

The City

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*Part Two**

I

Stepan returned from his morning swims in the Dnipro at nine thirty. He went out to the river at seven and spent two hours lying on the sand in the soft sunlight, which slowly turned his body into that of a brown Atlas. Such were the details of the invariable, if unwritten, daily schedule that he had developed on the second day after settling in his new apartment and adhered to without fail, thus marking the beginning of his new life.

For the first time in his life he was free of the hardships of inadequate means. He was entirely satisfied with his living arrangements, somewhat impulsively considering himself a hardy tree, capable of taking root in any soil. Following village habits, by summer he had again economized a few tens of karbovanets, living frugally, drinking two glasses of milk every morning, having lunch in the NarKharch Union of People's Food Service and Dormitory Workers cafeteria, and then in the evening returning there again for another modest meal. He did not keep even a slice of bread at home, fearful of mice and roaches, and instinctively concluding that using food, as well as discarding it, is not appropriate in a room where you work and sleep, and that civilization in its unceasing progress had created for these purposes specific places of public use whose value was not identically understood for both functions, although in practical terms they were of equal value.

The only indulgence the boy allowed himself was smoking really good tobacco. He did not economize on that, since if it was unpleasant to treat a friend to inferior cigarettes, it was even worse to smoke them yourself. The serious work that he began over the summer, when his affairs at the Institute had ended and he had moved to these new quarters, obscured for him all the seductive posters about world-renowned films, the most famous singers and actors appearing in the theaters, as well as the most raucous entertainments and amusements taking place in parks and along the Dnipro. Deliberately and willingly he had condemned himself to solitude within these walls, where the only decoration was a wilting palm in one corner, a relic of the former bourgeois owners that was handed down to each successive tenant, reminding them of the unfortunate history of this world. Under its yellowed leaves he undertook a systematic labor of transforming his own person.

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The boy had observed in himself a quality he found most strange and even frightening, and whose real causes and natural origins he did not understand. Instead of building him up with new knowledge, his first year at the Institute, brilliantly accomplished from all perspectives, had, it seems, resulted in the destruction of the wisdom that he had brought with him from the village. Suddenly he felt that his brain was dressed only in the most shameful rags, and this feeling troubled him, since it degraded his dignity. Most of all, he was troubled by deficiencies in a field that was not even part of his Institute studies at all but a personal and somewhat sensitive matter—namely, literature. It had become his closest and most important concern, for reasons that he did not really want to analyze in detail, justifying his enthusiasm, instead, with the substantial argument that a familiarity with literature was the primary characteristic of a cultured person. From his voluminous reading back in the village he had remembered a whole host of names, titles, and plots, but all this was like a neglected library, where the books have not even been put up on the shelves. So he began to arrange them in his head, just as he had once done in the library of the Village Hall.

After his morning bathing, the hours from ten to three were for reading. Then, until five, various minor chores—teaching lessons at various offices, exchanging books at the library, eating lunch, and resting; then, two hours to study languages, alternating between English and French every day; and afterwards, until ten, Ukrainian literature. Finally, some free time for a walk along the streets or in a park, supper, and then sleep from eleven to seven. This was the regimen that he followed, like a supreme law carved by a divine hand on stone tablets. At moments when something within him rebelled against such a regimented life, he scolded himself and cursed in the foulest language, knowing full well that a betrayal in one instance was a betrayal forevermore. But in the evening, after a walk and a fitness regimen that followed the functional system of Dr. Anokhin, when he lay down to sleep he felt that his thoughts were unusually clear, and he experienced the sublime pleasure that was the cornerstone of Epicurean teachings.

In two months he had covered as much material as can be covered by a talented young man who is willing to expend all his forces on the capture of this single fortress. He experienced almost no fatigue, refreshing his powers each morning with water and sunlight and exercising his muscles each evening with rhythmic calisthenics. A few weeks after introducing this schedule, however, he felt a need for at least a little rest after his work on languages, and after careful consideration in a special deliberation, having given himself an opportunity to be heard both “for” and “against,” he approved the resolution to permit Stepan Radchenko to lie down for ten minutes after language study. And these moments became the happiest time of the whole day. They came between seven and eight o’clock, when evening extends through the window its ephemeral warm hands, reaching down from distant heights, rising up from the depths of the earth, and carrying into the home the soothing tranquility of immeasurable space, silently joining the soul

with the expanse of the universe. Drowning his gaze in a corner of the room, the boy observed as objects dissolved in the creeping dusk and walls disappeared in a thick bluish glow. Ten minutes of this lethargy, and then he suddenly jumps up, turns on the electric light, harshly breaking the magical charm. Books open. Silence. Intermittent scratches of pencil on paper.

Sustained by the saturation of his own mind, he did not feel a need to interact with other people, those distant figures whom he occasionally encountered. Their lives now seemed to him comically simplistic and unworthy of any attention. He was becoming a wild recluse in his room, although he ascended the peaks of civilization every day. Having reduced his own life to a mechanical process, he wanted to see the same in others, as he gained more wisdom than one ought to allow oneself to gain.

At eleven o'clock on this day, after a morning that had augured nothing new, a knock on his door disturbed his concentration. Damn it! Who dares disturb him at this sacred time? But it was only a letter, whose arrival surprised him even more than an uninvited guest. From whom? Shrugging his shoulders, the boy tore open the envelope. It was from the poet Vyhorsky, who had taken his stories. He trembled as if in that very moment his future life was being determined and the wisdom of his fanatical efforts was being judged. An unexpected burning, a sudden confusion forced him to sit down and hastily scan the letter, searching for the necessary phrases. Here—here they were: “They are wonderful stories, to be sure.” Suddenly, the letter was no longer interesting, as if he had instantly ingested all of its contents.

The boy threw the letter on his bed and began pacing the room in agitation, like a person who has awakened in a strange setting. “They are wonderful stories, to be sure,” his soul sang out these words, and he realized that while he had forgotten about his stories, his entire life revolved only around them, in expectation of this unforeseen letter. Swallowing the burning sensation of joy, he stretched out and picked up the letter again. Unwittingly focusing on the beautiful sentence in the middle, which stood out from the entire text as if it were laid out in a diamond mosaic, the boy lit a cigarette and, leaning back carelessly in his chair, began reading.

“I stopped for a short layover in Simeiz and remembered that I owe you a letter. And what do you think jogged my memory? A couple was walking by and ‘he’ was complaining about Ukrainization. The poor fellow brought his offended Russian selfishness even here, to this resort town. So here I am at the post office, and you must thank that Russian vacationer, because I don’t willingly write letters—they’re one of the most foolish things invented by mankind. Whenever I see a ‘Post and Telegraph Office’ sign, I think, ‘Here’s the enemy of mankind.’ You don’t yet know how pleasant it is to run away as far as possible from those who know you, to a place where no one cares about you and you don’t care about any of them, and you can be anything you want to be and no one is going to demand an accounting from you. And to encounter at such a moment the mechanisms of communication! It’s barbaric! In any case, to my credit, this is the first letter I’m writing, and I’ve

already walked through the Caucasus and now I'm walking along the southern coast of Crimea. I'm all alone, but full of enthusiasm. My plan is to walk the western coast as well. I'm not tired, and there's still a great deal to do. I'm writing, but not about the sea or the monasteries. About the city! And your stories are all rural. They are wonderful stories, to be sure. Their faults only point to future accomplishments. I read them back on the train and sent them out to journals when I reached Katerynoslav. It would be good if they both appeared together. That would be an unpleasant surprise to our literary critics, who specialize in the aria about the crisis in literature. I don't know how to finish a letter. Nor how to write one. Vyhorsky."

Stepan got up impulsively, lost in thought. He grabbed a shirt and rushed out into the street, slowing his movements so as not to attract attention. Along the way he stopped in a couple of bookstores, but they did not carry periodicals. What do you mean, you don't carry periodicals? He sullenly walked out of the shops. It wasn't until he reached Volodymyr Street that he had any success. Which journal are you looking for? All of the ones that had issues last month! The boy greedily surveyed their contents, and with a trembling hand set aside two of them. His own name, printed alongside those of others, gave him such a start that he did not immediately understand what to do with the journals. Eventually, taking himself in hand, he purchased them and stepped out of the bookstore.

Now where? He couldn't imagine what else was left for him to desire. Within him a sharp burst of emotion settled into a sweet, calm, and intoxicating fog. He did not want to go anywhere. He stood in front of the shop window, forcing himself to look at the books displayed there, but feeling only the tension of his fingers on the pages in his hands. Suddenly pulling away from the glass, he left quickly, driven by a fervent desire to sit somewhere alone and read, over and over, the stories he had written.

In the park where he had once watched children playing ball, he hid himself in a remote corner and opened the publications to the pages where his works were printed. Carefully he examined the paper and the style of the printed letters and then began slowly to read, like a newly literate reader consuming his first book. At first, he did not recognize his lines in their new, external appearance, and he felt uneasy. This uneasiness increased even more as he connected with his own works. He read, trembling with exhilaration and fear, and the works he had created now produced in him a new being, allowing him to experience the joy of the complete oneness of his person, erasing any duality of the soul between internal and external components. He became unified and powerful, and if an unexpected tremor arose in him, it was only a response to his own greatness.

He read for a long time, and sat even longer, weaving indistinct dreams that led, time and again, to the indisputable fact that he had become a writer. If he had been capable of writing these stories, it was evident that he would be able to write many more, and better ones.

His dreams grew brighter, transforming into thoughts. He was

beginning to realize that secretly, without ever admitting it to himself, he had been certain that someday this moment would arrive, and this certainty had been invisibly guiding his life. Even before reaching the first rung of the literary ladder—not yet having seen his works in print—he had begun to study literature, in order to strengthen his position on that rung. He was fascinated by the secret processes of the soul, which knows more and sees further than the poor mind, which often merely sanctions already approved resolutions, like those English kings that reign but do not rule. The idea that all this might not have happened was something he acknowledged like the shadow of an incapacitated threat whose possible effects on his life he could not even imagine. But this thought, although disarmed, was too horrible to linger on for long.

After lunch, having decided that today marked the beginning of a new era in his life, he decided to start a diary. Having written a few uncertain lines in a notebook, he needed to put a date under what he had written. Glancing up at the calendar, he was surprised and forgot all about the diary: today was exactly one year to the day since he had arrived in the city. How short it had been, this year! How strangely and quickly it had flown by. So the boy decided to treat this doubly remarkable day as a holiday, and to mark it with an appropriate leisure activity. His shoes and trousers, with their slight bulges on the knees, were scoured once again, although cleaning them every morning was one of the rules of his strict regimen. At six o'clock, he changed his collar, put on his jacket, and without a hat, as usual, left his room.

The street greeted him with a soft evening rustle as he measured its surface with strong, energetic strides, as if his legs were fitted with new steel springs. The boy walked without hurry, haughtily raising his head as a mark of his superiority. His consciousness of this superiority had firmly implanted itself in his mind and added sparkle to his eyes and a peaceful dignity to his actions. This very process of proud walking, the flawless motion of each gear and lever of his own complex machine, gave him such intoxicating satisfaction that he didn't even consider where it was his legs were taking him.

Reaching Khreschatyk, he bought a newspaper, sat down at a table in an open-air café, and ordered coffee and a pastry. With incomprehensible and unexpected refinement he crossed one leg over the other and lazily stirred the aromatic liquid, all the while glancing obliquely at the hundreds of faces passing on the sidewalk and taking in the variety of colors and activities on the street. Then he opened the newspaper to the events announcements.

"Another pastry," he called out to the waitress who was walking past him.

A concert of the symphony orchestra at the Opera won him over, mostly because he had never been to such a concert, and hopping on the bus—although the Opera was only two blocks away—he reached Volodymyr Street. He bought an expensive ticket—it had to be an expensive one—and walked around the circular gallery, taking delight in the spectacle of

constantly changing faces, figures, and attire. The crowd had a strange effect on him. Its motion and sound aggravated his already sensitive nerves, as if he were for the first time seeing so many people and feeling his own relation to them. He experienced the joy of existing alongside his fellow beings, united with them in shared activity. He wanted to laugh when he saw others laughing. The diversity of these unknown beings was closer to him than all those he had previously known.

Peering further into the depths of the enchanting crowd, composed, it seemed, of the finest specimens of the human race, he found a woman. Slowly focusing his gaze, he passed through the transparency of her clothing, expanding the naked flesh beyond her arms and shoulders, sensing the pleasing firmness of her legs in the thin stockings that disappeared beneath the scallops of her dress. The crowd exuded desire like a blossoming tree in early spring sends forth its matrimonial scent. It oppressed with the power of its sensuality, hidden within these hundreds of beings, who seemed to be the refined incarnation of one giant male and one giant female, with passions worthy of their giant bodies.

He listened to the concert inattentively, distracted by impressions of the crowd. He, too, was a full member of this crowd, but he could not even speak to anyone. He was surprised at the insult he felt at his own alienation. Beyond doubt, all these people were cultured individuals who read journals, and many of them would consider it an honor to make the acquaintance of a talented writer. Yet they were separated by a very unfortunate boundary that made him a foreign body that had only accidentally entered into this smoothly functioning organism. Oh, if only he had a single acquaintance. But now he was like a ghost, perhaps a well-educated one but nevertheless one incapable of taking part in the joy of material existence. He was lonely, and the months of solitary effort were now turning against him.

During the intermission Stepan loitered gloomily in the gallery. The crowd had so easily taken him down a notch and so thoughtlessly destroyed him that he began, in the end, to pity himself, grasping at any sliver of high esteem that he could still ascribe to himself. After all, nothing much had happened: he had simply become a little too emotional. He was a writer, after all, and that was indisputable, and he need not concern himself too much with all these mugs around him. There probably wasn't anyone among them who could write a publishable work.

Seeking any kind of comfort for his alienation, Stepan approached the kiosk of an instant lottery that had been set up in all theaters by the Committee to Aid Children. Here he had the right to speak, if only for money. Since the lottery to aid homeless children was not very popular among the spectators, the pretty sales girl greeted the boy very graciously. Would he like a lottery ticket? They're twenty kopecks, please. Stepan glanced at the wine, candy, make-up, pen-knives, decorated boxes, and other trivia that was ready to belong to anyone who might win it, and, reaching into the box, pulled out a ticket, which, on examination, proved to be completely blank.

"I'll take another one," he said.

But the purpose of the lottery was to aid children, not to hand out a bottle of port to each customer for two coins.

"One more," Stepan continued.

After the fourth blank ticket, the boy was attracting the attention of a number of people, drawn in by the lottery girl's beautiful laugh and the figure of an intrepid philanthropist.

"But they're probably all blank!" said the budding young writer with theatrical despair after the sixth ticket, to the amusement of a sizeable audience, whose curious stares he felt on his back with great satisfaction.

"O no, you're just unlucky. You're probably lucky in something else," answered the sales girl coquettishly, pouring out her charm in front of the boy for the benefit of the charitable committee.

With the ninth ticket he turned toward the onlookers with a nervous blush on his face and, unfolding the ticket, held it high over his head. A roar of satisfied laughter rose from the crowd—this ticket was also blank.

With a conqueror's delight, Stepan surveyed the ocean of heads before him that was filling the passage, blocking the movement of people who were joining the crowd as they learned that this tall fellow was buying his twenty-third ticket without any results. Off to the side the shining helmet of a firefighter could be seen moving toward the crowd.

"I'll buy a ticket!" called out a woman's voice unexpectedly, and while Stepan was rummaging in his pocket a diminutive girl put her hand into the perfidious box. She won a pacifier and ceremoniously turned it over to Stefan, accompanied by the joyful shouts and applause of the onlookers, who were hurrying back to their seats. The intermission was coming to an end. The boy paid even less attention to the second half of the symphonic concert than he had to the first. Whether from shame or excitement, his face was hot. It was foolish to act so silly in front of the crowd. And an even greater misery gnawed at his heart: of the five karbovanets with which he had left home, he now had only two silver coins. The pacifier gave him the greatest misery, and he quietly threw it under his chair. May it be damned! And what benefit was there from all this spending?

After the concert, Stepan walked out of the opera in a dour spirit and stopped by the portico to light a cigarette. This doubly remarkable day in his life was ending without any uplifting feeling.

"Can you give me a light?" He heard a familiar voice and saw the girl who had participated with him in the lottery. For an unknown reason he was overjoyed and flustered. As if he had seen someone he had long expected, with whom the brightest hopes were associated. Graciously lighting her cigarette with a separate match, he began to walk alongside her.

"I've got the cigarette lit already," she remarked when he followed her as she turned on to Lenin Street.

"I want to thank you for your present," said Stepan, after a moment's thought.

“You’re welcome. You can enjoy it at your leisure.”

He glanced at her, surprised by her peevish tone. This skinny little thing, hardly up to his armpits and topped off with a flattened hat. The boy was dissatisfied with this disparity between them, but, nevertheless, carefully took her by the arm when it came time to cross the street. She threw him a sideways glance, pulled back her arm, and walked on with her firm, almost military, stride.

“Why are you silent?” she asked, turning into Gimnazia Passage.

“And what’s your name?” asked Stepan uncertainly.

“And what’s it to you?” she answered sternly. “My name is Zoska,” she added, softening.

“Zosia, ...” Stepan began.

“My name is Zoska, you hear—Zoska,” she cut him off impatiently, going toward the door.

The boy followed her, vaguely expecting the staircase to be dark, allowing him to steal a kiss there and thus recompense himself for the misery at the concert and the money wasted there. But, as if guessing his intentions, the girl sprang up the stairs to the first floor hurriedly and pushed her key into the lock.

“Bonjour,” she said, disappearing behind the door.

II

Finally, after many corrections and crossings out, the sheet contained only a few words, and was evidently completely acceptable:

“Dear Comrades. In the last issue of your journal you published one of my stories. Please write and let me know if you would like any more stories. I can send some. My address: Kyiv, Lviv Street 51, Apt. 16. Stefan Radchenko.”

And yet, on further reflection, he felt that the fact that his story had been published in the journal was so obvious that mentioning it in his letter would be unnecessary, so he crossed out the relevant sentence. Reflecting even further, he determined that it was insulting to his own dignity to promote his own stories, so after the final redaction his letter was entirely acceptable to him:

“Dear Comrades. My address: Kyiv, Lviv Street 51, Apt. 16. Stefan Radchenko.”

Copying this text in two separate copies, the boy addressed the letters to the journals, one in Kyiv, the other in Kharkiv, and felt a deep and liberating relief.

Then he got up and paced around his room. It was near eight o'clock in the morning—half of the second floor, which included his room, was only just getting up. From the kitchen, past a number of closed doors, he could hear the hiss of three gas stoves, corresponding to the number of families that were squeezed into the remaining four rooms of this apartment. He didn't really know his neighbors, since he spent most of his time alone in his room and did not meet them in the kitchen, the usual site of domestic meetings, acquaintances, and arguments. He never even touched this nerve center of activity, with its cooking stove, table covered with chopping scars, greasy cabinet, and collection of pans, pots, colanders, and ladles along the wall. Even to wash up in the morning he walked down to the Dnipro, which deprived him of the opportunity to come into contact with his co-habitants and to observe them in their natural state. After all, the code of customary behavior allows people to enter the kitchen in their housecoat, if they are women; without a jacket, if they are men; or sleepy and disheveled, regardless of their sex. Sharing the same roof brings people together not so much because they can demonstrate their finest qualities to one another but rather because they cannot hide the dirtier sides of their lives, which, unfortunately, are more significant. Every apartment is a small group of conspirators who silently grant mutual exemptions from the decent behavior that they would otherwise demand of anyone who did not have the honor of living with them.

Stepan listened to this morning symphony of domesticity all the more carefully because he had never actually heard it before, since he was never at home in the morning. The ceaseless slamming of the doors, the yelling of the

breadwinners who were rushing to their jobs, the angry responses of the women, the shrieks of children being sent off to school, and the incessant wail of infants bore witness to an income level of between fifty and one hundred karbovanets a month, a level associated with the intelligent proletariat, otherwise known as city dwellers or the bourgeoisie. These umpteen cubic meters of air locked between walls, ceiling, and floor were the unsung home of the youthful aspirations, beauty, hope, and rose-colored expectations that mattered in this world, and the boy, although he considered himself an incomparably higher being than the average person, reflected sadly and with a secret fear: “What are they living for, actually? Today, tomorrow, a month from now—it’s always the same thing. They’re nuts.”

At nine o’clock, when the working men had left for their jobs and their wives for the bazaars, the apartment sank into a relative silence, which, after the earlier clamor, seemed absolute. Sitting down at his table under the beneficent branches of the old palm, Stepan pulled a packet of papers written in pencil from a corner of the drawer and began to sort them carefully. These were the working copies of the stories he had written last winter, three completed and one just started. They were longer than the ones that had been published, but they shared the same themes—revolution and rebels. In addition, they all shared another quality, one which had already been evident in his first story, “The Razor,” and had emphatically continued in all of Stepan’s further stories, crystallizing his understanding of the civil war as a gigantic mass uprising in which individuals were invisible particles leveled in the larger whole and mindlessly subordinated to it, and where people were depersonalized in a higher will, which had stripped them of their own life and along with it of all illusions of independence. Thus, quite naturally, the heroes of his stories became things, in which the mighty idea was superficially embodied. Indeed, all by themselves, the carriers of the action in his stories became a derailed armored train, a burnt-out estate, or a captured station that had all stood against the human collective as distinct individuals. There had never been such summary executions and corpses had never fallen as meekly as they did in the works of Stefan Radchenko, because, as he tuned his ear to the groans of the derailed armored train, the author forgot about the cries of the living beneath its shattered carcass.

By evening he had completed the unfinished story, surprised by the heaviness of his hand in writing. Pages he had earlier written in an hour now cost him half a day of intense concentration, with unfortunate interruptions when the pencil refused to write altogether. He ended up crossing out what was written, grinding to a sudden stop from full speed after reaching a word that didn’t really fit but also wouldn’t allow itself to be replaced. His expertise in language turned into an unmitigated enemy. His mind, weighed down with the burden of his reading, with the stylistic examples of the masters, and with heightened expectations from every turn of phrase, was constantly holding back the free flight of his inspiration. His literary taste, sharpened by the finest works of literature, revealed countless blemishes in

the construction of his story. Twice he had to rebuild the plot of the work, abandoning what he had thought up and adding completely unforeseen elements. On finishing, he felt an angry satisfaction, like a rider who has finally subdued a horse that had repeatedly thrown him to the ground.

He devoted two days to making a clean copy and superficial corrections, leaving his home only to eat and to teach his language classes. He even neglected his hygienic bathing in the Dnipro. A day later he received a reply from the editorial office of the Kyiv journal, one just as brief as his letter: "Please drop in to the editorial office between 11 and 2 o'clock." The "please" was very gratifying, but he did not visit the editorial office. He was held back from such a step by a strange combination of modesty and pride. Nothing, however, held him back from washing up and tidying his clothes as carefully as possible and setting off for Gimnazia Passage, to the building where the girl Zoska lived.

In truth, he did not feel a great desire to meet with her, but solitude had become burdensome and the need to have some fun after working on the stories led him out to where he might at least hear a living word—and if it came from a girl, all the better. Of course, it wasn't words alone that interested him. The physical longing for a woman had not left him since he had abandoned Musinka, and the more completely he closed off any practical possibilities of satisfying this longing, the more completely it captivated his imagination. For a few minutes before falling off to sleep, as a just reward after the learned books, he allowed himself to toss around in his imagination a few of those things associated with love-making, and these imaginings were very gratifying, despite their immodesty. He would drift off to sleep wrapped up in invisible embraces that did not release his willing body until morning, leaving behind an unquenchable desire to convert them into reality. And his dreams were deeply immoral, revealing his goal in stark simplicity, dredging up material from his days as a wanderer, when relations with women were not adorned with even the most elementary seemliness, since in their very essence they were absolutely unseemly. The seductive tormentor of all champions of spiritual values, that sleazy devil, ceaselessly stoked the flames of the wild fire in Stepan's blood, and if the boy succeeded in containing it within the limits of his imagination, then that itself was a considerable virtue.

About Zoska herself, however, he had no particular intentions. He even thought that through her he might make some further acquaintances and thus expand the narrow confines of his solitude and imagination that were beginning to suffocate him. With such thoughts in mind he cleared his nose and throat and knocked on the door, which was opened by the girl herself.

"What do you want?" she asked, having opened the door.

"I wanted to see you," answered Stepan.

"I did not give you permission," she answered sternly. But then, a moment later, she added, "Not here. Wait outside, and I'll be right out."

Before the boy could say a word, she closed the door. Stepan went out on the street feeling offended, since he considered himself on all

counts—mental and physical—deserving of a better reception. What a snob! Nevertheless, he strolled along the sidewalk, mindlessly reading the signs on the door identifying the inhabitants. Zoska did not make him wait long, and soon stepped off the porch in a jacket and hat.

“Look at what I bought myself,” she said, showing the boy a small riding crop. “Nice, isn’t it? A remarkable one.”

“It’s very nice. Unusual,” said Stepan, examining it.

“Do you know how to use it?”

“Just please don’t hit me,” said the boy, seeing her take a swing.

“It’s for a dog—a Pomeranian, like the one we have. So, where’s the pacifier?”

“I threw it away.”

“The one I gave you as a present?!”

She stopped, mortified.

“No—no,” said Stepan, fearing that she would leave, “I’m joking. I put it away in a drawer, at home.”

“Bring it to me,” said Zoska, “I’ll attach it to the riding crop.”

I guess I’ll have to buy one. And a pacifier suits her, Stepan thought, glancing at her childish features.

A quarter of an hour later, Stepan was ceremoniously buying tickets for front-row seats at the cinema, expecting this expenditure to set a firm foundation for their further friendship. He reasoned, quite logically, that when a girl gets something from a boy, she begins to owe him something, too.

With knightly chivalry he let her into the cinema lobby ahead of him and graciously strolled around with her examining the posters and film stills.

“Look at this moron,” said Zoska, pointing with the crop at a young man riding a horse in one of the stills. “In movies you should ride in an automobile, not on a horse like a policeman.”

Stepan was puffed up with pride—this was the first time in his life that he was with a real girl in a public place. His only regret was that she was swinging the crop too much and looking around, instead of paying attention to him. Nevertheless, she was sure to have a deep appreciation for the fact that it was he who had brought her here.

When the lights in the theater went out and images began to flicker on the screen, Stepan took her small hand and squeezed it. The girl did not respond but she also didn’t pull back, so after a few minutes he put her hand on his knee and covered it with his palm, having decided, cautiously, to stop for the moment at that. After the last scenes, Zoska exclaimed: “What a wonderful film! Apollo, buy tickets for the next showing.”

“My name is Stefan,” said Stepan, offended. “Sit here. I’ll get the tickets.”

He quickly returned with the tickets, secretly fearing that she might run away.

“Oh, you’re just divine,” said Zoska.

But no sooner had the film begun than she proclaimed wearily,

“Phooney, this stinks. I want to go home. It’s stuffy in here.”

On the corner of her street, she expressed another wish:

“I want to take a boat ride.”

“As you please,” answered Stepan. “It’s such a quiet evening, we can go somewhere far.”

“As long as it’s on our street.”

“But where’s the water?”

“Create it!” cried the girl plaintively.

His patience ran out and, discreetly looking about, he kissed her.

“How boorish!” she cried.

“I love you,” mumbled Stepan helplessly.

“I did not give you permission,” she said as sternly as possible, walking away.

“Zoska, when will I see you?” he asked as she was leaving.

“Never,” she said.

But the boy only smiled at this word, and he went home filled with a variety of pleasant feelings. Zoska’s decisive “never” only cheered him. Indeed, it gave him hope for another meeting very soon, perhaps even with important consequences, since it was not difficult for him to figure out that this girl was a capricious double-dealer who didn’t know what she wanted. That gave a great deal of latitude to a person with constant desires. He was particularly pleased with her habit of saying that she had not given permission after the matter was already accomplished. Such a prohibition was, as everyone knows, not much of an obstruction.

All in all, he liked the girl more than he would have thought only a few hours earlier. When he touched her for an instant on the street he felt a restless change—experiencing at first hand the truth that a woman’s body, just because it is small, does not lose its attractive features. On the contrary, in the paucity of its dimensions, he felt some special, sophisticated charms bred by the city, since such a body simply could not exist in a village environment. It was precisely this urban quality in her that attracted him, inasmuch as becoming a true city dweller was the first goal of his ambition. With her he could go to all the theaters, cinemas, and performances. With her he would achieve familiarity in urban society, where, of course, he would be accepted and honored.

At the Institute, classes had no doubt already begun, and he promised himself over and over again to show up there. One morning, while dressing, he actually decided to make that happen forthwith. Then, suddenly, he asked himself: “Why should I go there?” And he did not find a suitable answer. At first he was surprised, then gratified, and, embracing his own decisiveness, he spent the day feeling himself a conqueror. What do I need the Institute for? Stepan Radchenko is a fine fellow even without a diploma.

Fortune was generous, showering him with gifts from its ancient horn, visible on posters in all the bakeries. Within a week he received an answer from the editorial office of the Kharkiv journal along with a check for

eighty-seven karbovanets. The letter was not unexpected, but the money was a complete surprise. Literature, it turned out, was not only a noble pursuit, but a lucrative one as well—that is, it was doubly worthwhile. The boy indulged himself in writing a long letter of reply about receiving the money. He would have been happy to write endlessly, if that had been required by the mail, that wonderful achievement of human culture that not only allows people to communicate at a distance from each other, and not only delivers journals with published stories but also delivers money.

The letter from the Kharkiv journal was very interesting, indeed. In it the virtues of his stories were briefly but clearly noted, and he was invited to send more, even several, if possible, so that a collection of between three and six printed signatures in size might be assembled. This last line confused him. What is a printed signature and, what's more important, will the stories he already has fit into these "three to six printed signatures"? This needed to be determined, along with other questions about the printing process that had arisen in his mind. That a page is composed of individual letters was well known from that place in the history textbook where Gutenberg's invention is described, but on the question of how, for example, books could include illustrations and portraits, history was silent. So the young writer decided that he would buy the appropriate technical guidebook, and from it he learned what a printed signature is and how many characters it contains, and what is meant by proofs, cicero, quads, leading, and Linotype. He paid particular attention to all things connected with portraits: zincography, half-tones, three-color printing, and offset presses. The information about portraits he stored in his memory for later use, but the definition of a printed signature was immediately applied to his own six stories as a practical exercise, with the determination that since they contained 207,194 characters, they fit very neatly into the category "from three to six printed signatures."

He then assembled them neatly, renumbered the pages, and wrapped them in clean paper, inscribing on it in nice large letters: "Stefan Radchenko. *The Razor: A Collection of Short Stories.*" He bound the whole with string, as he had once done with his report on the Silbud, and turned the package over to that marvel, the Post Office. He did not send any letter, since he considered silence the most dignified reply.

III

Theater has completed the circle of its development. In constructivist stagings with emphatic gestures and intonations from the actors as manifestations of the singular, concentrated character trait of the dramatic personage, with a preponderance of mass scenes and conventional situations, where descriptive signs and the mere skeleton of stage decorations designate the setting, allowing it to develop on any number of planes, the contemporary theater is at the highest level of its development, in communion with its original source, the religious spectacles of antiquity and the middle ages, and its future is laid out in a continuous repetition of its past, an accelerated replaying of the now familiar stages of development with an admixture of innovations but now without the great ferment of progress, which alone can give life to the arts. Governed by the all-encompassing, unique, and inviolable laws of development, whose presence in the diversity of life's processes the genius of man can discover but not alter, the main trunk of theater has sent forth an oblique branch from near its roots whose growth resembles the magic of an Indian guru who, within the space of a minute and directly in front of his onlookers, can make an entire tree sprout from a seed.

Twenty years ago, relegated to wooden shacks on the outskirts of circuses and bazaars, where it shared in the typical smells of barns and cheap commerce and earned the disdain of higher society, the press, and public opinion, the cinematic seedling was transplanted to the central streets, to sumptuous establishments with sparkling decorations, large lobbies, and symphonic orchestras, and, blossoming there into a mature flower, it immediately garnered a stunning acceptance. Realizing possibilities of illusion that were impossible in the theater and a full range of action for the actors, it reduced the stage by one whole dimension but expanded it into infinity and threw onto it the full flood of reality, without depriving it of any authenticity. Having taken away the action's voice, it made it comprehensible to all nations and tribes, and thus, turning contradictions on their head, like an accomplished dialectician, it strengthened and won over to itself the opinion and the hearts of mankind.

The variety of characters, countries, and times thrown on the screen by the wand of the silent magician awakened in the young writer Stefan Radchenko that tickling sensation of combined happiness and oppression that overpowers a person somewhere in the middle of the steppe when the night hums with inaudible whispers and bedevils the eyes with deceptions. When the lights went out in the auditorium, and the first bars of music were heard, the boy was enveloped in just such a mood of observation, and quietly, under his breath, he would repeat the title of the movie, as if it foreshadowed the plot. Then he would dive into the images on the screen with the enthusiasm of an explorer, shuffling his feet when a subtitle he had finished reading remained on the screen too long, and sometimes, engrossed by a pithy or

tragic scene, he clenched the fingers of his hand, which had its permanent place on the knees of his girlfriend, Zoska, who was his constant and invariable companion. She whispered in pain:

“That hurts, divine one.”

But in these moments, like a true god, he was far from her, united with the moving figures made of projected light, who captivated his fervent imagination and took it with them in their travels, experiences, and adventures, where he smelled the scents of the gardens he was seeing and heard the shots as smoke billowed from rifles. Often, on returning home, he did not light a lamp but in the dark glow of his window recreated the images he had brought home with him of beautiful actresses, clothing their seductive shadows in flesh.

But more often and more sadly, standing in front of that window, he thought about the girl Zoska, who called him “divine” as if laughing at the powerlessness of his endeavors. In the three weeks of their acquaintance their relationship had been stuck on the same level, as if they had bogged down after a propitious beginning, and the young man felt powerless to budge them toward a higher plateau. His rainbow plans were overturned by nature. An unexpected autumn covered the city with a gray and damp covering, wrapping the days in damp mists, rains, and ugly fogs. Sharp winds with sudden gusts bent the branches of the chestnut trees and tore off their still-green leaves. Cobblestones and roofs resounded from the cold teardrops, which then flowed down gutters in innocent streams, pouring out into the streets along the sidewalks, where the channels in the asphalt formed puddles that never dried out, whose surfaces trembled from the raindrops. Drivers hid beneath the taut cabs of their carriages, lined up in a black thread on the corner, their horses with bowed heads, seemingly forgotten. Street hawkers of cigarettes huddled on porches along with newspaper vendors; stores with artificial mineral waters, kvas, and fruit soda took down their colorful street signs; and the cheerful chatter of the huckstresses peddling Rennet apples and Bartlett pears died away. Moisture and tedium saturated the air and the people.

This angry weather abruptly interrupted the sweetly scented season of parks and walks along the river into the bosom of nature, where, in the quiet and deserted tangle of bushes, love-making can reach its natural culmination. Nature closed down its convenient shelters, but no rain was capable of dousing the flame that overcomes the human heart without regard not only for age but also for time, contrary to the hearts of other animals, who have a designated period when they are in the mood for love.

After some futile attempts to get into Zoska’s room, and a few rejected invitations to his own room, Stepan had to acknowledge the cinema as the only venue for his meetings with the girl, meetings that were hopeless, since his enthusiasm for art could not substitute for the disappointment of his desires. And this disappointment only further bolstered these desires, becoming for him a difficult trial by endurance. In the evening he now lost the

ability to fall asleep quickly, instead tossing and turning with eyes closed, and in the morning he awoke exhausted by his difficult dreams, where, it seems, his cheek began to swell interminably or his arm grew longer and longer and sometimes he was tortured by nightmares in which corpses would gather into a single mass and sway before him in the air, like bodies hanging from a gallows. He abandoned all his work and books; he continued giving his lessons at various enterprises as if they were a penance he could not escape. Each day he waited in agitation for the evening, longing for it, preparing for it, awakening to live in the evening, only to have it end in perpetual expectations and inconsequential dreams.

There were also, however, some victories. She agreed to call him by the informal, second-person pronoun, rather than the formal one, but she drew no conclusions from this. Furthermore, she was a smoker, and wore her hair cut short, but even these unmistakable—in his estimation—signs did not help him in anything. She expertly kept him at a distance, and only when he began to mope did she allow him to kiss her, which she never reciprocated.

“I love you,” he whispered with more passion than sincerity, leading her along the familiar path between the cinema and Gimnazia Passage.

“Ah,” sighed Zoska. “There is no such thing as love. All that is just something people invented.”

“If you don’t love me,” he asked, “why do you go out with me?”

“Because you’re paying for my ticket!” she replied in astonishment.

This answer offended him deeply, but he kept silent, since he had to acknowledge to himself that he was somewhat scared of her. She was fickle and wrapped up in strange, otherworldly whims. In a single evening she might want to fly in an airplane or fire a canon, or be a musician, a professor (any kind would do), sailor, or shepherd.

“Ah, I would like to be a shopkeeper,” she would say. “You sit in a store. ‘What would you like? Some pepper? Ten grams? One hundred?’ Lots of people would come by. And I would give candy to the children. I would like to be a child, a handsome curly-haired little boy. That would be so wonderful—to sit astride a stick and spur it on, ‘Whoa scout, whoa!’”

Skipping, she yanked on his hand. These endless whims exhausted her and sometimes, moodily silent for the whole evening, not having looked at or paid any attention to the boy, she would, on parting, take his hands and speak longingly, flustering Stepan with her quiet voice:

“Ah, divine one, we’re so stupid. We’re all stupid. You don’t understand anything.”

He really did refuse to understand anything at all, except the unfortunate fact that this delicate girl had cast a spell over him and tied him to her, occupying an indelible place in his life. Every evening at seven he set out from his home and stopped by a candy shop, where, after a week, he began to be greeted with a friendly smile. He, too, had grown so friendly with the shopkeeper that it would have felt uncomfortable not to buy a candy on any given day. Paying for his purchase, he would wistfully surmise:

“Indeed, why wouldn’t she go out with me? I take her to the cinema and buy her candy. I really am stupid. I really am divine, in fact—divinely dimwitted.”

A couple of times he tried to raise his own stature in her eyes, dropping hints about his involvement with literature, although he did not yet dare to speak openly about this to her. But these hints were so opaque that there was probably no way for her to understand them. Besides, she was mostly interested in newspapers and was always showing off her familiarity with the latest political news.

“Did you read the British diplomatic note this morning? It’s so long! And it begins so strangely: ‘Dear Sir, the Government of His Majesty ...’ How wonderful! To write such funny diplomatic correspondence.”

What did she really want, anyway? In vain he sought an answer to this question, stealing glances at her face, adorned with blonde curls under her flattened hat. It was strangely animated, every twitch of her soul immediately visible on it. It brightened and faded from unknown clouds that floated in her eyes, and in these eternal changes of mood he sensed first hope, when his eyes caught her affectionate glance—and then despair, when she became dour and descended into ill-omened silence. The boy would attempt to chase away her unprovoked gloom, telling her stories about his youthful adventures as a soldier and rebel, but she would get excited by something for a moment and then fall immediately back into her gloom, mumbling:

“Ah, all this is so boring. Wars are unnecessary. They were invented by people. Are you trying to tell me you were a hero? That’s nonsense.”

In moments like these he, too, was overcome with gloom, and the two of them walked together along the slippery streets, infinitely distant from each other but bound together by necessity, shuffling along in silence under the cloudy autumn sky. Once, in a fit of boredom, she threw her riding crop over a fence into someone’s yard, saying:

“I’ve grown weary of that—I hate it.”

Ten minutes later, she began to pine for it, and Stepan, angered by her fickleness, had to go into that yard and crawl in the mud searching with lit matches for her crop, waking all the dogs and disturbing the residents. Of course, he didn’t find it, and as he left the yard he felt such hatred for his torturers that he might have struck her with his fists.

That night he experienced a slave’s revolt. Turning on the electric lights, he saw, for the first time in a month, the terrible mess in his apartment. His meager furniture was covered in dust, and on the unswept floor there were revolting clumps of trash. Damp, cold air from outdoors was entering through an unsealed window, and gusts of wind rattled the window pane where the putty was loose and crumbling. In the corner, above the palm with its bent and yellowed leaves, a dark and moist spot was ominously widening. A heavy sadness overcame him, because this dilapidation was a visual reminder of the absurdity of his own life. The devastation in his heart had left its mark on his home as well. Sitting down at his table, where open books and

pieces of paper were randomly scattered, he recalled with the sorrow of a convict the vibrant days when he had enjoyed complete serenity in his work and his mind had greedily devoured an enormous meal of ideas. Where were those mornings, full of fresh and irrepressible energy? Where were those quiet evenings, when he fell asleep softly and sweetly, cradled by a feeling of harmony in his soul? They were gone and the paths to them were grown over. But why? He opened a few of his notebooks and examined some notes from his reading like a bankrupt man looking over his former accounts. He felt an autumn within himself, a cold rain and fog.

And what did he now have instead? Nothing but pain and humiliation. What had he become, except a woman's lackey, a plaything in the hands of a crazy girl. If, at least, he had gotten something for it. If he had at least gotten that real treasure, for which it is worth sacrificing oneself for a woman! And how ridiculous were all these candies and visits together to the cinema. Nothing but bourgeois philistinism, the nonsense of the intellectual class.

What's more, he had become poor. The honorarium for the story he had received from the Kharkiv journal had been frittered away a long time ago—the money disappeared without even leaving a trace approximately commensurate with its origins. His excessive expenditures mercilessly devoured his earnings from the language lessons, leaving only kopecks for his lunch and nothing at all for his dinner. His clothes were looking worse and worse, his socks were worn through, his underwear lacked buttons, and he was a month behind in his rent. Yes, this girl, completely useless and inconsequential, had ruined him not only spiritually, but materially as well, which was just as regrettable. Enough was enough. That's it. He's not going out with her again. Period. It's over.

He knew all too well that the best medicine for any anxiety was work, the pinnacle of human achievement. He felt its happiness with his entire being. He was ready to abandon himself completely to productive effort, but the problem was that some external concern was often tearing him away from this healthful activity. Most concerning was that this distraction would happen entirely unnoticed, as if he were, to his own shame, being blinded by trivial matters that were not only unworthy of his attention but entirely unworthy of even a fleeting thought. But there is wisdom in the saying that it is life's experiences that teach a person the wisdom to govern a lifetime of choices. Furthermore, it's important truly to learn from the experiences of others, particularly of the great ones who serve as examples of the true path and whose names have been inscribed in the honor roll of progress. Of course, you can't adopt their example uncritically. Schopenhauer, for example, liked to have women kiss his hands when they met him on the path to pessimism; Buddha, it is said, died from extreme caution; the moralist Rousseau, who wrote about children's upbringing, had an exaggerated interest in that part of his body on which his educators inflicted punishment; the wise Socrates expressed an unusual sympathy for his students, particularly for those who were handsome and well-built. Many other famous

persons, the heroes of their own nations and of mankind, had various and peculiar faults unworthy of themselves or of their high philosophy, but when this dirt—entirely unrelated to their genius, of course—was brushed off their persons, the remaining image offered a perfect example for unqualified emulation.

No idea occurs suddenly, the most trivial thought has such a complex pre-history in the backstage of consciousness that it requires a very patient researcher to analyze accurately the process of its development. Every thought is like a culinary dish served to us by our consciousness after being fried, one which we consume without knowing the cooks who prepared it, or the miners who dug out the coal on which it was cooked, or the shepherds who cared for the meat-giving animals, or the sowers who tossed into the earth the living seeds of the plants. And only because we know nothing more than fragments, pleasant surprises are indeed possible. One such surprise was Stepan's intention to write a screenplay, which arose in his head one morning, as he awoke and opened his eyes.

With the enthusiasm that was his characteristic trait, he contemplated this new project for a while and, getting up, was ready to bring it to fruition. Clearing his table of the books that had languished there for more than a month, he set off for the library, where, having escaped the late fine with a very sincere declaration about his grave illness, he collected the books on cinema that he needed. Two days were sufficient to gain a sure command of all the principles of constructing a film script—not necessarily a very complicated task. His practical experience of the cinema offered all the appropriate illustrations, and he happily assured himself that nothing in the world passes without some utility—even an infatuation with a girl could produce a variety of by-products, just as the coking of coal results in naphthalene, phenol, benzene, ethanol, ammonia, and various kinds of paint.

Then he carefully constructed an outline for a dramatic film epic about the civil war. It was in six acts with a prologue, and everything was handled appropriately: 1) Social conflict; 2) A love story between the worker/hero and a woman from the enemy side; 3) A beautiful woman from the proletarian camp who saves the hero from sudden death and wins over his tender feelings; 4) Fire and smoke; 5) Victory for the honorable ones—and, of course, a number of smaller matters that do not obscure the significance of the preceding ones. There were comic elements in the drama, too: for example, the character of the *kurkul*, that slouch of a rich farmer, who experienced one difficulty after another in the screenplay and whose failures made the author laugh. He worked on the screenplay for a week, putting all his talents into this simple scheme, giving it a tragic coloring and twisting up the story line to make it interesting. He read over his creation several times, marveling at the compactness of his own construction, and after making a final clean copy, sent it off to the All-Ukrainian Film Administration, VUFKU.

After this he immediately freshened up his suit, polished his shoes,

cleaned his galoshes, threw on his overcoat, and set off for Ginnazia Passage. When Zoska appeared before him, he passionately squeezed her hand and said:

“Zoska, I love you so much!”

“Where have you been, divine one? I missed you,” she answered, pulling back her hand.

“Work, Zoska—it’s that damn work.”

He had a brilliant plan. As he was finishing work on his screenplay, he came to the realization that the issue in their relationship was a matter of location. Indeed, as she herself said, she lived in a single room with her parents, and it would be sufficient for just one of them to be present to completely spoil that room. The second point was his conviction that no self-respecting girl would ever go to a boy’s apartment on her own: that wasn’t proper. The third point was the wet autumn weather. There was a fourth point and, fortunately, he remembered this one precisely from all those novels he had read. Damn it, the solution would be found in the European approach.

“Zoska, I’m hungry. Let’s go for dinner,” he said.

“I’m hungry too,” she admitted. “But we never go out for dinner.”

He lowered his voice.

“Shall we dine in a private room?”

She clapped her hands in joy:

“How lovely, a private room!”

They turned into the first dive they found where one sign, among others, announced “family rooms,” which, as Stepan immediately deduced, did not differ in any significant aspect from what he had in mind. They climbed down a narrow staircase into the basement. She was laughing at the adventure, curious and excited. He was self-conscious, anxious about the potential consequences and secretly embarrassed by every step he was taking. When they reached the landing at the bottom they could see through an open curtain the entrance to a general dining room where music was playing and, directly ahead, a dark door. When a figure appeared before them with a napkin over his arm and an expressionless, blank face, Stepan felt a wave of such embarrassment that before he could put together his thoughts and words Zoska spoke up, calmly and naturally, like someone who had often visited such premises:

“A private room, if you please.”

The figure silently bowed and led the pair through the dark door down a low corridor whose moisture and mold reminded the boy of the near and far caves of the Lavra monastery. He shuddered from the oppressively stale air, a strangely common feature of alcoves of worship and debauchery. Letting go of Zoska’s hand, he kept to the center of the corridor and lowered his head to avoid accidentally touching the ceiling or the walls, which, he thought, were covered with layers of slime and mold. But the figure soon stopped and, turning a switch in an opening on the right, illuminated the space and

welcomed them:

“Here you are!”

Stepan now noticed four doors opening onto this corridor, as well as a small grated window, without glass, that likely faced the wall of the adjacent building, since it was as black as a missing eye and no air could be felt coming through it. The corridor curved in a horseshoe shape, which explained why the music made its way down here in a whisper, like a distant sound echoing into the deep cavern of an abandoned, humid mine shaft.

Zoska had already entered the chamber when Stepan warily crossed the threshold. The first thing he noticed were the walls, once covered with wallpaper that had now separated from the wall and hung in clumps with patches where it was completely torn off, revealing the gray plaster underneath. The design on the wallpaper had long since disappeared beneath the dust and grime, untouched and now uncleanable, which itself had formed strange splotchy patterns, darkening in the corners from the moisture and cobwebs. There were no windows. On the right by the wall stood a wide canvas sofa, mildewed and faded, sagging and lumpy, all wrinkled and uneven, covered in the muck of human sweat and secretions as markers of its prolonged and diligent use. Above this principal object in the room, the focal point of the desires of the souls who came here, hung an oil painting depicting a group of transported convicts feeding pigeons through the grates of their railcar. A second painting, in a similarly cracked gilded frame, which hung across from the door and above the table, cheered the eye with a depiction of a girl with a kitten on a verandah adorned with roses. Everything here stank of cigarette butts, stale vomit, spilled wine, and sweat. The odors had nowhere to escape, and hung in the air of the chamber and the corridor, penetrating the stone and brick of the walls, settling in smudges of dust-covered moisture.

Stepan sat down at the table without removing his coat. Revulsion was brewing within him, and the beautiful plan to solve the problem of location no longer appealed to him. Zoska, on the other hand, was enchanted. To her, everything seemed unusual and magical. She examined the paintings, tried the sofa with her foot to see if it was soft, peered out into the corridor, extinguished and turned on the light, and came to a conclusion:

“It’s very pleasant here.”

“What’s the matter with you, Zoska?” the boy uttered in surprise.

“I would love to live here forever.”

The figure appeared again with the menu. Dinner was ordered and the guests took off their coats. From the corridor there suddenly came the sound of the eager footsteps of several pairs of legs, and the adjacent chamber filled with the cries and laughter of a rowdy company of bass and soprano voices. Zoska threw her cigarette to the floor.

“They’re having fun,” she said.

“We’ll have fun too,” answered Stepan.

Indeed, the first glass of wine immediately improved his spirits. An unfamiliar tipsiness sweetly clouded the mind, he felt a warmth in his chest

and a lethargy in his shoulders. What was there to be ashamed of? He had, after all, written a collection of very fine stories and a screenplay in six acts with a prologue.

“Zoska,” he asked, “who am I?”

“A bum,” she answered.

He laughed loudly and turned to the breaded cutlet, which was in no way inferior to a fried shoe sole.

Now his eyes explored the room with the gaze of a merciful judge who understands human weaknesses and knows how to forgive them. The fact that he was sitting here drinking wine and chewing a cutlet made him feel happy, and in this he saw great progress, which excited him.

Suddenly, above the yells and guffaws from the adjoining room, they heard the raspy sounds of an old piano.

“A waltz,” cried the girl. “Do you dance?”

“No,” he answered, pouring wine for the girl and for himself.

“You must learn.”

He sat down beside her with a glass in his hands.

“Zoska, let’s drink to our love.”

She laughed giddily.

“To love, divine one.”

A moment later, they were seated on that sofa and the boy was embracing her and whispering:

“Zoska, be mine! My love, my sweetheart, be mine.”

“What do you mean—yours?” she asked.

He was momentarily nonplused, then murmured:

“I’ll show you.”

“Show me,” she agreed.

Befuddled by her consent, by the wine, and by the howl of the cracked piano behind the wall, choking on the prospect of the coming fulfillment of what had gnawed at him and angered him, the boy resolutely took her in his arms. But the girl instantly squirmed out of his grasp and curled up in a corner of the sofa.

“It’s filthy here!” she cried.

The cry brought him up short and he bent over in an uncomfortable pose, leaning with his arms on the canvas cushion. Wilting in shame and weakness, he slid to the floor on his knees and fell with his head at her feet.

“Forgive me, Zoska—forgive me,” he rambled, lacking the courage to raise his head.

She wrapped her thin arms around his neck and, leaning over, silently kissed him on the lips.

“More, more,” he whispered, swooning, blinded by the meeting of their lips, by the touch of her curls on his face, and from the joyful loss of sensation that swept over him with every kiss.

Later, they sat down side by side, cuddling and holding hands.

“You’re nice,” said Zoska.

“You’re outstanding,” he said.

In an outburst of unstoppable love, he covered her neck, her hands, her fingers with passionate kisses. He gazed meekly into her eyes, he gratefully put his head on her breast, and he stroked her curly hair, animated by his newfound happiness.

“I look just like that girl,” said Zoska, pointing to the painting. “I’d love to have a kitten and a porch covered with roses.”

And they laughed like children on a sunny day.

Since Stepan was not yet so cultured as to summon the waiter by tapping a knife against a glass, he stepped out into the corridor to call him. While there, he glanced into the open door of the adjacent chamber, where there was so much laughing and music.

He was surprised to see a familiar male face there, smiling senselessly and drunk. He taxed his memory and recalled what he would rather have forgotten for all time: the kitchen, a shameful conversation, a fight, and then his flight from the house. It was Maksym, Tamara Vasylyvna Hnida’s son. The son of his former lover, Musinka. He had grown a moustache, which made it difficult to recognize him right away. On his knees he was rocking a very fat woman whose skirt was pulled up, while he himself was barely visible behind her wide shoulders. The boy instinctively drew back and pressed himself against the wall to avoid being seen. He was overcome by a terrible disgust over this event from the past, which he had forgotten but it hung over him nevertheless—it was his, it would be with him forever. At that moment it seemed to the boy that the heartless past, all his sins and errors, the slings and arrows of bygone times, would remain in his soul forever like a worm that gnaws at the roots of all other longings. He now felt the overbearing, eternal immutability and irremediability of his past actions, even thoughts and desires that lay the foundations of the future, hiding within themselves potential earthquakes.

In the narrow passage before him other men and women were circling about, and one of them, stumbling along, closed the door.

Having paid the bill, Stepan grabbed Zoska by the hand and whispered in terror:

“Let’s get out of here!”

She pressed against him and said wistfully:

“But I really like it here.”

Nevertheless he quickly led her out onto the street, where the autumn gloom was deepened by a sharp wind and cold drops of mist.

IV

The money problem was growing ever more serious. From his cap to his galoshes, he was facing bankruptcy in his entire wardrobe, which, having served him for half a year, was showing signs of a catastrophic, although quite natural, decline that could no longer be disguised with meticulous cleaning. The ritual of getting dressed, once so pleasant for him, now became a source of suffering, since morning, more than any other time of the day, clearly revealed the ruinous state of his underwear, the complete disintegration of his shoes, and the ugly shine of the elbows of his jacket, a sure sign of an imminent tear.

The first months of Kyiv's sloppy winter had begun, and it was very uncomfortable to leave the room unheated, even though he had sealed the window very carefully and precisely, not passing over even the smallest of gaps. The cold air, it seemed, came directly through the walls, and the boy woke up early most mornings shivering, even though he had put everything he had on top of his well-used military blanket, even his pillow, which he put over his feet, resting his head on a couple of statistics textbooks that he covered with leafy twigs. The poverty of his dwelling and possessions wore him down and sapped his energy. On those evenings when he wasn't going to the cinema with Zoska, he would lie down on his bed in an attempt to preserve some warmth and comfort himself with the hope that he would come up with an idea for a story. In fact, however, he just lay there, tired and miserable, often nodding off in his clothes, only to awake suddenly at night with a gnawing at his heart.

One morning, having downed a cup of hot tea and half a pound of coarse wheat bread at the communal cafeteria, the boy sat down at his table, found a pencil among the papers, sharpened it, and began to consider the various ways he might improve his financial status—which is to say, his physical and moral condition—since, quite understandably, he blamed his psychic ennui, at least in part, on the decline of his cash resources. The first step was to assess his needs, the expense side of his budget ledger. First there was Zoska. Considering all the circumstances, the boy determined that allocating less than ten karbovanets per week for her was simply impossible. Repressing his feelings and secretly regretting that he had started off with cinema—undeniably an expensive place to take her and, by its very nature, not significantly better than other places—he nevertheless acknowledged to himself that changing the routine would be shameful, as would be any interruption in the candies he still bought her. He was powerless in this regard, conceding with disappointment that after the incident with the private room and the sudden burst of intimacy, he was bound to this girl ever more firmly. Abandoning her now was far more complicated than it would have been back when their relationship did not go beyond simple acquaintance.

He himself understood that a new feeling had emerged within him,

something deeper and more poisonous than desire, something with an aftertaste of obligation and significance. On the other hand, his stubborn pride would not allow him to abandon an unfinished enterprise, and a costly one at that, not only in terms of financial losses, which had their own value, of course, but in psychic losses as well—the devastation in the soul, which would have surely frightened him if he had felt any weaker and had a better understanding of the value of human energy, whose wasteful expenditure is one of the unique privileges of the young. In any case, he had invested too much capital into this enterprise to renounce the legitimate earnings. Sometimes sullen, sometimes happy, he went on making his visits to Gimnazia Passage, which had become the focal point of his life, his thoughts, and his displeasure. In the kisses he had begun to receive he could sometimes sense the strange warmth of the first one that had blossomed in the filth of the tavern, the secret meeting of lips that expands the limits of a being in the highest and most profound self-realization, and with its powerful magic pushes that being to search for further intoxication in creativity, in work, in learning, and in struggle.

Often he told himself that he loved her very powerfully, as he had never loved before, and he took joy in uncovering this strong feeling within himself. At other times he was annoyed that this feeling was turning him away from the single goal whose distant echo filled his dreams. What surprised him most was that the desire to overpower Zoska had somehow faded, and he saw a certain danger in this. But for the most part he took a tolerant view of the girl's presence in his heart, somehow convinced that it was perfectly natural and inescapable for a young man to be in love.

So, considering that his usual income from the lessons was 18 karbovanets a week, that left 8 karbovanets to cover food and rent. It was senseless to think that any part of that could be spared for firewood or clothing. Calculating what it would take to fix up his external appearance, the boy arrived at a figure of 85 karbovanets at a minimum, which is to say that he drew up a budget with a deficit of at least 100 karbovanets.

Thus, he decided to visit the offices of the Kyiv journal that had printed his stories, since, he figured, they owed him a royalty payment. Why hadn't he gone before—only out of embarrassment. He was ashamed to appear anywhere where people would recognize him as an author, let alone where they might see him collecting money. The inspiration that he had put into his stories was entirely incompatible and unrelated to anything connected with money. It was one thing to get money in the mail—that felt like a present—but it was entirely different to get them in person as a payment for work. However, his actual needs—as is their wont—proved stronger than his benevolent meditations: they helped throw his cap on his head and his coat on his shoulders, pushing him out the door to the editorial offices located in a wing of the State Publishing House of Ukraine.

What a surprise! The editorial office of the journal was located in the same office that he had run through in his field jacket and boots, chasing his

fortune just after his arrival in the city. He recognized it immediately—the same bookcase, the same black typewriter, the wooden sofa, and on it a couple of young fellows whom he charitably took to be his potential colleagues. They were smoking, chatting, and laughing, not very loud so as to avoid disturbing the work of this institution. He felt ashamed of his earlier self, for his incredible naiveté and self-effacement, and a thousand small recollections, like an album of old photographs, entered his consciousness and fostered a feeling of embarrassed but nevertheless sweet-tasting pride.

He approached the desk and spoke softly, with humility. He was asked to sit down. Yes, he is owed a payment: 70 karbovanets and change. But why hadn't he shown up for so long? Stepan blurted out the first lie he could think of—he'd been sick. And what disease did he have? And so he had to answer this and answer that and answer something else—and what was he doing now? and how was he managing? and when had he started writing? He spoke very vaguely, lying at every step and blushing at every word.

“And I hope you've brought us a few more stories,” continued the secretary with a friendly smile.

“No, I don't have any, I haven't finished yet,” answered Stepan. He had not anticipated such an inquisition and was enduring it as if it were a form of torture. But he couldn't very well just push the money into his pocket and take off. That wouldn't be polite.

Then the secretary introduced him to the young fellows on the sofa. It turned out they were, indeed, all writers, except for one, who was only a courier but whose appearance did not distinguish him from them in any way. Stepan even knew some of them from their writing—these frightened him the most. But from the interest his name elicited among them, Stepan realized his stories had not passed by unnoticed. In the mockingly friendly looks he received from his new acquaintances he observed something like the glint of envy, or a challenge to a duel, which in the literary arena is far more brutal than French wrestling or English boxing.

Here he was subjected to a new round of questions. Would he be submitting a volume of collected stories? No, are you kidding, that's not in the works! So what was he writing? Stories! Stories about what? He couldn't answer this right away, since he wasn't writing anything and wasn't even thinking about writing. But he couldn't admit to being completely idle—that would be shameful. And then someone threw in a sarcastic comment:

“Don't worry, we won't steal your ideas!”

Then Stepan announced:

“I'm writing a story about ... people.”

Everyone laughed but he was satisfied with his answer, which didn't commit him to anything in particular.

The secretary asked Stepan to come again and to submit more stories. Since he did not strike the others as a particularly strong personality, everyone liked him. A little rough around the edges, but on the whole a decent fellow. Maybe he'll even turn into something someday, since his

stories, though certainly in need of a little more polish, with many technical errors, some even quite glaring, and also quite mannered—still raw, drawn out, unfocused, confused, completely terrible in some places, weak in imagery, poor in imagination, and uncertain in their lyric tonality—were nevertheless quite original and fresh, offering promise of something better in the future.

That's how the other writers evaluated his work. Then an argument emerged over the question of whose influence he was writing under and whom he was imitating, since otherwise he would have been original and that was simply unacceptable. Among Ukrainians, Kotsiubynsky and his "Vin ide" (He's coming) was mentioned, as well as Franko and his *Boa constrictor*. Then came the tests on familiarity with foreign literatures, and soon there was a whole bouquet of names of various scents. Someone even made a pitch for Selma Lagerlöf, whose stories he had read just yesterday.

No doubt the boy would have been pleased to hear how many previous authors he was judged to be following—and certainly would have been frightened by the number he was deemed to be imitating—if he had not already left the building, carrying in his pocket the money that he regarded as the profit of a brazen fraud. How exactly had he earned this money? Could he really imagine that he might become a writer, like those fellows sitting on the sofa? Could he ever achieve such a level of careless ease, naturalness, self-confidence, and eloquence? No, that was plainly impossible. No, he was not a suitable candidate to become an author.

"I simply will not write," he thought, but secretly he felt that this renunciation was merely an attempt to appear even grander in his own eyes, since he would, after all, continue writing, writing well, much better than all these coxcombs.

The payment was immediately converted into a broadcloth suit, though not of the highest quality, into which Stepan changed before delivering his next lesson. On his way home after dinner he bought 5 poods of firewood. While a grimy worker in ragged clothes hauled the wood on a dolly to his apartment, Stepan decided he would spend this evening in a fully heated home mending his wardrobe. This perfectly suited the mood of quiet contemplation that had washed over him after his visit to the journal's editorial office.

Gathering the articles of his wardrobe that needed attention, preparing a needle, thread, and some buttons, ripping his most tattered shirt into strips for patches, he laid out all these materials in front of the stove and set about lighting the fire. Anticipating the warmth that every particle of his skin longed for, he gazed with excitement as the flames spread, their tongues embraced, and the smoke swirled. Evening was falling, predictably moist and fluffy with clouds, gray, blustery. The boy didn't light the lamp, and in the room's twilight the erupting flames made his shadow lengthen and narrow like the bone of a giant hand.

Spreading a blanket on the floor, he sat down and began to sew. But the

languor from the warmth inflaming his face and chest soon poured into his fingers, and the needle fell to the floor. He didn't trouble himself to pick it up but stretched out face down in deep fatigue with his elbows on the floor, and put his head in his hands. The fire was now directly before him, vibrant, unsettled, magical. It danced before his eyes with that flaming, sinuous beauty that still conveys the power of the first and unsurpassed god. Fire! He knew it well, because it had marked entire eras of his life. Was it not these flames that had warmed him while grazing the herd on the fields as a child, when the nighttime shadows were dense with ghosts and goblins? Was it not into a fire that he directed his eyes as a young rebel resting after bloody events at the forest's edge, where the tree trunks seemed to be a party of enemy scouts? And now, in new battles, he was observing this flowing warmth on an autumn night in this city, still unknown, unconquered, where perhaps lay hidden even greater dangers than those of a child's imagination or an armed enemy. But, in answer to them, an internal fire burned within him, an indomitable life force that could not be extinguished until the last breath was drawn, the magic lantern of human aspiration that fills the screen with dramatic heights and leaves the swampy lowlands in the shadows, its prophetic voice appealing for ever more and more quests to find the golden, albeit ovine, fleece.

At that moment, caressed by his memories and the warmth of the fire, he felt the profound unity of his life experiences, happily recognizing himself in childhood, youth, adolescence, and as a young man. This recognition awakened in his soul a numb and forgotten organ, an abandoned space where life had already gathered its harvest, and this organ, this space, was spreading far beyond its bounds, further than memory could reach, reaching with its blind fingers into the infinite space of eternity. These reaching fingers set off a trembling in him—he saw before him all the more clearly another eternity, the sister of the one from which he had emerged: the one he, eventually, must enter. In this magical state of excitement and longing, refusing to think or know, forgetting yesterday and tomorrow, the boy drifted off into a boundless dreamscape, where nothing was accomplished or even possible, where images dissolved in the fading glow of the dying embers.

Abandoning the sewing by the stove, he wearily fell into his bed, full of sorrow and thirst.

The next day Stepan decided to visit the Bureau of Instructors to see if he could get another group in some institution, since the money he had gotten for his stories was simply not sufficient for the plan he had developed. After all, he still had some leisure time in his schedule, which could best be devoted to the cause of coupling the city and the village both on the national and the personal levels. Oh, this coupling! He often thought about it, considering the difficulties of its attainment, even for himself. He saw the city as a powerful center of gravity, around which orbited villages, like tiny planets, its eternal satellites. The pieces of these satellites that fell into the fiery atmosphere of this sun must adapt to the new conditions of pressure and climate. He

experienced this painful process almost subconsciously, absorbed by a blind desire to rise higher and excited like a person who has breathed in oxygen, like a drunk who stops noticing dirt and the lesions on his skin. For the speed and noise of a city affect a person far more than the gentleness of scenic views in the bosom of nature and an uncontrolled interplay of natural forces—forces summoned here to build a new nature, artificial and therefore more refined.

Stepan was confident he would be given another group, since he had acquired a reputation as a very good instructor, following the exemplary results of an official state evaluation of his teaching. Indeed, the administrator of the Bureau of Instructors greeted him very graciously and expressed his deep satisfaction at his elegant attire.

“You understand,” he said, “that until Ukrainians learn how to dress properly, they will never constitute a true nation. And that requires good taste.”

“And money,” added Stepan.

“A person with good taste never lacks money,” noted the administrator.

As for assignments, the only available openings were evening classes for upper-level employees of the Leatherworkers’ Collective. Although upper-level employees, of course, have linguistic preferences that are as firm as their salaries, Stepan didn’t hesitate and accepted the task of teaching them.

On the appointed day, fully armed with knowledge and experience, Stepan Radchenko appeared in the grand waiting room of the Leatherworkers’ Collective, which had been converted into a classroom. He organized his introductory lecture on a broad outline, beginning with a discussion of language in general, the factors that led to its appearance and development, the basic division of languages into agglutinative, analytic, and inflectional, the fate of Indo-European languages, particularly proto-Slavic, its varieties, and the foundations for these distinctions. He confidently and clearly led his listeners along, like Virgil leading Dante down through the concentric circles of Hell, each narrower than the previous, ever pointing toward the very center, where sat Beelzebub himself—the Ukrainian language.

Happily observing that he had caught the attention of his listeners, and sensing during his pauses their expectant anticipation of the next phrase—that anxious silence which is better than applause as a stimulus to eloquence—he turned his eyes to the auditorium, hoping to uncover in the faces of those present the future course of his efforts with this group. Suddenly, in the corner, he encountered a pair of eyes that were following him with scorn and derision, eyes whose gaze he found unpleasant, almost frightening. How could he have forgotten that Maksym was an accountant at the Leatherworkers’ Collective! Surely he would have turned down this assignment! And why did he have to run into him? This was a happenstance, of course, but a mysterious, unfortunate happenstance, like an intentional

attack, since his cheeks had suddenly turned red, as if they were again revealing a concealed but unexpunged insult.

While continuing his lecture, Stepan rehearsed the unpleasant memories which he could not repudiate. However repugnant they might be, they were still snippets of his life, deeply painful and deeply, particularly, his own. Why is it impossible to clean up one's past? Perhaps because the future, too, can't be fixed. This pessimistic thought kept weighing on him, while he energetically continued the lesson, but the moment he finished he felt fatigued from the lengthy strain on his voice and the secret tribulation. For a while longer he had to answer inquiries about textbooks, readers, notebooks, assignments, and all the doubly childish questions that came from these adults who had again become schoolchildren, so that when he finally left he was sorry that he would have to return. Oh, that Zoska! If it weren't for her, he wouldn't need so much money and thus would not have had to encounter the fellow who had slapped him. Indeed, that girl was just ruining his nerves! Walking along the deserted streets in the autumnal hush of the city, broken by the dull clatter of streetcars, the boy thought alternately about love and about insults to his honor, and although he considered both of these to be superstitions, he had to admit, nonetheless, that they were both exceptionally compelling.

While he was thus preoccupied, someone caught up with him and took him by the arm. In the feeble light of the streetlamps he recognized Maksym.

"Excuse me, honored teacher," he said, with an exaggerated bow, "I wanted to express my gratitude for your instruction."

"I haven't taught you anything yet," answered Stepan.

Maksym laughed.

"Precisely. I learned on my own, thanks to you."

They walked on for a while in silence, and suddenly Stepan detected the clear scent of alcohol from his companion.

"Are you drunk?" he asked.

"Are you sober?"

"Absolutely!"

"What a shame! As the Kyivan Chronicle tells us, 'The Rus' are happy in their cups!'"

And without further introduction, he slapped the boy on the back and told him, with the sincerity of a street urchin, how he drinks a great deal and often, that drinking was fun, that ladies prefer drunkards, expecting a higher payment—but, of course, they're wrong about that.

"And you say you haven't yet taught me anything!"

He said these words while pretending to be offended, but Stepan found such jokes distasteful.

"I am not the cause of that," he said gruffly.

"No? You don't say! I had a stamp collection. I gave presents to my mother."

Maksym laughed and added with conviction:

“Don’t believe the Josephs, who run away from women, sit behind their books, and love their mothers, but ... but their right hands are not clean.”

When he said this, a terrible revulsion to his presence overcame Stepan. This was the same feeling of visceral aversion that he had felt back when he saw him in the adjacent room of the tavern, but now enlarged and sharpened by the twilight, which compounded the strength of the reaction. Forgetting about the man beside him, Stepan thought about himself. Who needed this meeting? Sure, it was a natural event now, an accidental encounter following a previous acquaintance, but can’t the past be forgotten? Is every misfortune in life recorded in an indelible stain, a permanent brand, that can again and again renew the same pain that accompanied its flaming origin? Everything can be forgotten, he assured himself. But this forgetting was fickle, only surface deep, because even now, with his thoughts turning gloomy, he was experiencing a flood of memories about the harm he had caused others through his life. There were enough of these incidents, but they were always somehow unintentional, and he could not in any case accept any guilt for them. Why were they so unpleasant?

“Are you listening?” asked Maksym.

“I’m listening,” replied Stepan.

And the accountant resumed his story, or, more precisely, his rambling, which seemed completely otherworldly to the boy, since he had missed its beginning. Maksym was eagerly describing the comforts of his lifestyle, the frequent parties with girls whose attractions he was painting with drunken colorfulness. Abruptly, he cut short his recitation as if he suddenly remembered something and, changing his voice from that of a scoundrel to that of a secretive friend, he whispered to Stepan:

“Let’s go to the Lotto hall. A wonderful experience, you’ll see.”

“I’m on my way home,” said Stepan.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get there. It won’t run away. Come on, do this for me.”

And he sharply pulled the boy aside beneath an archway, where flashing letters blinked on and off one after another in a half circle, spelling out “Electronic LOTTO.” At the door of this establishment of urban amusements, Stepan was overcome with a dire premonition of the kind that arises suddenly and without cause, the weight of fear obstructing any efforts to clear the mind and think. After all, he really didn’t need to go in there with Maksym. Indeed, he needn’t go anywhere with him, but an insatiable curiosity overcame his revulsion and led him on.

Passing through a quiet corridor and past a silver-haired footman, they entered a large hall, flooded with light, where preoccupied men and women sat hunched over rows of tables, while ushers moved through the narrow alleys between the rows of seats, silently exchanging cards for the next round. Above this silence of intense expectation, like an oracle making sacred proclamations, like a chief justice delivering a verdict before a crowd of supplicants, maintaining regular pauses, emphasizing with metallic clarity

the monotonously similar words, which raised a quiet whisper of hope and disappointment, the barker sharply and without any emotion called out:

“Forty-one. Twenty. Thirty-four.”

And with every pronouncement the appropriate number lit up on a giant board along the back wall, weaving a chaotic pattern of illuminated dots.

Maksym stopped at the threshold beside a table where money was exchanged for chips, and Stepan looked at him questioningly, certain that the accountant wanted to try his luck, perhaps even at Stepan’s expense. But Maksym whispered:

“Over there, in the corner, on the right.”

The boy raised his eyes in the direction and saw by the table a swollen and drowsy woman, in a familiar blue dress that could barely hold back her bulging flesh. With lowered head, she was intently looking at her cards so he could not see her face, but from her posture and the hopeless and insensible concentration he understood that this table had become her only friend and family, that she had brought into this hall all the remnants of her desire.

“Is that her? It is!” he thought, sickened by the wreckage before him.

Suddenly, after another number was called, the bloated shadow that had once been Musinka jumped up and in a muffled voice, as if holding a fowl between her teeth, called out:

“I’ve got it! I win.”

“Twelve. A winner,” the barker announced without emotion.

And everywhere there was a buzz and commotion, as if the characters frozen in a fable had been awakened from their enchanted sleep by a magic word. The winning card was being verified.

“She always wins,” Maksym blurted out angrily.

Her thick and greedy voice, so different from the tender words spoken in the past, animated Stepan’s soul, as it had the audience in the hall. But there too, tranquility quickly returned, emotion subsided, as if all his recollections were again flooded by a magical dream. He felt himself free, distant, and superior. He turned and left the hall. Maksym didn’t catch up until they reached the entrance.

“I expect that you will allow me not to attend your lessons,” he said when they were out on the street.

His sober and sharp voice echoed with the hatred from the past.

“As you wish,” answered Stepan.

They bowed studiously to each other. Maksym left first, disappearing into the twilight just as he had appeared. For the boy, everything that had just happened immediately took on the quality of an illusion, a painful trick of the imagination. Forcing himself to understand what he had seen as reality and to give it careful consideration, he was frustrated by his inability to do so and angrily jumped on a streetcar, where he gloomily stared at the dark slabs of buildings which seemed to sail past the windows very close to the tram.

At home he realized he hadn’t had supper, but he did not want to go out again. Knowing that he wouldn’t find anything edible, he lazily searched his

drawers, then lit a cigarette and began thumbing through his notebooks. One page unexpectedly caught his attention. He opened it fully and read:

“Today I decided to start a diary. There are moments that need to be recorded. My stories have been published! I feel like yelling: ‘Published!’ And I see an open road ahead of me. I walk—no, I fly, I glide! I’m free, I’m warm, I’m happy. I kiss this day.”

He discarded his cigarette and was about to tear out the page, but then he took a pencil and scrawled one word in big black letters across the lines on the page: ‘Imbecile.’

V

Stepan Radchenko was growing ever more concerned about the fate of his stories. Enough time had passed for him to have received a positive response, but he had not heard anything at all from the editorial office. In his eyes, the stereotypical notice on the inside cover of every journal that the editors do not conduct correspondence concerning rejected manuscripts now acquired a disheartening significance. In these words he heard the funereal dirge of his pretentious hopes, which had suddenly seized him and cast him into a dark torrent, a strong current that crushed him and threatened to wash him up onto a deserted shore. Slowly, first as a bitter taste in his consciousness but then relentlessly gaining clarity every day, doubt crept into his heart.

Still unaware of the true cause of his despair, he already felt the bitter disappointment, the sour mood that pushes aside the true cause and grabs hold of anything at hand and highlights the trivial, thus justifying its own presence. He fell into a state of helplessness, and the secret forces of the soul, the true guardian angels of man, divinely blind and naive, quietly used any means to divert his attention away from the actual danger to substitute for it some other danger, be it even a multiple one, so long as it was less important, thus protecting him from a possible catastrophe. The instinct for self-preservation, so crude and brutal on the outside, ceaselessly conducted its devious work within, insistently demonstrating that he was troubled only by the minor discomforts of his unsettled situation, which was temporary and would soon pass.

He got the notion that the food in the People's Food Service cafeteria wasn't nutritious enough for him, so he switched over to a private dining hall. It seemed he didn't spend enough time outdoors, so he started taking walks between one and two in the afternoon, regardless of fog or precipitation. Having caught a cold with mild bronchitis, he became terribly alarmed about his health and carefully examined the mucus on his wet handkerchief, searching for signs of tubercular blood. Although he never found a single drop, nevertheless he felt a deep anxiety about his physical state, which he felt had been compromised. Feeling his biceps, he noticed a diminution in their former tone, accompanied by weakness and lethargy. And indeed, in the course of this painstaking research guided by a fervent desire to find signs of physical decay, his body softened and wilted, dutifully offering the desired evidence of a loss of energy. Then he was overtaken by sadness and an unspecified dissatisfaction.

He made a direct association between this state of exhaustion and his diminished emotional desire for Zoska. And indeed, the moments of sensual dreaming in the morning, when the entire body fills with a wild desire and yearns for all the women in the world, when arms stretch out to embrace them, when lips radiate a welcoming smile out to them and ears seem to hear

from them a heartfelt response, these moments of a morning's rebirth of energy, when the entire world rises in a passionate web of lovemaking—these moments of soundless communication between the sexes no longer visited him, no longer coursed through his veins in currents of excited blood. That's what he had come to! The horror! The shame! And if the list of possible diseases only frightened the boy, then the weakening of those bodily functions that he considered important stripped him of his self-respect and left a deep gash in his honor.

And so one day, while constructing the outline of his next lesson, he began to leaf through *Fata morgana*, selecting a passage he would work through with his students. Scanning the pages with pedagogical indifference, he unconsciously began to take interest and started examining various lines with greater attention. The mournful harmony of the images intrigued him. The words, illuminated by apprehension, uncovered for him the boundless panorama of the secret of their interconnections. Suddenly, like a swarm of active lighting bugs, they began to move on the page, leftwards toward the white margins, where they went out. He sat, mesmerized by the phosphorescent pages, whose sharp rays burned a painful mark on his downturned chest.

He had never read with such passion or experienced such deep immersion in his reading. In this book, not new to him, he found a new, intoxicating enchantment with the majesty of creativity, the power of its chisel, and the thickness of the paint distilled from its impulse. His eyelids trembled and his fingers fidgeted on the table. After finishing, he felt tired, the weariness of the thirsty who drink only to find their thirst grow, and the massive construction of the work, built in front of his eyes brick by brick, now toppled onto him. Bowing his head into his hands, he listened to the echo of the lines growing softer, dying out like the sound of a distant song. And from there, from that distant place, from the emptiness formed by the silence, a deathly chill blew into his soul.

"I can never, ever write anything like that," he whispered.

Now he recognized the absurdity of his ambitions. A writer indeed! Who was the sly one who had suggested this word to him? Where did he acquire that insane confidence that had tempted him for so long? Now he couldn't see any reason for confidence. Anyone can dream big, but only an idiot chases those dreams. A cossack riding a broomstick rather than a horse! A dope, a hopeless dope! And to trade an education and the Institute for this illusion, to cast aside years of hard work, carefully formulated plans, and obligations? Obligations to whom? To himself, at the very least!

Failing to understand how all of this could have happened, the boy anxiously reviewed all the missteps in his descent. Vyhorsky—there's who had led him astray, that's who sent his stories to the journals. And who asked him, after all? Damned seducer! A flim-flam man! And along with this anger there arose in him a warm gratitude to the severe critic who had chased him from his home without even hearing him out.

But, on the other hand, his stories had proven no worse than the stories of other writers. Some had already been published, though that didn't mean much. Anyone could write something good by accident, somehow once and not again. There was no shortage of such accidental names on magazine pages, appearing just once and never again. And maybe he would be one of those writers, maybe even a prolific one, whose works are forgotten right after they are read, whose works disappear without a trace, forming the immovable foundation on which true masters develop and grow. To become one of them you need to believe, to feel your creative strength, just as you do your physical strength. They don't fall into despair! But he was not going to serve as background for someone else's shining glory, no way! He recoiled from the thought that he might be the ladder on which others climbed to success.

Then he felt tired and pitied himself. Poor fellow! Why was he beating himself up? So he had made a mistake! OK—enthusiasm had gotten the better of him, but he was still young. That's so natural. And now it's over. What should he do now? Stepan got up and enlivened his benumbed hands. How long had he been sitting? An hour? Two? Slowly, he put on his coat and went out on the street.

November. Autumn was entering the period of age-related shortening, its days were numbered, its tears already shed in the face of the inevitable end. It became quiet and cold, tense but calm in the face of a snowy end, and the city's stony echoes seemed muffled in the emptiness of extermination. Feeling relief in the fresh air, happy to escape his room, where the walls smelled of his poisonous thoughts, Stepan pulled his hat down on his forehead and found himself walking to the Sinnyi Bazaar. He passed by it and walked out on to Velyka Pidvalna Street, stopping by the gates of Golden Gate Square, where the silent fountain towered over a pool of green rainwater. The walkways, covered with yellowed chestnut leaves, were lined with rows of lonely benches. No one was about. He yearned to go in and walk along the paths, to rustle the leaves with his footsteps. Over there, in the corner, he had once torn up his short story, but his memory of that was now tender and precious.

He trudged on in peaceful melancholy, desiring to go to sleep. But as he approached the Volodymyr Cathedral, a strange unrest awoke in him. The Institute was just down the street—should he stop in? What for? A moment later this sudden urge had turned into an unquenchable need. With passionate curiosity, as if he were about to peek at something forbidden, he approached the wide doors of the Institute. The doors were on strong springs and hard to open, and the effort he made to open them reminded him of the countless times each day he had done so in the past.

In contrast to the outdoors, the long corridors seemed dark and stale, with a gray mass of people and the hum of their voices coursing back and forth and up and down the stairs, like living blood coursing through the veins of the building. Stepan felt the peace and chill of alienation. He pulled his hat

down even further to avoid recognition and walked up to the glass doors of the auditorium. A class was in session. He looked around the benches, densely packed with students, and at the lecturer, whom he knew well. He observed familiar gestures of attention, indifference, incomprehension. But there was no anxiety or torment, and the regret that had troubled him just a moment earlier withered from the sense of estrangement he now felt from this setting he had once found so appealing. Surprised, the boy stepped back and looked around with the eye of a wanderer who has returned after a long trip to find that nothing of what he had left remained there, everything had changed and was so different from what he remembered that this deformed reality was not even worthy of regret. Having come in contact with what had been abandoned, he understood that there was no way back to it, that he was forevermore estranged from these walls and that these sounds would never call out to him, never reawaken his interest.

He walked out with the same dreary anxiety that he had felt when he first set foot in the city. The square seemed narrower, the buildings heavier and more severe, the low autumn sky an endless bowed stretch of cobblestones. Suddenly he realized that beyond the first row of buildings were countless others on the hills and in the valleys, countless glum settlements scattered in a giant ring, with each one hiding a surprise and a threat. He discerned the tangled web of streets where you can wander for hours and days through the same crisscrossed paths, wander until you fall in exhaustion and with tears in your eyes on the naked stones that define the horizon with their jagged teeth. He felt those invisible walls that had arisen for him at the edge of the steppe, and he bowed his defeated gaze, begging for peace. He was tired.

In the evening, when Zoska came out to him, he grabbed her by the hand and began to silently kiss her. She was astounded.

“What’s the matter with you, divine one?”

“Zoska,” he said. “You’re my one and only, there’s no one else.”

She sighed.

“You’re such a liar!”

“There’s no one else,” he continued. “No family, no friends. I’m alone in the whole world. And today I feel as if this were my first day here. It’s so difficult.”

“It’s difficult for him,” she mused gently.

“Don’t laugh,” he replied worriedly. “You don’t know what I’m thinking or how I’m suffering.”

“He’s suffering!”

The boy stopped and whispered in despair:

“I can’t go on like this anymore! What’s the point? Is this love? I’m sick of the cinema. The films make me sick. I want to be with you. The two of us, alone. Don’t worry, I won’t do anything to you,” he added bitterly. “I don’t need that. I love you anyway. You don’t understand me, you don’t know me at all. This is silly, this way we are. It would be better for me if we were

together, just for an hour, just you and me. I want to sit down beside you and tell you everything.”

“And what’s that to me?” she cried out.

“Don’t say that—that’s not how you think,” he pleaded. “I can’t joke around right now. This is serious. Do you understand? Serious! Zoska, think of something, because I can’t think at all. Think quickly.”

Zoska thought for a moment and then cried, “I’ve got it!”

“Let’s hear it.”

She briefly laid out her cunning plan. She had a girlfriend who worked in the SoRobKop, the Union of Workers’ and Peasants’ Cooperatives. Her room was unused until four o’clock! You understand? Let’s assume that Zoska would like to take the university entrance exams but there’s no room in her apartment to study with a tutor.

“Zoska,” he cried exuberantly. “You’re extraordinary. I’d like to kiss you.”

“Really?”

Then she added secretively:

“Let’s go to Shevchenko park—it’s dark there, we can kiss.”

He returned home completely calm. He was thrilled with Zoska’s plan. The notion of daylight meetings with a girl so dear to his heart, meetings that would have a secretive character, in someone else’s apartment, struck him as a very urban romanticism. The mere thought of such trysts boosted his self-respect and floated above all his other concerns like a sweet song.

In such moments of psychic comfort he often felt the need to clean up at home, take out the trash that usually accumulated in the corner, attend to his linens, like any respectable homeowner. When neatness was on his mind, the slightest disorder in his surroundings irritated him. When he had finished tidying up, he felt great joy. He arranged the books in neat piles, wiped down the inkwell, covered the table with a clean white sheet of paper, where, after his commendable efforts, he sat down to rest.

He figured thus: the young are characteristically ambitious, they dream of extraordinary accomplishments and fame, although only one among thousands ever achieves that. But if you revealed to such a young person his eventual fate, he would stop trying, throw everything to the dogs, and settle into the life of a bum. So, it turns out, deceptions are necessary. But it is sufficient to understand their nature—as, for example, he does—for them to stop being troublesome.

He felt the wisdom of his thoughts and was satisfied. He must live just as others do. A simple, normal life—develop friends and visit them, go out for entertainment, read newspapers and translated novels. What else does he need? All in all, compared to others, he was pretty well situated. His lessons gave him a decent income without too much effort. Ukrainization would continue for, say, three more years—then he’d go get a job. No, wait! He would certainly find a job as a teacher here, in the city—that would be the simplest. He just needed to expand and deepen his knowledge of the

language, to become a real expert. He was smoking now and in the clouds of smoke he could readily see his future. What could be simpler!

Two days later, at noon, Stepan had his first urban meeting with Zoska. Entering the small room, filled with the arousing scents of a woman's apartment—powder and perfume—he felt uneasy. Then, after a few breaths of this intoxicating air, he felt light and exceptionally ardent. Surveying the place he also saw Zoska, whose face and figure were entirely hidden by the newspaper she was reading, as if she had not heard him enter. Only two legs dressed in fine stockings from the knees down hung motionless, sticking out from under the hem of a dark dress.

"Miss Zoska," he began jokingly in a serious bass. "Let's start the lesson."

She was silent. Stepan came forward as if sneaking up to her and tore the newspaper out of her hands.

"Careful!" she cried out.

He stopped for a moment, having long not seen her undressed—that is, in just a dress, without a coat and hat.

"What are you gawking at?" she asked. "Where are the books?"

He suddenly bent down and embraced her knees.

"Zoska, is it you?" he whispered. "Are you mine, Zoska?"

Later, Zoska forlornly said:

"You taught me very quickly, divine one."

He was delighted to have discovered that his fears about the performance of the organism were unfounded. He wanted to joke around.

"What's there to study here?"

"You have spoiled me," she said. "Now I'm spoiled."

"It's your own fault," he said. "What was the point of covering yourself up with the newspaper?"

Zoska waved her hand.

"In any case, you wanted to tell me something."

"Did I?"

"You said that you wanted to sit down beside me and tell me something."

He remembered.

"That was nothing. If you want, I'll tell you."

He sat down and started talking.

"It's silly. Last year I was a student."

"I know," said Zoska.

"I guess I told you. And I foolishly began to write stories."

"I know."

"How do you know that?" Stepan asked, surprised.

"Because you read one at the Institute, at the stage event."

"Were you actually there?"

"I even threw you a flower, but you didn't pick it up."

"That was you? My love!"

He embraced her and drowned the rest of his story in kisses.

In parting with Zoska that day he thought, "Fate itself brought us together. That is wonderful."

Their lessons were strictly arranged: twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays. In addition, by separate agreement, they were to go to the cinema, to shows, and to the theater.

Returning home from their meeting, he found an unusual looking envelope waiting for him. Inside he read that his collection of stories was accepted for publication, had passed Glavlit approval, and that an honorarium of 350 karbovanets was being offered. A contract requiring signature was also included.

Stepan read it over and threw it on the table. He had decided to rid himself of this business of being a writer, but it would not let him go.

"This nuisance again," he thought.

VI

Literary life begins when the quantity of people with the talent to talk continually about literature reaches a minimum sufficiency. Actually, these endless conversations are not even about literature as a product of the human desire for understanding: they don't discuss its finest examples, and they don't express the reader's satisfaction or admiration. Instead, they are about trivial details, the mechanics of creativity, its professional side, which, like all things professional, is boring and monotonous.

Literature consists of creativity, and literary life consists of the conversations of literary figures. And through their words, every fact from the life of a writer magically becomes a literary fact, any anecdote about him becomes a literary anecdote; his galoshes become literary galoshes, since, of course, all the parts of his body have the magical quality of endowing anything they touch with literary value. Legends about nearly-divine singers who through their songs earned the favor of despots and princesses, as well as treasure—in short, a nice honorarium—are nowhere more prevalent than in the subconsciousness of writers who would, without any remorse, scorch the hearts of all humanity with their words. And it doesn't matter that through the functioning of libraries, these hearts become more fire-resistant all the time; writers secretly and stubbornly wallow in the prospect of their own exceptionality, the uniqueness of their talent, the originality of their works, nourishing with past experience the roots of their creative desire. And no matter how boring and nauseating this literary life may be, this unwinding of the ribbon of literary news—who is writing what, who is thinking of writing what, who said what about whom, who is about to praise or attack whom, who is going where for the holidays, and who makes how much—it is precisely from this blather that there arises the inherent spirit of authentic, non-commercial literature, the spirit of hidden competition. And within the perimeter laid out by the unrolling of this ribbon lies the place where literary soldiers gather to smoke the peace pipe before the next assault.

The young writer Stepan Radchenko began to take part in this literary life, visiting almost daily the editorial offices of the journal, where at twelve o'clock the bench and chairs were full of well-known, somewhat-known, and not-at-all-known literary figures. After spending an hour or two in their company, he would depart completely satisfied, although he had kept silent throughout, since he did not have the necessary store of trivial knowledge and was too much of a novice to have the right to speak. It's a well-known truth that non-authoritative ideas, no matter how insightful, evoke suspicion, while from the lips of the famous, even foolish utterances earn praise. So here, as everywhere else, the right to command attention was earned by the quality of one's work or, at least, by persistent attendance. And Stepan was happy to serve out his literary apprenticeship.

After all, he figured, if it turns out that I am fated to be a writer, if I have

instinctively already made so many steps in that direction that it would be shameful to stop, then I may as well keep going, and make connections with those others with whom I am destined to act—to show myself among them, remind them of my existence, to weave myself into the circle of literary friendships like a regular writer. At first he felt annoyed and uncomfortable in this new circle of acquaintances, because no one paid any attention to him, because there weren't enough chairs for him to have one. He was frightened by his inability to follow the conversations he overheard. But as his attendance continued, he quickly became familiar with the personal accomplishments of the people he met there, accomplishments often quite small and disproportionate to the pretentiousness of their behavior, and so he happily recognized that he was certainly no lesser a literary figure than they were. Now he waited impatiently for the publication of his collection, since only a book could give him a true literary passport, rather than the temporary identity card offered by stories in journals.

At first he was merely tolerated, then he was seen as one of the usual crowd, and later he even earned some sympathy by his reserved behavior and so might even hear a friendly word upon entering.

“Oh, and here's Radchenko.”

This pleased him enormously. Say what you will, but he had, it turns out, won for himself at least a little corner of the literary landscape, a seat that might accommodate at least a portion of his person. One day, in the course of a dispute, in a moment of silence, he even found sufficient courage to blurt out with a blush:

“I think so too.”

It wasn't quite clear what exactly he also thought nor which side this remark was intended to support, but he had expressed an opinion, and he was proud of himself for the whole day. He had taken part in a literary conversation!

His greatest interest, of course, was in the literary groups. Each of them had their own name and logo, and he imagined them as something akin to a marketing collective for the distribution of the members' works. He was particularly thrilled that the members of each team defended, promoted, and supported each other without qualification, while mercilessly excoriating their opponents. He, too, needed a firm foundation beneath him. Studying the members and listening to their ideas, he rejected those organizations that did not suit his ideas and style, but he was in no hurry to choose from among those others that were more or less acceptable. He was waiting for an organization to hold a general meeting, so that he would not be signing up unnoticed. This was all the more important a decision since by his choice he risked losing, in the opinion of the others, not only his sympathetic qualities but his abilities as a writer. That was true everywhere: your choice of friends determined your enemies. But it was not so easy to become acquainted with the internal life of the groups, to see what the situation would be like for you after you joined, because in the atmosphere of continual intergroup warfare

their meetings were closed. Naturally, for tactical reasons, no group would allow strangers to attend a meeting where the enemy's troop strength was discussed and various attack plans were proposed.

Along with the first snows the poet Vyhorsky returned to the city. They met in the street like old friends.

"Let's go," said the poet.

"Where?"

"For a beer."

They went into a dimly lit establishment with plenty of free seats and tables in the center and along the walls. It smelled of stale beer and the dirty rag with which the floor had been washed.

"This is my favorite beer hall," said the poet. "A couple of beers, please!"

"It's spooky in here," commented Stepan as he sat down.

He had not been in a beer hall before and looked around with curiosity at the buffet with its variety of snacks, the portly proprietor who wore a suit and tie with boots, the brewers' advertising posters on the walls, and the juicy illustration of a fresh crab right in front of him.

"I like this beer hall in the daytime," the poet began. "I like the stale air that carries the scent of thousands of people. I like this dampness of spilled drinks. And the quiet. A magical mood comes over me. I see better. If you want to know, I think through my poems here."

He took a sip of beer.

"I missed this place while I was away. I missed Kyiv. In the train I stood by the window and looked out—the city was spread out wide, like a giant crab. The buildings looked like cardboard boxes on hills. It's gigantic. And fantastic. When I got off the train, when I felt its ground beneath my feet, when I saw myself in it again, I trembled. It's silly, of course, but where else will you find such an expanse, such a mighty web of streets? And at each step you find memories, you walk in the footsteps of your ancestors. Yesterday I walked around examining everything, even the familiar porches. And I saw that everything was as it had been, as if it had been waiting for me. It seems to me that you can't even fall in love with a person as much as you can with a lifeless thing. How many of us have loved dozens of women and have gone through even more friends; but we love veal cutlets all our lives. I visited the Lavra, even went down into the caves. What a difference from 1922 and 23. Back then, it was just old ladies from the villages. Yesterday, there were even women from the intelligentsia. Even a few men! I thought to myself: 'They know the sweetness of prayer, the deep satisfaction of communicating with their god. What about us?' When push comes to shove, all our airplanes, radios, and poison gases are mere rubbish against the lost hope of paradise. Tell the truth, I envied them. Listen, have you ever thought about the terrible paradox of mankind; conscious of the absurdity of its fleeting existence but incapable of immortalizing it? I'm afraid we may be standing at the brink of a rebirth of faith."

“Well—no,” Stepan spoke up. “I’ll have you know that back in the village, young people are not at all religious.”

“Maybe so. I’m not going to argue about it. All I know is that the big issues have lost their attraction. We’re tired of big issues—being or consciousness, form or substance. You just want to say it’s all the same and makes no difference. Life does not break down into systems. Each one of us starts life from the beginning, and to each new person life seems new.”

“But science and learning are making advances,” said Stepan.

“Science and learning have been making advances for a thousand years. You must understand that the accumulated experience of past ages is just the background against which everyone demonstrates his tricks. Another couple of beers, please.”

When he unbuttoned his coat, the boy saw on him the same satin shirt with the same tie that the poet had been wearing last spring when they first met in the offices of the Housing Administration. Vyhorsky’s elongated face had become nervous and it trembled, as if all the muscles beneath his skin were in a heightened state of activity. And Stepan, himself somewhat excited after a bottle of beer, was following his words with interest and attention.

“Drink up,” said the poet. “Nothing stimulates our ability to think like beer. Science and learning are nothing. Absolute zero. For a thousand years it’s been spreading and it still can’t teach people how to live. What benefit do they offer? You’ll say, the revolution. Yes, I agree. Humanity sheds its skin, like a snake. But it sheds its spiritual skin with much more difficulty than a snake sheds its physical skin. Mankind oozes blood while it is shedding. But don’t forget—the new skin will eventually shed too. Progress? Well, that’s child’s play. I agree, there is progress—but there’s no reason in it. The worst mistake is to consider the inevitable as success. Man eats the very same meat, but fried and with a fork. Progress does not increase the sum of all happiness, that’s the important thing. The person condemned to death on the rack three centuries ago did not suffer any more than someone being executed by firing squad today. And perhaps I experience my dirty fingernails more acutely than a so-called savage would a whole filthy arm?”

He slowly finished his glass and drifted off in a reverie.

“That’s why I always said that teaching people is just cheating them. There’s nothing more shameful than inspiring illusions. And what’s even worse—spreading ideals.”

“Ideals?”

“Yes, exactly. Mankind, like a woman, likes to listen to compliments in the form of ideals. There are as many curses in the world as there are idealists. Who would follow them, if they didn’t scold? But these ideals are like food—while they’re on the tongue, they have a variety of tastes, but the stomach makes them all equal. The catarrhal stomach of history, as one poet with excellent digestion put it.”

He fell silent and bent over his glass. Stepan lit a cigarette and enjoyed sending smoke into the half-light of the room. Indeed, it was quiet and

peaceful here.

“He’s pretty smart,” thought the boy about the poet.

“Two more beers, please!” yelled the latter.

“That’s all for me,” Stepan said and lit a cigarette.

“Nonsense! A healthy young fellow like you and you can’t handle three bottles of beer? Here you are. And then there are the ones devoted to their ideas. That’s always been popular and admired. But what do we do with those people who live exclusively according to their ideas? Those for whom the whole world dissolves into their idea? We lock them up in the Kyrlyivka asylum. So where’s the logic?”

“You mean the insane?”

“That’s what they’re called.”

“You know, I remember an incident,” said Stepan. “There was this girl in the village—what a beauty she was. And she went insane. They said this one boy was to blame.”

“No one owes anyone anything in this world. But there is blame, because there has to be some kind of responsibility. Notice that animals are never insane—they’re rabid. Insanity is the exclusive privilege of humans. A marker on the road that humanity is traveling. An image of its future.”

The clock struck two. The poet flinched.

“The universe will die from the dissipation of thermal energy,” he said. “It will spread out evenly. Everything will be equalized and wiped out. Everything will cease. This will be a beautiful sight that no one will see.”

After the third bottle, Stepan felt a sadness in his soul, as if the universe were going to die within a few days. But the clock reminded him of his lessons at the Leatherworkers’ Collective.

“Maybe we should be going?”

“Sure, let’s go. Who’s paying? You? Actually, I’m a little short at the moment.”

But for Stepan money was not a problem. A week earlier he had gotten an advance from his publisher for 50% of his honorarium for the collection of stories, already at the printer’s. He immediately acquired a felt hat and ordered a stunning suit, for which he was waiting so as to impress Zoska. He was now all the more inclined to treat clothing as an artistic arrangement of his body. Since he liked his body and appreciated its strength and symmetry, he could not but take an interest in clothes intended to display that body in a favorable image, since displaying it in the nude was prohibited. Clothing became for him a formal consideration, a question of taste and even influence, since he fully understood the different impressions made by a person with a torn shirt and one in a stylish suit. This was, of course, entirely a matter of convention, but it takes an extraordinary degree of spiritual charm to overcome the effects of carelessness in clothing.

When the suit was ready, the boy felt a wish to give Zoska a present too. His feelings for her had taken root in his being and sometimes, quite unexpectedly, at home or during a lesson, her smiling image would flit airily

before him. Zoska! What a beautiful name! It was a pleasure just to pronounce it, because the sound of it carried the echo of her playfulness, the sensuous cadence of her kisses that evaporated on his lips, his eyes, and his chest. Beyond that, he felt toward her that peculiarly masculine gratitude with which the experience of secret assignations augments romance. And she, too, approaching with him the dark wellsprings of existence, consuming with him the eternally fresh fruit of the tree of knowledge, had become more judicious and friendlier towards him. She lost the capriciousness of her earlier desires; what remained was only some kind of nervousness that manifested itself in sudden bouts of longing.

Then she would gaze at him with a look that made him anxious, as if her glance penetrated his soul and agitated its most secret chambers. She would lie, then, with her hands under her head, distant, pensive, alien, and silent. Later, she would come to life again.

“Is it bad for you at home?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s bad. But there’s nothing that can be done.”

Her father, a minor bureaucrat, earned too small a salary for their domestic life to be attractive. And she herself had no luck finding a job. Stepan tried hard to cheer her as best he knew how. He bought her chocolates, candy, flowers, and illustrated magazines that they looked at together. And now he wanted to make her a present. But what should he get her? Having considered a large number of possibilities, he settled on a fragrance, because he liked scents but was ashamed to use them himself.

At the perfume shop he asked for a fine scent.

“Would you like Coty?”

“The very best!”

“Paris? L’Origan? Chipre?”

“L’Origan!” he said, because that name pleased him more than the others.

He paid fifteen karbovanets for the bottle, but he was satisfied. It must be a very fine scent if there’s so little of it for so much money.

On Friday, dressed in his new suit, he appeared at their meeting in good spirits.

“Zoska,” he said. “Look what I bought you.”

“Coty!” she cried, like a child receiving an unexpected but long-dreamt-of delight.

“This is the most expensive perfume,” he said. “I’m glad you like it. And I have a new suit.”

“Really? Stand up! Walk over there! Come back! You’re divine!”

“Wait,” he said, glad to see the impression made by his present and by himself.

He picked up the vial and opened it, carefully removing the film from the glass stopper. In a fit of tenderness he began to apply the perfume to Zoska with his moistened palm—on her neck, her arms, her face. She meekly endured, sitting still with only slight tremors from the touch of his cold hand

and the scent on her body.

“Enough, enough,” she whispered excitedly.

“No—the legs, too.”

A wave of fragrance slowly spread through the air, forming into an invisible halo around Zoska’s figure. The fine, gentle scent altered the room, transforming it from a common dwelling into a fairy-tale setting for lovers, evoking dreams of love in a flowering garden with gentle whiffs of celestial wind, as if the magic of secret essences, ointments, and oils from the distant past had penetrated this space through unseen cracks in the walls.

But where had he felt this intoxicating scent before? Why did it agitate him? Why did it burden his soul? And then he remembered. It was the scent of that woman, the woman he had once encountered at the window of a store. Suddenly a wave of recollections arose in him, countless memories spread out before him, like a disturbed pile of shimmering stones, radiating the shine of bright diamonds and cloudy rubies, tickling the eyes with their bright rays and touching the skin with a troubling shiver. His entire life passed before him in this play of light and shadow—an unexpected life, not the one that had to be, but the one that was.

“I’ll put my head on your knees,” he whispered. “May I do that?”

“You are allowed everything, unfortunately,” she replied.

Agitated, he pressed his face into her scented thighs, wrapping his arms around them as if on a sturdy support, and felt calmer. Then he asked:

“Zoska, have you ever loved anyone?”

She was stroking his hair, burying her hand in it, disheveling it.

“I did,” she answered.

“Tell me about it.”

And while still stroking his hair, she told the story of her first love. She was nineteen then, so it was three years ago. She was enrolled in stenography courses. One of the students always walked her home. Then he disappeared one day.

“But he was really strange,” she said. “He didn’t kiss me, even once.”

“Did you want him to?”

“Every girl wants that when she’s in love.”

“But you didn’t want me to kiss you, at first.”

“You didn’t love me.”

“Do I love you now?”

She pulled back her hand.

“Now I don’t care,” she said.

Lulled, he felt the urge to talk, to ask about their feelings for each other, to finally understand their origin. Under the influence of the scent and tenderness, he was enveloped in a mood of quiet observation, the kind that awakens a need to explore and understand the flow of life.

“Do you love me?”

She became pensive, as if considering the question.

“I love you terribly much.”

He embraced her again in a sign of gratitude.

“For what?”

“You have a nice voice,” she said. “I close my eyes and it cradles me. And your eyes.”

“... and your eyes,” arose a dreamy echo in his heart, “... and your eyes.”

“And what else?” he asked.

“Your soul is bad,” she added suddenly. “It’s a bad soul.”

“How do you know?” he asked, taken aback.

“I just know. But I like you. You’re handsome.”

“Do you think I’m a thief?”

“Oh, if only you were a thief! You would bring me Persian rugs, like the bandits in songs. And then you would kill me, or sell me into slavery.”

“Zoska,” he said, rising to his feet. “You’re extraordinary. How fortunate I am to have found you.”

“I let you find me.”

And they talked on, speaking words that when taken out of their romantic context seem banal and stupid, naive words without meaning, senseless, like a deck of well-used playing cards that acquire powerful symbolic meaning in the hands of each successive group of players. They were bound together by words spoken in whispers and in cries, old as the gray earth itself but vibrant, reinvigorated on the lips of lovers, reborn into their original brilliance by the power of undying feeling. They sat, enchanted by their own proximity, their boundless commitment, the tender touch of souls that, in moments of extreme longing, ring with the silver bells of spring. On parting, he looked at her for a long, long time, remembering her image, to take it with him into his hopes and dreams.

VII

Stepan's collection of stories was published in early January of the new year, earlier even than he had expected. Holding it in his hands the first time, he experienced a moderate joy. This was something useful and valuable for him, he thought, like a trump card in his hands, but he did not experience any extraordinary satisfaction, since he had already had this thought earlier, awaiting its publication, and had gotten used to the idea of the book's appearance. He was not one of those people who strive for something methodically, approaching the desired goal step by step, and knowing how to rest at appropriate stops along the way. His wishes were always an unquenchable need that burned him from inside, propelling him directly through difficulties that might have been avoided by patience and planning. In the struggle with inevitable doubts, he needlessly sacrificed the joys of success. His soul was a chiseled millstone, an unstoppable millstone that grinds everything together equally—grain, weeds, and the grass of life.

On the second day he leafed through his book, examining the typeface and the cover. He perused the titles of the stories in the contents, but he did not have the courage to read over a story. He felt uncomfortable before himself for what he had written. Had it been worthwhile to write this? While he was writing he had had no idea why or for what purpose he was writing. What value could you ascribe to such unconscious work?

He showed Zoska the collection, expecting her praise and suggestions.

"Did you write this?" she exclaimed. "People are so comical. They're always up to something, trying this and that."

"Should I stop, then?" he asked.

"Well, no! Once you've started, keep writing."

He understood this perfectly himself. Once you've started, you must keep writing. For him, this book turned writing into an obligation, a duty, a solemn pledge that he must keep. But with that, it stopped being a mere game he played with fame, a way of putting himself ahead of all his peers. Now it acquired the sense of being responsible work—too responsible for him to allow himself to write any-which-way about anything he liked. Why? He couldn't determine this himself. He could not trace the convoluted path of his relations with literature, from a childish prank to an ulcer on the soul. In playing around carelessly, he had cut himself and unintentionally severed those veins through which the heart pumps a river of blood. So, now, he had to be creative under a dual burden: obligation and responsibility.

He must write. This thought would not give him peace—not at home, nor at his lessons, nor in conversations, nor in his meetings with Zoska. He smoked and ate with it, as with a best friend, or worst enemy. He must write! But about what? He chose and arranged a couple of plotlines about the life of an insurgent, including plenty of action, but one by one he rejected them all, sensing in them an unscrupulous repetition of what he had already written.

No, that field was already exhausted for him. Actually, it had pushed itself away. It had become an illusion, one that no longer elicited the same interest that could force him to search and select new beads to thread onto the string of a new story, and so he was not at all worried that he was no longer able to find material on *this* topic. He vaguely yearned to write about what he saw now, to work out his most recent impressions—impressions of the city. Here, only here, was the fertile ground that he should cultivate, because it was only here that he experienced the unknown, the understanding of which is the motive and the joy of creativity. And it didn't matter that these impressions were lying around his soul in a pile of raw fibers: life never offers anything all wrapped up, it is just hints and fragments, the elements of the montage that need to be arranged, spliced, and refined into that final product called a work of art. Life only offers the clay that needs to be shaped by the hands and vision of an artist. He knew this, but he could not find the core.

Then he remembered inspiration, and he tried, doggedly and cleverly, to catch some, starting with simple naive methods and ranging all the way to complex endeavors. At first he tried to stimulate his conscience, putting himself into situations where it would be shameful not to write: he sat down at his table, eagerly pulled out a clean sheet of white paper, opened his inkwell, and took his pen between his fingers. And then waited. But instead of the desired concentration, all manner of trivial nonsense stole his attention. His eyes inadvertently rested on advertisements in the newspaper, on the cigarette label, on the knuckles of his own hand, examining everything with great interest, seeking any place they might focus other than the deceitful piece of paper that was the surface intended for their attention. His ears listened to shouts, crashes, and echoes beyond the walls, while in his head, disordered thoughts wandered freely, disappearing without a trace in the clouds of cigarette smoke that hung over and choked him. And nothing came out.

In that case, he decided systematically to remove any distractions that might divert him, to isolate himself completely and force himself to concentrate. First, he got rid of his pen, since it had to be dipped in the inkwell, then he discarded regular pencils, since they needed to be sharpened, settling on a mechanical pencil. He moved his table away from the window, where a gentle breeze perturbed his face, and moved it by the stove, in a corner, which also required rearranging the electrical connections. And to escape the exasperating din of the neighbors, he tried to write at night when everyone was asleep. But here, too, between four and five in the morning, when no one was yet up, he experienced defeat. The results of all these attempts at deprivation were always the same: on paper—a few lines of text crossed out, among innumerable drawings of trees, houses, and faces; in his heart—bitterness and fatigue.

Sometimes, on returning home, he would imagine that he was in a great mood and so, playfully, would tell himself:

“Well, it's time to write something for income.”

Something light and cheerful—the hell with all those serious topics. Why shouldn't he be a humorist? Here's a great topic, for example: A teacher is conducting anti-religious propaganda as part of his lesson, choosing the story of the great flood as his whipping boy. Do you really think, he says, you could fit all the extant creatures of the time into an ark? A pair of them, no less! And he impresses the students with a zinger: You can't get a pair of whales into an ark. The whales weigh more than a ton each and would drown the ship with a swipe of their tail. But then one student, a wimpish kid with a high-pitched voice, asks: Why take the whales on board? They can swim in the water themselves! And then you can even add that the teacher himself is a religious man, prays to God for forgiveness before each lesson. Or wait—this one's even better: A professor, a stately man with a family, a well-known economist, is answering a question for a newspaper about his view of the economic situation in the Soviet Union. His view is clear and simple, but "unspeakable." So he sweats, and rewrites, and gives it to his wife and close friends to read over. He edits, deletes, avoids, obfuscates, squirms, and is left with something ... well, something beyond time and space, with ideas that are neither here nor there but everywhere. Or take Ukrainization! How many dramas, comedies, farces, anecdotes you could find there! And who could know them better than he did. Damn it, why didn't he think of this earlier!

But it wasn't so easy to fool oneself. The primary power in the mechanism he was trying to put into motion was likely a lazy donkey, unresponsive to anger or seduction. The central management of this creative enterprise was apparently in the hands of a mindless bureaucrat, who always required something more, refused to approve anything, and always gave the same answer: 'Come back tomorrow!' Slowly Stepan felt superstitions arising within him. Maybe this house was un-creative? Maybe this year was unpropitious, because it's an odd number and he was born in an odd-numbered year....

Fearing despair, he instinctively began to imagine that he had already written something extraordinary, written a great many very interesting works, unmatched by anyone, whole piles of books that grew on his table into a substantial library. He could hear whispers of admiration all around him; he set out on distant trips; he conducted correspondence with his fans in which he explained his views, his beliefs, his opinions; he held public readings in huge auditoriums full of mesmerized listeners. And these dreams gave him comfort, they feasted on his accumulated doubts for their own nutrition, they left a strange satisfaction and a desire for more. But they didn't result in any progress.

On the other hand, external literary circumstances were, it seems, very favorable. First of all, the published collection secured him a place in the literary world; it granted him the rights of literary citizenship that he was seeking. He noticed this when people started asking him for his opinion, when he was addressed not as Radchenko but as Comrade Stefan, more like an old friend in familiar company. He heard a few verbal tributes about his

stories and understood that he had become an equal among equals. His self-esteem was singing, but his soul was silent.

Evenings he began to meet quite often with the poet Vyhorsky at the beer hall, where the poet was a constant fixture. The boy now entered here as a regular, feeling relief and relaxation at the door of this large hall, converted from a dingy basement by a bright flood of light. He easily dove into the friendly din of the patrons who sat by the white marble tables in colorful groups of two or three, punctuated by the clatter of dishes, the pop of bottle caps, laughter and cheers, all enveloped in loud music that streamed from the dais in the corner, uniting the diversity of faces and clothing into the plurality of a human collective, maintaining the unity of the motley group, which in moments of silence immediately dissolved into individual persons and words, distinct and distant, carried here from unfamiliar haunts, from unknown lives and fates. But after these brief intervals of alienation, the gray mass of beings coalesced in a new crescendo of sounds and melded together again, enchanted by what they had in common, as if the song coming from the instruments were their song, rising together from all their lips, exhilarated by the feeling of togetherness.

The boy felt the striking effectiveness of this beer hall music fully on his own person. It removed layers of worries from his shoulders, liberated the suppressed portion of his soul, which suddenly stretched its wings in a confused but passionate effort. He himself became sharper, more attuned to the fluttering hearts of others, consumed with the selfish certainty that he would write something, that he would succeed in expressing that something, still unreachable, that lived within him, and reacting in a faint echo to the wild winds of life.

He looked around, spotted Vyhorsky, and, smiling, approached him, threading his way through the labyrinth of tables.

“There’s a jazz band today,” said the poet. “Let’s listen.”

On the dais, instead of the usual threesome, there was a quartet, with a piano, violin, viola, and a Turkish drum with cymbals, spreading throughout the hall an animalistic roar that drowned out the melody.

“What thieves!” complained the poet. “They call this a jazz band? And for this we must pay an extra 5 kopecks per bottle! But have a look at the new violinist.”

The new violinist was young and wore a tie which he artistically configured into a big bow. His gestures resembled those of an epileptic. He bent over, jerked his head, stuck out his tongue, winked, frowned, and made faces, jumping up and down once in a while, as if the drummer’s strokes were accidentally falling on his stomach.

“He is solving the problem of how to conduct a musical ensemble when your hands are otherwise occupied,” Vyhorsky explained. “What sensitivity! Please give them each a glass of beer.”

Swaying his torso in keeping with the rhythm, he dreamily hummed along.

“What’s new in the literary world?” he asked.

“Nothing much,” Stepan replied. “I was praised in *The Red Path*. They published a review. Nothing new.”

“Who was it?”

“Guess! ... It was Svitozarov.”

“Svitozarov’s chief quality is to be different from everyone else. If no one else has praised you, then he will offer praise. In the opposite case, he will criticize you, from an instinct for self-preservation. They all see us as some kind of racehorses that they’re playing in a betting pool. Because to be a critic you have to be a very good critic. In any case, avoid them like the plague.”

“But, in the end, I suppose I’ll have to join one of the literary groups,” ventured Stepan. “It’s hard for a novice without some support.”

The poet frowned.

“It’s all the same: either you have talent, in which case you don’t need any support, or you don’t have talent, in which case all the support in the world won’t help you. So what’s the point?”

“To tell you the truth,” the boy replied, “I’ve grown accustomed to community service, whether at the village hall or in student leadership.”

“Then why don’t you join the International Organization for Aid to Revolutionaries?” the poet said with irritation. “Join the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Fleet, or the Society for Aid to Children, or to cripples, or to the unemployed. What’s this got to do with literature?”

Nervously he tapped on his bottle with a fork, to indicate he wanted another round of beer.

“To be perfectly frank,” he continued, “I don’t understand why these literary groups exist. People try to explain, but I don’t get it. I just can’t understand. For me, their existence is an incomprehensible and sad mystery. If these are crutches for crippled writers, I’m glad that we two have good strong legs. And here’s the beer, at last.”

He poured it into the glasses energetically.

“To literature! We have to honor what gives us an income. But tell me, honestly, why did you start writing?”

“From envy,” said the boy, blushing.

“In my case, it was a sense of frailty. That’s the same thing. But the problem isn’t in the fact that our literature is plain, like bread without fixings. I always compare a writer to a baker. From a little ball of dough he creates a loaf of bread. He has a good oven, he uses good yeast, and he’s industrious enough to knead his dough for a month, a year, or even a few years. But if he’s timid, if he’s afraid of what he himself thinks, and of what others think, then it’s better for him to close the bakery and take up teaching in grade school.”

The music came to life again, with the drum pounding. This time the melody reverberated clearly, unraveling in a fine thread from beneath the

fingers of the violinist, who was bowing every which way in what looked like a religious seizure. It was a melancholy motif of unfulfilled desire, a luminous stream of anguished reproach, craving, and unrest.

“What is that?” asked Stepan.

“A foxtrot. In our world, it belongs to the genre of dances that is condemned as debauchery and degeneration. Some people call it a bedroom dance, although it is really nothing more than a minuet. It’s denounced for being sensuous, but what kind of dance is not sensuous? After all, the whole point of dancing is the pleasure of touching each other. For us, the whole issue of dancing has reached a fantastic state. In the first years after the revolution it was persecuted as a form of religious ritual, but now it’s encouraged in civic clubs as a form of cultural expression. The processes of life are the processes of self-contradiction, my friend.”

“I can’t write,” whispered Stepan, overcome by the wistful tension of the melody. “I keep trying but I can’t.”

“You can’t write? Don’t worry! When it starts to hurt, the writing will flow.”

When the music stopped, the boy felt a strange excitement, a deep agitation of some kind, because the motif died unfinished in the noisy hall. The motif just suddenly came apart, cradling in transparent shards, petting and irritating the ear, and the boy felt an irresistible urge to gather together this acoustic swarm. The ache from his unsuccessful efforts to write was reborn in this urge, rekindling his longing for what had become inaccessible to him in his hour of triumph. In his memory he quickly reviewed the various segments of his urban path thus far, and, bending over to Vyhorskyy, he recounted the story of their first meeting, not in the offices of the Housing Administration, but in another office, where the poet had commented on his leaving with words that he did not then fully understand.

“Strange, isn’t it?” Stepan asked.

“I don’t remember that,” said the poet, “but that’s not the point. Back then, you showed up hungry, tattered, and without a place to live. Now you’ve got a nice coat, a suit, some money, and a collection of stories. But are you any happier? You’re already complaining: ‘I can’t write!’ Here you have a perfect illustration of my ideas about progress. That’s why I always say that happiness is impossible. Today you eat, tomorrow you’re hungry.”

“It’s unnatural, all this,” sighed Stepan. “Everything in the city is somehow unnatural.”

“Once the super-natural has been negated, the un-natural remains our only joy,” said the poet. “Any talk about happiness—that is, about complete satisfaction—elicits disgust. It’s the most animal-like of all human illusions precisely because it is the most natural.”

He poured two more glasses.

“Listen to me,” he continued. “All those people who go on about naturalness have as much understanding of life as pigs do about oranges. Ever since the human mind began to formulate abstract thoughts, man has

irrevocably abandoned the path of naturalness, and the only way to return him to that path is to cut off his head. Just consider this: how can man destroy the natural around himself without destroying the natural within himself? Every tree chopped down on the planet shows that something has also been chopped down in the human soul. When man abandoned natural caves for constructed dwellings, when he began to sharpen natural stone, that's when he chose the path of artificiality, which has come down to us as an inheritance. Is it natural to admit the imperfection of life at a given moment and to yearn for new forms? Or to condemn our life altogether? It would be natural not to notice its faults and to trumpet its glory regardless, as various panegyrist do. That's why all progress is progress away from nature in our environment, our thinking, and our feelings. Your smoking is also artificial, since it would be more natural to breathe fresh air."

"But I'm not going to stop smoking," asserted Stepan.

"I'm not berating you," said the poet. "I just want you to understand that man is the *reductio ad absurdum* of nature. In us, nature destroys itself. We are the last phase on one branch of the evolutionary tree, and there will be no others after us, no super-man. We are the last link in a chain, which may perhaps unroll again on this earth, but down different paths, in different directions. The brain—there's the greatest enemy of mankind. But, my friend, don't stare so much at that woman in the blue hat, although that's very natural."

"That's just incidental," Stepan excused himself.

"On the contrary, listening to me is very unnatural."

"You're always talking about the end of the world," the boy interjected uncomfortably. "It's so depressing."

"I'm always more interested not in how things are developing, but how they will end."

"So that's why they call you a spineless intellectual!"

These words visibly offended Vyhorsky.

"Spineless intellectual?" he grumbled. "And what's the point of having a spine if it's topped off with a dunce cap?" Then, after getting up, he added, "We're all just petite bourgeois, because we all have to die. Give us immortality and we'll all become new, great, consummate. As long as we're mortal, we're risible and inconsequential."

VIII

When Stepan got home that evening, he was told that someone had come to visit him and promised to return tomorrow morning. Who could it have been? Stepan was deeply concerned by this. The simple fact was that in all the time he had been living on Lviv Street, no one had ever visited him here. He could not even remember whether anyone at all knew his address. He lived just like the little mouse behind the wall, in a horrible place where he couldn't write at all. And this knock by an unknown hand on the door of his apartment awoke in him the wish to have visitors, to welcome guests, and to chat with them in his leisure time.

"I must develop some acquaintances," he thought.

Indeed, he needed to simply live for a while, to enjoy the minutiae of city life, to rest and rebuild his strength after the strenuous months he had just lived through. That's likely why he can't write—because he's debilitated. An enervated soul, like an exhausted ox, is incapable of pulling any load.

This was the plan that he formulated while lying down to sleep: not to visit the editorial office, because the literary conversations only aggravated his helplessness—in general, to stay as far away as possible from literature while developing a social circle unrelated to literature, even drinking beer with Vyhorsky no more than once a week. Actually, after his initial enchantment with the manifold complexity of Vyhorsky's thinking and his insouciant attitude toward the cosmos, Stepan was beginning to have doubts about him, since he himself lived without sophistry and embraced the world without the filter of abstract categories. He was not dishonest with himself, neither in thought nor in deed, and he retained his concrete materiality; and for him, life did not cease being a fragrant, if sometimes bitter, almond.

In the morning, the mystery of yesterday's visitor was resolved very simply. True, Stepan did not immediately recognize his face, which was now decorated with an English moustache, nor did he recognize his person in the wide deerskin jacket and the tan leather gloves, but the moment his guest uttered his greeting—"Hello there, little Stevie, I've come to visit you"—there was no longer any doubt that this was his old buddy from the Institute, Borys Zadorozhny, who had left this room to Stefan when he himself moved out.

"Sit down, Borys," the boy said. "It's good you came for a visit."

Borys Zadorozhny had certainly changed in the year since he finished the Institute, not only in his clothing but in his behavior and in the tone of his voice. That first cheerful exclamation coming from his lips by way of greeting at the door was but an echo of the old student days. His further conversation showed signs of the confident superiority typical of a man of business who does not scatter words needlessly and knows their value.

Taking off his coat, he revealed to the light of day a Tolstoy shirt of gray cloth with ivory buttons. He pulled a folding cigarette case from his pocket

and graciously treated his host:

“Please, have a smoke.”

Then he critically examined the apartment.

“So, you live here, it seems.”

“Yes I do, thanks to you.”

“Nothing to thank me for. It could do with a facelift. Put up some wallpaper, and maybe paint the ceiling. Have you got money?”

“Sure, I have some.”

“Then get some wallpaper, for sure. It’s not expensive right now. I recommend the Leningrad cooperative store.”

Stepan agreed, then asked

“How are your studies at the Institute?”

Borys let out a cloud of smoke up to the ceiling.

“My studies? I left after a week. Not for me this dry academic sh—... Now I’m the senior instructor in cooperative sugarbeet agriculture for the Kyiv region. Where’s your ashtray? You probably flick the ashes on the floor, right? You’re a student, after all.”

And he began to talk about the general state of cooperative sugarbeet farming, about last year’s harvest, about combating pests. A whole lot of problems, but we’re moving forward, that’s for sure. The bureaucracy is stifling. They’re restoring the sugar-processing plant near the Fundukleivka station, which he often passes. So what’s happening? The labor is there, the materials are there, the money is ready, but while they procrastinated, the construction season has passed. It’s the old guard ‘experts’ who hold things up.

“They haven’t got any fire in their bellies,” he said. “Chase them out with a rusty poker, these gentlemen bureaucrats! So, when do you finish?”

“I dropped out,” Stepan admitted sheepishly.

Borys grimaced.

“So you got caught up in something? Literature, no doubt.”

Stepan nodded.

Then Borys didactically explained to him that literature was, of course, a very nice thing, but an uncertain one. In life you need a secure source of income, a profession, and rewarding work for the common good.

“And for whom are you writing?” he added. “Take me, for example. I have no time to read.”

“So how’s your wife?” asked the boy, changing the topic. “Nadika, isn’t it?”

He really had to dredge up this name, as from a deep cave.

“Nadika’s wonderful,” beamed Borys. “She’s a great housewife, I couldn’t be happier.”

“Still at the vocational college?”

“I talked her into quitting.”

Of course, he was not against education for women, or equal rights, but the most important thing for him was family and a peaceful home after all

those damned business trips. Besides, experience teaches us that women are only qualified for secondary work—copying and registration—but could not be trusted with responsible tasks and leadership.

“And we need to have a kid,” he added.

“So what’s the problem?”

“Money,” Borys admitted, “though abortions aren’t free either. In a word, we’ll see.”

“Couldn’t you go on without children?”

“Then what was the point of getting married?”

“What about love?”

“Love, little Stevie, is a temporary phenomenon—a two-week vacation for a working man. But you have to live, too. I see you haven’t changed a bit.”

As he was leaving, he told Stepan:

“I’m hoping to see you at my place, that’s Andriivsky Descent 38, apt. 6. It’s a two-room place. Come visit.”

After seeing his guest off, Stepan sat down on the bed, as he always did when he wanted to concentrate on something and have a comfortable smoke. Borys’s visit had produced a generally unpleasant sensation, but nevertheless he felt a certain envy for his old friend. While the conservatism of Borys’s views and his bourgeois philistinism in the area of high culture were deeply offensive to the boy, on the other hand, Borys’s practical inclination, his love for his work and certainty about its utility, which rang out clearly in the words of the young agriculturalist, impressed Stepan with their solidity. Into this room, the scene of many disappointments and successes, Borys had brought the spirit of a real builder, the eager vitality of mundane, unnoticed creativity that ceaselessly changes the world. It is only thanks to him and to others like him, the constructors of the material foundations of human existence, that higher creativity becomes possible. Isn’t it then his right to consider it a mere reflection of his own work, and to reject it if he doesn’t have the time to enjoy it? His work is simple and unrewarding. It will not bring him fame, and his name will not be inscribed in any history book, so he seeks his reward in money, finds comfort in family, where he can enter eternity at least through his children. Does that mean he should be condemned with the label ‘philistine?’ Careful! It is not yet clear who should condemn whom. It is not yet clear who the real movers of life are: those who create its structure, or those who create its songs while sitting on that structure.

Stepan threw away his cigarette butt. Yes, Borys and he don’t smoke the same tobacco. Yes, they are different people.

So, Nadika had quit the vocational college! He talked her into it, he says. It’s pretty clear what kind of talking that was. Administrative decision for the greater good. But so what, it’s none of this writer’s business. These are all trivial matters.

But a sense of disappointment remained, as if Borys had offended him somehow. And the more he tried to justify his friend in his own eyes, the guiltier Borys seemed, and the more estranged. A speck of bitterness, rolling

down the hill of emotions, grows wider, gains substance, increases in size like a giant snowball and drops into the heart like a giant block of ice. And then it takes many, many calories of warmth to melt this unexpected burden.

It was half past twelve, time for his meeting with Zoska. Getting up and stretching, he felt hesitation, not because he didn't want to go, but because he didn't like to abandon any thought unfinished, not fully thought through and thus left behind like a knotted ball of wool. He got dressed and went out, shuddering from the frigid air after the quiet comfort and cigarette smoke. It's cold! He turned up his collar and stuck his hands into his pockets. The blinding whiteness of the packed snow on the street, the dry crunch of his own footsteps and those of others, the soft shush of sleigh runners were all bothersome to him, disturbing him with their irrational clarity. He walked quickly, overtaking other pedestrians.

He arrived early, Zoska wasn't there yet. Stepan sat down and urgently lit a cigarette, which quickly died out in his fingers, stretched out on an arm of the chair. This single armchair in the room, once upholstered in blue silk but now covered with a motley rug, was Zoska's favorite place, and he occupied it now, enjoying the feel of its softness. He wanted to dive into something warm and comfortable, to stretch out his entire body and forget about it, abandoning himself to those slow thoughts that penetrate into the depths of the soul and uncover its treasures for examination. He wanted to descend into the dungeons of the heart, to remove the forged locks from the trunks of experience, to open their lids and thrust his hands into memories, old and dry, like flowers between the pages of a book. Maybe Zoska will be late today. Perhaps she won't show up at all.

But the boy waited for her. He examined the furnishings in the room with interest, even more interest than when he had first entered this room that had provided him with unexpected shelter. The furnishings were meager: a bed, two chairs, the armchair, and a small table. There wasn't even a wardrobe to house the dresses that hung on the wall in cloth coverings. But the unknown girl who lived here had formed these paltry things into an attractive harmony, infusing their arrangement with a woman's grace, sprinkling their gentle simplicity with the magic of youthfulness. He could sense her adept hand in the straight line of the comforter, in the fluffy pillow that coquettishly raised its top corner, and in the series of photographs and glasses that stood on the doily-covered table. This is where she took action, where she lived, where her heart beat with all the usual human desires, where she had decorated the walls with the invisible pattern of her dreams. And this borrowed residence, fixed up perhaps for someone else, tidied perhaps in the expectation of someone else's kisses, had become the scene of his own activity, the shelter of his most intimate feelings, the location of his lovemaking. Why?

Finally, Zoska showed up, cheerful and red from the frost, her brisk walk bringing with her the liveliness of the cold air.

"You're here already?" she wondered.

“I left too early,” he said, laughing, “to see you sooner.”

“You’re such a little liar.”

She took off her coat and hat and ran over to him.

“Warm me up,” she said. “Zoska is very cold today!” And in that moment she noticed that he was worried: “The divine one is sour? Why is the divine one sour?”

“A bad mood,” he answered. “It will pass.”

She embraced him.

“Where’s this bad mood, is it here? Or here?”

She kissed him on the forehead, the eyes, and cheeks, just as children have their fingers kissed so they stop hurting.

Then she took her place on the armchair, and the boy sat down on a pillow by her feet. “At the feet of a queen,” he joked.

Lighting a cigarette, Zoska crossed her legs with her elbow on her knee and began to talk as if thinking out loud, expressing all her thoughts just as they unraveled in her mind, with all the gaps and jumps. Certainly Zoska, too, has bad moods occasionally. Why? Because people are so terribly comical, they don’t want to simply live, they’re always up to something, imagining this and that, and then afterwards they suffer. She’s been looking for a job, visiting the job lotteries and the union offices, but everyone there is so full of themselves, so serious, that she just feels like sticking out her tongue at them. Father spends his evenings writing some kind of reports; she once drew a doodle at the end of one, because he’s writing these silly reports that no one needs or cares about. She really likes airplanes, because they fly so high, but they will never give Zoska a ride because they’re for dropping bombs. She would like to poke all fat and self-absorbed people in the stomach, so that they would stop thinking.

But the strangest thing for Zoska was lovemaking between people. Everyone lives in pairs and performs these pleasant debaucheries in private, but no one wants to admit it. They even say it’s indecent—well then, don’t do it at all. All this riding on their high horses!

“Have you fallen asleep?” she asked suddenly, poking him.

“No,” he said.

He sat leaning against the chair and listening to her words, which he had heard more than once in various combinations on various occasions. He was silent and it seemed to him that everything in the room was silent, that all the furniture had bent over, wistfully wondering why they were here, and not somewhere far away. He didn’t even notice when Zoska fell silent, falling back into the armchair and closing her eyes. He didn’t ask what she was thinking about, since he knew he would not understand, just as he would be unable to convey to her his own ruminations, sensing that she had unconsciously crossed the limit where verbal communication between people ends. They sat in the room, mindless of each other, submerged in something endlessly their own, concealed behind the margins of the heart that suddenly grow into impervious walls of otherness.

Stepan woke up first and rose awkwardly.

“Are you sleeping?” he asked.

She opened her eyes without saying a word. He stood beside her and did not know what to say.

“We’re not cheerful today,” he said finally. “Are you OK?” he asked worriedly.

She was silent.

“Maybe something has happened?”

In their intimate conversations, this ‘something’ designated the price that nature tries to impose for the enjoyment of pleasure despite the ingenuity of the participants.

She raised her worried eyes:

“Will we all die?” she asked.

“Of course,” he answered, relieved. “Everyone dies.”

“Is it possible not to die?”

His heart melted at the sincerity of her voice. She wasn’t joking, she was asking candidly, as if she had some doubt, some secret hope of becoming the exception to the idiotic fate of the living. He kissed her, comforted her, overcome with a mournful sympathy for her and for himself.

“You shouldn’t think about that,” he said.

“It comes on its own,” she whispered.

They went out together and stopped on the corner where they usually parted.

“Don’t go,” he said.

“You’re silly.”

She nodded to him, and then he stood watching her slight figure weaving amid the passersby, getting progressively smaller, disappearing more and more until she completely dissolved in the crowd. He kept standing, hoping that she might still appear for a moment, from a distance. Then a torment began to grow: with her departure was he also losing hope of ever seeing her again? Never had she been so close to him as she was now, and he had never felt such longing on parting with her. It was as if he had not told her what he had wanted to tell her, what he had to tell the only person who was dear to him, and he felt the weight of the unsaid words on his heart. Like an old miser she had systematically taken from him everything that was hers, taken all his memories, like the presents he had once given. The thought that they would see each other again seemed strange to him.

Although it was still early, Stepan stopped at a cafeteria along the way to have dinner. Food did not find particular favor with him, and his attitude toward it was strictly utilitarian. He certainly did not belong to that category of people who on their way to dinner consider what they will have for the first course, the second, and the third, and can taste the anticipated dishes on the way there. Even his strongest appetite was completely bland, lacking the colorful additives of sensation. Deserts didn’t tempt him at all, no matter how appealing they may have seemed at first. He had purchased bags and bags of

candies and chocolates, but he never ate any himself. At first, the inscrutable names of certain dishes on the menu intrigued him, but later, when he learned that roast à la broche is nothing but ordinary beef on a skewer and that the mysterious omelette is just scrambled eggs, he stopped paying any attention to these inventions, these strenuous efforts to introduce variety into eating with the help of exotic names and the imagination of the consumers. He had developed a taste for the scent of tobacco and for better clothing, but his skills in fine dining were making no progress, still stuck at the level of primitive villagers.

Looking around at the cafeteria, its customers, and the settings in front of him, the boy suddenly, with no connection to anything preceding, thought:

“Nadika is a great housewife, Borys couldn’t be happier.”

This was a terribly bitter thought for him, as if his now ancient acquaintance with this girl had left an undigested stone. It seemed a horrible crime to turn that blue-eyed Nadika into a cook, cleaning woman, and defender of the domestic comforts of this young petty bourgeois. Does that lout Borys have any sensibilities, does he even know any pity? He’ll just mangle everything, he’ll take anything into those sinewy hands, be it a sugarbeet or a woman. That’s just the cruel personality of this priest’s son.

After splashing around in his borsch with a spoon and leaving almost half the bowl, he had begun picking over some varenyky with meat when a person entered the cafeteria in a tattered coat and red hat, pushing something large and strange in front of himself. It was a harp, and its owner asked permission to entertain the honored company with his playing. Permission granted, he sat down in the corner on a chair and set the huge instrument between his legs. Amid the sounds of clatter and chatter, he struck the first chords on the thick, straight strings.

The harpist played a familiar aria from Kalman’s *Silva*, and the dull sounds of his instrument, suitable only for accompaniment, gave the love song a sad depth and tenderness, expressing only a portion of the entreaty, leaving the rest hidden in the quiet trembling of the notes. But Stepan was looking at the performer. Where had he seen this elongated, cold, but passionate face, these sharp black eyes that seemed ready to ignite with a fire hidden within? Maybe he had caught a glimpse of him on a street wearing this strange garb? Maybe this musician had traveled in the villages during the years of tumult, trading his music for bread? Or maybe he had never seen him before but this strong first impression had created an illusion of earlier familiarity.

Who was he? A Tatar? A Greek? An Armenian? What kind of fate had sent this strong, swarthy fellow on this sad journey and had hung a triangular weight on his shoulders, concealing his passion in the melancholy sound of the strings? And how could this beggar retain the pride that shone in his eyes, that calm indifference to the public, to which in a moment he would be stretching out his pleading hand. Stepan sensed that this vagabond had his own separate world, like Stepan’s, his own human fate, his own suffering and

hopes, like all the others here, whom he only sees but doesn't know or understand. And Stepan felt his excitement growing, like the excitement of someone who is about to travel from earth to another planet. He was excited by the sudden transformation of the people around him into mysterious beings. He was as excited as a child who discovers the hidden mechanism in a toy.

He now understood that people are all different. He gained this understanding in the same way that any understanding of the known is gained, when that understanding penetrates your heart like a sharp blade, when it breaks out into the open like the music of a grain of seed from beneath the ancient husk of words. No, he did not comprehend—he perceived, as love can be perceived as pain by those who love, as despair and desire can be perceived by those who are overwhelmed by them without clearly distinguishing between them. People are different! He had anticipated this, but now he knew. He had felt it, and now it had become real.

There was a new world within him, the world of a new idea that tickles the brain, that sweeps out the corners and rearranges the furniture so that it may find its own place there. He had, it seemed, found that magic sentence that would open the door for his talents, exhausted after long wandering outside the walls. And like a researcher with an insight, intoxicated by his brilliant discovery and fearful for its veracity, needing to further test and strengthen his conclusions with wide-ranging observations, the boy went out into the loud wide streets, where there were people, masses of people, whom he could observe without impediment.

He went out onto Khreshchatyk as if into an alley in a large park, sprinkled with cold tufts of clouds, these large puffy birds from the blue heights who had flown yesterday above the slopes of chiseled cliffs topped with colorful hats. The sun, hovering in the sky as a cold disk, threw down an abundant shower of blue, red, and yellow sparks beneath feet, hoofs, and wheels, scattering on streets and rooftops a shiny dust of trembling frost, which at this very moment was softly and lovingly setting eyes alight with spontaneous happiness, painting lips with the unconscious smile of a being that sees the sun. Everything looked blacker and whiter, contours became deeper and narrower in the airy glow, the clamor rose a few notes higher in welcome to the rays, and the cheerful crunch of packed snow beneath ceaseless footfalls became more audible. The street was teeming, people returning from work came out in rows, from doors with wide signs above them, blending into the crowd, into the brightness, which they pulled into themselves and returned to the air in puffs of opaque steam, the warm evidence of their living spirit. So many eyes! So much motion!

The boy moved along among them with a passionate flutter, as if all eyes were focused on him and all motion was at his behest, as if he were reviewing this lean, energetic, song-filled parade of heroes, nonentities, and those in-between who were passing in front of him. And they felt so dear to him and among themselves, so simple and familiar. Yet soon they would go

off each to their own home, their own love, their own thoughts, inclinations, cleverness, and stupidity. There, on their own turf, they hoe the rows of their past existence, grow the happy and forlorn flowers of their puny little lives. There each of them will find something that waits for no other, perhaps similar but expressed in different feelings, colored in different tints, poured into glasses of a different type, shape, and quality. For each of them, the world begins and ends, appears and disappears in the narrow slit between their eyelids. People are different! Crazy different, despite their outward similarity. And he could see them as a single being that has disintegrated into a diverse multiplicity, like a single face that is divided and altered in the shards of a mirror into thousands of faces, each of which has retained its riddle, the riddle of a human being.

The crowd stimulated him; it stimulated not only his vision and hearing, but also his nose, dilated to take in the scents; his fingertips trembled to touch this moving, rumbling crowd. He longed to feel it with all the senses, collectively and individually, to pour it in through every connecting channel into that enormous workshop, where impressions are melted in the fires of blood and forged on the anvil of the heart. All the floodgates of his being were raised, and the frothing streams of the world poured into them, merging into a single turbulent flow along a narrow flume that turned the wheels of the creative mill. And this first shudder of the long, idle mechanism felt like pain, like a fearful anxiety, an unspeakable rapture that was overpowering him, pulling him to the side, carrying him out of its own element, where it had arisen until, moving slowly, blinded and deafened, he was himself among the crowd, alone with his fire. Then he set off for home, carrying this fire carefully and anxiously, like the faithful carrying candles on Maundy Thursday.

When he entered his room, dark after the brightness on the street, moist after the dry chill outside, Stepan felt only fatigue. Everything within him had come to a halt, and the flame that had been burning within him but a moment earlier had suddenly died out, quietly and without a trace. Where had it gone? What had all this been for, this excitement and then its disappearance? He sat down without undressing, insulted and depressed by the sudden evaporation of his drive, immeasurably saddened at the loss of his confidence to write. Just a short while ago he had been certain he would write; he did not know what and how he would write, but he felt within himself that flood, that churning of emotion ready to break out and overflow the narrow confines of the soul. And here it had dried out, like a trickle across the sand. It had burst like colorful soap bubble. And once again, as before, he was barren, once again in his room, this coffin of his expectations, once again by his table, where he had watched the nights and mornings pass, a slave to his own quest. Would it always be so?

Was he condemned forever to this punishment, expiating his ill-considered notion, his mindless, unplanned notion to write a short story? Condemned to these flare-ups that would agitate and scorch his soul, casting

him into endless sorrow, eliciting a ruinous loathing of himself, of life, of people? Because the creative drive in an individual is indomitable: once it has taken root, it takes over the whole person, makes the person an extension of itself, a meek servant carrying out its instructions. It ruins the purity of feelings by its intransigent demands, it turns life into a strange and permanent refuge, cheering the person with unimaginable dreams, oppressing him with unimaginable despair; it stings the heart, inflicts distress on the mind like a tumor on the tissues of the brain, envelops the person like a vine, and there is no desire more powerful, because all others seek something external to the self, but it alone seeks something within, because the fount of all other desires is transient, but only its source is bottomless, since it is the entire world!

* * *

Meanwhile, behind the back of the writer Stefan Radchenko, who was unable to write anything, there were developments preparing a pleasant surprise for him.

It was a matter concerning literary life, that endless turmoil which in the context of the battle between literary organizations leads to the accumulation of explosive material. Amid the daily quarrels and conflicts, occasionally—once or twice a year—real literary skirmishes erupt, where the battle becomes explicit and public, a battle for privileges, for influence, for the first spots in the line to the printing press and publisher's pay office. There are internal literary competitions, creative rivalries, which give value to literature, and there are external competitions, which give value to the writers themselves but have about as much to do with literature as backstage intrigue does with an actor's performance. And while creativity itself is a silent and sedentary thing, the battle for its consequences, on the other hand, is very boisterous and athletic, with the peculiar feature that it produces a whole cadre of combatants, whose connection to literature is limited to the mere fact that they take an active role in these gymnastic exercises.

The immediate cause of the conflict was very simple: there was an opening in a journal's editorial office and each of the groups had advanced its own candidate. A real parliamentary crisis developed, with meetings and dealings, telephone calls, coalitions created and then broken, demands put forward, attacks mounted, sieges endured, all in keeping with the finest examples of strategic thinking. This had lasted for a month and everyone had been bloodied, but no one was ready to retreat. Then, as the only solution in this irresolvable situation, an idea born from hopelessness was advanced: to reject all the candidates put forward and to issue an invitation to some Varangian who was not involved in any of the bloodletting. Somehow everyone immediately agreed on Stepan Radchenko, because they had tired of the continual warfare and, on the other hand, the new candidate had never

given anyone any offense and behaved mildly, giving everyone the hope that they could easily influence him.

Thus, Stepan got to sit at a chair behind a desk marked, “Editor. Office hours: Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM.”

IX

Work, work, and more work!

During the month of literary skirmishes chaos had, of course, descended on the editorial office. And so the boy rolled up his sleeves and got to work, attacking each matter in a full-scale assault, an approach he owed in part to his military service and in part to his innate character. The archive of manuscripts, for example, was completely disorganized. Correspondence was in a hopeless state. The library did not have a catalog and three-quarters of the books were missing. And a person only has two hands!

In the first days he considered it a matter of sacred duty, of preeminent importance, to examine the manuscripts, some old, some resubmitted, since he himself had experienced the excitement, despair, and hope that were infused into these manuscripts—some of uneven quality, some even illiterate—by the distant young writers who yearned, as he did, for a ray of that literary light, who longed to display their own thoughts and feelings, which they considered most valuable, and to express their own understanding of the world above, below, and around them, which was, of course, the truest understanding. He meticulously read over the abundant notebooks and loose pages, written in the finest penmanship, sometimes adorned with naive sketches, sometimes with complete illustrations for possible use, and the cover letters that came with them. Their authors had spent perhaps weeks considering, searching, for the most polite and modest words to express the pride and satisfaction that was overflowing their hearts. Somewhere out there, in far-off villages, towns, and cities, these countless authors waited, in distress or defiance, awaiting the appearance of their work, an answer, some comments. Sensitive to this waiting, Stepan turned the pages of their works for hours on end, filling his evenings with papers of various quality, from wrapping paper to the finest sheets, with inks of various kinds, and various styles of handwriting, always careful not to overlook anything that might turn out to be valuable in the pile, feeling an immeasurable sympathy for the failures and expressing in his heart a kind word of encouragement to all.

But after a few days he had come to understand how little talent there was out there, how hopeless a task it was to search for pearls in this ocean of paper. After a week he was tired of it all, feeling irritation at the silly pretense of these hopeless writers with their silly stories and their even sillier poems. In the end he became what everyone must become, what the jailkeeper becomes among the prisoners. That is, he laughed at the miserable wannabees and used their worst errors as comic anecdotes among his friends and acquaintances. Sometimes the authors themselves would stop by, perplexed or stately, like an anxious accused waiting for the jury to reach a verdict, entering this land of milk and honey where fame and glory lie right on the surface, ready for the taking. And Stepan listened to them with a serious demeanor, answered them politely and pleasantly, but in his soul he was

laughing at them, because they really were funny in their diffidence, devotion, and concealed disdain. Among those who came were unrecognized geniuses bitterly complaining of injustice, swindlers pretending to be extremely naive, and even an insane man who identified himself, with documentary evidence, as a well-known writer who had long since died.

After a week Stepan had brought order to the manuscript archive and even arranged the library, working on it with a peculiar sensory satisfaction, because he loved this work, he loved books. Those for whom their first experience of the world and their fascination with it came from books will always see them as eternal, protean, and living benefactors. He wanted not only to read books, but to feel them around him, and so he envied anyone who had a library and secretly hoped that somehow, somewhere, he would have one of his own consisting of thousands of volumes stacked floor to ceiling among which he could live. In general, despite all his passions, he never lost hope in a kind of quiet, simple life among his books and his friends, a hope he guarded and protected against the possibility of various failures, as if it were a psychic life preserver, not particularly comfortable to swim in but nevertheless better than drowning.

The new editor was unfailingly and calmly polite with everyone, although they were always waiting for him, seeking him out for conversations, turning to him with requests, trying to find his soft spot. He was reliable in his promises, true to his word, understanding perfectly what can and must be said to whom in the always heavy literary atmosphere, to which he tried to bring a breath of fresh air. He found himself buffeted by an enormous variety of mutually contradictory influences, and under their influence he developed his own ideas and views about literature. They were not even views, not a thorough system of literary rankings, but a living relationship to the written word, a thirst and respect for it, a skill in understanding it and in finding within it the golden seeds of nourishment.

His lover's assignations continued without change, twice a week as scheduled previously. But now, preoccupied with literary matters that cling to a writer like tar, at his meetings with Zoska he could not stop himself from launching into descriptions of his conversations, meetings, and business, giving voice to his need to express that overflow of impressions that had accumulated in him over the last few days. In these stories there was, aside from their inherent interest, a certain dose of bragging, a hidden impulse to highlight the role of his own person and thus to elicit amazement that it was no one else but he who was at the center of all this activity. He praised as if to suggest that he could praise, he criticized as if to emphasize that he had good judgement, and he conjectured as if to recall that he was capable of thinking wisely. This was innocent preening before the girl, an expression of his need to please his girlfriend also with his spiritual qualities, a need to take delight in himself on her account, to demonstrate to himself that he deserved her attention, and to demonstrate to her that in choosing him she had, after all, chosen well. And Zoska understood this, since, from time to time,

interrupting him at the most interesting moments, her hand stroked his head and she exclaimed with a smile:

“In a word, divine one, you’re enthralled.”

He laughed and assured her that he was enthralled only with her.

Aside from his work in the editorial office, he was also responsible for seeing the journal make it through the printing press. This colossal enterprise, which spit out hundreds of thousands of offprints a day, conjured entirely new though familiar feelings in him. Upon entering the premises, he immediately loved the sharp pungent scent of ink and lead dust. Waiting for the proofs, he was fascinated by the wide rows of type cases where workers in blue shop coats, some talking and laughing, and others silently focused, snatched the elongated letters in their nimble fingers, snatched them quickly, seemingly carelessly, and arranged them into lines and then the lines into columns that would later be divided into the even rectangles of pages. Here, before his eyes, was the strange and simple process of the materialization of human thought. Having flashed into existence elsewhere, it came to rest in this expansive, bright hall under the incessant clatter of ventilation fans, in an infinite row of dumb signs, maintaining its insight and clarity. He could feel it being woven in the hands of the typesetters, how it poured forth from under the keys of the linotype machine, continually gaining strength, preparing to be reproduced on paper thousands upon thousands of times under the pressure of the press. Here the thought achieved its innate goal—to spread out without limit, as gas spreads, but without thinning out, in its original clarity and density. It entered this place as a small manuscript, only to emerge in boxes carted in hand trucks onto wagons of books, replicating, like a living cell, into an infinite series of clones.

But it was the print shop that he loved best—long curved corridor where the squat presses stood in single file stretching out a heavy jaw with each turn of the flywheel. Here the odor of the fumes from the inking rollers was strong, and you could hear the faint rustle of the paper squeezed between metal, the rhythmic sighs of the rollers, and the whine of the motors in wooden frames. This variety of endless noise that drowned out human speech and footsteps was the heartbeat of the city. Here, in the breast of the city, he could see the steel weave of its fabric, hear its voice, and apprehend its secret being. Enchantment and reverie overcame him, and, listening to the disparate knocking, drawing together its component parts, he slowly internalized this shining motion, became one with it, entered into it, endowing it with lightness and energy. In that moment there awoke in him an old recollection of the boundlessness of the steppe at night, of the deadened stillness of the plains beneath the vast and shifting heavens that he had observed with wonder and trembling as a solitary child. Now, as then, vague desires surged within him, like the splash of a small wave against the rustling sand.

He frequented the beer hall as often as before. One evening, the poet Vyhorsky threw down on the table before him a copy of his new collection of poems, *Metropolis and Moon*. It was a book about the city, the city in

darkness, the city asleep, the city that lives a magical life at night. On its pages, with almost no rhymes but with sharp, taut lines of verse, unfolded the interminable meetings of the government, the passionate dreams of the love-struck, the shadowy figures of thieves, the serenity of a scholar's study, the illuminated vestibules of theaters, lovers on the streets, the casino, non-stop factories, the train station, the telegraph office, streetlights, and policemen on the corner.

"I've read it already," said Stepan, "At the printer's. It's a wonderful book."

"What of it," grumbled the poet. "I don't feel that way anymore."

Later he added: "There's too much sympathy in it."

The evening threatened to be rather silent because the poet was in a bad mood. But, suddenly, he said to Stepan:

"My friend, you're getting on my nerves with your constant staring at that woman in the blue hat."

"But she's here almost every evening," answered Stepan nervously.

"And where should she be? And your staring says much more than you think."

"You're making that up," said the boy.

"She's a whore," said the poet. "A *restaurant whore* as opposed to a *street whore*, who finds her clients in the great outdoors. It's very sad that you don't know how to distinguish them from honest women. Of course, I'm talking about distinguishing them practically, since a theoretical distinction can hardly be made objectively, without using such slippery and relativistic concepts as decency and honor. In any case, every good beer hall like this one has three or four dames working in collusion with the owner, who clears all their competition from the premises, sometimes with considerable force. In the bowels of the premises there are a couple of rooms where they practice, as Heine put it, their horizontal craft. The price per episode is from 3 to 5 karbovanets for a single pleasure, not including the cost of the meal, where the proprietor makes his money. Now do you understand the essence of this symbiosis? But in this world there is nothing bright without its shadow—in this case, the police. The proprietor risks a 500 karbovanets fine and the closing of the establishment. But there is a well-developed system of signals, and the girls disappear from their rooms through back doors in a truly fantastic manner. And here we go. Your friend has just gone behind the screen."

"Indeed she has," said Stepan.

He drank some beer and lit a cigarette.

"She's cute," he added. "I'm sorry for her."

"I'm sorry for them, too," answered the poet. "But only because they lose their appeal too quickly. Even singers are luckier in that respect, and singing is honorable, besides. The street whores are not so refined, but they're less expensive and more numerous. They're unpretentious, so you can't expect very much of them. But they all categorically call themselves simply

women, thus very aptly emphasizing the very essence of their profession.”

“How do you know?” asked Stepan.

“I’m the one who should be wondering that you don’t know!” answered the poet. “Leave it to the poets to expound on theoretical ideas and lyricism. A prose writer who doesn’t know people isn’t worth a fig.”

“But you can’t really know people,” said Stepan.

“It only seems that way. Life is so simple that it seems in the end to be secretive. Relax. People, like numbers, are put together from a few basic figures—in various combinations, of course. People are not even pictogram puzzles; they are equations that can be solved with four arithmetical rules. What is the essence of a beer hall? People come here to take a break from their work, from politics, from their family, and from their problems—to live without care for a half hour or so, and to dream a little. The guy sitting across from us over there is an official of X rank who can only allow himself to come here and have a beer and a couple of salt pretzels once a fortnight. He thinks about it for half a month, and then he comes here and stretches his pleasure out for two hours, dreaming about heroic adventures, love, glory. He’s happy. The fellows on the right are a bunch of NEP businessmen celebrating a good contract with a government ministry. From here, they’ll go to Maxim’s, which is open ’til 3 AM. Over there is a young couple whispering about how their lives will not be like that of the old couple next to them, who have also come out to have a good time but are feeling uncomfortable about it.”

“And who’s that?” asked Stepan, his eyes indicating a figure sitting beside them, his head sorrowfully bent over and staring intently at an empty glass.

The poet looked carefully.

“That,” he said, “is a white-collar worker who was fired in a cost-cutting reorganization.”

“No,” said Stepan. “That’s probably a young writer with writer’s block.”

“Let’s check!” the poet said dryly.

They moved over to the next table. “Don’t worry, comrade,” said the poet, as the stranger looked up at them in amazement. “It could happen to anyone.”

“That’s true, to anyone,” he answered with a scowl.

“You’ll write something yet,” said Stepan.

“You’ll find another job,” said the poet.

“I’ve got my own problems,” the stranger blurted out. “Over on Vasylykivska Street, no less.”

And he lowered his head into his hands again.

“So why are you so sad?” Stepan called out.

“How can you be happy when your stomach is churning! Damned liver paté! And they call that fresh?”

Outside, the poet said to Stepan:

“Mistakes are always possible! What’s strange is how a stomach ache looks just like a spiritual ache.”

His regular salary as an editor allowed Stepan to quit his job teaching Ukrainian language at various institutions, even though payments for that had increased. To tell the truth, he had long since grown tired of those courses. They had become nothing more than a source of income, without any discernible satisfaction. They had held his interest only as long as he was still learning something from them himself and had become intolerable as they became a bland repetition of abhorrent facts. Endlessly rehearsing iolated and sibilant sounds, sucking on nouns and digging up verbs and impersonal constructions—what a horribly boring task. So he left this linguistic cubbyhole with the same joy that he had once entered it.

His material circumstances stabilized and his time was occupied without those unpleasant gaps that force a person excessively to examine his own person and to arrive at negative conclusions. During the day, work and love-making, in the evening, the beer hall, theater, cinema, and books—read now not with youthful enthusiasm but with a sober seriousness. The period when books seemed more important than readers had passed for him, and he now turned the pages with a calm equanimity. He might be surprised by them, or moved, or even taught by them, but not belittled. His life had once again found balance, an unconscious satisfaction with himself, thanks to the constant demands of his work. This sense of equilibrium reduced the intensity of his worries about his creativity.

Somehow, always doing and thinking about something else, he would forget about writing. Once in a while he would think of it, but vaguely, as if about the distant past or the future, though time and again he sensed within himself the indistinct presence of something extraneous, hidden, like the barely audible gurgle of a stream in the silence of a brightly lit forest. But sometimes, quite unexpectedly, there would appear in his head an image, part of a phrase, a fragment of a description that hovered in his thoughts for a moment without beginning or end, filling him with a great, unexplained joy. These were brief, almost content-less letters from the unknown. They were incomprehensible but gratifying messages from a distant, sunny land where he had abandoned forevermore a part of himself, only to long to be reunited with it. He painstakingly gathered these precious crumbs, reflected on them, sometimes even wrote them down on pieces of paper, and entered them into his memory, a store of provisions without a specific purpose. Enough, enough of this childish futility and despair. He had, in the end, done everything he could to chase creativity—let it now chase him, let it try hard to please him, to entice him to allow his attention to be turned back to it.

In this mood of peace and comfort he finally received word about his film script. One thousand five hundred karbovanets in honorarium. One hundred fifty of those white chervinets notes with their magical power to be transformed into desired objects. He was richer than Croesus or Rockefeller ever were, because he felt that from this day forward, his material problem

was solved, that he had managed to secure his life on a solid economic base. The only questions that remained concerned the superstructure.

That evening he bragged to Vyhorsky about the fortunate and comfortable beginning of his career in cinema.

The poet frowned.

“Just don’t confuse cinema with art,” he said.

“On the contrary, only two art forms have grown into industries: cinema and literature.”

“Arts need to be valued not for the size of the industries necessary for their development, but by the degree of abstractness of the medium they employ. This is the only way to establish an objective ranking of their value. Beyond any doubt, first place belongs to an art that does not exist, although there have been efforts to create it—the art of smell. Its medium is so refined and sophisticated that the organ of its perception in humans is incapable of making fine distinctions. That’s also why our language doesn’t have independent terms for the basic categories of smell, as we do, for example, with colors. The ultraviolet band of the arts—the art of sounds, music—is the highest of the arts that actually exist. In third place is the art of words, because its medium is far more definite than sounds and requires only average sensitivity for artistic perception, but it is nevertheless refined and subject to profound modeling. The crude arts begin with painting, which is locked in a single dimension and cannot be distributed for widespread dissemination, as were the two previous arts. Its medium, paint, is very concrete and limited, since light is a precondition of its effectiveness. Darkness is inaccessible to it, and so, too, is change. So, you understand how successively more concrete media begins to limit an art form? This is most evident in sculpture, which can only reproduce something in three dimensions. But the crudest form of art is the art of action, theater, which combines the concrete elements of all the preceding arts.

“And that’s good,” said Stepan.

“And last,” continued the poet, deeming it unnecessary to answer the boy, “the infrared band of arts: the art of living, an art form that is exclusively concrete, but just as undefined as the art of smell. To experience it, one only needs to know how to eat. So here I have given you a logical ordering of the arts according to a definite principle. There’s no room for cinema here. That’s just a gimmick, not an art—a magic lantern plus the work of actors, not the other way around. It’s entertainment, which is why all films have a happy ending. But if you’ve made some money on it, then you’re buying me dinner today.”

“It will be my pleasure!” said Stepan.

And they held a little banquet at the beer hall with a bottle of white wine.

“I envy you, though” said the poet. “The difference between a person and a plant is said to lie in the fact that a person is capable of moving around. But is a person allowed to take advantage of this quality? Are we not chained

to our cities, our villages, our employment? Are we to be content with dreams? I can't! Life is tolerable only so long as you can change its location. If you can't go somewhere tomorrow, you're a slave. For that, one needs money, and you have it."

"But I have no wish to go anywhere."

"That's why I'm jealous of your money," said the poet. "But don't worry, I won't ask for a loan. This spring I'll come into 500 karbovanets. And I'll leave. This summer I will wander on foot across Ukraine, like the famous Ukrainophile Skovoroda. I hate the city in the spring. Why? Because we have not quite escaped nature. When she awakens, she calls us like an abandoned mother. It's a blessing to live beside her, but she's much too distant to spend too much time with her. For us, nature is recollection and relaxation."

"You mean the forests and the fields?" asked Stepan thoughtfully.

"The forests and the fields. We have to remember them at least once a year. Life is a miserable thing, we are justified in our complaints about it, but in choosing between life and death—there isn't any choice. I raise a toast to Grandma Nature: although the present she gave us was meager, it was the only one at her disposal."

X

The first order of business for Stepan Radchenko after he had become very wealthy was to change his room. It would be a great joy to send his tattered apartment off to the archives, feeling a dull enmity toward it for all that he had endured there, because a person's room knows his most intimate desires, spies on his vacillations, absorbs his thoughts and becomes, over and over again, the evil and odious witness of the past, always somewhat paralyzing his willpower and undermining his wishes with its eternal and annoying "I know you."

So he engaged a broker and explained his wishes to him: a spacious, bright, and private room in a large building somewhere in the center of town. Steam heating, unfurnished, and he was willing to pay a release fee. The tenant was quiet, single, and neat.

The broker heard him out and said:

"In a word, you want a *real* room."

Gradually, his circle of acquaintances was expanding. From his colleagues at work, his handshakes now extended to their families and friends and even further, into the depths of the city, to representatives of the most diverse characters, professions, and ideas. He was tipping his hat ever more frequently on the street, in response to greetings from young scholars, party members, union activists, and just ordinary people of both sexes, undistinguished workers at various institutions, where they were paid. In the theaters, in the smoking rooms, he could freely join a group where the play, the actors, and impressions were being discussed. He could stop by someplace for a cup of tea, he could spend a half-hour walking around and chatting with someone on the street about important and trivial things; he attended events where new works were read and criticized over a glass of wine, as well as events where people goofed off and told love stories. So he could certainly find the relaxation that all souls, fatigued by their daily obligations, find in meaningless diversions.

He felt free and at ease in social circles, taking pleasure in the thin threads that he had woven among people, like an industrious spider. He felt an insatiable curiosity about everything, an unquenchable thirst to know and understand every new person he met, trying to understand him completely, asking inconspicuous questions about him, about his circumstances, his views, his work. He observed his wishes and pleasures, he longed to enter that secret museum that every person makes of themselves, a museum of used-up ideas and buried feelings, a museum of memories, of anxieties experienced and hopes dashed, to enter into that archive of a person where endless drawers hide operational plans and the ledgers of the past. He was attentive to those little things through which a person appears more clearly than when speaking on stage, attentive even to gossip and rumors, and he was so persistent in his curiosity that if someone was not home when he came to

visit, he would ask to leave a note and then take the opportunity to rifle through the person's desk, examining his notebooks and letters as if overcome with an unconquerable intrusiveness, a kleptomaniac for the tokens of someone else's existence. Like a true maniac, he knew how to hide his prying beneath an unflappable composure and politeness. Like an accomplished thief, he carried with him everywhere an assortment of sophisticated picks and hooks which he used to perform, undetected, the most complex operations on his acquaintances. He had dozens of acquaintances but no friends, he walked side by side but felt an immeasurable distance from everyone, because there was always glass between them, the magnifying glass of a researcher. And often, returning from a well-attended function, he felt lonely, empty of all thoughts, and tired.

His official duties were supplemented by work in the cultural section of the union's local committee, to which he had been elected. As usual, he took on all the work himself, injected new life and spirit into it, fulfilling his own appetite for community work, his need to work on behalf of people and to stir them into action, for that other, malicious attitude toward them could not absorb all his energy or exhaust the breadth of his interests. He was a responsible citizen, as decisive in public matters as he was tentative in personal ones, as dedicated in the former as he was self-serving in the latter, because these were different affairs that he handled in different manners, although with identical fervor. First as a rebel, then in the village hall, in the KUBUch, and now the union's local committee, everywhere he found—because he had to find it—a niche where he could satisfy his innate inclination to civic activity. Meetings of the cultural commission, meetings of the local committee, workshops, roundtables, conferences, appearances, fundraising events, reports, development plans, accounts and estimates—all of these whizzed through his hands like the colorful balls of a juggler. You could rely on him, and you could pile on more. He could pull a full load like a race horse, and the more pressure he felt, the more efficiently he allocated his time.

The greatest difficulty in this atmosphere of relentless activity was to block off a few hours each week for his assignation with Zoska. They were harder and harder to fit into his schedule, since the busiest time was always before lunch. Before their meetings he fretted, almost grudgingly, that tomorrow he would have to drop various business, put off some smaller matters, run across to the other side of town, and then come back to pick them up again, necessarily somewhat tired, and then go for a late dinner, throwing off his accustomed schedule all the way into the evening. But he could find little time to devote to the girl in the evenings either, since he could never quite be certain if he would be free the next evening, and he would, for the most part, go to the theater with his colleagues, rarely having the opportunity to invite his girlfriend to join them.

For him, the room where they met became a small waystation, where he could get off the express train, with his suitcase and his watch in hand,

listening for the whistle of the next train. He kissed her hastily—indeed, he did everything hastily, adding a certain sense of anxiety to their assignations which destroyed the earlier serenity of their romantic dream. The moments of quiet enchantment when they sat close, happily leaning toward each other, had passed; the passion of caressing hands, always searching and finding something new, had faded; impassioned whispering about love had melted; and words no longer combined in stimulating sequences but sputtered into familiar platitudes. On the eve of spring, leaves were withering on the tree of knowledge in their Eden and slowly falling day after day, leaving the branches bleak and bare.

The girl sensed this painfully and apprehensively. He had completely brushed her aside. What could you do? He had business to attend to! But wasn't she worth attending to as well? Then he would talk about the priority of public matters over private ones, emphatically lecturing her about a boring moral code he hardly believed in himself. But he assured her that when spring came, he would have fewer obligations, he would have more free time, and then they would be able to abandon this room and move outdoors into nature, where they would not be constrained by the time of day. They'll move their assignations to the evening, because they always seemed unnatural for him in the daytime, for reasons that are well understood, and every man, unfortunately, feels this much more acutely than women do. What's more, he would have some vacation time in the summer, and if she wished, they could go somewhere together. Surely they would go! He spoke so convincingly, the sound of his voice was so comforting, that she unwittingly followed him on this imaginary journey, where there would be only the two of them again, without any cares or obligations, happy and enchanted. Where would they go? He was adamant about water. Either the Dnipro beyond the rapids, or the sea between Odessa and Batumi. Maybe they could wander in the mountains some, too. He would buy a camera. But now, he has to go.

“Stay! Just five more minutes,” she said.

He grumbled, but he stayed. She sat in her chair with her legs tucked in beneath her, silent and thoughtful, feeling a weariness that displaced her laughter, joking, and coquettishness. After a moment, she sullenly whispered:

“Go, already.”

It was an awkward parting.

One day Zoska mentioned that to celebrate the coming spring, one of her girlfriends was organizing a pot luck party. But the problem was, this would necessarily involve dancing. Just a foxtrot would be enough, but she wasn't sure the divine one could learn to dance in so short a time. He would have declined the invitation, no doubt, but since the matter concerned his physical prowess, he answered:

“Nothing to it! Show me.”

First he needed to learn the waltz, the foundation of all other dances. Lifting her skirt, she showed him the necessary steps.

“One, two, three! One, two, three.”

He stood with his hands in his pockets, carefully observing her steps.

“One more time,” he said.

Then he tried on his own. He took off his jacket and forced his unwilling legs to move with his arms outstretched. Zoska stood beside him, quietly clapping her hands, so as not to arouse too much interest from the neighbors.

“Yes, yes,” she repeated. “That’s wonderful.”

With the movements now familiar, he asked that they practice together.

“You must embrace the woman,” she said.

“That I know how to do,” he answered.

Time passed unnoticed. Zoska predicted he would have a great future as a dancer.

“You’re very nimble in your dancing,” she said.

“I’m very nimble in everything I do.”

“So our lessons will continue?”

“Yes, but we’ve switched roles.”

The next time they danced the waltz again, quietly humming a melody. He was more confident in his movements and was better able to keep the beat.

“I’m tired already,” said Zoska.

“More, more!” he said. “We have to work on this. There isn’t much time.”

In the end he admitted that he had been practicing at home with a chair.

After the waltz, the foxtrot seemed very easy. He was even somewhat disappointed in its simplicity.

“You just walk around like this?” he asked.

Zoska explained that the opportunities for variations were endless, that you could add acrobatic elements or your own inventions. But holding the woman is far more serious here than it is in the waltz, so this cheered him up. He immediately imagined that this would lead to squeezing quite a few women, tall and full-breasted women, stepping between their legs and feeling their breasts and tight abdomen through clothing. So he doubled his practice time.

The business of finding a new apartment was progressing very poorly and occupied a great deal of his time. He couldn’t find a suitable room. When Stepan visited his broker, expressing his disappointment, yelling and cursing, and repeating his conditions regarding the room, he always heard the same obsequious response:

“In a word, you want a *real* room.”

Stepan would get ten new addresses, but the same thing would happen without variation: some of the rooms were already rented even as long as a half a year ago, some would be free at an unknown time in the future, some were not for rent at all, and the two or three that were actually for rent were real hell-holes, the tattered homes of bed bugs. The boy viewed in revulsion the dirt that a person leaves behind after moving, the piles of trash and the slimy wallpaper thrown aside like manure. He was repulsed by the air in the empty spaces that reeked of sweat and the smells of life, and he would emerge

from these visits with forlorn thoughts about the depravity and animal-like character of people, among whom the finest are clean only because they wash and change their underwear.

In the end, he told his broker that he had no intention of climbing all over buildings for nothing, and the agent agreed to come over personally to inform him when an appropriate room was available. He took three karbovanets for this.

But Stepan had long since said goodbye to his own room, and he entered it in the evenings as if it were a hotel. To all his doubts about the creative process, he found a simple, formulaic answer: as soon as he found a new apartment, he would begin writing. Indeed, he had gotten into the habit of tying various expectations to his new room. Thus, although his housing crisis did trouble him somewhat, it did not disturb the equanimity of his spirit.

Be that as it may, trouble was stalking him from a different direction. On the distant horizon of his young spring sky, which was growing deeper and bluer under the influence of the enthusiastic rays of the sun, dark clouds had appeared, still barely visible, still transparent, but sad, like the first teardrops from the icicles hanging off the roofs of tall buildings.

Actually, spring was just getting sketched out, but it was certainly imminent. The snow wasn't melting as yet, but it had turned gray, lost its luster, and shrunk into heaps piled along the edges of the streets, while on the cobblestones continuous traffic had chopped it into a dark, reddish mush and the constant hammering of horses' hooves had pounded it into a series of uneven potholes. On the sidewalks, during bright days it turned into a thin jelly but during the cold nights it hardened into inconvenient lumps. Everywhere it was being cleared off roofs in giant snowballs, which hit the ground with a dull thump, like a soulless body. On the street corners, girls in fur coats were selling bunches of snowdrops that had sprouted on nearby hills where the ground had already thawed. Five kopecks a bunch. Five kopecks!

There were sunny mornings, mornings with a warm wind, that carried the scent of moist soil and last year's herbs from distant fields, the seductive aroma of rye shoots and bursting apple blossoms. There were quiet, dreamy days when, in response to nature's rebirth, a powerful, simple joy of life awakens in the blood, when the soul succumbs to that mindless desire that led our ancestors to the altars of the god of spring. On days like these, Stepan liked to wander and observe.

With his heavy portfolio under his arm, he meandered the streets in the afternoon without any evident destination, avoiding greetings and feeling a need to be alone among strangers after tedious meetings at work or in civic organizations. For a while, he did not himself understand this sudden urge to go out on the street and that sense of comfort and satisfaction that enveloped him amidst the bustle and laughter of the spring crowds. He thought he was just passing the time, the way everyone else passes the time on a sunny day, for rest and relaxation.

But once, returning home late, nervous and excited, he had to admit to

himself that he was wandering in order to look at women. He now understood that his gaze rested only on them, on their smiling faces, on their seductive legs, and on the warm clothing that hid their bodies, which he could almost feel; it was only at them that he looked with ardent desire, as if each one had her own, unique secret, her own garden of passions and delights that she tended for his benefit. From each of them flowed a voluptuous cloud of her female essence that intoxicated and energized him. His soul wilted in a steamy fog when he saw a shapely and good-looking woman, capable of love and worthy of love, and he would fall in love with her immediately for a moment, overcome with gratitude that she exists, that he sees her, that he can caress her with his passionate gaze. Some of them turned and looked, greeting him with a barely visible, provocative smile. This made his heart jump and sing. But now, having understood this, he did not feel shame, but rather fear and happiness at the realization of the wild force burning within him, a fraction of the powerful craving that moves the world. A new, bright feeling awoke within him—not lust, not desire, but a reflection of them: the certainty that he is capable of desire and will desire.

He approached the window and opened it, tearing the paper pasted over it. With the cold air that entered the room came the bustle of the inexhaustible street and along with it, the jingle of *their* voices, the rustle of *their* footsteps and skirts, the motion of *their* bodies and lips. He stretched out his hands. What was it with him? Was it spring? Where did this intoxicating premonition of an intimate, unexpected encounter come from? He fell on the bed and curled up from the cold air that continued to flow into the room, abandoning himself to that ardent dream that appeared before his open eyes in a numberless swarm of apparitions. The apparitions filled his room, appearing and disappearing with the unfettered flight of his imagination. He wandered in hot foreign lands, rambling across fragrant fields and through thick leafy forests, he climbed a mountain from where he could see the endless horizon of the earth, and everywhere, from various hiding places, slender hands stretched out to him, enchanting faces bent down toward him, and he felt their touch as if these were really kisses. He was dreaming. And suddenly, in this strange journey across the bright land of lovemaking, a small pale figure stepped out toward him. She was bent over and sorrowful, like a roadside beggar. Zoska. He stopped in surprise, and the bright illusion he was experiencing faded in proportion to the growing clarity of this figure, until he was alone with her, face to face in an empty room, confounded by the sudden interruption. Zoska! A terrible sorrow crushed him at the recollection of the girl, who was used up as far as his feelings were concerned, who was no longer on the path that his soul was following. Her image called forth a worry, not an impulse, a discomfort over the preposterous order of life that required penance for past happiness, a protest against the stickiness of feelings and people that have to be peeled off of oneself, like a bandage.

The boy got up and closed the window. It was only nine o'clock—he could still catch Vyhorsky in the beer hall.

As usual, a crowd of people was there, which calmed him. Smiling, he approached the table where the poet was sitting.

“Too bad you’re a little late,” said the latter. “You just missed a little scandal. They had to escort a drunk out the door, but he slipped out of their hands and managed to smash two platters of fish over by the counter. It was a great scene. Unfortunately, they didn’t let him continue.”

“Shall we have dinner?” asked Stepan.

“As long as you’re buying,” said the poet.

They ordered chicken fritters, and the poet filled their glasses.

“Do you know the relation between alcohol and the astral world?” he asked. “It’s an inverse relationship. Theosophists tell us that mankind will progress from its current intellectual phase into a spiritual phase. The nervous system will get refined into a truly psychic one, but for that to happen you must abstain from meat and alcohol. The center of the highest spiritual activity resides in the pituitary gland of the brain, which cannot tolerate alcohol. The pituitary gland is the focal point of all theosophy.”

His hand stroked his shaved head.

“What about the astral world?”

“It will be accessible to the race of beings that develops this gland. But I think we’re not missing much in this astral world by drinking beer, because people have had trouble wherever they appeared.”

“I don’t believe in old ladies’ fantasies,” said Stepan. “But I’m anxious today. Spring, maybe?”

“Remember that every spring ends with frost,” said Vyhorsky. “Better not to bloom, to avoid withering.”

“Well, excuse me,” said Stepan. “It’s better to die than to think like that.”

“I have no wish to die,” answered the poet. “To wish for what must come anyway is sheer lunacy.”

Suddenly, he cheered up.

“My friend, I haven’t yet told you my latest good news. Happiness on earth is possible!”

“You don’t say!”

“Yes! I thought about happiness for twenty-eight years, and I came to the conclusion that it did not exist. But in my twenty-ninth year I have changed my mind. By the way, did you notice when I turned twenty-eight? It was the day before yesterday. Time is such a cheat—always working conscientiously.”

“But it brought you happiness!” said Stepan.

“It would have been better if it had not come,” sighed the poet. “I’m not afraid of old age, or of death, but everything that is unavoidable is annoying.”

He planted his chin into his palms and silently stared for a moment at the room full of people in front of him, throbbing with voices and motion. His overgrown, unshaven face looked completely exhausted. Then his fingers began to move, scratching his rough cheek.

“Happiness?” he said directly. “Even happiness doesn’t satisfy me. The problem is that I was happy and didn’t notice it.”

He filled their glasses with his peculiar sharp motion.

“The problem is that happiness has nothing to do with satisfaction. If it were otherwise, we could never understand people. Victories in the realm of our emotions or our reason are too fleeting to bring happiness, which is a permanent sense of joy at a higher, that is, an abstract order. Happiness is a higher quality of spiritual life, as health is of physical life. Happiness is spiritual health. Particular pains and wounds cannot undo it. What is happiness? It is the aesthetic delight we have from ourselves, our own ‘self.’ The aesthetic function derives from the perception of harmony, or of greatness. The harmony of the ‘self,’ that is, this equilibrium within a person, is static, a stoppage at a given spiritual state. In our case, the aesthetics of harmony are a happiness of non-yearning, a happiness of acquiescence with life, a submission to it—that is, the happiness of a slave. It exists, it is happiness, but a miserable quality of it. Do you understand?”

“I understand, but not so fast, if you please. You’ve been inventing this for twenty-eight years, but I have to comprehend it in ten minutes, don’t forget.”

The poet smiled.

“You weren’t so witty when we first met. Now, I’ll continue. The aesthetics of greatness are the elevation of one spiritual element above all others, its dominance over the others, its active struggle against them, and thus action, yearning. The happiness of greatness is dynamic while the happiness of harmony is, in the final analysis, nothing but a pleasant dream. And now, the most important thing: the happiness of greatness can develop from the elevation of either feeling or reason. The former is evident in the example of any religion you may choose. The latter—happiness from the consciousness that the soul is ordered on the principle of reason and is subservient to it: this is the highest form of happiness, at least for now, and maybe for all time, if the prophecies of the theosophists do not come true. I don’t believe in them either, but we know so little that in the future, all kinds of nonsense may come true. I can’t even be sure that I won’t end up in paradise.”

“Not to mention hell?”

“I’m willing, if they have beer there and the devils are as friendly as you are. Therefore, we must put reason as the first principle of life. It is good. It accepts everything, and it is forgiving. It knows how to rely on causes, while feelings destroy them. The happiness of the greatness of feelings is the happiness of negation, while the happiness of reason is affirmation. Feelings are irritation, reason is tolerance; feelings are enthusiasm, reason is sharpness; feelings ultimately leave only ashes, reason only wounds. That is the full picture of happiness. Which do you choose?”

“The happiness of feelings, even though it is limited.”

“Everyone chooses what they can. As for the limitations, don’t forget

that our entire lives are limited by a particular time, place, and conditions which are, under the best of circumstances, hardly dependent on us. Personally, I assume it's even worse. When someone talks to me about the independence of nations, or of women, I want to answer, 'My friends, there is only one independence—the independence of our lives from us.' So there is no reason to fear limitations, because the inclination to the unlimited always leads to emptiness."

"It's midnight already."

This was spoken by the barman with a pleasant smile. Of course, this was a children's hour, but he, as an honest citizen, took it as a personal obligation to adhere to the prescriptions of the law, particularly since the fines were enormous.

He made a bow at the door.

"It was a little noisy today, please excuse us."

He was alluding to the scandal with the plates.

"Use aluminum tableware," advised the poet. "It doesn't break, and the metal itself is very fashionable right now."

Then he turned to Stepan.

"You want to walk around? It's a beautiful Ukrainian night."

The boy hesitated.

"I'm pretty tired," he said.

"I promise to be silent."

They went together to the opera, where the performance had already ended and the unsuccessful coachmen were slowly dispersing down Lenin Street. On reaching Shevchenko Boulevard, the friends turned back. The poet indeed kept silent, pulling down his hat and sticking his hands into his coat pockets, while Stepan, intoxicated by the cold glow of the moon, took off his galoshes and slid on the frozen sidewalks.

On the way to his next assignation with Zoska, the boy was nervous, even somewhat fearful. What words would he need to find to express that heavy, complex feeling of regret and parting that gnawed at him? The stereotype of love suggested that breaking up required a sufficient reason: jealousy, infidelity, at least an argument, or the gradual cooling of feelings over a long period of time. And would he have the courage? Would she understand?

Zoska was already waiting for him. Having kicked off her shoes, she was sitting on the chair in a puffy blue jacket. She smiled at him as he walked in.

"I've missed you so much!" she said.

Hesitantly, the boy stopped by the door and looked at her with restless eyes.

"I missed you too," he answered.

There was so much longing in these words that even to him they sounded surprisingly sincere.

"Come here," she whispered.

He threw his coat and hat on a chair and approached her with the timid walk of a criminal.

She sat him down beside her on the rug and lifted his head up with her hands.

“Shall I kiss you?”

“Kiss me!”

“Do you want that?”

“I want it,” he whispered in desperation.

She barely touched his lips with hers, and then, shuddering, fell on him with such a long and passionate kiss that he began to gasp for air.

“That’s how much I love you,” she said.

He sat in silent mortification, stroking and kissing her hands.

“These two days when we didn’t see each other seemed so long, like two endless years,” she said. “I don’t know what’s happened to me. I even wanted to come visit you at the office.”

“Springtime,” he mumbled.

“Yes, of course—springtime. How could I have forgotten.”

And she began to sing quietly, rocking a leg back and forth.

“As I walked out one morning,

In the springtime of the year,”

Stepan watched her, taking delight in her petite figure, enchanted by the happiness that rang out in her voice. He wanted to take her by the hand and lead her through fields of flowers and have her sing like this, sing for him, for the sun, for the beautiful horizon dotted with white puffs of cloud.

He squeezed her hand and said: “Zoska, shall we go out in the fields when the snow melts?”

“Yes, we’ll go, and I’ll plait a wreath.”

He could not hold himself back. In a sweet burst of repentance, in a flood of memories of all their times together, he embraced her and began to kiss her slowly, madly, on the eyes, hair, lips, choking on the happiness of contrition, as he had never kissed before.

“Zoska ... you’re ... I can’t live without you, I can’t,” he whispered.

When he calmed down, she stroked his head.

“You’re divine.”

But these kisses were not enough for him. Something inexhaustible and inspired still remained in his soul. He wanted to do something unique just for her, he wanted her always to be happy when she was with him, as she was now. He wanted to bind her to himself forevermore.

“Zoska, I’ve been thinking about something for a long time,” he said enthusiastically.

“About what?”

“Let’s get married!”

She gasped.

“You’re insane!”

No, he was not at all insane. With inventiveness at the speed of

lightning, as if he had really been thinking of this for a long time, he seriously began to expound his arguments. First of all, they were already married in all but name. They weren't thinking of breaking up, were they? Good! Well then, it's time to draw inferences. He's living like a beggar, with no peace or comfort. His life is in such chaos he can't even write. And you can't go on relying on someone else's apartment forever. They know each other quite well already. Why steal hours here and there to be together, when they could be together all the time? Her life will also be better—if she actually loves him, of course. Everyone else gets married. It's somehow strange they haven't done it yet. The financial side is completely secure. He'll even help her find a job, if it comes to that.

He calmly weighed all the arguments “for” and couldn't find any “against.” Then he asked:

“So tell me Zoska, do you want to?”

She answered slyly: “Of course I want to.” And then she added sorrowfully, “If you only knew how difficult it is to be a mistress. How much I've suffered.”

He kissed her in gratitude.

“This will be the end of your suffering. But what about your parents?”

“Why would I ask their permission? I'll just get married, and that's that.”

Now she sat down on the rug next to him, and they began an exuberant exploration of their future life together. They would visit the marriage bureau when the room Stepan was searching for became available. But maybe they should be looking for two rooms? They considered this for a moment, and decided that a two-room place is harder to find and more complicated to furnish. Maybe over time. Stepan expounded ambitious plans for work and leisure. Zoska immediately developed a woman's instinct for putting things in order. Instantly she could see herself as a housewife with unchallenged authority in the home. Two rugs, or you can forget about marriage! Breakfast will be eggs, of course.

“That's very nutritious, and tasty, too,” she said.

He hugged her and whispered in her ear: “And we'll have a little one.”

“A little what?”

“A baby—a boy, of course.”

“Oh, a little boy. That would be wonderful.”

Finally, Stepan remembered to look at his watch. Five to four. What a cheat time is!

When they were dressed, the girl remembered and added:

“Tomorrow is that party. Shall we go?”

He politely kissed her hand.

“Why not, and if you like, we'll announce our engagement there.”

“Oh, that will be something!”

Zoska took six karbovanets from him for their contribution to the party, his and hers, gave him the address, and told him to show up at ten. She had to

go earlier, to help set things up.

But he did not want to part from her until tomorrow.

“Shall we go to the theater tonight?”

“Only if we come home in a carriage!”

XI

The next morning Stepan woke up in good time, but even before he had gotten out of bed, he felt a gnawing in his heart. As if everything he saw around him was very ugly. He lay in bed with his eyes open in that half-diseased state when you don't want to move or think, when blood barely flows in your veins, as if the body were still sleeping, though the mind is awake. Then, suddenly, he jumped up, realizing what a stupid thing he had done yesterday.

He tried to force himself to reimagine yesterday's events calmly, to understand the confusion that had led him into a trap, but one thought kept ruining his recollections, piercing the surface of every reflection he tried to develop. He was getting married! But he wasn't just getting married: he had to get married, because he had asked for it himself—like a complete idiot he had made this senseless request, which, when fulfilled, will imprison him in chains. All the horrors of married life immediately appeared before him, searing his heart with revulsion, like a vision of a jail cell or a coffin into which he had volunteered to lie down with his hands bound.

He felt the unshakeable presence of what is usually called “someone close,” with whom he would have to share his thoughts, his joys, and his sorrows, diluting them between two hearts. Someone who would put his thoughts and plans under invisible and tender control, who would become the permanent partner of all his hopes and actions, a required addendum, chosen once but forged together forever. Someone who would always be in the same room with him, who would always eat with him at the same table, who would breathe the same air. And it would always be she, everywhere it would be she; at night he would hear her breathing; in the morning he would see her face; during the day, she would be the one waiting for him; in the evening, she would be waiting at the door. He imagined the lazy sleep of a couple in bed, the gradual familiarization of passionate encounters, which become regular and monotonous in the end, like tea or dinner; the intimacy with a different soul that no longer holds any secrets, the permanent availability of a body, which destroys the fire of desire; the boredom of inevitable quarrels that uncover the depth of incompatibility between two beings, and the even greater boredom of making up afterwards—evidence of powerless obedience to fate.

Thus rose the curtain on the reality of marital life, this bottomless pit into which fall those who are blinded by a fading love that has played out, and he struggled, like a little insect caught in the web of a giant spider, fluttering the transparent wings of its soul to tear itself free of the deadly threads. But this is foolish, to ruin oneself for nothing! A deep sorrow, an inexhaustible self-pity enveloped him. He wanted to hug and comfort himself, calm himself with the kindest of words, as a credulous victim of human relationships.

On the other side of the wall his neighbors were also getting up; the door

to the kitchen creaked, the stove whistled, women's raised voices rang out along with the cries of children. He listened to this and clearly felt the danger at close quarters, just beyond the door of his room, with its menacing hand on his doorknob, ready to enter. "That's how my child will cry. That's how my wife will yell. And there's my booming voice grumbling about something or other." And how is he going to be able to write in wild circumstances like these? And the voice of his soul answered without hesitation: "No, you won't—certainly not! My boy, you won't be able to write a damned thing—it's the end of all your hopes and dreams. And it's a shame, because, say what you will, you do have talent." So now he must say farewell to his dear inner world, like a monk's parting from the bright world outside before entering the darkness of a monastery.

And would his creativity be the only sacrifice on this monstrous altar of matrimony? Isn't he offering a futures contract at wholesale prices for all his lifelong kisses? Isn't he buying love on a promissory note without terminal conditions—a note that obliges him to pay an outrageous rate of interest in self-restraint. There are countless women he hasn't known, countless charming faces and sculpted bodies—to pass over them is to experience a loss. And from the depths of his memory there suddenly appeared lithe figures seen somewhere, glimpsed at some point vaguely on the street, figures who captivate the eyes for a moment and imprint themselves in memories like quiet invitations to the future. In the imagination they combine into dreams containing singular bits and pieces, gathered by the senses and assembled into a single image that appears before the mind as a creation from another world. Longing tortured him—until now he had loved only random women, women whom he met accidentally on a city walkway. But he had never searched for a woman. At that moment, he thought that perhaps somewhere there waits for him a woman who is identical to the one in his dreams: slim, charming, and beautiful, who would kiss him in the dark on a spring night in the park, who would walk with him arm in arm along the slumbering streets, raising her radiant eyes beneath the streetlights. And now he would be cutting off the paths leading to her!

Stepan got up and sat on the bed, his hair disheveled from sleeping, his shirt unbuttoned, his bare legs hanging down to the floor. He took a cigarette from the chair by the bed and smoked gluttonously, inhaling its smoke continuously until he had burned it down to the end. Then he lit another and began thinking again.

How could it have happened? He could no longer find the thoughts that he had expressed so eloquently yesterday. But they were, of course, only a reaction. The essence of the matter was that he had felt sorry for Zoska, the sorrow and pity of parting, and he had carelessly gotten carried away with these feelings. Now he had to pay, not for a sinful act, but for his own goodness. And he was overcome with the angry wish to force himself to marry, to teach himself a lesson forevermore. Next time he would know better—to feel sorry for someone is to punish oneself!

And how could *she* have been so treacherous as to take advantage of his noble impulse? Didn't she have enough judgment to turn down the offer? To see that such offers are only made in desperation? How could there be any respect for her now? An absence of the most ordinary sensitivity—that would be the most charitable way to put it. And in the worst case—a craftily calculated game, a woman's masterful hunt for a husband. And what's more, she has no job. She is probably unfit for any kind of work. She's bored, and doesn't have the money for clothes—so why not get married? Particularly when you find a nice young man, an honest fellow who doesn't have too much experience in life and with women's trickery!

Indignant, he got up and walked barefoot to the table where his pants lay. What a cheat that Zoska is! But he wasn't going to be duped quite so easily!

Remembering his obligations at the office, he began to dress quickly. A personal tragedy did not give him the right to ignore his duties, and he immediately abandoned his unfinished thoughts without reaching any conclusions. Only, while washing up, the thought occurred to him that maybe she really did love him and would be distressed to hear all the things he was planning to tell her. But, noticing again the signs of pity within himself, he angrily splashed water into his own face. What a dope! And even if she does love you, it's foolish of her to do so—she should have stopped a long time ago. It was not his function to provide a lover's equivalent of unemployment insurance.

Grabbing his portfolio under his arm, he ran out to the street, buttoning his coat on the run, and jumped on a streetcar, which took him to the Regional Executive Committee building. Having gulped down a cup of tea with marzipan at the cafeteria, the boy appeared at the editorial office only a half hour late. But he was embarrassed even by that.

"I've got to keep ahold of myself," he thought.

And there was plenty of business to attend to. Over the course of an hour or so, he had to walk over to the telephone at least a dozen times and answered a whole pile of letters. Then he rode over to the print shop, came back to the editorial office, drew up the statement of honoraria for the most recent issue of the journal, and signed off around four o'clock. The staff nodded or shook his hand as they dispersed to go home, and he wanted to tell them, by way of a pleasant joke:

"You know, I almost got married! What a joke, eh?"

He had his dinner, read over a few newspapers in the reading room, and at five he went to the meeting of the union's local committee. The topic for discussion was the policy for summer holidays—an important and substantial matter. Spring was coming, and it was time to plan for writers to get some rest over the summer and to replenish their creative juices. The meeting ended at eight, but someone suggested the cinema and they all went in a big group. It was ten thirty before Stepan Radchenko returned to his room that day.

At home, his anxiety, which had been sidelined by the extraneous business of the day, awoke again. Damn it, this marriage thing has to be cancelled! And then there's this party. Anger choked him when he recalled that this was to be the party where their engagement would be announced. How wrong can you be?! But, after hesitating for a while, he decided to go anyway. He won't let that little cheat think that he's a coward. He'll tell her straight to her face, you can be sure of that! She had not earned any leniency with these sneaky tricks.

The address was in his notebook. Great! And why let his money go to waste? And tomorrow's a holiday to boot, the day after is Sunday. So let's have a good time. In the end, he just wanted to dance a little, make use of the skills he had worked to acquire. But he changed slowly, washing up and brushing his clothes carefully, to make sure he arrived as late as possible. Let her worry a little too!

Around twelve, he rang the bell on the third floor of a big building on Piatakov Street.

The door was opened by a girl he had never met before, but Zoska came out to the vestibule right away. No sooner had he glimpsed from a distance her little figure, thin face, and the tip of her nose on it than it became perfectly clear to him that not only any notion of marriage but of any relationship with this canary was just some kind of misunderstanding. What could he have seen in her? He all but blushed in shame for his poor taste.

Meanwhile Zoska introduced him to the girl who had opened the door. She was the hostess, and Stepan graciously kissed her hand.

"Take off your coat," she said invitingly. "We've been dancing for a while already."

Stepan bowed. Through the half-open door of the living room came the loud rhythm of a dance, the rustle of feet across the floor, and indistinct conversations.

"Why so late?" asked Zoska apprehensively when the other girl had left. "I was worried. I thought you might be sick."

"Nope. Perfectly healthy," he said.

While he hung up his coat, Zoska, reassured, rambled on happily. Well, it's great that he showed up. Everyone's here now. How wonderful! The parents had been sent out of the house, because parents are such a bore. Nothing can spoil a party like parents!

Then she took him by the hand to lead him into the living room. But he pulled back his hands and coldly said:

"Wait, I need to talk to you."

Zoska stopped, startled by the severity of his voice.

"Something's happened!?" she cried.

"Zoska," he began, "Yesterday I said a bunch of stupid things to you. I admit my mistake. But forget them, once and for all."

She was silent for a while. Then she quietly answered, looking him straight in the eyes:

“You made it all up yourself. Well ... Alright. Let’s go back to how it was before.”

“No, not how it was before. Nothing. Not at all. You understand?”

Zoska whispered, shaking her head:

“So you don’t love me?”

“Stop with this love already!” he yelled in despair. “You make me sick. Leave me alone!”

And, turning away, he walked into the living room.

He stopped for a moment at the door, examining the apartment. It must belong to a doctor, judging by the illustrated journals scattered on the round tables and the medical smell that lingered in the air despite the tobacco smoke. The tables and chairs were pushed up against the walls, to make room in the middle for dancing. Further on, in the next room, glowed a soft red light, and over on the left, behind a closed door, there was a clatter of dishes and silver. Altogether there were about twenty people, and he immediately noticed that there were more women than men. Only four couples were dancing, the others sat against the walls amidst the displaced furniture. By the piano in the corner was a thin Jewish musician, who looked up at Stepan as he walked in with the careless gaze of a professional who was otherwise uninvolved, except for his hands.

Having carefully examined the place and the people, the boy walked up to the hostess with an easy, friendly smile and asked her to introduce him to the guests.

“Where’s Zoska?” she asked.

“Off somewhere.”

The music died down, the dancers separated, and everyone was available to him. He slowly walked around the whole room with the hostess, stopping by every chair and pronouncing his name clearly and confidently, carelessly looking at the men but closely examining all the women, as if they were citizens brought before a court. His torrid gaze eagerly explored their faces, floating easily over their hair, cheeks, and neck, mercilessly uncovering any blemish in their appearance, as if his was a superior gaze with unlimited rights to choose. His were the ardent eyes of a craving seeking its target. His handshake was firm and inviting, his body was limber and taut, for while making his own examination he was putting himself on show as well. He had the sweet feeling of being the handsomest of the young men, but, having made the entire round, he was disappointed—none of the women were attractive.

“We haven’t visited the ‘red’ room yet,” declared the hostess.

“So, let’s do that,” he said.

There, in the reddish half-lit room which he had entered without much hope, were two men and a woman sitting in soft chairs by a table. All the plants from the apartment had been brought into this room—a large rubber plant, an oleander, broad-leaf cactuses, prickly clover—and in the dim light of the lamp, wrapped in translucent colored paper, the room seemed a secret

garden. There was a large rug on the floor—the soft soil of this enchanted copse, which rustled softly beneath footsteps in languid sensuousness. Here was that quiet hideaway, that languorous atmosphere, which make one speak in whispers and stifle laughter.

The woman had a calm and almost static elongated face, framed by a rectangle of evenly cut straight hair with straight bangs over the eyes, that resembled something ancient, refined, and fixed, eternally young, confident in its beauty, and regal, like the faces of ancient Egyptian women who carried fans behind the pharaoh. But her eyes were alive, filling her face, vibrant and smiling, large beguiling eyes that shone in the twilight like the eyes of a kitten. She was dressed, as far as he could see, in a dark velvet dress that hung on a narrow strap across only one, otherwise bare, shoulder.

The hostess departed. Stepan pulled up a chair, sat down across from her between the two men and without waiting for the conversation, interrupted by his arrival, to begin again, offered his own comment.

“This could be a photographer’s laboratory.”

“That’s just what we’re missing, a photographer,” she said.

From these words, their cheerful tone, he understood that he pleased her.

“Rita, I, too, am an amateur photographer,” spoke up the fellow on his left, a young man with a girlish appearance.

This answer showed Stepan that this fellow’s chances were exceptionally poor.

“I, on the other hand, am a master photographer.”

Calmly, with a deep sense of confidence, he went on to explain that he was a writer and that his art lay precisely in photographing human souls.

“Only their souls?” she asked.

“The pathway to the soul lies through the body,” he answered.

The conversation turned to literature. Stepan lit a cigarette and very capably played the leading role. Naturally, none of the others could match him in knowledge of the subject and the accuracy of his judgments. But his neighbors kept trying to keep their own in the conversation by any means possible, particularly the one on his right, the somewhat chunky fellow with a moustache and signs of a legal education. Does she really like moustaches?

Finally, the girlish fellow gave up and left after making his excuses. From the other room oozed the longing sounds of a foxtrot, dropping the wilted petals of a giant ardent flower over the rug, the furniture, and the plants in the room. In the bright rectangle of the door, dancing couples shimmered, and some, crossing the threshold into this room, destroyed the sacred stillness of the bower by the sharp clatter of their shoes. Stepan spoke about contemporary literature, their own and foreign. He recited poems of passionate poets to insinuate for this beautiful Rita the feelings and atmosphere of love, to pull toward himself her bare arms, which lay on the table and looked so dark and tempting in the dim, suggestive light of the red lamp. Sometimes she rested her shining gaze on him in passing, intimating

mutual understanding and consent, and then the boy felt a heavy and burning sensation in his blood, as if it were not her gaze but her shoulder that had touched him.

“There really are a whole lot of new writers,” she said.

The lawyer’s moustache laughed haughtily. What’s there to wonder at? Everybody keeps a diary and writes poems as a child, but when they grow up they stop this silliness. Yet some just remain the children that they were.

Stepan flushed and without raising his eyes to him added acerbically:

“A moustache is not a sign of adulthood.”

Then he got up and asked Rita:

“Would you like to dance?”

He figured she’d either agree or he’d leave.

“I’d love to,” she said.

She took him by the arm and led him out onto the dance floor.

Now, under the light of six white bulbs that hung from the ceiling, he could get a better look at the rest of her. She was composed of two shades, without any transition between them: the black of her hair, eyes, dress, and shiny shoes and the swarthy skin of her face, hands, shoulders, stockings. This simple combination gave her figure a proud charm. There were no curls or combs in her straight hairstyle, there were no decorations or embroidery on her simple dress, which widened somewhat as it fell from the waist and seemed to be cut off at the bottom, just like the bangs across her forehead. Everything black sparkled on her, highlighted by her shining eyes, while the swarthy part was still. Life was in the clothing—the body was dreamy.

Before his eyes excited couples moved fluidly around the floor, and Stepan suddenly saw that Zoska was very energetically dancing with the girlish-looking fellow. He thought smugly: “She’s having a good time already. Just her type!” Then he took his own lady in his arms and, finding the beat, set off into the crowd of dancers. She moved supple and suddenly; her entire body, from breasts to knees, pressed against him, given over entirely to him and to the dance, while he stared into her eyes with an imploring gaze, all tense in this passionate embrace. Their ardent heat met, passing through the weave of their clothing. A wave of enfeebling languor, powerful and sensuous, quivered in their blood, and the boy lost all sense of feeling, except for the rhythm of the music and the woman’s body pressed against him, which in that moment he possessed more completely than he might ever expect to control in reality.

“Time for supper! Food’s ready!” the hostess called out.

The music stopped, and Stepan with painful regret opened his arms. A doleful annoyance overcame him, leaving behind longing and unconscious energy. He took her by the arm, just to feel her body. She, as if feeling his anxiety, quickly squeezed his hand, and the boy, immediately relieved, whispered:

“Shall we sit together?”

“Of course.”

Everyone poured into the dining room with loud cheer, eager for refreshment after the lengthy exertion. In the doorway he ran into Zoska, and, taking advantage of his partner's diverted attention, quietly but cheerfully whispered "Sorry and goodbye, Zoska." She looked at him with her deep, slow, familiar gaze that no longer irritated him, and she said something quietly in response, but he did not catch what it was as he walked past.

The table, extended to its maximum length, was densely covered with simple but tasty dishes—canned foods, cheese, herring, ham, marinated fish, vinaigrettes, and smoked sausages of various kinds. Among the bowls and platters holding these foods were some flowers, three baskets of sliced bread, the green necks of wine bottles, and the transparent beaks of vodka carafes. When everyone had sat down, it became quiet for a moment as everyone took their first bites. Then a breeze of quiet, reserved conversations blew among the guests.

Stepan was diligent in filling his own and Rita's glasses. She drank patiently, slowly, choosing her wine deliberately—no doubt she knew the varieties—but somehow lazily. He observed her and did not recognize her. There was something inert, completely indifferent in her features, and it was only when she raised her eyes to him that he again perceived the woman with whom he had danced.

"Rita, Rita, Rita," he whispered. "What a wonderful name!"

The faces of the guests seemed friendlier now, under the influence of the continued consumption of alcoholic beverages. The moustached lawyer, who was sitting across from Stepan and was enthusiastically wooing a blond with a beautiful bust, at first met his gaze severely, but then, quite unexpectedly, winked and smiled, like a partner in an enterprise. How satisfying! Stepan could approach any boy or girl and speak with them like an old friend, because everything that makes people distant had melted in their drinks, and everyone was equal—all carefree animals who only wanted to laugh and joke.

Zoska sat at the end of the table, engaged in a friendly conversation with the girlish young man, whose round face was glowing with satisfaction. Stepan looked attentively at this couple a few times, expecting to meet the girl's gaze and shame her. But she stubbornly did not turn around toward him. So much for love! Now she's running after the first guy she sees, as if nothing at all had happened with her! It's a shame he hadn't rubbed her cheating nose in the dirt a little harder.

Eventually, he stopped noticing her. Voices were getting louder and more shrill, pouring out in a stream of disordered speech, in which only occasional drunken exclamations and laughter were discernible. It seemed to Stepan that he was moving faster and faster down an enormous hill on a small, light sled. He found that his neighbor's leg was alongside his and he squeezed it as hard as he could.

"Careful there, you'll soil my stocking," she said calmly.

"I'll launder it in my own blood," he answered.

“You have so much excess blood?”

“Twice what is needed.”

He tried to give these words of his the deepest of meanings. After this he spoke to her in clear and bold hints and related suggestive anecdotes, about which she made very appropriate comments, since she already knew most of them.

Finally, his inebriation reached the point where a person becomes sad and worried. He had already reached the bottom of the hill and was standing alone on a gray field. From there, he glanced at his neighbor in fear and despair. Will this just be the same game of love all over again, that nauseating give and take between a man and a woman? Love is a complex algebraic equation where, after all your efforts, simplifications, and eliminating parentheses, you’re still left with zero. The next equation is the same. And on and on they continue, always equivalent. The variables change, as do the operations and the signs, but the outcome is always the same, and it’s always empty. And he despairingly felt that yes, he would get all excited, he would seek her, grab on to her as to a lifejacket, which even after reaching the shore he would still have to wear, because it will have swollen and shrunk, all the wet straps eating into his flesh. Nausea overpowered him, like a person who is about to see the same show for the tenth time but still, inexplicably, came to the theater.

He fell deep into thought. Suddenly she put her hand on his knee.

“Stefan.”

“What?”

“Give me your hand.”

He gave her his hand and then immediately tore it away, jumping back from the sharp pain. She had stabbed him mercilessly in the palm. He instantly flared up, as if her pin had burst the soap bubble of his contemplation.

“Hold on there,” he said, laughing. “I’ll poke you too one of these days.”

Her eyes were fading.

“You’ll run out of time.”

He leaned over and told her an amusing story from Catulle Mendès about a blind grandmother who sewed her granddaughter to her skirt to protect her from evil but became a great grandmother nevertheless, even though she had let the girl go off alone only twice, once for fifteen minutes and the second time for five minutes. “How did you manage to find a lover in fifteen minutes?” she had asked in anger. And the sinful girl had meekly replied, “No, grandma—it was the other time.”

“A foolish grandmother—to force the girl to such desperation,” said Rita.

“But I assume there’s no grandmother in your case?” he asked.

“There’s no grandmother, but there is a train.”

And she informed him that she was here by chance, having come to visit

her parents, but actually lives in Kharkiv, where she dances in the ballet. She's leaving in the morning.

Never had Stepan felt such gratitude to a woman as he did now. She's leaving! So there won't be any romance! How fortunate! He was ready to get on his knees before her and sing a hymn of praise to her. God, what a wonderful world this was, after all!

"It's two o'clock," she said. "I have to go. Would you like to walk with me?"

He wanted to very much.

The boy waited in the vestibule while Rita said goodbye to the hostess. When she came out, he grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to himself.

"Kiss me," he said.

She laughed quietly and sang:

"The girls were washing their feet in the stream,
The boys were fishing just upstream,
La la la la, la la la la
La la la la la, la la la."

Then she pushed herself against him as if dancing, and for a moment he felt the sensuous touch of her tongue.

"The fire of love is sweet only for a moment," he cried in delight. "Later they cook borsch on it."

"A moment is not long enough for a woman," she said.

"I was speaking allegorically."

A terrible racket of moving chairs came from the apartment. They were getting up from the table.

He went out into the street without his coat, despite her protests. Since it was cold, he immediately fell into a reflective mood.

"The sky is the color of a five karbovanets note," he said.

"Are you such a materialist?"

"Absolutely! And you?"

"Yes, we've already endured too much for the sake of ideals."

"The ideals have endured a lot, too."

Getting into a carriage, she said:

"Farewell, mischievous one."

"Farewell, my dream."

He watched joyfully as the danger disappeared around the corner. He waved to it. Goodbye! The end!

He could have gone home at that point, but he had left his coat. Fortunately, the door had not been locked behind him, and he could easily get back into the vestibule. Here he found the fellow with the thin girlish face pacing anxiously.

"What's the matter?" Stepan asked him.

"Well, it's ..." he muttered, "Zoska is not feeling well."

"So take her home."

"Sure, but I can't carry her there in my arms."

Stepan pulled three karbovanets from his pocket.

“Here!”

The fellow hesitated but then took the money and disappeared.

In the room they were still dancing—lethargically, ponderously, frequently colliding, but dancing. The boy casually walked along the wall into the red living room, sat down beneath the rubber tree, stretched out his legs, and immediately fell asleep, coddled by the music, the whispers around him, and the stolen kisses.

He awoke in complete silence. The red light had been extinguished, and only a single bulb was burning in the other room, barely illuminating the corners. He got up, walked to the vestibule on tip-toe, took his coat and left, walking out into the long deserted streets of the city, which slept under a leaden sky as dawn approached.

XII

He got home in a state of warm drowsiness, which had enveloped him from the moment he got up from the chair under the rubber plant where he had fallen asleep. All the way from Piatakov Street, across the empty Jewish Bazaar, which at night looked somewhat like a cemetery, he felt as if he had never completely awakened from a very deep sleep that had suddenly overpowered him after the spiritual and physical tension of the evening. He walked along listlessly, without thinking, seeing only what was necessary to keep walking. Throughout his body, his mind, and his heart, he felt a pleasant fatigue and a need for something like total forgetfulness. In his room he undressed mechanically and stretched out on the bed, forgetting even to remove his socks.

At one o'clock in the afternoon the boy woke up and squinted in the shining deluge of light that flooded his room. Through the window opposite his bed flowed the first warm rays of spring sunlight, tracing patterns on the walls and tickling his face. He got up and stood on his bed, surrendering to the mindless joy of warmth and the expectation of a close, unreachable happiness. And so he stood, body taut, bathing in the bright streams that washed over him like healing waters. Then he jumped down from the bed, ran over to the window, opened it, and stuck his disheveled head outside. The first wave of air from outdoors rolled over him in a shiver, the second was more pleasant, and the third was already familiar, cheerful, and enchanting, as if a giant sunny hand had stretched out toward him and stroked his hair, patting him on the chest. A new energy was flowing into his soul, a primitive power, filling out his chest and pumping up his heart with fervor. He sensed that his past had melted away after a powerful dream and sunny awakening, that he had no memories, that he had been born just now, in the arrival of the spring, born immediately as an adult—experienced, wise, full of a new strength and an unshakeable faith in it.

He got dressed hurriedly, grabbing at things as if every wasted moment was a great loss. He washed and went outside. Happy people were splashing in the dying puddles of winter, melting under a smiling sun. And everything was like a happy ending in a tragic movie.

He walked straight ahead, without a goal, without any wish to get anywhere or to stop. An intoxicated sense of freedom was driving him forward, a feeling of complete independence, an animal-like satisfaction of liberation from what he had seen, thought, and wished yesterday, from how he had lived yesterday, from all the pains and all the troubles from all the days that had come before. At the corner of Volodymyrska and Sverdlova, where girls stood with baskets of flowers for sale, he bought two bunches of blue snowdrops and, unwilling to pin them to his coat, carefully carried them in his pocket.

At home he set the flowers in a glass of water. They smelled of vegetation, the usual rawness of plants, but it was an awakened scent that had

sprung from the impenetrable depths of the earth, from the darkness and cold into the thirsty glow of warmth, and these humble flowers smiled at him with their little flags of the greatness of life. He put them in the center of the table. Then, from the pile of books, he unearthed his own collection of stories.

He could only dimly recollect what it was he had written about, and so he read with enthusiasm, as if this were something unknown, unrelated to him. He marveled at the unexpected images, the construction of the sentences, at individual words, which he seemed to anticipate, which were placed precisely as he would place them today. And everything he read came to life for him under his assiduous observation, allowing him to experience again the joys of his past creativity, resurrecting the past zeal in anxious trembling and sweet languor over the lines of text. A deep amazement came over him as he read the last page. Had he really written this? Certainly he had! The cover had his name on it. But his soul reacted coquettishly, refusing the earned praise, putting on airs, and retreating in modesty, like a fifteen-year-old girl receiving a gorgeous bouquet of flowers from someone she likes. Perhaps they're not for her? But, suddenly and shamefully, reversing one hundred and eighty degrees, without hiding the wish to possess what she was getting. It's you, he felt within his breast. It's you, it's you, echoed his heart. He was hearing a symphony sung by a giant choir singing him a song of self-love, and he was overcome with self-respect for his artistry. And he wanted to go out again, to roam the streets, smiling at everyone and everything, but he quelled this expansive urge and read over his collection from beginning to end once again.

Now he was left somewhat disenchanted. Specific faults troubled him: substantial flaws in construction and a terrible embarrassment over the contents. What, exactly, was he writing about? Nowhere in the space of hundreds of pages had he encountered a person—one who suffers and struggles, who generates insane impulses out of pain, who languishes and soars, crawls and scales heights. He didn't find in these pages a sad dwarf with great wisdom, a tiny animal who carries on its narrow shoulders the eternal weight of consciousness; he didn't find a charming child who cries and smiles so sweetly among the colorful toys of existence, the ruthless warrior who knows how to kill and be killed for his dreams, the stern conqueror of future days, the tireless messenger into the future. And this absence distressed him. What good are these works if the human heart does not beat in them? They now seemed dead to him, these stories in which people disappeared under the weight of things and ideas, created by them and for them.

He got up from his chair listlessly and lay down on the bed, his hands under his head. Indeed, he had not encountered a person—and what was worthy of attention other than people? Without a person everything else loses its meaning, becomes a soulless mechanism, a bell in a vacuum. The naive belief of the past, that man is the measure of all things, that the world came into existence and the stars began to shine for people, this idea now appeared

to him the only truth in the world, greater than all other truths or theories. He had spun the initial threads of his heartfelt creative tapestry from a longing for this past misunderstanding, from a clear appreciation of the first principles of life, from a glowing feeling for people.

He would write a novel about people.

When he formulated this thought, a terrible fatigue overcame him, from his helplessness before such an enormous assignment, whose weight he felt sharply and clearly, unconsciously magnifying in his imagination the actual difficulties of the task. How to combine the innumerable facts that he had managed to accumulate and experience, how to weave together the mass of observations about others and about himself into a single flawless artistic expression, accurate and well-tuned, like the mechanism of a clock? How to convey in a few thousand lines of text the endless variety of people, the mad incongruity of their thoughts, moods, wishes, and actions? So that the person appears complete, without improvements or omissions, just as he or she appears in struggles, in love, or in work, with all the usual noble and depraved urges, with criminality and sympathy, with baseness and with honor? No, this was entirely beyond his abilities! He must immediately forswear such a grandiose intent and must protect himself from the enormous pain of failure. And he should give up this writing altogether, which, as far as he could remember, repaid his efforts only with bitter disenchantments.

But he lay with clenched teeth, attuned not so much to his own hopeless thoughts as to something barely discernible, indistinct, and distant, like the memory of a dream. Hope? No, something larger than hope arose in him. Suddenly he forgot about everything, about himself, about his intentions. He seemed to have stopped existing, to have dissolved into passionate visions that carried him off on powerful waves. Unfamiliar figures filled his room—light, airy creations of his stimulated imagination, among whom he did not recognize anything either real or his own. They moved before him in the quiet evening twilight. Without the slightest effort he gave life to countless bodies, clothed them, christened them—heaven knows why—submerging himself into the sweet dreamscape from which this captivating kingdom of shadows was born. He could not feel the activity of his will nor the sensation of his feelings in this unconscious, imaginary game, nor even any satisfaction from this creative expression. He shrank down and became numb and still, so as not to cut off with an inept interruption the shiny parade of his incarnations. And suddenly these strange figures, these unexpected guests in his humble and forsworn home, began to laugh and cry, demand and struggle, then to set off into the distance on responsive sailboats, buffeted by breaths of hatred and love.

He sprang up in bed. Was he going crazy? A trick of the visual imagination he could understand, but he had clearly heard their voices. He sat motionless, listening to the fearful beats of his heart, the only sound that remained real for him in the silence of the dark room. It seemed he was alone within a vast noiselessness at an immeasurable distance from the world and

from people. He felt that he was not connected to life but was close to it, as never before. And in this feeling of terrible solitude, of a complete loss of contact with the surrounding reality and a new unity with it, lay an incomprehensible certainty of victory. A certainty! He had found the deep power of his abilities. He really was going crazy—from joy.

This secret inebriation lasted a whole week. From what he saw and heard, from what he observed within himself and around him, he now cut out characters, thoughts, landscapes, and sewed them together with the nimble threads of plot. He wasn't writing yet, just inventing. He didn't even think that this was necessarily for his writing—such was the burning, sensuous satisfaction that he had merely from imagining, this unforced labor that was transforming itself into a self-rewarding goal, occupying all of his interest and enthusiasm.

At work and at meetings, he became something of a well-tuned machine. Everywhere outside his room he felt like a wound-up mechanism that performs a given number of necessary actions, reacts in a familiar way to its environment, and has the capacity to respond. All of his sensitivity was concentrated in his dreams, putting a chill on his life.

In connection with this he changed his attitude, most importantly, toward himself. Now he no longer allowed himself to eat whenever he wanted and whatever he wanted. He had breakfast, lunch, and dinner at prescribed times and consumed nutritious foods, primarily fruits and grains. When he went outside, he carefully wrapped his neck in a scarf, something he hadn't done previously, even in the coldest weather. He routinely aired out his apartment and reduced his consumption of tobacco during the day, so that he could smoke more in the evening, without, however, crossing the limit beyond which, in his opinion, nicotine began to have a negative impact on health. And in the morning he began again to practice the system of calisthenics of the nerves as introduced by Dr. Anokhin. Once in a while, quite unexpectedly, he would speak to himself in the second person: "Well, it's time for you to go to sleep," or "Go outside and relax a little." He was courteous with his colleagues, as always, but secretly he felt a sense of his own superiority over them. It was even somewhat comical that they continued to greet him and talk to him just as they had yesterday and the day before. To tell the truth, he even felt some disdain for them—no one had noticed the great impulse that had entered his life. For them, he was just as he had been before. Incredible! Too bad for them! Sometimes, submitting to the sweet tide of self-admiration, he smiled, dreaming of the majesty of the wonderful work that he would write, and how it would amaze all of those who had noticed nothing at all.

The poet Vyhorsky, worried by Stepan's long absence from the beer hall, came to visit him at the editorial office.

"You've probably started writing something, haven't you," he asked.

"Almost," Stepan answered. "I'm thinking it through."

"Oh, that's the happiest time, the springtime of creativity," the poet

sighed. "It's like Platonic love, so to speak, and then comes the tiresome boredom of family life."

And then he suddenly asked:

"Do you know the mistake that most people make when they use the word 'Platonic'?"

"I do indeed, except that hardly anyone uses that word anymore."

And then Vyhorsky informed him that on April 20, in the morning, he would be setting out on a trip, and asked him to come to the beer hall the night before so that they could mark the occasion.

That day Stepan had another visitor, whom he certainly did not expect at all. It was Maksym Hnidy, accountant at the Leatherworkers' Collective, dressed in a rather tattered coat but wearing a very nonchalant smile. He spread himself out on a chair next to Stepan's desk, and when the boy looked up at him questioningly, he declared, using the familiar pronoun:

"I'm happy to wait until you have a free moment."

At first, Stepan thought he had misheard, but when he finally shook off the young writer who brought a lyrical short story to the editorial office every week and entered into conversation with Maksym, he found that the accountant not only addressed him with the familiar pronoun, but actually called him Steve. The boy chose not to cut off this unexpected assertion of some kind of camaraderie but spoke to the accountant using indirect, third-person constructions.

Significant changes had occurred in the Hnidy family. Everyone lived together now. At least they had achieved a modicum of normalcy in their old age, Maksym observed. The fish merchant's store had suffered a setback—it was liquidated to pay those damned taxes. But old Hnidy now hawked fish from a stand at the Zhytnyi Bazaar, and Tamara Vasylivna helped out with a haberdashery stand. So they made do, somehow. He, Maksym, was the only one who wasn't working. The problem was that at the Leatherworkers' Collective, where he had been an accountant, there was a little misunderstanding over the cash account, and he had to quit his job to avoid any unpleasantness. But that was just a trifle. He was actually happy it turned out this way, because he had had enough of this number-crunching already. It dried up your soul, particularly for a vibrant and independent person, like him. So he had decided to change jobs.

"Steve," he said, "you know I always liked books. Remember my library? It's a shame, but I had to sell it! Life has its ups and downs, as you know."

He smiled slyly to underscore the hint. But the boy still didn't completely understand where this was heading. Soon enough, everything became clear. Maksym had his eye on a position as a bookstore manager for one of the state publishing houses, or at least as assistant to the manager, and it was up to Stepan to help him, through his contacts.

"You're a well-known person," he added. "You probably know plenty of Communists, and nowadays without connections you're not going

anywhere. You know, without a little help you may as well give up and kick the bucket.”

Again he smiled with a sly insinuation. Stepan grudgingly acquiesced, angry at himself for letting this cheat assert any kind of rights over him. Maksym added:

“I’ll write an application and give it to you, and then you’ll pass it along into the right hands and put in a good word for me.”

He wrote the application, but still he didn’t leave. He asked for a cigarette and lit it.

“This is really nice tobacco you’re smoking,” he said, knowingly. “Remember when I was the one treating you? Well, what the hell—no matter.”

He twitched his head nervously.

“I have another matter for you, a personal one,” he said, lowering his voice. “I have five albums of stamps I’ve collected. My situation is such that I must sell them. But I don’t want to sell them to just anybody—they mean a lot to me. Buy them from me. I won’t take much—a hundred karbovanets, which is like giving them away for free. Do this for me as an old acquaintance.”

“No. I don’t need stamps,” answered Stepan.

Maksym sighed. Well then maybe he would loan him thirty or so, for a week? The boy gave him five karbovanets and stood up decisively.

“Ok, I’m leaving, I’m leaving,” said Maksym. “When will you come visit us? You know, it’s not nice to forget your old friends, not nice. And things are so cheerful now. We all get together, we sing. Mom has put on some weight, she looks grand. Come over! And when shall I come to ask about the job?”

“A month and a half,” answered Stepan. “There won’t be anything sooner than that.”

Maksym bid him farewell like an old friend, but with a strong infusion of precautionary respectfulness. At the door he turned and said with some embarrassment:

“Maybe you’re still angry at me, Steve, but that really was stupid of me back then. I sincerely regret it.”

“All right. It’s all right.”

When Maksym had finally left, the boy shrugged his shoulders. What a comedy! The very thought that there once was this woman named Musinka, and these little tragedies, and even a fight! A whole millennium has passed since then. And now this unnecessary, ridiculous, completely useless snippet of the past suddenly comes walking through the door and stretches out its hand to you. What the hell! The past should have some self-respect, it should know its place and not go pushing in where it isn’t wanted. He tore up Maksym’s letter of application and threw it in the trash.

Finally, he was done with the novel. That is, he had thought through the whole thing along with all the details. The novel appeared in his head like a

transparent color photograph. True, it had come out a little different than he had originally conceived it. At first he had sketched out a colossal work, in three sections, with over a hundred characters and the action taking place over a period of ten years. Then he had shortened it to two sections and thrown out around thirty characters. Finally, he had shortened it by another section, and what remained was a novel that would stretch in print to four or five signatures and encompass twelve participants. What had forced him to shorten so much? An inescapable inner command. Forced out of the original plan under the weight of this creative press were all the liquid, all the accidental matter, all the cheap effects and tragedies, all the unnecessary conversations and actions, leaving only a solid thick mass that no longer lost its shape under the pressure of a further turning of the press's screw. This was a painful process, like cutting out living flesh that wanted to live and clung to life in every possible way. But, like a stern surgeon, he caused this pain in the name of future health. He was conscious that he was capable of accomplishing only a tiny portion of the enormous challenge that now stood before him, since even the life of a single person was worth more than volumes of short stories. Even more, he was conscious that during his entire life he would accomplish only a small portion of this challenge, because the human soul is immeasurable and unfathomable, even if it suddenly fits into a few bursts of energy. But he used the material he had cut to construct a plot for a movie script, as well as a few themes for future novels. Now he was well provisioned for at least a year of intensive work. All he needed to do was write.

Having bought a half ream of ruled paper, the boy sat down one evening at his table and picked up a pencil with the sacred trembling of a prophet who has raised his knife over the sacrificial victim. This was the moment he had feared. Oh, happiness! He wrote the first chapter, then a second, then the third. He wrote easily, without stopping, and even without feeling any anxiety. The words poured forth from him, a stream of vivid, disciplined words that knew their own places and connections. He threw down his pen, clenched his hands in satisfaction and got up. Enough, enough for one day. Gradually relaxing, he counted his pages—if he kept up this pace, he would have the novel finished in two weeks. Wonderful!

But the second day he didn't write anything at all. He sat, he paced, he even lay down and tried to dream, but he couldn't squeeze out a single word of the next chapter. As if the entire spring flood of his imagination had suddenly dried up with only dead clumps left behind, which the heat of his despair could not melt. He knew *what* to write and he knew *how* he should write it, but a chasm had developed between his intentions and the paper. He felt a terrible disinclination to writing itself, an unfounded hostility to the very act of moving pen across paper. At first he was irritated with himself, then he tried to convince himself, and finally he became contemplative. Where had this crisis come from? Was the written word unwilling to come to him, or was he unwilling to write it? Maybe the remaining chapters were

defective in their construction, and this stoppage, an intuitive projection of the creative instinct, was a warning about that danger? And behind every thought of his stood the well-known terror of all vain attempts at creativity.

Finally, he decided he needed to rest. He needed to protect himself. He was simply weary in his soul. You can't push yourself without mercy. The right thing to do was to take a break from his work for a few days, to entertain himself and renew his energies. But how?

Suddenly, the memory of Zoska filled him with a pleasant warmth. Zoska! That lovely, smiling girl, the faithful companion of so much of his wandering. He remembered her slight figure, her unflappable smile and sudden melancholy, her naive, joyful philosophy, and her passionate kisses. He wanted to see again the curls on her forehead, her wonderful face, animated by emotions, to hear her wonderful whisper and to sit on the rug by her feet, "at the feet of a queen." He felt as if she had just left the room and was about to return at any moment. He jumped up and looked at his watch. It wasn't yet six. He could still go with her to the cinema, and then ... and then invite her over to his place. That would be wonderful! They could have a nice little party here after their separation—and the hell with what the bourgeois neighbors would whisper about them in their little burrows.

Stepan hastily began to put on his best suit while stringing together a series of pleasant thoughts. True, there was that misunderstanding between them. Getting married was, of course, a silly idea, but he had been somewhat harsh towards her. He didn't deny that. But he would apologize. He sensed that there was a link between his novel and the breakup with Zoska, one that he did not fully understand, and now he regretted that he had not arranged with her a temporary, half-month hiatus. Because now it was a little unpleasant.

"But if she really loves me," he thought, "then she should not be very angry."

The boy quickly walked over to Gimnazia Passage and rang at the familiar doorway. An elderly woman in an apron opened the door.

"May I see Comrade Zoska?" he asked.

Surprised, the woman asked: "Which Zoska? Holubovska?"

"Yes," he confirmed.

The woman clapped her hands together.

"Good God! But she poisoned herself!"

"She's dead?" asked Stepan.

"Indeed, she is no more," the woman answered sorrowfully. "Lord have mercy on her soul." She made the sign of the cross.

"And you ... how do you know?" asked the boy.

"What do you take me for?" the woman exclaimed, offended. "We're neighbors, and we share their grief. Would you like to visit them?"

"No," said Stepan.

They stood silent for a moment, looking at each other. Stepan was crushed. The woman was curious.

“And who might you be?” she asked.

“Stepan, Stepan Radchenko,” he answered.

“A relative?” she continued.

“A friend.”

“You won’t see her anymore,” she sighed. “May she rest in peace.”

He walked away slowly, while the woman continued to follow him with her eyes for a while, then loudly closed the door.

Crossing the street, the boy stopped. “I should visit the parents and ask about the details,” he thought. “Maybe she left me a note? Where is she buried?” But these thoughts were so vague that he could barely distinguish them. They moved so slowly that by the end of each he had already forgotten the beginning. And they seemed strange, completely foreign, absolutely unconnected to him. Someone was thinking for him, stringing together fragments of thoughts in a boring and frightening manner. And he himself was completely empty. He lost the feeling of his own person and of the world beyond him. As if he were nothing, nowhere, never. He feared raising his eyes lest he see the emptiness around him.

He shuddered, shriveled, and set off, experiencing his own motion with trepidation. Then he began to consider what one could use to poison oneself. Arsenic, mercuric chloride, strychnine, prussic acid, opium? What was the difference in how these poisons worked? Which of them is used to poison flies on those dark sheets that are purchased at the pharmacy, with the label in large letters and an exclamation mark: Death to Flies! And what is death? How can a person just disappear, so that she is never seen again? How can a person die, not for a day, not a week, not a year, but to be no more? So he could also die? How ridiculous! What a terrible misunderstanding!

“This is impossible,” he told himself. “It’s just completely impossible!”

It seemed to him in that moment that he could freely lie down in front of a streetcar, thrust a knife into his heart, drink any kind of poison, and still remain alive.

He raised his eyes, unconsciously expecting to see someone familiar and walk up to him. But all the faces he saw were those of strangers and seemed not to be alive. Yes, as if they had long since died, had long since drunk poison. And suddenly he felt that he was the only living creature in the vast kingdom of death.

Finally he managed to think: “Maybe it was an accident?” Instead of an answer, he experienced an overwhelming sense of loss. He wanted to run, shout, crawl on his knees, beg, and howl. To receive his punishment. To receive forgiveness.

Then sorrow moistened his eyes. He wanted to sit by a grave in the freshly sprouting grass, to wreath it with cornflowers, to bow down and cry. Clearly, painfully, he felt that incomprehensible link that develops between a soul that has departed and a living soul that yearns for the otherworldly with a mindless longing. *She* was now accessible to him through his heightened sensitivity, she entered his soul like a warm breeze. The feeling was

indescribable, but healing. He thought in sorrowful joy: “Zoska, you are gone, but I am yours forever. I shall come to you every year, when the earth flowers. You have died for everyone, but not for me.”

At the doorway to his building he was struck with nausea again—a fear of the evening and the coming night.

On the stairs by his door he ran into the agent who was doing such a poor job of providing him with addresses of possible apartments. The agent stopped, glowing with satisfaction.

“Well, there’s a room,” he said mischievously. “But not just any room, a *real* room. In short, you won’t ...”

“I no longer need any room,” replied Stepan wearily.

The agent was very surprised. A nice room is always needed! Why had he run over here himself? Why had he wasted a month running around across the city like a hound dog, only to find out suddenly that the room is no longer needed? If the comrade will just have a look at it, he’ll move in there right away.

And Stepan suddenly agreed. Just to do something. Just not to be alone. And in the long run, he did actually need a room.

“All right,” he said. “Just wait so I can get some money.”

And they rode out together to Lypky.

“Just wait ’til you see the building,” the agent rattled on, excited, as they got off the streetcar. “It’s a gem, a real treat. You won’t be able to turn it down.”

The building was indeed very impressive. It was seven stories tall, with countless windows that were just being illuminated.

“This way, if you please,” said the agent.

They got into the elevator, and this mode of transportation, experienced for the first time, greatly appealed to the boy. While still sitting in the cabin, Stepan decided to rent the room. But the room sold itself without any help from anyone. It was a smallish, bright, and well-ordered study, with parquet floors and central heating. It was hung with new blue-gray wallpaper and had two windows offering an unlimited view of the city and the distant horizon beyond the river. This was exactly the kind of room he had dreamt of. And the boy immediately imagined where he would place all of his future pieces of furniture and how comfortable it would be to work on them.

“I will certainly be able to write here,” he thought.

They were asking too much and he bargained ferociously. In the end, they agreed to a one-hundred-and-fifty-karbovanets release payment, plus expenses for the renovations they had made, plus ten percent for the agent. Stepan turned over the money and documents and was to move in the next day.

He was the last one to leave the room, and as he was turning out the electric lights, the sickening anxiety that had melted for a while in the face of financial concerns and the satisfaction of an acceptable agreement returned again in this dark emptiness, where the windows gleamed like two giant dead

faces. Clenching his hands in despair and despite himself, he said almost aloud: "Forgive me, Zoska."

Everything was silent around him, but silence is the sign of consent.

He quickly walked out of the frightening darkness, carefully and timidly locking the door behind him. The agent, having received his payment, disappeared without even saying goodbye. The owners bowed to him very graciously. He had made arrangements with them about morning coffee and a separate key to the building's main door. Then he summoned the elevator and softly descended.

On the street he was again alone, and a terrible anxiety rolled over him. It was only eight o'clock. In the two hours since he had left his apartment, two unusual and unique events had transpired. Unwittingly, he set them side by side. But was there any connection between *that* and the fortunate resolution of the housing question? And suddenly he felt that he had made a step forward, upward, having abandoned someone on a lower level. But in response to this secret rationalization, which had barely resonated in his head, his soul began to whimper even louder.

On the streets down which he walked, he again did not meet anyone he knew. There was nothing unusual in that, but it seemed to him that everyone had abruptly abandoned him. And suddenly he remembered that today was April 19, the evening that he was to meet the poet for a parting drink. He cheerfully shook off his gloom and quickened his steps.

XIII

The traveler had not yet arrived at the beer hall. The boy limply sat down at a table in the middle of the floor, surrounded by people and voices that evoked a feeling of disgust in him. For the first time since he had begun frequenting it, he found the beer hall repugnant. Now he could see the banality of the merriment that he heard around him, the artificiality of the alcohol-stoked laughter, the cheap gilding of the local variety of entertainment. The music, the jazz band with snares, drums, and cymbals that had always lifted his spirits and relieved his tension now oppressed him with horrible riffs and irritated him with intolerable clanging. He would have left immediately if he weren't waiting for someone, and so he sat with his hat pulled down low and his head resting on the table beside the still untasted bottle of beer that had been placed before him. Then he began to smoke nervously, breaking matches in agitation.

Finally, Vyhorsky showed up in a rubberized jacket and with a cap on his head. He was struck by Stepan's expression.

"So why the Childe Harold face?" he asked in greeting.

"Sooner yours than mine. You're the one who's leaving."

"I may be leaving, but I'm not cursing anyone."

"Well, I'm cursing, but I'm not leaving."

The poet carelessly waved his hand.

"Stop. The world only gets worse from cursing."

Today Vyhorsky volunteered that it would be his treat.

"But please note," he said, "I've become a vegetarian."

"Out of conviction?" asked Stepan.

"No, just variety."

When the meals and the wine were served, the poet again asked Stepan: "So why this dour melancholy? Is it because I'm leaving?"

"No," smiled Stepan. "It's worldly sorrow."

The poet sighed in relief.

"At least that's completely safe."

He was very pleasant, cheerful, and gracious. At first Stepan wanted to admit everything to him, to spill out his pain and sorrow and their most secret sources. But he only said: "If you want to know the truth, it's just a really bad mood. Sometimes you get the feeling that you're an animal, a wild, blood-sucking animal, and you feel sad. Life is cruel. You know that there's nothing you can do, but you regret it nevertheless. Then you begin to understand more clearly that everyone around you is also a wild animal—miscreants, lowlifes, criminals—and you are frightened by the fact that you're just like them, and they're like you."

"Where do you see such horrors?"

Stepan smiled despondently.

"Where? Right here, all around us."

“The people around us are lovely, pleasant people.”

“You’re always joking,” said the boy.

“Not at all. Just look!”

The poet leaned out of his chair and touched the shoulder of the person sitting behind him. The man turned around.

“Excuse me,” said the poet. “I think you’re a very fine fellow and I want to shake your hand.”

The fellow hesitated, but he offered his hand and even said: “Well, thank you very much.”

“You’re a strange one,” sighed Stepan.

Then they ate and drank, each one focused on his own thoughts. Stepan, suffering from a need to express his sorrow, raised his glass and announced:

“My friend, let’s drink to love.”

The poet was surprised.

“What’s the point of drinking a toast to this horrible sentiment that robs people of their peace of mind?”

Challenged, Stepan answered:

“It robs you of your peace of mind, it robs you of your life. It really is terrible, this love.”

“So you agree with me?” asked Vyhorsky with uncertainty.

“Absolutely!”

“I can’t stand being in agreement with people,” grumbled the dissatisfied poet. “Agreement is death. What’s more, I must tell you that the power of love emanates exclusively from tradition. The golden age of love has passed, knights and maidens have melted into the fog of ages. In the 12th century, women divided their persons in two parts, the body went to the husband, the soul to the lover. In the 19th century, it was the other way around. In the 20th century, they’ve completely lost the sense of any difference between these two parts. Love has plummeted—by about a half-yard from the heart. Which is to say, it has returned to its point of origin. If you truly want to understand its contemporary, let’s say international, situation, then you must understand that love is not an inherent quality of human beings at every stage of development. Savages did not know love, and our age is the age of enlightened savagery, of savagery in a sublated appearance, as the dialecticians would have it. Thus, love is also sublated. The music of love has been played out. Love stands beside the muses and along with them inspires only old-fashioned poets. However, what was foremost among savages now rises again as the preeminent value—work. The true poet today is only the one who is a poet of labor.”

“You, for instance?” asked Stepan.

“I am a sad phenomenon. In the transition between two ages there inevitably appear people who are stuck precisely on the boundary, from where they can see far into the past and even further into the future. So they suffer from the disease that members of either party will never forgive—the acuity of their vision. The most desirable servants of life are those who are

blinkered and partially blind. They eagerly move forward because they see what they imagine. They see the newness that they want to see. Life is governed by will, not by reason.”

“Heaven only knows what’s governing it,” said Stepan gloomily.

They soon left, because the poet planned to get a good night’s sleep before his trip.

“Yes, I’m going, I’m going,” the poet cried out on the street. “Tomorrow I won’t see any of this anymore. What joy it is, not to see tomorrow what you see today! And you too, my friend. I’ve put up with you long enough.”

“The same is true for me,” said Stepan.

“Admit it! It wasn’t really so boring, was it? But don’t even think of seeing me off tomorrow at the train station. A friend at the train station is just a nightmare.”

“I don’t even know which train you’re leaving on!” Stepan assured him.

“I don’t either!”

At the corner of Velyka Zhytomyrska Street, they stopped.

“Farewell, my friend,” said the poet. “I say farewell because we might not see each other again. Don’t forget that it’s just as easy to die in this world as it is to be born.”

The poet left, and Stepan suddenly felt that he was alone in the street, in the harsh, merciless city, alone in the infinite starry cosmos that glittered above him before the rising moon.

* * *

A string of ordinary days followed, which for Stepan passed like the endless circle of beads through a monk’s fingers. He could not rid himself of a profound distress. Although its sting had been dulled—its cause was now shrouded behind the mists of many days—the sadness he felt was unchanging, infiltrating all of his thoughts, cutting off every wish that would arise from time to time in his breast. The world seemed to fade before his eyes, his soul became numb to sensations and the warmth that grew more pronounced every day. Like everyone else, he took off his coat, but he was not aware of the difference.

He settled in to his new apartment very quickly. After a week it acquired the appearance and comfort that he had once dreamed of, when dreaming was still interesting. He put an American-style brown wooden writing desk by the window in the corner, a mirrored dresser against the wall across from the door, a dark red sofa across from the windows, and, next to the table, a bookcase with glass doors, in which he installed his library, the heart of which was the substantial collection of books on statistics and political economy once given to him by Maksym Hnidy, and also a complete run of the *Literaturno-naukovyj visnyk*, as well as the works of Fonvizin, which he had never returned to his old village friend, the mild-mannered agricultural

student Levko. The length of his possession allowed him to think of them as his own. After all his great and small expenses, with the rest of the money from his filmscript honorarium he bought a rug for the floor and a half-dozen chairs.

But the more improvements Stepan made in his apartment, the more alien it felt to him. Every new thing he brought into the room filled him with inscrutable anguish. He would set it in its intended place and then look at in surprise, as if it were something foreign that had audaciously intruded into his life. After a few days he got used to its presence, used it when needed, but the sense of the incongruity and hostility of the furniture was hidden somewhere deep within him, bursting forth suddenly when he turned on the light after coming home in the evening. As if the pieces of furniture all lived their own separate existence without him, perhaps even talking among themselves about him and his thoughts that they had overheard, until they suddenly fell silent when he opened the door. From the door he could see himself in full stature in the rectangular shiny mirror and this was unpleasant for him, as if he had unexpectedly encountered his double, who stayed behind here at all times and conspired with the morose furniture against him.

But most of all he feared the table. There, in the top drawer on the right, lay the beginning of his novel. He never pulled it out, but he sensed that the manuscript was hiding there, like a guilty conscience. He could not write further. The vacuum that had opened within him when he stepped away from Zoska's door was invisibly expanding, ruining his soul more and more, capturing ever deeper regions where human memories are preserved, and in this expanding destruction his past was disappearing into oblivion. It was disappearing without trace under the poisonous influence of his anguish, and, along with it, he was losing his support.

Generally, he awoke at eight, drank some coffee, and after a half-hour made his way to work. These were the happiest hours of his life, when his former strength, enthusiasm, and persistence awoke in him. He worked energetically and eagerly, immersing himself in his tasks, racing all over town, cheerful, witty, efficient, always indispensable. But at eight in the evening, having finished his work, attended all meetings and obligations, he was left alone with his own private life, whose threads had fallen out of his hands. This transition was terrible, as if he were divided in two parts, one for everyone else, the other for himself, and this second one was unfulfilled. On the way home from work he crossed one of life's great borders.

Evenings filled him with a fearful anxiety, a feeling of terrible loneliness oppressed him. And he endured the debilitating pain of a person who has lost the personal, lost everything—those human joys and sorrows, sometimes quite trivial, that give life flavor and interest.

All his efforts to find something were in vain. Conversations with friends seemed pointless. Women's views—disgusting. The courtesy of hosts—ridiculous. At the lectures he began to attend from time to time he did not hear anything interesting or new; the plays in the theaters were

monotonous, the films at the cinema—disgusting. He could not bear to visit a beer hall. On one occasion he went into the casino and put one karbovanets on number twenty. He won thirty. He put the whole sum back on the same number and lost, after which he walked out impatiently. Everywhere it was much too crowded, too bright, and too loud. And everywhere, a gnawing loneliness kept following him.

Sometimes he remembered his former friend from the beer hall, the poet Vyhorsky, who was wandering about Ukraine with a bag of provisions slung over his shoulder. Now that he no longer saw him, he felt even more deeply the qualities they shared that had attracted them to each other. His feelings were as agitated as his reason. He and the poet were both immensely nervous, changeable, and restless. So where was he? What was his address? Maybe he could write him an enormous, heartfelt letter. And he was stricken with a deep jealousy toward this person who had no address. He sometimes thought about taking a vacation himself and heading off to a sunny seaside. But he always put it off. He had some kind of antipathy to everything that might give him any happiness.

Finally he received at the office an envelope written in the poet's hand. He ripped it open impatiently. Inside were two poems for the journal, but not a word for him. That was when the poet ceased to exist for him.

One evening, as the boy was walking slowly in the dark along Khreshchatyk, near its end where a concentration of stores sell mechanical equipment and there are few streetlights, he was accosted by a woman of the type that asks for a light or expresses an interest in what the time is. She chose the first method and the boy struck a match for her. She made a suggestion.

“Shall we go?”

The boy agreed. Then the woman took him by the arm as a sign of their partnership and turned into Triokhsviatytska Street, where she led her client into a dark yard through a wooden gate latched with a chain. Stepan had to double over to fit under the low opening. Here the woman whispered to him:

“Don't make so much noise! You know, people now stick their noses into everyone else's business.”

And he heard from the woman that particular obscenity that is considered a male privilege. Finally, at the end of a fetid basement corridor, her keys jingled and she led the boy into a room of some sort whose odor was a direct extension of the corridor. Looking around, in the corner he saw the faint light of a small lamp that barely illuminated a dark icon.

The woman turned on a small light and could now be plainly discerned against the background of her setting. She was fat, swollen, and no longer young. She had angry eyes and a colorless, large mouth from which emerged crackling sounds like those from the cone of an overused gramophone. There was a bed in the room, covered with a gray sheet, and a few simple pieces of furniture appropriate to the simplicity of the activity that took place here. The Mother of God in the corner bent her head down over her Son and did not pay attention to what went on around her.

Most importantly, the woman sternly demanded a karbovanets in advance for one “hit.” When she received it, she asked somewhat more graciously:

“How do you like it? Naked?”

He replied that he would rather see her with her clothes on.

“Like a soldier on the march,” she laughed.

And she added that she had worked in the army too, on the German front.

The boy was looking at the photographs that hung on the walls, without frames, dusty, and sprinkled with the stains of flies over many years. And suddenly he developed an interest in this woman, he wanted to know how she lived, her views, her tastes, her legal status, her opinion of the government, and that secret inner life of her soul beyond the usual routine of her trade. He offered her a cigarette and sat down at the table. From the pack he offered she took at least a half dozen cigarettes, but said with displeasure:

“Are you trying to marinate me? Let’s have two more karbovanets, for the whole night.”

He pulled out his wallet and spilled out all the change—sixty five kopecks.

“You’re lying!” she said in disbelief. “Let me look.... What’s this?”

“That’s two more kopecks.”

“Add them to the pile.”

Having turned the wallet inside out, she finally settled down and began, gruffly but willingly, to answer his carefully formed questions, frequently using words that she felt were sharp, appropriate, and refined to describe the activities and objects that informed her occupation. She lamented for the period of war communism, when she could bring home stockings full of money. But now people are just thieves—miserly, and tyrannical. Sure, she has plenty of suitors, but she’s not interested in them.

“You get married for love,” she said. “But I can thump around even with you.”

Then she told him some of those invented, stereotypical stories that they all tell to amuse their clients and themselves, stories that slowly get transformed from dreams into half-real memories, into unconscious self-deception, to which their soul clings in its mechanical search for happiness. In particular, she emphasized a story about a Denikin army colonel who begged her on his knees to escape with him to England.

“And why would I go?” she dreamily asked. “I don’t even speak English. So over there I’d step out onto the street, and I wouldn’t understand anything... He didn’t know English either,” she added comfortingly. “This English guy would come see me, and he also said he didn’t know English.”

But as his questions became more exact and more demanding, she began to get restless. Suddenly she stopped him in mid-sentence.

“Why are you interrogating me? What d’you come here for?”

He answered self-consciously that he had come mostly to let his soul communicate with another soul, and she became terribly offended.

“So it’s my soul you want? For a single ruble you want me to open my soul for you? For you, my soul is under my skirt.”

He barely managed to calm her down, swearing before her that it was not his intention to offend her.

“And isn’t it all the same to you what we do?”

“It certainly isn’t all the same to me. Take what you’ve paid for. Don’t touch my soul.”

Their conversation failed to continue, she parted from him in anger, as if he had done her a terrible outrage, and the boy left, filled with respect for her, somehow emotionally understanding that the woman can be put up for sale, but the person cannot.

Mostly he spent his evenings reading, lying on his sofa. There was some kind of imperative in this endless turning of pages in the absence of that living interest that makes the eye stop over the lines. Between him and the book there was always glass, like the pane of a window that stands before the view of the landscape, letting it be seen but blocking its sweet smells, bending its outline, and muting its colors. Often, having read to the last lines, he would without noticing stop at an empty half-page and thoughtfully weave an extension of the concluded events that were slowly dimming, fading from his imagination, and suddenly disappearing. For a moment he felt that he was no longer thinking, and this feeling was magical, somehow joyful, unusually peaceful, unchangeable, as if he had fallen into a state completely different from life, a state of pure observation, of complete independence from his surroundings.

He read an equivalent volume of newspapers, not skipping even the most boring sections, carefully going over every story, note, and announcement, even including the various notices of meetings and conferences that are found on the last page in small type. He was a diligent but eclectic reader of magazines, which are published for the general public and can be interesting to an individual reader only on condition of skipping over very many articles.

Just at that time the Regional Congress of the Sugarbeet Industry was taking place and among the names Stepan noticed in the report was that of his former friend from the Institute, Borys Zadorozhny. The latter had given a presentation on some new system for selecting beets. He had been elected to the resolutions committee and as a delegate to the All-Ukrainian Congress. Stepan learned a great deal from these sentences! They became a bitter, painful reprimand to him. He read them over again. Yes, Borys Zadorozhny, this young bourgeois, tyrant over a beautiful girl, was moving ahead, acting, working, making progress. An old, suppressed enmity to him surfaced in Stepan’s heart, and he threw aside the newspaper in order to avoid seeing his name again.

The Sugarbeet Congress had a bad effect on him, awakening in the boy a line of sad thoughts about himself. Would this last a long time? Even if he had done something wrong, even if he had wronged someone, the penance had been sufficient by now. According to the calendar, three weeks of

loneliness had passed, but in his imagination these were years. It was time to get out of this slump. It was time. It was time!

He yelled this like a horseman over a horse that had fallen in the road and was unable to get up on its own. But where would help come from? From whom? And he began to hope that a deep and sudden change would come over his life, and his despair, having reached a certain level, would transform into expectations. As if he were expecting a letter, and that letter was already on its way, getting closer, perhaps containing horrors and terrors, but also possibilities. His presentiment did not deceive him, since it was not so much a foresight of events as a herald of an inner need projected into actuality. It is a mystery of the human soul that in moments of hunger it focuses so strongly and brightly on certain trivialities, that they, previously unknown, suddenly become an event long fostered in the heart, the answer to sad dreams, the realization of unconscious desires. The mysterious soul of man, the essence of his simple being, having hesitated at the edge, suddenly takes off down an incline from the slightest push, automatically transforming the boredom of inactivity into kinetic energy.

Now he always had dinner in the big dining room of the People's Food Service cafeteria on Khreshchatyk, which he had chosen only because it was on the way from his office to the Bessarabka Market, where he got on a streetcar to go home. He particularly liked a small table against the wall, where he could sit alone with his meal and a beer, which had become a staple element of his menu. The greatest drawback of the People's Food Service cafeteria, as with all cooperative cafeterias, was the very long wait and the minimal attention to the client—these were of no matter to him now, since dinner, usually very late, was the last event of his day, the boundary between day and evening, and he had nothing against the possibility that this hour, when his heart still beat in the rhythm of the working day, might not turn so quickly into the deadening hours of silence in his room.

Thus, it was all the more disheartening to find one evening that his table was already occupied. This was almost an insult to him, an attack on his usage-established rights, maybe even an attack on his person, which, from persistent use, subsumes lifeless things into inalienable parts of itself. But, after examining the invader more closely, Stepan ran up to him and warmly took him by the hand.

“Hello, Levko!” he cried. “It's you, Levko!”

The surprised guest raised his eyes without recognition.

“It's me, Stepan from Tereveni, remember?” said the boy, leaning over to his friend. “Remember, we traveled together on the steamship to Kyiv. Do you recognize me now?”

Levko recognized him, but was all the more surprised.

“Stepan?” he muttered. “I would not have recognized you. Not at all.”

The boy's soul was submerged in sorrow by these words.

“Why not?” he asked quietly.

Levko was now smiling with his comforting, a-million-pardons smile.

“You’ve changed,” he said. “Look at you, so dressed up, all decked out, a real dandy.”

Stepan hastily took off his hat and sat down at the table. The unfamiliar agitation that had awakened in him on meeting Levko now grew stronger, reaching into the far depths of his soul with a hot echo. He looked at his friend with joyful, almost loving eyes and with unconstrained delight discovered in his face the same features, the same motions, the same smile and softness that he had abandoned long ago and now found unchanged.

“Levko, I’m so happy to see you,” he said. “You can’t even imagine how happy I am. Ah, Levko. Everything is strange here. The people—the life.”

“Life?” cried Levko. “This isn’t life, it’s a meat grinder. And look at what they feed us!”

“And I eat this every day!” added Stepan.

“They feed us like kittens.”

He laughed, pointing at the portion of meat on his plate. And to Stepan his smile seemed pleasing, his thinking—sound, his expressions—masterful, his behavior—unparalleled. And he was suddenly jealous of this fellow, who had managed to remain unchanged, to stay the same over the years. And he was sorry for his own futile choices, desires, and inclinations. Before this friend, whom he had abandoned and considered inferior, he was now ashamed like a schoolroom prankster who has noticed the teacher looking at him.

“So how are you getting on, Levko?” asked Stepan cheerfully.

“No, you tell me about yourself first.”

And the boy told him, briefly, blandly, and hesitantly, about the time that had passed since their last encounter. He mentioned his stories and his job without sensing in his own words or in the events they described any reflection of the rays of life’s rainbow.

“Heigh ho, heigh ho!” laughed Levko. “You must be pulling down a hundred fifty karbovanets at least.”

“More or less. Plus the honorariums. A few months ago I sold a screenplay for a thousand five hundred.”

Levko smacked his lips.

“That’s damn good!”

But there was not the slightest hint of jealousy in his voice, only admiration. Then another idea struck him.

“So it seems you’re a Ukrainian writer!”

“So it seems, indeed,” said Stepan with a sad smile.

Levko thought for a moment.

“So there really are living writers?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“And is there one like Shevchenko?”

“No, there’s no one like Shevchenko.”

Levko sighed in relief, as if contemporary literature did not yet pose any danger to him.

Then, taking his time, he talked about his own affairs and plans for the future. He had finished the Institute and served as an intern for a year at the Nosivka station. Now he was picking up his diploma and setting off to Kherson province, where he has been appointed regional agronomist.

“That’s nice. And what about that teacher and Latinist in whose place you used to live? The one who offered us tea,” asked Stepan. And he felt an anxious satisfaction at touching in this way some of the past, which suddenly came to life within him, though still hazy, like the morning mist that will soon disperse under the sun’s bright rays.

“It’s not so good with him,” laughed Levko. “He killed himself, the poor sot—slashed his own wrists. And with his own knife. He had said he would kill himself like some famous philosopher, but we thought he was just raving. But he went and did it. We had a mess of trouble.”

“What about his wife?”

“She’s a champ, that old lady, even if she is toothless. She can cook and bake like nobody’s business. Restaurants can’t hold a candle to her. They sure knew how to eat, those old bourgeois. I’m planning on taking her with me to Kherson province.”

“You’re not married?”

“Are you kidding? Once I get settled in my new job, then I’ll find myself a dame. Or I’ll manage without one.”

“You’re a strange one! What are you going to do without a wife out there in the wilderness?”

“There’s great hunting out there,” said Levko. “And I love the steppe.”

The steppe! Stepan loved it too. A bright and warm memory surfaced within him, a recollection of a still night and the dreamy expanse of plains, of the endless reaches of the sky and the earth, the blue silence of the moon’s rays. Lying face up in the grass, with arms outspread, without a hat, barefoot and looking at the golden, azure, red, and green shimmering of the stars scattered across the sky by someone’s benevolent and powerful hand. To feel that hand in the air blowing faintly across your face. To fall asleep tired from observing the infinite space, secretly in union with it. And in the morning, from behind the mounds, sunrise—a ray of light from the red ocean, a terrible, giant icicle of cold fire, flowering slowly into a searing ball.

Levko was finishing his cutlet and wiping his hands on the paper napkin.

“I’m off to the cinema right now,” he said. “I like to watch people hopping around. Just think—how people manage to make money. Let’s go together.”

“No, thanks—I’m busy,” said Stepan.

On the street, they embraced warmly. The boy was moved.

“Levko, write to me from your Kherson wilderness,” he said.

“There probably won’t be anything to write about,” answered Levko. “It’s for you writers to do the writing. And we’ll read it some day.”

XIV

In autumn on the steppe, dry corn rustles apprehensively, whole fields of even yellow stalks, as if someone were crawling on the ground, pushing aside its hanging leaves. In autumn, along the trails, weeds spread their seeds: the tall, overgrown, ungainly goose foot, spurge, thistle, wormwood, and mugwort. Plants are ungainly in the fall, they've lost their green life. In autumn, the winds blow, strong and unexpected. In autumn, the winds are sly and prone to attack. They surprise and disappear. The gullies in the steppe unexpectedly collapse into the deep, uncovering the clay below. At the bottom of the pit are clumps of peashrubs offering shelter to snakes, insects, and millions of lizards. There are countless roads and paths in the steppe—intersecting, curving, doubling back. It seems they have been purposefully intertwined to allow for endless walking and wandering. And you want to enter the steppe. You want to turn off on a side path. Where does it go? You walk slowly in the steppe, and it feels strange when you reach a destination. The roads are uneven, with deep depressions that hide a person completely, while the paths wind over hills and mounds, running straight across meadows and orchards. And the stubble breaks beneath your feet.

Stepan stopped suddenly. As far as he could make out, this was Pavlivska Street. He had been walking for maybe a half-hour since he parted with Levko at the door of the cafeteria. He had been walking deeply immersed in thought, happy and in that unintelligible serenity that envelops people at the most responsible moments of their lives after painful difficulties and disenchantment. He sensed that he was preparing for something, that something unique was about to happen, something long expected but frozen in the soul by an accidental vision. He had a premonition of his liberation, and the recollections that flowed endlessly into his consciousness kept throwing him back, again and again, into his wonderful childhood, into the unforgettable period of his first apprehension of the world. He was walking the magical path of the past, breathlessly searching for his earlier wellsprings. In the middle of a spring day in the city, he was passionately dreaming of the autumn warmth of the steppe.

He glanced at his watch. A quarter to nine. It wasn't late yet. He could still see her. And what difference does the time make? *He must see her!*

The boy turned and walked quickly, formulating his intentions equally quickly. He found them already formulated, luminous, chiseled deeply into his heart.

He would return to the village.

This idea, wild and sudden, did not frighten him. It did not even surprise him. It was born unexpectedly, bright and wonderful, full of vibrant joy, strength, and hope. He would return to the village. To the steppe. To the land.

He would abandon forever this city, so foreign to his soul, this stone, these enervating streetlights. He would forswear forever the harsh

entanglements of urban life, the poisonous dreams that weigh down the noisy cobblestones, the stifling fervor that gnaws at the soul in the narrow confines of apartments. He would discard the insane desires that fester in a mind locked inbetween the walls of a city. He would go out to the peaceful, sunny expanses of the fields, to the freedom he left behind, and he would live as the grass grows, as the fruits ripen.

The bell of a streetcar made him stop. And he was cheered by the thought: “Tomorrow I won’t hear you anymore.”

And all the pain that had accumulated for a year and a half, the festering disappointments so typical of people with ardor, all the bitterness of daily strivings, and the exhaustion of dreaming that he had experienced in the city were now transformed into a happy fatigue and a painful yearning for tranquility. He saw himself tomorrow not as an activist of the Village Hall or a member of the Village Council, not as a teacher or union official, but as an ordinary farmer, one of the countless gray figures in peasant garb who pull the eternal plow across the soil. Welcome, moist sunrise! The freshness of the first rays of light! The wonderful gleam of silent dew! May the hour when the light of life is born be forever blessed! The spirit of the past, petrified and powerful, awoke in him, the spirit of the ages that sleeps in the soul and awakes only in the moment of agitation, encouraging stillness and silence—that invincible, though subdued voice that whispers fables about the lost Eden and sings the hymns of naturalness.

But this was not where his greatest problem lay. Tomorrow he could find someone to buy out his lease on the apartment and furnishings, and he would submit his resignation from his job. Sure, they would try to keep him! But tomorrow evening he would get on a train heading south to join a commune or a workers’ brigade. That wasn’t important. That was simple and easy. There was nothing there to think or worry about. But! ... But, he would not go alone!

Just thinking of this made him lose his breath. There was something absolute about this sudden animation of a rejected and trampled love. From the tiniest ember, half-extinguished and turned into ash, as if in revenge for the cold horror of going out completely, this passionate fire erupted and illuminated him with a new ardor. The path before him was bright, straight, and happy, and he would follow it together with Nadika.

“Nadika, Nadika, Nadika, my little Nadika,” whispered Stepan.

He now understood that she had always been present in his soul, like a distant bell calling him. With her breath she had awakened anxiety in him, she had appeared in his dreams, but he did not recognize her until now. In others he had loved only her, and in her he loved something infinitely distant, an unrecognized memory, a barely audible echo from beyond the hills of consciousness. He now felt that he had never forgotten her, that he had always been searching for her in the maze of the city, and she was that flame that burned within him, urging him forward into the distance. In returning to her he was finding himself. In returning to her he would be resuscitating what

had died, what had disappeared because of his mistakes, what he had ruined in his blindness.

Nadika, Nadika, Nadika. You beautiful girl! Pale watersprite of the twilight meadows. She answered his call with a quiet trembling that was embodied in him, having come from over there, where she lived, where she waited for him, trampled and suffering. She seemed to turn her head toward his plea and her eyes lit up in joyful consent and her hand stretched out toward his forehead. She was forgiving him! Could it be otherwise? She would come! And that, too, was inevitable. In the flowery valleys that awaited them he would look ceaselessly into her eyes, where he would find the world and life; he would take her by the hand in radiant submission and feel in his palm the inexhaustible warmth of her body, which he would never approach. At night, he would keep watch over her dreams, the wonderful dreams of a somnolent beauty, and he would understand them, just as he understands human speech. And he would drink, drink forever, the sweet poison of her divinity, and he would slowly die at her feet in fatal intoxication. That's how it must be! Her resurrection, along with the song-filled allure of the steppe, flowed together into a single urge for sensual penance, a longing for eternal slavery, in which he felt all the joy of renewal.

At the corner of Volodymyrska Street he stopped, worried. Had he forgotten their ... that is, her address? No! Andriivsky Descent 38, apt. 6. The name of the street and the numbers immediately flashed in his memory, although he had heard them only once. And the only surprise was how close it was, how easy it was to get there. All the better, since he would have gladly crossed a desert in hunger and thirst, or wandered in underground tunnels, or in a jungle with otherworldly dangers. He would have conquered anything in her name.

He repeated to himself:

“Andriivsky Descent, Andriivsky Descent.”

He soon recalled this curved, inclined street, his former path from the Podil to the Institute. And he would meet her again on this path, where he had lost her, and he would now find her again.

“How wonderful! How wonderful!” he thought.

A new idea suddenly came into his head, born of his recollections and the wish to renew the past that up 'til now had lived only within him. He wanted to see that little building near the Bessarabka Bazaar, to go into it just as he had done earlier, when he had seen Nadika in the company of her village friends. Where were they now? Where is the bashful Hanusia and young Asha? Where is the full-bodied Nusia and the instructor of club work? Suddenly, they became very dear to him, almost family, and very interesting. A vague expectation overcame him that he would meet them all in a moment around a table and that he would sit down beside Nadika, who was waiting for him. And why, indeed, wouldn't she happen to drop by here? If he could run into Levko, whom he hadn't seen for an even longer time, why not her? Stepan turned to the right and quickly walked down to Khreshchatyk.

His heart was beating wildly as he knocked on the rickety door of the squat shack. He recognized everything around him, the old-fashioned porch, the fenced-in yard, the wooden shutters. Nothing had changed. How fortunate! Well, it hadn't actually been so long ago—only a year and a half, which now seemed to him like one night of very deep sleep.

The door was opened by a man with a heavy voice who seemed somehow disappointed, uninviting.

“Do the girls still live here? The ones who lived here a year and a half ago?” Stepan asked.

Unfortunately, he could not put the question differently, since he had forgotten their surnames.

“There aren't no girls here,” answered the man in a tone as if to indicate that there were only honest people living here. He was about to close the door but Stepan, in confusion, began to explain. He was actually looking for his sister, whom he left in the city a year and a half ago. The only people who would be able to tell him were the girls who had lived here. Did they move out? If he doesn't find them, he won't find his sister, who has gone off somewhere. He's already visited the address bureau, but they couldn't tell him anything.

“Yeah, they just take your money,” grumbled the man, softening. “That's the Soviet way, for sure!”

“Yes, the bureaucracy's terrible.... One of the girls was a seamstress. A small girl.”

“There's a seamstress living over through the courtyard. Just go through the gate.”

They parted on friendly terms, and the boy went into the shadowy courtyard—a narrow space with a few trees between the neighboring tall buildings. At first he couldn't see where there might be any habitable space, but then he noticed a tiny shed that seemed to be attached like a mushroom to the blank wall on the left. A faint ribbon of light from the crack between the shutters was hardly visible in the darkness of this enclosure. Tripping over clumps of earth and bricks, Stepan approached the window and knocked carefully.

“Who's there?” he heard a woman's voice.

The boy trembled and then answered: “Open up, it's me, Stepan. Remember? I use to come visit when Nadika lived here.”

“Stepan?” the voice from inside asked in surprise.

“Sure, Stepan from Tereveni. Hanusia, open up.”

There was a sudden laugh inside.

“You bet, but my name is Yivha.”

Stepan recoiled in horror. Her name is Yivha? Yivha? That's a useless name for him. He was ready to fall on the ground right here, close his eyes, and forget everything. But when he got out to the street, the memory of Nadika swept over him again and he began to think about her once more.

But his thoughts were no longer the sweet dreams that had thus far

warmed and cheered him, but an extrinsically imposed, painful necessity, a terrible, inescapable need, whose causes were not even remotely known to him. Now he was considering the matter more with his reason than his desires and evaluated his intentions from the perspective of their actual realization. That Nadika was waiting for him seemed an undeniable fact. A sense of his exclusive rights to this girl had, indeed, never left him. If she was not with him now, that was only because he had not wanted that until now. Today, he would explain to her that life was only possible in nature, which they had abandoned and to which they must now return. The city, suffocating and boring, was a terrible mistake of history. He understood that these ideas were not particularly new, but that was only further proof of their veracity. But she would understand this even without words. At the moment, he was not worried about her at all. But she's married! And that Borys was such a stubborn fellow, he'd probably be hard to convince. What will it take to explain all this to him, to convince him? And he'll probably disagree and contradict! It will probably be necessary to mention that Nadika's virginity belonged to someone else. How unpleasant! The boy glanced at his watch. It was twenty to ten. A little late, but this had to be done today!

Feeling terribly tired, he called a cab and set off, drowsily leaning back in the seat. The flickering streetlamps and the evening rush of the crowd annoyed him, accelerating his fatigue to complete exhaustion. The boy closed his eyes, and a longing for sleep, like a warm and heavy quilt, covered his thoughts in a motionless fog. He felt the stiffness of his body, a tight swaddling of his soul, and the soft swaying of the carriage on its springs rocked him further and further from the troublesome bustle of life.

Suddenly the coachman stopped.

"What?" asked Stepan, awakening.

"We've arrived," said the man.

The boy shook himself and jumped to the ground.

"Shall I wait," asked the coachman.

"Yes, wait. I'll be right back," answered Stepan.

He nervously opened the door of the building on whose gate he saw an illuminated sign with the number he sought, but he climbed the steps slowly, lighting his way with matches. Finally, he stopped on the third floor and rang. His soul was filled with tranquility.

He leaned against the doorjamb and began to think about the fact that he had left his home today with his portfolio but did not have it with him now. Obviously, he had lost it. And although the portfolio, fortunately, held nothing of great importance, Stepan nevertheless felt a deep disappointment. "What a dolt I am," he thought.

Footsteps behind the door interrupted his thinking. He felt nervous again. Will she open the door, or will someone else? No, it was a woman's voice, but not hers, that asked, "Who is it?" The boy suddenly thought that maybe they had moved somewhere else. This possibility encouraged him, and he answered loudly: "May I see Comrade Borys?"

The door cracked open on a chain, and through the crack he was observed by a teenage girl.

“Borys Viktorovych isn’t home,” the girl responded earnestly. “He’s on a business trip.”

“That’s a shame,” grumbled Stepan. Then he added, nonplused, “I’ll leave him a note.”

“Please come in,” said the girl, inviting him in.

In the vestibule he hung up his hat on a hook and patted down his hair before following the girl into a room where a lamp with a wide lampshade of orange lace stood on a table covered with a bright oilcloth. He sat down at the table, and before the girl brought him a pencil and paper he stealthily looked around the apartment. The windows were covered with embroidered drapes and there were flowers on the windowsills. In the corner was a fabric sofa with a small rug beside it. Against the wall were simple chairs arranged very neatly. And suddenly, off to the side, an enormous bourgeois sideboard with engraved panels—the heavy centerpiece of the apartment, disproportionate to the size of the room. The room was simple and clean—all the furniture stood in its duly appointed place, keeping to the principle of symmetry. The sideboard seemed to be the chief guardian of order, the stern representative of the unchangeable foundations of life in this home.

Something touched his leg—a cat was rubbing against his shoe. He caught it and put it on his knees, focusing his attention on writing.

“Dear Borys, I finally decided to pay you a visit, but it didn’t work out. I thought we would spend the evening talking about old times.”

A side door squeaked and, raising his head, the boy saw a woman at the door, with a broad red shawl that covered her figure down to her knees. Stepan got up, embarrassed, deducing that this woman had likely been observing him through the crack when he was petting the cat.

“Is it you, Stepan ...”

“Pavlovych,” he added, realizing why she had paused.

And no sooner had he heard her voice than he recognized her. It was she! But terribly changed, almost disfigured, but he could not immediately tell in what way. Even her voice resounded different, somehow irritating, confident, and proud. She frightened him with her sudden entrance, with her appearance, with her formality and disdainful look. Shaking her hand, the boy thought: “I really am a dolt!”

“Have a seat, Stepan Pavlovych,” said the hostess.

And he suddenly realized that she was pregnant.

“Thank you,” he said, overcoming his horror, insult, and pain.

She sat down on the sofa by the door and called out:

“Natasha, put on the samovar.”

“Is that for me?” asked Stepan, concerned. “Thank you, I’ve had my tea. I just drank some.”

“But I haven’t had any,” she answered.

An uncomfortable silence ensued, and the boy thought this silence was

humiliating him, and perhaps pleasing to her, but he could not find any words. The round, heavy belly paralyzed him.

Finally, the hostess broke the silence.

“You are a very rare guest in our home, Stepan Pavlovych.”

“Indeed,” mumbled the boy. “It’s hard to find the time. And Borys is always away on business.”

He wanted to stop, but his fear of the silence squeezed a few more sentences out of him.

“I wanted to suggest—that is, if Borys were around, that we all go out somewhere together tomorrow, somewhere distant ... into nature, as they say.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” she replied. “But I’m not feeling very well.”

And the boy observed with chagrin that silence was falling between them again, a boring, irritating silence between people who would have done better not to meet. Every thought that arose in him immediately came crashing down on her belly and fled back into nothingness.

Suddenly she said, “They say you write stories.”

“Yes, I used to,” he answered sadly.

“And now?”

“I’m not writing now.”

“Why?”

“There’s nothing to write about.”

She smiled.

“Were there really no adventures in your life?”

He gave a start. Was she allowing herself too much liberty in making fun of him? He proudly answered: “There were, but they were minor. Too ordinary.”

Then he solemnly looked at his watch and got up.

“Please excuse me, Nadia ...”

“Semenivna,” she added.

“Nadia Semenivna, I have to go. Please give my best to Borys.”

“Please come visit us again,” said Nadia Semenivna. “We will always be happy to see you.”

On the stairs down he let his anger loose. What impudence! And who is this person, asking pointed questions? Is she the one he chased away from himself like a whore? She assumes that once she has a husband, she’s something special? And her husband is just a thief. You think he could purchase such a sideboard on the salary at a cooperative? So, of course, he’s stealing! He’s heading for a stay in the slammer. As for her, she’s just a city girl with a fat belly. He repeated this phrase a few times with sensual pleasure, and that calmed him down.

Out on the street, he decided to descend down to the Podil and then take a bus back up to Khreshchatyk. But he hadn’t made more than a few steps downward when someone yelled.

“Comrade. Comrade!”

It was the coachman, who had been waiting for him. As he paid him off, regret overwhelmed him. So why did this coachman wait for him? And why had he come here in the first place?

Descending the dark, curving street, the boy contemplated the broom of life, which swept up the footprints of the past after the fact—that great sacred broom, always new and always unerring. But, nevertheless, he was not at peace. This evening was pulling him back toward those crumbs of himself that he had once left behind, and these crumbs, scattered along the path, now tempted him inexorably. He wanted to gather them, to pick them up, to return them to himself, to undo the depletion of his being. So when he reached Revolution Square, illuminated with streetlights and the moving lights of streetcars, he slowly turned to the left, into the narrow streets of the Podil. And here was Nyzhnyi Val Street, and here was the Hnidy home, his first urban settlement. He was on the opposite side of the street, looking from the shadows at the familiar yard, the shed, the porch where he once sat in the evening, and the house. How strange! All the windows were illuminated, and strange sounds emanated through the walls into the dreamy silence of the street. Inside, there was dancing to the vibrant rhythm of mandolins. The somnolent, decaying building had opened its eyes and emerged from an oppressive stupor. The little house had come to life, stepping out of a coffin-like silence, and in this deferred resurrection there was also, perhaps, a sign of his path in the world, the path of someone whose steps are marked with death and life.

Suddenly a deep tranquility enveloped him. How comical it was to remember! Yes, everything in the past soon becomes covered with geological layers and transforms into incomprehensible strata compressed by the oppressive action of time. Anyone who tries to infuse memories with a new existence is simply mad! Because the past decomposes, like a corpse.

But as he walked away from that house, he slowly realized that his conceived composure was only the quiet beginning of a deceptive longing. It was growing every year, expanding, and becoming heavier, like a pregnant belly, and along with it an ever deeper, an ever more painful anxiety was suffocating him. He felt a terrible hunger of all his senses, a wild ardor, a powerful excitement of life's energy within him, breaking through the morbidity of his recent thinking. This terrible force churned within him in a white noise, and, choking in this renewed maelstrom, he conjured, in fear and hope, that from now on his life would be somehow new, not at all like what it had been, entirely different from what he had already experienced. May it begin all the sooner!

On the square named for the Third International he made his usual purchase of newspapers, and, as he was leaving, a surprise stopped him in his tracks. This really was a fairy-tale evening! Approaching him directly, face to face, was a glowing pair of unforgettable eyes, smiling at him from the still mask of a woman's face. He recognized them immediately and threw himself at them, as if they were the rescue beams of a lighthouse.

“Rita, my dear Rita,” he whispered, squeezing her hands.

The wound she had once made on his palm he now felt in his heart. And he was ready to clasp this woman to him right here, in the middle of the street, passionately and mindlessly, to feel her as he had felt her then, dancing.

She responded, smiling.

“What a surprise to meet you here.”

“Is it only surprising?”

“And desired,” she added.

He was devouring her with his eyes.

“Where are you heading?” he asked, finally.

“To Mala Pidvalna Street.”

He took her by the arm.

“Let’s go.”

But beyond the Regional Executive Committee Building, in the darkness of the alley, he stopped and sensually grasped her around the waist.

She squirmed out of his embrace and whispered, without much dissatisfaction, “You’re insane!”

“I’m always like that,” he replied happily, taking her by the arm again. “Lean over towards me. Closer—don’t be so miserly! Today, I’ve been searching all evening. If you must know, I even lost my portfolio somewhere. But I found you. You can’t possibly understand me. After you left back then, I could not do anything. I lived only in recollections of you, in the hope of seeing you.”

“Really? I didn’t forget you completely either.”

“All the better! But, even now, I’m not completely sure it’s you. Do you understand? You’re dressed differently, and it seems to me that maybe it’s no longer you.”

“You need proof?”

“You’ve guessed, precisely,” he cried out.

For a moment, just a moment, she touched his lips with her former kiss.

“Is it me?”

“Yes, it’s you,” he replied, subdued. Then he asked, “Are you in Kyiv for long?”

“Until the fall.”

He squeezed her hands in gratitude. He had been afraid she might say “t6forever.”

“I love you madly,” he whispered. “You are unique, you are just amazing.”

All of his sorrows suddenly poured out of him in a lover’s whisper, in poignant expressions, in tender pet names, in bold, arousing comparisons in which flowed all the depth and variability of his feelings.

Suddenly she stopped.

“That’s enough, you little rascal. I’m home.”

He cried out impetuously, “And I will follow you! I’ll come home with you!”

She wagged her finger at him.

“No you won’t. As you know, I live with my parents.”

“Oh, that’s not very convenient,” said Stepan with a pout. “What shall we do?”

“Tomorrow we dance at the opera. Wait for me.”

“Only tomorrow?”

“Only tomorrow! But I want flowers.”

“You shall have them.”

In the dim light of the entryway, barely illuminated by a lamp on the second floor, he kissed her passionately and inquisitively, insistent, uncontrollably, as if searching in the depths of her lips the answer he had been searching for all his life. And he left quickly, elated by the joy of discovery.

He had never before felt such powerful emotions. The ground seemed to flow beneath his feet in a velvet carpet, and the roofs of buildings greeted him like giants tipping their hats. And in his head, in that beautiful, unconstrained head, row after row of invincible thoughts marched in ebullient excitement.

Without waiting for the elevator, the boy ran headlong up the stairs to the sixth floor, entered his room, and threw open the windows onto the dark abyss of the city.

It lay submissively below, in cliff-like waves marked with dots of fire, and out of the darkness of its hills sharp stone fingers stretched out to him. He stood immobilized in sensual contemplation of the magnitude of this new force. Suddenly, in a grand gesture, he threw an enchanted kiss out below.

Then, in the silence of the lamp on his table, he wrote his novel about people.

Translated by Maxim Tarnawsky

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