

The Ping Pong Professor

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To Ukrainian professors from Ukrainian students

Just a few moments ago, Stepan had reached the Square. “The Square” was what they called this desolate space resembling a massive crater that had obliterated the city center, which was sealed with solid concrete and surfaced with granite slabs in a dark gray color reminiscent of the plumage of rooks. The young man felt awkward standing there, getting his bearings as he struggled to recover from the packed subway, out of whose oceanic depths he had just been borne as if by a random wave onto the safe shores of the Square.

However, ultimate salvation was still far away. A wintry blizzard insidiously grinned in the man’s face; his already flushed cheeks felt the biting frost, and the relentless cold wind snatched the last warm breath from his chest. His eye was continually drawn to the gray surface of the slabs, in places blackened with wear, that had been laid here by the assiduous hands of the city construction crew. Stepan knew he was in the Square, as it had come to be known, though he had to keep convincing himself that it was indeed so.

After a moment he came to his senses and remembered what had brought him here. There was to be a meeting, a meeting with his dissertation supervisor. However, Stepan was still a long way from the place they were to meet. The tall Institute building stood somewhere on a hillside, but the Square, on the contrary, judging by the steep slopes he had frequently had to negotiate on foot in this uneven terrain, was some distance away from that hill, at the bottom of a very, very deep ravine—or, rather, abyss—which once meandered in a winding serpentine fashion until it was replaced with a long-drawn-out avenue, straight as an arrow.

Even in summer there were never many people on the Square, and in the depths of winter scarcely any at all. Stepan set off across its deserted horizontal surface like some apparition. A second later, this figure disappeared amongst the mute throng of stone sculptures occupying an amphitheater of the Square, alleviating the dismal impression of its emptiness. Broad-shouldered men, agile, nubile young women—the statues were assembled in small formations, representing canonical portraits of accepted social groups.

Stepan first came across a group of musicians: four lead casts of Cossacks in Astrakhan hats and fur coats, laughing good-naturedly through

their moustaches, holding wooden flutes and zithers in readiness for the concert to begin. In the center of the group was a young woman. She held no instrument; her refined beauty stood out in contrast to the rather rough-looking men. Her petite form enveloped in a flimsy dress, with a luxuriant, well-arranged coiffure extending from shoulders to waist—she seemed uncomfortable as a soloist before the clamorous, confident instrumentalists. Judging by her stooped shoulders and lowered chin, the girl was unable to overcome her shyness when meeting the public.

Leaving behind the musicians, Stepan came across a long slab of reinforced concrete being shaped by two workers. The youth in the hat was forcefully holding down the slab, ensuring it did not move; his older colleague was squatting next to him, painstakingly carving out a shape with an adze. The momentous effort he was applying to his work was clearly revealed by his bare, deeply wrinkled forehead, his tightly tied forelock, his hair soaked in sweat, his eyes bulging from their sockets, and the straining fibrous muscles of his powerful neck.

At the center of the next composition was a block of wood, next to which two men adopted contorted, melodramatic poses. They both wore woolen overalls and long fire-proof aprons thoroughly protecting their bodies from their chests down to their knees. The workers' faces were almost completely covered by protective masks reminiscent of medieval visors. Two pairs of determined eyes lent a unique atmosphere to this scene. The knights of labor glared with a passionate intensity at the object of their creativity, located at the very center of the wooden block, as though it was not just an ordinary lump of metal but some magic crystal or a diamond which could, with the assistance of the hammer and anvil lying nearby, be turned into an elixir of immortality.

Without realizing it, Stepan found himself behind these figures, in the very center of the Square. He was used to this space being unnaturally overcrowded with sculptures, toward which he was actually quite indifferent. The stone figures of women and men were much taller and heavier than he was, overwhelming in their indomitable physical reality, in comparison with which his own body seemed like something insignificant and unreal, something quite inconspicuous, merely ephemeral, briefly carried to this place on a chance gust of wind. He would be simply swept over the Square, unnoticed by anyone, casting the merest shadow across the sculptures, incapable of eclipsing their eternity, were it not for the glass pyramid in the very center of the Square, which, as always, inevitably bore witness to his presence.

Stepan paused in front of one of its transparent facets; in the glass he saw a blurred reflection of his pale features and behind him the entrance to the underground passage leading to the other side of the road, which in turn led to the side street where his Institute was located.

Although on the glass surface everything was well ordered in a compact,

recognizable image, almost like a postcard photograph, in fact there followed a farther descent below ground and consequent climb back to street level, requiring a good deal of additional time and effort. Having negotiated this phase, the young man actually did not feel tired at all. He had spent many years in the city, and by now he was well used to coping with the demands of the urban labyrinth. Stepan did not find it at all unpleasant; he had long since ceased to find anything annoying in these endless descents and ascents. On the contrary, his thoughts turned to quite different matters, enabling him to escape to other environments, unlike the place where he presently found himself.

This was indeed quite possible. Such an opportunity presented itself right here, in this street which appeared to have become terminally drained and exhausted during all those years he had been coming here to attend the Institute. It stood at the very end of the street, occupying a far right-hand corner. For those approaching from below this building represented the end of their climb, while for those coming from above it formed a kind of gateway. So Stepan proceeded not just casually but full of expectation about his meeting with an old acquaintance, whose face he was so fond of recognizing again and again.

Old? But how old? Indeed, the secret of this edifice had revealed itself to him only quite recently, thanks to pictures taken by a friend who photographed buildings of this particular type, studying a stratum of urban architecture quite unfamiliar at the time. During one of their regular visits to the coffee bar, Andriy unexpectedly took out a small disc containing photographs from his briefcase.

"Look, I want to share my findings with someone who is not indifferent to the history of the city."

At home, Stepan studied the images at leisure, and afterwards he began to recognize buildings on streets he thought he knew like the back of his hand. It was the same with this building. Stepan made his way along the familiar street and, all of a sudden, there it was! He recognized a building which he had never noticed before, noting clearly all the features of the hybrid style about which Andriy was so enthusiastic. What was mysterious and inexplicable in this case was the presence of avant-garde characteristics in entirely neo-classical residences erected at one time for the party elite. The apartments had extensive balconies and large windows letting in the light. Thanks to the high ceilings, the sun's rays reached right inside the rooms, revealing a fantastically luxurious realm of domestic furnishings—brown lacquered wardrobes, decorative doors on the sideboard, tables slightly raised on elegant carved legs, heavy opaque curtains at the windows, and ornate chandeliers filling the room with a cascade of light. At any rate, that is how Stepan imagined it, having unfortunately never had the opportunity to live in such houses. However, thanks to Andriy's discovery, he could now grasp something rather different, though no less absorbing—something not

concealed inside, but always accessible from the exterior: the graceful, geometrically perfect proportions of the walls, the bold, prominent design of the balconies, and also the surprisingly pliant, gentle curvature of the trim in the individual niches concealed between the semi-transparent stained-glass panels in the staircase.

As it turned out, the building in question was not the only one on the street. The characteristics of the inimitable style, clearly distinguishable on the photographs, were now also unmistakably visible on the neighboring structures. One of them occupied a complete block, in no way detracting from the capricious continuity of the slope. The building appeared to grow directly out of the street, the two forming an integral whole. Looking down from an aerial perspective, one could imagine its facade forming a continuous undulating ribbon that drew the eye all the way down, so that the slope of the street felt like a single sheer swoop.

Negotiating the incline with ease, Stepan found himself at the very summit of the hill. The Institute was quite close now, about two hundred meters away. Actually, despite the short distance, the rest of the way was not very inviting. That had to do with a sudden change in the weather, which became appreciably more severe up here on the hill, by comparison with the Square. The trees lined the horizon like fine black hieroglyphs crowning the hilltops, from where a panorama of the river stretched farther than the eye could see; seen from above, it appeared to be quite out of reach. However, the elusive yet inescapable proximity of the river instantly made itself evident—even in winter, when it was not flowing but merely resting at the foot of the hills, trapped in blocks of ice. The water continued to breathe even beneath the frozen surface, and the wind drove this silent, icy breath upwards, enveloping everything around it in mist and haze. On the hillsides, amongst the black branches, the breath from the river slowly froze to form thin transparent shards of glass, engraved with fine patterns of hoarfrost. The air lost its soft moistness, filling with crackling strings of snowflakes that stung the face and hands and melted on contact like tiny sweet fruit drops.

It must be said that during his years as a student this street, which led upwards from the foot of the hills all the way to the Institute, had changed almost beyond recognition. At one time it had been an ordinary little street leading past the park and turning off in a semicircle towards the Institute. However, time passed, and the number of daily visitors, as well as the number of their cars, increased considerably. Because of a shortage of parking spaces, the street had first of all to be widened, and this involved felling trees in the park and the demolition of what were usually called "unsafe" buildings. Years passed, but people remained unwilling to give up the use of their cars. And so the land surrounding the Institute was turned into a parking lot.

On arrival at the Institute first thing in the morning, the vehicles arranged themselves neatly side by side in compact semicircles. However, during the day so many of them turned up that one had the impression that

everywhere around was awash in a sea of cars. In the evening, after they had driven off, the lot was empty again, looking like a military encampment surrounded on all sides by a spiked fence.

The tall Institute building stood right in the center of the vehicles' camp. It was a multi-story structure with an unusual exterior appearance. This edifice was built about forty years ago as an experimental project. The designers wanted to create the first building in the country to conserve heat by drawing it from the ground. To prevent heat loss, they built it high above the ground—several stories, one above the other, forming a kind of wheel attached to a massive central column which was to serve as the foundation. Each floor consisted of elongated rooms, each having a square-shaped balcony. The gleaming square balconies were arranged one above the other on the facade so that they merged to form a motley image. Seen from a distance, the Institute looked like a beehive with its honeycombs, buzzing and soaring into the clouds above the summit of the hills.

Viewed from the parking lot, on the other hand, the Institute gave the impression of a solitary alien bolt rising above the river, its summit leaning forlornly like the Swallow's Nest. The top of the building was crowned with a bronze statue consisting of two male figures. These workers, dressed in jackets and trousers, embraced one another enthusiastically, fused together in a passionate kiss like an ornamental couple on a wedding cake.¹

So much for the wonders and surprises which the designers managed to achieve. The energy-saving project, on the other hand, was a total failure. Since the design of the central column was not fully implemented, it was not possible to install the special pumps which were to extract heat from the ground and transfer it upwards. It now contained nothing more than elevator shafts giving access to the upper floors. The building was designed with no internal staircases, so when the elevators broke down one had to use a light metal staircase attached to the main outer wall of the building.

Maneuvering among the narrow spaces in the jam-packed parking lot, Stepan gradually began to make his way to the Institute. The cars crowded together like ravens that, having failed to migrate south in good time, now had to flock together to subsist and survive the bitter winter. Momentarily, Stepan's eye rested on their smooth blue-black backs, as though he was listening for a reply to some perennial question. However, the mechanical birds stubbornly maintained their hostility and inscrutability, failing to react in any way to the young man's presence.

Stepan suddenly felt a sharp, internal pain. He instinctively called out, as the pain was almost unbearable. Taken by surprise, he remained on the spot for some time, adopting a pose of desperation, defenselessly gasping for

¹ An allusion to the *Friendship Sanatorium* near Gaspra, Crimea, one of the best-known examples of late Soviet modernism of the 1980s. (KD)

breath, his pupils flickering behind his steamed-up glasses, which had slid down his nose, now barely resting on its very tip. His eyes widened strangely in a vain attempt to make out something of what was going on around him. With his right hand Stepan clutched at the left side of his chest, where his heart was beating desperately; below, his knees kept trembling.

Then Stepan felt something mysterious dragging him down and backward, away from the street where the Institute stood, back towards the slope, towards the Square and further on to the underground passage and the subway. He slid helplessly down from the parking lot, lower and lower, leaving behind him a thin, snaking trail like the tracks left by an inexperienced, novice skater venturing onto the ice for the first time.

Stepan made desperate attempts to resist the invisible force of gravity which had taken complete control over him on this snow-covered, deserted parking lot, where apart from him there was not a single other soul. In his fright, he began to seize hold of everything within his grasp. His moist fingers spread fan-like on a windshield as he unexpectedly saw himself in a driver's side view mirror. In desperation he tried with his nails to grip a warning label indicating that in reality all was not quite what it seemed. But in vain!

For a brief moment he once again felt slippery glass under his elbows, quickly turning to rubber moldings and metal doors. Stepan tried to catch hold of the handles, but his whole body crashed onto the trunk. His legs gave way and his arms were of no use. Across the treacherous ice he almost careered, chin first, into headlights. Losing his balance, he attempted to grasp the thick tires, which were supposed to protect the car from ice—but the protection was meant for the car, of course, not for him!

In the end, all of Stepan's efforts were in vain. The cold, shiny surfaces of the cars callously rejected him, leaving him with painful red marks.

He was carried further and further downhill, until he managed to come to a stop by the wooden gate of one of the neighboring houses.

At this instant everything became calm; the sudden ice storm subsided, and Stepan was no longer being carried away, so he could calmly consider how to move on.

Crossing to the other side of the street, he briefly disappeared into the park and then turned into a little avenue which circumvented the parking lot and led directly to the spacious Institute forecourt. The old doors reluctantly creaked open and Stepan slipped inside unnoticed.

The main foyer of the Institute was divided into two areas. The first began at the entrance, and the second was a little further on, inside the building, near the elevator shafts. Stepan took a look around; he was very familiar with this place, as he had been a regular visitor for many years. The first thing that struck one was the unusual design of the space. The foyer extended vertically, following the central column which supported the entire building. It stretched upwards to the very top of the internal well, forming a long, inclined wall, decorated with an old-fashioned mural. The picture on

the wall was the first thing that caught one's eye as soon as one crossed the threshold of the Institute. The bright red images began at the base of the wall, rising gradually upwards and converging in a single tiny point at the top.²

Although the composition was dated, it had not lost its striking, pointed dynamism. The mural did not simply occupy the space, it shot to its peak with the velocity of a rocket and the suddenness of a lightning flash, making a vertiginous impression on the observer. As a result, this totally secular space was rendered virtually sacral. The painting on the wall had been inspired by a sense of cosmic vastness. It could be taken to depict the universe itself—cosmic objects and cosmic inter-relationships.

The central heroes on the canvas were people, but seen as a whole they took on surprising dimensions and forms, striving to take off and reach the highest point. From below, it was impossible to take in everything located at the very summit of the universe; however, the eternal rays of something beautiful shone down from above, drawing all the characters towards it. Here no individual walked casually on the earth. Although the characters were varied and each of them represented typical professional roles—the academic, doctor, or astronaut—what was common to all of them was a continual movement towards something better and perfect, whose constant star shone somewhere above, reflected on the surface of other satellites and planets.

This was how the entrance to Stepan's Institute opened.

Beyond that, however, the foyer was supposed to serve purely pragmatic purposes—access to the elevators, a cloakroom for depositing coats, and a place for the reception of visitors. It was particularly unsuitable for the latter. The second area of the foyer, situated immediately beyond the mural, was more like an attic. There were all sorts of things lying around here, accumulated from goodness-knows-where.

There was a battered old table, where the elderly housekeeper usually sat, propping herself up on her elbows, when she emerged from her adjacent cabin to draw a breath of fresh air, as it were. And a scruffy desk with wobbly, hopelessly twisted legs, on which book displays were set up for receptions or special occasions. The top of the battered wooden desk was covered with newspapers (as always, there were no funds for establishing a bookshop). However, the rest of the time the desk always remained clear, attracting attention by its inscriptions and scratches and the adjustable chair with one arm-rest sawed off and half of the upholstery missing, making it hard as a rock, which began spinning round crazily if anyone so much as thought of sitting on it.

Other objects in various areas of the foyer showed similar signs of

² A monumental work of art in the foyer of the V. I. Vernadsky National Library in Kyiv (KD)

disorder and decline: the cloakroom where nobody had left a coat for ages because it was in need of refurbishment and most people attending the Institute left their things in their own offices; and the cupboard with its broken doors left ajar, containing nothing but old, yellowing papers. Then there was the table and stool. The bottom drawer stuck out, blocking the way to the elevators, which was narrow enough to begin with, while the top drawer had long since disappeared in an unknown direction. There was a creaky, broken-down divan squashed into the space between the cupboard and the table, and there were bundles of newspapers, piles of dirty, unwashed crockery, a dusty kettle, its electric cord missing, and much more besides that had somehow found its way here.

It was practically impossible to reach the door through all this clutter. Visitors had to go round it on one side or the other, forcing their way through gradually and having to keep looking back to check that, God forbid, they hadn't damaged anything. In places you could generally make progress only by hopping on one leg. In front of the actual doorway leading to the elevator there were several rectangular steps, invariably with something placed on them—newspaper cuttings, a notebook containing rough drafts, a crushed pie packet—so it was better not to step on them but to jump over them, if possible.

Having taken the necessary leap, Stepan quickly turned to the left and walked through the doorway leading to the elevator. However, as it turned out, he was mistaken. Access to the elevators was on the other side, so he found himself outside once more, right on the external staircase.

Stepan sighed deeply. He felt worn out, exhausted by the evidently excessive demands this expedition was making on him, especially this last phase of it. After all that clambering uphill he just could not help feeling that the obstacles he faced whenever he needed to reach the Institute were not accidental—indeed, that they were deliberately placed in his way.

“Oh, so what! What's wrong with me?” thought Stepan, suddenly bursting out laughing in relief. He recalled that he had come here once to continue his studies—that is, to undertake research—and on that occasion he really had felt out of sorts, and he had had a tingling feeling in his spine: was he really capable of doing this research, or wasn't he? Would he be competent enough to follow this difficult path from beginning to end?

But this initial fear gradually dissipated as Stepan demonstrated that he was, after all, deserving and capable. He had worked hard on his dissertation, giving it everything he had, and he had always handed in his work on time, never even a minute late. He had submitted his work for the professor to read, and the latter had, in the end, given a very positive assessment. At the moment, though, he had come just to get a reference, and this was in fact a mere formality.

Taking heart, Stepan easily negotiated several flights of the snow-covered metal staircase. Opening the heavy metal door to the interior of the building, he entered a small, dim bunker of a vestibule leading to the floor

where the professor's study was located.

Before entering the corridor, Stepan paused: his eye caught a sign with the inscription "No Smokyng" attached to the left of the door with new steel screws. The message was in Ukrainian but misspelled by someone who did not quite know the difference between Ukrainian and Russian.

Things like this for some reason always drew Stepan's attention, luring him; one could even say that they stalked him. It was just such a small, insignificant sign-plate, on the face of it something quite ordinary, that could simply drive him crazy. He had noticed it earlier, when he crossed the threshold of the Institute for the first time, and since then, whenever he visited the building, he had simply been unable to avoid it. One way or another, he had been obliged either to greet it, or silently give it a nod, or at least cast a sidelong glance, or blink, as the sign had become for him a kind of little secret conspirator known only to him. He loved it for the oddity of its permanent presence in one and the same place for so many decades.

The sign-plate combined the old and the new in a rather striking way. Judging by the material it was made of, it could have been thirty to forty years old, but the gold lettering stood out so brightly against the dark red background that it could just as well have been inscribed yesterday. It was a light laminate, made of colored plexiglas, but the exhortation was so distinctly and deeply engraved on it that one had the impression of a sign made of something permanent, like quartz or granite.

Stepan took another look at the inscription on the sign, drawing out the syllables in a quiet whisper: "No-smo-kyng." He could not believe his eyes: many years had passed since the sign with its exhortatory inscription had first appeared here. The sign itself no longer bore any relation to reality, since everyone around was smoking—and not just tobacco. Still, the sign continued proudly displaying its irrelevant imperative as though there really was something to be proud of around here.

In themselves, the letters were of no particular interest. Naturally, in the course of all those years they had been repeatedly renovated and re-painted, as witnessed by the insertion of the Ukrainian "y," not so much filling the space left by the removal of the Russian "i" as, on the contrary, further emphasizing the absence of the latter, its clumsy prominence against the quite ordinary background of the sign-plate, like a gold tooth standing out in someone's dazzling white smile. But what really enhanced the value of the sign-plate in Stepan's eyes was the material it was made of. It was plexiglas, genuine plexiglas which, by contrast with cheap plastic, never stuck to your hands, never got covered in cracks or scratches, and remained rock-hard and as durable as steel for many, many years. It was pleasant, lightweight, pliable and cool to the touch. For this reason it was continually liable to be stolen—well, perhaps to try making spectacles out of it and observe the world through clouded lenses. What might it look like then, he wondered? But he had no time to ponder this question. The doors to the corridor were opening now, as

if of their own accord, and beyond them another part of the building suddenly came into view.

Once inside, Stepan froze—what faced him was not at all what he expected.

The floor where his Institute was located was usually cloaked in semi-darkness. The walls of the corridor were a misty yellow color and they radiated coolness, as in a cellar. Somewhere at the far end there was a scarcely visible glimmer from an open ventilation window. The light shone sluggishly and unwillingly through the air, and individual rays fell on portraits, illuminating the faces of the dignitaries proudly presenting their high foreheads. A little further on hung a notice board, which, like the sign by the entrance, was also made of scarce plexiglas, though not of the semi-transparent red variety, in which a mysterious reflection often glinted deep inside, but was completely transparent, so various announcements could conveniently be displayed behind it.

It was cozy and warm in the Institute, as in a rural cottage on a foggy evening just before dusk. There was very little furniture remaining in the corridor. The space was almost completely empty, and nothing prevented visitors from proceeding to where they were going. People who hung around here would, from time to time, come across various objects such as ancient library catalog drawers full of cards, an empty desk deserted as always, and several chairs covered in soft foam rubber. All this had remained here for ages. The objects seemed to have their own unique rhythm of existence, unaffected by anything except perhaps the regular dusting by janitors each morning—a rhythm unimaginable anywhere beyond the walls of this Institute.

But on this occasion everything was quite different. A blinding light shone directly from above. Small spotlights installed in the suspended ceiling continually emitted piercing, garish rays. The white walls, the floor, and the ceiling merged into one another seamlessly. In this room no clues remained which might give an indication as to its age. The corridor was like an operating theater where at any moment doctors wearing masks would appear to operate on the next patient.

Down at the other end, voices and footsteps could now be heard. Two female figures momentarily appeared in the corridor, each carrying a large pile of documents. Finding it difficult to carry so many, the women propped the stacks of files against their bodies, thus supporting their ample breasts, scarcely contained in their low-cut, tight-fitting blouses. One of the files bore the inscription "DEBI," the last letter hidden by the long red fingernail of one of the women.

It occurred to Stepan that the women's behavior was unusual—within the confines of the Institute it was really quite out of order! To gain entry to the academic community here, women had to behave just like men, and this entailed the masculinization not only of their behavior but also of their dress.

No covert glances, no playful gestures or flirtation! Short mini-skirts, dresses with plunging necklines, tight shiny leggings, low-cut blouses, frilly lace, semi-transparent georgette—all this was subject to an unspoken but strict and immutable taboo. How would it be possible to pursue research without such rules?!

And then again, even under conditions such as these, relationships were formed, families were established, and children were born. In a word, life never stopped; it continued to flow unremittently in its entirely understandable and natural way.

In the end, the adaptation of men and women to academic research involved only a superficial, neutralizing effect. The women may have worn austere jackets, baggy trousers, and long skirts, but this did not prevent them from adding small, purely feminine accessories: striking earrings, expensive rings, fine gold chains. These typical tokens were inevitably retained, not so much for the sake of beauty or seductiveness, but for the purpose of reminding themselves and others of their femininity and of all the privileges attending that status.

At meetings the women were offered the best seats, in gentlemanly fashion; they did not have to queue to enter the conference room, they received gifts of flowers, and they were protected and taken care of like weaker beings. As for married couples, in the professional context their relationships were modified without difficulty—a wife or a husband was transformed into just another participant in the debate, or even an academic adversary.

However, young girls in short, tight-fitting dresses, with half-bare backs and protruding breasts, such as those that had just been blithely walking down the corridor, showing off their long legs in high heels and loudly exchanging the latest gossip—no! Women like that simply had no place here!

Stepan realized that he had in fact come to the wrong floor and that he had ended up in the reception area of the cosmetic surgery clinic. The hospital rented this space from the Institute, which was obliged to lease some of the floors in order somehow to cover its budget deficit. These women were, evidently, members of the clinic's administrative staff.

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The professor's study was located behind the library, hidden away in a remote corner, so to reach it Stepan had to go almost to the end of the left-hand corridor. On hearing some commotion, he paused outside one of the offices. On the other side of the door voices were raised in agitation—some kind of discussion was in progress. Stepan looked into the conference room through a chink left by the slightly open door: the research committee was in session. "Ah, of course, it's 'dissertation' day today," he recollected.

Sure enough, the set-up was a familiar one. A young woman was

prancing at the rostrum, defending her thesis. Of all those present, she was the one who had to make the greatest effort during these proceedings. The members of the committee were sitting calmly in their seats. The chairman was keeping time, giving equal opportunity to all who wished to speak. At a long, rectangular table sat the experts and reviewers. Their role was to put questions and offer remarks, responses, or commentaries. Seats were also provided for the public, in the gallery. As it happened, there was actually nobody there that day, apart from a single elderly man, deeply engrossed in the latest issue of a newspaper.

The examination procedure functioned perfectly, strictly by the book, with no deviations or distractions. The participants rose from their seats one after another and made their statements without undue hesitation. The entire protocol of the session was known in advance, down to the smallest details. The eminent academics knew who was to speak and in what order, who was supposed to say what, and even, since they had all worked together for decades, who could say what "off the record."

The members of the committee rose one after another from their seats to play their respective parts; it was like a puppet show, except that there had been no director for a long time now. One had the impression that at some time someone had drawn up this whole scenario for them and then just left, but no new producer had appeared, unfortunately. The puppets themselves, of course, had no imagination, so they were fated to repeat the same things over and over again throughout their ever-so-long careers. Someone once called a dissertation "words set to someone else's music," and Stepan had personally witnessed many times how true and telling this statement was.

Suddenly he was aware of something in the room seeking his attention, interrupting the turgid routine embracing everything around him. It was a sharp, piercing gaze that Stepan would be able to recognize in any situation. It was something very familiar, known to him very well for a long time, something extremely intimate and at the same time stunning and agonizing, capable of changing the course of events forever.

He was overcome by a kind of dizziness—what a dangerous, risky moment this might be, he felt—the moment of recognition! Yes, it was him! Stepan was no longer in doubt that he had recognized his old friend Ostap, with whom he had once spent many days and years in parks and cafés, drinking tea or coffee, engrossed in fascinating conversations about matters known only to them as close friends.

But then the moment of parting had inevitably followed. Their student days came and went, and so did their friendship. It was as if, like the score for a puppet show, it had been prepared in advance by a third party who, without knowing either Stepan or Ostap, had drawn up the entire scenario for many years in advance.

Was there anyone who "appointed" Ostap, or was it an entirely independent decision by his friend?

Stepan could not answer that definitively. It just became clear one day that Ostap had realized something about himself and come to a definite decision. Stepan remembered very clearly standing there, looking his friend straight in the eye as the latter quite sincerely admitted to him that he "intended to become a somebody" and that only then would he be able to return to something "real," "essential," the "main thing." Although that was an unpleasant surprise for Stepan, he didn't hold it against his friend by any means. Nevertheless, he made a different choice, to remain "a nobody." Since then, he had never had occasion to see the cheerful glint in Ostap's eyes, full of a kind of strange energy; somehow it gradually dissipated in the course of business trips, meetings, and involvement in important social matters, as well as confidential negotiations—the world to which his friend had become totally devoted.

Today that glint had suddenly reappeared, flashing before his eyes like the light from an internally concealed torch. After so many years of separation Stepan could foresee exactly the moment when Ostap's eyes would once again light up, albeit only briefly, yet with that same brightness, that same undying flame that instantly permeated the entire being of his interlocutor, from head to toe, making an indescribable impression which could never be erased from memory.

Stepan could now distinguish two completely different roles adopted by his friend.

At the meeting, Ostap resembled more of a regulator who was supposed to coordinate matters in such a way that everything proceeded with painless precision, all participants in the discussion being able to follow smoothly one after another, unhurriedly, not needing signals, avoiding conflict and—God forbid—any mishaps. It had to be said that this role suited Ostap to a tee. Smartly dressed in an austere business suit, like a uniform, he was able to focus on all the details and nuances inherent in phenomena such as road traffic movements, while maintaining a flexibility of reaction in order to come to the aid of anyone needing it. Taking a sidelong glance, Ostap would briefly draw attention to some minor response, only to bring in the next speaker a moment later on the other side of the table, without making the slightest sound, giving the impression that everything proceeded of its own accord, with no external intervention. From time to time, the chairman lowered his gaze, stopped looking round and concentrated on himself—the position of his hands, the angle of his elbows, his stretched-out fingers—and at such times everyone around him also stopped and fell silent: a pause ensued.

A minute later, however, everything started up again. Some member of the assembly rose and started speaking, while others coughed in unison with the speaker or silently nodded, one of them shuffled documents while another raised a hand and asked questions; but it made no difference what any of the members actually had in mind, what meaning they gave to their words, what tone they adopted or what their voices sounded like, just as on the road the

particular make or model of a car usually makes no difference—the main thing is to keep the process itself going, keep the traffic moving, avoid malfunction, and, of course, show results, which in the present case meant the production of new academic staff.

Apparently, all the members of the assembly were agreed on this primary task, and it was this agreement that lay behind the deep consensus that allowed for the re-starting of the pendulum of examinations and defenses, launching new cycles of activity throughout the whole calendar year, one after another, changing the light from red to green and back again, letting through now the vehicles, now the pedestrians.

However, everything could also happen quite differently for Ostap—for example, in the case of a chance meeting on the narrow metal staircase by the entrance to the library.

Standing slightly unsteadily by the door were two shimmering, youthful figures. Turning to his interlocutor, Stepan did not so much listen to his words as look into his eyes. For a scarcely perceptible moment he was anticipating the elusive yet bewitching glint in his friend's eye, which would completely wrench him from his present surroundings. Stepan had only to catch that glint and everything around him would dissolve, giving him the feeling of being flung into the far distance, to the horizon, into the unknown.

He looked around and realized that he had ended up somewhere in the middle of the sea. Stepan unexpectedly found himself thrown into a small dugout, carried on the waves somewhere far from the rocky shore. His toes were resting on the rough wooden surface of the boat, while from time to time the lukewarm seawater, heated by the sun, washed over the rest of his body—his arms, chest, and stomach. Everywhere could be heard the irrepressible dashing of the waves, their rolling grumble, and their sad, desperate lapping. He closed his eyes and felt himself alone with the endless horizon and the inexpressibly clear sky, unblemished by a single cloud.

The sea reminded Stepan of a stranger he once happened to meet who was surprisingly similar to Ostap. It was when he was on holiday in one of the resorts. Arriving at the coast, Stepan took accommodation right in the center of the tranquil, small town at the height of summer, full of young families on holiday with their children. It was a typical consumer oasis, where the vast majority of holiday-makers came to lie on the beach and to eat cheaply but well.

Stepan was completely out of his element here, because of what he called "lack of instinct." Indeed, in Stepan's case, the instinct required for proper participation in the pleasures and delights of holiday resorts was something of a rarity, something he could hardly ever boast about. As far as he could remember, he had always been lacking in instinct. Eventually, even the slightest traces of the precious sensitivity once given to him at birth finally vanished; discarded as unnecessary and superfluous, they disappeared. So all that was left for Stepan to do, given his lack of instinct, was to stay on with

the crowd, uninstinctively observing the instincts of others.

Leaving his room every morning, he ended up on the summer terrace of the restaurant. Sitting there, waiting for his breakfast, Stepan calmly observed all the excitement and the delight around him aroused by the fact that "they've brought the coffee," or "there are palm trees growing in the park," or "we're going to the mountains tomorrow."

Once he came to the restaurant after dark, for dinner. Stepan, as always, kept to himself, satisfied with the modest company of his room keys that occasionally rattled in his pocket. However, on this occasion there were no free places on the terrace, so he went inside. He sat at a table and gave his order, then he suddenly realized he was in a very different place, entirely unlike the terrace.

This room had an unusually high ceiling and also incorporated a gallery, which occupied half of the hall, forming a mezzanine level with cozy, cave-like niches. The predominant materials were wood and limestone, native to this locality. Apart from the large tables, there were several small tables for singles.

However, what actually determined the tone of the place was the guests themselves, who occupied the seats haphazardly, totally engrossed in their own affairs. Although they were all on their own, they seemed to be united by some extremely intense, self-sufficient activity. A face mysteriously peering at a screen or a book open at any old page, thin, bony fingers holding tightly onto a glass of café-latte or a gin and tonic, languid lips, half-open, now and again breaking into an ironically confused smile, eyes looking ahead distractedly, not focused on anything in particular, and not taking seriously anything going on around there.

A man was busy working behind the bar. Stepan did not notice him at first, but you only needed to glance at him to realize that the personality of the bartender was a kind of key axis or line of force governing all that went on here. His hips and chest were displayed in tight jeans and a short-sleeved tennis top, highlighting the flexing of his prominent biceps. He had a slightly elongated, taut face with a pointed nose, stubbly chin and rather hairy cheeks. On the one hand, the bartender looked like a typical local man; on the other hand, the professional dexterity he had developed over the years was quite striking.

The bartender's gestures were so lithe and adept that he looked not so much like a member of the restaurant staff as like an accomplished artiste with the ability to take orders and prepare drinks while performing graceful ballroom routines. In fact, this impression was reinforced by an awareness of the mundane purpose of the spectacle. Of course, there was so much the bartender needed to know. He had to remember a long list of items in order to operate so confidently in this complex set-up involving all the various drinks and ingredients, as well as the containers—from squat, heavy whiskey glasses to elegant, refined champagne flutes, from everyday little tequila

glasses to exotic clay gourds with special straws for maté tea.

However, dealing with all these lists and inventories was by now a straightforward matter for the man behind the bar. He had long since acquired all the necessary skills, satisfying customers' every whim at the drop of a hat. What is more, he even had time to answer his cellphone in a single gesture, calling out another enthusiastic "hello!" and continuing to hold it surreptitiously to his ear as he introduced a drinking straw into a glass of ice coffee with the index finger of his other hand, not forgetting as he did so to glance in acknowledgement in the direction of the latest beauty of the beach as she struggled to keep her balance on one of the rickety bar stools.

The bartender handed the coffee he had prepared to the waiter and for a moment, as he focused his penetrating gaze on the girl, he sensed a fantasy of desire in the first words unleashed from her torrid lips. However, this romanticism was short-lived. The next moment someone called to the man from somewhere behind his back, and he turned round, instantly switching to other matters. It could be a customer the bartender had got to know well in the last few days, someone with whom he could not only share jokes but discuss serious topics as well. Of course, there was no substance or depth to any of this; everything the bartender did was superficial, intended to disseminate a pleasant aura for the benefit of everyone patronizing the restaurant, ensuring a continuous interchange with strong drinks, lighthearted banter, gestures of familiarity, or passionate, knowing glances.

Everything around here moved and lived in unison with the lithe, supremely deft movements of his body. The walls of the restaurant vibrated with the techno, a passionate female voice now and again repeated with fake ecstasy in English, "with you I feel so high." Stepan wanted to stay on a little longer in this delightful atmosphere; his eyes were still riveted to the bartender's mesmerizing movements as he sank deeper and deeper into the magical vortex unfolding around him...

He experienced a similar sense of unity in Ostap's chairing of the meeting. This also demanded both systematically organized knowledge and remarkable skill, a highly developed responsiveness to situations and to the whole gamut of human characteristics, foibles, and desires. However, in this case it did not concern scantily-clad girls on holiday and those who occupied the, beach but staid members of the Academic Council. Social status was not so important here; people were still human and they revealed the same habits and patterns of interaction, whether they were at the holiday resort or on the premises of his own Institute.

The session was unexpectedly interrupted—the chairman rose to announce the next candidate.

"Candidate number five seven five four three one, seven two two nine one one. Le candidat cinq sept cinq quatre trois une, sept deux deux, neuf une une ... Der Kandidat Nummer fünf sieben fünf vier drei eins sieben zwei zwei neun eins eins.... Kandidat nomer pyat sem pyat chetyre tri odin sem dva dva

devyat odin odin....”

The announcements of the respective candidates were made in accordance with the new regulations of the Higher Attestation Commission. The principal points of procedure had to be announced in several languages. The legislators were convinced that this would promote the study of foreign languages, the internationalization of the country's research effort, and the overall global integration of the national academic community.

The chairman mumbled the accursed numbers for such a long time that the old man in the public gallery was obliged to drag himself away from his newspaper. Raising his head, he looked around in despair, attempting to grasp the arcane meaning of this litany evoked by the voice of the chairman, who chanted his announcements like a priest praying for peace.

Stepan hastily closed the door and hurried off in the direction of his professor's office.

* * *

The young man stopped just outside the door. He entered the office unhurriedly, holding back his rapid breathing, as his chest was fit to burst. During his visits to the Institute over the years, Stepan had got used to arriving for his meetings with the professor in good time, having his speech at the ready, carefully thought-out in advance. At the same time, however, he tried to enter the office with a casual nonchalance, as if he just happened to be passing by and decided to drop in for a few minutes.

This tactic helped maintain a sense of spontaneity at the meeting. The professor was many decades older than his student, and he seemed to exist in a completely different time continuum, very slow-moving by contrast with the accelerated pace of urban life to which Stepan was so accustomed.

The pace of the conversation was usually so lethargic that Stepan kept having to remind himself what he was doing in the professor's office and what the purpose of his visit actually was. As far as he remembered, during the time he had been working on his dissertation over the entire three-year period at the Institute, the professor had not said a word to him. And then, when the thesis was finished, and Stepan came to see him, delighted to be able to finally discuss what he had written, the professor remarked briefly and succinctly: "Well, you have completed the work."

That is all that he had managed to say, as supervisor, about the content of the thesis, though it is true that they did subsequently spend some time correcting formal errors that could be problematical at the defense.

It was not that Stepan was deeply hurt or disappointed by his professor's attitude. Of course, as he left his office on that occasion, he threw up his hands and shrugged his shoulders by force of habit, but this gesture did not mean he had taken any offense. More importantly, in fact, what Stepan had struggled with all these years in his relations with the professor was to understand his

silence for what it was, to give this taciturnity some meaning, or at least to set it out in a few simple sentences that he could understand. The thing was, you could not say of the professor that he did not know anything, or that he lacked sufficient knowledge, or that during the course of his very long life he had grown generally indifferent. In fact, there were times when the professor had shown himself to be cheerful, lively, and fully aware, laughing, making ironic remarks and smiling. On the other hand, none of this could adequately explain the impression of doom-laden frostiness and bitter alienation that Stepan experienced each time he entered the professor's office.

Usually, as he crossed the threshold Stepan almost immediately had a view of the professor's back, growing directly out of the back of the chair as if they were an integral whole. Twenty years ago, when the professor was younger, he wore an unattractive woolen coat, but lately he had taken to a thick fox-fur coat, which he had picked up at a street market. The fur on the coat was extremely lush and it certainly made the rather slight professor look bulkier. The deep-cut neck was set off by a gorgeous fox-fur collar. The collar was so big and so long it gave the impression that a live wild animal was curled around the professor's neck. Thanks to his coat, the professor could hardly ever have felt the cold when he sat for hours on end in his office, even in the winter, despite the fact that in the cold season the building was left largely unheated.

Eventually, Stepan found a convenient and understandable explanation of the professor's behavior that was summed up in one simple phrase—"the wall." "The Wall" was a purely internal designation for something situated somewhere very deep inside the professor. It may have started right down in his toes, climbing higher and higher, up to the spine, and then, after passing through the spinal cord, have taken root in the head itself. Stepan did not know the exact route followed by this internal barrier and he had no way of knowing it, but over the years he had become convinced that what he came up against on visiting the professor's office was quite simply a wall that was utterly unassailable.

At one time the professor, along with everybody else, had lived through the turbulent revolutionary times when it seemed that all obstacles and walls were supposed to collapse and fall. However, according to Stepan's approximate reckoning, he had been about forty years old at the time—and at that age nothing stands or falls any more, but just gradually and steadily becomes more and more overgrown with a layer of moss and mold. By all accounts, this is precisely what happened to his professor, a professor named "the Wall."

After receiving his assessment, Stepan turned towards the door and he was about to leave. As always, he was overwhelmed by a feeling of being up against a blank wall of misunderstanding and indifference, from which there seemed to be no escape. He tried to look back, to take a last look at the professor sitting in front of the monitor, in the far corner of the long, narrow

cell-like room.

But this time, perhaps because he was visiting the Institute for the last time, Stepan was resolved to break the oppressive silence. He decided to ask the professor about one of the most incomprehensible and inexplicable things that had tormented him and disturbed his peace of mind throughout the past year. It concerned the books which were stacked in neat, tidy piles under the professor's desk, right under his feet. Carefully wrapped in heavy paper, the books had evidently been brought here direct from the printers, though for some reason they were intended to be forwarded somewhere. Stepan, visiting the professor throughout the past year, had kept expecting that one day he would arrive to find the books gone, that someone had taken them away, or that they had somehow disappeared of their own accord, and that the space under the desk was at last clear again, as it should be. However, this had never actually happened, so today he looked down to see yet again the shiny toes of the professor's shoes unconcernedly protruding over the books.

So, with a deep sigh, he went ahead and asked:

"Excuse me, Serhiy Ivanovych, I have always wanted to ask you, but always put it off until later ... about the books, about the, er ... packages of books.... Those under your desk. Don't they sometimes, er ... get in your way? What are you, er ... intending to do with them?"

The professor, who had been anxiously consulting his shimmering monitor, stood up and gave Stepan an unexpectedly positive, cordial look. His face lit up and a smile appeared on his lips. It seemed that he was deeply touched by his enquiry.

"Everything is all right, Stepan. Don't worry. I'm glad you ask. I was just looking for somebody to help me move these books into the cupboard. Perhaps you could stay on for a minute or two to help me deal with this?"

Without waiting for a reply, the professor quickly threw off his fur coat and his business suit and he stood there in his tracksuit trousers and an old tee-shirt. Almost simultaneously, Stepan followed suit. In winter, to keep out the cold, he also wore a tracksuit under his ordinary clothes. As it turned out, he and the professor wore the same brand of tracksuit.

The professor bent down and pulled out from under the desk the first package of books that came to hand, quickly passing it to Stepan. The younger man took the pass cleanly and placed the books in the cupboard. The second package found its way into the cupboard in similar fashion, then the third, the fourth, and the fifth....

They continued to work together in this way for nearly an hour—the old professor and the young postgraduate, the former by the window-sill and the latter by the cupboard, one of them bending down to the floor and the other, by contrast, standing high up on a stool, trying to reach the shelves that were near the ceiling.

Gradually, the office became brighter and warmer. It no longer looked like a chilly monastic cell: the agile movements of both men brought this

space to life, filling it with remarkable energy and tension. Now the room looked like a railway carriage racing at full speed towards distant lands. Stepan and the professor were bending up and down like stokers, tossing packages of books into the cupboard one after another.

The print run was much greater than Stepan had expected. He did not notice that the packages gradually became lighter and smaller. Now they were passing quite thin wrappers, as if they contained notebooks, not books.

That probably happened because the printers decided to use different paper, Stepan surmised.

He recalled that for printing the most popular academic publications, two types of paper were the most popular; one was the heavy variety, like stiff foil, which was used for the vast majority of books, and the second was light and soft like a bird's feathers, causing the book to swell like yeast and making it seem much larger than it actually was. The second type of paper was usually chosen for printing manuscripts with a small number of pages, or when the author was highly respected.

However, that did not explain the change in the size of the packages, because although they decreased in size, their weight remained the same as it had been at the start.

"Perhaps it's just some completely different edition," Stepan thought. Then he immediately switched to something else.

Although the packages had become thinner, they still maintained their rigidity, which later turned out to be advantageous for Stepan and the professor. Suddenly Serhiy Ivanovych straightened up and drew himself up to his full height, presenting a strong broad chest. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small plastic table tennis ball.

"What about it, Stepan, fancy a game?" asked the professor, smiling through his fluffy moustache and immediately reaching under the desk to press a hidden catch. The floor between the men opened up and a board rose vertically into the empty space, gradually spreading out to form a table. Eventually, it turned out to be a real professional table tennis, table with shiny polished steel legs, a brand new green surface, and a bright white elastic net.

Stepan and the professor each picked up a packet of books, and they began slowly knocking the ball over the net. At first they did it half-jokingly, as if just pretending. Barely touching the ball, the men playfully leaped around the table, serving and returning passes.

However, they gradually got into the game and became keen adversaries. The professor and the student started making faster and faster strokes, both winning points, hammering the ball home. Stepan no longer felt that the room was too narrow; on the contrary, he felt just as confident as in the gym. The young man drew himself up to his full height to serve, fairly whacking the ball, while the professor adopted a comfortable defensive stance on the other side of the net, both feet firmly on the ground, so as to be able to return an equally adept shot.

Finally, one of them struck the ball with such force that it flew up in the air, screaming in pain as it cracked and crashed down like a wounded bird, never to return to the game.

For a few moments Stepan and the professor stood there speechless, truly regretting the demise of the ball, which had interrupted their game so abruptly. This finished off their diversion for good and all. They could not continue playing table tennis without a ball.

Unfortunately, this was the only ball the professor had. To get another one he would have to put on his jacket and go looking round all the neighboring offices, or even go outside, where there were plenty of shops selling sporting goods below the Square. But of course, on account of the freezing cold weather and the shortage of time, he was not going to do that.

There was only one last thing that they could still do together. Stepan and the professor faced each other across the table and removed their shoes. Now the men were barefoot; they took hold of the table and silently pulled themselves up onto its wooden surface. Unhurriedly, with full control over their movements, they both adopted the lotus posture, joining the tips of their fingers and closing their eyes.

In an instant all was quiet in the room, all oscillations and vibrations ceased and the last sounds fell away. Both men, deeply immersed in meditation, were enveloped in total calm from head to toe.

Difficult as it was for Stepan to break the silence, he whispered anyway:

"Own up, Professor, do you do this often?"

"Every five minutes."

Translated by Patrick John Corness

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