind, grabbed her by the thighs, and pressed himself against her butt in an insolent way. Alex clenched his fists intending to teach the jerk a lesson. It turned out, however, that Vika had no objections to make against the man grabbing her butt in this way. She turned around to face the man and kissed him on the lips.

Alex helplessly leaned against the cold glass of the store window. His heart was slamming against his ribcage. The blood rushed to his face and pounded in his temples. Liar. . . Bitch. . . Whore. . .

He dialed her number, afraid of changing his mind if he didn't do it immediately.

"Hello?"

"Vika?"

"Oh, hi, sweetie."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at a hairdresser's with a girlfriend. What's with your voice?"

In the meanwhile, the mustachioed "girlfriend" was caressing Vika's ass which she arched like a cat. If Alex didn't see this with his own eyes, he would have believed Vika because her voice was very convincing.

"Nothing," Alex said hoarsely.

A mist of rage shrouded his field of vision. He was fighting an uncontrollable desire to go outside and knock the Mustache out with a direct blow to his jaw. And then do the same to Vika.

It took Alex everything he had not to do that.

"Vika, I don't want to see you anymore."

"Why?" Vika was so surprised that she pushed her insistent admirer aside. "You are still angry about yesterday?"

"No, I'm angry about today."

"I don't get it. . . What do you mean?"

He knew this tone of voice. Now she was going to go on the offensive. She'll turn things upside down and make him feel guilty. This happened many times before. But not today.

"Don't call me again," he breathed out. "Ever."

Chapter 6

Crazy

On the next morning, Alex was standing on the platform and looking around. He couldn't see Nicole anywhere. For the hundredth time, he checked his pockets. The piece of paper with her phone number wasn't there. Alex felt angry with himself. *Idiot! I should have entered her number into my cell phone as soon as I got it!*

A train approached. The girl never showed up.

When Alex got to the office, though, all thoughts of Nicole immediately evaporated. Miller didn't even let him sit down.

"Let's go."

They kept silent in the car and listened to a jazz station that Miller had turned on. The blues, the swing, the funk. Alex imagined Louis Armstrong's

cheeks as he was blowing into his trumpet and black orchestras on the steamboats travelling on the Mississippi. Alex liked some of the pieces but he was happy to hear Miller finally say, "This is it."

The mental health clinic didn't look as sinister as Alex had imagined it on the way there. If anything, it looked like an expensive hotel. It was a new beautiful three-story building with columns and turrets. Bushes in front of the entrance had been trimmed to look like animals. There was a lake with a stone bridge and lawns with roses. No bars, stone fences, or armed security guards.

"I'd give it four stars," Miller murmured, guessing what his young partner had to be thinking.

Inside, a nurse made them sign a logbook and then called a security guard. This annoyed Alex a little. He expected his FBI badge to be enough to gain him admittance to the clinic. Of course, after *this kind* of client had disappeared, the clinic's personnel probably wasn't above using any security measure at its disposal.

As they waited for the head physician, Alex looked around the luxurious high-ceilinged lobby. The polished parquet floors shone like a mirror, paintings of cold seascapes decorated the walls among garlands made of pumpkins, and an enormous mantelpiece was surrounded by leather arm-chairs and couches. The walls were lined with oak bookshelves filled with orderly rows of books. A little to the side, there stood a baby grand piano with its lid open. Classical music was coming out of

amplifiers that were hidden from view. One could have thought that an invisible man was playing the piano.

"Nice place," Alex said. "Would you mind ending up in a place like this when you get old?"

"Where?" Miller became grim. "In this museum of wax figures?"

Only then did Alex notice several small bent silhouettes that looked almost invisible in the deep arm-armchairs. The figures had their heads on their chests and were not moving. There was also no sign that they were still breathing. It looked like these old people were in hiding, afraid of reminding Death with a careless gesture that they were still alive.

There was some movement there, though. An old man accompanied by a Filipino nurse was slowly walking down the hallway. He was barely managing to shuffle his feet as he held on to his walker. An absent smile of an idiot who'd left his use of reason behind the walls of this institution played on his lips. One could see that he was wearing a diaper under his pants. And it looked like the diaper was overflowing.

Miller's cheek twitched, "You want me to live my last days in this Panopticum? I'd rather just be shot to death in South Chicago."

For a moment, Alex managed to see the situation through Miller's eyes: artificial flowers, artificial music, artificially maintained life. Harry, who was terrified by the proximity of retirement, wasn't

joking about the alternative.

The head physician of the clinic turned out to be a woman of about fifty. She had a strict face, short gray hair, almost no makeup, and a haughtily upturned chin.

"Hello," Alex said.

The woman confined herself to a barely noticeable nod.

"Your colleagues from the police have already conducted interrogations. Twice."

"We are not with the police," Miller showed him his ID and his badge. "Agent Henry Miller, agent Alex Smirnov, the FBI. And you are Simone Parkinson, if I'm not mistaken? Can we speak confidentially?"

Simone's facial expression did not change. She led the agents to her office. There she sat behind her desk and clasped her slender fingers.

"What exactly would you like to know?"

Miller decided to start from the beginning, "Dr. Parkinson, what does your clinic do?"

"We specialize in providing psychiatric care. We are also offering unique methods of treating patients who present with symptoms due to brain injuries or nervous and psychiatric disorders."

Miller nodded, "So you are treating psychos?"

"I beg your pardon!" the woman exclaimed in indignation that looked overdone to Alex. "This is not a loony bin."

Miller raised his palms, "I know, I was wrong to say that. Do you take good care of the patients?"

"We provide top-notch care to our patients: we change them, wash them, feed them, and take them to their treatment."

"Big staff?"

"About a hundred people: nurses, work therapy specialists, nutritionists, therapists, and clinical psychiatrists. They have all been checked out."

"Checked out for what?" Miller wondered.

Alex kept silent, letting his more experienced partner conduct the conversation.

"For the degree of their professionalism," an edge crept into her voice. "I also want to let you know that nobody on our staff ever had any drug-related problems, nobody has ever been arrested."

"And the doctors. . ."

"Our doctors have been educated in the most prestigious medical schools."

"Great. Absolutely fantastic! Then how could two patients disappear from your hospital if everybody is so professional?"

Simone bit on her lip. There was nothing she could say.

"Never mind. If you don't object, we will question the staff that is on duty today."

"Do you want me to ask them to come by my office?"

"No, thanks, we will take a walk around the facility."

Miller groaned as he got out of his deep arm-chair. Alex, who hadn't uttered a word during the

conversation, also got up, grabbed a business card from the table, and went outside into the hallway.

"I'll go to the second floor and you take the third," Miller said. "Let's chat with the nurses. Although I'm not sure it will produce any results. . ."

Alex aimed the pen at his notebook.

"Tell me, have you seen anything suspicious in the past few days?"

The old man chewed on his lips, knit his brows, and asked, "And who the hell are you?"

Alex squinted at the orderly who shrugged his shoulders while concealing a smile. Alex turned back to the patient. The old man used to live next door to the young man who's been missing.

"I'm a special agent with the FBI. Do you remember Robert McCanley?"

"Sure I do! He's one lousy actor."

The old man fell silent. Alex waited for a few seconds and asked him again, "So do you recall him?"

"And who the hell are you?"

The second old man with teary eyes and shaking hands decided that Alex was his son and asked him in an angry voice when he was going to take him home and away from this old folks' place filled with stinky old farts.

"Tell me, where is McCanley's other neighbor?" Alex asked the orderly.

"It was a woman."

"OK, where is this woman?"

"In heaven."

Alex gave him a wary look.

"What happened to her?"

"Smoking killed her."

"Cancer?"

"No. Her oxygen tanks exploded when she went to the backyard for a smoke in her wheelchair. Boom! And the old lady is gone."

Miller turned out to be right. The interrogation gave them nothing new. The rest of the patients had as little control of their faculties. The members of the staff listened to Alex attentively, smiled politely, and shrugged, "We've done nothing, seen nothing, know nothing." It was all useless.

Alex walked down the empty hallway and approached the elevator. Before he could press the button, a swiftly moving man in his fifties jumped out from around the corner. He was short, about five and a half feet, round and very excited. Alex immediately noticed that the man held his right hand under his shirt. He could have been scratching his chest, or he could have. . . Alex took his hands out of the pockets of his trousers and prepared himself for anything unexpected that might occur.

The chubby man approached Alex on his short legs, peered closely into his face, and asked, exhaling his breath that reeked of medication into Alex's face, "Are you with the FBI?"

Alex's pulse quickened and he took a step back. But the man immediately shortened the distance

between them. He still kept his hand under his shirt.

"I heard you introduce yourself to the nurse, agent Alex," the chubby man said. His eyes rotated in their sockets in a crazy way. "Are you looking for the guy who disappeared?"

Alex nodded and considered the ways he could stop the persistent patient in case he started behaving obnoxiously. It was both embarrassing and scary to be dealing with a mentally unstable person.

"Mr. Fuller knows who kidnapped him," the man announced, casting a glance around. He didn't have a slightest suspicion that the only thing it would take for him to be knocked out by Alex was one careless movement. "Just a couple weeks ago I was staying at another clinic and the same thing happened there. The *Magician* went missing. But I know who did it! *Demons* kidnapped him! And now they are looking for me."

With lightning speed motion, he took out his hand from under the shirt. Alex flinched, intending to immobilize him with an arm-lock. Before he could do that, however, he drew a breath. The man wasn't holding a knife. Instead, he was clutching sheets of paper that he must have torn out of a magazine.

"Hide them," the sick man thrust the sheets into Alex's hand and tried helping him to conceal them under his jacket.

Alex had no experience dealing with mentally disturbed people. And he wasn't sure he was willing to acquire such experience. How is one supposed to act in such a situation? Probably one should speak as if nothing out of the ordinary is taking place.

"OK. And who sends these demons?"

The chubby man stood on tiptoes and brought his lips close to Alex's ear as if planning to kiss him. Instead, he whispered, "The children."

Alex drew back.

"Whose children?"

"SATAN'S CHILDREN!"

Alex took another step back. His skin crawled. All he hoped for was that insanity would not turn out to be contagious.

The chubby man nodded and whispered, "It's true! Nobody has seen *THEM* but Mr. Fuller has."

"Who is this Mr. Fuller?"

"Me," the sick man's face contorted with annoyance. "Stop interrupting and just listen. They kidnapped the Magician and now they are after me."

"Why?"

"Fuller knows the mystery. The Magician told him."

"Which mystery?"

"If you find out, the *Satan's Children* will be after you."

"Then I will be able to place them under arrest."

Fuller laughed out loud but his laugh was bitter.

"How can you arrest somebody who isn't there?"

Things were getting better by the moment. Now the man was saying no kidnapers existed. Or was this Fuller rapidly getting better?

"What do you want from me?"

Fuller gave his sleeve a hopeful tug.

"Hide me. Please. It's dangerous for me to be here. You have a witness protection program, don't you?"

"Witness to *what*?"

Fuller looked around. There was still nobody else in the hallway. Alex looked around, too, and thought that the sick man was about to yell, "Demons! I can see them!"

"I'll tell you my mystery."

"Maybe it will be easier to kill the demons?"

"Your weapons can't kill the demons."

"What about a silver bullet?"

"What the hell. . . You don't believe me, agent. I get it. What will make you change your mind? My lifeless body?"

"So how can they be destroyed?"

God, why was he still continuing this crazy conversation?

"With the help of the diary."

"Excuse me?"

"Mr. Fuller!" a nurse came running down the hallway. "Why did you leave the ward?"

Fuller's round eyes gave Alex a scared look, showing that the agent had to hide the *dangerous clue* as fast as possible. Alex didn't feel like

disappointing a crazy person. He placed the papers into an inside pocket of his jacket.

The nurse started walking more slowly. She gave Alex a tense smile. Then she asked in a strict tone, "What are you doing, Mr. Fuller? Your procedure is scheduled for within the hour."

"I'm sick and tired of your procedures," Fuller said indignantly. "In any case, I need fresh air!"

"You can't go outside alone. Let's return back to the ward. We'll give you a vitamin shot and in the evening we will go out for a walk."

"I don't want a shot," the short man whined.

"Let's go," the nurse took the patient by the elbow in a gentle but insistent way and led him away. The sick man turned around and placed his finger against his lips, pleading with the agent to keep silent. Then he mouthed, "SATAN'S CHILDREN!".

Alex looked after them until they disappeared round the corner. Children? What kind of nonsense was it?

He took out one of the pages and read, "*The clothes should be modest. Women are to avoid short skirts and skin-tight pants. Long skirts and blouses as well as dresses are preferable. Pants are only to be worn in casual situations. . .*" Crazy. Fuller must have torn the pages out of a fashion magazine. What was it that this disturbed man saw when he was reading these pages? Killer children? Devils with horns who were peering into the windows of his ward?

Suddenly he felt like leaving the hospital as fast as possible. He couldn't even imagine what was going on in real mental clinics. The kind where violent lunatics, serial killers and the criminally insane were being held.

Alex couldn't have imagined how soon he was going to find out the answer to his question.

He took the elevator to the lobby and saw his elderly partner sitting in front of the fireplace, chatting with an old lady who looked about a hundred years old.

Miller stood up and addressed his interlocutor, "Ma'am, you are very charming. I'll come by to talk to you some more very soon."

They left the clinic and got into the car. Miller rubbed his temples in a tired gesture.

"You look bad," Alex said.

"I feel even worse," Henry gave Alex a look. "Why are you staring at me this way?"

"I'm waiting for you to say, 'I'm too old for this shit.'"

"Keep waiting, greenhorn. Besides, I'm nothing like Danny Glover and you are nothing like Mel Gibson."

"Have you heard anything of interest?"

"On the day Melinda Hamilton disappeared, a hundred bucks were stolen from the head nurse's handbag. She blames the Mexican who works in the kitchen and dates the assistant nurse."

"Fascinating. Is that all?"

"No. I also heard a new theory about of the Kennedy assassination. And if I'd stayed a bit longer, I would have learned who really killed President Lincoln. Everything's mixed up in the old lady's head. Ah, I also heard a joke. The medical commission is visiting a lunatic asylum. The head physician shows the members of the commission around the wards and introduces the patients. "This patient considers himself to be Duncan MacLeod from the clan of the Immortals. It's our most hopeless case. We've been treating him for over two hundred years"."

Miller gave Alex a serious look.

"A doctor told me this joke."

Alex chuckled, "One of the patients gave me a clue that will let us discover who the kidnappers are for sure."

He took out the crumpled pages and showed them to his partner. Miller cast an indifferent glance on the sheets of paper, "What's that?"

"The psycho who tore them out of a magazine is convinced they will help us find the missing people."

"What a great result for an interrogation: a joke and a revelation from a crazy person. Throw this garbage away."

Alex put the sheets back into his pocket. He was very meticulous.

"I'll dispose of them on my way back."

"This is all for today. Do you need a ride home?"

"If you don't mind."

The car started. Miller turned on the jazz once again. As if that weren't enough, he started accompanying the music with his out-of-tune singing. Alex decided that if they ever were to take *his* car, they'd listen to nothing but hip hop.

"But first I'll pop into a bookstore," Miller warned him, interrupting his moaning.

"Have you already finished the book you bought yesterday? Was it good?"

"I don't read them," Miller said. "I just collect them."

"Why?"

"When I retire, I'll move to Miami and read them all," Miller muttered, looking at the road. "I'll sit on the balcony, pour myself a cognac, put a book in my lap, and enjoy the sunset. For now, I have no time for reading."

"So it's like a tradition with you?"

"Yeah," Miller nodded. "In the past year, I've been buying a new book each week."

A minute later, the old man stopped the car in front of a McDonald's. Alex looked out of the window and threw the "clues" into the garbage bin.

He failed to notice that one of the pages remained in his jacket. The crumpled page sticking out of his pocket left only two words visible: *CHILDREN OF GOD*.

To Be Continued ...



Suneeti Phadke

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The Quest

“The water is yellow,” Danny, Maxine’s husband of two months, was brushing his teeth. “I think the pipes are rusty.”

“What about it?” Maxine emphasized the “it.”

“No, there is no it. And there is no toilet seat either.”

Maxine eyed the peeling paint in the upper corners of the room. Her eyes followed the wall to the dark fake-wood cupboard, and finally rested on the dull-grey carpet that covered the floor. She thought back to the frantic activities of the past couple of weeks. The visa, the packing, and the excitement of going to an exotic and almost sinister place. She had been thrilled about the trip. How many people get to go

to the Soviet Union? Danny had been invited to the 1990 Science Symposium in Leningrad, USSR. He was going to go to seminars and give workshops at the event. Maxine was going to see the Hermitage, the Summer Garden, the museums, and oh so everything that city had to offer.

They had arrived in Leningrad very early that May morning. A student from the university had met them at the airport and driven them to their hotel. "It is Academic Hotel. You first foreigners permitted to stay there. You have best room in hotel. It has refrigerator!" The young man helped them register, said a polite goodbye, and was gone.

Danny came out of the bathroom.

"You know the first thing we have to do is go shopping," Maxine told him.

"Shopping? For what?"

"For it."

"This isn't the decadent West, you know. We can't just go to a store and buy it. And remember, we can't afford to buy anything with our credit card," Danny reminded her.

"Danny, you said we could use the credit card in an emergency. I think we definitely have an emergency."

"Well the Soviet rate of exchange is six dollars for one rouble. And we can only use the credit card in the hard currency stores where the prices are super high. They call hard currency *valuta* for some reason," Danny explained. "But don't worry. We

will hunt and gather for whatever we need. You know, like early man in the state of nature. When in Rome and all that!"

"Danny, you should have just let me bring more of it. I knew such things would be difficult to find. I should never have listened to you. Luckily, I brought one roll for emergencies."

"One roll? Well that's something. But Maxie, one roll isn't going to last you, let alone us, the entire month." Marriage had opened up whole new vistas for Danny. "You seem to go through an entire forest of toilet paper in a week."

Maxine rolled her eyes.

"Well I have a plan. We're going to ration it. We will each be allowed five sheets per day," Danny told her.

"Five sheets! I need way more than five sheets."

"Well you can't have more. And to ensure that we each comply, we will leave the toilet paper roll outside the bathroom door. Each morning, we will take our five sheets, and we can't take anymore. That way, the roll will last the entire month." Danny smiled broadly, pleased with his plan.

For the next several days, their scheme worked. Every morning, one of them counted off five sheets of paper for each of them. The other watched carefully to make sure that the sheets had been correctly rationed. By the end of the fourth day, Maxine eyed the toilet roll. It sat innocently on a small stool outside the bathroom door. It was no

longer plump and thick and cushy. It had shrunk. Maxine picked it up and caressed it. Her fingers felt the paper carton on the inside as she gently squeezed it. The roll, no longer in its infancy of baby fat, was clearly heading towards adulthood, its pillowy-figured fullness transforming into a tighter and firmer form. The plan was not going to be a success. She really needed more than five sheets a day. Who wouldn't?

"What are you doing?" Danny asked her accusingly.

"I just need to touch it. It will be gone soon,"

"You look very guilty. Did you take more than your fair share?"

"No, of course not. Don't be silly."

Danny eyed his wife suspiciously.

Maxine woke up. She looked at Danny sleeping soundly beside her. She walked to the bathroom and stopped by the stool where the toilet paper was kept. It would be easy to take a few extra pieces. Danny would never know. And women are different anatomically from men. They just need more paper. She stood gazing longingly at the paper.

The next morning Maxine almost confessed to Danny about her temptation. She remembered Wolfgang Borchert's story about wartime Germany. How the wife had woken up and discovered that her husband had eaten the last piece of bread. The break of trust in their long relationship.

“Danny, let’s see if we can find some TP today.”

Danny agreed, his primary reason for being in Leningrad forgotten. They got ready hurriedly and left the hotel. They walked past neglected aristocratic buildings, their days of glory being recalled only in a Tolstoyan novel. The morning sunshine lit up the yellow-gold painted apartment walls, splotchy in places where the colour had faded. Danny and Maxine peered into small cafeterias with grimy windows and empty counters as they strode by interminable lines of stoic customers. Every block or so, they found two or three people lined up in front of a closed store. What are they waiting for? “Screwdrivers,” the man with light blue eyes and moles on his cheek explained. If the store ever opened, he would buy the screwdrivers and trade them later for something he needed. Maxine and Danny’s eyes lit up. They waited patiently in line. Then, another line.

After several hours, they were the masters of queuing up. Their grand plan was simple. They prowled from street to street, over stone bridges that covered silent water canals. They strode past Petrine-baroque buildings with doors solidly shut and windows veiled, hiding the lives of tenants past and present. Danny and Maxine concentrated on their quest. Whenever they came upon a gathering (two was the minimum requirement), they would scurry over, get in queue, and chat with the customer in front of them to find out what the store was selling. Like greedy children, they oohed and

aahed and giggled conspiratorially as they added to their loot, eventually acquiring a bagful of usefully useless items.

At the end of the afternoon, they returned to the hotel room with their treasures. Danny emptied the knapsack on the bed. Six porcelain egg cups, a small box of screwdrivers, an intricately embroidered white-linen table cloth, a bunch of red, blue, and green wooden toy trains, and a small cast-iron frying pan. Maxine inspected the items. "You know Danny, we are going to have to take harsher measures," she stated.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Stealing!"

Danny's grey eyes stared at her.

Rain clouds formed a canopy under the evening sky as Danny and Maxine trudged to the German bar and restaurant, the Chaika, and entered into a virtual West Germany. Forks scraped the china plates and glasses clinked, and bits of conversation floated in the air. Ralph Lauren, Polo, Abercrombie and Fitch, and Chanel sat at long dark wooden tables, drinking beer in large blue steins and wine in crystal glasses and eating sausages and sauerkraut and caviar. Maxine and Danny found a table and glanced at the menu, the prices given in Deutsch mark and American dollars. A stereotypical blond, high-cheekboned waitress approached them. "You know, you pay in velouta."

Both nodded their heads. Their mouths moistened as they ordered the bratwurst, the chicken, and the green salad. Some time later, the waitress returned with loaded platters, and Maxine and Danny tucked in with relish. Their plates clean, they stared at each other guiltily. Maxine glided nonchalantly towards a darkish corridor and disappeared behind a door. Danny waited a couple of minutes, put some dollars on the table, and followed her into the narrow, dark corridor.

Maxine and Danny left the restaurant. The heavy rain was washing away the street grime. They stood in the doorway as Maxine fumbled with her umbrella. A tall couple, both wearing beige coats, the man holding an umbrella, walked quickly towards them and stopped by the window of the pub. The menu was posted on the wall between the window and the door. The young lady glanced furtively at Danny and Maxine, read the menu and muttered something to her friend, but the man shook his head and replied, "Valuta." He pulled her away from the restaurant menu. The couple vanished through the dark curtain of rain. Danny and Maxine looked at each other. They walked briskly down the sidewalk, their heads close together under the umbrella, Maxine's coat pockets bulging out, completely stuffed.