

## *My Self (Romantica)*

To “Apple Blossom”<sup>1</sup>

From the mists in the distance, from the placid lakes of the Commune-beyond-the-Hills,<sup>2</sup> there rustles a whisper: Mary is coming. I walk out on the boundless fields and over the hillcrests, and out there, amid the sun-soaked barrows, I lean against a barren and deserted cliff. I gaze out into the distance. Thoughts and more thoughts swirl around me, galloping like Amazons. Then everything vanishes: the mysterious Amazons, swaying rhythmically, fly away toward the spurs of the mountains, and the day grows dark. The road runs on through the hills, and beyond it is the silent steppe. Lifting my gaze, I think of my own mother, an incarnation of that extraordinary Mary who rises above ages immemorial. My mother—simplicity, silent grief, and infinite kindness. (This I remember well!) And both my unbearable suffering and my intolerable torment grow warm in the lamp of fanaticism before this beautiful, sorrowful picture.

Mother says that I, her rebellious son, have absolutely tormented myself to death. I then embrace her dear head, flecked with silvery gray, and rest it quietly on my chest.... Outside the window, dewy mornings pass and pearl drops fall. Intolerable days pass by. In the distance, wayfarers trudge out from the dark forest and stop by the blue fountain, where roads disperse in all directions and a highway cross stands. They are young people from beyond the mountains.

But nights pass, evenings rustling by near the poplars, and the poplars stretch away on a highway to infinity and, following them, pass years upon years and my turbulent youth. Then come the days before a storm. There, beyond the spurs of mountains covered in blue-fir forests, flashes of lightning increase and deepen, and the mountains foam. A mighty, oppressive thunder cannot extract itself out of India, out of the Orient. And Nature grows weary before the storm. Beyond the cloudy fog, yet another roar is heard—a dull cannonade. There are two storms on the move.

Alarm! Mother says she watered the mint today and it wilts with sorrow. Mother says: “A storm is coming!” And I see two crystalline dewdrops in her eyes.

### I

Attack follows attack. The enemy’s regiments press on ferociously. Then a flank of our cavalry and phalanxes of insurgents mount a counterattack. The storm grows, and my thoughts are stretched unbearably taut, like wire.

Night and day, I am disappearing into the Cheka.<sup>3</sup>

Our quarters are in a fantastic mansion, the palace of an executed noble. It contains gorgeous drapes and old pictures, portraits of a princely family. All stare at me from every corner of my improvised office.

Somewhere an army telephone draws out a sorrowful, anxious lament, sounding like a siren from a distant station.

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1. Khvylovy dedicates his story to a story by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky (1864–1913) entitled “Apple Blossom.” In Kotsiubynsky’s story, a father who is a writer, experiences the death of his daughter simultaneously from two perspectives. He feels spontaneous grief for the loss of his child but he also observes and remembers the circumstances and his own emotions so that he can use these memories in his writing.

2. Khvylovy often used the image of a “Commune-beyond-the-Hills” to convey the idea of a communist utopia, an imaginary and perfect society.

3. Cheka (= *ЧК*) is an abbreviation for the secret police; a person belonging to it is called a Chekist.

On a plush sofa sits an armed Tartar, legs crossed under him, monotonously chanting an Asiatic "Ala-la-la."

I look at the portraits: the prince is knitting his brows, the princess exudes a haughty contempt, the princelings play in the shadow of century-old oaks. And in this extraordinary austerity I sense the entire world of the past, the whole impotent grandiosity of it and the faded beauty of the nobility's last years. That gleams like mother-of-pearl place settings at the banquet of a wild and famished land. And I, a total stranger—called a bandit by some, an insurgent by others—gaze openly and unflinchingly at these portraits, and in my soul, there is no longer any anger. I am a Chekist, yes, but also a human being.

This murky night, as, outside the window, evenings in the city pass by (the palace estate has leaped on high and lords it over the city), citizens scurry about like mice as thin columns of blue smoke rise above a brick factory. This murky night, my comrades pass through the gates of the canary's castle and meet in my extraordinary office. This is the new Sanhedrin; this is the Commune's black tribunal.

Death leers from every corner, real and terrifying.

Citizen: "Sadism presides here!"

I: ... (am silent).

From the city tower, beyond a ravine, metallic chimes ring out apprehensively. The clock is striking. From out in the dark steppe, a dull cannonade resounds.

My comrades sit around a large table made of dark wood. Silence. Only the distant telephone is again drawling out a sorrowful, anxious lament. Outside the window, insurgents occasionally pass by.

My comrades are easily identified: Doctor Tahabat, Andrusha, and the third—a degenerate, the faithful sentinel charged with standing guard. The black tribunal is in full session.

I: "Attention! The first case is that of Merchant X!"

From distant chambers footmen appear, bowing as they did before the princes. Casting searching looks at the new Sanhedrin, they put tea on the table and then vanish, treading soundlessly over velvety carpets into the labyrinths of the lofty rooms.

A two-candle candelabra burns dimly, illuminating scarcely a quarter of the office. Up above, a chandelier's light barely gleams. The city is dark, and here it is dark as well; the electric power plant has been shut down.

Doctor Tahabat is sprawled out on a large sofa some way from the candelabra. I see only his receding white forehead. Behind him, obscured still more, stands the faithful sentinel with the skull structure of a degenerate. I see only his rather foolish eyes, but I know he has a low forehead, a crop of disheveled black hair, and a flat nose. He always puts me in mind of a convict; I think his name must figure in more than one criminal report.

Andrusha sits near me, looking distracted. From time to time, he casts anxious glances at the doctor. I know why. The revolutionary committee has assigned Andrusha—my poor Andrusha—to the Cheka against his feeble will. And whenever the unhappy commundard<sup>4</sup> Andrusha is obligated to boldly put his signature under the somber resolution "To be executed," he always hesitates. Then he invariably signs the grim, requisite document not with his name or surname but in a completely incomprehensible, absolutely fantastic scrawl resembling a Chinese hieroglyphic.

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4. Originally, a term used to designate a member or supporter of the Paris Commune of 1871..

I: "The case is complete. Doctor Tahabat, what do you think?"

The doctor (dynamically): "To be executed!"

Andrusha looks at Tahabat apprehensively and hesitates. Finally, in a tremulous and irresolute voice he says: "I do not agree with you, Doctor."

"You do not agree with me?" Hoarse laughter rolls through the dim chambers of the princes.

I am expecting this laughter. It is always like this. But this time I shiver, feeling as if I were sinking into a cold swamp. The sensation culminates swiftly. For suddenly, at that moment, the image of my mother rises before me. "To be executed"? And my mother is looking at me quietly, anxiously.

From the distant city tower, beyond a ravine, metallic chimes ring out again: the clock is striking. To the north there is darkness. In the residence of princes, the dull cannonade can scarcely be heard. A message comes by telephone: our men have begun a counterattack. Beyond the drapes of the glass door, a red sky glares: beyond the distant barrows, villages are burning and the steppe is ablaze. In the city, dogs howl at the conflagration. The city itself is still, and hearts ring out to one another in the silence.

Doctor Tahabat presses a button. A footman brings aged wines on a tray. He withdraws, his steps melting away on leopard skins.

I look at the candelabra, but my gaze involuntarily goes to where Doctor Tahabat and the sentinel sit. They hold bottles of wine and are drinking from them greedily, savagely. I think: "It has to be this way."

But Andrusha is pacing back and forth nervously, and he keeps trying to say something. I know what he is thinking: he wants to declare that all this is not right, that communards do not do such things, that this is—a bacchanal! And so on, and so on.

Ah, how strange this communard Andrusha is!

Yet when Doctor Tahabat tosses an empty bottle down on the velvety carpet and signs his name clearly under the resolution "To be executed," I am suddenly seized by despair. This doctor with his high forehead and white baldness, with his cold deliberations and heart of stone—is he not both my inexorable master and the agent of my beastly instinct? In his hands, am I—head of the Commune's black tribunal that I am—just an insignificant nobody who has surrendered to a savage will?

Is there any way out?

A way out? I see no way out.

There then passes before me, in a rush, the dark history of civilization—its peoples, ages, and time itself.

I see no way out!

Indeed, the truth is with Doctor Tahabat.

Andrusha hurriedly scribbles his scrawl on the resolution, while the degenerate, smacking his lips, stares at the letters. I think: "If the doctor is an evil genius and my evil will, then this degenerate is the executioner." But then I think: "Ah, what nonsense! How is he an executioner? Wasn't it to him, to this sentinel of the black tribunal, that I wrote hymns of homage in moments of great distress?"

And then my mother, incarnation of the Mary on high, withdraws from me and waits, standing motionless in the darkness.

The candles are melting. The austere figures of the prince and princess dissolve into the bluish mist of cigarette smoke.

Execution has been decreed.

"Six!"

Enough! That is enough for tonight!

The Tartar again drawls out his Asiatic "ala-la-la." I gaze at the draped door and the conflagration of sky visible through its glass. Andrusha has already vanished. Tahabat and the sentinel are drinking the aged wine. I toss a gun over my shoulder and leave the princely residence. I walk out on the silent, deserted streets of the besieged city.

The city is lifeless. Its citizens know that in three or four days we will be gone, that our counterattacks are in vain. Soon our tachankas<sup>5</sup> will be rumbling to distant regions in the north. The city lies in wait. Darkness.

The princely palace, that dark, burly silhouette to the east, is now the seat of the Commune's black tribunal. I turn to look at it and suddenly remember that there are six lives on my conscience.

Six on my conscience?

No, that's not true. Six hundred, six thousand, six million—there is a countless multitude on my conscience!

A countless multitude?

And I grasp my head in my hands.

And again, civilization's dark history rushes before me—peoples, ages, and time itself.

Exhausted, I lean against a fence, get down on my knees, and fervently bless the moment I first met Doctor Tahabat and the sentinel with a degenerate's skull. Then I turn and gaze devotedly at the gloomy silhouette in the east.

I lose myself in the alleyways. At last I come to the solitary, small house where my mother lives. The yard smells of mint. Above the shed, lightning flashes. There is a rumble of stifled thunder.

Darkness!

I enter the room, take off my pistol, and light a candle. "Are you asleep?" But Mother is not sleeping. She comes up to me, takes my weary face in her dry, old palms, and rests her head on my chest. Once more she says that I, her rebellious son, have absolutely tormented myself to death. Crystalline dewdrops fall from her eyes onto my hands.

I: "Ah, Mother—how tired I am!"

She draws me toward the candlelight and gazes into at my weary face. Then she goes up to a flickering votive lamp and gazes up sorrowfully at the icon of Mary. I know! My mother will join a nunnery tomorrow: She cannot bear our savagery, and everything she sees is horrific to her.

But then, just as I am reaching the bed, a shudder passes through me: "Horrific? How dare my mother think that? Only the Versailles people<sup>6</sup> think that!"

Then, distraught, I assure myself that she is not real, that that's not my mother before me but just a phantom of some sort. "A phantom?" And again a shudder passes through me.

No, that's not so! Here, in this quiet room, my mother is not a phantom but a criminal part of myself, the part to which I have given my will. Here, in this forsaken hut on the outskirts of the city, I am hiding that part of my soul from the guillotine.

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5. A *tachanka* was a horse-drawn machine gun, usually a cart or open wagon with a heavy machine gun installed in the back. Tachankas were used in World War I and the civil war in Russia.

6. The "Versailles people" were supporters of the Thiers government during the Paris Commune of 1871. Analogously, here the phrase refers to defenders of the old order in the Russian empire.

Then I close my eyes in an animal-like ecstasy and, babbling like a mammal in early spring, whisper: "Who has to know everything about me? I am a true communitarian. Who dares say anything different? Don't I have the right to a moment's rest?"

The lamp flickers before the icon of Mary as my sorrowful mother stands motionless before it. But I am no longer thinking anything. A tender, quiet slumber has enveloped me.

## II

Our men are withdrawing from position to position. There is panic at the front, panic at the rear. My battalion is ready. In a couple of days I, too, will be throwing myself into the roar of cannon. My battalion is made up of the Commune's youthful fanatics.

But just now I am no less needed here. I know what the rear is like when the enemy is at the city walls. Dark rumors increase daily, slithering down the streets like snakes. They are already beginning to disquiet the garrisoned companies.

I get reports: "Sullen complaints are being heard." "A revolt may break out." Yes! Yes! I know a revolt is likely, and my trusty agents are already out scouring the alleys—already the prisons lack space for the city's guilty yet nearly blameless rabble.

The cannonade draws closer and still closer. Messengers from the front arrive more and more frequently. Clouds of dust gather and hang above the city, concealing the misty, fiery sun. From time to time there are flashes of lightning. Transport trucks move along in a line, engines clamoring loudly, as cavalymen dash past.

Only at the black tribunal of the Commune does an oppressive quiet reign.

Yes, executions will number in the hundreds—and that staggers me!

Yes—in the deathly, eerie silence of the princely estate above the city, the Versailles people can already hear bursts of gunfire. The Versailles people know:

"To Dukhonin's staff!"<sup>7</sup>

The mornings blossom in pearl-like dewdrops as the stars fade into the mists of the distant pine forest...

As the sounds of the dull cannonade grows louder...

The threatening thunder increases—the storm will be here soon.

I enter the princely palace. Doctor Tahabat and the sentinel are drinking wine. Andrusha is sitting in a corner, downcast. Andrusha comes up to me and says, naively and sorrowfully: "Listen, my friend—let me go!"

I: "Go where?"

Andrusha: "To the front. I can't stay here any longer."

A-ha! He can't stay here any longer! Suddenly I am filled with rage. So, it has finally come to this, after I have restrained myself so long! He wants to go to the front! He wants to be far away from this dirty, filthy work! He wants to wipe his hands clean of it and become as innocent as a dove? He's transferring "his right" to bathe in puddles of blood to me?

I cry out: "You're forgetting yourself! Do you hear me? If you mention this again, I will have you executed at once."

Doctor Tahabat, dynamically: "That's right! Yes—that's telling him!" His uproarious

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7. Nikolai Dukhonin was the last commander-in-chief of the Russian Imperial Army. He refused to acknowledge the Bolsheviks's takeover in 1917 and was captured and executed by them. The phrase "sent to Dukhonin's staff" came to mean "executed."

laughter resounds through the deserted labyrinths of princely rooms. "That's giving it to him!"

Andrusha wilts, grows pale, and leaves the office.

The doctor: "Well, that's done! Now I'm going to rest! You do the work!"

I: "Who is next?"

"Case 282."

I: "Bring them in."

The sentinel goes out of the room silently, like an automaton. (Yes, he is irreplaceable, this sentinel. Not just Andrusha but we, too—the doctor and I— have sinned. We have often avoided witnessing the executions. But he, this degenerate, has always been a true soldier of the revolution. He leaves the field of execution only after the gun smoke has cleared and the corpses are being buried.)

The drapes part and two people come into my office: " woman wearing mourning clothes and a man with a pince-nez. They are frightened by the setting: the aristocratic luxury, portraits of the princes, scattered empty bottles, revolvers, and bluish cigarette smoke.

I: "Your surname?"

"Z!"

"Your surname?"

"Y!"

The man puckers his thin, pale lips and begins to beg for mercy in an unpardonably pitiable whimper. The woman wipes her eyes with a handkerchief.

I: "Where were you taken from?"

"From such-and-such!"

"Why were you taken?"

"For so-and-so!"

Ah, you had a gathering at your place! What kind of gathering can be held in such perilous times, at night and in a private residence?

Ah, you are theosophists! You seek Truth! New Truth? Yes? Who is that? Christ? No? Another savior of the world? That's it! You're not satisfied by Confucius, nor Buddha, nor Mohammad, nor the devil himself! Ah, I understand—the emptiness must be filled.

I: "Then, according to you, it's time for a new Messiah to arrive?"

The man and woman: "Yes!"

I: "Do you think that this psychological crisis is recognized in Europe, in Asia, and throughout the world?"

The man and woman: "Yes!"

I: "Then—shithead—why in devil's name don't you make the Cheka into this Messiah?"

The woman bursts into tears. The man grows even paler. From the walls, the austere portraits of the prince and princess gaze down gloomily. Terrifying noises are coming from the railway station and the cannonade. By telephone come reports that the enemy's armored vehicles are bearing down on our positions. A din arises from the city as tachankas rumble over the pavement.

The man falls to his knees and begs for mercy. I push him away roughly with my foot and he falls backwards. The woman presses her mourning veil to her temples and bends over the table in despair. Dully and tonelessly, she says: "But I am the mother of three children!"

I: "To be executed!"

The sentinel springs forward at once, and half a minute later there is no one in the office. I go up to the table, pour some wine from the decanter, and gulp it down. Then, placing a hand on my

cold forehead, I say: "Next!"

The degenerate comes in. He counsels me to postpone the cases that are supposed to follow and take one that's not on the list: a new group of Versailles people has just been brought in from the city—all nuns, it seems. They have openly been agitating against the Commune in the city's main square.

I assume my role. A fog has formed before my eyes, and I have entered a state that can be described as a kind of extraordinary ecstasy. I imagine that fanatics went to the Holy Wars in just such a state. I walk up to the window and call out: "Bring them in!"

A whole crowd of nuns packs into my office. This I feel rather than see, for I am looking out at the city. Evening is drawing near. I do not turn around for quite a while: I am enjoying the thought that in two hours, they will all be no more! Evening is drawing near. Lightening heralding a storm is again rending the landscape.

On the distant horizon, behind the brick factory, smoke continues to rise. The Versailles people are advancing fiercely and wrathfully—that's reported by telephone. On the deserted highways tachankas appear from time to time, hurriedly withdrawing northward. Out on the steppe stand cavalry detachments, like the valiant knights of old.

Anxiety.

The city shops are boarded up. The lifeless city has been transformed into a wild medieval expanse. Up in the sky, stars have appeared and cast a sickly green light down on earth. Then they grow dim and vanish.

But I must act! Behind my back stands a group of nuns! Yes, I must hurry! The cellar is filled to capacity.

Resolutely I turn, wanting to proclaim the inevitable: "To be executed!"

But I have turned to see, right before me, my mother—my sorrowing mother, with the eyes of Mary.

I start and anxiously bolt to one side: what is this—a hallucination? Alarmed, I bolt to the other side and cry out: "You?"

And from the crowd of women I hear a sorrowful "Son! My rebellious son!"

I feel that I'm about to collapse. Dazed, I grab hold of a chair and lean against it. But, at that very moment, hoarse laughter roars, bounces against the ceiling, and dissipates.

It is Doctor Tahabat: "'Mother'?! Ah, you devil's pup! A suckling babe who wants his 'Mother'!"

Instantly I come to and grab my gun:

"Damn you!" I lunge at the doctor.

But he looks at me coldly and says: "Well, well—not so fast, you traitor to the Commune! See to it that you manage things with 'Mother' (he emphasizes 'Mother') like you have with the others." And then, silently, he withdraws.

I am stunned. I stand pale and almost lifeless before the silent group of nuns, eyes wandering like those of a wolf at bay. (I see that in the gigantic mirrors across from me.)

Yes! At last they have seized the other part of my soul! Never again will I be able to venture to the outskirts of the city to hide that criminal part of myself. Now I have only one right: to never mention to anyone that my being is shattered in two.

I do not lose my head.

Thoughts sear through my brain. What must I do? At this critical moment, will I, a soldier of the revolution, actually shrink from my duty? Will I leave my post and betray the Commune so

shamelessly?

Jaws clenched tightly, I frown at my mother and declare sharply: "Take them all to the cellar. I will be there shortly." But I have scarcely finished saying this when my office again roils with laughter. I turn to the doctor and say emphatically: "Doctor Tahabat, you seem to have forgotten whom you're dealing with! Do you want to join Dukhonin's staff—together with this rabble?" I motion to where my mother is standing, and then I leave the office without another word.

Behind me, I hear nothing.

I leave the palace like someone intoxicated and go out into the dusk of the stiflingly hot, storm-threatened evening. The cannonade is growing louder. Above the brick factory in the distance smoke is rising. Beyond the barrows, armored vehicles are rumbling by. The enemy's regiments are pressing against the insurgents zealously. The air smells of executions.

I walk on aimlessly. Transport trucks pass, cavalymen dash by, and tachankas rumble over the pavement. The city is covered with dust, and evening does not quell expectation of the threatening storm.

Thinking nothing, I walk on aimlessly, in a dull emptiness, a heavy load on my stooped shoulders.

I walk on aimlessly.

### III

Yes, these minutes are intolerable. They are torture. But I already know what I will do.

I knew even as I left the palace. Otherwise I would not have left the office so quickly.

But I must be consistent! So I ponder these matters the whole evening. Then, during the few hours of darkness, come periodic, brief, and bright flashes of insight.

I, head of the Commune's black tribunal, am fulfilling my duties to the Revolution. So, is it my fault that through this whole night the image of my mother has not left me for a moment? Is that my fault?

At noon, Andrusha comes in and mutters somberly: "Listen, allow me to let her go!"

I: "Who?"

"Your mother!"

I: (am silent).

Then I feel a painful, irrepressible desire to laugh. Unable to restrain myself, I let go a burst of laughter that reverberates through the rooms. Andrusha looks at me sternly. He is wholly unlike himself. "Listen—why this melodrama?" This time my naïve Andrusha wants to behave shrewdly. But he is making a mistake.

I (roughly): "Get lost!"

And this time, too, Andrusha turns pale.

Ah, this naïve communard really does not understand anything. He literally does not know why this senseless, beastly cruelty has to exist. He sees nothing beyond my cold, wooden countenance.

I: "Get on the phone! Find out where the enemy is!"

Andrusha: "Listen—"

I: "Get on the phone! Find out where the enemy is!"

At this moment a shell whistles above the palace and explodes nearby. The windows shake as the explosion echoes through the empty chambers.

The telephone reports that the Versailles people are advancing and already close, just three versts away. Cossack scouts have been seen near the station: the insurgents are falling back. From

the railway station comes the wail of a distant siren.

Andrusha rushes out. I follow him.

Smoke envelops everything. Fires are again streaking across the horizon. Dust clouds hover above the city. The sun looks like copper, and the sky cannot be seen. Only a mountainous, turbid cloud of dust speeds across the distant arc of heaven. The dust rises up from the road in fantastic eddies, soars through space and goes on and on, over the settlements. The threatening storm is suspended in place, as if enchanted.

Cannon are thundering nearby. Cavalrymen dash about. Tachankas and transport trucks are getting out and heading north.

I forget everything. I hear nothing. I don't even remember how I come to find myself at the cellar.

Bursts of shrapnel spatter around me, and the courtyard swiftly empties. I go up to the cellar door, intending only to peep through its small window to see where my mother sits, when somebody takes me by the arm. I turn—it is the degenerate. "What kind of guards were those guys! They have all fled! Ha!"

I: "You're here?"

He: "Me? Of course I'm here!" He knocks on the door.

Yes, this one is a faithful dog of the revolution. He would keep guard even under the fiercest of bombardments! I remember that I had the thought "He is the sentinel of my soul" and then trudged on mindlessly through the urban wasteland.

By evening, the area to the south is taken. We must move north and get out of the city. But the insurgents have been commanded to hold on until nightfall. They are resolutely dying on the ramparts, in the trenches, at the crossroads, and in the silent corners of the city.

What about me?

A hurried evacuation is underway, and sharp, clear crossfire resounds.

I am finally on the brink of collapse!

Documents are being burned. Groups of hostages are being sent off. Any remaining requisitions are being collected.

I am finally on the brink of collapse!

But, suddenly, my mother's face appeared and once again I heard her sorrowful, persistent voice.

Tossing back my hair, I gaze wide-eyed at the city tower. Evening is again drawing near, and the settlements to the south are again ablaze.

The Commune's black tribunal is getting ready to flee. Wagons are being loaded, tachankas plod on, and throngs of people are hurrying north. Just one of our armored vehicles disappears into the depths of the pine forest, to check the advance of enemy regiments on the right flank.

Andrusha is nowhere to be seen. Doctor Tahabat sits serenely on the sofa, drinking wine. He wordlessly follows my commands, occasionally casting ironic glances at the portrait of the prince. But I feel that gaze myself, and it wearies and vexes me.

The sun is setting. Evening is dying away. Night is drawing near. People can be seen running back and forth on the ramparts, and a machine-gun rattles on monotonously. The deserted chambers of princes are still with expectation.

I look at the doctor, unable to bear his glances at the old portrait. Sharply I declare: "Doctor Tahabat! In an hour I must liquidate the last group of condemned people. I must take charge of the detachment."

He responds ironically and indifferently: "Why not? Of course!" I am distraught. The doctor

looks at me and smiles. Oh, he understands, without a doubt, what the matter is! My mother is among those condemned to die.

I: "Please, leave the room!"

The doctor: "Why not? Of course!"

At that, I lose control of myself and fall into a rage. "Doctor Tahabat! For the last time, I warn you—don't play games with me!" But my voice breaks, and I feel a gurgling in my throat. I move to grasp my gun and settle accounts with the doctor right here and now, but suddenly I feel so piteous and insignificant that what remains of my will vanishes. I drop down on the sofa and piteously, like a beaten dog, look at Tahabat.... But the minutes are slipping by. We must move.

Trying to regain control of myself, I gaze for a last time at the portrait of the princess.

Darkness.

"Convoy!"

The sentinel appears and reports: "The group has been taken out. Execution is set for outside the city, at the edge of the pine forest."

From behind the distant mountain peaks, the moon rises and drifts down along quiet azure streams, casting out lemony glimmers. At midnight it reaches its zenith and pauses, poised above a precipice.

In the city, vigorous shooting resounds.

We take the road going north.

I will never forget that silent procession, the somber group being led to execution.

Behind, tachankas creak along.

Out in front—an escort of communards; next come the group of nuns; and in the rear—me, another escort of communards, and Doctor Tahabat.

The Versailles people we are dealing with are indeed a committed bunch: the whole way, not a single nun speaks a single word. They are sincere, these fanatics.

I walk down the road as I did before, aimlessly, while at my side move the sentinels of my soul—the doctor and the degenerate. I look at the group, but I see nothing.

Instead, I feel: there walks my mother, her head bent.

I catch the scent of mint. I caress her dear head, flecked with silvery gray.

Then, suddenly, the distance beyond the hills rises before me. Once more, painfully, I feel the desire to fall to my knees and gaze prayerfully at the burly silhouette of the Commune's black tribunal.

Grasping my head in my hands, I keep going down the deathly road as the transport rumble on behind me.

Suddenly, I give a start: "What is that? Am I hallucinating? Is that really my mother's voice?"

Again I feel such insignificance and a pain somewhere under my heart. I want to weep—not to wail but to shed a cascade of minute tears on a warm breast, as I did as a child.

A thought flashes through my mind: "Am I really leading her to her execution?"

What is this: reality or hallucination?

But it is indeed real—a veritable and vital reality, as savage and cruel as a pack of hungry wolves. A reality as irrevocable and imminent as death itself.

But could it be a mistake?

Maybe something else should be done?

Ah, but this is cowardice, vacillation. In life there is a certain law: *errare humanum est*. So, why worry? So—err! And err precisely in this, not something else! For what other mistakes can

you make?

This is indeed reality—a reality like a pack of hungry wolves. Yet it is the only way to arrive at the distant lakes of the unknown and wondrous Commune.

Then I blaze with the fire of fanaticism, and my footsteps resound clearly on the road going north.

The silent procession approaches the pine forest. I do not remember how the nuns were standing. I only remember the doctor coming up to me and putting his hand on my shoulder: "Your mother is over there! Do whatever you want!"

I look.

A figure detaches itself from the group and moves, lonely and silent, toward the forest.

The moon is at its zenith, poised above a precipice. The deadly road fades into an infinity of lemon-colored greenery. To the right, my battalion's guard detachment can vaguely be seen. At this moment heavy gunfire begins in the city, again heralding alarm. The enemy knows that the insurgents are withdrawing. To one side of us, a shell explodes.

I take my pistol out of its holster and walk hurriedly to the solitary figure. I recall hearing bursts of gunfire just then: the nuns were being done away with.

I recall, too, that just then, in the pines, our armored car suddenly sounded an alarm, and it reverberated through the forest.

Gunshots—once, twice, then again and again!

The enemy's regiments are gaining ground. I must hurry. Ah, I must hurry! I keep on going, but the solitary figure that is my mother is still a distance away. She stands with arms outstretched, gazing sorrowfully at me. I keep hurrying toward that magical, impossible edge of the forest, but the solitary figure keeps receding, receding.

All around—emptiness. There is only the moon, casting a greenish light down from its pierced zenith. My hand still holds the pistol, but it is growing weak. I am at the point of shedding minute tears on a warm breast, like I did as a child. Summoning great effort, I cry out: "Mother! Come here! Come to me here! I must kill you."

And the sorrowful voice again sears my brain. Once again I hear my mother say that I, her rebellious son, have absolutely tormented myself to death.

What is this? Am I hallucinating again? I toss my head back.

Yes, it was a hallucination. I had already long been standing at the deserted edge of the forest, facing my mother and looking at her.

She was silent.

In the forest the armored car was raising a clamor. The fires were spreading. The storm was approaching. The enemy attack had begun. The insurgents were withdrawing.

In a daze, enveloped in the flames of some sort of impossible joy, I threw my arm around my mother's neck and pressed her head to my chest. Then I raised my pistol and pressed the barrel to her temple.

She fell on me like a mown spike of wheat.

I laid her down on the ground and looked about wildly. Around me—emptiness. To one side lay the black and warm bodies of the nuns. Guns were roaring nearby.

I put my hand in my pocket and immediately remembered that I had forgotten something in the halls of the princes.

"What a fool!" I thought to myself. Then, glancing about: "Where has everyone gone?"

But no matter—I must hurry and join my battalion! And I run to catch up.

But I had taken scarcely three steps when something made me stop. I shuddered, and ran up to the body of my mother. Going down on my knees before it, I stared at her face—lifeless. Trickling down her cheek, I remember, was a dark stream of blood.

Then I lifted her poor head and pressed my lips fervently to her white forehead. Darkness.

Suddenly I heard: "Well, communard—get up! Time to join the battalion!"

Looking up, I saw the degenerate standing before me once again.

"Oh, yes—I will. I will right now. I should have a while ago!" Then I put my pistol back in its holster and hurried off to regain the road. Out on the steppe, insurgents on horseback stood about, like the distant knights of old. I ran in that direction, grasping my head in my hands.

The storm was approaching. Here and there, faint blots of dawn appeared. The moon was silently fading away from its pierced zenith. Clouds were drifting in from the west. Sharp bursts of gunfire were being exchanged.

In the midst of the lifeless steppe, I stopped: there, in the infinite and unknown distance, glowed the placid lakes of the Commune-beyond-the-Hills.

Translated by C. H. Andrusyshyn<sup>8</sup>

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8. The original version of this translation has been revised and edited by Uliana Pasicznyk. The original version appeared in Mykola Khvylovy, *Stories From the Ukraine*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1960, pp. 31–55.