

Dinosaur Eggs

Oles Ulianenko

Here's what Havrylo Kuzmuk, nicknamed Gorilla, recounted on that fine August day, under a generous, curdling sun, somewhere near the square, where pensioners spent their final days, children played on creaky swings, and lovers, hiding in the shadows, dashed into the open jaws of wooden tigers, the German tanks, to satisfy their carnal needs almost in view of hardened and ill-tempered veterans. And so, on that day, with the sun and the wind, with that intoxicating, pre-autumnal hope, he told his story, hands thrust into the pockets of his threadbare velveteen pants. Thus he stood, you know, and recounted:

“That summer, I got really lucky. I'm sitting by the zoo. I've got the blues really bad. Cars are whizzing back and forth, the sun is shining bright, life is rolling in high gear, you know, but your pockets are completely empty. Girls nibble ice cream as they pass you by, squealing like magpies, undermining your male pride. You're going numb, anger is taking over, complete despair, which is to say—and all signs point in that direction—it looks as though you're a useless human being in this world. Boredom. Weariness. There's no emotion or romanticism. Naked pragmatism and the usual nonsense. Life and pleasures just roll right along, as in a movie.”

Vasko Blokha inhaled, slurped some beer from a bottle, and cast a sidelong glance at his neighbor, Pepa, with the expectation that the latter might just miss his turn at the bottle, which was going around in a circle, but the welder, playboy, and local intellectual Pepa was always of sound mind, which is why, with a glassy gaze, he stretched his arm out toward his demons to impulsively satisfy his insatiable gut. And so the guys angrily and in unison said:

“Yeah! ... And your point is? ...”

According to neighborhood protocol, this was an insult, so Havrylo circled round the children's playground, sniffing and spitting frequently underfoot, turning his pockets inside out until, after a while, he returned to his place and said:

“Hell, I guess there's nothing I can tell you.”

Everyone present put on inscrutable, theatrical faces. Pepa even threw out the “f” word, whether to instill fear, or not to break with expectations, or maybe just for style and show. The pensioners raised their heads, ready to condemn, to curse, but not to request that this band of stinking hardhats finally

cut it out. Rather, they were convinced that the evil associated with these disheveled roosters was completely insignificant, much less than those young imbeciles who were dragging long-legged chicks into the forest of lions or tigers and then emerging with a befuddled and anxious appearance. Everyone present, including Pepa, pulled respectable faces. Morality creeps out upon the stage of life only when you yourself don't want to take action, or are incapable of doing so—the causes are just the end result of your upbringing. That's why underdogs are always envious of the powerful. It's all so banal. Which is why it turns out like this:

"The swine, don't they have anywhere to stick their dicks? When we did it, that was something to behold."

"Go on, Havrylo. Just don't make it up, or you won't get any beer."

Havrylo did one more lap around the playground, sure of himself and the victory of his own intellect, suppressing the insult but putting up a dignified front—as he had seen, as he had noted and learned, how all the famous people did on television and in the movies. Then he approached again, took the bottle of warm beer from Pava's hands, and excitedly continued.

"So I'm sitting, smoking, when two guys walk up to me. Intellectuals. And one of them, he's wearing glasses, looks like a professor and starts saying something about them conducting this important experiment in biology. So, if I want to make some money, and maybe ..."

Havrylo pompously raised a finger, and created a dramatic pause.

"... If I want to be of service to the state, I should go with them, that is, I'll go with them, I'll write a secret agreement and then, of course, they'll conduct their damn experiment. I know. And then we left. Not far, because, you know, it's really hard to bamboozle me. We did not go any further than the zoo. There was nothing special there, besides a house that stank like a horse barn on a collective farm."

Upon hearing these words, Pava, like any city dweller, made a sour face and waved his open palms like a fan, while Havrylo continued, excited at the sound of his own words.

"So, you know, I look, and there, sitting right in front of me in a cage, is a gorilla. Massive, like a shack. Bigger than a monument. It's a female, I mean. They sort of explained it to me. And then, bam, out of the blue:

"Would you copulate with this lady?"

"What the...?" I exclaimed, twirling my finger around the side of my head, in other words, what's with you, brother? 'Did you just break out of Pavlivka?' But they're outdoing one another, enthusiastically telling me they'll give me an injection and everything will go smoothly. After lengthy discussions, they jabbed me in a vein. It grew dark, I blacked out and when I came to, I was sitting naked in front of the zoo, under that cast-iron bull, my mouth full of fur, fur in my hands, fur on my chest. So I guess I did indeed screw the monkey. Then a bespectacled guy appears, like a satanic lawyer,

and says, as he holds out a packet of hryvni, 'you certainly exerted yourself and their Lucille is fully satisfied, and you—that is, I—have entirely fulfilled your duty before the state and society and you will receive compensation.'"

It was then, they say, that the street riff-raff, along with the neighbors, began to call Havrylo Gorilla, and whenever he visited the local pharmacy or some such medical establishment, then everyone would laugh uproariously, asking to whom and for how much he was selling his children, or, what kind of carrots he fed them. But Gorilla made a charming artistic expression, in other words, he was offended. Later they were drinking beer, and Gorilla was telling the next story, which no one wanted to believe, but in the end, everybody agreed that something of the kind could and should happen in such a strange society as ours. They say the latter was the instigation for the undesirable continuation of the twisted comings and goings of Havrylo Kuzmuk, nicknamed Gorilla. He wasn't even offended that he was thus nicknamed. Sometimes, though, confusion occurred, when drunken legs carried him to the zoo. Malicious folk snickered that Havrylo had gone to look for his children amongst the cages.

One memorable, violet-tinged evening, my mother hid my eyes from two chimpanzees, or gorillas—or were they hamadryads?—or, in a word, from the exposed intimacy in which the monkeys were engaged, looking at one another, while Mother was screaming, covering my eyes with her hands, not even realizing that she was thus confirming the great idea of the immortal Freud. The story was about something completely different, but it often reminded me of Havrylo. And this is what we were told by Ninka Kochetkova, the busty, blonde military widow who lived in the co-op building on Victory Square. That afternoon, she saw the cortege of the Japanese prime minister moving like a black snake from the south along the dusty highway, as though straining to take off. A racket arose, leading Ninka to surmise that perhaps a total mobilization had begun, or some other catastrophe from among those described to her by the hereditary alcoholic Khomenko before once again defrauding the unfortunate widow on the question of marriage. On that hot August day, when with a rumble the cortege rolled ostentatiously down the sweltering highway, while cynical citizens, indifferent to political or civic life, blankly beheld this spectacle with their cold and contemptuous expressions, confirming before the world their apathy and infantilism, or, as the philosopher would say, the fragmentary nature of their miserable existence, on that day, walking beside the roadway with two buckets full of either mushrooms or eggs, was one Gorilla, or Havrylo Kuzmuk. This minor detail was not observed until it was too late to change anything in this narrative, although there is no sense in it either, and everything, as it should, happens for the better. And so, precisely at noon, after the Japanese delegation had rumbled away, conversations once again swirled around Victory Square, in the usual fashion, feebly and slowly, utterly boring and unromantic, and on

that day Pepa stopped by to see Gorilla, who for some odd reason, hadn't shown up for work.

"What's with you?" was all Pepa said.

"Ah, nothing," Gorilla calmly and coldly shot back, beating into an enormous pan, which in the western regions they call a skillet, an omelet of unheard-of proportions. If Pepa had had any people smarts, then, I repeat, likely nothing would have transpired. But his expression, that is, Pepa's, was haggard and hostile. In other words, his eyes became huge as plums or the bottoms of a whiskey glass.

"What's that, man?" inquired Pepa.

"Scrambled eggs," answered Havrylo, and pushing his spoon deeper into his mouth, swallowed the eggs, drank a sip of water, and solemnly, in worldly fashion, continued the repast.

"What kind of crap is that in the corner? ... Yeahhh! And it's time to go to work," Pepa always talked like that because he was always embarrassed to call Havrylo by name.

"What goddam work? Right now I don't have time for work," answered Havrylo with a sense of importance, deterministically and with flair. "I have things to do here. Yeah. Uh-huh. Yeah."

Pepa could not tear his eyes away from the gigantic eggs, cut in half, that were piled together in the corner near the buckets.

"I got 'em for the pigs," Havrylo explained matter-of-factly..

"I get it, for the pigs. Yeah. Yeah. But what is that crap in the corner? Yeah. Yeah."

"Eggs," said Havrylo.

"Yup, eggs," said Pepa, shaking his head. Pepa wanted to drag himself away, but his native curiosity forced him to stay in place, as though someone held him by the legs while his head pleaded to get away God-knows-where

"Dinosaur eggs. Uh-huh. Dinosaur eggs." Havrylo carried the spoon into his mouth, swallowed, smacked his lips, washed it down with mineral water, without even dignifying Pepa with a glance.

"Why?" said Pepa, taking a step forward, whether toward the corner, where indeed there lay enormous, halved eggs, or simply because he found himself unpleasantly prostrate and didn't know what to do with his legs, which wouldn't obey his head.

"Dinosaur eggs. Yesterday, it fell on the garage."

"What fell?"

"The dinosaur."

"What the ... Yeah. Right. S-u-u-u-re."

This time, Pepa skedaddled. He ran, as they say, four blocks, and then he paused, gasping and coughing, deciding on the spot to return to work like a good and decent citizen. Havrylo was just finishing his scrambled eggs, when a crew of alarmed, excited, and curious mugs burst through the door

frame. The foreman, with whom Havrylo worked on construction sites, unassumingly stood in the rear, allowing the brigade to view the spectacle up close.

"What is that?" the foreman finally blurted out, pointing with his finger at the gigantic eggs that lay in the corner.

"Are you, blind? They're eggs. Uh-huh. A dinosaur fell on the garage and crashed through the roof. Right now, it's on a leash and laying eggs for me," stated Havrylo Kuzmuk with conceit. The mugs beyond the door guffawed, drawing out into a pyramid.

"Can we try some?" asked the foreman.

"It'll be expensive," cautioned Havrylo.

"How much?" said the foreman, logically concluding the first phase of the negotiation, holding his back nearer to Pepa.

"Well—uh-huh—for a try it's ten hryvni each, on the spot. It's a delicacy, you know, I mean, it's a rudimentary historical thing, you know." Havrylo was beginning to pile on the smarts.

"OK, yeah," agreed the foreman. "And the producer himself? Can I take a look?"

"Fifty hryvni each, on the spot, and not a kopeck less."

The mugs—the crowd that is—roared in alarm. The pyramid swelled menacingly.

"Yeah... I always knew that you—" began Pepa, once again stammering on the name but he gathered his wits and spit out, "that you're a bum and a cheapskate."

Havrylo just sniffled and said, "Proletarian slobs! Uh-huh. Envious, eh? Uh-huh! It's a historical fact that you have no need of anything, not even culture."

The crowd grew still, thoughtful. About culture, they knew one thing: you should regularly wash your hands, wipe your ass, refrain from cursing when you are a guest, correctly place commas when filling out complaints, love your wife and kids, give up your seat to the elderly when using public transportation, and the like. Nobody knew anything about dinosaurs and culture. This made them guarded and reduced their current position to the blunt edge of absurdity. And so, after awhile, they decided to give fifty hryvnias each in order to personally witness the wonder. However their national pragmatism, which is to say their character trait, won over. This is why initially, the construction workers decided to chip in ten hryvni each in order to try, or more precisely, to finger the enormous dinosaur eggs. Havrylo sat right near the door with a large fat school notebook into which he noted the first and last names, the sums paid, even the professions of the visitors so that no one could shamelessly push through past their place in line, or usurp their turn through favoritism, which Havrylo Kuzmuk could not tolerate in any form. Pepa attempted to hoodwink a spoonful of egg but the fair-minded, worldly, and transparently honest Havrylo put a stop to any kind of attempts

to violate the established agreement. On the third day, having concluded the egg-show, he disappeared without a trace.

The roused and intrigued community began to exhibit signs of unrest and dissatisfaction. They wanted a miracle, but, surprisingly, the miracle impudently and tautologically faked them out, deceiving all of them who were seized by the illusion of a great holiday, and disappeared. But one man, that is Pepa, had doubts and endeavored to peck away till he found the truth, for his girlfriend stubbornly cursed Havrylo, probably because for the third year in a row he was avoiding her apartment. Rosy-cheeked Havrylo, as tasty as a tomato, was always successful with the plump lasses of Shuliavka, the young schoolgirls who traded favors on the side during summer vacations, swaddled and enveloped in a silvery dream, faraway and charming and magical, youthful and fresh, and also foolish. That is where Havrylo Kuzmuk had success, notwithstanding his monkey adventures—they even added incentive. Thus, Pepa was the first to circulate the rumor that Havrylo was squandering the dinosaur money in a restaurant with schoolgirls. So when everything had quieted down, and Havrylo appeared, radiating handsomeness and smarts, by now devoid of money, then the community demanded a true miracle—more precisely, the dinosaur that had crashed through the roof in Havrylo Kuzmuk's garage. For a long while, Havrylo responded with silence, and in all honesty, he resisted the unrelenting persistence of his construction buddies as far as his conscience and upbringing permitted. But the brigade gradually grew animated, acquiring the threatening features that create a mob out of civilized and sophisticated people and in its turn, the mob hastily creates a ruckus or even a true revolution. And then Havrylo, nicknamed Gorilla, agreed. He immediately collected the amount of fifty hryvni per person, establishing the fact that a dinosaur is an animal, and that is why money is essential for feed, in other words, for the nourishment of an important, historic relic. For three days, the gang held back, but after successive periods of idleness, they stormed in a chorus to Havrylo's place, forcing the poor soul to pull out the fat notebook and note everyone down by name, by rank, by amount of money earned, by wards, by regions, by neighborhoods, by nationality, and so forth, yielding to the ancient principle that paper is understood to witness and validate historicity, that is, the importance of an event. Which nobody doubted. Subsidies, additional allocations, and benefit quotas were not anticipated by Havrylo. This is why his buddies became the factor that played the main, if not the key role, in this story.

And here, finally, the agitated crowd, actually a brigade of members of the brotherhood of municipal construction workers, descended in a crowd on the countless metal garages that hugged the stinking river called by the legendary, almost charming name of Lybid, or was it perhaps Shuliavka—because of the historical nature of the event, its geography and toponymy have competing versions.

They raised a ruckus that spread over an area of two wards. They lined up in rows and columns, as though for a May Day meeting. They wore their festival faces to encounter the miracle they had seen in their school textbooks, and indeed, presently this might happen just as it had with an icon of Nicholas II. They raised up a storm in anticipation of the holiday: some inquired whether the dinosaur could be hand-fed? Does he answer to a nickname? Does he have a name? Is the dinosaur inoculated against rabies? What kind of muzzle is best? How much exercise does he need in twenty-four hours? and so on—all the various petty nuisances that get in the way of living. At about 300 feet, Havrylo stopped the crowd with a gesture, shoved his hands into his pockets in a business-like manner, and declared:

"I'll go get him ready. Otherwise, he'll be alarmed. Uh-huh."

Pepa protested that this was a trick, that Havrylo would escape together with the dinosaur or he'd cook up something bad. Pepa was jealous about his girlfriend, which was why almost no one listened to him. And Pepa hid the evil and malevolence he felt toward Havrylo.

The crowd grew excited, ceremoniously drawing forward; the last time they had witnessed something like this was when an icon of Nicholas II was fetched from somewhere and the surging crowd fell directly under the wheels of electric trains. This was described by Pepa, who was boiling over with anger at Havrylo and the crowd. Finally, when everyone had noticeably soured, Havrylo appeared and commanded them to follow him. Quietly, everybody moved forward on tiptoe.

"What's this?" Pepa, with good reason, was the first to ask, glancing around in search of not so much the dinosaur but of Havrylo himself, whose trail had gone cold.

Everything was as it should be: the garage with a broken-down roof, the stench, like in a pigsty, and the beast, tied to a cattle halter, howling in fear in a dark corner. When they attempted to remove the animal, it growled and began resisting. Finally, the daredevils turned on the light. The animal, which turned out to be a stray dog nicknamed Jack Pot, a good-for-nothing rogue who had been dressed in fins and had wings attached to his spine—the same kind of wings that children wear during Christmas when they play angels and elves. His tail was decorated with the green mane of a rubber toy crocodile named Gena, and his eyes were covered with polyurethane foam balls of the kind that parents allow their children to wear when play-acting as various clowns such as Oleh Popov, Chipolino, or Pinocchio. The animal raised its snout and howled at the hole in the roof. Jack Pot knew that soon he would be beaten, according to a dog's fate, even sooner than his benefactor, who, as the evidence indicated, had fed the mongrel fried eggs. During these hours filled with bliss, the dog had grown insolent, imagining that he had landed in dogs' heaven. All of this, it seems, had now passed.

"Yeahhh! Hee-Hee!" was all Pepa uttered, rubbing his hands. Jack Pot growled, wagging his green tail—the remains of Gena, the green rubber crocodile. The dog took the first blows steadfastly.

Havrylo was apprehended in exactly one month, intoxicated, lonely, and miserable. He was trying to feed Jack Pot, whose jaw was broken, with fish patties and was also trying to tell him a story. Jack Pot yelped, and then, noticing the rising dust, was the first to realize what was coming and ran off, leaving his savior behind to face the mob's righteous anger. They beat Havrylo long and tediously. They beat him for lost illusions, for the money, for everything. Thrice, he was brought down by his legs from the seventh floor, yet not demonstrating any determination to throw the rascal down from there headfirst. Pepa constructively proposed lynching the scoundrel. Havrylo stood with a cord around his neck on his own construction site and wept, but pride kept him from pleading.

"You idiots. Mothas! All of you. Trash!"

Later, it took a while for them to patch him up at the local hospital. Then the surgeon, a wiry bachelor who resembled a locksmith, came up to him, repeating:

"Ha, ha, ha—well, they sure gave it to you, the donkey asses.... Whoa, what a sorry sight you are." And the surgeon asked Havrylo, nicknamed Gorilla:

"I understand about the dog, but the eggs? How did it go with the eggs? Maybe truly—you know, really—they're from dinosaurs?"

Though in agony on the cot, Havrylo was uplifted in spirit and explained:

"Have you seen those longish lamp bulbs on the street lanterns? Uh-huh. So that's how it came out. I took those lamps, painted them, bought a pail of eggs, and didn't sleep for about a night or two as I separated the whites from the yolks. I cooked up such a mess that even scientists couldn't tell the difference. So there you go. And with the dog business, well, that was easy. In a word—inspiration.

With a blank, challenging stare, the surgeon stood facing the heavily bandaged and mutilated Havrylo and once again lectured him.

"So what was all this for? What is the advantage for you? Absurd!" He spread his fingers, as though trying to capture the air. "A stupid waste of time. I don't understand."

"Well, it's like this. At least I had some excitement. You don't just find two thousand hryvni on the street. I've never had such excitement before and never will, doctor. Uh-huh."

"I think that another such prank and you are guaranteed another kind of place. Uh-huh," the surgeon teased as he walked out of the room, continually amazed by folk wisdom. Havrylo lay on the bed and thought about Jack Pot and the traitor Pepa. And, of course, about justice.

"Hey, doctor, how is it that you know so much? I mean, at least I had

some fun. Uh-huh. Pepa's gonna choke. Uh-huh. Who's the bigger fool? Uh-huh," said Havrylo to the empty door.

On the street, under the windows, Jack Pot whimpered. And the illustrious Havrylo finally fell peacefully asleep. Everyone has their own pinnacle. I believe that, too.

Translated by Luba Gawur

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