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Maria and Wormwood at the End of the Century

It is not enough to tell about those events. Therefore I am making an attempt to help you see them. Hence the style. Perhaps it should be called a “video-novel”.



1.

Roots. Thick, sinewy roots crossed the sandy country road. As though they felt cramped underground, and were straining for all they were worth to break through to the surface.

Mutilated by the caterpillars of tractors and the wheels of carts and lorries, hacked in spontaneous fury with axes and spades, and yet alive. Scarred and twisted, drops of tar showing on fresh wounds. The country road seemed paved with roots, it was usable in any weather.

Right next to one side of the road lay a cemetery. A broken wooden paling, crosses made of welded pipes or pine logs, graves surrounded by metal wiring, faded photographs, yellowed by rain and sun, cheap monuments. And among all this stood live bronze-colored pines, their roots twisted about little mounds. Silence, solitude, desolation...

A large motley cow was grazing among the graves, its horns pointing skywards like swords. It was nibbling the tufts of young wormwood, chornobyl¹, that was already turning green along the roadside, and particularly in the cemetery. The cow was snorting heavily and kept looking at one point.

A board was fixed to the trunk of an old pine, that had obviously been the side-wall of a lorry—you could still see the number—“86 KHE”. It had been hastily sharpened at one end, to form an arrow head and on it was written in red paint: “Village of Horodyshe”. It had never occurred to the mindless carpenter that it resembled a strange kind of cross made of the live pine and the dead grey board.

The cow continued to graze greedily and glancing up in the same direction. Whatever could be holding its attention?

Two middle-aged men were digging a grave, breathing heavily, heaving up wet sand, clean sand with a golden sheen. Their heads kept bobbing up and down. The spades screeched, the men snorted, up shot fountains of sand.

A young lad stood by the grave dressed in a quilted jacket, feet stuck in canvas boots, head bare. It was Fedir, youngest son of the deceased Ivan Myrovych. He was deaf-mute. From birth. The villagers were used to him. He was born in the village and had lived there with father and mother, now with his mother alone, his father having died two days before.

The grave-diggers knew he was deaf-mute and talked unrestrainedly:

“Standing there like black sin!”

“No hope of him bringing a bottle to wet our throats when we’ve done digging...”

“His father must have made him when he was drunk...”

¹ Chornobyl is another word for the plant called polyn or wormwood.

“Taking Maria for Nastia. And by the time he had hatched” and they realized he was deaf-mute” it was too late. Nothing you can do about him, he sees everything, and understands everything.”

Furiously they drove their axes into the roots that happened in their way and threw them aside. Fedir gathered them up with his long, sensitive fingers and stacked them into a pile.

“It’s not left much of Uncle Ivan, that cancer has. Skin and bone. I wonder what she’s wailing for, Auntie Maria should feel relieved. She’s had a tough time of it.”

“He’s lived his fill! Time he made room for the next. Not a bad life it’s been! Must have drunk up barrels of vodka...”

“And all for nothing. First after the war he was chairman, then team-leader. The moment he crossed a threshold of a village’s house, a bottle would hop on to the table. The worst skin-flint would dig up a bottle! The chairman” after all!”

“And the widows he’s laid! The more husbands were killed in the war the bolder he became. And nobody to thrash the life out of him for it. Have your fun as long as you’ve got the strength. Some life. And we? All we’ve got in the village now is married women and old hags. That’s what we’ve come to. When a decent skirt turns up the town whisks her off, for those atom chaps so they can have their fling while they can—they say their blood thins quickly, those who’re on the reactor... And we—we’re stuck with our one and only, as though we were the only live beings on the planet, like Adam and Eve. Well, this will do! Enough digging! The hole’s deep enough.”

“That’s right. Else we may strike an underground spring for all we know! The old man won’t rise up anyway. And then it’s only cancer, not the plague... and for the money they pay!”

2

A patch of field, surrounded on all sides by woods. Sand, sand all round, a bit of manure spread over it any old how. In the middle of the field a tractor with a trailer. Belarus, it’s called. Old and battered, the window panes smashed, the side windows boarded up.

A man of about forty, haggard and puny, was unloading it.

The tractor-driver was sitting in his cabin, demonstrating his contempt, smoking and doing a crossword puzzle in a dog-eared magazine.

“Mykola, what is the word for the feeling of two people who are in love? Eight letters, horizontally.”

Mykola Myrovych, one of the sons of the deceased, was pitch forking manure. Now he doffed his smart little cap and straightened his tie.

“Love, Arkhyp! Only love. Horizontally or vertically. Nothing else!”

He went on with his work. His modish shoes were splattered with liquid manure” the sweat came pouring down his face” he was panting, but wouldn’t stop. No time.

“Though you work an the reactor, Mykola, your arithmetic isn’t up to much. Love has four letters, and I need eight. Jealousy. Jea-lou-sy, precisely! You’re ignorant, Mykola, even if you do work on the reactor. We were at school together, we shared a desk, but it’s done you no good!”

“Give a hand, Arkhyp, I’ve still got to wash the trailer. We’ve holding up the funeral...”

“I’m not dressed for manure unloading,” and he looked at his clumsy rubber boots, splashed to the top. “I’m a tractor driver, and not a dung-beetle. Load the spade fuller, fling it harder, you intellectual, you. You should have asked at your atomic station for the car for your father’s funeral.”

“I was in a hurry. I’d hoped to find father still alive, to talk to him, to say goodbye.”

“What do you make on that fiendish thing of yours, Saint Mykola?”

“I’m not complaining...”

“I’m saving up for a Zhiguli car. Dark blue, like a raven’s wing. Your Liudmyla, she’s in the trade. Money’s like manure to them. Won’t she give you any? Tell her they’ll confiscate it anyway. Times have changed, it’s all strict now, the days of the prosecutor.”

“Don’t eat your heart out over my money. I’m not asking you for a loan.”

“What a funny bloke you are, Mykola, sort of sub-standard. You’ll never be normal standard, like everybody else. Leave your manure, let’s go down to the river, and you’ll wash your trailer. Almost time for me to go home and feed the pigs and the bullock. Another thousand and a half by autumn—and the blue Zhiguli’s in my garage. Honest money, Mykola, as pure as a tear...”

3

A shiny black Volga car, latest model thirty-one, drove up to the most respectable building in the district centre where the district Party committee and the district executive committee were situated. The number indicated its owner’s high rank.

Out of it a man extricated himself, slowly and laboriously, as though in parts: first the legs, then the head in a black beret “*A la Fidel*”. Finally, all of him. He straightened up. He was very tall, about two meters, wearing a black Austrian mackintosh. He was very thin and awkward. Old enough to render the habitual address “young man” ironical, and a little sad. In actual fact, he was fifty-five, but looked older. He was completely bald, his forehead crossed with parallel rows of wrinkles. When he talked to anybody he had to bend down to hear better.

Crossing the large square he directed his steps to the district Party committee. In any other district centre his arrival would have been an event, reported by the press. Here, however, in Ivanhorod, Oleksandr Myrovych was a frequent guest, it was his home town, and besides, his visit was unofficial.

He had designed a cheap and simple reactor, “safe as a still for making moonlight,” as he himself put it, and it had been used in a number of nuclear power stations throughout the country, needless to say, with some permissible emissions, more than ten years generating the cheapest electric power in the world.

Sensing a promising opening he got down to it with a group of young physicists. Nobody knew much about it, so that chances were equal, and being of a venturesome disposition he felt not the slightest doubt.

At the scientific council specialists’ opinions were divided concerning Myrovych’s type of reactor, but somebody suggested that it should be submitted for approval to the state commission headed by the Minister of Energy.

The opinion of the minister and the commission was that the given design was the cheapest—no gigantic subterranean pits had to be dug in anticipation of possible accidents, it could be installed wherever there was a river or a lake.

The mighty state machinery at once agreed to support the design. Its cost amounted to only half a billion rubles, including the necessary housing estate, the government was in urgent need of atomic electric power stations to satisfy the demands of the Warsaw Pact countries, somebody “very high up” praised it and proposed an award to the talented scientist. Myrovych received a State Prize, and his adversaries fell silent. If anybody still called Myrovych’s reactor amateurish, and this was passed on to him, he would say with a magnanimous smile: “Every stroke of genius appears at first glance simple and amateurish, just because it is a stroke of genius.”

“Yes, they did telephone from the regional committee. Glad to meet you. Please accept my condolences. Sad, very sad! You’ve lost your father and the district has lost another selfless veteran of the kolkhoz movement and of the war. Can we be of any help?” the First Secretary murmured obsequiously.

“Well, in actual fact I really do want to trouble you, eh-hm.”

“Andrii Tymofiiievych is the name.”

“...Andrii Tymofiiievych. The team is in Horodyshche, and I’m not acquainted with the Trylisie kolkhoz chairman. We need a coffin, and a lorry, and an orchestra, since my father did not believe in those clergymen. The new kolkhoz chairman may not know of my father’s merits, or my own, and you know what it’s like if one has to beg and explain.”

“The chairman will be at your place, on the dot. Just tell him straight what you need... He is stupid and lazy, he’ll never think of anything himself, and he forgets what he’s told. We ought to send him packing but there’s nobody to take his place. How do they imagine restructuring with people like him? If you have difficulties, just give me a ring.”

He walked with Myrovych as far as the car and asked:

“Was it your idea to build the reactor in our parts? They say it was you who insisted...”

“No, no. This is a government matter; it depends on a higher level of economic policy. Just a lucky coincidence, in the given case...”

The car gave a jerk and moved towards Horodyshche.

The secretary flung away his cigarette-butt, heaved a sigh, and straightened up. His face assumed a significant expression.

“The sowing campaign is round the corner, and here I am, wasting all day. Talking of restructuring!”

4

The only reason why the town had sprung up was that four atomic reactors gurgled wildly close by in their concrete straitjackets, each of which contributed millions of kilowatts to the country’s energy resources. Very cheaply at that. The reactors snorted peacefully in their concrete shells; no fume, no need for coal or oil. Clean, even beautiful in a way.

Summer suits the youthful town best, with doors and windows open, its whole territory flooded in greenery, the river invitingly close, woods offering berries and mushrooms. The other

day a local family changed flats with Leningrad, with no additional pay, losing only one room. Like a magnet the town draws young country folk from surrounding villages. The villages are depleted, some have become doomed. However every hour four million kilowatts of energy flow out of the town into the country's electric energy system. Not to be sneezed at.

Although summer is the town's glory, early spring, when April melts into May, is also lovely. The April sun has polished its streets and micro-districts, and the town looks languid with bliss.

Children are romping about in a yard playing hopscotch on the sun-warmed pavement that janitor Odarka has scrubbed clean. It was Stepan who had married her and brought her over when his first wife died leaving his son and daughter motherless. Thus Odarka became mother to Ruslan and Lida. In the small hours she cleans the yard.

There she is now sitting by the entrance door on a bench not yet painted over for May Day holiday.

She is beautiful in her own quiet, calm, inconspicuous way. You notice it only when you talk to her, listen to her answer, look closely at her eyes with their fluctuating shades of green, and dancing little sparks, observe the soft curve of her lips, her smooth brow, slightly damp with excitement.

At present she looks demure, as if she were feeling guilty towards those who leave or enter the house. She is not forty yet, but considers herself hopelessly middle-aged. She is neatly dressed after the contemporary fashion of country women: a grey dustcoat, a black shawl, plain boots of local make.

A little girl comes running up to her on her way from school, daughter of one of the people employed at the atomic station.

"Hallo, Aunt Odarka! I saw Uncle Stepan on Energy Avenue. Where they sell juice in plastic cups. And ice-cream with cherries. A police car drove up, blue and yellow, you know, barred windows, he got in there, they took him off somewhere..."

"You're mistaken, daughter, Uncle Stepan has gone to our neighbor's to fix a lock for him. I'm expecting him... You mistook somebody else for him. Somebody who looks like Uncle Stepan. Many people do."

The child shrugged her thin shoulders, looking confused, straightened her pinafore, and hopped off on one foot towards her home.

Odarka dried her eyes and lips with the corner of her black shawl, rose, called the children, picked up two heavy bags of provisions she had prepared for the funeral feast, and directed her steps to the bus terminus.

The people in the bus knew her, they greeted her, helped the children up, handed her the bags.

"Where's your daddy?" a young woman asked Ruslan.

"He's fixing the lock at the militia station, and then he'll come to Horodyshche to cover up the hole where they're putting Grandpa Ivan."

"They're putting him in a great big wooden box, not in a hole," Lida corrected her little brother. She started peeling an orange. Thoughtfully, like an adult, she whispered in Odarka's ear: "They'll cover his grave like they covered our first mummy's, wont they? Forever?"

5

Horodyshche.

A crowd of people had gathered on one of its streets outside an open gate. A bunch of old women stood whispering, shaking their heads sorrowfully. The men were sitting on the bench outside the gate, smoking or just enjoying the sun, having interrupted their work on their vegetable plots. Children were playing, yelling out loud.

A car spluttered with wet yellow sand rolled into the yard. The kolkhoz chairman got out. It took him a long time to extract the kolkhoz banner from the car, the joiners had made the pole far too long, they'd hardly managed to push it inside. He planted the banner by the gate and waddled off in the direction of the house.

"They're going to carry him outside, the boss has come," came a woman's voice. "High time, too..."

"It is. I thought I'd manage to fetch up the potatoes from the cellar, so the sun can warm them a bit before I plant them. Ah, well... Tomorrow will do. . ."

"You ought to stay to the end, Paraska, and pray for his sinful soul. You were like Maria to him, weren't you? A good long time, too."

"He never fancied you, though... I was widowed at nineteen, with a baby in arms. I'd waited for my Pavlo for four summers. Standing by the gate like carved in stone, gazing my eyes out. I'd have really turned to stone if not for Myrovych, he warmed me back to life, with his warm hands. I forgive him everything..."

"He hit me once, when I was team-leader. He was chairman at the time. We'd quarreled with him over payment for kolkhoz hemp. We wrote a complaint to the regional committee, our whole team. And they sent it back to him, telling him to settle the matter on the spot. Was he mad at us! Those were evil days, people would fly out at you, it was the war that had got them. Maria persuaded me not to make a fuss. I never really intended to... I'd forgiven..."

Oleksandr was stepping out of Myrovych's house, bending down so as not to knock his head against the lintel. His bald patch was gleaming in the sun.

The kolkhoz chairman waited for the "Academician" to descend from the porch, then rose on tiptoe to save him the trouble of stooping.

"I've settled two questions: the banner and the coffin. And I've found somebody to carry the banner—the present team leader, it'll look like continuity of generations. I have my speech written out for me, two pages of it... A schoolgirl is going to speak in the name of the young generation, she's top of her form... I'm afraid I couldn't manage to get an orchestra. Never mind, professor, I've got a tape recorder in my car, and a recording of the funeral march. I've taken the cassette. The driver will follow the procession and play it. So we won't be without music, and it's all one to the deceased, isn't it?"

"How many villages are you in charge of? Three?" Myrovych asked fastidiously wrinkling his nose.

"Four, professor. Four teams in different parts of the wood. Before the town existed the old man Pidkova was the main authority in the kolkhoz, all the villages were promising, but now it's

only Trylisie, the central farmstead. The towns sucking up the young like a vacuum cleaner... Every single day of my life I comb the woods, 500 kilometers at least, to see to it that there is order and restructuring. Who's there to do restructuring, I beg you? Old women who're ready for the grave? Perhaps you could help us get a couple of lorries through the regional committee and some building brick, and potatoes for planting—ours have developed some kind of pest.”

Myrovych thrust a hand into the pocket of his black mackintosh, produced a tablet and swallowed it. He suddenly sagged looking somehow smaller. Slowly he walked in the direction of the house. The chairman followed him with a bewildered look...

They're all the same when they come to us: give me this, give me that, but no one will stir a linger to help the kolkhoz, he thought.

Indoors the whole Myrovych family had gathered around the coffin in a semi-circle. Mother Maria in the centre. Small and slight, like a little black bird, exhausted with a lifetime of hard work, her enormous blue eyes as blue as they used to be, despite her years.

Next to her stood Oleksandr, stooping though the ceiling was high: he had got himself used to bending down whenever inside a building. From under his black coat shone the order of the Golden Star. Deep wrinkles cut across his brow like scars. Next to him stood his wife Olga, very small, smaller even than his mother, slim, still beautiful, with a lusterless complexion, probably carefully tended. Her head was covered with a simple peasant shawl that they had found for her in the mother's chest, but even this did not impair her beauty. Olga was heading a department in the Moscow experimental clinic for radiation disease, she had a number of research papers to her credit, but what she was really proud of was the fact that she had saved several lives when the case had seemed hopeless. The old man seemed to have been fond of her, she was his first daughter-in-law. At any rate, he had never interfered in her life. Remembering it, she felt sad. She did not weep but a wave of warmth suffused her body, and her eyes moistened. She dabbed them with a white scented handkerchief.

Mykola was standing next—emaciated, his face exhausted and tormented, his eyes red with sleeplessness. His hair had receded prematurely. His suit was crinkled, the tie twisted. His wife Liudmyla stood by his side. She was a saleswoman in the “Energetics” general store, dealing in goods that were in short supply and could only be bought in exchange for medicinal herbs. Not quite “only,” of course, and not necessarily for medicinal herbs...

Liudmyla straightened her black velvet dress about her hips, under her leather coat. She was bareheaded, instead of a shawl she had tied a black silk sash round her head that was very becoming. Inclining towards Mykola she whispered in his ear:

“Just look at yourself! You've ruined your Yugoslav shoes! And no dry-cleaners will accept your coat and trousers. People will think I don't look after you...”

Mykola was used to her constant reproaches and turned a deaf ear to them. Especially now. He stood looking at his father, reproaching himself for not having come the week before, to bid him goodbye; for having stayed instead to do a little extra job for the fishing state farm. God damn the money. Perhaps Father had something to say to him before parting from life?

Sobbing, and wiping her eyes with the edge of her shawl, Odarka was tying the laces of her father's boots, pulling up his socks, smoothing the trouser legs, as though it mattered to him. She wanted him to be comfortable in his coffin.

The youngest son, Hryhorii, was looking if not sad then distinctly serious, and stood wrapped in some private thoughts. As if observing himself from outside. At every movement his leather jacket with its numberless zip-fasteners crackled. The father used to love him the way one loves one's own youth. Passionately, as one can love it in one's old age. Hryhorii was a bachelor, and the father always stopped over at his place when he came to town. He would look up Mykola and Odarka, but it would always be Hryhorii for his height cap, and a midnight chat. It was all over now. Father was no more!

Deaf-mute Fedir was the last link in the semi-circle. He stood gazing at his father, his mother, his brothers, his sister Odarka. His lips were moving as though he were vainly trying to say something to all of them. And there was nothing he could occupy his hands with. He felt for a piece of root in his pocket that the grave-diggers had shoveled up from his father's grave, and fumbled with it with nervous fingers.

Maria was sitting on a chair at her husband's head, silent. She had cried herself dry.

"What was his last request, Mother?" Oleksandr asked.

"Death, only death. The burning pain in him was intolerable. He begged for death, and... and for a sniff of crushed young chornobyl..."

"Did he express any wish in parting?" Oleksandr asked again.

"He wished us to live. To respect one another. To keep to our clan, our families. He had had this ups and downs—you know it. He never protected his nest, and this accursed drink—it led him astray, folks talked all sorts of things about him, but it's in love of him that I begot each one of you. All that was in me has died with him. What is left is our family. Let us, then, forgive him everything, for we'll never have another father. This is what we talked about when his pain wearied and let off a little. Fedir! Pick some wormwood at the back of the house and put it in his coffin." She said this looking straight at Fedir, and he understood her by her eyes, and the movements of her lips. He nodded and left.

Roots had pushed up in the main street of the village. Tarpaulin boots, shiny men's shoes, heavy rubber boots, and fashionable ladies' shoes caught in the roots, or stepped across them. A spring rain in the morning had left rust-colored puddles in the sand. The wet sand, washed clean, crunched gratingly under feet and wheels, and dazzled the eye.

The funeral procession was passing along the road.

The team-leader who at the head of the column was carrying the banner kept looking down to avoid the blasted roots that had all but shaken the soul out of his team-leader's body in the course of long years of motorcycling along this very same road. He hardly ever walked, no wonder his feet caught at every root.

The trailer on which the coffin rested was followed by a flock of relatives. Then came the chairman's car, behind it came a crowd of running children and a white pup called Pushok. No tears, no lament. Clearly, the man had lived his fill, and suffered his fill.

Almost the whole of Horodyshe had turned out to bid Ivan a last farewell. Mainly the old folks. They had interrupted work on their vegetable plots and stood leaning on hoes, or rakes, or spades. The women were silent, eyes lowered, sniffing; those who had gathered in little crowds, curiously gazing at the Myrovych family, whispered among themselves.

They had managed to get two musicians only—a drummer, and a trumpeter. The others must have gone up the river in their motorboats with fishing nets. It was the spawning season...

“Ivan doesn’t need the music. He won’t hear. Must be listening to the angels singing.”

“Who knows, perhaps devils are prancing around him, wriggling their tails. He’s done plenty of sinning, he has. No telling where they’re going to place him.”

“Maybe he’s going to boss it there too?”

“D’you think they’re short of bosses?”

“Hush—don’t you see? Fedir...”

“He can’t hear. And if he does—he can’t tell on us.”

When the procession came up level with them they fell silent and followed with their eyes the coffin, and the group of relations, and then returned to their plots.

The trailer was approaching the next farmstead where two old grannies and an old man were standing by the gate.

“Good Lord! Oleksandr’s all bald...”

“Why should it surprise you? Radiation! He’s been working with radiation for years.”

“Look! Odarka’s widower ain’t here! Must have parted already.”

“Ah, but she’s going to live in town, here she’d have withered away an old maid. She’ll get half the widower’s flat through court, and I shouldn’t wonder if some retired chap from the atomic station hitched on to her yet.”

“Better be a spinster to the grave than take two children upon yourself. A step-mother, with no children of your own...”

“Hryhorii, he can’t settle down! Still sowing his wild oats. In the end he’ll find himself stranded with some painted horror...”

“Just like his father, can’t get enough fun. Look, the way he’s dressed up. You might think he’s on the spree, and not at a funeral.”

“And what about your own son when he comes from town?”

“Mykola looks all in. What did he need that reactor for? Could have stayed here as team-leader...”

“Nothing left of Ivan. That cancer... Skin and bone,” the old man finally managed to put in.

“Heaven forbid. If only one could simply go to sleep and never wake. That would be best.”

“Only a suicide chooses his death, Nastia.”

The chairman’s driver switched on the tape recorder full blast. Out flowed the funeral march, hoarse and blurred, performed by the village brass orchestra. The team-leader was carrying the banner, a black ribbon draped across it. The wind fluttered the cloth, and the fringe slashed him painfully in the face, making it difficult for him to mind his feet lest he should stumble, banner and all.

The slow mournful melody stopped abruptly, a click was heard, out came the voice of variety singer Alla Pugachova:

the lights are dimmed,
Once more I face the stage...

Oleksandr drew up and pulled in his bald head.

The team-leader looked round, his boot caught on a thick root and he just about managed to keep his balance by leaning on the flag staff.

Utterly flustered, shaking his fists at the driver, the chairman fell behind.

The driver was so confused that before he had collected his wits the whole first verse of the song had been sung.

The grave-diggers heard the popular song and one of them said to the other:

“Listen! The chairman’s coming!”

Quickly they emptied their bottle, flung it away among the graves, and hastened to devour their bread and sausage.

The chairman was fussing at the grave. Oleksandr had to double up to reach his ear and whisper something to him whereupon he thrust the paper he was holding in his pocket and approached the girl in the school uniform.

“The meeting is off. You don’t need to speak.”

One by one the children approached the open coffin to kiss Ivan’s darkened face for the last time. A wasp circled over it, each in succession tried to flip it off, but it always returned.

The grave-diggers were impatiently gripping their hammers.

The chairman motioned to the team-leader to lower the banner.

A white-and-brown cow came plodding up to Ivan’s coffin and stretched out its long smooth tongue towards the bunch of wormwood at the head of the deceased. The grave-diggers waved their hammers at it, and it retreated to the back of the cemetery.

Maria approached the coffin, slowly went down on her knees by her husband’s head, and silently, without a tear, she kissed him on the lips, on the forehead, on the hands from which the gauze had been lifted. She then re-arranged the wormwood at his brow, crushed some of it between her palms and put it on his chest. Then she rose holding on to the edge of the coffin. “I won’t be long, Ivan. Nothing to keep me here. We’ll soon meet...”

They started hammering in the nails. The hollow sounds reverberated in the wood and among the village houses. The balmy spring air seemed to lend them a kind of verve—as though builders were driving in rafters to erect a new house. The sounds receded into Horodyshe, floated into the wood, rippled across the surface of the river close by: so transformed that they now resembled the ticking of a clock, or perhaps a human heartbeat.

Maria’s whole being reacted to every sound, and she started at each hammer blow. Only Fedir heard nothing, but he saw—his look seemed to intercept every blow. His fingers squeezed his sister Odarka’s hand and his brother Hryhorii’s shoulder until they went blue with the strain.

6

The darkness was thickening and growing impenetrable when the visitors began to disperse. They had drunk, and eaten, and talked their fill.

According to local custom Maria gave each departing guest a meat pie with a burning candle stuck into it. The evening was very still, and the candles continued to burn in the open a long time. Singly, in twos, in little groups the flames dispersed in the dark village, moving into the unlit streets. Some flames went out quickly, others continued to burn, sheltered by coarse peasant palms. Flames and voices in the dark.

The driver of the district committee Volga was nervous. He lit a cigarette, switched on the engine, let it run a bit, turned on the light, then turned it off again. He still had to drive to Kyiv and take that lanky giant and his little chit to the airport.

The Myrovych family had remained alone in the house. They were sitting around the table by the wall where their father's coffin had stood a while ago. On the wall hung a family photograph and an old simple little icon—a primitive drawing of the Virgin with a plump child in her arms.

Oleksandr raised his glass.

“Once more, to our father.” His “Golden Star” clicked against the glass. “We are his children. I’m proud to wear his name which I have not disgraced, but made known throughout our country...”

Olga who sat next to him, secretly (so that the brothers and Odarka should not see) produced a thick packet of ten-ruble notes from her handbag and pushed it into her husband's hand. He placed the money in front of his mother.

“Use it as you think fit, Mother. I won't come on the ninth day, I'll be in Hungary then, but I'll certainly be here on the fortieth², and stay longer. Well, I'll be leaving...” He drained his glass, and following the tradition he had been reminded of by the village old men that night, he shook out the last drops on the floor. “You were going to say something, Olga, weren't you?”

Olga's eyes sought Mykola, and she addressed him straight:

“Mykola, I'm asking you once more, please come to Moscow in summer... To our clinic that deals with... modern diseases... We'll have you properly examined. Let me tell you, as a specialist, that I don't like your complexion. You may have to leave the reactor. Oleksandr will arrange it for you...”

“Olga, don't spread panic. My reactor is safer than a home brewing contraption.”

“I'm a doctor. I'm only concerned with medicine. Don't put it off. Come over and take Fedir along. Ill get him a Japanese hearing aid, but I'll show him to a specialist first.”

Oleksandr and Olga rose to go. They embraced and exchanged kisses with all members of the family. The others walked with them to the car. One more embrace, one more kiss in the dark, this time excluding Fedir who was standing a little way off.

The headlights brought out the roots on the road, the trunks of pine trees, the slumbering houses, the crosses in the cemetery...

Maria was calmly studying her children's faces. Very attentively. In front of her on the table stood a little plate with red caviar, the package of money notes, Oleksandr's shiny visiting card that indicated that he was Hero of Socialist Labor, Corresponding Member of the USSR Academy of Sciences, director of the Designing Institute of Atomic Energy, his address, his telephone.

The candle was burning down and Maria lit another and stuck it into a glass of wheat flour. Candlelight flickered across the faces of her children and over the family photographs.

The glass of wine filled, traditionally, for the deceased, stood at the head of the table.

Fedir's hands began to grope again for something to do, and his fingers resumed their fumbling with the piece of root from his father's grave.

² An Orthodox Church tradition of remembering the deceased.

“Odarka’s Stepan never came. D’you think he’s really at work?” Mykola asked, picking up his glass and emptying it at one go. Liudmyla followed the movement with a contemptuous look. Olesia pushed the plate of jellied meat closer to her father, cut him a slice of bread, and poured him a glass of lemonade.

“He’ll turn up all right when there’ll be a chance to have a drink. There’s a dry law in town,” Hryhorii cut in, but Fedir failed to catch the phrase and wrinkled his forehead, looking strained.

“Dry for some, wet for others. If you’re hard put to it just turn to me.” And Liudmyla gave him a meaningful wink with one eye, removing her black silk band. Her hair, scorched by chemistry, came tumbling down, and she at once lost her good looks.

Odarka entered and placed a jug of milk on the table, fresh from the cow.

“She’s somehow out of sorts, our Mavra, wouldn’t let me milk her. Drink, the children are asleep...”

“She was at the cemetery... she stood close to grandpa,” Taras, Mykola’s little boy, muttered either in his sleep, or on the verge of it. Everybody turned to him, but he gave a deep sigh and was asleep again, his arms about Lida and Ruslan.

“And now we’re going to talk life,” Maria uttered quietly and firmly, and straightened the candle flame with her fingers. “After father it’s my turn to go. But I want to talk about life, not about death. I don’t need anything from you, my children. I have all I need. I’ve even provided for my funeral, and saved up for it, so you shouldn’t have to worry. Fedir and I, we’ve got all we’ll ever want.”

She fell silent, looking at them, then turned her eyes on the candle flame.

The little white pup padded in quietly and crouched down by the threshold. Olesia threw him a bit of ham, but he merely sniffed at it, stretched out, putting his head on his paws, and gazed into the room.

“My clockwork is running out, I can feel it. I’ll leave you and join your father. As to Oleksandr, he stands firmly on the ground. He is my firstborn, and nature has been bountiful to him. For me he’s a slice cut off the loaf. It’s Mykola I’m leaving with a heavy heart. Don’t be angry with me, Liudmyla, but I’m afraid for him. You’ve got a home, and you’ve got children but there’s no peace in your family. It’s for money that he went to work at the atomic station, and for money that he goes out with the fishermen’s team at night, and almost got drowned once. Do you really need all this money?”

“I knew you’d put all the blame on me,” Liudmyla spoke nervously.

Mykola went even paler, his bald patch glistened with sweat. He took a cigarette and left the room, stepping over the little dog.

“See what he’s like, he won’t listen. Not only to me, but to you too. It’s always the same. Like talking to a dummy. I’d rather he snapped back, or even hit me. Or gave himself an occasional fling as his father used to.”

“Mykola can’t help being what he is... It was after the war, and I thought I’d remained all alone in the wide world, with fatherless Oleksandr. I’d been notified that Ivan was missing, somewhere in Austria. I’d reconciled myself to my fate, I took on a job, it was hard work, and I plodded on and on, dumbly, like a beast of burden, I’d drop down for a few hours, in dead sleep, and go back again. But he did return, my Ivan. In the spring of forty-five, when the wormwood was turning green. It was on that shore over there that I suddenly saw him. And I almost broke

down... Ivan, he was dressed in his green soldier's uniform, it didn't show, but my dress with red polka dots, I couldn't wash it off, the wormwood stains. What with my longing and the young wormwood—this is how our Mykola was conceived. He's the only child neither I nor his father have ever struck. Sometimes he'd get my goat when he was naughty, and I'd chase him with a whip, but when I saw his eyes—no fear in them, only guilt, my hand would drop. Once he threw a ball and broke old Granny Kalyna's window. I grabbed an axe, and thought I'd cut that ball to pieces, that would teach him. I swung it up and brought it down. But it bounced back! I don't know how I managed to jump aside. So the handle only grazed my forehead. See the scar? It's to remind me: learn to forgive, learn how to change anger into tenderness, it's a woman's weapon—to forgive."

"And what if I've nothing to forgive him for?"

"Well, you should know best, daughter... And you, Hryhorii, you will-o'-the-wisp, see you're married the moment the forty days of mourning are over! Father said so, too. Otherwise I don't want to know you. And I'll die with a heavy heart."

"But, Mother, I'm trying to..."

"It's twelve years since you returned from the army, and you're still trying, you're trying so hard that I'm ashamed to look people in the face. How many girls have you got into trouble, perhaps even ruined their lives..."

"What do you mean? Have you heard any complaints? All my brides got married. Not a single quarrel, no claims, they live and produce offspring in their separate little nests... They greet me in the street, they introduce me to their husbands."

"Shut up before I pull out your Gipsy hair, for all the girls you brought over to introduce to me, you windbag!"

"I'm through now, Mother, I'm different..."

"How many times have I heard it, you skirt chaser?"

Fedir started and gestured to his mother. Maria was the only one to pay attention, she understood him and gave a slight nod: good for you, Fedir, you've noticed the girl in the wood.

"So why isn't she with us now? Why didn't you bring her along? Are you afraid you'll drop her, too, and marry her off to somebody else?"

"No, Mother—not this time, I had my work cut out getting her, she was somebody else's girl. I didn't take her along because it isn't the right time. I did call her, but I'm glad she didn't come. We couldn't have talked so freely in her presence."

"Indeed we could, even more truthfully. About you, you giddy-head. She would hear from me more about you than you'll ever tell her yourself. You'd better be careful! If you do her wrong too there will be no place for you in my heart. And take care of Odarka. Hers isn't a simple fate, and she's got nobody in the world except you. She's not the sort of person to feel bitter about the world, nor will she ever ask for help. You must hold out your hand to her when you see she needs it. And talk to Fedir sometimes when I'm no more, forget that he can't hear you, just talk, and he'll respond. That's all. Share the money Oleksandr left me, take whatever each needs. Now let's all turn our thoughts towards your father for the last time, and then go and rest. You must go to town tomorrow."

The three of them were sitting on a bench outside Myrovych's gate.

One of them struck a match protecting the flame with the palm of his hand. They lit their cigarettes. The flame fell upon the face of Mykola who was sitting at the edge. Hryhorii bent towards the flame, inhaling avidly. Fedir sat between his two elder brothers, happy to sense their warmth. Hryhorii's leather jacket crackled, the zip fasteners on his pockets gleamed in the glow of the cigarettes. Fedir was kneading his bit of root peering into his brothers' faces to see whether they were talking. Mykola had thrown back his head leaning it against the boards of the garden wall and was gazing at the star-spangled night sky.

The village dogs were exchanging barks from various corners of Horodyshche, just to remind people of their dogs' existence and pass away the cool spring night. A cock broke the silence with his crowing. A cow heaved a sigh.

7

For Mykola, Odarka, Liudmyla, Olesia and the children sorrow did not outlast their journey to town. The hustle and bustle of daily life soon absorbed them with its petty worries and constant hurry and flurry. There was only one thing they remembered well: Saturday the twenty-sixth (what bliss! Two days off—the last days off before a succession of holidays!...) was the ninth day, traditional day of commemoration.

Old Myrovych's death had changed nothing in their way of life, their natures, the relations among the brothers and their sister. The most dramatic events, the greatest shocks do not always change anything in man's innermost self or his behavior, and this... Their father had lived his life, had fallen ill, had suffered... The grave-diggers had dug a grave, then wielded their hammers... The family had drunk to his memory... They'd talked... They would gather again on the ninth day. Their mother had a house, Fedir lived with her, they would visit her now and then... So father was no more, but then none lived forever. We'll all of us go some day, sooner or later, preferably later. But the world would stand.

The town was preparing for May holidays. Streamers and posters were touched up, housewives washed windows, beat out carpets, aired winter clothes before putting them away till autumn. Meat shops were crowded, holidays were approaching, which meant visitors. Some prepared to go out of town.

A new poster appeared above the entrance to the park: "Workers of the atomic station! By May First—one hundred million kilowatts in excess of the plan!" The film *Go and See* was widely advertised. A narcological department was opened at the town hospital where alcohol addicts were given compulsory treatment. In response to the working people's wish, a dry law was implemented in the town, and now the men would gather in little groups, collect the money "for petrol" and get a car to go to a neighboring place where the management were less categorical about things.

Cucumbers and tomatoes appeared on the market, as well as fresh fish, that you could only buy under the counter, since the spawning season was still on.

The town kept its ears cocked to events in the whole country. The central newspapers were sold out by the early hours of the morning, and the stalls stood idle, selling stamps to children and cigarettes to smokers. The papers wrote about outrageous disorder and corruption, this was

immediately referred to local authorities, those responsible for supplies of food and clothing. The local newspaper of the atomic station also timidly raised its voice and cautiously criticized the supply department: wouldn't order and justice be implemented in the distribution of goods?

The minister for energy was pensioned off, should have been long ago!

Life acquired a fresh taste, people were expecting pleasant surprises, changes for the better. And on top of it all—this succession of holidays: May First, Easter (of course, it was the old folks that celebrated Easter, but they'd prepare magnificent eats, and it wasn't a sin to visit them), Victory Day, then the tenth anniversary of the first block; it was no secret that awards would be bestowed on the station as a whole and on individual people...

Roman and Olesia were walking in the park above which loomed high in the air a vividly painted Ferris wheel. Every now and then they would stop to embrace and kiss ignoring the passers-by, then take a run holding hands, stop again to kiss, and walk on in close embrace.

They approached the hunchback with a goatee who was standing by the Ferris wheel. Roman offered him a cigarette, waved him aside, pointed at his soldier's pants, pushed a five-ruble note into the man's pocket, and whispered something to him with a conspiratorial wink. Olesia could make out only his last words:

"Two years ... desert ... like a film ... no harm in ... she waited."

It was only just midday—too early to start the wheel. But why not, if that demobilized soldier and his girl were so keen? What with the fiver—why not let them? It could count as a trial. With passengers.

They sat down in one of the seats. Olesia made a desperate effort to overcome her fear, it was the first time in her life she ventured to go up, but there was Roman by her side and this gave her courage.

"Freedom and love," Roman pronounced recklessly and waved to the hunchback "There goes! Love and freedom, damn it all!"

The whirligig slowly creaked into movement. Olesia stiffened with fear, screwed up her eyes and leaned her head against Roman's warm shoulder.

Higher and higher they rose, she could see the river and the distant green meadows beyond, the golden strip of river bank where two lonely old people were leisurely sitting in a dilapidated boat.

"Let the devil turn the wheel, as to me—heigh-ho, freedom and you!" Roman was yelling above the noise of the engine.

They had reached the highest point. Before them spread the lovely young town in its spring beauty: the atomic station on the river bank, the tall buildings, broad avenues, the stadium, the market place, the sun sparkling in the shiny windows, people in yards and in streets. It was beautiful indeed, and young, their own age. Olesia had never seen it from this height.

"This is life! Takes your breath away! Freedom! No officers, no commands, no... no need to write letters to you. All I want is close to hand, it's all mine! Come on, Life, pay up what you owe me!"

It seemed to Olesia that she could discern Horodyshche somewhere beyond the wood—the village where she used to spend her summers, where she always felt happy with granddad and granny, for she was their first grandchild, hence the best loved.

She was very frightened, she wouldn't look down but only into distance, towards the wood and green meadows, the villages on the outskirts of the town, the grey buildings of the atomic station with its four bubbling reactors at one of which her father worked.

Her head was going round. It seemed as though the Ferris wheel would stop any moment, and leave them suspended, her and Roman, at this dizzy height. But already they were hurtling downwards.

“Say you were longing for me, say it! Really and truly!”

“Can't you feel it?”

“I want more... I want all of you! Maddeningly! To the end! Haven't I deserved it, in two years of desert and snakes? Haven't I?”

The wheel moved quicker and quicker. Olesia glimpsed in rapid succession the river, the bank and the old couple on it, the distant meadows, the atomic station, the town square scattered with little bunches of human figures. All this whirled before her eyes, quicker and quicker, she clung frantically to the metal fittings of the straps from which the carriage was suspended. Her face was pale and horrified.

The hunchback had forgotten all about them, he had moved away and stood, his goatee quivering, talking to a woman with two shopping bags.

“Your parents are leaving for the country the day after tomorrow, they're taking Taras. And we'll remain alone... Love and freedom! Don't go with them, I implore you, don't! Haven't I deserved... desert... snakes...?”

Olesia heard him no longer, the world had melted into a motley giddy stream, into a circle broken into segments in which they rotated at a crazy pace: distant and nearby villages, the river, the bearded hunchback and the woman with her shopping bags, the reinforced concrete blocks of the station...

The wheel carried them madly on and on, as though it were not moving round its axis but precipitating them into an unknown sinister reality where everything was displaced, had moved away from its habitual order. It was like a cruel, daring diabolic venture, a devil trundling the wheel into the unknown with nobody to stop him because the hunchback whom Roman had bribed for five rubles, stood down below bellowing with laughter.

Olesia held Roman in rigid embrace, but it failed to give her confidence—his body had sagged, as if losing solidity, in fact, he seemed to cling to her, with silent docility. This was why she felt as if she were alone and forlorn, dashing through cold space between heaven and earth. She was losing consciousness. not all at once but in frightening intermittent little bouts.

“Daddy!” Da-add-dyy!” she cried out at last, and the cry that hurled itself at the town brought her back to consciousness.

Startled, the woman with the shopping bags motioned to the hunchback, he drew up, flung away his cigarette end and dashed to the control. But he could not at once stop the wheel, and rushed to the emergency switch. However, the wheel went on turning. Finally, the emergency brake screeched. The wheel stopped. The hunchback stood stroking his goatee.

Olesia and Roman remained in their seats. Motionless. Exhausted by this crazy senseless whirl, tired out as though they had lived through the hardest years in their lives.

Ivan Myrovych's death was an ordinary, unimportant happening in the life of the small, prospect-less village of Horodyshe. A man died, nothing to be done for it. We must live while we can, while death takes her scythe to the next village. Ivan was soon forgotten, for spring came early, they had to sow, and whitewash their homes before the forthcoming May holiday, and clean up the yards, and get ready to receive their guests from town.

So people were planting, and digging and putting up scarecrows against the wild birds that flocked about the village on the lookout for grain.

"If you count the scarecrows, Horodyshe's quite a village! Doubled its population, all in a few days!" the poultry woman Eva shouted addressing team-leader Kapshuk, the one who had carried the banner during the funeral. But he couldn't hear her, since one of the silencers on his motorcycle had burnt out and was emitting clouds of black smoke accompanied by loud noises. He drove towards the office of the team and summoned Pavlo.

Rolls of red cloth protruded from his side-car. May Day was round the corner and he hadn't spruced up his slogans according to requirements. He'd be reprimanded.

Pavlo, the one who had been digging Ivan's grave (he wasn't a grave-digger, really, he was a jack-of-all-trades in the team and would do any job assigned to him), was already there, waiting for him. His face looked crumpled and apathetic, a deep furrow along either side of his jaw made his mouth and everything he uttered seem bracketed in. The villagers were used to him and hardly noticed it. Leaning against the old pine that grew by the entrance to the office he stood gazing at a plywood board on which was written "Team News". To it was pinned an announcement written by hand on the back of a cinema poster:

"Total abstinence from alcoholic drinks proclaimed for the duration of the sowing period. Violators—fined 200 rubles. Council of team-leaders."

Pavlo scrutinized it as though he were searching for grammar mistakes, but needed effort since the rather uneven letters were fluttering before his eyes: the night before Myron and he had helped an old woman to spread manure on her vegetable plot, and she had thanked them so generously that Minor had had to funk work.

Kapshuk drove up on his motorcycle and extracted at random two red rolls.

"Give a hand, while there's no wind."

They fixed a red streamer above the entrance using large nails, "Restructuring Concerns Each and Everybody!"

While Kapshuk was looking for a suitable place for the next slogan Pavlo relaxed and drank a mug of tepid stale water from an enameled tub. He then walked towards the exit feeling the water bubble in his stomach.

"Let us Complete the Sowing on Time!"—this appeal they hung between the pine and the telegraph post having climbed on the seat of the motorcycle. They made it fast with wire, lest the wind should blow it away.

The team-leader crossed over to the other side of the road to admire his achievement. Then he returned to his motorcycle and wriggled into a comfortable position.

With a screech of the motor he rolled off along the sandy road that led on to the roots over which he drove shaking as in a fever. With one hand he was holding down the rolls in the side seat, and this made him jolt all the more violently.

9

The Board of Honor stood in the central square in a form of a semi-circle.

A bearded artist and a photographer hung with cameras were sprucing it up and changing the portraits in view of the approaching holiday. On the grass lay faded pictures that had been removed for good; of people who had not come up to somebody's expectations. There they lay looking at the passersby sadly and guiltily. They were superseded by others. All places were occupied except one, where you could read "Myrovych, Mykola Ivanovych, senior operator, Block No. 4".

"Couldn't you re-photograph it from the old portrait?" the artist asked sucking at his pipe.

"It had already been copied from the picture on his pass!"

"Is he giving himself airs, or does he really ignore honors?"

"I'm damned if I know! I went to his home twice today."

"They'll pull out my beard at the committee if I'm not through with this gallery by tonight."

"And my five rubles for Myrovych's portrait will go west! Couldn't you just touch it up properly and have done with it?"

"All very well for you to say. You press a button—and hey presto! But a painter's work—do you know how finicky it is? So it should have resemblance, and people should like him."

"Ah, but you get better pay. And I—five rubles here, three rubles there... bits and scraps. I was lucky today: I took a picture of Myrovych's wife—she promised me a pair of plimsolls for my son, she works at the general store. He's rather a wet rag, but she's a hell of a woman. My own wife, she isn't photogenic, but she likes me to take pictures of others, that's how money trickles in."

"Let's be done with this. I'll touch up your old Myrovych. I couldn't make him look any worse."

He seated himself on a ledge, put the old portrait on his knees and began touching up the eyebrows, the lips; then he reduced the bald patch, added a gallant twinkle to the eye, an air of optimistic drive, rounded the pointed collar of the shirt, in keeping with the latest fashion. As he looked intently into the face it seemed to him that Myrovych was bucking him up, as if saying, Don't spare paint, who doesn't want to look better than he actually does?

10

The frogs were croaking to distraction on the moist soil of the river bank. They seemed to have crawled ashore in unison to yell out to the world: We're through with winter! We've survived! We're ready to prolong our frog species in the face of all your DDT and herbicide and

stinking sewage that you keep pouring into our water! We live and let you live—why don't you do the same?

The Ferris wheel was rotating in the evening sky, above the trees of the park. Gaily colored skirts billowed in the wind, blond plaits fluttered, cigarettes flickered, laughter and squealing shook the air, exhilarated cries came from the seats that had reached the highest point remaining poised as if frozen to the spot before hurtling down again. Oh, the passions you could buy for fifty kopecks!

Boys and girls in jeans flailing their arms and curving their backs deftly whizzed by on rolling boards that had flooded all the towns of the world replacing bicycles, in front of the very noses of passers-by who drew up prepared for a painful collision, cursing them, shaking their fists at them, but what was the use? They'd materialize noiselessly like ghosts and vanish again swaying their lithe bodies.

On the door of the modern hotel hung the habitual notice "No vacant rooms". Arrivals would have been more surprised by the absence of this announcement. They would enter the hall all the same and patiently wait for the administrator.

Along the edge of the roof of the Sovremennik cinema glided electronic letters that read "Citizens of our town! Tomorrow, Saturday, April 26, cross-country run! All those fit and eager should meet at the fountain on Central Square. Everybody can win a prize. Wear anything! At 10:00 a.m.—Ready, steady, go!"

Loggias and balconies were hung with freshly washed baby clothes, men's shirts, women's summer dresses and pinafores drying in the early spring sun. They would be ready by the following morning, by Saturday.

Crowded hydrofoils shot down the river, illuminated, sending forth sounds of music. From balconies along the river banks people watched their reflection in the water.

In the spacious yard of the town hospital stood several first aid micro-ambulances in a row. Their number plates had been freshened up, the flaws acquired during winter painted over. They had passed technical inspection.

The atomic station glimmered behind the town, already adorned with festive illuminations that flared up and went off alternatively, and this pulsating light reached the streets and houses of the town. It seemed to reflect the breathing of the station calm and even, tracing an impeccable cardiogram. The station itself was invisible but a milky shine dimmed by distance flowed from it.

A green Volga stood outside a tall building with deep loggias and a signal panel connected with the flats. Near the car stood Puzach, director of the atomic station, the chief engineer, and their wives. They were dressed in fashionable sports suits, and were loud and boisterous. They were thrusting bags of provisions into the boot, as well as jackets, an enormous length of tarpaulin, skewers for barbeque. The wives looked so much alike that in the twilight even their husbands could easily mistake one for the other. It was obviously the engineer's wife who was responsible for such similarity—she had transformed her chestnut hair into tight little pearly curls that kept getting into her eyes.

Puzach was at the wheel, next to him sat Iurko who was still puffing and panting with all the running around. They were waiting for the wives to finish with the luggage and take their seats.

“Those ‘Kyiv-Energy’ people certainly came begging at the wrong moment. Help us out, we need two million! The way Borys used his eloquence! Had I known it was him I’d never have lifted the receiver! Honey dripping from his gold teeth, blast him. Well, what else could I do? He’s helped me out many a time... I didn’t want to get his back up...” the director spat through the open window.

“When we danced, you were looking on, now you can sing and we’ll do the listening. This is how my father-in-law would comment situations like this. You have a light touch, Osyp Kuzmych, it’ll all turn out beautiful, as in a film. Holoborodko is on duty. And Palyvoda. Dmytro likes to unfurl his tail, in the presence of strangers he’ll oppose the management, let off steam. But he knows what’s what. No worse than I do, or almost. He has a donkey’s disposition, but his noodle’s all right. Should the worst come to the worst they’ll resort to ‘emergency’.”

“I’d rather not. There’ll be talk... We’ll never hear the last of it...”

“The fourth reactor is like an innocent babe, it won’t even wake when it’s cooled,” and seeing that his wife had at last climbed into the car Iurko handed her his battered portfolio with the bottles.

“Are you ever going to stop talking shop? Or will you grind away at it even at my birthday party?” said the director’s wife in mock indignation.

“And where would you be without my station? Even on your birthday, indeed!” the director snapped back, pressing the starter and driving the car into the road. Soon enough it was swallowed up by a whole stream of cars and lost itself among them. A little ball of smoke remained hanging above the yard in the still air.

11

Liudmyla returned from work in a good mood, and not a bit tired, as though she had been picking mushrooms in the wood instead of standing behind the counter all day long. Small wonder! The day had brought her three achievements: she had enticed Vasyl Holoborodko with a “weekend package”. An inexplicable feeling... distant and pleasant had drawn her to him, besides, he was a person of importance, he could help her with the flat business, perhaps with a cooperative flat for Olesia. He was coming to see her the next day. Well, time would show. Secondly, she had her picture taken at the counter in different positions, with different lighting, in different garments, one in a fur-lined coat, another in a leather coat, another in a sports jacket, in a word, in everything that fitted her in her “herbs” department. Finally, Roman’s father and mother (they had been divorced some time now, each had a family of his own, and small children, so that Roman hardly mattered to his parents) had given him a hundred rubles each after his demobilization, and Liudmyla, as his future mother-in-law, had dolled him up... Now you’d never guess that but a few days ago Roman had stomped about his barrack in tarpaulin boots, saluting every time he met an officer. And all this in one single working day. Incredible. Ah, no, not quite so. She had met Vasyl the day before. Though it seemed as though it had happened on this very day (“Ah, Vasyl, Vasyl! At last. How old we’ve both grown. The girls will soon call you Uncle, nor am I what I used to be, especially in strong light...”). His fingers

had touched her hand when he took the “weekend parcel” from her. He’ll come again today, to bring the money...

The Myrovych flat was crammed with furniture placed helter-skelter, senselessly. The eye was dazzled by cut glass and cellophane, that covered the divan and the armchairs (they were expensive, upholstered in velvet, so they had to be treated with care). The wallpaper had a pattern of backs of books, as though the room held a considerable library. On the wall was a reproduction of Repin’s painting—Zaporozhian Cossaks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan, and a brightly colored cock militantly posed like a hussar—Liudmyla had embroidered it before she was married. On the table stood a vase with artificial flowers brought from the GDR—you had to feel them to know they weren’t real, and who would do that?

Olesia was standing on the threshold. She was wearing jeans, warm sports jacket, a white beret with a decorative pin. Roman wearing a brand new “a la cosmos” suit, steel grey, was following her every movement with his eyes, and Liudmyla watched his infatuated look with deep satisfaction: I used to be like her, she thought, and Mykola was melting away... Ah well, what’s past is past...

“Enjoy yourselves while you can, children. Joy doesn’t last forever. You’re grown up. I kept Olesia on a short leash while you were serving, my boy. Now you have full freedom. It’s springtime. Even nut and screw fall in love in spring... You are free to walk till the small hours, and tomorrow we’ll go to Horodyshche to commemorate grandpa. You know what—drop in on Uncle Hryhorii, ask him for his motorcycle, tell him I’ve allowed you to ask, and drive out of town. You’re grown people, after all. I entrust my daughter to you, Roman. Hryhorii won’t grudge you his ‘pony’.”

Olesia looked at her mother amazed. What has come over her? Granny would have said: The saints were brewing mead, and treating us from the pail. Mother used to guard her like a schoolgirl, and all of a sudden—such generosity...

Liudmyla intercepted her look and gave a broad smile as if to say: This is also me, daughter!

Mykola’s figure appeared in the doorway next to Roman’s. His pale face had been touched by the sun, even his bald patch was pinkish. With a guilty smile he tried to cover the stains of dried tar on his overall. He wished Liudmyla would fly at him quickly and pour out her full repertoire. In front of the children, at once: tell him he was a fool, that everybody could use him as they pleased; that she’d be happier if they divorced, that they made fun of her at work, saying she had two husbands, one on the Board of Honor, the other on the atomic station, while most of her women friends at the store had none...

However, for some reason or other Liudmyla paid no attention to him whatever, she straightened Olesia’s beret, then kissed her and accompanied her and Roman as far as the stairs.

“Mind you don’t drive too fast, Roman! We’re entrusting you with our dearest possession, I and father Mykola!”

“Why should we hurry, Liudmyla Ivanivna? All the future is ours!” Roman replied and dashed downstairs, several steps at a time.

Mykola drew in his head, and his body tensed even more. He tried to remove the patch of tar that had dried on his cheek but it had stuck fast to his unshaved skin.

“Don’t be angry, Liudmyla. Come on, say what you were going to say, and I’ll ask you to forgive me and get ready for my shift. We’re in for a hot time at the reactor today... I thought it

wouldn't take me more than a couple of hours to fix the boat, but it turned out to be a hell of a job...."

"It doesn't matter. But you've had no rest, and now your hard shift... The photographer was looking for you ... for the Board of Honor... He even looked me up at my job. He was upset. He was supposed to have the board ready. Go and have a wash. I'll make you some pancakes, the way your mum used to make them." She looked him over from head to foot, compassionately (for a moment she visualized Vasył—his sun goggles, his carefully shaved face, his white shirt, and neatly knotted tie, his intriguingly haughty look and poise, and yet—his simplicity, his openness). She heaved a sigh and went into the kitchen.

Mykola felt stunned at the unexpected family bliss he had long since forgotten, and never expected to experience again. And suddenly—out of the blue! A dream come true!

He washed noisily, peeping into the mirror and smiling happily at his reflection.

He washed, and shaved, and changed into dark blue trousers, rather on the biggish side, and a white tennis shirt, brushed his hair to one side covering a part of the bald pate. Pleasure and confidence had transformed him—he looked an attractive radiant young man. Liudmyla placed a plate of pancakes in front of him on the table but would not sit down with him. She continued doing something in the kitchen.

"How nice when everything's... nice. When I see that I've done wrong, and still you don't scold me. Then I feel doubly in the wrong, and I fall in love with you again. As I did—remember? In Horodyshe, on the river bank... When I finish my shift we'll do the shopping together and get all we need, and then we'll go to mother's. Wouldn't you like to go to that place of ours at night?"

"I've ordered some groceries—smoked sausage, hothouse cucumbers, cheese, ham. I must remember to pick up your suit from the cleaners. I sold their director a Japanese shawl for his wife (or his mistress, what do I care?), so 'he did accept your suit and promised to have it ready for tomorrow. And I'll get you a new pair of shoes tomorrow, they promised to put them aside for me. Your mother did force Oleksandr's money upon me. When we're rich we'll help her. See how much I've done to get delicacies for your father's funeral repast. If the others did the same, Odarka, and Hryhorii..."

"You're so sweet today, so kind. When you're like this, nothing else matters. True, I'm facing a hell of a nerve-wrecking shift. If Holoborodko really disconnects the automatic emergency switch all the reactor will have to rely on is our nerves. It's we on the turbines who'll bear the brunt, and Holoborodko will take the credit."

"So what! You have enough credit as it is! As to your atomic business, it's Greek to me, sort it out yourselves. By the way, they say in Horodyshe that Holoborodko is your half brother, you have the same father..."

"We're all brothers when we're born into this world, Liudmyla, it is only later that life separates us, by such distances, such thick forests that our voices cannot reach one another. May well be that he is my brother... As for you, Liudmyla, when you're kind you are absolutely beautiful. Remember it."

Mykola looked in at the nursery where little Taras was already asleep, his head tucked under the pillow. This was the way he always slept, the Myrovychs no longer wondered at it, he couldn't fall asleep unless the pillow was on top of his head. It was only at his grandmother's

place in Horodyshe that he slept like everybody else. Perhaps the street noise didn't let his fragile little heart find peace.

All walls of the nursery were covered with drawings in colored crayon. The white wallpaper was washable. Above Taras's bed was the drawing of an enormous weird flower that resembled an atomic mushroom, or the open blossom of a water lily from which a double-headed dragon was emerging.

"Perhaps we ought to take him to the folk healer in Trylisie, people say she can cure a person in one session if it is a matter of shock. Look at the things he invents! Hell grow up and start painting naked women on fences. We'll have no end of trouble with him. When the school year is over let's take him to Trylisie. The folk healer doesn't charge much," Liudmyla straightened the blanket and lifted the pillow a little so as to ease Taras's breathing.

"Bolotnia may be better than Trylisie. We ought to show him to Maria Pryimachenko³. Their teacher took them there. He looked at her drawings, this is what started him off. Let's hear what the old artist thinks of him—as to me, I know nothing about art," Mykola replied. He began to leaf through Taras's drawings: wolves with horns, flowers with gaping mouths, leaves of flowers like human eyes, a tree that looked as though it were crying out with all its hollows...

He picked up the boy's diary and opened it. "He covered the classroom walls with drawings. I kept him after classes to clean the walls." The form teacher's signature.

Mykola signed the diary and lingered inspecting the mushroom-flower above the bed, and the other drawings. Liudmyla was soon tired of it and left to clear away the supper dishes.

Where does it come from? Mykola wondered. Not one Myrovych has a talent for drawing, and our handwritings are atrocious. And Liudmyla's parents too have only drawn straight lines with the plough or the hoe, never with a pencil. But Taras—he seems tormented by something, as though he were bewitched. He felt an irresistible desire to look into his son's sleeping face, and very cautiously he lifted the pillow a little Taras's wide open eyes met his.

"We'll go to Maria the artist, shall we? I don't want to see the folk healer..."

Mykola gently stroked the child's tangled mop of hair and smooth forehead and nodded. The boy freed his arms from under the blanket and warmly embraced his father. Then he covered his head with the pillow and lay very still.

Mykola stood a while by the bed, then heaved a sigh and tiptoed out of the room.

"I'm leaving, Liudmyla. I was asked to come a little earlier. Wait up for Olesia and go to bed. All shall be well, because today you have been kind and beautiful. . ."

"I wanted to buy you a new suit for the money your mother gave us, but they had nothing from abroad, and I don't want to buy our home made stuff."

"You think I don't understand you? You'd have liked a better husband than myself. It is only natural for a woman, especially at your age, when youth is gone. I know I'm not the man you'd have liked me to be. You see, today, for example, I really intended to come home earlier from the boat, and prepare supper for you, then meet you at your store... But this blasted boat delayed us and I couldn't leave Igor alone. And on my way home I was blaming myself: I ought to have met you. This is what I'm like—irresolute. And if I'd made your supper and gone out to meet you I'd have eaten my heart out for having left Igor to tar the boat all by himself. Perhaps it

³ A well-known Ukrainian primitive artist.

is where the sense of life lies, in our conscience torturing, and nagging us. Don't regret that you married me. Don't, and you will feel how good our life is."

"Take these pancakes along, you'll eat them at your job. They promise to install a phone in our flat after the holiday. . ."

12

Maria had milked the cow and spread some straw on the floor of the shed so the boards should not rub against its sides. She shut the door of the shed behind her, and now she was sitting with Fedir at table drinking fresh milk and eating the bread they had bought at the store.

"My heart feels heavy, Fedir. Weal mark the ninth day since the father's death and what then..." She spoke quietly. Why raise her voice if Fedir read the words from her lips? "The Chernobyl makes the milk taste bitter. Can't be helped, there's no other grass at present. Shall I give you some sugar to add?"

Fedir shook his head, then swept up the bread crumbs from the table and threw them into his mouth.

A candle was burning in the centre of the table, although the light was on in the room.

The pendulum of the clock on the wall was chasing its own shadow, never able to catch it.

The mirror paneled into the wardrobe door was still covered by a cloth, in keeping with tradition.

Some shots resounded from the direction of the cemetery.

A sniff and rustle came from the wormwood patch outside. Maria caught it and gathered that it must be the hedgehog that used to spend the winter in the hay-stack behind the barn. She poured milk into a little bowl, took it outside and placed it underneath a tuft of wormwood.

"I could do with a little nap, else how am I going to live through tomorrow... No, I won't be able to sleep anyway. My heart keeps sinking, sinking. All I want is to get through tomorrow, the ninth night... without Ivan. And to see my children again..."

She was standing on the porch steps: Fedir was indoors, yet she uttered the words aloud.

13

Odarka was through with the chores in her flat that she had arranged fondly in peasant style, so close to her heart: embroidered hand towels draped about the wedding picture of Stepan and his first wife, who had died, and the picture of herself and Stepan and his two little children by the fountain, taken when he had just brought her over to town; dried poppy blossoms in a glazed jug; an old little TV set that Liudmyla had had given her when she had bought herself a color TV; large bunches of onion and Turkish pepper above the door to the tiny kitchen. She had cleaned and washed everything hoping Stepan may wake. He had fallen asleep in the armchair and was snoring so vigorously that the poppy blossoms quivered in the jug. She was relieved to have him home, even if drunk. A trickle of saliva was rolling down his chin, about to drop on his

shirt. Odarka took a towel and dried his chin. Thank God, she had something to do again, she would wash the towel so she could use it again for the dishes...

She washed the towel and hung it on the balcony to dry. Whatever he may be, a man in the house is a man in the house, she thought. If only she could cure him of drink they could live out their lives together and bring up the children. She had a husband, that was all that mattered, and when he settled down she couldn't imagine a better one.

The thought put her into a sentimental mood, and carefully she took off Stepan's shoes, pulled off his working trousers, and his shirt. She then scooped some warm water into a plastic bowl and washed his feet, and dried them with a clean cloth. Then she wedged her hands under his body, and with utmost effort she carried him to the divan. She put him on his back and covered him with a blanket. She produced a jug of kvass from the fridge, poured a mug full, and placed it on the night table at Stepan's head. Finally she put out the light.

She opened the door to the room where Ruslan and Lida were lying very quietly.

"I thought you'd have gone to sleep. . ."

"Isn't it time to go to Granny Maria?" Ruslan asked and jumped off the bed.

"Not yet. You must first have your bath and your sleep," she said, picking up both children and carrying them to the bathroom.

She washed both of them together. They were unusually obedient and silent, as though they were feeling guilty, because their father had come home drunk again. He had been shouting and swearing, and shifting the chairs, and he had refused to eat supper, and in the end he had fallen asleep and began snoring something terrible... When they grew up, as soon as they grew up...

14

Hryhorii was laying the table in his bachelor's nook. He was flustered—expecting Natalka any moment... So he hurried, and fumed at himself: like a teenager before his first tryst. As though no women had ever visited him here. Sometimes he would ask them over just to tidy up, cook some soup for him, warm him with their bodies and make themselves scarce at dawn, leaving a hot breakfast on the range.

He spread a white tablecloth and placed a bottle of Cabernet wine on the table, then sliced some sausage and cheese. Next to the bottle he put a vase with three tulips. He then critically surveyed the room and straightened the gun that was hanging on the wall. That hussy on the America magazine cover was ogling him impudently. Stop it, will you? You won't, you Texas filly? All right, well lock you up in the desk. Now, don't kick, you're to leave the exhibition, and I'll put you under lock and key, else Natalka will come and you'll look pale and wan next to her anyway. You'd better keep mum, unless you want to go on the rubbish heap!

The melodious tinkle of the doorbell came from the corridor.

Quickly Hryhorii removed his apron and flung it into the kitchen, glanced in the mirror as he rushed past it, smoothed his unruly hair and pressed down the collar of his white shirt, cleared his throat and flung open the door.

Olesia and Roman were standing outside.

"Oho, my niece and nephew! From Baikonur? Or straight out of cosmos?"

“On our way there, but we’d like to go on your motorcycle, if you don’t mind,” Olesia replied falling in with his tone. “I see you’re expecting somebody, so it’s free...”

Hryhorii quickly produced the key out of the pocket of his officer’s tunic and handed it to Roman.

“The throttle is out of order. If you drive at one hundred kilometers an hour the bike’ll take over. Keep it in mind!”

The two youngsters hurried off along the corridor, and down the stairs.

Hryhorii returned to his room and gave it one more look-over, removing a last pin-up girl from the wall.

15

When Liudmyla had closed the door behind Mykola and returned to the room her knees gave way and she collapsed on the chair, suddenly feeling how terribly the evening had exhausted her. Oh, God, why had life to go that way: neither real joy in it, nor real pleasure. All that was real was weariness and boredom. She could have howled and wailed and dissolved in tears. Yet she had not enough feeling or passion even for that. Even that would not have been sincere, would have brought not relief but more weariness!

She pulled her dustcoat from the peg so impetuously that the loop broke (never mind! I’ll fix it later!) put it on as she ran to catch up with Mykola. He was walking along the pavement, slowly, looking—back towards the windows of their flat. Some of the street lamps had no bulbs, but Mykola was not swallowed up by the dark, his tennis shirt gleamed white, and his unhurried footfalls rang out confidently on the pavement. He threw one last backward look and quickened his steps in the direction of his service bus stop when suddenly he noticed Liudmyla, or rather, sensed her with all his being.

“I knew all I knew you’d come to see me off tonight.”

He was about to embrace her right here in the street, but was suddenly embarrassed, ashamed of his emotion, and he just took her by the hand that seemed cold and trembling.

“You’re frozen... I’ve tired you... I’ll try to change, I’ll be good to you, Liudmyla. We haven’t got so much life left, we can’t waste it on misunderstandings and anger. I’m sure, father, too, regretted his life on his death bed: he’d lived wrongly, the temptations he had yielded to had emptied him out. And what did he leave behind? Us, his children, mother—his patient wife, and a world uncomfortably arranged, or rather stupidly, senselessly arranged, filled with fears. I was thinking today, our Taras is a child of fear, why else should he unconsciously draw all these beasts? The monsters he draws, they live within us, only we hide from them. In comfortable flats, behind furniture, in offices, seeking to satisfy our vanity... but Taras’s consciousness is still unprotected...”

“Here’s your bus, Mykola! You can catch it. I’m in my slip.”

Mykola wanted to kiss her on the cheek, but she bent down to adjust her slippers and his lips touched her hair. He inhaled its fragrance and hurried towards the bus.

Liudmyla stood a while observing her husband shaking hands with his mates, and taking up a seat by the window to wave his hand to her. The door creaked to. The driver flicked his

cigarette-end towards the urn but missed it. Flashing the left indicator-light the bus drove off in the direction of the atomic station. For a long time she could see Mykola's happy smile in the lit window.

She remained standing until the bus disappeared behind the bend of the road, then, drawing the coat tightly about her body she hurried homewards almost at a run.

"It's not only Taras that needs a folk healer. Mykola does, too..."

16

The Ferris wheel was still turning above the town, but only a few of the seats were occupied by people who couldn't get their fill of excitement and thrill. The bearded hunchback continued to work, though other less exciting entertainments had been closed a long time. He wasn't married, so there was nothing to draw him home, and he continued earning his bit as long as people still came for a turn.

Frogs were croaking in the warm moist grass. It sounded as though they had encircled the town in a solid ring and were slowly closing in on it. They hastened to cry out their cries, the time was approaching for nightingales to burst into song in willows and woods—who would then listen to their croaking?

The recorded voice of the variety star Valerii Leontiev streamed from the window of the hostel where Hryhorii lived:

They all run, and ran, and run...

Shadows flitted across the window, moving towards each other, then apart, somebody stepped outside on the balcony to catch a breath of fresh air, and disappeared again in the room. Music, the rhythmical scraping of feet, shadows jerking convulsively...

The electronic clock on the town soviet building lit up a chain of zeroes, the separate elements unlinked so that the chain looked as though it were going to fall apart. Presently, the first minute of the new day appeared, time moved on.

April twenty-six.

Nineteen hundred eighty-six. No stop, no break in the continuity, no pause for preventive maintenance. No time, no time!

No time to think, so we stuff our brain with information.

No time to rest, to relax, so we buy a bottle.

No time to bring up our children, so we atone for it with Japanese tape recorders, jeans, flashy weddings, cooperative flats.

No time to love, so we offer an "abridged version": the bed is ready: "hallo"—"good-bye".

We are short of energy—so we split the atom.

And by the time we resolve to do something good, something of lasting value, something really important—death stands by our side.

Soon the electronic clock of history will show three zeroes and a two in front of them. A new era, a new millennium. The Ferris wheel will swing us up to its highest point. But is it really the highest? Will not the bearded hunchback forget to switch in the brake?

A fleeting moment of reflection, and the clock on the town soviet shows that three minutes have elapsed of the new day, of April twenty-six. Onwards!

A red Java motorcycle shoots out of town, carrying two passengers in red helmets. Olesia clings to Roman clasping his neck with both her hands. They dash into the night like some fantastic creature with a motor and two human hearts. It swings itself up the steep arch of the bridge, looking like a rocket about to rise into the air, cutting a path through the dark with its beam of light.

“Freedom! Speed is freedom’s reality, Olesia!”

She answers something, but the wind snatches the words off her lips and even she herself cannot hear them.

Clouds of mosquitoes, and midges, and moths envelop every street-lamp and the Board of Honor that is illuminated from within. On its roof several wild pigeons are dozing. From the Board of Honor the touched up face of a superman is gazing at the town, eyebrows like two swords, eyes hard as steel, thin lips mysteriously compressed. If not for the caption “Myrovych Mykola Ivanovych,” not even he himself would have recognized himself in this daring young man surrounded by a nimbus of midges and moths. He is gazing across the square, as though the concrete walls of houses were no obstacle, and he could see through them each separate human being hiding in his separate stone cell: no matter whether he is asleep, or in his bath, or reading the newspaper, or counting money or the wrinkles on his face; whether he is in passionate embrace, or uttering unfair words that hurt; whether he shivers with loneliness on this warm night, or is washing the sweat of passion from his body... He sees it all, but his eyes are haughty, because all is vanity of vanities.

In the hospital yard at a table covered with a sheet of stainless steel, ambulance drivers were passionately engaged in a game of dominoes. A lamp with a large aluminum plate for a shade was suspended from a tree above the very table, its light showing only the drivers’ hands and the dominoes. Whoever !out was out. and those who were waiting their turn to join the game provoked the players to make mistakes so they could step in more quickly. One of the ambulances returned—nothing special. An old woman of eighty two had had a heart attack well. high time... The pips clicked, muffling the croaking of the frogs, the voices of the sympathetic onlookers, and the snoring of the lanky driver who was asleep in his cabin unaware of the fact that the boys had tied up his legs with a bandage. But. since no summons came it wasn’t really fun...

17

A long concrete corridor. Fluorescent lamps fitted into the ceiling, the floor covered with pale-orange lead-impregnated linoleum. Telephone booths with massive telephones placed close to one another—emergency phones, illuminated with red light. The corridor resembled an underground tunnel. Very long as though spanning two continents of the present and... the Unknown. However for those who after a briefing at Holoborodko’s proceeded to their working places it was just an ordinary corridor you had to cross to get to your working place.

Some bulbs in the ceiling were not burning, others twinkled wearily, but the men who worked here had the knowledge of the place in their bodies, their feet knew every seam in the linoleum, their heads knew when to bend so they shouldn't bump into the ventilation system that was under repair at the time.

They looked like a flock of drakes, in their white overalls, white linen boots, and caps. They carried in their breast pockets dosimeters that had to be reloaded before every shift, but... the five minutes it took were better spent in the smoking room. At one time they had a snazzy young woman for a safety engineer, so it was worth dropping in, but now the post was held by some silly coot who would play cards with the director and the chief engineer, so what the bloody hell! They all had that thing-a-ma-jig in the buttonhole, let it do the counting, and at the end of the month they would—hand it in at the laboratory, and it would show the results. If you went in regularly to reload your dosimeters people would laugh at you like anything.

“You know, I'm afraid the Kyiv “Dynamo” will bungle it in Lyon. They've beaten them all so far, but now they're going to flop. They should've had another month's training at home...”

“One more week of anxiety and you'll feel easier. They'll exhibit the Cup. Next time you visit your sweetheart you can admire it...”

“Admire what?”

“The cup, and the sweetheart...”

“Don't remind him of her before Holoborodko's experiment.”

” All very well for you to laugh. I was told about a woman from Moscow who came to see the first block engineer. They had been students together. She had come to pick mushrooms, and taste Ukrainian dumplings, and enjoy the scenery. He took her out to a friend's country house, so that she should be farther away from the reactor and closer to nature. And made her stay there.”

“Well, so what about it?”

“This is only the preamble. So the woman collected mushrooms and dried them, and registered her ticket, and she came to the check point at the airport, passed under the arch. The signal went buzzing like mad. She removed her gold ring, her ear-rings, took out her money purse—no go. She took off her shoes that had some metal on the heels, removed her hair pins. The alarm buzzed on and on. Then the militia woman took her to her office and there she admitted that she'd been picking mushrooms with the engineer from the atomic station who worked on the reactor at the time. So don't you forget, mates. we're marked, one fine day we may find ourselves in trouble.”

“Ah, come off it! Here are those boys from Kharkiv, from the turbine factory, they might believe you, you blabbers!”

“Let them talk...” said one of the Kharkiv men who had been summoned to take part in Holoborodko's experiment—it had been decided to divert the energy obtained from the inertia of the eighth turbine, Mykola's, and use it to cool the reactor. The Kharkiv men pretended to know all about it, but the reactor workers saw they were jittery and pricked their ears to every talk.

Mykola walked on air, still sensing the fragrance of Liudmyla's hair, seeing her in her coat and slippers, feeling her cool hand in his. His mind had arrested the moment of quiet bliss, of harmony and understanding that his wife had bestowed on him. He did not take in the story of the engineer from the first Block and his visitor and it did not affect his mood.

At the last check-point they produced their passes and continued along the corridor.

“Holoborodko shouldn’t have switched off the emergency system. What if Number Four goes berserk and gets off the leash?”

“He’s showing off, our Holoborodko! Itching for an order. One move—and he’s tops.”

“Number Four has lulled everybody into complacency. It’s been purring away for two years now, and never a bite. All quiet.”

“Don’t tempt fate, damn it all!”

“We’re all in the same boat, aren’t we?”

Dmytro Palyvoda caught up with Mykola and was walking alongside.

“Did you want to say something to me?” Mykola asked to break the silence.

“I’m a fool, Mykola. I should have taken your brother’s phone number and informed him of this crazy venture of Holoborodko and Co. I only just thought of your brother Oleksandr, he’d have stopped it. It would have been better still if the design had made it impossible to switch off the emergency system. As things are... all we can do is rely on our good luck... on the stars. OK, keep your chin up!” He vanished the way he had appeared, turning towards the hall where the central control panel was situated. He was followed by Nechyporenko carrying a book.

Mykola was thinking that he really ought to have pointed out to Oleksandr this flaw in the reactor, but they met so rarely, his brother and he, and always in passing, and Mykola didn’t like hurting his feelings so perfunctorily. Yet—he should have... When they meet, to mark the fortieth day of their father’s death, he would certainly talk to him.

The white ghostlike shapes in the concrete tunnel receded into the shadow and floated up again. One or two of them separated from the crowd and disappeared in a side door as though to hide away in a safe shell.

Brilliant holiday illuminations flickered above the atomic station and the surrounding meadows. The holiday was drawing near.

18

A cherry brown Zhiguli car stopped outside the window of Mykola’s flat. Below its mirror a toy skeleton dangled from an elastic, and continued to sway to and fro before Holoborodko’s eyes, after the car had stopped.

He switched off the radio, lit a cigarette, and only then turned his head to look at the lighted windows of the house.

A curtain moved on the second floor, a shadow appeared, the balcony door opened. Liudmyla!

Only now when he saw Liudmyla waving to him, motioning him to come upstairs, did he realize that he had come for her sake, for the sake of that over-ripe seventh form Horodyshche school girl, whose breast was fuller than the teacher’s, who would gaze at the boys from upper forms with languid eyes, who was always prepared for a rendezvous after her mother had gone to bed, and would melt in a boy’s embrace and not push him away when his hands fumbled about her body. What a fool he had been, never to take what she had not particularly guarded. He would feel shy, and put it off for later. And now, after almost thirty years, now that she had aged and withered, and he had won a place in society, had become a respectable man—now he had

decided to make up for past omissions. It wasn't the same, needless to say, but why not rid himself of the lingering bitterness? Especially since now it was not fear that was an obstacle on her part, only her conscience, which made it even more thrilling, even more alluring. An experienced woman... Perhaps it would be more exciting now. The only snag was that he had little time to spare. He had to be back at the station in an hour.

Cautiously, he drove up his car at the neighboring house, and looking about him stealthily, keeping to the shade, he slipped into her doorway.

19

In the dark the headlight of the motorcycle picked out the cemetery crosses, and the trunk of an old pine with a notice board fixed to it: "Village of Horodyshe." The motorcycle bumped over twisted roots. Roman slowed down, now he could hear Olesia's voice and not only see her hand that was pointing towards the road:

"Shall we drop in on Granny Maria?"

"Another time, Olesia. I want to be alone with you. I've been longing for it for two years."

He took the path that led into the wood and was covered with pine needles and twigs, and pushed aside the sappy undergrowth. The light of the head lamps fell on the river that was sleepily rolling its waves, gleaming milkily in the dark.

He cut off the engine and jumped off, Olesia hardly managing to follow, for already he was rolling the Java into the depth of the wood to be fully protected from strange eyes. They scrambled out of the thicket, and he flung himself at her kissing her wildly while she stood leaning against an old pine gazing into the sky.

Excited with their wild drive they stood kissing, alone on the deserted river bank. Yet to Olesia it seemed all the time that through the dark of night, through the thick of wood, Granny Maria was gazing at her from the window. Attentively, calmly, relentlessly. There was neither reproach in her eyes, nor encouragement, nor anger, but something that made Olesia keep her eyes open and freeze in anticipation of being ordered home, or else granny'd come with a whip. That's what granny was like, she was fully capable of it.

It was not the first time this strange feeling had come to her. Whence did it spring? She had grown up with her grandparents and had attended the local school up to the eighth form, granny knew more about her than her mother and father, who would visit the village occasionally, to relax and see their daughter. It was only her mother she was afraid of, she would shrivel up in her presence and obey without a murmur. This dumb submission—was it fear?

Granny Maria was a permanent presence in her life. She would scold her when she was disobedient, even punish her, but it all came naturally, calmly, in a level voice. Granny seemed to believe that Olesia would remain face to face with her conscience and develop the need for an independent inner life, perhaps too serious for her age. The three last years of her school life she had spent in town, and her class-mates considered her old-fashioned, tied up in complexes. All of them were having passionate love affairs, they would give themselves to the older boys without a moment's hesitation, and then brag about it and they looked at their outmoded class-mate disapprovingly, a little contemptuously. Not that Olesia had no boy friends: she would stand for hours

in the doorways with them, but she never yielded to the temptation of being like the others. When she parted from Roman on the day of his call-up she almost did give herself to him (his parents had gone on a visit to some relatives, and they were alone in the flat), but at the last moment Granny Maria's eyes emerged before her, piercing and severe. They did not frighten her but they returned her will power and she controlled herself.

And now she was grown up, and Roman had returned from service, and her mother had let her go out for the whole night, and spring was dizzyingly sweet, the pines were spreading protective arms above her, the river flowed in eternal continuity, the wormwood grew lush beneath her feet... Now everything was permitted, because now she was a ripe particle of the universe, because Roman's hot hands were ardently caressing her shoulders, her breasts...

20

In front of Nataalka and Hryhorii stood glasses of dry red wine.

"I've arrived, my lass! I'll unharness myself!" Hryhorii uttered with a sigh and shook his shoulders as if really shaking off invisible straps that in his present unusual state seemed almost palpable to him.

"So you're unharnessing? Throwing off the collar?" Nataalka said shaking her very fair head that had the bluish tint of young wormwood.

"If the collar doesn't rub—you hardly feel it."

"Only so long as you cart nothing. Only then. Only then, Hryhorii. Take my word for it—I was married for two years."

"I'll love you in my own fashion, girlie. Not a trace of Nechyporenko will remain!"

"Aren't we impetuous ... and self-confident. I'll take care of my past myself, thank you. You should see to the future."

"Let's drink!"

"Let's commemorate your father."

Hryhorii's face clouded, his handsome head dropped, he visualized his father's folded arms, the wormwood strewn over the pillow, the emaciated face with its sharply protruding cheekbones, the blue compressed lips. He drank up the wine at one gulp, and shook out the last drops on the floor, as tradition had it. Nataalka only touched the rim of her glass with her lips and put it back on the table.

"This is not the way to commemorate father. He—may he rest in peace—he loved a bit of drink, and he loved beautiful women. It's your favorite brand, Cabernet, it destroys the strontium in the blood. The boys brought it for me from Kyiv. Drink it up! And the next glass we'll drink to us two. To you and Hryhorii who has sown his wild oats."

"You can say it only of your father—you have your whole life before you, don't hurry to promise, lest you may repent."

21

The control panel of the Block at the atomic power station is shaped like an enormous horseshoe. Mykola Myrovych was a nail driven into the horseshoe.

The wave of tenderness and calm was still lapping his heart even now that he had sunk into his soft operator's armchair that would usually automatically cut him off from his family, from all the humdrum of life, from all passions. They would recede and he would switch his nerves and his emotions into intensive observation of the turbine generator and its uneven breath. His eyes would manage to take in all indicators at once and react with cold, hence infallible calm.

It was clear to him that the domestic life he had dreamed of when he married Liudmyla had failed to bring him not only happiness but even calm. Only his work could satisfy his ambition. He liked the night shifts best, when the town and the neighboring villages, and Kyiv were asleep, and his turbine rotated steadily in its concrete container, while he watched it carefully, listening to its heavy breathing. And he was alone with the fissioned atom, sending out millions of kilowatts of energy that would bring light to somebody, move an electric train, warm a flat, cover the walls of refrigerators with thin layers of frost, elicit music from a tape recorder. Not for his life would he voice any of this, it would have sounded far too solemn, even for an address at a meeting, but alone with himself, sitting at the control panel, knowing that nobody saw or heard him, he would gladly indulge in these reflections: they meant that his life was worth something after all.

Now, however, with the tenderness of family feeling still warm in his heart he did not want to obliterate himself as he usually did, and become an invisible addendum to senior operator Mykola Myrovych.

Yes, he must be kind to Liudmyla. Once he had married her it was his duty to be kind to her. What had she gained by marrying him? Household chores, washing, cooking... What had she acquired? Three years of enjoyable love making, until Olesia was born. Then came the humdrum of life, hard work, quarrels, reconciliations, a crowded hostel, expectations of a flat, and then—furniture, carpets, crockery, rags... She would do all the procuring, humiliating herself so as to get things, she would skimp and scrape, re-sell things that were in short supply. All this had aged her. There were people to whom it came more easily, some had rich parents, but his family had nothing to offer, and Liudmyla's mother was a pensioner, and she died soon after the wedding.

Yes, he must be kind to Liudmyla, he must be good to her, and she'll respond...

What's wrong with the indicators? Why are the burners blazing?

He informed the reactor controllers that the nuclear outburst must be curbed.

He remembered Liudmyla showing him the swaddled little bundle—Olesia through the window of the maternity home, a pink little baby face, sleepy, crinkled, like a little baked apple.

And look at her now, a fine young woman, ready to produce a baby herself. He had stood outside the window with a bunch of paper flowers, there had not been a single live flower in all Ivanhorod at the time, so he had bought a whole armful of paper flowers at the store. Liudmyla had sniffed at them and smiled...

What on earth?! The turbine was in a frenzy!

“Serhii Nechyporenko! Are you reading a crime story, or what? Curb it!”

“Whoever mentions work on my birthday will pay a fine! He’ll have to drink up an extra glass of wine and eat a skewer of meat hot from the fire! A penalty worthy of the crime!” said the director’s wife reclining in her chaise-longue that they had taken with them for her specially so that she could preside over them like a princess. The other guests had made themselves comfortable on the tarpaulin and would get up on their knees to pronounce their toasts.

“And you—off with you to collect firewood,” added the wife of the chief engineer, playfully poking her husband in the ribs with a skewer.

The headlights of the director’s Volga illuminated the gathering, the enormous shadow of the director’s wife was reaching across the whole meadow. The transistor inside the car was crackling like dry firewood.

“To humanity’s better half!” said the director and laboriously went down on his knees, whereby his right hand squashed a fresh tomato so that the red juice spurted on to his wife’s sports suit.

“...Which is better only because there is the worse half by its side,” added the chief engineer.

“Hush, Yuri, nowadays toasts and drinking are not popular. In Byelorussia the chairman of the district executive committee has already been sacked,” said the director wiping his hand on the tarpaulin.

“It’s Saturday. Our day off. We’ve worked all week—we’re entitled to relax!” said the wife of the chief engineer and proceeded to wipe the tomato juice from the director’s wife’s sports suit with her handkerchief.

“Ha! You’ve mentioned world! To punish you, here is one more glass of wine and another piece of burning hot barbequed meat!” said the chief engineer gleefully. “Farewell to your wasp waist, dear madam!”

“I’ll collect firewood for our fire and lose the weight I’ve gained. So don’t try to frighten me, dearest hubby. Besides, I visit the sauna every week.”

23

Actually, Vasyl Holoborodko had not derived real pleasure from what he had looked forward to so much a little while ago... He had no qualms about abandoning his night duty, he had rushed into town, wondering all the way how Liudmyla was going to receive him, how they would talk, whether they would get stuck in petty reproaches concerning their past, their school years.

But the moment he crossed the threshold and saw Liudmyla in the dimmed greenish light of the standard lamp, wearing a long pale-orange dressing gown, his tension left him and he knew that everything was going to be as usual, perhaps even without the inevitable feminine “don’t...” This filled him with assurance and a certain playful superciliousness which soon turned into masculine impudence. No sooner had he shut the door behind him than he enclosed her in a firm embrace and overwhelmed her with a long passionate kiss. She had apparently not expected this

swift opening and was taken by surprise, he had not given her a chance for the slightest resistance.

He lifted her up and carried her into the room. He noted with satisfaction that he was still rather strong: Liudmyla was on the heavy side and kept slipping from his arms. He found time to think that he would be back at his job very soon, and nobody would have noticed his brief absence. It was his lucky day, his fate was kind to him...

Now Liudmyla was taking a shower while he was buttoning up his swanky shirt, with a sense of languid disappointment, a kind of emptiness: had it been worth racing into town for the sake of this, risking (what if anybody had seen him?!), burning with impatience like a teenager? He had discovered nothing new for himself; well, he had put to right a rankling mistake and gratified his masculine vanity. It had been no different than any other seduction of another man's wife, or of an unattached female, perhaps a bit more insipid because of his hurry, and because he was aware all along of being in Mykola's home, and that at the station they were putting into practice his experiment; and of Taras who might wake and enter...

He even regretted having yielded to the temptation. He should have postponed it, and carefully chosen a time and a place, taken her to somebody's vacant country house, warmed up with a glass of cognac by a fireside, and only then taken his revenge on her, and gratified his own body and soul. Should he find time, and still feel like it, he ought to repeat it, unhurriedly, without the present nervous strain.

He looked out of the window from behind the curtain, and froze: his car was gone!

Bloody fool! Why, he had parked it outside the neighboring house. He was about to light a cigarette but remembered that all he had was "Golden Fleece" tobacco that Mykola never smoked. Nothing for it, he mustn't leave his scent behind in his room. .

He put the money for the suit on the table. One hundred and fifty rubles. He had only small notes, so that in the light of the street-lamp it looked an enormous pile of money.

He was ready to leave, but Liudmyla appeared on the threshold of the bathroom. He wanted none of the habitual sentimental talk and simply embraced her, mechanically, without even feeling the warmth and tension of her body.

"Don't you dare boast of your easy victory. I'm not afraid of Mykola, I'm afraid of gossip and of Horodyshche," Liudmyla whispered in his ear.

"Why should I spread gossip about myself? Especially since people say Mykola is my half brother..."

"So you've seduced your own sister-in-law, into her first breach of faith, you wicked man! Shame on you,,,"

"Consider that it happened twenty-five years ago. In Horodyshche, in a hay stack. Well—I've got to be off. I'm on duty, you know!" When he said this he suddenly became a stranger as though he had pulled on a mask. He put a hand on the bolt.

"Don't forget about the cooperative flat for Olesia. After all, she's a kind of niece to you... you seducer..."

After the decree concerning alcoholic drinks was announced, immediately sinking into every consciousness, provoking reactions in every adult mind, small, quiet gatherings became the fashion. It was dear to everyone, that it was no joking matter: too many people hitherto “untouchable” had been removed from their posts. And who wanted this kind of hangover?—A hangover for good and all, one may say.

Thus, when the old atomic physicist and academician turned seventy, he celebrated the event in his Moscow flat with his family and closest friends and colleagues. It was indeed a quiet celebration, the old man ridiculed the exalted toasts and countered his colleagues’ emotional exaggerations with ironic remarks directed at himself; re-addressed all compliments to his wife and to the institute. When it was Oleksandr Myrovych’s turn to pronounce a toast he was already prepared. He had intended to speak about atomic physics as the super-science of today, and the academician as the super-specialist in this super-science. But the response he would have got was clear to him. Therefore he turned to a different theme. When a person is born, he said, nature and the parents endow him with various virtues. Life strives to mix these virtues with vice and sins. And only a real personality is capable of preserving throughout his life the childish, the real, the truly human he had been initially endowed with. This is manifested in his behavior: never, in any circumstances does he accept compromise. This is the lesson our host has taught us. May what he has preserved and upheld in himself remain alive in him throughout future decades.

It sounded sincere and heartfelt, with no trace of flattery. The academician did not interrupt, and remained silent, looking moved. Olga felt quietly proud of her husband. Myrovych’s toast had tuned the old man to reminiscences—he told them some touching episodes from his childhood in the country, in the Pskov region, and then he challenged his guests to enter a peculiar kind of competition: each of them was to tell his most vivid childhood memory.

This adult game lent peculiar charm to their festive gathering, bringing them very close to one another, leaving them with a feeling of having jointly lived through moments of purest sincerity and happiness.

Oleksandr’s turn came last: “At sunrise when sleep is sweetest mother would wake me. Very gently, so as not to frighten me. The cow was already milked and had to be taken to pasture. The dew still held the cold of night, the mist from the river seeped into every bone. The dust on the road was still held down by the dew. I had to drive my cow into the wood. Barefoot. It was cold. My teeth chattered, beating out rhythms trickier by far than those produced by modern rock groups. In the wood I’d let the cow off her tether and then wonder where to hide my feet that had gone blue with cold. Then suddenly I noticed that the cow had disposed of its cake of dung. I quickly stepped inside it—it was warm. To me this was the highest degree of bliss and happiness. I’d stand there until it cooled, then quickly step into the next that was still warm. At the age of six it was my ideal of happiness: following the cow through the wood waiting for the warm dung...”

The old host’s eyes were moist, he sipped his champagne and said:

“First prize, Myrovych! For courage and truth! It’s in our childhood that we are at our best.”

The river gleamed like metal through the delicate lace of willows. It looked heavy, confident, and mysterious in the dark of night. Under a pine, squashing the nettles, lay two red helmets, their tops touching. On them sparkled drops of dew. The river was sleepily lapping the steep bank.

Roman and Olesia were lying in the forest glade. In summer it would be all trampled down and bespattered by holidaymakers, littered with cigarette ends and cellophane bags, dotted with dark spots left by campfires. Now, however, it was clean as though it were a very young and uninhabited planet where civilization was only about to be born.

At first Roman's dogged vehemence frightened her. But lying on the glade in the dark of night, breathing the fragrance of wormwood, listening to the lapping of the river, as if alone with him in the wide world, overwhelmed by his kisses, his hot relentless hands, that stirred in her body, in her entire being a dark, all-absorbing irresistible passion she had never known before—she gradually lost control over herself.

For a short moment she collected her strength and rolled away from him through the soft wormwood, but he caught up with her, pressed her close, and breathing heavily he started kissing her neck, her face, her weakening open lips.

Once more she tried to free herself, but could not, and sensing it Roman grew bolder.

He had some experience, which in his dealings with Olesia could be easily exaggerated. When he was in his ninth form at school he joined a sambo section in the town. His parents were divorcing at the time, and he enjoyed almost unlimited freedom. He became junior champion, and was accepted in a company of older boys, who used to have pocket money. They would gather in a country house on the outskirts of the town. It belonged to a sportsman specializing in sambo. They would listen to music, drink wine, and then dance. Then one of the boys dropped out of the company, his parents moved to an atomic station in the south of the Ukraine and took him with them. His “doxy,” Tamara, a typist from the house committee, remained alone and Roman took his place. The company actively approved. After wine, dancing and the relish of cigarettes Tamara took her “champion” by the hand and led him into an empty barn that was filled with stale hay, a smell of stables, and the squeaking of rats in the corners. On crackling, prickly hay, with thick cobwebs that hung down on them from the low ceiling, Roman learned to discard fear and shame. True, the woman called him Arthur—the name of his predecessor, but aware of being older and more experienced, she patiently taught the boy to feel a man.

He still remembered every detail of his first night, the revolting taste of stale smoke on Tamara's lips, her superior ironical matter-of-fact manner, the crackling of hay, the scurrying rats, the stench of dry manure, the spiders' webs above their heads.

On the following day the house-owner's cousin arrived, a student on vacation, and Tamara left Roman for him. Roman felt stung and stopped visiting the “gang,” nor did anybody ask him to. He ran into her several times, but she did not recognize him. To hell with her, she had at least taught him a lesson, and he was a man now, and not just a boy. Soon after he met Olesia and was intrigued by her inaccessibility. It was interesting, it tickled his vanity, but before he could get her he was called up. Now he was back. Now she would not escape him, after all, she wasn't made of stone.

“Not today, Roman. Please. You'll spoil it all...”

“I won’t! You’ll be still closer...” he whispered, his hands stroking her feverishly under her sweater.

“Am I distant?”

“You are cruel. You’re mocking at me... After two years in Asia...”

“It isn’t like this that I imagined it to be...”

“You couldn’t think of anything better if you tried: the wood, the spring, the river, the moon, the young grass...”

“It isn’t grass, it’s chornobyl, wormwood. Bitter.”

“That’s even better...”

His hand was growing more insistent. She made one last attempt, then gave up, exhausted, grew very still, her arms lay limp in the wormwood.

The button on her jeans had come undone. Her bare white legs lay stretched on the forest glade.

A large fish leaped above the river.

Roman pushed the helmets accidentally and they rolled off in opposite directions.

26

“Serhii! Nechyporenko! Why doesn’t Holoborodko reply?! Where is he, the swine? Switch in emergency. The cooling pumps are out of action! The turbine won’t work! Lower the rods! Every second counts! It’ll explode! Extinguish the pile, I’m telling you, it’s an order!”

Mykola was yelling, his chest on the control panel. Without listening to Nechyporenko’s answer, without listening to anybody, because the whole concrete room was now shaking, the turbine was gaining speed, he felt his complete helplessness, that had suddenly turned into despair.

“Lower the rods, you worm! Coward! Swine! What are you doing?”

A deep explosion resounded inside the reactor. Plaster came crashing down from the ceiling. The block gave a shudder, as if it wanted to leap out of the earth, foundation and all.

The sirens in the corridor issued a piercing, vicious wheeze.

The logbook was flung off the panel and dropped to the floor.

The light went out.

“That’s the end, Liudmyla. I wish you...”

Compressed darkness filled the concrete box.

“Oleksandr, brother, help!”

In the dark Mykola groped for the flexible neck of the microphone and almost moaned into it:

“Put him out, the goddamned beast. Don’t let him break forth. Put him out, the beast...”

Mykola seemed to sense with his whole being how the concrete was straining and cracking in every seam, how...

An explosion flung him out of his armchair.

I’m not to blame...

A crash, a rumble, the grinding of metal, a blood-curdling whistle of steam.

The heavy metal door fell on top of Mykola.

Mother's warm hand stroked his brow...

Out of the debris of the reactor a gigantic twisting column of steam broke into the night sky, it rose higher, it grew, it expanded covering the moon and the stars above the station, above the town, above the surrounding villages and fields, and wood, and river.

The roof was smashed to smithereens, and on its fragments tar was melting, drops falling to earth like the black tears of this sinful century.

A column of fire, steam, fragments of reactor shield, shiny pieces of pipes, bits of flaming graphite rose from the ruins of the reactor. Swiftly, like a fantastic rocket it rose into the sky lighting the blocks of the station, the river framed by willows, peaceful fishermen's campfires along the banks, revealing the houses at the outskirts of the town, the arc of the Ferris wheel, the desolate beach with the old boat.

The fiery column stopped at a height of one and a half kilometers, from its tip grew a globe of light that seemed to suck up the ghostly column. An enormous mushroom unfurled in the sky, something moved inside it, curled up, and straightened again, while it stood above the nightly earth like a gigantic Christmas toy, a pale crimson, almost the color of blood. The night was windless, and the mushroom hung suspended neither descending, nor rising, between heaven and earth, as though thinking where to sink its toot.

27

Roman and Olesia were lying in the wormwood on the glade, utterly exhausted. What he had been so ardently pressing for had happened. Their jeans lay crumpled to one side. Emptied out and indifferent, Roman lay face downwards in the crushed wormwood; Olesia face upwards, gazing into the night sky above Horodyshe. She had covered her nakedness with Roman's jacket.

"Say something, Roman..."

Without stirring he drawled sleepily:

"Thank you for having waited. Intact. To tell you the truth, I didn't believe you would. I thought, at school when that chap Prymachenko was after you... It's in fashion nowadays ... to start while you're still at school. In our class the girls had vowed that they'd all be women before finishing school.

"Well, I am what I am... stupid and old-fashioned..."

"There was an Estonian in our unit who said he had a girl waiting for him in the district centre who was a virgin. So all the boys laughed at him: she must have a flaw, they said, nobody wanted her..."

"And you, did you also laugh?"

"How was I to know you were the same as that Estonian girl?"

Suddenly a glaring light flashed up in the direction of the town, and the whole sky was aflame. The river, the trees, the wormwood—everything turned scarlet. It lit up Olesia's face, her eyes, her lashes on which two tears quivered. For a moment she felt embarrassed in the bright light, she jumped up and crouched down tucking her bare legs under her and covering them with

her hands, but the light grew more vivid, a strange fantastic mushroom was rising behind the wood. Quickly she pulled on her jeans.

Roman was dozing, his face in the wormwood.

28

Holoborodko's Zhiguli was racing towards the atomic station. The brakes were screeching, the tires leaving black lines on the asphalt. The car kept swerving towards the pavement, the wheels stirred up dust, and gravel flew in all directions. There was horror in his eyes, and the reflection of the enormous atomic mushroom that hung motionless in the sky.

"Idiots! Bastards! I'll sack the lot of you!"

29

Liudmyla whisked the table-cloth off the table and shook it out in the middle of the room. She drew back the heavy velvet blind to air the room, and tottered back: a gigantic gleaming globe hung above the atomic station rising higher and higher, and dragging up a column of black smoke and phosphorescent fire... A cold light burst into the room that seemed to suffuse her very soul.

She jumped away from the window, dropping a pillow to the floor, and flung herself on the sofa whose springs suddenly issued a loud wail, as though a baby's cry.

30

The birthday party of the director's wife was beginning to flag. They were replete with drink and meat straight from the skewer, and filled to capacity with oxygen, and now drowsiness was getting the better of them.

"One more glass, and let's call it a day!" said the chief engineer.

The women emptied the remaining mineral water in the fire to extinguish the glowing coal, and stamped the cigarette butts into the ground, chattering in loud voices.

The men stood about drinking and waving away the tiresome midges. The headlights of the Volga were turned on and their light was so blinding that neither the director nor the engineer perceived the gigantic radioactive globe rising above the atomic station. Their eyes were riveted to the ground, they were folding up the tarpaulin, and the chaise-longue, and throwing the bottles into the bushes.

31

Maria was bustling about in the kitchen preparing for her guests. She noticed the glow in the sky above the wood at once, since her kitchen window was facing the station.

She pressed her face against the window pane, so closely that she seemed melted into it: the nose flattened, the forehead white, the wrinkles smoothed out, the entire face diffused and unrecognizable. Only the eyes were hers... deeply troubled, she was staring at the distant glow beyond the wood.

“Something’s burning. In town. My Hryhorii’ll certainly not keep away... Dear God, divert the fire from my good-for-nothing. Let him get married...”

The clock was ticking in the room. She had never noticed it before, but now it seemed to tick right into her ear. As though the grave-diggers were again driving nails into Ivan’s coffin. Will she ever get rid of this hallucination?

Fedir noiselessly entered the kitchen, in briefs and a sports shirt, barefoot. His steps were so soft that Maria did not even notice him appear. He stopped behind his mother’s back and looked out too. His face was strained, his jaws were working.

The glow fell on the family photograph on the wall of the large room. It made the faces look alive, they seemed to be talking among themselves.

32

“Drink it up, Nataalka, I’ve thought of something, and if you drink it up it will come true. Nataalka—sweetheart...”

“If you could see how ill sentimentality becomes you. You’re a stranger, a different person. Is it the Cabernet, or old age, or what, Hryhorii? What do you think?”

“Old wine and first love. Almost the same as new wine and last love,” Hryhorii said and turned on the tape recorder from which flowed a soft song, performed by four male voices.

Before Nataalka’s arrival Hryhorii had drawn the blinds, because his window gave on a flat where a young couple had moved in so recently that they had had no time to buy even a curtain.

What with the curtained window, and the sounds of the song they failed to hear the explosion or see the glow in the sky.

“You’re a different girl tonight. Distant, as if on your guard. Drink up, relax. Have you had an unpleasant talk with Nechyporenko?”

“You called me and I came. Nothing else matters, Hryhorii... I’ve come.”

“For good!”

“Don’t hurry a good horse, my dear. The slower you go, the more you will see.”

“I’ve seen too much already. Enough to make me squint...”

“If you knew how tired I am, Hryhorii. I feel as though I’d lived a whole life—a stupid, unsuccessful, primitive sort of life. Let me catch my breath and come to. Otherwise I can’t tell whether I can start on another life. I’ve flung myself at you—it was like jumping into an ice-hole. I’d thrown reason to the winds: come what may! At work I try not to listen. They all talk about that arch seducer Hryhorii Myrovych who has never known defeat.”

“So you want to open my account of defeat?”

“That will be a change, won’t it? It has cost me a high price. And I dread to think of the final price, it may turn out to be too banal. There’s a primitive way of forcing old gadders like you into marriage—by getting pregnant, and threatening to appeal to the Party organization, the trade union and public opinion. But you needn’t worry...”

“Do you mean to say...”

“I’ve said almost all I meant to say.”

“So this is why you won’t drink, Nataalka! Is it really true?”

He jumped off his chair and embraced her, tried to kiss her, but she averted her lips and turned away her head, and when he persevered she held up her glass between their lips.

“Tomorrow we’re going to see mother. You can’t imagine how glad she will be.”

There was a loud, peremptory knocking at the door.

“I’m out! I’m married!” Hryhorii shouted for the whole corridor to hear, and clasped Nataalka.

“Captain Myrovyeh! Myrovyeh! Alarm! Accident at the atomic station! Accident! You’re wanted in your unit!”

Hryhorii rushed to the door upsetting a chair and catching a glass of wine with his elbow. It dropped and broke to smithereens. The red wine splashed his white shirt and the hem of Nataalka’s lavender skirt.

Now Nataalka tried to embrace him, but he was hurriedly pulling on his tunic, and grabbing his uniform cap.

“Sleep! I’ll run down to the station and come back. What evil spirit could have thought up fireworks for our wedding? Hot enough as it is! I won’t be a moment!”

Outside the door he hesitated a little, longing to go back and embrace her, but then hurried off to settle things quickly.

He stormed down the concrete steps, and his footsteps in the deserted corridor reverberated from wall to wall.

33

The mushroom that looked like a jelly-fish was slowly spreading above the town. The clouds close to it first looked singed around the edges and gradually melted away.

Townpeople were quietly asleep, anticipating the forthcoming free days when they would either potter about at home, or drive out to the country, or go visiting, or themselves receive guests.

Light went up only in houses close to the station, where one could hear the howl of station emergency sirens and the strident wails of ambulances and see the glow above the atomic station from which a strange sinister flame rose and stood almost still like a fantastic enormous candle.

Scattered around the ruined Block lay chunks of concrete and iron reinforcing from the shield and uranium and graphite ejected from the reactor core. All this lay on the rose and tulip beds in front of the entrance to the station, the concrete slabs of the square, the sandy bank of the canal, the green meadow, the roofs of the service buildings.

On the top floor of the hostel in which Hryhorii Myrovych lived, in a room just like his, a company of young boys and girls were having a party. The sounds of Volodymyr Vysotskyi's voice singing one of his popular songs reached out through the wide open door from inside the flat.

Presently one of them noticed the glow above the station building, the dancing stopped, they stepped on to the balcony.

"Goodie-goodie, now we can turn off the light completely. Won't it be romantic, dancing to music and light rolled into one!" a rosy-cheeked lad with a short crew-cut exclaimed cheerfully.

"UFO, that's what it is! Inhabitants of other planets. They're said to steal beautiful girls," exclaimed a plump young girl feigning fear.

"No fear! They won't come to us. Nobody to steal. Not even for earthmen—let alone for aliens."

"You're a fool, Igor. A blind fool, at that." The girl was offended.

"That's right, I'm blind. I go by touch, light's no good for me. I've got sensitive fingers, I'm a joiner."

"Oh, stop fooling! I'm scared!" said another girl, stepping back from the balcony. She was a dressmaker, tall and long-legged, a head taller than the boys.

"Don't! As soon as the light goes out I grow terribly tender and daring," the joiner said.

"And even more foolish than when the light is on," the dressmaker added.

"You can't see the brain in the dark. It's not luminescent."

"Gosh, warm dew is falling from above," the fat girl cried out, frightened.

"Somebody spitting, I suppose."

"There isn't anybody above us. Except the sky."

"Then it's God who's spitted, or dropped a tear perhaps."

34

Heavy drops fell on the tulip beds in the central square of the town, the delicate leaves and petals quivered though there was not a breath of wind. The letters on a poster slowly flowed downwards. A drop rolled over the glass of the Board of Honor leaving a wet trace behind. It halted a moment at \likola's left eye.

The frogs continued croaking, nonstop, as if to warn the sleepy citizens that they had encircled the town from all sides.

A fire engine shot out of the open door of the fire station, signals and sirens wailing, splashing ghostly blue light in all directions, it braked sharply, Hryhorii jumped into the cabin. He had hastily pulled on a pair of heavy boots and clamped a helmet on his head, but was still wearing under his tarpaulin overall, his corduroy jeans and fine white shirt. From the footstep he commanded:

"Second company! After me! Lieutenant Sobko! Get the other crews! To the station! Communicate by radio!"

The door slammed to, the first cars raced down the deserted avenue past the town, towards the station.

Hryhorii lit a cigarette, inhaled ravenously, and said to the driver:

“An unlucky man has no luck even on his wedding night, as our ancestors wisely put it...”

The driver was clutching the wheel, eyes glued to the road, and all he understood was that the captain was calm, taking the whole thing lightly, as though it were a practice drive. Lucky disposition. When the car reached the highroad the driver relaxed and said:

“We’ll extinguish it, Captain. Remember, when the oil tank caught fire we got it down at one go with wet bags, this time we’ll give it a sprinkle and all will be well...”

35

Swaying over the roots and bumps the director’s Volga was slowly emerging from the wood. Its rear bumper had hitched a guelder rose bush which had been wrenched out of the ground, roots and all, and was dragging it along, leaving a deep scratch behind. The bush was covered with green-tipped buds. It would have blossomed before long.

“They’re saluting you on your birthday!” the chief engineer’s wife exclaimed, fidgeting on the back seat, and leaning against the director’s wife’s shoulder when she noticed the enormous jelly-fish in the sky.

“Turko! I don’t have my glasses. Take a look, what is this apparition? Perhaps bits of the American “Challenger”? Or perhaps Halley’s Comet strayed into our woods? Can’t see a thing” said the director calmly without taking his eyes off the road.

“Hells’ bells! A holy miracle...” The chief engineer giggled, his face against the windscreen.

“Shall we drop in at the station to see how our experiment is doing?” the director said.

“Haven’t we decided – not a word about work today! You’re fined: You’ll vacuum clean the flat tomorrow,” said his wife.

“What about the extra drink?” said the chief engineer.

“Let him kiss the ladies first,” said his wife.

“Don’t let us go. We’re in sports clothes and we smell of alcohol. There’s be a sheaf of anonymous letters, and people would talk and talk. Don’t let us risk it. We’ll call up Holoborodko from my place; if it’s OK, we’ll wash the barbeque down with champagne and be off to bed.”

“Hot tar for you. With acetone and ground glass, and crushed wormwood,” the director’s wife added sweetly and peaceably putting her hands on her husband’s shoulders.

36

Lights flared up in the dark windows of the town hospital. A hustle and bustle in the wards. A shuffle of slippers. White overalls of the medical staff and stripy pajamas of convalescent patients flitted past. At the ambulance center all telephones were ringing. Ambulance cars rushed out of the hospital gate.

A lanky driver, whose feet some jokers had tied up while he was sleeping, dropped out of the cabin. He tore off the ties and switched on his motor:

“Damn it! We’ll be all played out by the time we’re through.”

“All right for you, you’ve had some sleep...” a young nurse complained, getting into the car.

“What if we had,” an elderly woman doctor said wearily. “I fell asleep and had such a dream—heaven forbid. I woke feeling like a lump of clay that an elephant had stomped over. I have two weeks to go before my pension—and now this accident. What a misfortune. Let’s get going, quick!”

37

Serhii Nechyporenko was rushing along the enormous corridor of the reactor section pressing a battered little book against his body. His cap was gone, one sleeve of his overall covered in soot. The red emergency lights flashed up intermittently, lighting his face, and his eyes seemed to flare up and go out, like a robot’s.

“Call the dosimeterists, blast you! Quick! My teeth taste metal, my throat feels raw! It’s the end! The reactor core has been blasted open! Call the dosimeterists!”

The sirens were wailing.

Feet stuck in white boots were running up and down the stairs. Massive doors were banging. People were breathing heavily. The flashes of emergency lamps all along the corridor were sinister.

Dmytro Palyvoda, small and puny, was pressing his chest against the massive cast iron doors of the boiler that had been flung open by the explosion. Radioactive steam was gushing out with a piercing whistle. His suit was wet, filthy, torn. His pale face looked like an old man’s. A cough wits tearing his throat asunder, he was suffocating, yet he continued to press the doors to.

“I’d rather clog the door with Holoborodko and his kind and their bulls’ heads!”

A young boy ran up to him, all covered with soot and tar.

“Myrovych’s gone! And Khodemchuk! And Nechyporenko!”

“What about Holoborodko?”

“He’s just answered... from the bunker.”

“I’ll get him, the swine! Even there! Get out of here! You’ve got to live, and produce children! Tell them in Block One and Two: they should switch in the emergency system, at once, hear me?! Else they’ll blow up, along with the whole town! Block Three is being stopped. Off with you, I tell you!”

“And you?”

“I’ll turn off the switches first. I won’t die before I lay my hands on Holoborodko, and Puzach...” Dmytro pushed the boy out into the corridor and dashed to the energy panel on the top floor.

After a few flights of stairs he had to stop in front of a breach in the wall where you could see the ruined reactor. Firemen were mounting extendible stairs, their helmets a sinister red from the graphite flames. Through the crackle of fire and the whistle of steam, their hoarse voices could be heard:

“C’me on! Pull it!”

“Join the hoses, quick!”

“Hot tar trickling behind the collar. No radiation here—tar burning us, blast it! Fire and tar!”

“Give us water. Or has it all gone into your pants? I’ll show it to you when we’re through here!” It was the voice of Hryhorii, who had already climbed to the very top of the reactor wall.

Dmytro wanted to cry out to the firemen they were moving into the very jaw of the reactor, straight into radiation, they should cut off the fire from Block Three, but his voice produced no more than a morbid groan. He slumped down on the landing. A shiny pencil, the dosimeter dropped out of his breast pocket and rolled downstairs.

He groped for the edge of the breach in the wall, clutched a sharp projection, and slowly drew himself up. He began to cough, trying to take a deeper breath because a feeling of sickness was rising in his throat, but the radioactive gases irritated his throat even more.

He could see through the breach that the lid of the reactor had caved in bearing the uranium-graphite rods, but the firemen on top of the collapsed wall were trying to extinguish the flames, pouring water into the very jaws of the graphite fire.

“What are you doing? It’s suicide...” He made a superhuman effort, his voice gurgled in his throat, then broke out in a thin wheeze: “It’s radiation! You’re mad! Cut off the fire from Number Three! Number Three-ee-eee! What’re you doing? Come down...”

Somebody in the ruins of the reactor did hear him. Somebody’s shadow stopped. Hryhorii’s voice was heard:

“Mykola! Where are you? Bro-o-th-er!” The concrete walls flung the sounds forth and back, then emitted them into space. There was so much passion in them, so much pain that they seemed to reach the town, and Horodyshche.

Dmytro began to make his difficult way down the stairs. He stopped, hanging for a while on the railing, and then rolled down, hitting jutting stones, then scrambled up again. He was feeling sick, his throat was burning, his head dizzy.

Groping along the wall he finally reached the emergency phone, took off the receiver and, clutching it, remained suspended on the thick flex.

“Listen! Tell them the lid of the block... is ripped off... The back wall... too.. Radioactive steam... uranium... graphite... gases... flung into the air... lethal radiation... Call the firemen off. R-adiation... Look for Myrovych... Khodemchuk... Holoborodko I’ll find myself... even in the neuter world...”

The receiver slipped from his hand, he collapsed in the telephone booth.

An uncontrollable fit of vomiting shook him, his hands went black, his face an earthen color, expressionless, only his eyes seemed still alive reflecting the emergency lights which kept flashing up in the corridor.

38

Olesia was trying to wake Roman. She couldn’t make out whether he was asleep with his face in the wormwood, or pretended to be.

“Roman! Darling! Get up! What’s the matter with you? My heart is breaking! Something has happened over there. It’s father’s shift. Get up, Roman, dear. How can you sleep? What if something has happened at the station... with father, with all of them...”

“In the army the sergeant-major wouldn’t let me sleep, now it’s you. A man must have a rest after this. It’s physiology. The woman ought to know and consider it. Especially if she studies medicine...”

“I’m studying to be a surgical nurse. We haven’t been taught this. Come on, my soldier. Get up. Later on you’ll teach me all you’ve heard and learned in the army, but get up now. We’ve got to go to town. My heart tells me—something has happened to father! What’s happened to him? I’m terribly worried!”

She turned him round and stroked his hair, his face, kissed him, lifted his head, and shook it.

“I implore you: if everything’s all right we’ll come here again and stay till morning, and I’ll do whatever you want me to do. But let us go now, Roman, I’ll die of horrible premonitions if we don’t.”

39

The director, the chief engineer, and their wives were in the director’s flat. Puzach was standing by the couch, talking over the phone. Iurko was trying to pull on a pair of pants that director’s wife had handed out to him, but couldn’t get his right leg in. He was hopping on one leg shouting:

“Give us some sunflower oil! It takes the smell away!”

Puzach was yelling into the phone:

“It can’t be true! It couldn’t possibly happen! It’s a lie! You’re panic mongers! As to the situation with radioactivity—report to me only. I’ll be there straightaway, the chief engineer is right here. We’re coming. It’s all lies! You’re just scared out of your wits. You’re not to report before I come!”

The two men quickly swallowed some sunflower oil, straight from the bottle, and wiped their fatty chins.

“Your damned work again!...” the director’s wife drawled.

“Shut up, you idiot! We could have had the celebration at home! Nature, nature she needed... If it’s true we’ll be famous indeed, Iurko, the world over, we and your Holoborodko!”

“Why mine, why not yours?” said the chief engineer huffily.

“Close the ventilation windows! And don’t leave the house! Don’t let the children go out... in case it’s true. Take a tablet of potassium iodide, and give one each to the children... In case it’s true... I don’t believe it!” Puzach took another sip of oil and put on his coat that his wife was holding for him.

“How are we to know what’s happened? Eh? The children are with us!”

“I’ll yell from there and you’ll hear. You just keep listening!” Puzach replied, indicating that he wanted to be left alone.

40

Doctors carrying the stretchers were running along the corridors of the atomic station. Towards them, also at a run, came other doctors with a stretcher on which lay a man lethally affected with radiation and burns. His suit was scorched. His face bloody, covered with burns. His parched lips were moving trying to say something, but nobody cared at this moment whether it was “mother,” or “water,” or “life”.

One of the doctors carrying his stretcher managed to tell those coming towards him:
“Behind the second landing, by the telephone. Quick!”

41

The underground bunker of the atomic power station. A low concrete ceiling showing damp patches. Piles of clean working clothes for the employees: white, black, grey. An elderly woman was distributing them to men and women who had been summoned to come—dosimeterists, engineers, operators.

“Sign for what you take, dears, sign for it, take the slips yourselves. I’m handing it out without orders, and I earn ninety rubles a month. Take what you need, only sign for it... I’ll have to account for it. Ah, what a misfortune...”

“What’s happened here will be talked and written about for a long time to come, Mother. There won’t be enough paper...” said a young man with a thick beard.

Men and women were changing right there, in the hall, unashamed of each other, paying no attention to anybody.

In a far corner of another hall in the bunker, a little smaller than this, Holoborodko was sitting in front of several telephones, wearing a gauze respirator and a new white outfit. By the table stood Nechyporenko, looking pale and bewildered.

“Go and look for Myrovych! And don’t come back without him, you son of a bitch! Why did you leave your duty post? Where is my brother Mykola Myrovych? What am I to say to his wife, his brothers, his mother? Tell me, you deserter!”

“Send a dosimeterist with me! It’s hundreds of roentgens there, sure death! You’re sending me to senseless death! I’m only twenty-seven...”

“Take whoever you like, but remember: you have to find Myrovych!”

The telephone rang. Holoborodko lifted the receiver.

“Holoborodko! Deputy chief. Yes. The emergency system gave out at the moment the Block was stopped. A heat explosion. No, this is all bunkum. Panic. An admissible emission into the atmosphere. Victims? Good heavens, no! The director and chief engineer will be here presently, and everything will be settled. I couldn’t tell, it’s their business. Yes, they’re coming. I’ve summoned them...”

42

Natalka was changing in a corner of the room, hiding behind the backs of other women. Nechyporenko spotted her at once.

“Natalka! Holoborodko ordered you to accompany me to the turbine hall. Quick!” he said tying his new respirator.

“I haven’t got a dosimeter,” she answered calmly.

The woman behind whose back she was changing, said:

“Nobody has one. Somebody has removed the key to the room where they are kept. The guard says it was Holoborodko, but he says he never took it, never even saw it. It couldn’t be otherwise, the situation here being what it is.”

“We must force the door,” cried the bearded young man excitedly.

“Holoborodko is expecting the director and the chief engineer.”

A girl in a light summer dress flew into the bunker. Her face looked frightened, her lipstick smeared all over it, she wits trembling as in a fever.

“Oh, God, what a ghastly sight, the man they carried to the ambulance car! Ghastlier than a corpse! Burnt all over. Orderlies running forth and back, with stretchers... I’m not going in, I’m afraid, I can’t bear the sight of blood...”

“Quiet, you hussy! You ought to have become a janitress, or a ticket collector in a cinema, or gone to a dressmaking establishment—but no, you wanted to be a dosimeterist. Fine job, isn’t it? You wriggle your behind before your bosses, you do your nails during working hours, and jabber about men!” droned the woman who had screened Natalka, loudly but without malice.

Nechyporenko had heard the girl, and at once rushed into Holoborodko’s room.

“Myrovych’s found! They’ve taking him to hospital. He’s alive.”

“Have you seen him?”

“With my own eyes. Terribly burnt. But... alive! The orderlies just carried him past. He’s on his way to hospital. Let’s force the dosimeter room door... There’s not a single dosimeter.”

“Mind your own business. You should have turned on the emergency switch a few minutes earlier! And me, fighting for your flat at the Trade Union Committee!”

“But you weren’t there, and you’d left no instructions...”

“I was. Please remember it once and for all! I was at the chief’s office. You might have thought of it and phoned... But you were reading a crime story, you oaf!”

43

The radioactive mushroom above the atomic station had spread over half the sky, and now looked like an ordinary heavy cloud that was slowly sliding westwards, towards Byelorussia, the direction in which a gentle wind was blowing, almost unnoticeable on earth.

Chunks of uranium rod lay scattered at a fairly wide radius around the station, flung there by the explosion. They were like bright candles—in the grass, on concrete and asphalt, on roofs of industrial buildings, in deep ruts cut by lorries and filled with liquid dirt. These puddles bubbled and boiled, and out of them crawled frogs, crawled with difficulty, half dead, and anyway, unable to escape from the danger. They had no more strength either to move or croak.

Anglers in the centre of the canal hurried to drive their inflatable boat towards the shore.

Buses, ambulances, fire brigade cars from neighboring districts rushed to the square outside the atomic station. One of the fire brigade cars rammed its bumper into Holoborodko's Zhiguli, denting his boot, but continued on its way towards the burning reactor without stopping.

People were running towards the exit gate, jumping over the chunks of uranium and graphite hurled there by the explosion. Who could imagine that these smoldering fragments were radiating deadly danger? They had never seen anything like it before. So how were they to know? Somebody caught his shoe on one of them and ran on.

Four hobbled kolkhoz horses were standing in the meadow, behind the canal. They had drawn dose to one another gazing indifferently at bustling humanity. A frightened foal was whinnying into the night.

Cars were rushing through the streets: militia cars, ambulances, service cars, private cars. They moved along nervously, violating traffic rules, braking abruptly, stopping in the middle of the road to pick up acquaintances and rushing on again. This ceaseless movement in the midst of night conveyed a sense of extreme alarm, of catastrophe casting its shadow on the town—something irreparable had happened, but yet only a few people knew it. The town was asleep. Now and again, somebody would look out sleepily from a balcony, or a window, a light would go up and go out again: whatever had got into people at this early hour?

44

Maria and Fedir were standing on the threshold, gazing intently towards the town, beyond the wood. Alone with Fedir Maria would talk aloud all the same, and he usually understood her. Sometimes without even looking at her face and lips. Now she was also talking as though he could hear.

“They seem to have put it out. It's smoldering. It isn't the way a house or a risk burns, Fedir, it must be oil or gas. Do you think Hryhorii is on duty, or is he gadding around somewhere? That girl who came on father's funeral day, she's beautiful, isn't she, Fedir?”

He looked into her eyes, he hadn't got all she had said. She repeated her question, and he nodded vigorously, approvingly, and put up his thumb.

“Once Hryhorii told me how they were putting out a fire on a petrol pump and he hadn't been able to remove the smell of petrol from his body, not even with eau-de-Cologne. Something's burning down over there, but the worst is over now. With God's help, all may be well Nine days ago at this very hour your father left us. His soul is still here, in Horodyshche. Floated above us, taking leave, preparing for the way. He may be right here between you and me, listening to us, but unable to say anything. The soul is mute, my boy, like you.”

Fedir remained standing where he was, while his mother went indoors, struck a match, and lit a candle that she placed on the table in a glass of wheat flour.

The little white pup slipped into the house between Fedir's legs. He seemed to be escaping from something, seeking protection. Noticing him Maria took a piece of sausage from the fridge, threw it to him, but he only sniffed at it, wagged his tail and looked at her with devotion. As if to beg: don't drive me away.

Let the candle burn—it was lit by a mother’s hand. A token of remembrance for her husband, though perhaps now it was burning for both the father and the son, Mykola, and maybe for many more... Maria had lit it—let it burn...

It was the only light to burn in Horodyshe that night. The only one.

“Sleep, Fedir. I won’t be able to fall asleep. The pillow feels like a stone to my head. I’ll catch up on all my sleepless nights in the world to come. Go to bed, son, we’re facing a hard day. Sleep, I’ll find some work to do. A night like this can turn you into an old woman—but that’s something not for me to fear. Only I mustn’t die yet, not yet.”

45

The motorcycle carrying Roman and Olesia leaped onto the bridge over the railway line. The night town lay spread out before them, lights of cars dashing along the streets, the atomic power station looming behind the river. Above the station rose, almost motionless, a bluish red tongue of fire. Ambulances, sounding their sirens and flashing their lights, were rushing towards it; buses, private cars.

Olesia yelled into Roman’s ear:

“Turn towards the station! To the right! Don’t spare the motor!”

With the wind in his mouth, he cried back: “Can’t hear! The helmet...”

She dug her slender fingers feverishly into his shoulders, shaking him with all her might, pointing towards the station, and he turned his motorcycle where she wanted it to go.

Olesia rushed into the bunker. She peered into the faces of the men in white service clothes, but could not see her father.

“You oughtn’t to be here, girlie. Else who will give us our grandchildren?” moaned the elderly woman who was handing out the clothing, sadly shaking her head.

“My father Mykola Myrovych, is he alive?” she gasped.

“Ask Holoborodko. my pet. He knows everything. Even where the key is to the dosimeter room...”

She was facing Holoborodko. He recognized her, had seen her in the village, and in town. She knew him too, he had come from the same parts as her parents.

He was dumbfounded. The girl must have seen him in her flat. A fine kettle of fish. What with Mykola... What a moment to choose for seduction. Could it be that the girl knew?

“Uncle Vasyl. where’s my father?”

“He’s alive. A slight burn on his arms, he’s in hospital with it. He’ll be all right for your wedding. And it’s all settled about your hospital appointment. The flat, too... you’ll get it... You’re as good as my niece, aren’t you...”

“I begged my mother not to interfere. Don’t worry about me. You’ve got children of your own...”

She rushed into the large hall and towards the exit.

46

Odarka woke and jumped out of bed. She looked at the clock. Past three. So she hadn't overslept. She straightened the blankets on Ruslan's and Lida's beds.

Her husband's legs had slipped off the divan. She lifted them, distressed at their terrible thinness, and covered them up. Then she refilled his empty mug with cold kvass. Hastily, she washed, threw her quilted coat over her shoulders, pulled on her rubber high-topped boots. Stepped outside, carrying a broom and a large metal dust-pan. Pulled out the hose, opened the tap, and started on her janitor's chores.

The even swish of her broom could be heard everywhere, but it annoyed nobody, on the contrary, people found it soothing, as though it were saying: sleep, my good people, while I'm doing my job; I love to do it at night, so as not to irritate you; so that you should face a clean town when you get up. I like to clean my yard during the night, because in the morning the children wake and my husband, and I've got to take care of them...

47

Roman put on the brakes outside the hospital building. Olesia jumped off, caught her foot, and her red helmet rolled off her head and bounced into the centre of the road, so that the militia car that was driving at full speed just about managed to dodge it.

"I'll go and return the motorcycle to the captain. He may be needing it right now... I'll come back to you. I'll find you... where your father is."

Olesia no longer heard him. She was running across the yard that was jammed with ambulance cars, towards the entrance.

Roman drove into the middle of the road, swooped up the helmet, and swept on, sighing with relief. At last he was alone with the motorcycle, nobody to yell in his ear. Freedom! He had loved... back in the wood.

As he was turning the corner the helmet again bounced to the ground. He turned, snatched it up, and the Java rushed forwards with such a roar that sparks showered from its silencer.

"Freedom!" he cried again.

48

There was no light in the director's office, but the Block was burning, and dawn was beginning to break. Puzach had taken off the receivers of all telephones on his table in order to hear what Holoborodko and Nechyporenko had to say—people were ringing nonstop, and what could he tell them before he had listened to those responsible.

Approaching the station, he was gradually realizing that the lid of the reactor had indeed been whipped off, and yet he would not believe it, he still hoped for a marvel. He had always been taught, even as a student, that our reactors were safe, their shielding reliable, and if need be there was an emergency system as a backup. Had any one doubted it they would have called him a provocateur. The after-effect of drink was still bucking him up, distorting his vision of reality,

and even when he actually saw the ruins of the reactor he still doubted that what had never been deemed possible had actually occurred. Perhaps, it could have happened somewhere else, but not here where he was in charge, not here, not on this day. Perhaps he had better register his leave as from the day before?

A white gauze respirator was covering Holoborodko's lips and nose, and in the twilight it looked as though his mouth were stuck up with alabaster.

"What was it? I can't hear what you're saying," Puzach uttered as though weighing down every word, and gazing out of the window.

"Everything was going according to plan. Palyvoda took over the shift, Nechyporenko had no questions, he started reading his crime story..." Holoborodko lowered his respirator, otherwise his voice sounded as though he were talking through his nose, and breathing was difficult. "I don't know where Palyvoda was... I was at reception, checking on my experiment once more. Nechyporenko had been either engrossed in his book or dozed off..."

"You were not there, Holoborodko! I telephoned reception, and you were not there! You think you've found a scapegoat, want to palm it off on me! I started looking for you as soon as the temperature jumped. I tried every single 'phone, I wasted the minutes I should have used to turn on emergency! You were not there!" Nechyporenko exclaimed and withdrew to the corner of the office.

"Be a man, at least at this critical moment, you miserable coward!" Holoborodko said in a dead voice, pulling on his respirator again, forgetting that he was holding a cigarette in his hand.

The chief engineer was pacing the room, and gradually one comforting thought crystallized itself out of the jumble of thoughts in his mind: I am not to blame, there's the director, who had made the decision, there is Holoborodko who had started all this muddle, there is Nechyporenko who had lost self-control at the critical moment; what a stroke of luck that I never authorized Holoborodko's experiment. I'm clear, I've left no traces. Puzach will wriggle out, he'll see the minister, and make use of his connections, and they'll punish those who are guilty. He heaved a sigh of relief, and concentrated on his insides: he felt a little queer, must be the sunflower oil, or too much of that barbeque.

"Be silent, you're behaving like market-wives! What is the level of radiation? In the halls of the Block? In the administration building? Around the station?" he asked looking at Nechyporenko.

"It's Holoborodko's responsibility," Nechyporenko snapped.

"I didn't want to sow panic," Holoborodko said. "Here's the key to the dosimeter room. I was waiting for you," he added, addressing the director and the chief engineer. "Now we can start measuring. I didn't want to act on my own responsibility, without you." Holoborodko put the key on the director's desk.

"As to the cause of the accident, we'll go into it later... or perhaps... others will get it straight for us. Now we've got to save ourselves, I mean we've got to save the people. Iurko! Send out a group with dosimeters to the Block! Another to the territory where burning fragments have dropped. The results you will report to me personally. Only to me!"

"What about the town? We ought to measure the radiation level in the town, people will be up in some three hours, children will be going to school," Nechyporenko ventured.

“You should have thought of it when you were sitting at your panel. Of course, we’ll measure the radiation level in the town, too. You can’t hide a wolf in your coat pocket. We’ll be famous all over the country. And if they get wind of it abroad, we’ll gain world renown. What the deuce made us agree to Holoborodko’s experiment? How to report the whole business to the higher-ups? I ask you.” Puzach moaned, and his despair grew so tangible that it seemed to have acquired flesh and blood in this gloomy office by the light of the dawn and the glow of the conflagration. A spring fly between the panes issued a troubled buzz, like a plane in the sky.

“Couldn’t we cover it over with something? Get all our boys, and cover it up without outside help? What d’you think?” said the chief engineer, who had persuaded himself of his complete innocence, so that his voice sounded level, almost cheerful, as though he were at an ordinary briefing.

“Of course, sure, we could cover it with hats, and rotten tomatoes, and wet blankets and coats... Enough! Get the dosimeters ready!” No sooner had Puzach replaced the receiver than the telephone rang:

“Yes, Puzach listening. Unfortunately, very serious indeed, no use pretending. The Block has blown up. Radioactive emission into the atmosphere. Registered in Kyiv and Moscow, you said? I’ll inform the Ministry myself. I can report in half an hour. Yes, I see, of course. But we were preparing for reactor shut-down, not for an accident. Flaws in the project. Absence of another protective circuit. No, no, according to preliminary information the town is absolutely clean. No question of evacuation. Our planet is large enough, the wind will disperse the cloud, and we’ll fill up the reactor with sand. Now, don’t exaggerate. No need for you to come, you can save your strength, I’ll report myself. People are showing great heroism. No, don’t hurry with conclusions. Can you imagine what will happen in town if the children don’t go to school?... All right, but don’t forget that a few hours ago I was heading a model station. My team will see it through!”

Puzach flung down the receiver. The empty office room had never struck him as being so enormous. The fly was buzzing between the window panes like an overloaded bomber.

49

There was a tense atmosphere in the hospital admission room—groans, shuffling of feet, hurried running of doctors and nurses. They, like medical staff everywhere, were used to the daily routine of human suffering: the pain, the broken bones, the lethal wounds and death itself. But what they were witnessing at the hospital today was something else—from some other time perhaps, from a different reality which suddenly appeared before them... The doctors were frightened and somewhat at a loss.

The majority of the new arrivals had no gaping wounds, no pain, no bleeding, none cried out for help; what they had was a look of doom, a consuming weariness, an indifference that numbed the heart. Why did these young lads seem to grow old before your eyes? Why had strong men given up the struggle for life? Why was there no pain or sadness or hope in their eyes? Only resignation, and a total lack of interest, as with the very old. What was it? What strange galaxy had they been to that had sapped all their vitality and powers of resistance in a moment? What

medical specialists were now to treat them surgeons or psychiatrists, therapists or narcologists? And what were they to do?

The head doctor, Volodymyr Masliuk, was expected to arrive any minute, and hopefully, would know what to do. Was it really radiation disease, that they had only heard lectures about, but had never had to deal with, thank God, for the practice with those members of the reactor staff who occasionally received too soon the permissible radiation doze was to whisk them away to the specialized clinic in Moscow.

The corridor was overflowing, but they kept bringing in more. Some could walk unsteadily, holding on to the wall, others were helped in by the half-cured alcoholics urgently discharged to make room for the new arrivals. Then there were the stretcher cases, carried in by doctors and orderlies.

The admission room was filling up fast. All the chairs and beds were occupied, leaving some men standing, clinging to the wall, others lying on stretchers, or on spare mats on the floor. Most had greenish-grey faces, beaded with cold sweat.

The worst cases vomited endlessly, on the floor when they couldn't make it to the big basin in the middle of the room. They looked up guiltily in between fits of vomiting.

Dmytro Palyvoda felt a little less sick for a moment and tried to smile at the young girl in white, but the smile was strained, like a grin of a madman. The girl covered her face with her hands, burst into muffled sobs, and slowly slumped to the floor. Nobody paid any attention to her.

Dmytro's frozen smile vanished and his face suddenly came alive. He got up, gathered up the unconscious girl, put her in his chair and went out into the corridor. Could it be the end of his disease then—nothing but a momentary shock, over and done with?

The head doctor came running in, pulling on his white coat as he ran.

“Get ready the blood purifiers! Put the patients in the narcology wards! I'm calling in specialists from Moscow. All the staff are to take iodide tablets!”

At that moment, amidst the heavy breathing, the dragging feet, the ringing of telephones, the banging of doors, came a voice unnaturally high-pitched. It was Dmytro singing:

Once I jobbed for our good landlord,
Couple summers back that,
What I got for all my labors
Was just one little duck...

Metro's voice cracked and there came a sound like steam hissing from a chink, but he sang on, making his way out of the corridor.

“Stop him!” yelled the head doctor. “It's the euphoria! The latent stage of radiation sickness.” And he made a dash for Dmytro.

Then I jobbed for our good landlord,
The summer after that...

Dmytro tripped, but Masliuk was there to catch him.

What I got for all my labors
Was just one little goose...

A young girl in jeans and a grass-stained white sweater rushed up and helped to drag Dmytro to the nearest ward.

“Go take your iodide and put on your uniform,” Masliuk called after her. It was Olesia. “And get somebody from intensive care!”

More arrivals... A fireman in a canvas overall, carried in by a man and a little old woman. His face was deadly pale and his eyes stared unblinking upwards. Olesia examined the fireman’s face. No, it was not her father.

A tall and lanky doctor from intensive care rushed into the ward where Dmytro lay singing.

And my duck goes a-waddling...

The senselessly rollicking song did something to the doctors. It was much worse than the groans of the dying or any cry for help. The young nurse, who had fainted again, had to be carried out of the room:

“Get away, girlie, don’t stick around here,” said an old nurse’s aide with a big wart on her nose, speaking to Olesia. “It does not matter for us, the old ones so much.”

“I’m looking for my father. He’s got to be here.”

“You won’t be able to find anyone. It’s such a mess, it’s a madhouse. There’s some you can’t recognize at all. Go get a uniform, or they’ll have you out of here. Better still, run away home!”

Another patient was being brought in by two young fellows. One staggered, about to drop the stretcher. Olesia and the nurse’s aide rushed up to help.

The man on the stretcher was wearing heavy army boots, jeans spotted with tar and a tunic burned in many places, his white shirt showing through. The lad they had relieved was leaning against a wall and vomiting.

Olesia’s gaze was fixed on the big tarry boot swaying next to her face. It was still warm from the fire, and smelled of rubber. The stretcher was very heavy, but she couldn’t give up, she had to get that man to the ward.

She gathered courage to look at his face.

Slightly swollen sensuous lips...

Eyebrows that met above the bridge of his nose with a deep line between them.

Sharply cleft chin...

Dark curly hair that stuck to his forehead. . .

The nose, with its slight hump...

Uncle Hryhorii!

Hryhorii opened his eyes, as if answering Olesia’s stare.

Did he recognize me? Or did he think he was dreaming?

That stretcher! Only a few more steps to the ward now.

“It’s me, Uncle Hryhorii. I’m here with you. Father’s here, too!”

“Put radiation casualties’ clothes in bags, every single thing! Or else we’ll all be lying like them by morning! Immediately discharge patients who can walk and send them home. Why haven’t you taken the potassium iodide? Get out all the reserves and phone for more!” commanded Masliuk and disappeared into one of the wards.

Olesia thought she saw Uncle Hryhorii smile and move his lips.

50

An apricot twig in a glass of water stood on the desk. And on the curtain rod sat a frightened sparrow, who had somehow got into the atomic station telephone exchange room.

The pale operator, her hair wildly disheveled, switched on the emergency battery, and the telephones came alive. The room was filled with the voice of the station director, talking to someone in a high-pitched voice.

“There mustn’t be any panic! See that all the phones out of town are shut off. No long-distance buses going out. And all roads have to be blocked. We don’t want the whole country to know, do we? A runaway reactor is one thing, but a runaway town... Well, you’re the town boss, so preventing a panic is your duty. We’ll pour sand on the reactor and get that fire down. The radiation level in the town is normal, no need to evacuate. The whole thing’ll be over by the holidays and we’ll be marching in the May Day parade. Your responsibility is the town, mine is only the atomic station. The rest is none of your business.”

The sparrow feebly fluttered to the floor and was silent, its head hanging, the beak open.

The operator sat with her head lolling on the desk, upsetting the glass with the apricot twig. Soon there was a little pool of water under her cheek.

The day before, her sister had finally moved into town from her poky one-room flat in Odessa. It had taken Lusia three years to get her to make up her mind, three years of campaigning, listing and re-listing all the advantages of living in the town of nuclear engineers—the clean river, woods full of mushrooms, pure air thick with ozone, the farmer’ market, and Kyiv right next door. To get all that for her one-room flat was a real bargain. To say nothing of the advantages of living close to each other.

Finally the sister gave in, and yesterday she moved over with her little girl and was now spending her first night in the new two-room flat. Next summer they were planning to sell their mother’s house in the village and have her move in with them... Now all their fine plans were dashed. The sister would wake up in the morning and curse her. But there was no going back to Odessa. No one would be willing to exchange now.

Somebody was screaming into the phone, but the operator was past hearing.

“Lusia, dear! Come on Lusia, where are you? Get the check point. They must tell the doctors there’s two more cases in the electricity shop. Where is that stupid girl? Are you deaf, or what? Actually, I seem to be sick myself...”

51

Odarka was carefully hosing the garden around her block of flats. To get a sprayed-out jet she had to press the nozzle with her fingers, which by now had gone all numb. Time and again she had nagged Stepan to make her a proper metal nozzle, but he had never found the time.

She washed the sandpit frame, the wooden-horsed swing, then watered the hedge and the flower beds.

It was only nine days since father passed away, but his death already seemed a thing of the past. Life went on, she had to clean the garden, get lunch for Stepan and the kids and then go down to her mother's, and that was that for today. The garden washed and cleaned, her kids properly scrubbed and fed, Stepan still sober, the big table at mother's laid for the traditional ninth-day memorial dinner—with all the family gathered round it—that was happiness enough, for nothing could bring father back anyway. A real and concrete kind of happiness.

Odarka was unaware of any other kind. She had her work, and it was there to be done. Once it was done, she was happy. It was simple. She liked the town that gave her real and concrete things to do: when she woke up in the morning she didn't have to wait for any instructions—there was always the garden to be cleaned, and she readily set about her daily chores.

She was almost finished now—only the pavement outside to hose, and that would be all for the day.

Strange, there was something wrong with her throat. It felt sore and dry, she coughed and coughed again but nothing happened, and there was a funny metallic taste in her mouth. Just her luck, to come down with the flu, on father's memorial day.

She had another fit of coughing and did up the top button of her quilted jacket. Here she was, with a stupid cold on such a warm morning. And yet, come what may, she must go down to Horodyshe. A hot cup of tea would pick her up, and nobody would notice anything. She knew perfectly well that if she didn't go, Stepan would promptly take off to join his drinking companions.

52

The early anglers were pedaling down to the river, their rods, tied to the bikes, were swinging up and down, as if the big bite was on already. The sky was grey and overcast—no chance of a good catch, but they were still looking forward to their first fishing trip after the long winter break. They had hoped for a better day, though, for the night before the sky was clear, with lots of stars...

A little motor-launch had stopped at the pier, rubbing its tyre-faced flank against it. A small group of village people spilled out, loaded with sacks, baskets, and old suitcases tied up with string. When the motor of the launch died down and the river was still again, the air was full of the pungent smell of spring onions, cucumbers and home-made sausage. Looking forward to the Saturday market, with its challenge and excitement, plus the joy of making an extra ruble, the farmers were enthusiastic and talkative. They stood around with their wares—new radishes, greenhouse gherkins and tomatoes, fresh pork and veal—all these welcome additions to the holiday meal and thus likely to sell very nicely.

“Radishes are a bit on the soft side this year, too much air in the middle. . .”

“Go easy on the fertilizers, that’s the trick. Put in more manure, perfect for radishes.”

“My neighbor, he’s giving shots to his tomatoes. A regular surgeon. Never goes out without his syringe now. And the tomatoes, they get ripe in a couple of days, some even burst open.”

“That’s modern science for you. Progressive technology what the Food Program needs. Who ever heard of eating tomatoes in April before?”

“Eating? Have you been eating any yourself, now? I bet the whole lot goes straight to the market. Even the kids don’t get any, except if some are going bad anyway.”

“My girl likes tangerines. Give her tangerines any time. And the boy, well, he wants a Japanese cassette recorder, so what with the tangerines and the recorder, they don’t really need my tomatoes, do they?”

“My boy promised to come down in his car and take me to the market,” worried an old woman in a nylon wind-breaker. “But he’s not here, I can’t think why. And there’s no bus, either. I can’t carry that bull all the way there, can I?”

“You shouldn’t have killed it! He would have walked there on his own four feet” jeered a big man with a huge suitcase on his shoulder. “Shouldn’t have got your boy the car, either, if you want to know. Look how much he cares about you now. I’ll get everything sold by the time he turns up for you. Mark my words, that car was a big mistake,”

53

Natalka rushed into the Director’s office, panting. She pulled off her respirator, which had been making it hard to breathe. Her black overall was soaking and stuck to her body. Her silver Aquarius pendant was dangling over her jacket. (Hryhorii used to joke: The Water-Carrier will be a fireman’s wife.)

Puzach was yelling into the receiver:

“You just do as you’re told. The pills are in my desk drawer, keep the children in, close all the windows. Iurko and me, we’re alive, but very busy. That’s all now.”

Natalka wanted to take off the dosimeter, but the old knotted strap was too short—she couldn’t get her head out. So, with the heavy counter tube under her arm, she stood before Puzach, like a dark creature of the underworld. A pale girl, with fair hair sticking out of her black cap, her lipstick smeared, her eyelids heavy and red. Puzach shrank from her, pressing deeper into his chair, and adjusting the receiver on the telephone, just in case.

“I’ve gone through three districts. Only three, but that’s enough to tell. Even this old meter, that doesn’t show the right figures, proves we’ve got to evacuate—right away! We mustn’t lose a minute! And when I was on the bridge, you know, the Kyiv road, the meter went right off the scale. The four other girls went home to warn their families. You have to use the radio and tell people not to go outdoors and to get ready to evacuate. They’ll understand, just tell them the truth. And you have to speak yourself, it’s the only way. Why have you blocked the roads? It’s a crime! The children will never forgive you twenty thousand children! They’d damn you for years to come!... And the firemen, are there any bad cases there?”

“They have themselves to blame, for going on top of the wall and exposing themselves, like some bloody fools. They weren’t born yesterday. Why, even their pay comes from nuclear energy. And this fire, they knew it wasn’t in a stable or a field of grain !”

“What about you? Do you think you’re in charge of an atomic power station or a brick factory? Though, come to that, you are no good for a brick factory either!” And Nataalka ran for the door, her high heels clicking on the stairs.

The dosimeter kept swinging against her chest, sending a dull pain through her body. She dropped the tube, had to stop to pick it up, and ran on. Outside she saw an ambulance starting and just had time to jump in before the doctors shut the door. There was nowhere to sit down, but some man, pulled her down on his lap, without a word, his small, thin body like a teenager’s, torn with his coughing.

54

The pajamas that Hryhorii got in the hospital were old and too small for him, and his arms and legs stuck out comically. On a little settee in the admission room he showed a young nurse the short sleeves and trouser legs, doing his best to smile, but the effort brought on a painful grimace and another fit of sickness. Olesia only just managed to put a plastic bag in his hands.

“What’s your name?” the nurse asked when he straightened up.

“What’s yours, beautiful? Imagine a rose like you, in our town! Incredible! Have you got a boy friend? Is he good to you? I bet he isn’t. Hackers, most of them, like season jobbers. Good-for-nothing grabbers, the whole lot of them.”

Olesia was buttoning up the jacket of her uncle’s pajamas, pulling down the sleeves, wiping the sweat on his forehead.

“His name is Myrovych. Hryhorii Myrovych. Thirty-five years old. Captain in the fire-brigade. Unmarried.”

“I’m a captain, but doing a major’s job. So I’m really a major, just a matter of getting an extra bar to the insignia. Think hard, beautiful! Want to marry a major, with no other commitments? Think twice before saying no. Give me a chance. I’m as tender as a dandelion, you could blow me away with one puff...”

Hryhorii’s flirting was grotesque. And with the groans of the sick, the mad to and fro of the doctors, the cries and sobbing outside the hospital window, it was unbearable.

He was about to say something else, and began vomiting again—Olesia was not quick enough with the plastic bag.

“It’s euphoria. You get it at the initial stage! Quick, do an infusion, before he’s too far gone,” commanded a woman doctor with a heavy masculine face.

“Who, me? I’m not going anywhere. Such a girl, and they want to take me away...” But instead of a passionate look, Hryhorii produced only a pitiful, uncertain leer.

55

The front door of the town soviet was propped open. Clouds of cigarette smoke were coming out of the windows. You could see them even in the early morning mist. It was going to be a hot day.

The joggers were already in the square, near the tulip bed, the starting point of their daily routine—from the square to the woods then a workout and back again. They were still half asleep and not taking much in, each one denouncing the whole fitness craze to himself. Yet you didn't want to die young, did you, so you had to do something. By the way, what were they doing in the town hall? Why were the lights on in the "White House"? What was up, anyway?

"No petrol vouchers for public transport! Tell the fuel stations to fill them up without them. Tell them that today insistence on normal procedure will be regarded as an act of sabotage! I've got no time to listen to your reasons, just go ahead and do what you're told! I'll sign everything later! I'll see you if we're still around. Go on, fill 'em up!..."

"A door-to-door campaign? Iodide pills? Won't the people panic? No, I'd better have a word with the boss. Not now, though, he's talking to a general from Moscow... Without my OK? Yes, but remember, you never phoned me, and I didn't know about it..."

"I've got no idea. It's not my responsibility. There's a commission in to investigate the accident, the Union deputy minister is already here. . ."

"Get out there and liven up the trade! Have all your stocks out and set up new stands. Beer and ice-cream too. It's the boss's orders. No, you can't have it in writing, there's no time for that. You've got to take my word for it. Now do as you're told..."

"What's the radiation situation in the town? No, that's not good enough, the general wants figures and a break-down by districts. What are you talking about, man? What do you mean you're understaffed? Only a week ago I asked you to take somebody on, and you said there were no vacancies. Now, I'm afraid, we'll have plenty... the directorship, too. Well, the general's on his way down. The anti-radiation unit is quite near, too, just outside Ivanhorod. No, no, I'm not interested, save it for your statement, please."

"Block the Byelorussian Road. The patrols are on their way. And watch out for the scum, they're always the first to surface in any storm, and they'll be trying to sneak out."

"How many cases, did you say? A hundred and seven? Palyvoda? Died in intensive care? Volodymyr, listen, boy, you've got to hold on a little more. The Moscow doctors will be with you any minute now. Levchenko is here, of course, hanging around the bosses, playing it safe. Lucky for you, to have him out of your way at a time like this. Look, have somebody put out the lists of patients, for wives and families, you know. Hold on now!"

"I'm dying for some tea... my throat... All right, give me a cigarette then. Haven't had one since I quit smoking."

"How did I know you're from the Ministry? There's no car anyway. Well, I'm sorry, but the general is using the only one I had."

"It'll take some time before we realize all the implications. But Puzach is just bluffing. I think it was bound to happen some day, everything snowballing like it was. Something had to give out. We're all to blame. Didn't we all close our eyes to things? Didn't we sweep them under the carpet? But atoms are funny They don't care about decisions and resolutions like some petty bureaucrats, who do as they're told, and never ask questions."

“Oh, come on, Serhii, we’ve got to do something. There’s no time for arguing now, we’ve got to act!”

“We’ve been acting far too long, Mikhail, acting without thinking.”

“The helicopters are here! Who’s going to load the sand? Oh, OK. Let the builders do it. Plenty of sand out on the beach. Bags? Make them, man. Use the cloth for the May Day banners. We won’t be needing them now, I guess. I have three kids too, and my mother and father are down for the holidays. I don’t know when I’ll see them all.”

“That was to be expected. He’s a deserter, that’s what he is. So you’ve got to take over, as of now. Right.”

“Third reactor’s okay. The firemen cut off the flames. Number Four is still out of control and the radiation is spreading. Nobody seems to know what to do.”

A column of army lorries carrying soldiers and militia officers came into the square, drowning out the voices in the town soviet office. A militia general came out of the front door of the building, with his tunic undone and cap a little off the proper angle.

56

Odarka’s husband strained his eyes, and the familiar green lampshade came into focus, then the sideboard with its rows of glasses, then his wife’s embroidery on the wall, and finally, a mug of kvass on the bedside table. Well, he was home, back in his bloody room! Thank God for kvass! Marvelous pickup, perfect for a hangover. A mug in the morning and by noon you’re your own self, ready to provide for yourself what’s needed. Grunting from time to time, he turned over and scratched his belly meditatively. Now, Odarka, didn’t she say there was something on today...? He’d have to sit there, with her next to him, jogging his elbow every time he reached for his glass... No, that won’t do. Besides, he had a little job the boss needed something done at his dacha, he’d promised to take him down in his car. The pay would be good, and there’d be a couple of drinks. Oh, things were looking up! As for the wife, she wouldn’t mind so much, not her. The first one was a terror—nag, nag, nag, like some bloody machine, till you pulled out the plug to make her stop. But Odarka was like a candle one puff and out she goes, just a wisp of smoke left. What else was she to do? She had a home, two kids, a man who’s smart and hardworking, too.

He finished the kvass and got dressed. Peering around like a burglar, he hurriedly put his tools into an old gas-mask container, and glanced out the window: well, she was through with the cleaning, and putting the hose away. Get a move on, Stepan, don’t miss your bloody chance... You have to be clever and give her the slip, or else, goodbye dacha, money and drinks. He left the flat, walked up to the next floor and stood waiting for his wife to let herself in and close the door behind her. Her father was dead anyway, he wouldn’t care if Stepan wasn’t there to remember him. Meanwhile there were those who were alive and needed him. Odarka looked over the garden she had cleaned. Seeing a plastic doll’s arm lying near the playground, she walked over, picked it up, wiped off the dust, first with the hem of her jacket, then with her handkerchief, and put it in her pocket. An arm was an arm, even though it was only a doll’s.

Just then, a car, brakes screeching, turned into the yard and a man ran out of the building, pulling on his coat. Must be somebody important, but Odarka didn't know who he was. Bound to be important, though, to have a car picking him up every morning. She heard snatches of dialogue between the man and the driver—"... the accident ... terrible thing ... evacuation ... casualties ... hospital overcrowded."

The car shot out a cloud of exhaust and was off.

Without knowing what she was doing, Odarka took the doll's arm out of her pocket, held it for some time and wiped it again. Then she looked up at her own windows.

Suddenly, she put the broken toy back and rushed towards the front door. The next moment, Stepan popped out of the door and pressing his body close against the wall so as not to be seen from the window, made his getaway.

Then he crossed the street and disappeared.

57

In the admission room of the hospital next morning the stream of patients had dwindled to a trickle. Ambulance drivers and doctors were exhausted, but still worried whether they haven't missed some casualties. Olesia, in a dirty uniform and cap that kept falling off her head, was mopping up vomit with a big rag, actually a piece of hospital blanket.

(Not very pleasant, is it? Too naturalistic for you? I know, it offends your sensibilities. Mine, too. But the doctors who went through it all insisted they had walked ankle-deep in vomit, that it was worse than blood, for it carried the "white death" with it. So, what's the verdict? What do we writers do? Tone it down, perhaps? Or get around it somehow. But there is no getting around it.)

Olesia was hard at it, rinsing out the cloth in the big basin, mopping everywhere, trying not to touch all those feet in slippers and canvas boots, the kind they wore at the power plant. The sweat streamed down her forehead, she closed her eyes and quite different scenes floated before her:

Pine tops against the starry sky...

The sleepy river with big fish playing...

Old Maria's face in the window...

Tall wormwood bending over her face, and Roman's hand pushing it away. Roman tries to kiss her, but the wormwood gets in his way again...

Her father, tired, his clothes smeared with tar, standing on the doorstep, smiling guiltily, preparing to catch it from mother...

"Where's that Lelechenko? He said he wanted a smoke, so I let him go out for one, he didn't seem too bad... Will you go and get him?"

At that moment, two burly doctors practically frog-marched a young man into the room. He was wearing civilian clothes. The man was kicking and trying to break loose.

The woman doctor took one look and backed away in horror. It was one of the ambulance drivers, with a mad look on his face, which was fearful and aggressive at the same time. One of the medics said, “Valerii is in shock and doesn’t seem to be coming out. We had a hard time catching him in the corridors down at the station. We had nothing to tie him down with. Give him a sedative, he’s violent.”

“Well, I never. He was such a quiet one... So hard to wake up when there was an emergency... Everything’s upside down. I wouldn’t be surprised if I went off my head myself...”

A nurse rushed in announcing:

“Lelechenko has gone off to the station! I saw him jump into a car. He was saying something about shutters... Goodness, is that you, Valerii? What’s the matter with you?”

But the young man didn’t even look her way, he was desperately trying to break loose, twisting around and biting the doctors’ hands.

Olesia was still doggedly mopping, making her way slowly between the feet. At the windows, women’s eyes, full of fear, were looking in. Is he there? Is my man, there? Eyes and faces, many faces, full of dread, clinging to their hope...

58

Roman really wanted to return the motorcycle to Hryhorii, but he’d lost his way in the town. All the buildings and yards looked the same. Cars tore up and down the streets with their headlights on against the lights and traffic. Some even climbed the curb to get round the others. He got the feeling they must be after him, chasing him like a hare. Finally he managed to break away and now sped down the highway, getting all he could out of the Java.

Sometimes he thought he could feel Olesia’s breath on his neck and her hands clutching his shoulders. In another moment they would get out of this maze to the safety, love and freedom they had been seeking.

There was a militia patrol on the bridge stopping all outgoing traffic. The road was blocked, and two or three dozen cars had collected. The drivers were arguing with the militia, each explaining the extra urgency of his trip, but the patrolmen were deaf and dumb. They pointed their batons the other way.

One militiaman saw the speeding motorcyclist coming and placed himself strategically in the middle of the lane. You never knew with these crazy guys, he might try to slip through.

Roman saw they were ready for him and his old fear returned, he could almost smell it—the fear of a hunted animal. With a screech of tires he slammed on the brakes, then turned round and headed back.

One of the car drivers, seeing it was hopeless to argue, swore under his breath, turned back, and began recalling other roads he knew and could try. When Roman looked back, he saw the car. It confirmed his worst fears—the militia were after him. What would he show them if he was stopped? He had no license, no documents, only two sticky pills—a gift from a Kazakh, who was keeping Roman’s civilian clothes for him, for he planned to put them on the moment he was out of the army, quite soon now, too. Then he would not have to salute every officer he met. In

return for Roman's leather jacket the Kazakh gave him a meal, a few drinks, a new crisp hundred-ruble note and the two pills, saying: "Life is hell. These are heaven. Take two one-way tickets to heaven." What if the militia found the damned pills?

He heard the second helmet fall and bounce away on the concrete road. By that time, his whole body was throbbing with a dull and dreadful emptiness. He didn't care any more. They could do what they liked. But he would think of something and get away all the same. He'd use his brains, thank God they were still there, them and the Java. But the pills, should he swallow them or get rid of them? Would it be heaven or hell?

59

With a telephone, we'd have known what was going on, Mykola would have called me, or I—him, and I wouldn't be so worried. When there was a chance to get a phone, without any waiting list, too, just by slipping a bribe to the right people, Liudmyla had said no, two hundred was too much, and Mykola agreed. He said they would be getting their telephone soon enough, together with the others at the atomic station. And now she had to beg that awful Holoborodko.

Liudmyla couldn't sleep that night. Her head buzzed with stupid everyday problems, and her guilty conscience was as unbearable as the whining of a blind puppy out in the frosty night. She felt an awful fear that Vasyl would talk, boasting to some of his pals. Why on earth had she done it? Why did she go to bed with him, just like that, like some cheap lay? What had she got out of it? What problem had she settled? True, he did make some promises, but only to get rid of her, she understood that perfectly well. There was no tenderness, no warmth. None of the passion she had hoped for... She felt as though it hadn't happened to her at all, as though she'd only been a witness. Had it really been her? Perhaps not. She was still the same, wasn't she? When Mykola got back, they would go down to Horodyshe and forget everything. As for Holoborodko, let him pull a few strings, get her a telephone, like he promised, also a cooperative flat, and that would be the end of the story, the last of this stupid business, forgotten and done with.

Feeling better in the morning, Liudmyla set about preparing young Taras for school.

Taras was eating his breakfast slowly and lazily, just to make her happy. He was half-heartedly cutting out odd bits of his fried egg, getting it to look like a big white flower with a yellow middle. But she wasn't looking, she was busy sewing a button on to his school jacket.

"Ask the teacher to let you go early, right after the third lesson. Tell her you've got to go with me to your grandfather's ninth-day memorial. And mind you, come straight home, no drawing on the pavement, all right? This week's record is bad enough as it is. Your father may have some use for his belt, after all."

"I'm not afraid of him... Mum, where's Lesia?"

"Gone to school."

"I put a drawing on her pillow, and it's still there."

"None of your business. She... slept with me, on the sofa. Want to be late for school? Out you go."

Oleksandr woke up when a reflected sunbeam got into his eyes. It was playing on his Gold Star Medal, which he wore on the lapel of his dark gray jacket. It took him back to his childhood, which was nice. He wished he hadn't had so much coffee last night... The sunbeam was like his mother's hand in the morning, just as tender and warm. He saw himself as a little boy, walking barefoot across the dewy grass... Mavra (all their cows, as far back as he could remember, were called Mavra) was grazing nearby, twitching her tail and stamping her feet. Finally, she started dropping her warm cakes on the grass and Sashko stepped blissfully into them, thrilling with excitement... What pure and perfect happiness. Without a trace of reason, which now only too often reminds you of the futility of life...

How lucky that he had remembered that thing last night! He was afraid the Academician and his wife would miss the point, say nothing and just smile politely. But he put it in so aptly that it appealed to everybody. Now the Academician would always remember his words—he was that sort of person, a small thing could decide him, and he would start liking you, or else hating you, for that matter. Finally and irrevocably. Never changing his mind.

He heard Olga and his daughter Ivanka putting the breakfast dishes into the sink, his son-in-law looking for his car keys. Then they left, dosed the door behind them and the house filled with the smell of roasted Brazilian coffee that came through the door to his study. It wasn't time to get up yet; he still had a little while...

Oleksandr closed his eyes, turned his head to get the sunbeam on the bridge of his nose, and again saw himself as the little boy who had just that moment stepped into one of Mavra's cakes. He felt utterly fulfilled, wanting nothing more from life. Nothing at all. Only there was that big meeting at the Ministry at two o'clock to discuss the new policies that were to bring about major changes to the power industry... He heard the whispering trees again... and Mavra's breathing... The new minister, no doubt, would of course blame everything on his predecessor, and they would nod their heads in wordless agreement, like horses on a hot day... The first big flies were already there, biting poor Mavra though she swatted them away with her swift tail... Suddenly, the small Japanese telephone, looking like a black chocolate bar with the microphone, receiver, and the dial disk all there, came alive with a soft trill. It could only be the Director of the Institute, or the Ministry's Nuclear Department, for nobody else had that number. How he wished they were calling to tell him that the big meeting had been called off. Then he'd try to get away, somewhere down to the country, walk in the spring forest, maybe get some birch sap, and hopefully meet some little village boy looking after a cow... He hoped he'd see a boy like that, at least from the train, or get a glimpse of him among the lovely pines and birches. The telephone was chirping away. Could it be that they'd really called off the meeting? He reached for it.

"Yes, speaking... Yes, Myrovych, it's not April Fool's, it's the twenty-sixth. I don't care for that sort of joke... No! It can't be, no! Come on, they're kidding you. It's not truer... if it is—it's sabotage. I'll be right over."

Fedir was walking through the wood with a red-enameled container on his shoulder. Just their luck to run out of gas right in the middle of the morning's cooking... Mother had put some broth and cabbage on to boil and couldn't understand why it was taking so long...

Without telling anyone, he got out a bottle of the vodka they'd bought for his father's funeral, took the empty gas container down to the river, rowed to the other side and found the driver who delivered gas to the nearby villages. The driver caught sight of the bottle, recognized the deaf youngster from Horodyshe, and replaced the container without a word, knowing that the boy wouldn't talk.

Fedir felt tired. The container was heavy, his shoulder was sore and he couldn't walk straight, and yet he went doggedly on, stepping over the knotty tree roots. Soon he could see the cemetery and the deserted old house next to it. Every now and then prospective buyers came down from town to have a look, but all were put off by the view: the graves and crosses across the road could be seen from all the windows. The local foxes, however, didn't seem to mind and had been squatting in the house for three winters now...

There must have been a fire in the town, you could even smell it in the forest. They had put it out by now, of course, poured a lot of water on it. Hryhorii and his boys from the fire brigade must have made short work of it... That container was killing him. He just had to sit down.

He got it off his shoulder, and with both hands laid it carefully on the ground, making as little noise as he could. The cemetery was right near and there his father was. Quiet, Fedir, let him sleep...

Maria went out to milk Mavra, but the cow's udder was hard and very sensitive, and the cow wouldn't let her come near.

"Mavra, dear, what's your hurry? It's not due yet, is it? Hold on a little, till there's some proper grass, and not just the nettles and wormwood. I'll go and get you something warm to drink as soon as Fedir is back with the gas."

The milk came very thick, as if already baked in the oven, and left cream on the inside of the bucket.

"Come on, Mavra, that's a good girl. There's no need to be so stingy. The kids are coming down for the holiday and you know how they love your milk. Real milk, not the watery stuff they get from their shops."

After some time, Maria emerged from the shed carrying her milking stool, the bucket half full. A white puppy pressed itself to her legs, looking up at her as if seeking protection from an invisible dog hunter with a gun in his hands. Maria pushed him away with her foot but the puppy didn't seem to mind. The next moment he was back again.

"Get away with you, good-for-nothing! Why don't you chase the sparrows off the kitchen garden? Spoilt, that's what you are. Just eat and eat. No more sausages, you're too lazy. And so scared of everything. Wait till the kids get there, they'll show you who's boss. No, no milk for you today, don't even ask for any."

An assortment of children waiting at the crossroads of Horodyshe's square. Some were sturdy and strong, but most were small yet, their bags heavy on their backs. The local school had shut down some time ago and that meant traveling to the next village every morning. Most of the time there was no transport for them, for the man in charge always seemed to forget. They

depended on whatever cars or lorries were going that way. The teachers knew about this and didn't scold the children for being late.

A lorry came up, loaded with bags of fertilizers and the children crowded round climbing in; the older ones pulled up those who couldn't get up, and the smallest ones flopped onto the fertilizers bags so that reddish dust whirled around; they lay with their legs in the air, like so many young frogs. At last all were in. The next moment the lorry was off.

Maria opened the hen house, let the birds out and shook out some maize for them, her eyes all the time fixed on the road. The town bus was due any minute.

62

The Ferris wheel rotated creakily, in fits and starts, as if someone was turning it by hand. Three girls, each in a separate car, had bought tickets early in the morning.

Presently, a car pulled up, decorated with ribbons and a big doll sitting on the bonnet with its back against the windscreen. The newlyweds got out.

The photographer, the one who designed the board of honor, nearly tumbled out of the car. His two shabby leather cases made it hard for him to move about—he could hardly get out. He aimed his camera at the bride and groom; she straightened up and took the groom's arm. Then they laid flowers at the grave of soldiers killed in the war. The camera clicked and clicked.

The next port of call would be the Wedding Palace.

A watering machine was washing down the streets; its powerful stream sprayed a poster exhorting the public to take part in today's cross-country race-for-health. The gouache dripped down the poster in uneven streaks.

Natalka, dressed in a black overall, propped up an old lorry tire against the hospital wall, climbed up on it and peered through the window.

Now she felt detached from what had happened last night. It was complicated and mysterious, like fate, and she was only a speck of dust carried along by the storm. If she had a child, she would instinctively be protecting it with her body, sacrificing her own life if need be. But she had no baby, and did not know the thrill of something warm moving inside her. Here in town, she had only Hryhorii. Something terrible had happened to him, and now she wanted only to see him, to make sure he was alive. That was now her purpose in life—to know that in the midst of all that pandemonium and grief—he was all right. Only then could she think of herself. Hryhorii and Hryhorii alone was her support, her salvation, the meaning of her life. She was no good for anything if she did not see him. Without him she didn't exist.

The glass doors of the local department store were flung open, letting in a crowd of women.

“End of the month, maybe they'll have something good for once...”

“They say they've got a batch of ladies' shoes to help fulfill their plan for this month.”

“Now if it was the end of the quarter, or better still the end of the year.”

“I'd like to get my hands on the people who make those shoes!”

“At the nuclear station, they say, some pipe’s burst and several operators got badly burnt. They had to call the ambulance.”

“Some holiday they’re going to have, poor things.”

“Where are all those goods we’ve been shown on the TV? The announcers must be wearing them...”

“How can you plan your budget if you have to buy everything those hucksters put on sale—after they’ve taken what they want, of course. You get your winter coat in the summer and your summer shoes in the winter.”

“If it’s something serious at the power plant, why don’t they at least put out all the scarce goods they’ve got stashed away?”

“It’ll go to pot anyway...”

“Look, they have safari shirts!”

“Yes, the kind they had yesterday at the shop for veterans.”

“Now that I’m divorced I’ve got half the worries off my head: you try and get something for a man. For two months now—I’m free as the wind...”

“Don’t be too sure, dearie. What will you say in two years?...”

“That’s right: the men took on the Nazis, now they’re taking on the radiation. Without them, what good are we? What’s a little queuing...?”

“If everything in this country goes the way it’s started to, things will be all right. Some day, our turn will come.”

“You think we’ll live that long?”

“There is no other way, love...”

63

Several helicopters were chopping up the peaceful sky over the town. They landed somewhere near the beach in a cloud of dust. They flew so low you could see the pilots’ faces in army respirators, which made them look like hippos. The kindergarten mistress started hastily herding her flock off the playground indoors.

Minutes later, the choppers took off again, rising with difficulty, their engines roaring with the effort. They were lifting gigantic nets filled with huge canvas bags. Some of them must have got torn though, and the town was sprinkled with golden river sand. The load swayed from side to side. People in the streets ran for cover. One of the nets almost hooked the upper car of the Ferris wheel (the hunchback had just managed to take refuge in his booth).

There was a crowd around the beer barrel and brazier with sizzling skewers of meat. Odarka’s Stepan downed three mugs of beer, then stopped to catch his breath, lit a cigarette and settled down on a nearby park bench. A pesky wasp was circling around the fourth mug; Stepan tried to wave it away, then directed a well-aimed puff of tobacco smoke at it.

“There’s talk that one of the boilers at the station busted and the whole station’s conked out. Well, it didn’t reach here, the town is still standing, they’ve brought beer for the holidays. Too bad they had no smoked sprats—I could do with a couple of dozen, tails and all...”

One of the bags in the helicopter net suddenly slipped out and hit the ground some twenty paces away from the beer line.

“Hey! Did that fall out of your pocket?” shouted a red-haired, balding young man, wiping the foam off his thick lips.

“What’s that bulging bag? Must be your purse.”

“They’re sending us a bag of dried roach fish for the beer! Come on, boys, dig in!” replied an old man leaning against his bike, with a duck in a shopping-net hanging from the handlebars, as he bit into his stringy grilled meat.

64

Taras’s teacher didn’t come to school that day. The children thought she was just late and ran around the classroom, jumping on the desks, taking full advantage of her absence. Twice the headmaster looked in and they scurried back to their desks, but still nobody came to teach them, and they resumed their horseplay.

Marta the teacher never did come that day, so after the break seventeen-year-old Anatolii from the tenth form was sent in to substitute. He was the captain of the basketball team; the younger children were more afraid of him than of the teachers. Anatolii called the lesson Civil Defense. He had brought along a green canvas bag with a gas mask and said he would teach the class how to put it on. He first put on the rubber mask himself, which made him look like an elephant. The class roared with laughter. Then each of the children was to try the thing on, and this, of course, provoked more laughter. But Anatolii was walking up and down the aisles, so they had to shut their mouths with their hands, shaking helplessly with laughter. They were all delighted with the lesson and wished they had such a teacher the whole year. But he sure could slap hard.

After the second break the class was let off, but not before each received a pill “for the flu”. But they were so bitter, only four of the best pupils swallowed theirs. The rest shied them at each other with impunity, since neither their teacher nor Anatolii were in sight.

Taras refrained from using his colored chalks anywhere at school, but later, on his way home, he made up for it with a vengeance, rubbing them down to his fingers. All the asphalt paths showed pictures of boys and girls wearing elephant-like gas masks... But the artist was in a hurry: he was going to his grandfather’s.

65

“... Hryhorii is nowhere either. I was at the fire station, but all the men there are from Kyiv and other places and they don’t know anything,” Odarka reported to Liudmyla, dropping her eyes. It was a lie: one of the firemen confessed to her that all who had been the first to rush to put out the fire were now in hospital.

“What will happen to us now? What if all this is true?” moaned Liudmyla.

“Well, we’ve seen a bit of life. Both joy and sorrow. But the kids, what will happen to them? How can we save them? Where shall we hide them? One of the bosses told somebody they’re going to evacuate the whole town.”

“Who needs orphans? There just aren’t enough stepmothers to go around. Not like you. Even we have only just tasted life, only got adjusted, into the swing of it” Liudmyla broke off as a pigeon flew into the window, small, dirty and bedraggled, and landed on the ceiling lamp, which started swaying under him. After a momentary rest he slid down into the bowl, like a nest, with only his head sticking out.

“Mum, aren’t we going to grandpa’s?” Ruslan whined. “I want to see Pushok.”

“Yes, yes, we’re going. Granny must be lonesome,” Odarka answered with an inward smile: they called her mum, so she needn’t resent her sister-in-law’s calling her stepmother. “Liudmyla, go down to the hospital and see what’s going on. They say the place is bursting, no beds left at all. Even all the young mothers have been discharged...”

“Olesia and Roman are taking a mighty long time. They must be at grandmother’s already. Roman’s a good boy, she’s safe with him, you can be sure of that. Wait for Taras, Odarka, and go. And I’ll drop in at the hospital and then the department store: they know everything there.”

“I’ll take the children and go straight through the woods. I know all the paths there. We’ll get right around that radiation. Did Mykola ever tell you what it actually is and how to deal with it?”

“Oleksandr knows more, but he never explained. The only thing he said was that he could start a bathing beach on the roof of the reactor. If the department store manager is at work, then there’s nothing to be afraid of. She ought to know since she provides all the bigwigs with clothes.”

“I wish they’d say over the radio what to do, how to protect ourselves. The announcer could quietly explain and give instructions—just to those who are sitting at home with children. There would be no rumors then, nobody’d be afraid. You can’t keep it a secret anyway...”

“Anyone can tell you’re from the village, Odarka. For that cur authorities would need to phone Kyiv and ask permission, and in Kyiv they’d have to decide if such things can be talked about on the radio. They’ll say, it might start a panic, and the information might leak out abroad. This is politics, Odarka, and that means you’ve got to weigh everything. It’s not as simple as sweeping the courtyard.” Liudmyla turned on the light to care the pigeon out of the bowl—he might foul it up. The bird fluttered over to the wardrobe.

“Go and ask the Holoborodkos. Maybe Vasyly will tell us the truth. After all, we were born in the same village, and he’s a relative of sorts...”

“I wish my Mykola would get home—in any shape, but alive. Who needs me now?...” Liudmyla suddenly felt sorry for herself, realizing that she could actually lose him and be left all alone. It was noon already and Mykola was still not back. And nobody else around except for this meek and mild village woman who was trying to convince herself she was happy with two adopted children and a hopeless drunkard for a husband who doesn’t work anywhere. And Vasyly is no better—he could have at least dropped in to say what’s happened there... Out of sight, out of mind, I suppose...

“I want so much to see our Mykola alive... And my Stepan, though he’s such a fool—can’t help being sorry for him, too. Went off somewhere in the morning. Maybe he was called out, too...”

66

The buses pushed through the dense crowd into the hospital courtyard, honking their horns, the drivers leaning out, persuading, swearing.

The sun was hot and the asphalt got soft underfoot, so those women who had come in high-heeled shoes took them off. The grisly rumors and endless gossip had brought here even those whose men-folk were alerted after the accident or went on their shift in the morning knowing nothing.

As the hospital doors opened, the crowd started to move, voices rising. Somebody’s child was pushed back and nearly got under a bus. The mother started screeching and wailing.

The head physician stood in the doorway, with complete indifference on his unshaven face. Perhaps he had wanted to say something to the crowd, but started coughing, gave up, and went back inside.

Natalka was standing right next to the hospital steps. In front of her was an old man with a wooden leg, who kept stepping on her foot, but she felt nothing. The crowd was shoving from behind, but her back was numb.

A man in hospital pajamas, all hunched over, appeared in the doorway.

“Hey! Let me through! That’s my husband, let me through...”

“Don’t have to yell in my ear! I’ve got a son there, too. The only one I have... Let me just speak to him. He’ll hear me...”

“Stop! Don’t go up close to them! And get your child away, quick! You crazy or something? They’re radioactive, can’t you see?”

One after another, swaying slightly, the irradiated men who could still walk trudged wearily along the human corridor. Their faces were somehow all alike, indifferent, unseeing, as if they were passing from this world into another. That other world held no interest either, but they were going anyway because the doctors told them to.

“Victor! Victor!... I got a new suit for you...”

Supported by a nurse, the young man with a heavy, glassy-eyed look stopped for a moment, as though hearing something very familiar but long forgotten. Where did he... hear that voice before?... No, he couldn’t remember. He lowered his eyes and plodded on. The young woman with the blotchy face who was shouting to him, probably his wife, struggled through the crowd so as to meet her husband again at the bus door. But in vain: she could not use her hands because they were protecting her big belly.

Natalka hadn’t seen Hryhorii yet, but suddenly stiffened: now he’d come out. And he’d recognize her. He must.

It’s him!

Two women doctors were holding him up. His tousled hair kept getting into his eyes. His too short striped pajamas made him look even more ghastly. Seeing the crowd of women, he

stopped and disengaged his hands, showing that he didn't need any help. A forced smile twisted his gray face.

"Goodness gracious," he said. "I never knew there were so many pretty girls in town. What a rose garden! If I'd only known! I would've put on something decent!"

Natalka cried out to him. At the top of her lungs. But she couldn't hear her own voice, nor could anyone else, because it died in her throat.

The two doctors took him by the arms again, and he moved on, hanging his tired head. Then suddenly he looked around and saw Natalka.

"We did put it out after all," he said. "We cut the blaze off from the third reactor. You hear, Natalka? I'm quite well. These quacks here don't understand a thing. I won't be gone long. Olga will get me out quick. Take care of the kid..."

Then came the stretchers with those who could not walk. The orderlies gently prodded the walking patients. Natalka tried to get out of the crowd, but the cripple's wooden leg pressed her foot down into the asphalt. She saw Hryhorii's face drifting away in a blur, so dear and yet a stranger now. They helped him up onto the first step of the bus. He hesitated for a moment, but didn't look back. Only his shoulders drooped even more, and the hospital pajamas now looked too big for him. The men in the white coats helped him again and he disappeared in the bus, whose windows were tightly curtained.

That face, so dear and yet so indifferent to her presence. What had happened to him that fateful night? Why had her instinct let her down. why hadn't it screamed that those were crucial minutes?

"Anatolii! Elvira's gone to fetch the kid. Back in a jiffy. Move your lips so I know you can hear me. Elvira was here all the time!"

"Vasyl! Vasyl! What should I tell Halia in the village?"

"Say we got a flat yesterday! Let her go to the town soviet on Monday for the voucher. Tell her to move in... without...me..."

"We're sending only the worst cases to Moscow, to a special clinic. The rest will stay here. Keep back, please, you're in the way here." But the head physician's voice only rustled over their heads, drowned out by shouts, and moans, and cries.

"Pavlo! All is forgiven! You hear? It was my fault all around."

"Where's my Lelechenko? What happened to him? Tell me the truth! I'm ready for the worst..."

"I'll just take the children to mother's—and I'll be with you in Moscow in no time at all. I'll take the very first plane."

"What have you done! It's Tanya's wedding tomorrow!"

A woman carrying a baby breaks free of the crowd and runs to her husband, who is lying on a stretcher, but the doctor bars her way.

"Keep away! You're killing the child! The man is radioactive, don't you know? Give the baby a cup of milk with three drops of iodide and don't leave the house."

The nurses were carrying large paper packets with medicines on to the road, also files with case histories and hastily noted tests and diagnoses ("Radiation sickness... degree"). The last to come out was Olesia, with a bag over her shoulder. Somebody's hands took the bag into the bus. She herself just managed to climb inside just as the doors snapped shut behind her, pinching her

foot. Without a word, she disengaged her foot, and then her white cap was seen drifting over the curtains.

The drivers switched on the headlights. Up until then no one had noticed it was already dark.

As the women surrounded the buses, a few faces appeared in the windows. A few moved their lips or waved, but most just looked, with doomed, suffering eyes.

Red-faced and breathing hard, Liudmyla was elbowing her way to the bus door. She had been to the department store and heard such things there that she lost both shoes and her head scarf running to the hospital. She was ready to break through into hell itself, if need be, just to make sure Mykola was alive.

As the buses revved up their motors, a militia car, red lights blinking, slowly ploughed its way through the crowd, leading the convoy. Reluctantly the women made way, shielding their eyes from the headlights.

Liudmyla managed to get through to the buses, banging her fists against the windows.

“Mykola! Mykola!” she called. “Ask for Olga! She’ll cure you.”

Olesia’s face, pained, exhausted and ill, appeared from behind the curtain. Seeing her mother, she lowered the window a bit and, putting her lips to the crack, said,

“Father’s not here. Nor at the hospital either. Look for him at the atomic station.”

“Where are you going?”

“He might be at the station... Uncle Hryhorii is here.”

“Get out! What are you doing there?”

“I’ll just go down to Boryspol with Uncle. Hryhorii... Go look for father!”

Liudmyla ran after the bus, but didn’t hear the last words: she had run into an old woman, knocking her down and falling on top of her. Somebody helped both of them up, but the convoy had already left the hospital yard, leaving a cloud of exhaust behind. With the militia car leading the way, the buses headed for Kyiv.

The hospital yard suddenly looked deserted and sad. Some of the women were going home, others gathered outside the door, waiting for a list of casualties to be put up.

Natalka sat with her head on the table where the drivers had left their dominoes. She was coming to. ,Where was she? What had happened to her? Who put her here? Where was Hryhorii?

In the thickening dusk, the grotesque silhouette of the slowly rotating Ferris wheel dominated the town, but it was too dark to see if there were any passengers.

At the town beach, several men who had volunteered to load sand into bags for the helicopters sat smoking on an overturned rowboat under a leaning wooden umbrella.

“I’m afraid our sand won’t be much use.”

“Well, they know best.”

“Hey, where’ve all the loud speech-makers gone to?”

“What would they be doing here? They want to be where the bosses can see them. They say the place is teeming with big shots.”

“There’s hell to be paid for it. A lot of heads will roll now.”

“I’ll tell you what: we were heading for disaster all along. And there’s more disasters to come, bigger ones too, if we go on at this rate. Science maybe forging ahead, but those in charge can’t keep up. I think for many of them, such things as moral responsibility or professional

honesty—are, well, just irrelevant. The old standards are gone, and they've never got adjusted to the new ones. All they're interested in is setting records and getting in the reports. Once they're in—the hell with the rest. Couldn't the engineers have calculated and foreseen every contingency? After all, it's not just an old steam radiator, it's a uranium reactor. What they've done to this beautiful country—it's a dirty shame! Now even our great-grandchildren will have to suffer for this."

"I'd put it in plainer words, but you're right, of course. Let's not talk here though, there's all kinds of people around. We'd better go and fill some bags. My business is filling sandbags..."

A raven sitting on a granite boulder took off into the reddened sky over the atomic station. In a few minutes, several helicopters came clattering through the air, their searchlights sweeping the ground.

67

Arkhyp the tractor driver drove away from the milk farm, some of the silage he had stolen for his cow falling out of the trailer and chunks of manure flying off the wheels to leave a trail on the ground behind him.

Fedir was waving to make him stop, but Arkhyp pretended he did not see, so Fedir ran after the tractor. He caught up only when Arkhyp reached his own house. What Fedir was asking, a child could have understood—his hands and face made it so plain. "Take me to the highway on your motorcycle. My brothers and sister are waiting." But Arkhyp did not understand. Then Fedir tried again, more slowly this time. He even wrote with his finger in the sand, "ONLY TO THE HIGHWAY!"

"You can't get what normal people are saying these days and here's this deaf-mute pestering me." That much Fedir could lip-read, despite the cigarette in Arkhyp's mouth.

As Maria started down to the cellar to get some pickled tomatoes, she slipped on the steps, only saving herself by throwing out her free arm and pressing it hard against the wall. "Didn't I ask you and ask you, Ivan, make steps of cement. No, never found the time. And now you're dead."

In the dark, she leaned over the barrel, groping in the brine for tomatoes that didn't have cracks and weren't too soft. The salt was getting into the scratch on her finger and her back ached every time she straightened to put a tomato into the pan... Something was moving around underfoot. It touched her foot, hairy, alive. "Why can't you stay where you belong? Now be a good dog and get up those stairs."

She straightened up yet again. Her eyes used to the dark, she now made out a small black shape.

"Oh, so it's you, Ivan's soul, haunting me. Did I ever do you wrong, Ivan?"

Maria felt neither fear, nor joy at the sight of the thing quivering on the floor. She bent down and picked it up without a qualm. It was too dark to see. She gathered up the skirt of her apron, put the slippery, throbbing creature inside, and started up the steps. "Are you here to have a look

at the house, or did you come for me? You can't wait, can you, Ivan? Not like the old days, when you used to forget you had a wife at all. And now even nine days seems too long to you."

Upstairs, she did not turn on the light. The clock on the wall was ticking louder than the radio on the porch, over which a woman was talking about what progress was being made with sowing, and about the fortunes of some new team of farm workers. Someone had thrown Ivan's old sheepskin over the loudspeaker, so the woman's voice was only a murmur, as if she was telling all those things only to herself.

Maria let the little animal out on the floor.

"Too cold down there in the cellar, isn't it, Ivan? You can get warm up here. Everything's on the table; just help yourself... The children have forgotten us. Even Odarka didn't come. There hasn't been a single bus from the town, though. Well, let's wait. That's all that old people have left, to wait—for their children to come and see them, and for death to take them away for good."

She closed the door to the big room and went back downstairs to get the pan of tomatoes.

68

They had reached the big block where the Myrovych flat was. Holoborodko switched off the headlights of the Zhiguli with the dented trunk, but he did not get out. He waited until the car lighter began to glow, lit a cigarette and spoke to the man beside him.

"Go on, Nechyporenko. You'll just have to do it. It's not the radioactive zone, just your own subordinate's house, your former subordinate."

"That makes it even harder."

"Go on now. You were his boss, weren't you? And tell them the truth. You can't go on lying forever. Even Moscow knows already: there's two men dead—Myrovych and Palyvoda. So get up there now." Holoborodko all but pushed him out of the car.

"What if they ask who sent me?"

"A government commission. Puzach. Forget you ever saw me."

Nechyporenko got slowly out. He walked to the corner of the house and stood there smoking, then took some time grinding the butt out under his heel before walking slowly back to the entrance and opening the door.

69

For a long time, the children skipped happily behind Odarka and even ran on ahead. But then Lida's foot began to hurt where the shoe rubbed. She whimpered until Odarka picked her up and sat the child on her shoulders. Soon after, Taras and Ruslan started falling behind. After that, it was only mile after mile of the grey wood-path with patches of early green. And the sweat that began running down her face and into her eyes. She was tired and worried. What was to be done? Well, for one thing, she mustn't fall... And what if she had to spend the night in the forest?... Back she went for the boys, again and again, each time depositing the sleepy Lida under a tree...

Her whole body throbbed. If only she could lie down for a bit and close her eyes. But she only sat for a few minutes, her back against a pine tree, then got up and labored on.

It occurred to her that she could tear her shawl in two, tie it up in a double bag, put Taras and Ruslan inside and hoist them onto her back, with Lida in her arms. But walking that way, she couldn't see the path, and soon got off it altogether. It was dark now. Would they have to start collecting twigs for a bed and stay there for the night? Just then she came out into a clearing. Woodcutters must have been there recently, for the freshly cut pine stumps showed white in the moonlight. Small branches and twigs still littered the ground, but the firewood was stacked up neatly, ready to be carted away.

Odarka lowered the children to the ground and glanced around, trying to get her bearings. The place seemed familiar, but she still wasn't sure where she was. Could it be she had passed round Horodyshe and come out here? She should have to keep to the river. Were it not for all these wanderings, she would have been home by now. Crossing the clearings, she came upon a cart already loaded with firewood. One rear wheel was damaged: a spoke was sticking out of the hub. Odarka unloaded all the wood, carried the children to the cart and put them on it. Then she made a kind of harness for herself, took hold of the shafts and started down the road. It had to take her somewhere after all...

The clock on the wall at the Myrovyches said midnight. Maria was sitting at the cottage window, the curtain drawn back. The baby mole was moving about under an old quilted jacket in a corner on the floor. The cellar hadn't been lined with concrete; it still had its original earthen walls, and that was where the baby mole must have fallen out of. She would put it back tomorrow.

A few of Ivan's cronies had come in during the evening. They had sat around awhile, talked a little, eaten the memorial meal and gone away again. There had been some accident in the town, and their children that they had expected at the weekend had not come either.

Odarka knew the road now, and the cart seemed to go smoother and lighter. She passed the old, roofless barn with the chemical fertilizers. (There used to be a summer camp there for the Horodyshe schoolchildren, and her classmates had always chosen Odarka to head their field team.) Pressed close to each other, the children slept in the cart. It wouldn't be long now, they were almost home.

In a while, it got easier still. They were going downhill, and Odarka had only to hold the cart in check, but she was afraid to let it get out of control. Then she remembered the steep hill that lay ahead after this hollow. Soon after that she would see the first cottages of Horodyshe. Odarka recalled that sandy hill. She could remember every bump and hollow of it, every root that stuck out in the road.

She mustn't hold the cart back any more, she must run downhill with it now, to give it the momentum it would need to get to the top. With the shafts jammed into her armpits, she ran down the hill. The damaged wheel kept pulling the cart over to the side. Once Lida cried out in her sleep. And time and again, some little animal, frightened by the noise, would skitter off the road into the bushes.

The hollow was behind her now; so was the well with the broken sweep... But going uphill was hard. She mustn't let the cart slow down or let it stop. She'd never manage to get it going again.

Maria now sat at the table, her face to the open door, a lighted candle in the middle. The baby mole was asleep in her apron. She sat stroking it, her unseeing eyes fixed on the flame of the candle.

Fedir was outside in the yard. He would disappear for a time, then return, with slow, heavy steps to the house. He stood there, coughing occasionally. But soon after, he was off again, beckoning the dog to follow him. Maria sat still. Today was Willow Sundays⁴, she remembered. The women in the next village had pussy-willows. Last year she didn't go—she couldn't, Ivan had been too bad... So next week would be Holy Week. What if she were to close her eyes... and just not wake up... Then they would gather at her house again. The children would come, Oleksandr would be there, too...

There was a scuffling noise, and in ran the dog, panting, tongue hanging out so far it looked about to fall out. He whined and yelped, his claws scratching on the floor boards. He kept his eyes on the porch outside, his tail thumping against the open door. She heard Fedir's shuffling steps, and other steps, too, lighter, hesitating... not someone she knew...

Fedir came in with a satchel, followed by a young girl who stopped in the doorway. Lord! She looked as if they'd just taken her down from the Cross. Her yellow kerchief was almost off her head, and her hair was all tangled, with a twig stuck in it at the side. Her stockings were ripped over the knees. And she had on Hryhorii's leather jacket. Oh!... Hryhorii!

"Come in, child. Tell me your name and come in, quickly. Sit down, here at the table. You'll have a glass of something to remember Ivan. Just rest a bit, and then... tell me..."

Odarka could see the smooth road beginning ahead. A few more yards, and it would be easier. She could almost smell her native Horodyshe. And there were more spaces between the trees. But her arms were going numb; they were cold, too. No matter what, she couldn't let go the shafts now, not with the children in the cart!

The cart was so heavy going uphill. It was dragging her back. What if those shafts slipped out of her hands? She felt now that they could. And then her sleeping children... would...

Thump! Down she went on her knees, managing, however, to clutch at a big pine root sticking up out of the ground. The other hand still held the cart. If she were to let go, it would roll back down the hill and she'd never be able to catch it.

She was being torn apart—the cart pulling her down, her other hand glued to the root. Let her die, but what would happen to the children...

She'd have to get the front wheels turned crosswise. Then the cart wouldn't roll down. They would all be safe! How many times she'd stepped carefully over those roots... Let them save her now! Or if not her, then her children.

⁴ Palm Sunday.

Maria once again settled the baby mole under the padded jacket on the floor, straightened the candle wick with her fingers, and said: "Pour us each a glass, Fedir. And pour it from the bottom, the bitter dregs for us all."

Natalka sat down to the table and found herself face to face with Hryhorii, in the photograph on the wall. He was looking straight down at her, dashing as ever, with a hint of mockery, his sailors' cap at an angle, embracing a palm tree on the sea shore. Oh, how full of life he looked in that picture !

What can I say to his mother?

Fedir kept his eyes on Natalka and his mother, afraid to miss a single word, glance or gesture. Mother had obviously guessed that this was Hryhorii's girl. He had known, too, when he saw her out there on the road beyond the cemetery. She had shown no fear, giving him her bag and following him meekly.

"May Ivan's soul rest in peace," Maria said picking up her glass. But her hand trembled. "And what other soul?..." The look Maria gave her told Natalka that she must not lie: this woman knew already, perhaps even more than she herself.

"Mykola's..." she breathed, suddenly shaken by a fit of coughing, dry and harsh. "Hryhorii is alive though! They took him to Moscow to be treated. He spoke to me. He sent you his love. He's going to live, they said he would... But Mykola is dead. They looked for him all day and didn't even find his body. He never got out. What happened there was terrible, they're going to move all the people out, the whole town and all the villages... Horodyshe too..." Natalka could no longer hold herself in hand and began to weep—her fitful, childish sobs, which she vainly tried to stifle, were unbearable to hear.

Fedir understood everything. His head shook in his grief.

Somewhere near the hen-house, two shots rang out, the echo resounding for a long time in the Myrovyches' cottage.

The ticking of the clock suddenly sounded louder. (Again it seemed as if someone was hammering nails into the coffin. Hurrying to do the job as fast as possible.)

Maria sank down in her chair.

The mole had escaped from the jacket and was moving towards the doorway.

Maria's eyes were on the photographs, but the faces grew dim and blurred. Sons, husband, daughter, daughters-in-law, grandchildren... merging and separating... Neither smiling nor sad, she could no longer tell them apart, so dear were they all and so alike. Ivan, Mykola, Oleksandr, Odarka, Hryhorii, the grandsons. She alone heard their voices in the troubled silence.

Maria stood up and the voices became silent.

"Pray, child. Pray for Ivan and Mykola."

Two more shots. Nearer now. Somewhere at the edge of the village.

"And pray for me, too. It's time... I won't mind..."

“Will there be no grave for you, Mykola? Where shall I bow my head then? Where shall I weep for you? How shall I believe you are dead? Death had been near before. Three times it had swung its scythe—but you didn’t drown when you were little, you didn’t die in that car crash, and weren’t killed when the steam pipe burst at the atomic station five years ago. You said that death would never catch up with you now, you’d got away too many times... How could you have died out there now? So young, Mykola, and in such a horrible way...”

Maria spoke and Nataalka shuddered at her words. She had expected Maria to wail, to burst into tears, and she would have tried to comfort her as best she could. Instead, Maria spoke as if Mykola were sitting at the table with them.

“We were going to plant the potatoes today... But look what happened!... The elder brother has killed the younger brother. O dear Lord! Why did I live to see all this?... O people! Isn’t it enough to have cancer and cholera and hatred and drink to kill us? No, you must have that radiation, too. You’ll destroy yourselves and there’ll be no one left on earth. What a war we’d lived through... What a terrible war! So many people were killed, but the Myrovyches survived. We could have learned from all that, and try to live wisely. Instead it’s madness setting in!... What is it like, Nataalka, this new death that’s come. What’s it like to look at?”

“That’s the whole trouble, it’s not like anything. You can’t see it or feel it. You only know when it’s too late. It’s like one’s fate. No one ever knows.”

“What’s the use of living if it’s going to be like that... No land, no family, no graves... What good am I to anyone? Oleksandr will go to jail, I suppose. For Mykola, for Hryhorii and all the others...” Maria’s forehead was furrowed with pain. She thought her heart had turned to stone since yesterday, that it was as empty as the deserted hut, where the foxes made their lair. But no, her heart could still feel pain. If only she could die this very moment. Fedir and Nataalka would bury her. Her last joy would be to lie down in the earth where she had been born. Next to her Ivan. No need even to make the funeral feast. She’d prepared a meal herself already...

Fedir understood from the beginning that Mykola was dead, that Hryhorii was very poorly, that some great trouble was stalking through the town. And suddenly he wished more than anything in the world to be able to speak, to cry out, so that all Horodyshche would hear. He had never heard anyone’s voice but he could see that when someone cried out, it was terrible for others, he saw it in their faces. But those who cried, felt easier. He left the house and stood on the porch, the pale moon sending down a milky light before the dawn. He stood with his mouth open, looking up at the sky.

Soundlessly Fedir cried out to the dark sky that Mykola was dead. His brother that knew him better than anyone else. He’d been patient and he’d loved him. With father it was different. He died like an old tree who’d lived out its time, who’d stopped blooming and bringing forth fruit. But Mykola wasn’t ready.

He was young and hadn’t wanted to die. I should have died, Mykola, not you. He could not voice his grief. He had no voice. Oh, if he had... only for a moment...

But he had to do something. If he didn’t, his heart would burst.

Fedir knew the only thing that could save him now was work, hard work, back-breaking work! He looked around. Next to the shed there was a big pile of stumps that had been so hard to dig up out of the ground. The forestry paid for that work and let them have the stumps besides. He and Mykola had earned some money and they could use the stumps for firewood, too. Fedir

had tried before to chop them up, but the axe would only glance off the hard wood as from a rubber tire. So the pile had lain there, the dry roots sticking up in all directions, each like an octopus thrown up on the shore.

Fedir found the axe, a wedge with the sharp end all nicked, a heavy hammer. He pulled out the nearest stump, threw off his padded jacket and began swinging at the stump, hitting out with all the strength he had, each ringing blow resounding in the cold air, only Fedir did not hear. His whole body quivered with the effort, but each stroke of the axe left only a barely noticeable notch on the grey tree stump. Anger rose in his chest, and a stubbornness he did not know he had. The axe flew through the air up and down; he no longer aimed as he swung. This one's for Mykola... for Hryhorii... for Odarka... for Taras!...

Finally the axe stuck. He tried to loosen it, putting his whole weight on the handle. When that did not work, he pressed a metal wedge into the wood next to the sharp edge of the axe and took up the hammer. Then he struck with all his might again and again. And at last, he felt relief. His work was beginning to take the strain off his mind.

The dog came running from somewhere, all covered with burrs, and started barking furiously. When Fedir did not react, it tried to get his attention by running around the tree stump and jumping at Fedir's feet. "Are you doing that so I'll follow you?" Fedir said. "All right, let's go."

71

When the plane with the twenty-six radiation victims (twenty-six, she had counted them herself) taxied slowly onto the runway, gunned its engines, and took off into the night, Olesia's knees began to tremble, she felt the ground giving way under her feet, and at the same time thought that the most terrible part of the ordeal was over. The idea came so suddenly, it surprised and even frightened her. No, the worst was still ahead—for Uncle Hryhorii, for all the stricken men, and all the people back there in the town. For her, too. She had had everything; now she had nothing. In the last twenty-four hours, she had been to hell. Its most horrible corners. It occurred to her that she now knew more about life than the most experienced people. She had seen the eyes of the doomed; she had heard their moans. And she went on lying to them: everything would be all right, you would live, you would all be well again...

"I want to see it in writing, that the general is actually allowing you to use his plane. With his signature." The officer's total indifference shocked Olesia. He had opened the airport gate only a crack, and would not even hear out any explanation from Esaulenko, the deputy chairman of the town soviet responsible for the transportation of the radiation victims. That was too much for Esaulenko. He banged on the iron gate with his fists, swore, vowed that the officer would be punished and mentioned some high authorities.

Those in the bus who could walk stepped out and vomited right outside. One tried twice to run away. Olesia, the youngest there, caught up with him both times. She grabbed him by the legs, fell with him, and held him down until help arrived...

When all had finally been loaded onto the plane, Olesia heard the officer's voice again: "Such fine plane! They will ruin it, they'll puke in it. It'll be radioactive!"

An old-timer in a black coverall who had been examining the engine, walked over to the officer and, without a word, hit him hard in the face. The officer went off to complain.

The drivers took their buses to a nearby fire-brigade to have them washed and cleaned out. For a moment Olesia, the doctors and two nurses thought they had been abandoned. They wanted to buy some meat-pies at the airport but none of them had any money. There they saw the same man in the black coverall. He apologized curtly for the officer, whom they graciously forgave, but confessed they were terribly hungry. He produced a can of pork sausage and a loaf of dark bread. The woman doctor brought out a small bottle of alcohol. Everyone drank, except Olesia, who began to cough, after which she lay down in the flower bed outside the airport building and immediately fell asleep.

The drivers woke her, the buses, having been washed, returned. Esaulenko soaking wet, reported: "The firemen found this old dosimeter. They tested me with it and the pointer jumped way off the scale. So they hosed me off as well—I'm still wet to the bone—and what do you think? The dosimeter flew up again."

Kyiv slept as the buses sped through, but the real problem began outside the city, with long queues of stalled traffic and several smash-ups. The bus drivers sought every opening they could slip through, and got stuck even more firmly. A small smashed-up Zhiguli was pushed off the highway by an armored car. As metal screeched against metal, the car rolled over several times and stopped under a tree.

It was cold and damp in the bus. The men inside were wracked with their coughing. The doctor and nurses slept, leaning against the window, and woke up only on sharp bends, or when the driver was too vocal in his complaints. Esaulenko had to show his permit time and again, but it had all but lost its meaning.

Olesia knew now that two people had died, that the whole town was contaminated, that all its residents would be evacuated, that rumors about the disaster had already reached Kyiv, but that people there were still unaware of the terrible evil of radiation... All she craved for was to find Roman and her family, and then to get to her grandmother's. There she could wait out the worst of it. Father and Roman would protect her, even from the radiation. Men are braver and stronger. She still believed you could hide at home or in the forest, down in the cellar or behind somebody who was big and strong.

She remembered the glade on the bank of the river. The wormwood on the ground, the pine branches overhead... and Roman so impatient... She felt bitter and lonely. She should not have yielded. It was not what she'd wanted. Not like that. And not then. That night was an evil night. It was not meant for love, that tragic night killing all hope.

Now it was getting light, but the dawn was somehow tortured and weary, in spite of the early spring. The ploughed-up fields, the neatly whitewashed village homes, the tidy courtyards, and the orchards white with lime would have been a feast for the eyes... Would it not be wonderful to drive off somewhere, her head on Roman's shoulder, and look out at the world in blossom... But now thousands of vehicles were pressing down on the grey asphalt, engines droning. Olesia thought that the ground must be bending under that moving mass of metal, under the wagon trucks with the young soldiers sitting under the canvas roofs, their faces serious and grim.

When such wagons had driven through the town before there had always been bantering, catcalls and laughter. The men enjoyed making girls blush. Not now, though. Now there was silence. All these soldiers, militiamen, firemen, all were going in one direction. Out to the atomic station.

Esaulenko's permit was no use to him now. No one would as much as look at it. Their buses would be crawling along with the rest. Esaulenko smoked endlessly. It made Olesia sick, but she couldn't bring herself to protest. His wife had had the baby only the week before, and a whole day had passed and he'd been unable even to phone her. Let him smoke if it made things any easier for him. Olesia could stand it.

The family might be in Horodyshe already, waiting for her. Should she get off at the crossroads and walk back? But Roman doesn't know the road. And she's got to find father. He'll take care of all of them then. She's a married woman now and must find her husband. Grandma Maria said that during the war she went looking for grandfather, twice, way out of their place. She didn't find him, but he did come back alive, and all because she wouldn't give up.

No, Olesia had to go on to town with the rest. She won't get off anywhere—they'll think she deserted them. She'll be working with them after all ... if they all still remained alive ... if there remained any people in the town.

After Ivanhorod, the place was more familiar. This was where she had grown up. But now, at the point where the old Horodyshe road comes out onto the highway the buses ground to a halt. The driver opened the door and Esaulenko ran out on the road to see what was causing the trouble. To the right was the forest, many of the trees already in leaf. The new spears of grass lifted up last yews leaves. The birches, where their bark had been notched to get the sap, had healed and grown over. And birds... Such a twittering and a chirping in the trees! Some of the men got out of the buses and did what they had to right on the road, not suspecting there might be any women there. Olesia looked away and headed for the forest. The old fallen leaves rustled underfoot, sending up a sharp smell that was not unpleasant. It was the smell of life and of death. A piece of old roofing lying in the grass had a primrose with a single leaf growing through it. What strength it had needed to make its way into the sun. To bloom... and be trampled...

Overwhelmed with fatigue or weakness, or that momentary surge of happiness, she slumped on the new grass and dead leaves. She flung out her arms so that her body in the dirty hospital gown now looked like a white cross in the midst of the forest. Her fingers pressed into the earth. A flock of sparrows took off from a birch tree, sending a shower of morning dew on Olesia, the cold drops rolling down her neck. She sighed and, unexpectedly burst into loud anguished sobs that shook her whole body. Would relief come? Would the pain ever end?

72

The long column of buses slowly moved across the bridge, and into the town. An hour back, the local radio had come on with the affectedly cheerful voice of the beautiful Nina announcing that the atomic station had sustained an accident, that the town's entire population were to be evacuated, that pending further instructions, all residents were to stay inside their homes, pack enough food to last them three days, and wait indoors until they were called out to board the

buses. In a few moments, the announcer repeated what she had said before, but this time her voice sounded more natural. She spoke evenly, without the dramatic inflections she sometimes used when she read the news. In any case, her voice brought a measure of calm to those who were listening.

The endless column of buses entered the town and fanned out into the streets, stopping at every house and every entranceway. The children, already dressed, climbed in, clutching their different favorite toys.

Then came the very old and the cripples, helped in by relatives and neighbors. The women in charge compiled lists and ticked off names in the house register.

“Oh, I forgot to shut off the water mains! And they’ve already sealed up the doors.”

“Wouldn’t you know it! Payday’s just tomorrow and I haven’t any money in the house.”

“Well, at last! We waited up all night. They said you’d be here before midnight!”

“I heard the decision to evacuate was made at the very top, not by our local people. Here they must have thought you could keep it a secret forever. Didn’t realize it was bound to get out. Well, now the whole world knows how they tried to keep it dark. Stupid officials!”

“What will happen to us after three days?”

“Let them do the thinking now, since they couldn’t be bothered before.”

“Oh, this can’t lead to anything good! I feel it in my bones.”

“Oh, Mum, don’t you start in now, weeping and wailing. There’s enough trouble without that.”

“Where are they taking us?”

“To different villages, they said, in other districts around here.”

“And they just can’t wait for us to come, in those districts, I suppose. All ready to welcome the dear guests!”

“Well, we’d help them with the planting, earn our keep so to say,“

“What if it’s for more than three days? We left the dog in the house!”

“Well, that man over there left his paralyzed sister behind.”

“Isn’t that life for you? You keep getting things for the house, rugs and fancy furniture. It all costs money, by the way. And now, bang, you have to go off and leave it all. What was the use of trying?”

“What can we take with us? Just our souls and our children. Well be lucky if we manage that.”

The last to leave that house was Liudmyla. She had put on the same dress she had worn for her father-in-law’s funeral, black velvet dress, a black silk ribbon across her forehead and a large sports bag over her shoulder. She was thinner and her face was swollen with tears.

One of the passengers whispered to his neighbor,

“He was burned alive at the reactor...”

“See if he won’t be the one to blame.”

“Oh no! When it comes to things like this, the ones who are to blame always come through alive.”

“They can still blame those who died.”

“Not this one. He was the best operator they had. They had his picture up on the board of honor, and he’d meet all the delegations.”

“That’s the widow, and he left two children.”

“She’s a hero’s wife now.”

Those were the words Liudmyla heard when she climbed into the bus; an elderly man got up and gave her his seat, walking over to take another one in the back.

The bus made its way out of the courtyard into the street and immediately joined a long column of buses headed out of town.

Faster and faster the eyes and faces flashed by. They were young faces and old, frightened and sad or just anxious. But not a single smiling face...

...Except one. There was somebody who smiled in that sea of misery! Who could it be but the drunkard Stepan, Odarka’s husband. There he was, sitting by the window, holding two beer bottles in a grubby string bag on his knees. He was muttering to himself.

“Every man jack of you will croak! Except yours truly. Two glasses of radiation-killer, now nothing can touch me. One gram per roentgen. Can you do any better? They say it’s good for children, too. Should be given to suck it from the bottle.”

People in the bus saw other familiar faces. The old cloakroom attendant at the atomic station, the operator of the Ferris wheel, the newlyweds married the day before, the telephone girl who had fainted, and Liudmyla with the black ribbon across her forehead.

A neat young militiaman was trying to calm down some woman:

“You could have put pigs’ trotters to boil. It would have been ready to eat in three days, when you come back!”

“Do we pay for the bus or do they take us for free?”

73

Maria stuck the baby mole back into its hole in the cellar, but the creature did not want to go, it had got so used to her. So she had to block the hole with a stone she used to keep the sauerkraut down in the barrel.

Fedir had arrived pulling the cart with Odarka and the children in it. Now the cart was standing in the courtyard, shafts leaning against the gate. The children were in the orchard behind the house, where Natalka had made a fire under the galvanized iron wash-tub.

“The kids must be washed. But their clothes must be destroyed. Better let them walk around in rags, but not in these clothes.”

“Why, it’s all brand new!”

“A lot of things will lose their value now. Everything perhaps, except life and human decency.”

Natalka left. She went as far as the cemetery, but then came back again, no telling why. Once in the room, she gazed for some time at Hryhorii’s photograph on the wall. Then ran off to the neighboring village. There she hoped to get a ride to Ivanhorod, where she had a relative. She wouldn’t be long—just find out how she was and come right back. Why then did she look so sad, on the verge of tears, when she was saying goodbye? Perhaps she’d always been a sensitive

soul? She did seem anxious to see her relative. She told them not to worry if she stayed over night. Fedir was eager to take her down on his bike, but she said she would manage.

Odarka had still not awakened. Fedir lifted her off the cart and carried her to the settee on the porch. She was shivering, and talking aloud in her sleep: “Stepan, help me take out the rubbish... Oh, don’t fall asleep, Lida, I’ll buy you ice-cream, lots and lots!... Grab that root! Hold on tight! Hold on with your teeth. Lie down under the wheel, then it won’t budge... Get away from here! It’s all radioactive...” Let her sleep, let her get over her fear and this inhuman fatigue. When she wakes up, she may forget the nightmare she’d been through. It wouldn’t be the first time. She saved the kids. When that radiation gets out of her, she’ll be all right.

Fedir went on chopping wood again. Like a sick dog, he knew instinctively what cure he needed. It was work. The harder the work, the sooner he’d get well. He had done half the pile already, even the axe was hot. You’ll feel better soon, Fedir. Go on, chop away, you have to do it, never mind that the wood-shed is full, anyway.

Mykola, son, I will visit that cursed reactor as I would your grave. On Faster Day I’ll take you sweets and painted eggs, and kneel down, to kiss the ground and talk to you. Why did they make you such a big tomb? And was it your soul that came to Horodyshe, to see me?

You, Hryhorii, if you jilt Nataalka too and make her suffer, don’t come back to my house again. If you do, I’ll pull out that black Gypsy hair of yours, I swear I will. And you’ll have to walk around bald as a billiard ball, you skirt chaser. I suspect she’s pregnant. She tries to hide it, but I’ve noticed she’s feeling queasy often.

Lida ran up to Maria, whining:

“Grandma, I want Fedir to give me a ride, like mum did. Let him pull that old cart and I’ll take the reins. The boys don’t want to play with me—they say I’m telly-active...”

“Radioactive,” Taras corrected her.

74

The hospital courtyard was littered with bits of gauze, prescription forms, empty medicine cartons, all carried around by the wind; some cotton wool was trampled into the asphalt, and here and there lay a mismatched slipper.

Yet another group of radiation victims in need of special treatment had just been sent off to Moscow; the rest had gone to hospitals in the district. Several doctors were dragging out bags of medicines and boxes with equipment to the waiting mini-buses—everything that could be evacuated immediately. They moved sluggishly after two days and two nights of nonstop work. And besides, there was no need to hurry now: the hospital and the town itself were deserted. The wind was free to roam the empty wards, and the very walls seemed to radiate human suffering. Why was it so silent now? Could it be that every last citizen in town was well?

“You won’t forget the rubber stamp, Doctor? Without a stamp we’re not a hospital, just a Gypsy camp...”

“And get all that remains of the alcohol in the dispensary. Those scum who may be lying low in town now, will look for that, or morphine.”

The woman doctor with the masculine face appeared in the doorway:

“What about Palyvoda? His body’s still in the mortuary. Who’s going to bury him? We can’t just leave him there. His wife phoned and said she was coming, but she never did. There’s a coffin ready at the carpenter’s.”

“Phone Puzach at headquarters,” said Masliuk. “Let him send a lorry. And some men. Tell him we’re ready to drop and we just don’t have the strength to lift the coffin, or to dig a grave... I don’t know about you, but I’m falling off my feet.”

A heavy fog was rolling in from the river. With it came the loud croaking of frogs, echoing in the empty houses. The night trains thundered past without stopping.

The bus with the hospital staff was the last to leave town. Close behind it, tongue hanging out, ran an old mangy sheepdog.

For the first time in many years, Masliuk noticed the sign on the arch at the edge of town, “Bon voyage!” it said. He winced. then pressed his cheek against the cold glass and closed his eyes. He tried to decide whether there was any truth in the rumor that the head of the atomic station’s medical service, his immediate superior, had used the hospital lorry today to take his own furniture out of town, to somewhere in Byelorussia. Twice the man had showed up for something at the hospital, sat around in the office and then disappeared somewhere. Maybe it was true... But Masliuk had no strength left to think.

The mangy dog fell further and further behind the last bus.

75

A pitch-dark night descended on Horodyshche and the surrounding forest. Only a few windows were lit, but it showed that everyone had not left.

The children were lying naked on the mat over the oven after being bathed by Odarka. In an old trunk Maria found some of her sons’ old trousers and shirts and a dress of Odarka’s. Now Odarka herself was taking in the clothes on the noisy old Singer sewing machine. Maria sat under the photographs of her clan, watching the candle in the glass of wheat.

Fedir was carrying water from the well and filling up the tank over the wash-basin, the wash-tub, another tub, the big pots and assorted empty jars. He filled up everything that could hold water. He peered down into the well as though he might see his beloved Mykola there, the kindest, most patient person in the world. He leaned over the well and silently addressed the dank void, but there was no answer... He then drew up the last bucket of water, put down the top cover, wrapped the frame with a sheet of film and an old rag, and nailed them down. His hammer echoed over Horodyshche, and Maria shuddered with every blow. Again that hollow knocking, like someone nailing down a coffin lid.

An old rattletrap of a motorcycle with sidecar pulled up at the Myrovyches’ house. Sticking out of the sidecar were some rolled-up posters that never did get put up. The new foreman jumped off, kicked the wicket open, and entered the porch. He was wearing his usual dusty boxcalf boots, blue crash-helmet with a crack in it, and a pilot’s leather jacket.

“I clear forgot you were having a memorial for Ivan today. I took over after him, you know.”

“My son, too... Mykola...” said Maria.

“So it’s not just empty talk, The boys on the team are saying Mykola pushed the wrong button and busted the reactor.”

“Oh, there’s a lot of talk. You barely have time to sort out the truth from the lies. I wouldn’t repeat everything I heard, my boy... But since you’re here, take a seat and drink to both of them.”

“I’ve not the time to sit around. But I’ll have a glass... It’s going to be a busy night,” he said, downing the glass without even removing his helmet, and sucked on a pickled gherkin so as to favor his aching tooth. Odarka held Ruslan naked in her arms, pulling on the made-over trousers. She was standing under an old icon. The woman there also held a naked child in her arms.

“They say we’ve got orders to retreat,” he said. “Into the heart of the country. Some district near by. But retreat in an organized manner, team by team, village by village, together with the cattle. Small livestock will have to be left to the enemy, the radiation, I mean. The damn thing keeps spreading, and there’s no stopping it. Now here’s the briefing: milk your cow, feed her, and get her to the summer stable next to the cowsheds. Tie a tag to the cow’s neck with name and address... the owner’s. For people, there’ll be two coaches—modern cozy coaches. Everyone who’s alive has to leave. Take along nothing but food, for three, four, five, six days. Also identity papers and money, if any. Panic-mongers will be fined... two hundred rubles.”

He poured himself another glass, drank it down, sniffed some bread so as to save his tooth, and walked out. Going down the steps, he added:

“We’re leaving behind 1835 hens. All good layers. Now who’s going to write them off for me? Who, I ask you?”

At the Horodyshche cemetery, a lorry was silhouetted against the night sky, and cigarette lights moved in the dark. Next to the grave of old Ivan Myrovych there was now a fresh mound.

“Sorry, Dmytro, it’s not very fancy...”

“They’ll write it up anyway: ‘The farewell volleys rent the air...’ Even the hole is only knee-deep...”

“Poor old Dmytro... Come to think of it, we were going to lay the foundation for your country-house today. Even argued whether to make a cellar or not. You were afraid it would be flooded in the spring.”

“We should give Sofia a lift to Ivanhorod. How will she get there otherwise with two kids?”

“No, I’ll stay with him a while. You go, I’ll stay. There’s some lights over there, I’ll spend the night at the Myrovyches’, and come and see the grave, again tomorrow. I’m sorry, boys, I’ve got nothing to serve,” said Sofia Palyvoda, pressing her two small children to herself.

Fedir stood by the sealed-up well like a ghost. With the bucket of water in his hands, he stood there gazing down the dark road. along which death was to come from the town (and some said. had come already). In the thick darkness his sharp eyes caught sight of an ominous figure with two wings dragging on the ground. Could that be it? His first impulse was to hide behind the well, but, ashamed, he resolved to wait and see. leaning against the well. Then, to overcome his fear, he went out to meet the thing. When he was nervous, the best thing was to act, so he

advanced with the bucket full of water. Finally, he made out a woman dressed in black and two children holding her by the hands. They drank from his bucket, then followed him to the house, seemingly not surprised that he was deaf-mute.

On the porch the dog started barking, but then lay down on the padded jacket where the mole had stayed before.

“Nataalka’s back,” said Maria without moving. She sat at the table as if made of stone.

Before her stood a woman with a tear-stained face and two children—a girl and a boy. She understood: they were from out there.

“Sit down, my girl, and have some supper,” said Maria “Misfortune or not, you’ve got to eat.”

76

The sleepy little district centre of Ivanhorod knew what was happening. Hundreds of buses with evacuees had gone through. It still shook from the heavy lorries, tractors, and bulldozers, which day and night, their headlights turned on, moved towards the atomic station. A headquarters was set up at the Community Centre to organize the resettlement of evacuees and help relatives and friends to find each other. The local inn accommodated ministers and generals, while district Party committee chiefs would have to catch a few hours of sleep in the office armchairs.

The old district hospital was as busy as a Moscow railway station. A girl in a school uniform was anxiously asking people queuing up to have their radiation levels measured:

“Where do they take blood for transfusions? I’ve got group one. Tell me quick or else my father will catch up with me!”

In a long narrow corridor a dozen or so women sat along the walls waiting. There weren’t enough chairs to sit on, and some of the women stood, casting nervous glances at the clock over the door with the sign “Gynecology”.

“...My husband wanted a second kid, too. But how were we to know? Who could’ve expected a thing like that?”

“All I want is to stay alive and well. I’m so fertile I can get pregnant from anything... from the wind. There’ll be time enough to have babies...”

“No, you can’t just leave it. Because what if heaven forbid you give birth to... something not quite normal What then? Better now, before it gets born, before you see it, and while it doesn’t care...”

“Well, I’ve made up my mind, too. But do you think that doctor will have enough strength for all of us? Looks like he’s ready to drop. Doesn’t anybody have an apple or something to keep him going?”

“I’ve got a chocolate. My kid only had a little bite of it. I bought it here, so it’s all right.”

“I don’t know about you, but for me an abortion is no worse than a pin prick,” a fat woman was telling Nataalka, who sat on the chair next to her with her arms around her knees. “Others have got husbands and lovers and what not, but I have to pay for every minute of fun... Don’t be afraid, dearie, it’s like a bee sting, really. And since you were actually down at the station you

can't avoid it; you've got to do it. I'm even worried that I had to stand half a day in a queue for imported shirts. Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time later to have babies nice and fat, with good lusty voices..."

"For Christ's sake, will you keep quiet! My head is ready to burst from your jabbering, just like that reactor."

"When you're talking, you're not so afraid. Once he's doing it, you don't care anymore. The worst time is this waiting here."

"...And that's only one reactor," somebody else was saying. "Where would we be if it was a bomb?"

The door of "Gynecology" opened and a slight, gaunt-looking man appeared. The nurse was wiping sweat off his brow.

"It might be fun for your men-folk but it's sure hell for poor old Krasyskyi," he said with a forced smile.

"Have a chocolate, Doctor," said the talkative one, handing Nataalka the bar for him.

77

Horodyshe reverberated to the roar of lorries and buses with their wheels skidding in the sand, and there was an echo in all the forests around. The rounded-up cattle were mooing in dismay, sending fine threads of saliva out on the wind. The hens cackled in alarm as their owners hastily caught and decapitated them. The pigs were oinking mournfully in their sties.

The sealed-up wells stared up like so many blind men into the fathomless sky.

Five little figures sat on the Myrovyches' fence, like five music notes on a staff. Besides Ruslan, Taras and Lida, there were also the young Palyvodas: Dmytro and Nina. Their clothes were baggy and shapeless, remade in a hurry from the grown-ups'.

In the cowshed, Fedir was scraping Mavra with a brush. He pressed his cheek to her side. You're mute, Mavra, like me, and you understand everything, too. Let's talk to each other, old girl.

The day before, Olesia had returned to Horodyshe. Without a word, she fell down on the divan under the old icon and fell fast asleep.

Maria was putting homemade bread into the oven. Odarka was helping her.

"You think we'll manage it, Mum? It would be a pity to have to leave it behind."

"You kids go. Get away from that. plague. I'll stay here with Mavra, the dog, the hens, and the mole. And I'll bake bread... I'm no chicken—what can happen to me? Hopefully, I'll be all right."

"Oh Mother, how can you say such things! If you carry on like that, I won't go either... They said they'd take Mavra to the same place they're taking us. A few dozen private cows and some three hundred at the collective farm—no one would ever think of leaving all that. They say Pavlo is staying behind to evacuate the cattle: I'll take him down a bottle, and he'll see that Mavra's all right."

"And what if she starts calving?"

“But you said yourself there was another two weeks,” Odarka argued.

“I won’t go either if you stay, Maria,” said Sofia Palyvoda as she cleared the table and packed food for the journey in a basket. “My parents live near Poltava, but I won’t leave you. I’ll only go when you go.”

“How can I leave all this? For whom? When the Germans came during the war, they shot us and hanged us and burned our houses, but the land remained ours. The earth, the water, the forest hid us and protected us. Twice I escaped when they came: once I hid in the outhouse and the other time in the attic. Why should I run away now when there’s no danger you can see or hear? And I’ve got the garden to plant yet. Then there’s Mykola’s ninth day, and Ivan’s fortieth... Look—there’s no bullets flying, no bombs exploding, the orchards are in bloom, the river is overflowing, and you say run! I’ve lived on this land for seventy years, and now I have to leave? Has the world gone mad?”

Arkhyp the tractor driver—the one who did crossword puzzles—slaughtered both his pigs, tarred them with a blow torch, and was now gutting them, helped by his teenage son and his wife. She was wearing a rubber apron spattered with blood; all three were covered with soot from the torch and smudged with fat and entrails. All three were bustling about, sharpening knives, and washing the tub, basins and pots to keep the meat and lard.

“Get a move on, you slowcoaches, or they’ll leave without us, you’ll see. If we’d bought that dark-blue Lada then, we wouldn’t be dependent on anybody... But now, see, half the pigs will go to the dogs.”

“You didn’t have to kill both of them at once, did you? One was enough, the other could’ve stayed in the sty. I would have left some swill for it... Now what are we going to do with all this? Who’s going to buy it, and for how much?”

“Oh, stop that moaning. Please! I feel sick as it is... If we have a good store of meat and fat, we’ll come through all right. You think the people out there will meet us with outstretched arms? Ha, they’ll run from us like the plague!... We’ll sell to the other evacuees, put a little more in the bank, and then who knows? We might be entitled to buy a car out of turn as disaster victims...”

The foreman, followed by several militiamen, entered the Myrovyches’ yard.

“Maria! How long are we going to wait? The radiation is around the corner, it’ll be here any minute. Take your cow to the dairy farm! Odarka, get your kids in that bus. Were going to the neighboring district, the one we had the competition with. This year, I guess, they’ll have the edge on us... Well, come on, get in! One, two, three!”

Maria did not look at him. “Take the kids to the bus, Sofia. You Odarka, get the bread out of the oven. And you, lock up the house,” she gesticulated to Fedir. “Give the hens some grain, put up the scarecrow so that the crows don’t get at the seeds. Sweep the floor, somebody, so we come back to a clean place. I’ll take Mavra out... And don’t boss me around, my good man. We’re not just getting off a train. This is our home where we’ve lived our whole life, it’s our land. What good am I without it? For the likes of you decisions are easy to take. ‘One-two-three, indeed!’”

“What about your own boys? Didn’t they all get out when they could? All but the deaf-mute one. Gone to the city, for an easy life in comfort.”

“My boys are none of your business. They’re no angels, but they’re not dirt either.”

“Your Ivan used to throw his weight around, too. The men here still remember him.”

“You don’t have to tell me that, but he’s dead now. He’s done his commanding and you’re just getting in the swing of it. All right, never mind. Go and call the neighbors.”

There was a babel of voices around the buses; the drivers hooted impatiently. The only ones to have taken their seats were the school children. They were in fact the only young people Horodyshe had. Not counting the deaf-mute Fedir. The rest were past middle age or just old.

“Don’t be in such a hurry. They might call it off yet. A messenger will come from town—and we’d be gone already.”

“Look, mind your own business! You may be too old to care, but we want to survive,” snapped Arkhyp’s wife as she dragged a huge sack into the bus. The sack had developed a rip, which revealed a blackened pig’s snout with a toothy grin.

“Are we in your way? We’re not stopping you! Go on living any way you please. Have your babies and bring them up. We’ll leave you everything we have—we won’t take it with us... And you’re even afraid of parting with a pig’s head.”

“What do you expect us to eat out there?” Arkhyp’s wife snapped again. “D’you think we’re going to a holiday resort?”

“Today’s the second day of Easter. Tomorrow the whole village would have gone to the cemetery to remember our folks. How can we just leave them out there like that?”

“My daughter was coming in with the kids tonight. She’ll find the door sealed and think her father’s been put in jail or something.”

“Our children have all moved to town and let Horodyshe go to pot. And now the town itself has got no future, what with the radiation...”

Just then, the foreman ran up, panting.

“Now, comrades,” he announced, catching his breath. “There’ll be no farewell meeting. We’re starting out. And as soon as you settle in over there, your cattle will arrive. The militiamen here will be responsible for your houses... So, off we go!”

Maria embraced Mavra at the pen gate, and stood talking softly:

“Stand firm in the lorry, so you aren’t jolted too much. And don’t lie down on the floor, you’ll get trampled... I’ll be the first to meet you there...”

In the bus, Odarka was busy handing out homemade bread:

“Here, take some. It’s still warm. Mother just baked it and said to pass it around.”

Fedir caught Maria and held her. She was gasping for air because she had run all the way from the cowsheds. He helped her into the brand new tourist bus and climbed in with her. The driver revved up the motor.

Taras was drawing something on the dusty pane. Olesia looked sadly out of the window as the gusty wind blew apple blossoms off the trees and carried them on to the cemetery.

The bus started out, bumping along the gnarled roots, followed by a cloud of dust and apple blossoms.

They passed the cemetery, with two new graves at the edge. Then a faded sign with the word “Horodyshe”.

The main street of the district town beyond the danger zone was crowded with people hurrying along with anxious faces. Most of them wore protective outfits and carried dosimeters, first-aid kits and gas masks attached to their belts, some had militia shoulder straps.

Houses, trees and post office windows were plastered with notices:

“The headquarters of the Jupiter Plant is located in School No. 1, class 7a.”

“The Homeland Collective Farm, of Poltava Region, will take in families for permanent residence. House, furniture, land allotments and cow supplied.

The Collective Farm Board.”

“Mother, I am staying at 12 Shevchenko Street. Liudmyla Lopatiuk.”

“Citizens without identification papers are requested to obtain a certificate at the cinema box office. Open 24 hours a day.”

“State financial relief can be obtained at the office of the boarding school.”

“Whoever has lost a ring may collect it at the book shop.” Men, women with children, and old people were standing in the queue for state relief.

79

The dog sat on his hind paws at the door of the Myrovyches' house and howled, pouring out all his canine misery and despair.

The column of heavy cattle vans bumped along the dirt road, crushing the roots, which emitted a whitish juice. The bellowing of the cows inside was carried away by the wind as the vans disappeared in the forest.

Pavlo and Myron, who had volunteered to stay behind and help evacuate the cattle, settled down on an abandoned cart next to the pen with the privately owned cows. Pavlo produced a bottle and took a long satisfying draught. Myron emptied a cellophane covered cigarette pack and filled it up from the bottle.

“Don't skimp, fill her up! There's nearly a whole case left at the Myrovyches' after the memorial. And now that I've got a grandson born, we have a good reason to celebrate.”

“Oh, come off it! The house is sealed up and there's militiamen everywhere. And it wouldn't be very nice anyway... I know where my old hag has a bottle stashed away. We could dig it up now.”

At that moment the cows were startled by something and turned towards Pavlo and Myron, but they waved and hooted them away. The herd then rushed the other way, broke through the flimsy rotten fence and spilled out into the open.

“Hey, catch them! Or we'll land in goal!” Myron yelled and dashed around to intercept the fugitives.

Most of the wickets had been nailed down or secured with wire, so the cows just stood there, waiting to be let in. The two men had little trouble collecting them and driving them back to the pasture in the centre of the village, Mavra heading the procession. But the pen was of little use now.

“I've got it!” Pavlo shouted. “The cemetery. There's a good fence around it.”

The idea turned out to be a good one. The men drove the entire herd into the Horodyshe cemetery and closed the sates, heaving a sigh of relief.

Mavra stood sniffing the two fresh graves...

80

Liudmyla Myrovych, still in mourning, was sitting in the office of Esaulenko, deputy chairman of the evacuated town soviet.

“So what am I supposed to do, Comrade Esaulenko?”

“Wait a little. You can see for yourself what pandemonium we have to deal with: finding people who are missing, sending away workers we don’t need at the station just now, providing living quarters for those who’ve come to deal with the damaged reactor, hunting down looters, making arrangements to have the children sent to the south. The worst shock is behind us, but there’s so much to be done yet! Why don’t you take the regular help, and later you’ll get the difference between that and what you are entitled to as ‘wife of a hero’. It’s not an easy thing to prove, as you can see. We all know that Mykola Myrovych died the death of a hero—fell in action, actually. But there’s no death certificate. I’ll get in touch with the lawyer, we’ll see that you get what’s coming to you. The shock is over...”

“What about a place to live?”

“Well, I can tell you as the wife of a disaster victim and a brave woman in your own right, we won’t spend the winter here. That’s for sure. The government won’t forget anybody, and you least of all. Most likely, you’ll be given a flat in Kyiv, bypassing the waiting list. Anyway, we’ll see to that. Just as soon as this madhouse calms down a bit.”

81

The cattle vans had arrived. They had passed through the silent, empty streets of noon-day Horodyshe, and now stopped at the cemetery, where the drivers let down the gang planks.

Pavlo and Myron ran about between the graves, catching the cows and pushing and pulling them up the ramps. When Mavra refused to budge Pavlo gave her a kick in the stomach. She moaned and started up. She was the last cow in the van and had to stand up against the backboard.

Myron, who had briefly disappeared, ran up lugging a huge glass jar of homebrew. He set it carefully on the seat, then jumped in himself.

“Let’s go! The Myrovyches’ door wasn’t locked, but you know how it is, with the militia and everything...”

The van rocked from side to side, especially going over the pine roots, but the drivers were in a hurry, and it was only cows, anyway.

The dog Pushok howled as he sat outside the door of the cottage. At the poultry farm the hens clucked and cackled. And a hawk hovered in the sky above.

A big mud puddle in the dirt road brought the van to a sudden halt. But then the driver lunged forward and it was on its way again. Only Mavra had not managed to stay on her feet, and crashed against the back-board. The momentum sent her right over it and she fell heavily to the ground behind the van. No one inside noticed.

82

The Ferris wheel was lazily turning on its axle. The hunchback had forgotten to switch off the brake and the wind had set it in motion, screeching and rattling, the empty cars swinging. In the houses, unlocked front doors creaked to every puff of wind. Hungry cats and dogs were rummaging in the heaps of rubbish. Crows sat listless on balcony railings. The helicopters, changing direction over the town, raised a wind that carried on torn theatre posters, ice-cream wrappers, newspapers, empty cellophane bags and cigarette stubs.

The road to the atomic station was covered with dry sand dropped from the helicopters. The military armored car bumped along the seams between the concrete slabs. The sun glistened on the narrow slits of glass through which several pairs of eyes peered anxiously out.

“You really ought to put on the gas mask,” said Puzach, as he leaned over to Oleksandr Myrovych from his rear seat. As Myrovych did not refuse outright, Puzach rose to his feet, stooping under the low top of the armored car, and pulled the gas mask over Myrovyches bald head and chin.

Myrovych said something, but his voice was barely audible under the gas mask. Puzach strained his ears, trying to make it out.

“Why don’t you put one on yourself?”

“For me it doesn’t make much difference. The government commission talks to me as if I were a criminal... Somebody must have set them against me. People in my position have many enemies.”

“They’ll sort it out, don’t you worry... But how come you couldn’t keep Mykola safe? Mother will never forgive me.”

“You will manage to get out of it somehow. You’re a hero! But who am I, just a little spoke in a big wheel. Could you somehow put in a word for me, up there at the top?”

“Come on, faster!” yelled the young dosimeterist suddenly. “Step on the gas! We’re in a danger zone! It’s gone off scale!” The two men had not even noticed him before, nor the driver either, a lad with a thin, almost childish face. He now threw the heavy machine into top gear so that Myrovyches head jerked back. Puzach threw up his hands to steady it from behind. From a distance they caught a glimpse of the ruins of the reactor belching grey smoke. They dashed by it at top speed, protected by the heavy steel plating of the armored car. But Myrovych took in the situation, at a glance.

“It’s all true, I can see. My power block... The first time in the history of civilization... on such a scale...”

83

Maria tried to shove a three-ruble bill into the driver's hand, but he balked:

"Take your rubbish and go away... Or I'll run you right back to where I picked you up." Maria climbed out of the lorry and hurried into the forest. That her Mavra was not there she could both see and feel. The cows had all been led away by their owners, and Mavra had not been among them. Pavlo was indignant: "Could I sell that contaminated cow or what? Who would buy her? I'd found the best possible place for her in the van. She just gave us the slip, the dirty bitch!"

Vexed, she threw a handful of sand into his drunken face. He smiled foolishly. At least she wouldn't take him to court.

The residents of Horodyshche had all been put up in Kniazhyi Liubech, a small, well-off village where the people make a little money at their collective farm, but live off allotments of their own, and mostly off their magnificent hothouses that supply Kyiv and even Moscow with early spring vegetables. The Myrovyches and their children were quartered in the house of one such farmer, on the second storey of his home. No sooner had Maria introduced herself to the owner who was busy working in his hothouse, than the cattle began to arrive in vans. She rushed off to find her Mavra, but the cow was nowhere to be seen. That wasn't right now, was it? Here they had all come to a safe place, and left poor Mavra behind? She had fed them with milk all these years, she was a member of the family. And now they had abandoned her to her fate, to death from radiation—a poor suffering creature, and with calf, at that!... Abandoned! Thrown to the wolves! Oh, no. That wouldn't do. Maria must go and find her, or else her conscience would never give her a moment of peace!

...A militiaman passed by on a motorcycle, and she dropped down flat on the ground, next to an ant heap, lying in the tall grass, with ants crawling over her hands and face. She thought: what am I afraid of? This is not the danger zone. All around are people. And here I am hiding like some sort of villain! Yet she waited awhile until the motorcycle had sped off. Only then did she get up, shake the ants off her skirt, and go on...

...A young soldier drove her in his tank over a pontoon bridge across a small river. She did not tell him she was making her way into the danger zone. "Sonny," she had begged. "Take me a little way down the road. I'll give you something for cigarettes..." "I'm from Azerbaidjan, Granny. We have our own thoughts about money. Don't give money... it's bad luck."

Then she had to persuade a lean, frail fellow with a sharp, pointed face.

"What's there to be afraid of? I'll get out on the other side and you'll row back. And for that you'll always have Granny Maria over there. You could come every evening if you want to. I'll give you food and drink and, the main thing, your wife will never find you, because of the river. You can take potatoes if you want. I have a cellar full of potatoes. Just take an old woman across. I'll always pray for you and your sins will be forgiven."

"Go to the devil, you old woman. Nobody is allowed out in a boat now. You're not long for this world, what do you want across the river for?" But his face had lost some of its severity. And Maria, encouraged, said, "Yes, yes, straight to the devil. But he's over there, on the other side. You just take me across."

"Where do such people come from? You're an old woman, but you stick like a leach."

He undid the rope, set the oars into the locks, took off his shirt and pants (if they seized his boat he would have to swim back home), and pushed off.

“But if you don’t play fair and drop dead on me, just you wait... I’ll sure pay you a visit, after the radiation’s gone.” The river bank, and the forest beyond which stood Horodyshe, were drawing near. Maria’s heart was beating fast and so loud it drowned out all other noises.

84

The armored car with Myrovych and the dosimeterist sped down the streets of the deserted town.

“One must not allow such great achievements of science and of human reason to fall into the hands of crooks, adventurers and climbers!” he had said to Puzach. “But your brother Mykola was in that category, too,” parried Puzach. “Mykola was a victim of a criminal command. His only fault was that he implicitly followed your orders.”

The scope of the accident stunned Oleksandr Myrovych. He realized that he would be held to account at the highest level and decided that he would go to Moscow the next day and ask to be included in the commission for dealing with the consequences of the catastrophe. But he yet had to make his case. Well, he could, in the fashion of the day, assume the blame—not all the blame, of course, one could go too far. After all, he had got more than his share of punishment: one brother had died, the other brother was down with radiation sickness...

Myrovych put the eye-pieces of the gas mask to the embrasure of the armored car. All he saw was abandoned houses, padlocks on shops and office buildings, children’s bicycles left lying in the streets, a baby’s crawlers hanging on a balcony. Grass grew rank between the concrete slabs of the sidewalks, stimulated by the radiation. The hotel was empty, with its “no vacant rooms” sign still on the door. An abandoned goat which had apparently come from the outskirts was grazing on the flower bed amidst the unusually tall tulips. A few dead sparrows in the dry fountain pool. Some ten or so fat rats leisurely crossing the road. A smashed-up Volga car under the lamp-post into which it had crashed. A poster advertising “Counterattack” over the boarded-up entrance to the cinema. Two militiamen leading a youngster with a stolen block of cigarettes out through the smashed window of a restaurant.

As they approached a turning in the road, a bright reflection from the sun forced Oleksandr Myrovych to shut his eyes. It was the glass on the board of honor (where a family of swallows had made its nest under the eaves). When he opened them he saw Mykola looking at him. His brother’s eyes found him through the narrow slit in the arm our and fixed him with their gaze.

He touched the driver on the shoulder and the car came to a halt. Myrovych fumbled at the hatch, but the dosimeterist’s hand shot out.

“What’s the matter with you? It’s forty-five R’s here! Either a spill-out or a piece of nuclear fuel. We always get through this place at top speed!”

The soldier drove the armored car out of the town, but Oleksandr still felt his brother’s eyes looking at him... Several times he covered the embrasure with his hand, but could not escape the sight of Mykola’s eyes.

They passed by the cemetery where his father lay buried, but he couldn't see the grave from a distance.

They turned in at the Myrovyches'. The well was covered over, the wormwood and nettles so tall he could hardly see the cottage. The gate of the cowshed was wide open, the path overgrown with weeds.

Oleksandr peered out "Mother always left the key on the pole under the bucket... I don't see the bucket, so there is no key... My only connection with... the zone..."

The dog, covered with burrs, jumped out of the tall weeds onto the steps of the porch, barking at the strange machine. He was very lean and his face was scratched and torn. Oleksandr motioned to the driver to go on... Mykola's rueful grey eyes looked at him fixedly, as if to see whether it was really his brother under the gas mask.

Going through the woods, the heavy wheels of the armored car crushed roots and underbrush beneath them. On the curb of the road they saw a stillborn calf, lying in the sand. Several hungry dogs were busy with the carcass; a cloud of crows hovered overhead.

The driver drove around it, crashing through a hazelnut grove and some hawthorn bushes, out to the highway where a shiny black Volga stood waiting in the sun.

Oleksandr had a job getting out of the armored car, but with the driver and dosimeterist pushing, finally made it out of the hatch. He walked over to the Volga, but did not remove his gas mask.

Something was obstructing his breathing and even his thinking, but whether it was the rubber mask or Mykola's eyes... he did not know,

85

A shop-on-wheels had brought some cheap clothing to Kniazhyi Liubech. The evacuees from Horodyshche stood in a crowd next to the village club, formerly a church. Its crosses removed, its cupolas patched up, the walls re-plastered, it now had a dance floor and cinema inside. The women tried on cotton prints and house dresses, and there were some old-fashioned trousers and shirts for the men.

Fedir was mowing weeds in front of the building while he waited for his mother to come. The rhythmic swinging of the scythe eased the tightness in his chest. But the rhythm was suddenly broken as a minibus pulled up in a cloud of dust and sand. Television crew spilled out with their cameras and microphone. Fedir did not look up until a man ran up to him with a microphone and another man, with a beard, trained a film camera on his face.

"We know you've been evacuated from the danger zone, that you're the brother of Mykola Myrovych who died at his post, and the brother of the hero—fireman Hryhorii Myrovych who prevented the fire from spreading to the neighboring atomic blocks, saving us all from a still worse disaster. In spite of your personal tragedy, you carry on with your work. You and your brothers must have been brought up that way. What can you say to our television viewers today?"

Fedir's face tensed; his jaw began to work. His eyes showed the torment of a mute person who wants to speak, but whose words are choked in his throat. He stood still, his eyes on the camera,

"OK, then, Could you tell us, aren't you dreaming of returning to your native village? After all these are all temporary difficulties which are to put up with."

Taras' head came into the picture from behind Fedir's back.

"Uncle Fedir knows everything, he knows what you want. But he won't speak."

86

No sooner had Maria started out on the path that led to Horodyshe than she heard the rumble of an engine and saw an olive-green tank driving out of the village. It looked like a regular tank except that instead of caterpillar tracks it had rubber wheels. Used to anxiety and fright on her long trip from Kniazhyi Liubech to Horodyshe, fearing that she might be detained and made to go back, she retreated into the forest and hid behind the thick pine trunks. "Why did they have to take us out? Everything is green and blooming, just like in Kniazhyi Liubech. The bank here's like a regular carpet, and no holiday-makers to tramp it down. So calm, so beautiful, and the earth is warm underfoot. All you have to do is to live and enjoy life."

The armored car sent out a cloud of petrol fumes and kicked up sand with its wheels. Staring through the narrow slits at Maria were outsize glassy eyes, cold and terrible. Thank goodness, they did not notice her standing behind the tree, and drove on their way. For them this was "the zone"; for Maria it was her native land... She wished it would get dark so that she could go into her house without fear of being seen. It would take her in and protect her and warm her heart. And maybe Mavra had come home and was waiting there with her new-born calf,

Maria came out upon a clearing grown over with Chernobyl. A short distance away, under its steep bank, the river calmly lapped the shore. Far overhead were the lush crowns of pine. She knew and loved this place, but had not been here for some time, because in summertime it was usually invaded by crowds of holiday-makers: in the daytime they hid away here to escape the heat, and at night made bonfires. And now everything was cleaner and greener than it had been for a long time.

... It was May then, too. The cockchafers got into her hair. Just as she was dozing off, a cockchafer stirred and scabbled at her ear. Little Sashko had fallen asleep as soon as he touched the pillow. But not before the ritual words: "Wake me up when papa comes back from the war... I want to shoot his gun..."

Victory Day was past. Horodyshe had celebrated for two whole days. The accordion played on the square at what today was the bus stop. The accordionist played straight through, given food and drink right there out of the hands of the festive crowd, so he would go on and never stop. The orchards were in bloom and there were clouds of dust from the dancing. Maria went round and round with the little boy. By evening her shoulders, face and legs were covered with golden dust. Home, at last, she was exhausted, and glowed like amber. She put Sashko to bed and at midnight ran to the river for a dip, so as to be clean when Ivan came back from the war. At this very spot she had left her clothes; and there, drenched with the moonlight, she dried

her young body with a rough home-spun towel, listened to the river, to the forest, to herself, believing and yet disbelieving that she could have gone through such a war, that her Ivan was alive and that the nightmare was behind them. Now the time to live, to have children, and love her Ivan.

That day in May, Maria had started a major laundering job, squatting on a granite boulder under the bluff of the river bank. Tired, she laid out a whole mountain of clean sheets, curtains, and shirts, both Ivan's and Sashko's. She had washed all the clothes in the house, as if determined to wash the war itself out of her life. After that she had come to this glade and stretched out on the soft wormwood.

She woke up, aware that somebody was bending over her, breathing tobacco smoke into her face. She sat bolt upright, seeing only the stranger's black moustache, and slapped out at his dark cheek as hard as she could. Then she jumped to her feet. That sent the stranger rolling on the grass with laughter:

"That's my Maria all over!"

Ivan! He was here! Her legs turned to cotton, and she fell to the ground.

The grass heaved under them like a boat on the water. Ivan's kisses tickled and burned. Overcome by his caresses and intoxicated with joy, she barely managed to whisper:

"Ivanchyk, your medal... the pin is pricking me..."

By February, a cradle was swinging from the ceiling of their home, like a pendulum.

"Oh, Mykola!" said Maria aloud. "You were conceived in joy and I had an easy time of it when you were born. I thought you'd be the happiest of all... And now I wish I could find your bones and bury them in our cemetery. Your friend Palyvoda at least has a grave; his wife and children can come and weep for him. Young Dmytro and Nina will come, too, if they grow up decent people in this mad world. What only haven't we done to destroy ourselves?... She found easily the place where she and Ivan had been together that night, May 12, 1945. She sank to her knees and then lay down on the Chernobyl grass, sighing with relief, her frail body relaxed.

Looking about, she noticed a white handkerchief under a bush, edged with embroidery, tiny red cross-stick. Where did I see that? At Olesia's? Yes, Olesia had one like it. Last year she'd bought some batiste, cut it up into hankies and hemmed them with cross-stitching. When had she been here last? This year, must be... When the old man was buried... Maria put the handkerchief into her pocket. She'd wash it and give it back to her grand-daughter.

Maria woke up because somebody was breathing into her face. She opened her eyes and saw the dog Pushok, all scratched and bruised. He whimpered with joy and began licking her hands and face, rolling back, and crawling around her on the grass. Maria caught and pressed him to her chest. Aren't you thin? all skin and bones... I'll take you home and feed you.

That evening an ambulance sped through Kniazhyi Liubech. It turned smartly in at the large two-storey house, where the Myrovych family were temporarily quartered. Behind the iron gate

and the high iron fence, a well-fed dog jumped up on its brick kennel, put its paws on the gate and started barking, spraying the red cross over the windscreen with saliva.

The owner of the house, who had recently returned from the Kyiv market, was sitting at the table in the big room, smoothing out the crumpled banknotes and sorting them out so he could count the money more easily. Who was that outside? Not another evacuee to be planted on him? He'd already taken in five children, an old woman, two younger ones, a girl and a deaf-mute. He'd even been interviewed for a district newspaper... It couldn't be yet another person, or could it? His house has been turned into a regular Gypsy camp. He called out to the boarders and one of the women went out... He had to finish counting... Only one large bill, all the rest was chicken-feed. But there was lots of it!

Odarka walked out towards the car as a man in a white coat on top of his suit got out.

"Are you from the Myrovych family? We need either a brother or a sister of Hryhorii Myrovych. It's urgent! He's to be operated on in the morning—a bone marrow transplant. Either a brother or a sister! The plane is waiting at Boryspol."

"Fedir! You and I must go and save Hryhorii," Odarka shouted.

But Fedir did not need to be called. He was there, standing behind Odarka. He could not very well understand in the dark what was going on, what they were all talking about, but he knew that somebody needed his help. His skin, or his blood, or maybe his very soul told him... They needed him!

"I'll just say goodbye to the children," Odarka rushed into the house. Olesia and Sofia Palyvoda scraped up the last few rubles in the flat, and shoved them into her hand. Odarka kissed the sleepy children and ran out to the car.

The big dog again jumped up, leaped at the gate and barked for a long time after the ambulance was gone.

"If they need a lot of marrow to transplant, there'll be both of us, both Fedir and I," said Odarka softly.

88

Maria did not light a candle, because she knew that the militia were on patrol and if they saw her they would make her go back. She ate some cold potatoes which were left in the put from the funeral repast. The leftover sausage she fed to the dog, who swallowed it unchewed, chocking on it and whining.

Once home, she felt more and more confident. Everything here was familiar and dear to her heart. It calmed her and set her to thinking about life before the accident. Those walls must know everything about her, and remember her when she was still young and strong, like spring water. They knew her when she was sick and sluggish. like a swamp. hard like ram's horn, and later, generous and tender-hearted. They had heart! her how when Ivan took to seeing Nastia, and Nastia gave birth to Vasyi. Only the walls knew that Maria would forgive him, wretched bastard that he was. All she wanted was to have him back home. She would not scratch his eyes out, would not splash acid into his handsome Gypsy face. She would only heat up water so that he

would wash off the smell of that Nastia... The radiation must have gone through every board in her house, but it was still here, it hadn't fallen to pieces, had it?

Now, Maria thought, my life is like the owl's: I must never go out in the daytime. There was nothing that could be done about it. Down in the cellar, she collected a small sack of potatoes, dressed herself all in black, and got to work. That garden had to be planted.

"If only I could call Mavra—good and loud so she could hear me—I'd go out in the woods and find her. But here I must be as dumb as Fedir. There, dog! You go find her! You're in the way here anyway," Maria said aloud.

The rows she planted were even, the holes she made shallow, for the potatoes were straight from the cellar and hadn't been warmed in the sun first so the sprouts were very poor yet. It didn't matter though. The earth would warm them. And disaster or no disaster, the potatoes must come up, you couldn't live without potatoes, we'd never have survived the war without them.

Every time the dog pricked up his ears and started sniffing in the night air, Maria would quickly hide behind the scarecrow. She would stand there without breathing for a time. Then back to work: the sunflowers along the path, and beetroot, dill and parsley in neat rows. When they got back everything would be in bloom. It wouldn't be a desert they would be coming back to, it would be a home. Her throat was bothering her, she felt like coughing all the time, but feared it would make too much noise. And where had that dog disappeared to now? If he got in the way of some strays, he might not get away in one piece. And besides, she had heard that dogs in the abandoned villages were being shot. She'd have to lock him up in the cellar.

Nearing the shed, she thought, what if Mavra had come back and was waiting for her? Inside, she saw the somnolent hens all on the edge of the empty manger. She carried each one to the high perch, because down where they were now a ferret could get at them, or a fox. The hens did not resist, there was no cackling or beating of wings, only a feeble fluttering and hoarse breathing. She sat down on the edge of the manger. What a lot of work there always used to be outdoors, and here everything seemed to be done already—you could just lie down and die... She might just walk down to the grave and stay with Ivan for a while... and Dmytro... It was nine days today, and Sofia had said she would have a meal... for Dmytro and Mykola... Some feast! One old woman left in all Horodyshe!

Maria went to get an armful of hay at the other end of the shed—Mavra just might be walking in soon... and her hand knocked against something hard next to the wall. Pushing aside the hay, she came upon a large oaken cross leaning against the crumbling clay wall of the shed. "Oh, Ivan! Remember, I kept asking you where that piece of oak went to that was left over after we built the porch? It disappeared just about the time you started getting thinner... wasting away in front of my eyes... So that's what you were doing nights, locked yourself up, smoking and coughing away there in the shed. Whittling and whittling... So you knew... Nastia was on her deathbed then, and I told you, 'Go and see her before she dies, you old so-and-so. You've got to.' And do you know what she's supposed to have said? 'Don't be long, Ivan,' said she. 'I'll be waiting for you—up there. Only this time without Maria!'" (There was a long pause.) "...Well, you made that cross smooth and oiled it... It's dry and hard as bone now, and rings like a bell. Nothing will ever get at it, not even the radiation."

Maria untied the rope that was attached to the metal ring on the trough in the cowshed, wound it around the wooden cross, then pulled the ends over her shoulders, hoisting the cross on her back, and with heavy, halting steps left the yard.

The big cross was rubbing her back sore and cutting into her spine, but Maria, teeth clenched and holding on to the fence carried it across the lifeless village. Small and hunched over, she moved on to the howling of hungry dogs, chickens flapping their wings in the tree tops, foxes darting in and out of courtyards. The trees that lined the road were shedding their blossoms, and when the cross caught on the lower branches, the blossoms would rain down on Maria's shoulders, her black shawl, her arms and hands wet with sweat and blue from the pitiless rope.

"But I'll find you up there too, Ivan, and tear you away from Nastia's clutches. You're lucky, though: I'll not be dying just yet. Too much to do. Just look at what's happening! Anyone can curl up and die, the trick is to go on living! Just try it yourself. Oh, I'm not much good any more, and that cross of yours is as heavy as if it were made of stone... The first summer of the war, the time I thought I was a widow, I could carry a sack of potatoes all the way to Kyiv, to swap them for grain. And I'd be back by morning, too. And many were the logs I would drag in from the woods, oak logs they were, not very light, you know. I've lost my strength now... But why are they all so afraid of that radiation? Not that you can see it anywhere. Or are my eyes not as good as they used to be?"

She stopped often, setting the end of the cross down on the ground and standing very still under it, listening. It weighed down so hard on her that she thought it would end up by pressing her right down to the ground. and she would never get up again. Gradually, though, her heart would stop racing, her breathing would grow more even, and she would speak to the cross, invoking it not to be heavy, because she was going to have to carry it anyway, to get it to that cemetery. She appealed to it not to be so stubborn: was it not better to be a cross standing over a grave than to be burnt up in a stove'?...

At last she reached the cemetery, set the cross down on the ground, and only then saw that the graves of Ivan and Dmytro had been trampled by cows and befouled. She gathered up the dry dung and carried it over to the fence. There a dog that had been dozing next to a heap of chicken feathers snarled at her. But she spoke to it and it grew quiet.

Raking up the earth on each grave separately turned out to be too much for her—she had nothing to work with but her hands—so she made the two graves into one. Dmytro had been buried at night, they dug the grave right next to Ivan's. She made a hole between the two graves, and dragged the cross there.

"If you ever meet Mykola's soul, Ivan, don't you be mean. Don't begrudge him a kind word. Be good to him and set his mind at ease. Be a bit thoughtful for once. I say this because I know you; you're such a one to order people around and tell them off. Show a little kindness for once in your life. To Mykola and Dmytro, too. They wrote about them both in the newspaper today, poor things. I was on my way home here and two militiamen saw me. Well, they wouldn't let me pass. One of them said I couldn't go any further. The other was sitting on his motorcycle reading the Moscow paper. And who do I see looking out at me but our Mykola... and Dmytro, too. It said if it weren't for Hryhorii and his fellow workers, Kyiv would have had to be evacuated... Well, they didn't believe that I was their mother and told me I'd have to go back. Of course, I

just went around through the woods. They have their maps, but I know this place so well, my feet will take me anywhere. They made us all leave, Ivan. Took us a hundred miles away. It's a good thing this land of ours is such a big one. What if we had a small country with everybody crowded into it? Where would we go then? Some other country? And ask them to take us in? Suppose they didn't want us, too many mouths to feed of their own. Where to then? Not the moon. It's just the same out there... you can see how brother turns against brother with a pitchfork. Remember how we used to look up at the moon when we stood at the gate of my house... For hours... all night through sometimes. And you used to love me and me alone. But now, Ivan... What has the world come to since you died? I can't forsake the children now. I'll have to go on living..."

Gathering up her last strength Maria lifted the cross, and set it upright. She raked up the sand with her foot, and packed it around the base of the cross. Then she leaned against it, exhausted.

Day was breaking over Horodyshe when she got home. She latched the door behind her and, without undressing, lay down on the creaky couch. Shall I ever wake up if I fall asleep? she thought. What do I have yet to do? The potatoes have come up, the cross is in place, I've fed the dog. Why is the silence so oppressive? Because I'm the only one left in Horodyshe? Oh, I know why—the clock has stopped. I miss the ticking, and I can't fall asleep.

She got up, pulled at the chain of the weight, and gave the pendulum a push. Now everything would be all right. She drew the curtains at the window in case the patrol decided to look in. At that very moment Pushok barked from the steps. Well, that's the end of my rest.

With a trembling hand she moved the curtain aside and looked out the window. What she saw was the white spot on Mavra's forehead. With caked blood all around it.

89

Why are some people so heartless? thought Olga Myrovych, tense with impatience as the man at the door of the specialized hospital kept carefully examining her pass. He knew her very well, why behave like a frontier guard?! Finally, he let her go in.

"I shall give you my photograph for a present. You can study it at leisure. And not waste time when my patients are waiting," she said, putting away her pass. The man said nothing and proceeded to the identification of a nurse from her department. She knew that the hospital had been put under special orders and that if that man were given a free hand he would demand a personal file for all its employees. She also knew that for a ten ruble bribe he would let in anyone at all. But today she had no time to go into that. At midnight Hryhorii had taken a turn for the worse. The day before, his skin had begun to grow dark. The only thing that could help him now was a bone marrow transplant. And it had to be young and vigorous! Fedir had Hryhorii's blood type. No other marrow at the hospital was the same. Would they find him?

Olga opened the door of the isolation ward where Hryhorii was lying, his pillow strewn with luxuriant black hair. There were curls of it on the sheet too, and on the white plastic floor. Like black foam on snow. She had seen young lads going bald before, under her very eyes. She knew that this was bound to happen to Hryhorii, too. But it was only yesterday that she had combed his hair. And now he held a lock of it clutched in the darkened fist of his right hand, which was

unattached to the infusion bottle. The thought crossed her mind; I'll tell the orderlies not to throw his hair away. Natalka asked for it if... if... Well, today she will meet me again, when I leave the hospital, and beg me to save him. I can't lie to her. Natalka herself must be examined... She got an overdose, too.

Hryhorii lay still, with his face to the wall, his bald head with the darkened skin pressed into the pillow, his neck wrinkled and splotchy. Without turning his head, he slowly raised his right hand, and let the curly hair in it fall on his bare skull and over the pillow.

"Don't torment yourself, Hryhorii. Look at Oleksandr. He has done without hair all his life, so what? I've always loved him and I still do. And your Natalka told me yesterday: 'Now that I've dealt with all my rivals, I'll deal with the leukemia, too.' Fedir is flying in any minute. I shall operate on you myself. The American surgeon will be there too—he's one of the best they have. So we'll make it yet, Hrysha. And what is a head of hair for a man? An extra bother. Don't you worry."

"Where is Mykola? Why don't you say anything about Mykola?"

"They have all been evacuated. From the town and the whole district. Sashko flew there yesterday, and says they're all safe. Work has started on the after-effects now. Mykola must be there too. Sashko, and Natalka are insisting on seeing you, but you know they are not supposed to. Not a single outsider is allowed past the door of the hospital."

Hryhorii was weakly gathering up the hair on his pillow. Then he slowly turned his face to her: it was an earthen color, with dark circles under the sunken eyes. His forehead was deeply lined, with a big, vertical crease above the bridge of his nose.

The door opened and a young assistant called to Olga.

"We'll all get together in Horodyshe... And trample the grass at your wedding..."

"Olga, tell me. If I survive... can I have children? Tell me the truth, I can take it..."

"Excuse me, Hrysha, the chief surgeon is calling me. That American must have come. He cracked a joke, you know: the nuclear age has to be an age of large families, so we can have more people to take bone marrow from. Otherwise we won't survive. I'll be back in a jiffy..."

90

Well, now they can chase me out of Horodyshe. Let them, I don't care, said Maria to herself as she poured out for Mavra the last half a pail of water that Fedir had drawn from the well. But it was not enough. Living next to the water, and dying of thirst, she thought. She wanted to wash Mavra's milk caked udder which was scratched and bloody. Wherever have you been, Mavra? But Fedir had nailed the well lid down like a coffin. One of Mavra's sides was all scratched and bruised. It would be good to wash it with warm water, but there wasn't even enough water to drink. That's what we have come to: once they thought that water would be the cause of all their troubles, and now trouble came from the lack of it.

Just then she remembered the birch juice that Fedir had collected in the forest in April. Bringing it up from the cellar, she warmed it and pressed a moist rag to Mavra's side. The juice is clean, not contaminated. Fedir brought it before the accident. "Don't be afraid, Mavra, have a

little patience, dear. It's hard on all of us today: man and beast! Everyone with a heart feels the pain."

She gently touched the stiff teats. stroked them, worked them with her fingers. The cow looked down at her, nuzzled Maria's shoulder, sighed and moaned softly from time to time. At first the milk was red with blood, and then pinkish sprays began to pour into the pail, then at last white ones. But the foam that gathered on top was still pale crimson and thick. The bubbles did not burst but, instead, gathered into tiny globes, and spilled over the edge of the pail.

Pushok waited at the door of the cowshed avidly sniffing the milk. He sat sweeping the floor with his tail, white with burdock.

"Don't you fawn on me. How do I know where Mavra's been grazing? Natalka said that milk is our worst poison now. So you won't get any today. I'll not drink it myself either, thirsty as I am."

Maria went to the end of the yard with her pail, poured out the milk into the chornobyl bushes. The bright green grass turned to white and then a silvery film formed over its stems and leaves. Pushok sniffed at the milk and then looked up at Maria.

"Even when all of our cows grazed on wormwood, their milk was still milk. We'd make a face, but we'd still drink it. And it gave us strength. Now it's nothing but poison."

Maria took all the photographs off the wall, pried them out of the frames and stacked them up on the table. From some of them, children smiled up at her; from others they frowned in mock seriousness, and still others posed self-consciously for the camera: the boys showing off and Odarka quiet and meek. There they were in front of her—all young and handsome, not yet battered by life and time. They reminded Maria that she had not always been an old woman, for all of them came of her own young blood.

What will become of you, my kith and kin? We have been torn apart, scattered in all directions, as if we'd gone through a terrible war: with killed, wounded and missing... And now we're left without our land, as if we'd lost that war. Some say that Oleksandr could be jailed and his order taken away from him. Then Fedir would be the only one left. But he will not be able to tell anyone who the Myrovyches were. What we were like, how we lived, what we believed in. And why we vanished.

Maria wrapped the photographs in a plain white kerchief, hung the empty frames back up on the wall and then sat for a long time with her eyes closed, swaying slowly in front of a dead candle which had been there on the table since the ninth day's memorial repast.

Now I can leave. I can still be of use in Kniazhyi Liubech. There is nothing left here... Life has gone out of this place, either for Mavra, or for me, or Pushok. Out there people will at least give me a decent burial like a human being... Well, I think I'd better get going. Mavra has turned her foot. but there is nothing to be done, we have to go. There is neither grass nor water here.

She again rummaged through the photographs, and found a large one showing the whole family sitting near the house (even Oleksandr had come in from Moscow for Ivan's fiftieth birthday) and stood it on the window sill: let them look out into the street.

Then she went to the trunk, took out the clothes she had prepared for her funeral, shoved them into a plastic bag, threw in the packet of photographs, and left the house. She locked the door, put the key on the pole, the pail on top. "So we won't have to look for it when we come back. Have been hiding the key here all my life."

After that she plucked a piece of Chernobyl and threw it into the bag, tied a rope around Mavra's horns. Maria left the cowshed open so the chickens would have some place to get away from the foxes and could lay some eggs for their homecoming.

She wound the other end of the rope around her hand, hooked the plastic bag onto Mavra's horns and, fearing no one now, set out towards the river. Mavra hobbled after her mistress. Pushok circled the house three times, and, having had his fill of the smell of his native courtyard, ran after them.

Mavra wanted to slake her thirst with river water, but Maria held her fast by the horns.

"Mavra, what are you doing? Stop it, this water's no good. You think I'm not thirsty? Wait a little, now. As soon as we get to the other side, you'll have your fill from the first clean well we see."

Maria went in up to her neck but Mavra refused to budge, and Maria had to pull on the rope with all her might. The dog was nervous, scratching the packed sand with his paws and yelping hoarsely. However, on seeing Maria and Mavra acts. ally swimming, he jumped in himself.

Maria had grown up by the river and learnt to swim as a child, but now her wet clothes were pulling her down. Her arms were soon tired; she was swallowing water. Then she grabbed Mavra's horn, and the cow did not push her away.

The woman's head, milk-white, moved alongside the cow's with its two horns covered with the plastic bag which bobbed up and down, like a huge fish that led them to the other shore.

But the current was too strong to resist, so they gave up and just floated downstream. The cow was breathing hard. With her free hand, Maria grabbed the dog's fur; he paddled for all he was worth to keep afloat.

When the stream swept them onto a narrow sandbank, they all three collapsed in total exhaustion. Mavra drank and Maria had no strength to protest. Her white head lay on the wet sand, her body in the warm water, which softly lapped at her arms and legs, as though a newborn calf were licking her.

91

At the break of dawn, when the children were asleep on the floor, Olesia walked Sofia Palyvoda down to the community centre in the former church near which there was a bus stop. Olesia had borrowed money for Sofia's fare from a nurse at the first-aid station. She had also persuaded Sofia to leave the children behind: "I'll look after them. You go and get your relief money. People from the town were to apply in Ivanhorod. Take Odarka's too, and kids', and mine. Here are the papers you need—they've been certified at the village soviet. Find out all the news. Ask at the Evacuation Committee about my mother and leave them our address. And, please, don't forget to ask about Roman Tsvigun—here, I've put down the name. Don't worry about the kids, I'll take care of them."

The children were still asleep when Olesia returned. Let them sleep, she thought. When they wake up I'll have the devil of a time looking after them all. She set about cooking breakfast on the gas stove in the summer house. The stove had been lent them by the collective farm, as theirs was the biggest family among the evacuees.

The owners of the house were busy loading crates of tomatoes into the boot of their car.

“The Hay Market is your best bet,” the woman was saying. “Ask for Kulchytskyi. He’ll give you a place and get you a radiation clearance certificate. They’re from the hothouse, but anything can happen, of course. After all, the lodgers come from there. This crate will be for Kulchytskyi if he’s stuffy about the clearance.”

“Don’t have to tell me, I know. It would’ve been better, of course, if you went along as well, but you’ve got to keep an eye on the refugees... Lord knows when they’ll clear out of here, but then we can repaper the walls and do the floors.”

When Olesia heard these words, an old potato she was peeling fell out of her hands and rolled down the path to the dog’s kennel.

She ran upstairs, burst into her room, woke up the children, and started throwing their things into her grandmother’s old plywood suitcase...

92

Fedir’s arm slipped down from the wheel stretcher in the operating room. and hung limp. Olga watched the blood pulsating under his tender young skin. His long fingers and rounded nails were sprinkled with little white spots. Just like Sashko’s, she said to herself.

Hryhorii was given no anesthetic—they were afraid he mightn’t wake up. He lay on the wheel stretcher next to Fedir’s. He lay very still, eyes closed, the skin on the bump of his nose taut and white. The eyes of the assistants were fixed on the sensors of the blood purifying apparatus.

The American doctor pulled off his rubber gloves and washed his hands.

“At this stage,” he said, “I think I can wash my hands of it. I’ve always been superstitious, but now... I think I can. Well, let’s hope for the best. Nature had done a good job on this man.”

Fedir’s fingers began to move, as if groping for something they had just lost. It’s Sashko’s hand, Olga thought, when he was young. That’s the way he used to grope for me when he woke up in the morning. I loved to watch him.

Then the whole arm came alive, the elbow flexed, the fingers started moving in the air. It reached out to Hryhorii’s stretcher, moved along the rounded ledge, and touched his brother’s arm. Hryhorii’s hand twitched slightly and came alive, too.

The American stood by, his soaped hands in the air. His impassive face suddenly showed a spark of interest.

Fedir found Hryhorii’s fingers and squeezed them gently.

“That’s the only way, Doctor Myrovych,” he commented. “It’s both the cure and the stimulus. I know of no other option.”

93

“Just a little further, Mavra dear,” Maria begged, pulling the cow along. “I can already hear people over there. We’ve got to reach them. Try not to fall down though. I won’t be able to carry you. You’re awfully thin, but I still can’t lift you.”

They had been walking the whole day: the sun hung just over the tree tops. They must have lost their way. They seemed to have traversed a whole planet—alien and deserted. Only the machines stuck up in the fields, potato planter, sowing machine and tractor—and there were hundreds of crows... When she stopped to rest, she milked Mavra. The milk flowed out on the ground; the dog lapped it up, but she didn't push him away. After all, he had covered twice as much ground as she and Mavra, running ahead every now and again, sniffing around, trying to catch a human smell, he led them on like blind men.

"Don't be so stubborn," she would prod the cow on. "And try to favor your leg, I can't help you at all. It's not far now, just to the first village where there are people... No, I won't leave you, not to the wolves, or the radiation. We have to move on." And to the dog, "Keep on sniffing and remember the way home. When they let us go back, Mavra's not going in that van again. We'll go on foot..."

The minute the dog led them out of the forest, he was on his belly, whining, crawling towards Maria, rolling from side to side. She tried to push him aside so he wouldn't be trampled by Mavra, but he refused to get out of the way, and she had to stop. She looked up, sweeping back the white hair which was getting in her eyes.

Was it a mirage?

People in their kitchen gardens... A stork perched up on a dry sycamore near the last house... the smell of borshch and freshly baked bread... bluish smoke coming out of the chimney... A scythe-man was piling up a hay stack, while on the saddle of his motorcycle a white cat napped. On the hill, a mini-tractor was shuttling to and fro, sending up rings of white smoke... The fruit trees, with their lime-painted trunks, stood in the orchard like schoolgirls in white knee-socks... Heavens, just like home, Maria sighed. People! Living people! She had thought she would never see them again.

She wanted to call out, but her parched throat did not let her; only a low croak escaped. The windows of the house nearest her reflected the setting sun, and Maria pulled harder, afraid to lose sight of that orange glare. Even if she was seeing things, she must go that way.

In the yard, an unharnessed horse was champing away at some freshly-mown grass, pulling it down from the cart, snorting and waving off the mosquitoes with his tail. Nearby was a well, the lid closed, but not nailed down. Moreover, there was a pail full of water waiting perched on the frame under the roof. Both Maria and Mavra went straight for the water. Maria let the cow drink first, then using the last of her strength pulled up another pail-full.

"Enough, Mavra, that'll do. It's cold. You'll catch your death, you stupid beast."

Then she drank herself, long and greedily, feeling the dryness dissolve in her throat and strength spreading throughout her body. But she shut her eyes so as not to see the haggard old woman with the disheveled white hair looking up at her from the pail.

Maria had no strength to come away from the well. She saw Mavra limp up to the cart dragging her leg, and bury her nose in the hay. Maria sank down on the bench next to the well, her back against the frame, Mavra mooded, content at last, the dog pressed up against Maria's feet... This was home...

She had dozed off and did not hear a man come in from the kitchen-garden, gaunt and already tanned from the spring sun, holding a sickle and an armful of grass for his rabbits.

So that's why the cat was washing up—we have guests today, thought the man as he tossed the grass to the insatiable rabbits and wiped the sweat off the rim of his cloth cap.

“Mykola ... my Mykola...” breathed the old woman on the bench. He started hearing his name pronounced by this stranger, who looked more like a ghost than a woman.

Yes, it's me... I went down to the river to get some grass for these lung-eared creatures. I've never seen such gluttons.” Maria woke up from his voice.

“Where am I? Am I alive yet? Mavra is eating hay off the cart. The clog's here at my feet... I must be alive!”

“Come inside, it's not locked. I don't think I remember you. Too bad my wife's not home—gone with the kids to town. They're being taken down south. I don't have anything ready to give you. My wife would've fried something up in no time. But maybe you'd get something together yourself? I only know how to make scrambled eggs, and she says I put in too much salt... I can see you're from there... Perhaps you knew my mother. Well, she's no longer. We buried her back in January... Make yourself at home. I've got to take some drinking water to the people in the field... You know I heard a funny one... three robots from Japan came to the atomic station to put out the fire. One got burnt up, the second one beeped once and stopped working, and the third one made a bee-line back to Japan ... I can't imagine how we're going to live through the whole summer without the kids... Not a single kid in the whole village—it's sort of weird.”

The children could not get over the excitement of the new flat where Aunt Olesia had brought them. You gave a yell, and your voice would come back at you from the dome, as if someone was teasing you up there. And plenty of room to play in the huge yard next to the community centre. There's even no landlord to be afraid of—the community centre was specially for people to come to.

Olesia did not explain to the collective farm manager. She had only said, “We need to be close to a phone. There might be a call from Moscow. The museum room is empty anyway people've got other things on their minds just now.”

To the children she said, as sternly as she could:

“If any one of you so much as touches an exhibit, we're ... going back to the old flat!”

The ambulance driver assigned to the first-aid station (he had driven all the way from Tallinn and was now sending letters home three times a day) helped her to bring some steel beds to the museum room and arrange them along the wall, like in a students' dormitory.

The opening of a new village Museum of Regional Studies had been planned for May 9, Victory Day, and not all the exhibits had been properly arranged, but the accident at the reactor had disrupted so much more that the museum seemed insignificant in comparison. A gigantic map of 12th-century Kyiv Rus with lands belonging to the Princes of that time, copied from a textbook by a local artist decorated the wall, and a red circle indicating the village of Kniazhyi Liubech (their own neighbors!). On the other wall there were photographs of local revolutionaries, and of activists of the Poor Peasants Committee of 1917–1919, and a map of the Ukraine during World War Two, with arrows showing the Red Army's counteroffensive to liberate Kyiv (and Kniazhyi Liubech too, of course) from the Nazis. Next to this, a chart demonstrated the growth of the local collective farm's cattle stock and grain harvests over the years. Showcases displayed a milkmaid's credentials as a delegate to a national Party congress; a

document certifying the collective farm's right to use the land; the uniform and kit of a cavalryman in Commander Budionnyi's army during the Civil War, the bullet hole in his tunic neatly repaired; a Red Army soldier's helmet from World War Two, with a crack down the middle.

But most of the exhibits were not yet ready, and lay in a heap in the corner, on the windowsill, and on the large table in the centre of the room.

The local history teacher was said, upon retiring, to have put all his savings into this little museum, cadging for historical objects in Kyiv, Moscow, Pereiaslav, and among local farmers. How much one man can do, Olesia thought, scanning the collection, which also included a pair of mammoth's tusks, a stone axe, a home-made model of an atom nucleus, and another of the solar system. To think how many thousands of years people have lived on this earth... And each one of them loved somebody...

"I'll go fetch some water from the well," she said to the children. "You'll wash your feet, and to bed. But please! Don't touch anything, or else ... well, I told you already."

Yet, no sooner had she gone out the door than the children rushed gravitated to the forbidden objects. After all, the things wouldn't fall apart if you just touched them! At first, Taras, as the eldest, yelled to the others to stop, but how he himself longed to put on the helmet and take up his position behind the machine-gun. Seeing it in the cinema was nothing compared to the real thing. Opportunity might not come again. Just for one minute, and Olesia would never find out.

"Taras thinks he can do anything. If you want to know, I have no father either," protested little Dmytro, donning a spaceman's helmet and wielding a heavy rust-coated sword.

Nina was spinning a large creaky school globe with continents colored in different shades and seas and oceans in bright blue. She was wearing the painted papier-mache crown of a prince... and wooden shoes. The globe spun faster and faster.

Ruslan looked around for what he could take—the older children had grabbed the most exciting items. The rusty chain mail he tried to put on nearly pulled him down to the floor. Never mind... Instead, he pulled on a cavalry cap and trained an ancient Cossack pistol on the ceiling lamp.

Lida was left with the model atomic nucleus and the stone axe with a new handle. Then, either because her toys seemed the least appealing, or because she suddenly remembered Olesia's warning, she let out a long, high-pitched wail of chagrin.

Taras got out from behind the machine-gun to explore the mediaeval spear standing in the corner. He clutched it with both hands, raised it triumphantly over his head and broke the lamp hanging from the ceiling. The children were plunged into darkness and showered with fragments of hot glass. They couldn't see each other and suddenly felt terrified and alone.

Then they burst into tears, all four at once. They wept with the hopelessness only children feel—in the dead of night, with no grown-ups around and no one to call on or complain to. They had been left alone, used their freedom unheeding, and paid the price.

Their wailing filled the dome of the old church, multiplied by echoes, but the thick walls refused to let it out into the world.

They wept to exhaustion and, being afraid to make even a single step, stood as they had when the darkness overtook them—in space helmet, combat helmet, prince's crown, and holding

a stone axe. And the school globe still kept turning, slower and slower. Still turning... and turning...

94

That was the wailing Maria heard as she followed the cart on which Mykola was transporting Mavra to Kniazhyi Liubech the cow's leg was too swollen to let her walk any further. The dog was running ahead, its white tail curled upwards and bobbing up and down like a candle flame.

They could already see the lights of Kniazhyi Liubech up on the hill. But Maria gradually fell behind and finally stopped to catch her breath. She looked up and saw a moving star. It was not falling, but flying somewhere and shone bright, at once far and near.

It was then that she heard the children weeping. The sound of it hit her like a blow and pushed her onward.

"I'm here, I'm alive! Just wait a bit. I'll put my arms around you and comfort you. And give you a good spanking, too. But then take pity on you again... No, Maria, you've got to live. There's much to live for yet..."

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