

Stalinka

Oles Ulianenko

Part One

Legs splayed, nostrils flaring, stumbling ceaselessly like a sleepwalker inside the sweaty, wide-mouthed sewer pipe (dead silence above), Lopata was first to catch sight of the clamoring sun through the small dark opening. He let out a faint moo-oo, like a calf might, and with great effort (an “oh-h-ah-h” ripping out of his numb lips), he stretched out his arms; that futile shout, that “oh-h-ah-h” wrenched out of the darkness, was lost in the noise of splashing water; Lopata wiped the saliva off his chin, croaked something through the yellowed stumps of rotting teeth, nervously tugged at his chin with withered fingers, and, puffing and hissing, grabbed hold of the metal pipe as he stumbled and fell into a pool of brown mush. Lord kept moving forward after him, and landed on top of Lopata’s hunched, sagging spine. On the cobblestones of the inverted shell of the city—imagined as the faded canvas of an evening sky—crisp footsteps bouncing like pellets off the cobblestones resounded annoyingly but nonetheless happily, clattering in a sound new for Lord, as if by the sea the whoosh from an emptied seashell: a clock striking in a tower and the arteries of emptied city streets flowing with an oozing slush, the rustle of damp newspapers, and bright elongated bands of light; when he and Lopata had set out on their escape the rain was already pelting from all sides, thus Lord’s stunted, disordered memory, preening in its two hemispheres, foggy with haloperidol, stirred in the early autumn downpour, and, in the beginning of the end, unwound in the narrow strip of the corridor; as he fled, Lord saw that corridor before his eyes, that freshly-painted corridor, and it restored his ability to think. This exertion, this struggle to think, was so tricky: here in the sewer pipe what came back to Lord wasn’t what he sought but, rather, what he was fleeing: the white madhouse in building No. 5: the barred windowpanes, yellow and slimy with rain, and the patients, the insane ones and the ones made insane with injections of haloperidol—the ones in building No. 5 who, licking their palates for bits of food (just to keep chewing), bunched up like a herd of cattle on a couch, the only couch in the ward or in the corridor; those who had missed their chance for a spot on the couch shuffled back and forth end to end (forlorn candles in a neuroleptic fog), as trees bending in the wind scattered ragged shadows; enchanted, those made insane calmed down and

stared blankly at the theater of nature on the other side of the barred window. Thinking about heaven-knows-what: the breakfast, with the rancid margarine, and the watery tea. And the old Jew, who occupied a prominent place in the twin hemispheres of Lord's brain: clad in a long housecoat, inconspicuously pulling from his pocket a piece of paper folded in four to note down something with the stub of a pencil. In truth, from his first days there Lord realized that thinking was not advised in the madhouse because here everyone thought. And he, Lord, was the most thoughtful, which, however, the medical staff had noted as a sign of superiority; truly, from the very first days in the madhouse, Lord was delighted to discover that he wasn't actually so mad after all, that these crack-brained fools had nothing to do with him, nor he with them; the idea of escape must have struck Lord as he observed the old Jew jotting things down; already reduced to a state of sleepwalking, pushing one foot in front of the other, noticing only the aggressive, blatant onslaught autumn was launching on the windows, only then did Lord begin to study Buscholz, the old Jew, always aloof (was he a fool, or what?); the madhouse came to life every morning at half past five: the patients didn't budge, so the short-tempered orderlies tipped over the reeking mattresses, dumping the patients to the floor: there the sick and the mad lay in a layered heap, a shifting mound of bodies, the livelier ones stomping on and kicking the passive ones, all of them finally swarming toward the exit, strands of clear saliva in tow; the orderlies opened the washrooms for barely a half-hour after removing the door handles and anything sharp or pointed; well before the trip to the washroom was organized a yellow puddle of urine flooded the passageway to the washroom; the still sleepy medics, stout young interns from the medical college, observed the raucous goings-on with sleepy, dulled eyes, as these ghost-like, almost see-through human shapes rummaged through trash bins in search of cigarette butts and bits of uncontaminated paper. Lord observed all of this with an alert and sharp gaze, still high on the cyclodol old Buscholz had given him: "Here's what I have to say to you, young man: put yourself in God's hands, and swallow this here, what I'm giving you—don't take what the doctors give you. And find yourself a friend, or you just might become like them," said the old man as he stood with his back to Lord: a reflection of the old man's pallid face floating on the polished surface of the tiled wall; he was writing something down on a piece of hard cardboard, the tails of his blue housecoat swaying, a housecoat issued only to long-term residents of the madhouse in building No. 5. Those made mad were already lined up in a tight row, pleading for cigarette butts or something to eat; good weather always cheered them up: Lord did not care to preserve that memory; it was only afterward, inside the sewer pipe, that he felt the horror of events out there, outside the madhouse, where confident footsteps resounded in a hollow wasteland; before the escape, Lord—sharp-eyed and focused—had stumbled upon the hatch to the sewer pipe. and later, after he got to know Lopata, he studied the hatch; he decided that it led somewhere

down below, to the laboratory of the medical institute, where he was taken, bound in restraints, to serve as a specimen for research, to provide know-how for the future psychiatrists studying at the medical institute. “Don’t get too worked up, young man ... you’ve landed in a place where people don’t end up for no reason,” said the old Jew. “Be smart, but not too smart, you understand?” Lord understood but stuck to his own sense of things: he was the only one in the ward who still had dreams in his sleep; the only one who wanted a woman, and freedom. During sessions at the medical institute he pretended to be a fool and muddled through the hours of “whatever” that came along like old man Buscholz had advised. “Hey, we need more idiots like him,” the young female medical students muttered among themselves, while Lord offered anecdotes in answer to suggestions that he suffered from a “persecution complex” or that he had “anti-government tendencies” even as his mind was preoccupied with the cast-iron hatch leading to the sewer pipe. “You sure you don’t want a woman?” the chief physician had asked him, his myopic gray eyes staring at him from behind thick glasses. “Sulfazine, sulfazine is all I want, doctor,” Lord replied. “Bastard,” sniveled the doctor, his leaky sinuses dripping; he took off, shuffling past rows of listless, tranquilized inmates rocking in a synchronized rhythm on the couch, and approaching the orderlies he became more animated, spoke with great gusto, breaking out in raucous jollity and joke-telling; then he loped over to nurse Nadia, skinny as a rake, and took from her the white plastic pad, quickly erased what was on it, and proceeded to sketch something with a pencil. Soon, Lord’s long body was dragged to the bed-lying ward, “the lounge,” after he’d been pummeled in the back and laced tightly in a filthy straightjacket; puddles of blood appearing on the tiles as they dragged him along the corridor; eventually, after the injections, he coupled with Lopata, who in a jealous rage had tried to kill his wife and now, shackled to a bed, convulsed violently after being overdosed with sulfazine—“good, goo, goodo” droned his lips, desert-dry, like an invocation; exhuming from the depths of his being accusations at the orderlies in their worn-out lab coats, “... she lay on the ground, the barrel of the gun smoking ... wisps of smoke ... little wisps ... a little streak along the ground, along the lush grass ... gray smoke ... it was night when she came, stepping lightly, she came talking, and I was quiet, I had nothing to say ... nothing ... I can still see her coming ... I can still see her ...” His neighbor in the ward, Bronka, a homosexual, had wagged his tongue, gossiping: Lopata had managed to get away, he’d slithered through, he said, he’d joined a sect of the Jehovah’s Witnesses—he’d wanted to grieve communally, to diminish his sorrow by fasting and praying, and group sex; Bronka even pulled down his pants to sort of demonstrate how it was done; somehow Lopata had managed to escape conviction; “Ya-a-a, Lopata: born a sheep, you can never be a wolf,” remarked Lord, baiting Bronka. Squat—like a half-uprooted, scorched little stump—wiping away the slime from his eyes, Bronka went over to the orderlies to badger them for a Prima cigarette; after that he sat down on a

white tile and rubbed his anus; Lord recalled a ribbed white tile like that; Lord remembered tiles like that from his days in the army because his thoughts evoked images of a jumble of green uniforms, and what followed neither his memory nor his imagination would replicate. Bronka skipped over to the long-bodied Lord, with his strands of reddish hair reaching his shoulders—“Yeah, that scum is too clever to let them give him a haircut”—as Lord wriggled his focus into every nook and cranny, his eyes poking about for cigarette butts, hoping to find a nice, smelly one for Bronka, one that had been lying around forever under a radiator; Bronka was happiest showing off his penis: he’d look at it, then he’d put it back, only to pull it back out and look at it again, parading it in front of the orderlies—o-o-o, Bronka could perform; he would quietly snuggle up to Lord, reminding him that he and Lopata were compatriots: “Don’t, um, hang around Lopata, ’cuz, here’s the deal: we had a church, what a church we had, in Popivtsi. It was an archeological relic, not a church: it was hand-hewn, with solid beams, all wood; and the priest was a good priest, he was so good, he spoke Ukrainian, man was he go-o-o-d, people wept, listening to him; I was a little kid then, just a little twerp ... my head hurts, my head hurts ... oy-oy, the buzzing in my head ... inside the church it was always cool, even in mid-summer hands would go numb, even in summer’s heat, August, but like a cool forest ...” Bronka’s voice slowly trailed off and he hopped about on his left foot as if shaking water out of his ear, like kids do after swimming in the pond; his eyeballs rolled crazily in their sockets: the yellow-tinged whites latticed with fine blue veins; Lord strained to remember: the gray cattails bent over in the wind, a wind that had dropped down from somewhere up above in the rust-colored cliffs, and he, the little kid that he was, kissing the lips of a fully mature girl like a practiced man; recovering his senses, he turned his head, approached the barred window, waning like the supple willow beyond the walls, and saw the sparkling lake; Lord shifted his gaze and saw blue spots in the mist with yellow images retreating and then melting away, and then suddenly there was Bronka jumping out, crouching down, pulling Lord by the collar: “The buzzing in my head is gone ... it’s stopped. Completely. Lopata’s brother was never right in the head, it was always buzzing inside his head—we were, little, like this”—he resumed his one-legged hopping—“and he always had this buzzing in his head; when Father returned, the bolsheviks tore into everyone with their long rods, searching for grain, everyone, everyone got it, but they didn’t touch Father: the old man claimed he was a member of the proletariat ... Father together with Grandpa Yeresko smashed the windows and climbed inside the church ... and ever after, after they ... oy, my head ... the buzzing ... and Lopata’s brother, it just never stopped buzzing inside his head...” Bronka disappeared in mid-sentence, and glancing out of the “lounge” Lord saw him already stretching out his hand and whispering something into the orderly’s ear—a smile spread practically from ear to ear across the face of that burly brute, and shaking his little doll-like head after hearing what Bronka had to say, he

ushered him off to the washroom. They returned soon enough, the orderly all sweaty, and Bronka, hobbling, his hands cradling his buttocks, going for the couch, driving out Lopata, green with the aniline that had been smeared over the ulcers and boils erupting all over his skin—"So, in the end, who fared better? That's right, o-o-o ...," he addressed Lopata, and then, settling in, turned to Lord, "Oy-yoy, they climbed up to the top of the church, banging with an ax, and the priest didn't stop praying, his lips all bloody, the sacred words all gummed-up in his bloody lips ... the priest wiped the gore off his lips; the women shrieked wildly ... the bell clanged, Grandpa banged with the axe, banged with the axe ... suddenly there were flames, the fire spread all around the church, the bell crashed through the choir loft, crashed all the way down, rolled over and broke the tractor driver's legs, shattering his bones like dry twigs; the tractor driver had smashed the gate to the church, and there went the icon of St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker, into the mud ... and the church cross took off like a bird and flew over the village, going down past the village; Yeresko had swung at the cross, whack-whack, and the cross took off, going down someplace in the vill- ..." Bronka trailed off and Lord turned away to have a look through the barred window; Bronka headed off to resume walking in circles around the orderlies, pestering them, touching them; they kicked him away and he fell flat on his back by the washroom; "c'mon, guys, c'mon, gimme a cigarette ... c'mon," yanking his hands in front of their faces, like a beggar; the orderlies winked at each other: "Hey, Bronka, maybe it's time to discharge you, you're so much like a smart guy already ...," and Bronka cleverly withdrew to the "lounge" to continue: "... Lopata's father carpeted the floor in the pigsty with icons and then he stood there, hands on hips, yelling to my brother at the top of his lungs, dancing and stomping all over the icons, 'Look at this, Nykyfor, God has truly punished me, eh?' Laughing his head off ... his once normal laugh was now ghastly, inhuman ... his son, meanwhile, was tending the cows as they grazed on an island, an island of green grass, reading a book as the cows grazed, oy-oy-oy; when he turned his head to look, his neck went snap, it stayed that way for two months—he roared like a bull; to think that he was perfectly normal when he was born; people said he killed his own mother in the pigsty; he, that piece of shit, their very own piece of shit, had even applied to study at the institute, man was I jealous, oy-oy-oy was I jealous ..." Bronka ran off, skipping, snot running down his nose; he sat on his tailbone and scurried off, sliding his fingers across the tiles in the corridor; the old prisoners, the mad ones from building No. 5 liked to say that they longed for the "lounge" because there meals were brought on a tray and set down right in front of their noses; and that he, Bronka, was certainly not a teacher, Bronka was as likely to be a teacher as a ballet dancer, since he was a Baptist, and he refused to share his sister with Lopata; even after shedding, a wolf is still a wolf. The chief physician had had enough of this business with Bronka: he told Bronka "Off with you to the 'lounge,'" which was where Lord had made friends with

Lopata, even as Bronka kept going on and on: "... sonny boy's neck went snap, and that's where he died, right there in the pigsty, where he killed his own mother"; Lopata snuggled up close to Lord for hours on end, telling him about his children and about his gunned-down wife: "She lay on the ground, the smoke wafting from the gun barrel ... a wisp of smoke ... gray smoke"; the doctor approached, a friendly follow-up visit after the brain-rinse with sulfazine, after the large-dose injections of insulin, and, speaking softly, like a patient to another patient, he asked Lopata: "You feel better? Well-well-well ... Drop by my office tomorrow." "Dropping by" scared the dickens out of the patients: it meant "a poke": hands folded on the lacquered tabletop the doctor—hands folded—would be waiting; an ashtray, a cigarette, and even a lighted match would be offered as a friendly gesture—"how are things? why, that's terrible; after all, you must be ..."—while the patients gazed at the window drapes, which reminded them of home, and some of them would cave in, would actually say something nonsensical, like "the guy in ward 3 can read minds," for which a derisory reward was granted: permission to go out onto the balcony aviary, where it was pleasantly breezy, the air smelled of sweet, late-summer apples and damp leaves, and the sight of the green poplars soothed the soul; then that poor bloke would get a dose of haloperidol, and megeptyl, too, and the whole affair would be over with a smoking break and an inspection: the patients crowding into the washroom, poking around and sniffing one another, until everything got washed away the next day, and through the following days it became ancient history—the truth will never be known. Shuffling from corner to corner, fancying a fifteen-minute walk. "How was it outdoors?"—always the same question greeting the ones returning from the fifteen-minute walk; in a corner prayers were secretly uttered; Lord spent his time relaxing on a couch; using necklace beads, old Buscholz scratched hieroglyphs; outside, a glimmer of autumn; and Lord was bored silly: it was the memories, his own and Lopata's—and he was constantly digging them up—not the thoughts of escape, that wore him out: "... she lay ... the gray smoke ... you know ... and the kids, in a huddle around her ... I couldn't live without her"; occasional bouts of fitful giggling seized Buscholz, shattering the relentless stupor that had come over him as he scratched the hieroglyphs, while a determined Lord listened to the racket in the water pipes, and, the bizarre quiet surrounding him notwithstanding, he proceeded to bribe an orderly with a gold wedding band, for which he obtained a tool for unlocking the door; painstakingly, feeling confident, he marked the route of the sewage pipes. So then: freedom. The old Jew looked at Lord's back and the last thing Lord heard coming out of his mouth was "Where are you going to go, for heaven's sake? Where can one go? In a country full of undying fools and poets ... you have Yahveh's protection, you know ... a country of poets and fools ..." Lord turned his head once more: across Buscholz's chest he saw a growing black stain; Buscholz turned around and

left, the hems of his housecoat swaying as he retrieved a piece of paper folded in four and pretended to write.

* * *

An unmanageable Lopata lay twitching in a pool of water; the small round window went dark; the street noise died down; ordinary days became extraordinary and the wind howled; squatting, Lord swallowed the cyclodol; and Lopata—only his eyeball moved, yellow in the day’s fading glimmer; tangles of light skipped across to the other side, onto Lopata, onto the sweating walls; his face was white as a sheet, and Lord was concerned. “Get up, Lopata, it’s time ... time...” “Do not force me to commit sin. I am a man of faith.” Lord stuffed several tablets of cyclodol into Lopata’s mouth but he spat them out. Miscalculating, Lord struck Lopata under the jawbone and felt bad about it. “Asshole,” he mumbled to himself as he climbed up, putting his feet in the grooves in the wall—there was no ladder. The last shred of light grew dim. Hunched over, Lopata followed Lord, murmuring, “The Last Judgment, the Last Judgment is waiting for us ...” The sound of glass breaking; footsteps above them; Lopata missed and cut his hands raw; lay flat on the cement floor: “I’m not going, I’m not ...” Like a taut wire, the cutting wind slashed away the last vestiges of summer, slicing through their pathetic clothes; from the street Lord cursed, “Fuck you, Lopata,” turned back, and pulled him out and up into the street, ripping his clothes on the last bits of glass: the city, sunk in darkness: an inverted, hollow black washtub, the dead streetlights like candlesticks; useless expired opaque lamps reflecting chunks of a red moon. Darkness. They set off into a city they could not see; neither of them knew how much time had passed, the time that on a whim they had been deprived of; tottering, dispossessed, and stripped of everything save the horrors of paranoia, with legs torn open to raw flesh, Lopata left a trail of bloody footprints. Lord did not recognize the town, the town he had lived in for so many years, not only behind bars in the madhouse; here it was all strange and mysterious, in the middle of the night; no signs of life in the windows; the ground, so physical and real, cooled off by the night, felt intimate on the soles of their feet; blocks of buildings; and lady night, also known as death, lying utterly still on the rooftops. “My God, my God ...,” Lopata droned on and on, leaving bloody footprints. He fell down. At first Lord didn’t notice, or was it that he knew Lopata liked to feign injury; ten steps down the road, Lord realized that Lopata wasn’t next to him, turned back, and urged him on, prodding him with his foot, kicking him lightly. A virtuous but sickly man, Lopata turned silent, making munching motions with his lips; moving with authority, Lord grasped Lopata by his tattered clothes, threw him over his shoulders, and, his frozen lungs wheezing, lugged him into the darkness. His head had cleared when he stepped onto the tramped earth, permeated with the odor of decaying summer grass, an odor the earth releases only at the juncture when

summer surrenders to autumn; suddenly he felt like he could remember who he was, what his real name was; like he could turn back the clock, reload his batteries. Feeling assured and composed, he stopped, and from the top of a faded, bald hilltop he gazed at the contours of the city stretched out in front of him like a rapacious beast. The air seemed yellow. He took a step forward and then stopped as if something were ready to break free, but that something was unspeakable; the thought itself, its bleak outline, led him through those grim corridors once again, twisting his memory, obliterating it; God in Heaven!—what was he thinking when the door closed behind him and the orderlies put the door handles away into their pockets: did he think it was forever? But it was too late already to wonder about it now, and pointless, besides; Lord sat, pressing his face into his hands, almost sobbing from the shock of admitting to himself that yes, indeed, he had experienced a kind of loss. A dead dog lay across the trail, maggots crawling over its decomposing carcass. A driveling Lopata tried to speak and gave up, pointing with his finger, instead, “oh-ah-hhh-oh-ing” over and over.

And then it was morning: liquid gold flooded the steppe, gilding the wind-flattened grass—the wheel of the great luminary rolled alongside the black earth. A road. A well-trodden road. A clump dropped out of the sky into the grass: a falcon. Not a soul in sight.

And then it was night. And cold. And in the numbing darkness they wandered through fields of prickly jimsonweed, pigweed, patches of black tilled land; the restless wind ruffled their clothes: ahead of them lay stalks of hemp, cut down, probably last year; the sharp tips and bristles of the stubble stabbed their feet, and every time Lopata began to tremble, Lord cursed and shouted out crude Russian profanities, lifted Lopata off his feet, and dragged him to the closest crossway. Laying him down in a trough, Lord listened with ears pricked up, like a hound’s, studying the wind. Lopata vomited bile and burned with fever; his body convulsed, and he wailed in drawn-out yowls addressed to his children or to his wife—Lord couldn’t tell; unbuttoning his cotton collar, Lord leaned against a twisted willow tree that lightning had split apart, hung his hands off his pointy knees, and watched as puffs of white clouds floated across a towering sky; his hand reached for the cyclodol wrapped in shiny plastic, and then fell away, limp. On the ground Lopata squirmed like a worm; a gust from the south blew in, a warm breeze. And, thought Lord, I could stuff a couple of tablets into Lopata’s mouth, but that would be useless, it wouldn’t help. Lopata wasn’t in lockup anymore, and if he started up again, he’d be sorry. Three days into the escape, the weather cleared a bit; Lord hazarded exploring, sniffing around places like a wolf; followed old trails like a wild beast, sensing that a search party was in pursuit; he crawled through brambles, towing Lopata, tied at the waist with a belt, behind him, until he reached a decrepit little hut. It might have been a forester’s hut, or an old hermit’s; sitting on a hillock, they crammed tart berries into their shriveled stomachs. Lopata recovered a bit of strength and filled the air with drawn-out psalms, only to

end up losing his voice and lying on the ground like a rigid cable, motionless and all yellow, like a corpse. The weather cleared. It warmed up. Lord mended the roof, covered up the holes with branches—the gusts of wind turned cold suddenly, and damp. It rained. Lord went out to explore the tangled forest and returned at dusk; after making sure that Lopata was still alive, he sat in the entry, watching the rain embrace the earth. It was evident that summer was breathing its last breath. Trying to stay warm, Lopata huddled close to Lord, plastered in mud, who told him: “You’re like a stray animal, Lopata—you’re a cast-off.” And about himself he said, “Miserable ass, you’re not even in lockup ... a worthless gimp.” And as Lopata teetered on the brink of death, Lord dug out a can, stacked a bunch of twigs he’d broken up, picked a handful of fern leaves, lit a fire, and brewed a fern-leaf tea to nurse Lopata—Lopata coughed, vomited blood and refused to drink the brew. “You bitch, Lopata—you’re a man of faith, why are you tormenting a man with worry ... a-a-a?” Now and then Lord was able to get a few drops of the brew into Lopata’s throat, and, gaining a bit of strength, Lopata would raise himself up on his elbows to say, “For man is full of sin, Lord; man carries sin within ... and acts in sin ... Don’t touch me! ...” “Ya-a-a,” snorted Lord. “So that wasn’t you who whacked your wife with a double-barreled gun?” And then, after a pause, he added, “You know what I think? I think that if the world were fine, God would be pleased with man ... ha? ha? What do you say, Lopata—ha?” “Do not blaspheme ... man is mere dust ... and he who does not love God treats others ...” Lopata mumbled and fell flat on his back, while Lord circled around him with the boiling-hot brew, not knowing how to approach him. “You’re a fool, Lopata, a fool ... I have faith in God, but I can’t help thinking that this here is heaven, compared to what we had ... and you are indeed a hopeless fool ...” Lord wasn’t even angry. Ten days into the escape, uneven gray bands of rain were still pounding the pools of standing water. Lopata got up, and, mouth open, like a child, drew irregular breaths; he spread out his arms and then folded them and approached Lord. Lord sat in the entry and did not turn his head even when he heard a light sob; the wind crashed in, something behind him toppled to the ground, and, still not moving his head, Lord was suddenly seized with a sense of grief and longing; a devastating exhaustion hit him hard; hundreds, myriads of stars slammed into his head, and something inside his bosom quivered, something sickeningly warm, only to break loose—to tumble across the wild, ochre steppe. Lord wanted to reflect on something; his mouth let loose a sudden roar, a shrill, braying roar; with neither defiance nor malice, he stood in the doorway for a good minute, and walked out. He felt something like panic for the first time, all these days later; his gaze darted over the tops of the still green trees; his eyes followed the birds, watching them merge with an airborne flock. Everything stopped. It grew cold. Dusk. Perhaps it wasn’t fear. Lord couldn’t handle the thoughts swimming in his head, a gray mass that eventually formed into a multitude of shapes; he felt a stab in his

chest: cosmic nothingness scratched at his heart, and when he started to recall, to realize, that he wasn't Lord but someone else entirely, as it dawned on him that all that time he had spent in the madhouse—and the present time, too—was lost, had slipped through his fingers long ago, he turned and saw that Lopata was dead. At first, Lord didn't believe what he thought he saw; he thought, at first, that it was a set-up, or had he misremembered something? Finding a connection between all this and Lopata's death seemed impossible. Actually, Lord felt relieved that Lopata was no longer there. At the moment all he craved was food and rest. He drank a little bit of the fern tea, snacked on wild apples, and fell asleep at the entry to the hut. He slept twenty-four hours straight through. At the first light of dawn, he woke up. Not understanding anything, Lord looked at Lopata's body. He sat up. He sat for a long time, until it was broad daylight. But there was no light in his eyes. Lord drank a bit of the tea, and then he dragged Lopata to the forest, hurled him into a pool of water, and with a long stick scraped and scraped batches of dirt to cover Lopata—Lord left him half-buried. He hesitated for a moment and then recited a few passages from prayers and psalms; finally, feeling satisfied when he had said "Amen," he crossed himself as he had been taught to do so long ago; but then, maybe not at all like he'd been taught, and, famished, he returned to the hut to sleep. He slept as long as any man who in his dreams is oblivious of time. And he dreamed that he was on a sled (maybe not a sled, maybe it was something like a trough), hurtling headlong down a steep hill, a giant hill—and he wanted to jump off, but somebody was holding him back, and then, a gleam of daylight and a voice calling him. A warm, dearly loved voice, calling out and calling his name from so far away, from that faraway time, and finally he broke away and dragged his feet toward the voice. He staggered along a blue shore, through tall grasses, but he wasn't walking, he was floating above the earth; the wind gently stroked his chest; the voice echoed louder, and tears rolled down his cheeks; when he looked, the hill was already behind him, and there a red fire blazed, like a city on fire—although, in fact, Lord had never seen what a city on fire looks like.

Fall arrived. Beads of cold sweat bathed his skin, his weak legs couldn't hold him up, and his defeated body crumpled onto the decayed straw; the fragments of his remaining teeth chattered; he got lost in snatches of dreams, visions, and hallucinations; his body was riven with cramps, and often he thought about whether it wouldn't be better to go back. Cold and hunger. Frosty mornings. Mustering all his strength, he gathered some grass in the swampy thicket, counted how many matches he had hidden away in a secret pocket, and laid them out in front of him: he laid them out and counted them again and again and then gathered them back up in a little heap. He vomited bile, had a bout of bloody diarrhea; and then one day, upon waking up, he remembered the dream. Something ordered him to get going, so he decided to go.

Confident in its ascendancy, autumn unfurled its power in a thin veneer over the earth; Lord walked along the river bank, gazing into the water—dark and viscous, as befitted the first months. He walked for a long time by the river, silently glancing at the slopes and strips of forest in the distance and then getting lost; day blindness replaced night blindness, and he walked and walked, bruising his feet, stepping heavily over the black plowed field, driven onward by his own shadow and the voice in his ear urging him on. At last he stopped: before him were the square shapes of a small town. He stopped in wonder—leaves were falling to the ground: dead leaves, velvety leaves, greenish ones latticed with fine veins. And then it came back to him: an image of the old Jew writing things down on a folded-in-four piece of paper, and for the first time a clear, firm, sensible thought came to him: “Memory: the only true memory is what has not been condensed onto white sheets of paper,” and it stung Lord like boiling water, piercing him with a mad fury. He recognized the place where he was born. He looked up and watched as if the weightless falling leaves had something to teach him. It struck him that foolishness gives birth to incredible foolishness, or it simply engenders and nurtures a more refined foolishness; there’s a difference between the two. They even have a distinct taste. But how was it possible to show and prove that you just can’t any more, without humiliating others? Not to say that you don’t love any more, when you actually do love! But it’s very different, and it comes out all wrong. You can’t love. You simply don’t want to. Don’t want to, is all. Because something has changed, and that something was huge; and it’s been lost. You want to step away so as not to see what you had sought for so long. So others wouldn’t see. Then it’ll come back—otherwise, it never will. It’s like chasing girls in your youth. That’s what it’s like. Yes—the leaves dropped down, imbued with the sun’s golden fire; autumn was rolling in; a whole world separates “I love” from what is actually said—a world shattered, a world that has experienced “I love”; this present-day absurdity will end as pure folly: a differently experienced, differently interpreted “I love”; but what if you have been crushed, broken to pieces, what if you don’t even want to try to bring yourself back together? Smashing things, or escaping, is easier. At least that gives you a chance, an opportunity to view things from a different angle. That is to say, if that chance, that opportunity, doesn’t turn into something strange that gets you to escape. There you are, lying in the sand, in the shade, and a thought starts to take form, when suddenly you remember who you are. Better to go to the other side of the planet, or even further from this world, to the next one? A sin?! Yes, committing suicide is a sin; but what is one to do when just walking is a sin? At least, that’s what they say. Relentlessly, over and over, again and again, they stuff your ears and your head with nonsense. Hmm—so, he wasn’t Lord after all. Enough already. He’s done with silly battles. He will be Jonah, Iona, Clement, Mykyta. That was none of anyone’s business. He is Jonah. And thereafter he felt himself to be the master of his own destiny. And Jonah

went wandering over places he knew, and he saw hunched old men heaving bundles uphill along trails, and then he felt a deceitful twinge—pigeons in warm courtyards, cows mooing, apples falling loudly from the very tops of trees, dried berries rustling in the breeze. The wind fingered his meager garments. Jonah continued on for another hour, keeping to the bushes; the wind swept fallen leaves across yards, and fluffy little puppies yapped—the leaves mixed with stones and pebbles in the alleys, a trace of mint and burnt sour cherries passed through the air; Jonah lay down beneath a rail embankment, picking stalks of grass that had sprouted through a mix of shells and gravel. Who was the last to see Jonah? That was a cow: a toy-like figure in tattered clothes running along the top of the embankment and then grabbing the door of the railroad car, and, feet dangling, hanging on like that for a long time.

* * *

A flock of birds flew over the broad tract of black earth, heaving their wings wearily, breaking a temporary stillness; their black, needle-sharp eyes looking down; behind them glimmered their favorite farmyards gradually fading away; the birds were bidding farewell to people, because after three days of flight, after crossing an ocean, they would be settling in to spend the winter months in cliffs on uninhabited, quiet islands; flying over the black tilled earth, they pushed up into the heights, tearing through the dense, humid autumn air, and the leader of the flock cawed loudly as he flew past the town with its sharp-roofed towers and little boxes of buildings glowing red in the night air and gray arteries of rail lines pasted with brown and green train cars, stuck together like a family of turtles, pulled forward by puffing steam engines; the buildings spreading out under the leader's eyes like reddish-brown crabs; and as the birds left solid ground, the leader flung a loud caw into the air, as if he understood something—this time directed toward the town: toward the black crisscrossing streets, the winding electric buses and trams that crawled like snails into the puddles of light in the town illuminated from behind the clouds; and then the flock climbed higher, higher, and still higher, receding ever farther from the town that looked like a brown clot darkening more and more the further they flew, the water glistening like mercury, little vortexes the only movement on the still surface, the wind ineffective in keeping the gray smoke from clumping up above the cast-iron fence that surrounded the cemeteries, the morgues, the medical institutions, the crematoria, and the correctional facilities fenced with barbed wire; finally, the leader flung himself headfirst, drilling through the thick air, slashing through, pulling the flock behind him over the high-voltage towers; the birds' wings beat close to the ground as they flew above the forest; turning, the leader took off alone into the swirl of tremulous human souls, gathering them up to bring along to a warm paradise; the flock

wheeled around the sun, cried a gentle lament from up above, and in an hour the city lay far behind them, the red sky ablaze.

* * *

Horik Piskariov was born around noon, at summer's end; the sun flooded pyramids of glass and concrete with gold as it licked the dew off the tops of human dwellings; viewed against the sun, they looked like a looming black mass. And then, as evening approached, the sun, sputtering, inched across the city like a huge red eye, painted onto reflecting windowpanes and, as it set, chipped by rooftop antennas. It was hot. It was incredibly humid, and sultry. You couldn't fully wake until evening: old men and women looked out from behind the curtains, their pale faces following the sun's performance and grumbling that they could not remember such a blistering sun—surely this was a bad omen; day after day went by with no relief, until autumn. Cats lay about in the sun, preening, until well into September; above the sleepy creatures posters flapped in the wind, which blew into openings, chasing out the stench from the entryway at the corner of Volodymyrska and Prorizna Streets—the overwhelming mid-summer stench could steer a drunk off course, in the middle of the night leading him as far as the Podil. The stench was indeed legendary. Even stray dogs bypassed the corner. The Piskar family, later known as the Piskariov family, lived in a semi-basement apartment, along with several dozen others; the Piskariovs' dwelling was the only one with windows facing the Leipzig Restaurant. All of it was etched in Horik's memory: the rats scampering around under the windows, the yelling and ceaseless chatter in front of the brightly lit shop windows, the crunch of ribs; hundreds of feet trudging across his angled field of vision; hands suddenly appearing, the fingernails clicking on the glass, and children gawking at the windows. Swarms of flies hovering above the purple garbage container—the teeming flies made the light in their room shimmer. At least the kids had a bit of entertainment. At noon the locale was surprisingly deserted of pedestrians; the murmur of the cars above and the striking of the central clock had their moment of eminence; when it rained, mist gathered at the bottom of the building and an actual stream flowed along the wall, overturning the cigarette wrappers, and the milk and kefir cartons; little twigs floated into the mist like tiny vessels.

Well before Horik was brought home from the maternity ward, and even before the elder Piskariov had congratulated his wife, in the common kitchen the neighbors had already drunk a bottle or two, slapping shoulders and wasting another afternoon slouching over the greasy oilcloth and chatting about this and that; afterward the family clan, with Mykhailo Piskariov presiding, all sat around a sturdy, round, deep-brown table with curved and crooked legs, adorned with the curse words the lady of the house had personally scratched into the top of this German trophy. The table,

handed down from generation to generation—of which, in fact, there hadn't been that many—was acquired or confiscated long ago by Grandpa Piskariov, who had always worn blue fringed riding breeches and an officers' military jacket, three of his fingers squeezed into the slit of a pocket in such a way that the gold chain hanging out of that same pocket had been visible—the gold chain that now existed only as a shared family memory, since somehow it had never made it into the family treasure chest. All of the family property—from real estate to prized possessions—was shared among the seven members of the family. Back in Grandpa's day (already Piskariov), they lived in an apartment in a tall building with granite columns and white walls that had been built during the war by German prisoners of war. Grandpa Piskariov had a personal pension and was the legitimate owner of the apartment, but the stubborn old man still shuffled off to work somewhere at the Central Committee of the Communist Party as a guard, sloshing down shots of vodka and blabbing on and on, wagging his tongue without restraint and lisping through the few crooked teeth he had left, often saying things he shouldn't be saying—things like “Vanka, do you know how many of those bald, hollow scarecrows, do you know how many of them I got rid of, how many I shot? ... ja-ja ... you take one down the corridor, as if you're escorting him to some special place—nice, ja—and he's telling you stuff, giggling like an idiot, not knowing that right behind him death is walking in my boots ... ja-ja, and such excellent boots they were ... and the ass just goes on and on, spouting all kinds of crap ... his animal heart squirming ... I had riding breeches, I wore riding breeches—shit, the times are different now, but in those days, was it ever great ... you go bam with the revolver, and chunks of his skull and brain splatter all over the wall, and his carcass falls to the cement floor, right into the ditch, where the blood drains ... no longer a human being ... but he never was ... the scoundrel ... that's how it was ... Vanka, tsk-*tsk*-*tsk*,” blabbing, blabbing ... “Anyway, it looks like I won't live to see that bald scarecrow being led away. But hey, Vanka, maybe we will? Live to see it? Shouldn't be long, I don't think, I know what kind of people are in charge there. Ho-ho!” Piskariov got all hot, raising his finger upward, thrusting his bloated stomach forward, eyes glassed over as if he were watching the events of his life pass in front of him. Vanka listened, sipping a glass of sweetened tea (he wasn't an alcoholic); at home he had six famished dependents to provide for, all six chewing on hard corn cakes, their lips blue with hunger; Vanka reported on “baldy” to the proper authorities, after which old Piskariov was retired, to remove him from temptation, while Vanka was promoted to the post of chief guard. Everything might have ended quietly, except that old Grandpa's crazy regard for his personal integrity got the best of him. It was so crazy that when it hit him, it wrung Grandpa inside out and drove him mad: he growled, an intense fury filled his chest, his wrecked stomach got tense and upset, an undershirt stretched over it tightly, the undershirt back from the days when favors were still being doled out. Actually, quite a few

years had passed since those days; even so, after a bit of homebrew, or the real thing, Grandpa grabbed his bayonet and galloped like a young colt around the communal kitchen, smashing the trophy plates to smithereens: “Kill the bastards!” he yelled as he slashed a face here and there, and if he missed grabbing someone by the throat he stabbed the door with his bayonet: “I’ll slice you up into noodles, you wild dogs, you ... you mother-fuckers, for the fatherland, for Stalin!” And then after four in the morning he quieted down and settled in on the slimy floor in the common bathroom, moaning, mumbling, apparently seeing ghosts; finding him all black, with foamy saliva around his mouth, his bloodshot eyes popping out, the residents would take his knife away. They were careful to approach him quietly, because who knew, he might suddenly launch another “blitzkrieg”: he might be pretending to be dead tired, beat, overwhelmed, and then—wham! He grabs you by the throat, choking you and yelling like a madman, “You bastard! You’ll be the sheath for my knife, you scarecrow—I’ll feed you boiling tar!” And the neighbors would say, “What’s gotten into you? We’re intelligent, Soviet folks,” because they could sense that he was out of their reach, and there would be no community ruling to restrain Grandpa: there was a time when together with the district head he had roamed the Ukrainian steppes, carrying out de-kurkulization and having their way with quite a few girls; and after 1933 they’d both been assigned to the same department, except that the district head specialized in poets, while Piskarenko took care of the dissenting scientific or technical intellectuals.

Drinking themselves into a stupor, the two of them would sit in a cubbyhole and sing sad Ukrainian songs, ending with the “Internationale.” Basically, the residents of that apartment were all in leadership positions, directors or supervisors. In the Piskariov household the family was careful not to get in the way of the patriarch, barely breathing while making sure he always had some homebrew to sip, or the real thing, or denatured alcohol; after having some, the smashed old man lay helpless and motionless in his blue fringed riding breeches, fly open, stomach churning, passing gas, spread out all over a feather quilt in a bed with bright polished metal globes around its border—his body lurching, his mouth spewing commands to anonymous people, teeth gnashing, cracking the yellowed enamel and letting out long wails in the early morning light. And the Piskariovs would have stayed there, in that building with the granite, monumental, practically Corinthian columns, and those spacious rooms with the deep-set, almost blue windows; but the old man had somehow become quiet, worn out, he walked around looking lost. It was thought it was work-related. And then one day he bought a bottle of real vodka for 2.68, getting it himself—before, he’d send whomever he could; he skipped the usual invocation: “May that corn fritter have the worst possible coming to him, the mother-fucker,” after which he sat all evening completely composed, barely a glimmer in his faded eyes, which were directed at a picture of Joseph Vissarionovych: lifting a shot, he glanced at the portrait, murmured something through his

smoke-suffused whiskers, something that was meant for his descendants, smacked his tongue half-heartedly, got up, looked warmly at his small and elegant wife (who was always full of warnings about the End of the World), and grunted, “He appeared to me in my dream—a good sign.” The old woman shrugged her shoulders, shed a tear, and thought to herself, why is he doing this? but she refrained from commenting and said, “You know better than I do.” “He knows better, you foolish wench,” Piskarenko squawked, but nicely. He walked out. It dawned on her what he might do; she noticed that the bayonet was missing. An hour later she was alarmed when she heard shouts coming from the third floor: “You’ve dishonored the Fatherland, you lice-ridden vermin, you! Die!” Recognizing old man Piskur’s voice, the tenants raised their faces (was it gladness or was it surprise they showed?)—what can you do, it wasn’t Sunday, life didn’t follow a fixed schedule. Vanka’s high-pitched voice chimed in, “The times are different ... the times are different ... the times ...,” but in the end it sounded like the skinny, timid man was trying to apologize, after which Grandpa’s bellowing cries slowly died out in the long, gray, peeling walls of the corridor. And just as the noise subsided, down the steep steps tumbled Vanka, all bloody, the blood spurting out of him. As he bled all over the floor, legs folding under him, babbling something quietly, his voice gurgling in his throat, Piskarenko’s powerful bass, full of righteousness, unfurled behind him. Into the emptiness. Outside it was spring—a dreary March, the willow branches dripping wet. The street lights swayed monotonously. Vanka was in the hospital, the old man was in court. Steaming in the sultry heat during preliminary proceedings, he grew feeble. Almost fragile. He was released under supervision. Doors opened a crack as he walked through the communal corridor. The crumpled old man drank and drank—his skin turned yellow; and then one Saturday afternoon he went through his things, admired them, polished his medals clean, and then sat himself down by the deep-set, blue window and stared at the battered, weather-beaten statues of angels as he warmed himself in the brief flush of the March sun. Toward evening he lay down and died quietly. “We’re all going to end up dead,” said all the “directors” and “supervisors,” downing shots of vodka for his repose. They felt sorry for him, but they did not let bygones be bygones.

And no matter how many prayers the old woman prayed into the empty corner, six months later the Piskariovs moved to the corner of Volodymyrska and Prorizna Streets.

And there they were, all seven of them, the whole family slumped in chairs and sprawled out over the prized table with the curved legs, pouring out shots of vodka, slowly at first—“this vodka is nice, but the other year it was better”; it was impossible to guess what the occasion was: a christening, a funeral, a birthday. Mykhailo, the father of newborn Hryhorii (Horik) Piskariov, paraded back and forth among the guests like a military commander at a wedding. Mykhailo had hoped after the death of the senior

Piskariov to take over as clan patriarch and gain all the rights that went with it, but it didn't turn out that way: wasting no time, Maria, Mykhailo's wife, had boldly seized the reins of power; her face as pretty as a pysanka, except for her ruddy complexion (high blood pressure) and the black fuzz over her upper lip—who would have guessed she had an aggressive streak? So there was nothing left for Mykhailo—ostensibly the head of the family—to do but to carry on putting up a respectable appearance, continue working as a guard at the candy factory, keep stealing molasses, keep gulping vodka, and persist in pawing women in the corners of the locker room. And thus for six months he gained celebrity as the local charmer. Nothing else about him was exceptional. He drank, fornicated, drank, fornicated. The men around the table (mother and newborn were still in the hospital) drank and snacked and took turns in determining a future for the newborn boy. It was commonplace, this wishing-planning: the baby hadn't even popped out yet and already he'd been assigned the career of a half-baked army general or an aviator. That was exactly what happened to Horik. After letting out a loud belch, Mykhailo prophesied that the kid would be an officer—all the men in the family had been officers. Facing the empty corner, Grandma Piskariov made the sign of the cross and mumbled, "Lord, Lord." Vodka usually acted on Mykhailo by jogging his memory, laying bare his failings and his impotence. This time around it didn't happen, though—at least, not all the way. Looking at the portrait of old man Piskarenko with murky (like the weather) eyes, his brother Nykodym—a former horse thief who operated all over the county, his hair greased up with brilliantine, all smooth and shiny, a dandy and shit-eater, decked out in skin-tight parachute pants, possessing loads of money (dirty money, of course), and fornicating on the run with women galore—offered a comment: "If he drinks, the little shit, he won't turn out any worse than his grandfather did." He shoved his hands in his pockets and sat down in his skin-tight pants and a shirt so shockingly red it was obscene, until Mykhailo regained his senses, raised a hand, then dropped it, and finally splashed vodka in his bro's face. Grandma Piskur prayed into the empty corner, while Horik's retarded brother, who had been born two years earlier and had stopped growing (having a narrow forehead and a sharp jawline, he took on an ever more threatening look), gurgled "OOO-OOO-OOO" and, smacking his lips, squashed the cockroaches on the floor. And nothing happened after that. Nykodym simply got up, wiped his face genteely with a silk handkerchief, and adjusted his pants: "A last splash of masculinity. I respect that, asshole." Then he walked out. He reemerged many years later, when a photographer immortalized Horik's full face and profile at the Lukianiv prison.

The first years of Horik's life were accompanied by the constant rattle of a wooden baby carriage in his ears—its shiny, smooth, wooden handle was entombed in his memory, as was an image of his older brother, whom everyone called Sio-Sio, squashing cockroaches or playing with his own excrement; his other hand was always firmly tied to the carriage with a

string, but Sio-Sio would forget that; with his spellbound gaze fixed on the low ceiling, his free hand would slowly smear the insect over the floor. To his parents Sio-Sio was a footnote, an afterthought; occasionally they clucked over him, tickled him, and grunted like pigs for him, only to curse and fight with each other afterward; at times the air was bursting with wild screaming; on the other side of the window feet would stop, stomp a bit, and then continue to walk on. His father—Horik clearly remembered this, just as he had clear memories of green trees—grew smaller and smaller and turned into a withered and shabby man, though always polished to an almost unnatural sheen, with the scent of vermouth or cognac on his breath. Later, when Horik ventured “past the windows,” he saw his father in the company of two babes. One of them stood out especially vividly for Horik, with her bright lipstick and skinny but big-breasted figure; a tangle of footsteps and his father’s glossy hair; white clouds streaming past on the other side of the window, the shadows of dozens of feet rushing by; the moonlight shining on the windowpanes, occasionally reflecting smeared faces; and a downcast, gloom-filled gaze, while in a corner Grandma Piskur shook off her drowsiness and with an air of tender warmth bustled about before reciting evening prayers.

At six he ventured out into the world for the first time; he wet his pants, he was so enchanted and overwhelmed: the vaulted roofs they passed, the archways decorated with plaster statues, the hustle and bustle and buzz, and the crowds moving along the curved spine of Khreshchatyk Street; he felt his heart grow cold even as he held on to his father’s little finger, as his father, pale and with beads of sweat on his forehead, stepped boldly into the human tide, his gait stiff and awkward. Noticing how Horik’s cheeks grew all rosy, how his eyes shone, old Grandma Piskur turned to face the empty corner and quietly made the sign of the cross, saying, “Thank the Lord—and I thought he would turn out like Sio-Sio ...” And so it went: when Mykhailo would quiet down, Maria would start yelling about something. Neither one could be helped. “They’re both full of sin,” old Granny Piskur grumbled quietly, but even just saying that cost her.

It got worse. Mykhailo grew feeble; meanwhile, the family, thanks to the former directors and supervisors, moved to Stalinka. They settled in a building similar to the one they had lived in before Horik was born, except that it was gray and disgustingly like the fortresses in an old-fashioned history textbook about the French revolution; the main highway cut through down below, horns blared all day and cars whizzed by; close by—within arm’s reach—a forest curved toward the horizon like a green ridge. The Holiiv forest. Here everything coalesced in a chimerical mesh—the colors, the voices, the people, the concrete. Horik was eleven. The kids’ games stretched from the yard to the forest and from the forest to the yard; they walked along Vasylykivska Street in a loud pack, and when they turned into Rivenska Street, the gleaming shop windows reflected the sky

streaming past them, as the sun blinded them—dandies off to war. And what a war it was!

The old alky who had lived in Stalinka during the German occupation and had assisted the Germans—he'd washed floors, or was it that he'd hung around some babes?—in other words, an “enemy of the people,” had for a bottle of vodka divulged the location of a bunker where the Germans had hastily stockpiled their weapons. Evenings, just as the dogs' howling would end, the clatter of a Schmeisser machine gun would rip through the air in Stalinka; the people, terrified, didn't know what was happening; they burrowed into thick, warm quilts as whistling grenade shrapnel flew overhead, and the kids went wild running up and down the steep hills, damp and slimy even in summer, firing real weapons. The district police chief, an old NKVD agent, Major Syrovatko, was besieged with daily dispatches. Every day the entire police division was put on alert, but the riffraff always managed to vanish without a trace, leaving puddles in craters blasted out by grenades. Every morning Major Syrovatko would get up and then sit on the porch, keeping an eye out until noon while listening to the silence and the noise; and then, smacking his lips, he would make his way to a small cut-glass carafe of cognac; he drank until evening, as he had during the war. At dusk he was off for the hunt. On one occasion they got lucky, but two militiamen had to escape under fire across all of Hosiiv without actually discovering who was involved. An unexpected calamity came to his assistance: the munitions bunker caught fire and Horik was the only one brave enough to fight the flames. Several trees were blown out and two kids from the neighborhood were killed—they were shredded to pieces. Half of Horik's face was blown off—you could see his teeth. Bleeding heavily, he was brought to the hospital, where mercury fulminate and firing pins were shaken out of his pockets, as well as a grenade and several cartridges. To the sound of the frantic shrieks of Maria Piskur, his face was stoppered. “He looks like a wolf. Honestly, he does,” one of the doctors had remarked. And so the name “Wolf” stuck to him, a name that became interchangeable with “Klyk.” Looking at people with a somber, unflinching gaze through the brown curls that flopped down over his eyes, he walked along the sidewalks, hands stuffed in his pockets, minding his own business, different from everyone else; he was in his own world, though he was just a dumb little kid. Summers, when scuffles in the yard reached a boiling point—one neighborhood against another—Horik was always out in front. He would always advance, not minding the knife or the brass knuckles. He had no fear. He learned to fight early in life. “The kid has real talent, a real talent, not just a sort-of talent,” Major Syrovatko observed with obvious relish, even though in reality he didn't care much about the kid or his fate, as if he could sense what the future had in store for him; he'd throw out random remarks, like “Watch out or he'll end up like Nykodym.” Like Nykodym—meaning Mykhailo's brother, the one-time horse thief on a regional scale, card-player and impulsive lover-boy, greased up with brilliantine, all

smooth and shiny, in parachute pants, reeking of women's perfume; Mykhailo's big brother Nykodym, always loaded with money but never a job, broads falling all over him, an arrogant shit-eater in whose face Mykhailo had splashed vodka, spilling it all over his shirt at Horik Piskariov's christening right after his birth. "I respect real masculinity, asshole," Nykodym had famously spat out, before vanishing to begin a new chapter in his life.

Nykodym didn't concern Mykhailo—he didn't know or care about the what or the how or the when of Nykodym's goings-on: pale and worn-out, Mykhailo sailed through the days drifting aimlessly—he never could stomach Stalinka, with its vulgar, brainless residents, wretches the lot of them; without any introduction a long-haired parasite-swindler sidles up, swaying drunkenly, knees shaking, droning obscenities, and opens his gob: "Hey old man, you're something of a bad joke. Lay off Liuska—your worthless carcass smells of the grave, one way or another!" And meanwhile there's two-way trouble—the sting of jealousy, and the tension of anticipated loss—and he went through all of it on his own, everything. With the police chief's backing Maria got a job at a "wine and vodka tavern," so there was never a shortage of alcohol for Mykhailo, but that wasn't what bothered him: what bothered Mykhailo was that from then on the man Mykhailo Piskariov, the monumental figure known as the family provider, the presence that served as a symbol of the family hearth, was stripped of all substance, even a passing, ambiguous, hollowed-out sort-of substance: "What's the point of shuffling along, bullshitting at the factory and grabbing some broad's ass?" And so now Mashenka—Maria, that is—got steamy standing behind the walnut-brown counter, steamy from cheap wines, wrapped in a fog of her own homegrown dreams, listening to the sounds of the semi-prohibited song, "Murka, you're my purring cat," coming from the storeroom; the mirrors surrounding the counter multiplied the dozen customers manyfold; red-lipped and buxom, sinking her pink fists into her hips, she didn't raise an eyebrow as gooey-eyed morons strutted past her and past the counter, emanating currents of heat, making Maria feel giddy; under a gray cloud of cigarette smoke, on top of tables glazed with herring oil and wet with piss-like watery beer, covered with green flies as big as your fist, they pretended hand jobs, while Mykhailo, his balls aching from a stomach-turning hangover, enough to make your tongue curl, nursed a shot of vodka listening to "My purring cat." He slurped the shot of vodka like a pathetic cat. He looked like death warmed over: frightened, he would wake at the sound of rain; his gums were cracked, his jaw mostly hung open; mumbling random words through scabby lips, he'd open the curtains; bead upon bead and raisin upon raisin of sweat chilled his forehead; he hustled around the room collecting cigarette butts, his eyes embroidering a pattern across the scratched-up wallpaper, and as he shook the tobacco out of the cigarette butts to roll one for himself, he struggled to imagine where Africa was on the wallpaper and where America was; Sio-Sio soiled his pants,

ground his sharp jaw, rocked in his own excrement, and rolled his eyeballs—his pale, guileless eyes—as in a single unchangeable tone he wailed “o-o-o,” the windowpanes jingling with that plaintive “o-o-o.”

“May you die under the wheels of a car, you unleashed wild dog, you half-baked piece of crap,” an angry Mykhailo spouted as Grandpa Piskarenko looked on, immortalized and preserved in the photo-portrait mounted in a dilapidated frame, dressed in his blue fringed breeches, his two fingers slipped in between the second and third buttons; crushed by feelings of despondency, casting quick looks at the old man, Mykhailo sometimes found a half-liter of booze Maria had hidden away; following a long nap he’d make merry with a little vodka, spurting blue rings of hope and encouragement for the family but mostly for himself; suddenly springing to his feet, he’d run out, away from everything, the farther the better, to a Holoziiv lake, loping, admiring the swaying fat asses of the women strutting by—oh yes, fat asses was one thing Mykhailo knew well and loved—bounding forward awkwardly like a colt, flying over curbs, sticking his face into the windows of strange apartments, spitting and cursing as he waited at the bus stops; only upon reaching the filthy lane surrounded on all sides by dirty-red buildings did he wind down and remember that “fuck!”—he had forgotten to slap on some cologne.

There was more, though: there were times when waking up, his head would be buzzing and rumbling inside—it felt like someone had set up camp inside his head and was banging a hammer in it (or else a worm was picking at his brain), and recently he’d heard someone with the voice of the Leviathan yelling from above, from the corner of Vasylykivska and Kozacha Streets, right where the billboard “Don’t Waste Electricity” was located, “Mykhailo Abramovych, defend the Motherland—here are your general’s badges—Attention!” But when Piskariov turned his head, raised his narrow, stooped shoulders, and scrunched his neck he saw nothing, so off he’d charge to the lake. Halfway there, at the sunlit square—the sun beating through the window displays—in a shady spot, a voice stopped him and repeated the command; Mykhailo wanted to skedaddle, but the invisible one screeched: “You wretched lowlife scaredy-cat—you’ll end up in the penal battalion! In the penal one!” The tone of the voice was suspiciously similar to Nikita Khrushchev’s; or it sounded like the angry roaring of old man Piskariov. Speedily Piskariov left the commands behind: he dashed off and, tottering, sauntered through the blocks of sweating department stores; like a superior being, he watched the sea of humanity shuffling past him in tight packs, only to realize, privately, that he was not at all unique or different from them, save for that one or that one with the bulging fish eyes; somehow Mykhailo had managed to pull away from the crowd to spend his last coins on some wine, which he sloshed into his burning throat. He felt relief: the world quieted down, the insistent voice of the invisible man sputtered, cursed, and drifted off; now Mykhailo could handle himself. But only after that bit of wine, after drooling over the women walking by,

swaying their hips; after his sense of dignity was restored, and after he reminded himself of what life had taught him: that the little he had drunk would not be enough; as the heat bleached the sky he shuffled over to Kalinin Square, where his former mistress lived, and there, as if catching up on something he had missed in his life, submersed in a profound stupor, he drank for three days, to his heart's content, snacking on sauerkraut and wallowing in bed in the filthy black sheets like an uncastrated pig, and when his lover shoved him in the back because another man, cursing insistently and with pockets full of cash, had turned up, Mykhailo gave her that prolonged miserable look, the look of a man who had no business asking for help, a man unable to adapt; a man unfulfilled in this world. "You supreme bitch," and out he went, reeling, like a fly in hot water; stupefied and humiliated, he looked at the posters for "Energotrest," "Metrobuild," and "Kyivbuild," wondering if maybe now, in this hopelessly miserable state, he could figure out whom he resembled. Grandpa? Khrushchev? Stalin? Maybe Lavrentii Kaganovich himself? At home he told his wife: "Masha, something's eating me inside." And turning her head slowly, a bored Masha looked at him with glassy, alcohol-enhanced eyes and squawked in her "Vodka-and-Wine Tavern" voice: "Drink less, you bastard," and off she went somewhere, to work or who knows where. Sipping the last of his wine, Mykhailo settled in on the bed to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come, so he looked behind Grandpa's portrait and then behind Stalin's portrait to find nothing—when you need something most, it can't be found; after lunch he walked down to the lake. He sat on the clayey bank, undressed, cracked his joints with great pleasure and satisfaction and then dove into the water and swam out to the middle of the lake when suddenly he heard, "I'll drown you, you dog!" Mykhailo recognized that voice, the same voice that had shouted of "Saving the Fatherland"; he kicked around on the shore, his skin taut and blue in the wind. He wanted to hide from people: he heard whistling overhead and his veins felt as if sand and crushed glass were circulating in them instead of blood; again the growl and the sound of a chain falling: "You bastard, are you scared? Did you shit in your pants?" And Mykhailo took off along the lake, his feet crushing hats, dresses, and brassieres as he ran off into the woods, the branches springing, tumbling, snapping, the breeze whistling in mockery, delicately blowing into his snotty nose. He thought he was naked. He tried to bury his head in the sand, the people all around him tittering and giggling, pointing fingers, offering pertinent ideas that burying his whole self was what he should do, and then someone hit home with the correct solution: a helping of vodka was offered. "You fucking pervert—there you go drinking again," a voice hissed in Mykhailo Piskur-Piskariov's native jargon. It calmed him down. The booze burned his innards; playfully the wooly clouds strung themselves through the shafts of light in the sky; the lake shone like silver fish scales; evening lavished its love and protection on Hosiiv.

Back home, Mykhailo sat in his late grandfather Piskur's room, hands dangling off the armrest, quietly taking things in, casually observing Sio-Sio playing with his excrement; then Maria came home, bringing Kostia Shapoval with her—freight-loader, debaucher, lover of the guitar and of Rosenbaum: “How about a drink, Misha?” Grandma Piskur recited her “holy-holy,” made the sign of the cross into the empty corner; the men had a drink, and a suddenly happy Maria stayed in the kitchen to cook: but when Mykhailo got bored, Kostia Shapoval began scolding him, “Why are you drinking when you’re not supposed to? Stop drinking and start working.” On and on he went, while Piskariov stared at him with fish eyes and Kostia’s words sounded like the echo inside a barrel; Maria paid them a visit from the kitchen and proceeded to bully her husband to go sit in the corner; Mykhailo might even have remembered everything that happened afterward, but that wasn’t what fate had in mind: he sat with a finger raised, the fingers of his left hand shoved under the straps of his undershirt (from the days when Grandpa Piskariov had received favors), and said over and over to his wife: “You’re trying to poison me, bitch—you’re sprinkling stuff over my slop,” after which he flew out the window and circled above Stalinka for a long time, trying to guess which block he was flying over by looking closely at the little boxes that were the buildings; he brushed past the limbs of the trees, breaking out in jolly laughter; he flew around as long as the petrol lasted and landed next to Sio-Sio, who was sitting on the floor in wet pants picking at the long hairs on his pointy chin, when suddenly a piglet appeared out of nowhere (he couldn’t quite tell—it may have been a lion) and oinked, shaking its snout; then it flapped its wings like in the Cinderella cartoon and, without picking up Mykhailo, flew past him and out through the open window; death arrived, bones rattling, and chattering the gold dentures that were the work of a dentist Mykhailo knew, but Mykhailo drove it out—“who do you think you are”—as he crashed through the earth, landing on top of a pile of glowing embers, where he sat drinking and talking with the devils, while in the back of his mind an idea nagged him: wouldn’t it be excellent if he could fool the horned ones. Then he took flight again; an angel swooped down and with a white wing picked Mykhailo up around the waist and deposited him on a fluffy cloud, where he lay under a rosy canopy and it was so pleasant, like after the first shot of vodka; but he was chased out of there, and now he saw Maria, his lifelong partner, pulling Kostia Shapoval by the legs toward her through the roof and through the ceiling; the wretch got stuck between the attic and the ceiling—the buttons on his shirt must have gotten caught; he shrieked like an animal being butchered while a familiar voice, a dearly loved voice, intimate and warm yet focused and business-like, said “Cut down that stupid mare,” and Mykhailo grabbed an axe, lightly struck the doorpost with the polished (shining blue) steel, and drove Maria and the phantom Kostia outdoors. It took half the people living in the building to contain him. Piskariov did not resist—on the contrary, he behaved like a calm, rational man would; but

once the militia arrived, he saw wide deer antlers on the senior sergeant's head and pig snouts on the rest of them, and when they approached Piskariov they stank of pigs, even though they spoke a human language. Mykhailo didn't want any part of them, so he disentangled himself and ran off: the wind was packing leaves into the yard, gusts of air passed through, the walls were peeling and crumbling, and an otherworldly chill seized him: the buildings were tumbling down and with both hands he tried to hold them up, he even stuck his foot out, too, until it dawned on him that his effort was useless, that it was all over; he fell to the ground and covered his head with his bare arms, yelling "Help!" Puffs of heavy breaths ascended, a demonic frenzy took over, dogs gnashed their teeth, clumps of fur flew in the air, howling, clamor, mayhem, all of it rising in a single gasp up into the square of the night sky stamped with pointed stars. At the district office, belching the mint-flavored vapor of his liquor, the worn-out major pushed a sheet of paper under Mykhailo's nose: "Do as I say, asshole—write down that you need help to get over your alcoholism." In every corner of the paper before him Piskariov saw a red monkey teasing him, "Ah-h-h-h, my precious, my blood"; Mykhailo tried to scratch them out, rub them out, but the monkeys lunged out, converged in a bunch, screeched, argued, counseled, droned on, and stank. "Take the idiot away to the psych ward," Major Syrovatko blurted out benignly, smoothing his gray, spiky hair with the palm of his hand; ram horns sprouted from his forehead while the regular militia guys oinked and shat on the floor like pigs. A vociferous Mykhailo, hands cuffed, was ushered into a paddy wagon, all the while complaining that no way could he be taken away to the loony bin because his innards had been removed and the only person who knew where they were was Maria, until a voice from an invisible source scornfully croaked, "Get to sleep already. You're bothering me!" Mykhailo made the sign of the cross over the invisible source and had a conversation with two angels who were giving each other a pedicure; a moment later they changed into hairdressers who were stuffing pastries into their mouths, peeing into a cup, and pouring the urine over Mykhailo's head as helplessly, sadly, quietly, sobbing like a baby, Mykhailo whined into the air, "Gimme back the angels, gimme back the angels," until he came to in the hospital's endless corridor with its yellow glow and stench of disinfectants: his bloodshot eyes spotted a generously endowed young nurse with splendid haunches, as hard as if carved out of wood; she filled a syringe and a drop of the crystal-clear liquid ran down the tip of the needle and tinkled as it hit the scratched linoleum floor; she transformed into Piskariov's last mistress; quietly he howled like an animal and chomped his lips caked with dried saliva. "Check his blood pressure," said a little man in a dirty lab coat with the tired eyes of a loser as he blew air through a copper pipe and grunted like a pig; the nurse began dancing; from below the hospital's ceiling and walls dissolved in pellucid panels; dozens of hideous mugs crawled all over each other, one ahead of the other: long-eared, with tongues stuck out, they acted like fools and

wrinkled their white noses, winking conspiratorially. The rising temperature became oppressive; chills shriveled his balls; intense heat flooded his chest: he felt as if his innards were expunged and glacial whirlwinds were sweeping through the cavity, exactly like way back when he was still a kid sitting in a dentist's chair for the first time and had raised his knees to his chest; out of the sky coiled bands of blue and green, and he convulsed violently, plunging from abyss to abyss, until he saw his supine body covered with a yellow sheet, stiff with chlorine, emerging out of the darkness, feet pointing at an arrow-shaped window, the faraway space stretching, reaching out into the surroundings: the dizzying sunken sky, the embankments on both sides of the rail line, the train wagons, like seashells, wheels clattering; at twilight, pigeons pricked holes through his amber dream, showing him a quiet, pleasant yard, with lovingly and carefully tended cherry orchards, and a twisted little old lady leaning against her shovel, while a little kid in ragged pants with a strap across his shoulder steps up to the window: he hears the groaning of poplar trees and smells the sharp fragrance of asters; there is the distant sound of a scythe being sharpened. At yard's edge the light grows dim and fades; a road follows the stream-like line of poplars; clouds float across open hands and, looking back, silky grass lies in the sun; there is no time to make sense of the surroundings and the road stretches out, shimmering and quivering along the fences, between patches of seeded fields; a tired woman sits reading, not bothering to comprehend anything, following the necklace of print with a fingernail; the country crawls forward, inching ahead as it passes you by. After the heat abated Mykhailo saw a tiny black dot, as small as a poppy seed. The dot grew and grew to become old woman Piskariov, her hands twisting a bundle full of his clothing, making and remaking the sign of the cross, and he wanted to shout at the top of his voice, "Let me go! Leave me alone! I'm full of pain!" But the black dot grew bigger and bigger, slowly absorbing Grandma Piskariov and Horik and Sio-Sio; a soft, whistling breeze surrounded them, rippling like a flood of water. It hurt. Mykhailo couldn't breathe; he saw a moving blue-lipped mouth; he let out a shallow breath; in his ribcage his heart beat wildly and then slowed; the skin on his face stiffened, and it seemed his body had broken free, detached itself from the bed. "He's still alive," Grandma Piskur proclaimed in a desperate voice, and he could still hear her; the sun's golden glow filled the hollows around his eyes. And then, all of a sudden, he unexpectedly felt relief, as if some force that had held his body captive was cut loose. His body cramped up. His fingers raked the air. "He has died"—he heard the voice of the little man in the dirty labcoat: a cat rubbed up against old woman Piskariov's legs; it let out a meow and the fur on the back of its neck bristled. The old woman made the sign of the cross three times. A swallow cried out through the open window and landed on the handle of the stroller, pecked at it with its beak, and then flew off into the blue sky. The little man struck a match and lit a cigarette.

Horik was fifteen going on sixteen when his father died; his voice had broken, though there were times (like during fighting matches) when his voice became hoarse and rattled in his throat, only to rise hysterically and finally drop to a mere huff, sounding like a young rooster's. The news of his father's death reached him as he was walking along Lomontsov Street, where, together with the gang, he was "cleaning out" student dormitories and strong-arming the late-returning, post-partying, promiscuous black students from African countries; along the way he felt a nudge from behind and noticed a metallic taste in his mouth; Horik stepped aside and even smelled his hands, first one hand and then the other one, but the taste had permeated his body; he spotted a red clay roof and the diagonal slash it made across the morning sky above the wrecking crane; the shaft of the lift mechanism let out long, drawn-out squeals; Wolf was puffing heavily (like a young horse) as he wiped off the tacky sweat; fifteen-year-old Nilka lay next to him on the cot, flat on her back; Nilka, with her alluring, gleaming gray eyes—irresistible eyes—the same Nilka about whom the neighbors hissed, "And mark my words: that maggot will end up like Liuska Fanera." Horik was determined to show Nilka what a real man was: "I'm not a loser or a worm." In response, Nilka shook her full, firm breasts and arched her back, giggling on the cot and casting roundabout looks at the walls, her skin a delicate pink in the morning light; "What a she-devil," Horik said, as Nilka flopped over on her belly, flaunting her round buttocks. Then there was a knocking at the door: a scratching sound. He felt chills up and down his skin; Nilka recoiled, flopped back, and Horik noticed that her breasts, fully-formed and eager to fill up with milk, the nipples pointing in opposite directions, were trembling; he looked at the sunbeams licking the floor, at the light cast by the lantern on a picture of a half-naked Marilyn Monroe, and then the knocking again—was it imagined or real? A scent of bachelor buttons in the air, a whiff of metal mixed in; Horik was panic-stricken. Nilka watched Horik's twisted, sweating face, misshapen and scarred; Horik sat up, clenching his fists; he was fighting nausea, his body felt numb—suddenly a terror shot through him, he felt stabs in the tips of his fingers; a jet of brown liquid spurted out the window of a car; he ran out, he ran, panting, mouth open, his balls throbbing with pain, headlong through sleepy alleyways, hushed by the afternoon sun, as pale as the eye of a dying man. With a swap of his hand he killed a bee; a truck siren wailed. Half-aware, he loped up the four flights of stairs, sucking in the dense basement stench like an animal; eyes wide open, he stopped and stood still to listen to the sound of violin strings coming from the fourth floor; he made a face and pushed open the peeling door—as if it wasn't happening to him, as if he was being watched—and in front of him he saw a table, endlessly long and covered with a white tablecloth, thick with rows of bottles and the friends of his father (or were they Maria's one-night stands?) sitting around it, their ugly faces already red, downing drinks to good health and to the son; by the time noon arrived and it was time to carry out the casket, upholstered in black

and red cloth, half the people who had drunk for the repose of the dead man were snoozing in their chairs, their fat bodies spilling over like jello; someone was sticking an imported bottle into his unfaithful wife's face; a neighbor lay on a sofa alongside, her skirt hiked up to her belly, the chief prison guard banging her. Maria watched angrily, not because behavior dishonoring her husband's remains was being exhibited, but because for a long time already she herself had fancied the neighbor who "couldn't help" his "fascination with women." To subdue her anger she poured everyone generous amounts of vodka, "In memory, in memory of our dear deceased," whose nose looked even longer in the yellow glow of candlelight; dollops of wax dripped down onto his chest; Major Syrovatko knocked back shot after shot, singing praises to the wonderful red caviar; that night, when it was impossible to say whether it bore the chill of a spring evening or a frosty reminder that summer was coming to an end, at twilight, a group of policemen dropped in, politely showing their respect for the deceased by taking off their sweat-stained caps, white with salt. After a shot of good vodka they let out a hearty belch, then sat around, and stared straight ahead and at old Piskariov's portrait: "Yep, he was a good bloke." His throat gravelly from running and from smoking, a sweating Horik croaked "Asses," and the cops gave him a look, then they looked at the portrait of Stalin, at old Piskariov, and guzzled more shots in remembrance of the old man. When the party was all set to carry out the casket, which was draped in black crepe, Maria slipped a bottle of Armenian cognac into Major Syrovatko's scuffed briefcase (the hypertonic veins on his temples were engorged like pipes), and casually remarked, "I've another imp growing up, and as for the authorities, we have to be respectful: as we treat them, so they treat us," and then, completely drunk, she leaned over the back of the chair where Sio-Sio was sitting, her large, age-flattened breasts hanging down, and puked, throwing up first the potato salad and then plain bile; under the yellowed ficus old woman Piskariov crossed herself with her ancient fingers and recited the "Lord's Prayer" and "Mother of God," as silently, deep down, she wept. After midnight, after everyone left, the wind let loose, the door jolted, and hair crackled with static electricity. With that, Horik's memories broke off, faded, rootless, steeped in the smell of the old cabbage rolls Sio-Sio was destroying with his paws. The last memories of his father. His chest bathed in a cold sweat; a glimpse of morning in the window of the car; the trembling nipples on Nilka's breasts; the sleepy alley of lindens; the high noon sun; and more visions of Nilka—those were the images that were carved in his memory; there was nothing left for Horik, nothing, except to continue hanging out around Lomontsov Street, shaking down the pimps, knocking the Arabs' teeth out, and then, out of plain boredom, perching with his buddies on a fence like birds warming in the sun, puffing Kazbek cigarettes, spitting, and watching the long-legged beauties swaying their hips as they promenaded along the alleyways. Y-a-a-ahh. A dream. Horik was the only one who had a girlfriend, but aside from trouble, Nilka brought

him nothing. And that was maddening. It made the gang mad. It made Horik madder.

Horik couldn't let go of Nilka. Even though Mister Peps Mare's Eye, also known as Skull, Moidodyr, and Street Musician, grumbled things like "with the female here, we shouldn't." Horik even spilled blood to have Nilka; yet how could it have been otherwise, given that after he and Nilka had been together for a couple of weeks the gang had already started to identify itself as a brigade and had gotten busy shaping and sharpening metal rasps and files and inch-thick screws into knives in cold and dank cellars until their minds and their fingers went numb. All of it exploded on a level playing field: from strangers Wolf got wind of the fact that Nosach, a standout at dances, who liked to deliciously yell out "and now the cranes" every time there was a brief pause in the dancing—the same Nosach who was a petty marijuana dealer on the side and a star among the not-so-bright—liked to bang Nilka in corners and in basements. Around that same time, the short, plump, and pink Botsman began accosting the district police chief, Syrovatko, for favors. That story was soon enhanced with hearsay; but Horik had already stepped onto a straight path, as if he'd taken a summer excursion, as if he'd spotted something down that road.

At the hop-fests—at the dances, that is—they, the under-aged, were made to stay on the other side of the fence, so they stuck their faces into the open spaces, with one eye catching sight of the whirling pairs, the glimmer of the girls' arms, the legs in nylon stockings; in the sultry air and coils of gray smoke, they discovered things one could hear and see only in movies; thus Horik was practically the only one who came to the who-gets-Nilka meeting, with only Botsman there, fidgeting like a squirrel: "Gimme a cigarette, will you?" Nosach took care of the two of them right off the bat: puffing on a Marlboro stuck between his lips, with one motion he flung Horik over the fence and did the same with Botsman; he turned around and calmly said something to Nilka, showing her what he'd done with a nod of his shoulder. Horik got up and without even brushing off the dust returned to the dance floor. A punch sent Nosach flying into the wire fence. He cut his lips. Standing there, muscular, dazed, he scrutinized first one hand and then the other, the blood visible in the glow of the streetlight, trickling drop by drop; suddenly he let out a roar and started to throw himself at Piskariov, but a powerful blow under his ribs stopped him in his tracks; and when he saw Horik bend over, as if to pick up a stone, his alarm intensified, and that was when Nosach pulled out his knife—a mistake, it turned out, for that was exactly what Wolf had wanted: instantly his nordic hunting knife appeared, a gift from the old rascal Nikandrych, and traversed the dance floor into Nosach's belly—the distance of an outstretched arm: everyone saw the knives in their hands, and the more they saw, the more they inclined toward Horik; the blade cut through muscle; Nosach roared like a bull, reeling as if he'd been scalded; two of his friends pulled him away under the ledge with the record player—the bellowing Nosach hit a stack of records with his

head, strewing discs of black vinyl over the bloody stains on the ground. After the dance, the two brigades bumped into each other by one of the Holosiiv lakes: bike chains clanked, hydraulic rubber creaked, bouts of spitting ensued but the ringleaders didn't initiate any action; curls of mist from the lake drifted toward the woods, settling in thin layers; the tranquil sound of muted voices echoed from the woods; a panting Mister Peps Mare's Eye appeared, his forehead scarred with gouges from the numerous blows he'd received: "Wait, guys—the cops will be here, and then what?" and both brigades dissolved, disappearing in houses and cellars, boiling with anger and crafting knives and axes out of rasps.

The next day they met by the same lake, and no matter that so few of Nosach's guys showed up, he still hoped that things would work out; Wolf was victorious over Nosach's brigade and for the longest time kept Nosach's people submerged in the deep mud, even the girls, and stuffed the clayey mud from the bottom of the lake into their mouths until they turned blue—all that in the presence of Nilka; then Botsman was dragged over squealing and begging, but Mister Peps Mare's Eye forced him to pull down his pants and, screeching high-pitched shrieks (like a nail scratching glass), the whole brigade butt-fucked him "for disloyalty." Nilka stood and watched, breathless; her skin broke out in goose bumps; amused and aghast at the same time, she was bewitched as she watched the spectacle of the young stallions; she was melting with silent arousal until she collided with Horik's cold, immovable gaze; she cooled off and felt disgust, standing there in wet panties, on the brink of tears. Horik looked up over everyone's heads and past the woods: the pink glow of early morning spread across the sky; Botsman lay sobbing in the yellow leaves; Nosach's guys begged to be let out of the water—some of them actually snarled in anger.

That was how Horik made his way to the top.

* * *

The soft sound of cockroaches dropping to the floor woke Jonah: their backs made a crunching sound when they hit the floor; they moved their little legs, crackling along the vinyl floor, and touched his face with their feelers, making him wake up, not knowing at first where he was as he stared at the curtained window, and then it came to him: he was somewhere in a summer cabin sleeping on a warm feather quilt; the earth was swathed in the musty air of autumn; treating himself gently, with tenderness, puffing lightly, trying not to miss the tiniest hint of danger, taking his time, Jonah observed as the light of morning grew through the gray haze; the new wallpaper and the new furniture and the clothes scattered around haphazardly had not yet been imbued with human presence; it was cold; he tried to guess which day it was: it was probably time to move on, because places have the quality of making people accustomed to them, and that only brings grief: the clamorous assault of useless thoughts. Plus he was

completely exhausted and feeble. And the thoughts. He didn't know what to do with them; right after the escape something genuine, undiluted, and fresh had sprouted inside him, and he, Jonah, had owned that genuine, fresh something; but it had come out of nowhere, only to disappear. That was how Jonah spent the first days: first getting his thoughts in order, classifying them, reflecting on all that worthless stuff; he even had conversations with the thoughts, but, strangely, no pictures emerged; his mind stubbornly refused to turn to the past, and he lacked the energy to consider the future. At night, feeble and shivering, he'd fall on the feather quilt, but sleep wouldn't come; he'd start thinking, and he'd arrive at the conclusion that he, Jonah, wasn't one to carry tragedy with him—his own, or a stranger's—even if he was fated to encounter all the realms of universal human tragedy; this is what he did know, or what he'd picked out of the void: calamity forces a man to cross the conventional line of duty and morality—to survive, he is forced to plunge into all kinds of filth, and there's no sense in claiming that that kind of conduct needs an explanation and/or justification; that those particular circumstances require a sense of morality and duty; rather, what you did and what you brought into the world with your deeds and your actions aren't a tragedy—they are the settling of accounts; thinking such thoughts, debating them, jerking his legs around, Jonah reasoned that he had never felt fear; it seems he had cast fear out of himself, instead keeping himself occupied by study of his circumstances, as if he'd taken his circumstances into his own hands, to shape them, and that shaping was reminiscent of how hunters chose their firearm; yes, Jonah had made a choice—he expelled fear like a man who has eaten too much warm bread. He simmered down and, relaxed, roamed around his corner of the cabin; through a crack in the door he saw a raspberry-colored dress, a large window, and, in the window, a lamppost that cast a bundle of light at night; the wind roared wretchedly; gloom all around; woods, gardens, the rattle of dry plant stalks; and a yawning Jonah, squatting, heels pressing into buttocks, was busy digging discolored cigarette butts out of the nooks and crannies: on the other side of the window he heard the murmuring rains wash away the last remnants of summer's splendor; the days were long and weary; the nights were framed by the lamppost's blue light, and for Jonah they hardly differed from the days.

At a time when the weather had turned for the worse, he heard a grinding noise—a key disengaging the lock; Jonah looked around—everything was wrapped in a golden autumn haze; the doorpost jolted, then steps, a woman's steps, resounded; bands of mist swirled in the poplars. The steps were stealthy, light, like a cat's, and Jonah rejoiced at the sound of these self-assured steps, as he endeavored to rid himself of the melancholy brought on by the intermittent rain and the dark overcast sky, a melancholy that awakened in him some kind of brief but painful memories. A woman entered. A glimmer of the sun; autumn's gold scattered in the mist. In the half-light he saw the figure of a tall woman in a long brown coat. A woman

walked through the rooms, and Jonah sensed her nostrils inhaling an unexpected scent, like a she-animal. A click of the light switch: Jonah sat half-turned; the woman's eyebrows rose, though not in surprise; wrinkling her forehead—light-brown eyebrows—"Who are you?" the woman asked, coughing into a fist. "Just a nobody." "Are you an escaped prisoner?" "Not exactly. Something worse." Jonah leaned on his left arm, and in the light of the lamp he studied her face—narrow and pale; slightly slanted eyes, with dark circles underneath; she sat down on the edge of the couch. She suddenly got up and started nervously pacing around the room. "The tyrant has died. Have you heard?" "Which one?" "I see you've been in lockup for a long time." And later, "Are you hungry?" "Just don't panic," he answered faintly, "I'll be off soon." The woman looked at Jonah, Jonah looked at the woman, at the deep blue gully in the window, at the slippery trunks of the aspens; glanced at the tired woman with dark circles under her eyes—he felt an urge to stretch out his hand to caress her head, her light-brown hair. She caught him looking at her—this dejected, sallow, withered man; a red-furred cat rubbed against her legs. The woman picked it up, then let it down as, without looking at Jonah, she threw out. "My husband's suit should fit you ... I'll give you something to eat, and then off you go—you'll go." She said the last phrase indistinctly, as if she wasn't speaking to anyone, as if it was her husband's gray suit she was talking to. "Sure," Jonah stretched out on the feather quilt, a ray of sun warming his unshaved cheek. Jonah ate, chewing slowly, as the woman watched with the eyes of a tired she-animal. Finishing up, he thought of the madhouse and didn't think about the woman any more. He gulped the dense red wine and looked at the small mounds that were her breasts—like a young girl's, the breasts of a hysterical woman; the cat meowed from the other side of the room; he had a desire to fondle her breasts but all he felt in his heart was anguish, only anguish. The splash of rain was heard again. November cut the last leaves off the trees, and dusk clustered inside the room. The woman lay down and lured the cat with her hand: "Was it frightening there?" "Where?" "There." Water ran down the windowpanes: a spray of water and leaves; Jonah finished the rest of the wine—red and rich; he chewed a crust of the white bread, wiped the spilled wine off his chin, and suddenly realized that he was expected to answer: "Madam, it was like in the middle of the night, in the middle of a wasteland: all thirty-two of your teeth are driving you crazy with pain, and there's no doctor around." He rubbed his chin again; the woman unbuttoned her coat, baring her knees, skinny and sharp, like a child's, her face long, her eyes green plates floating in a white setting; she lay down on her back; her downy lashes fluttered as her eyelids shut off and then turned on again the green of her eyes.

Suddenly Jonah saw a vision: an endless road, a road to the sky, a dark wooded hill, the drizzle of rain; a tranquil yard, strewn with the petals of apricot and apple blossoms; a sunken sky with clouds lying low over a valley, again a serpent of a road, the scent of water-logged aromas in the

room, on the steps, throughout the yard; and at that moment he wanted the worst thing he could possibly want: he wanted to return to the madhouse, because this woman, overflowing with a spirit that was foreign to him, with blood that was foreign to him, emanated the life force, and he, Jonah, felt like a nobody, like a nothing, like the solitude of his growing up, the solitude of the quiet garden from his childhood, when the light of the Milky Way gets lost in the folds of the brain; and aside from a burning grief and sadness there is nothing. The woman's cold fingers touching his forehead brought him back to reality; skeins of fog slid down the slippery trunks of the aspen trees, the bare hills dissolved in the golden glow; the woman's cold fingers unbuttoned his shirt, but Jonah felt nothing aside from raging, unimaginable anguish. "Relax, calm down," she murmured in his ear; her cold thin fingers bustled around his body like little animals, and when they reached his crotch a hailstorm of hot sweat burned him; he tried to get up, but the surprisingly strong, almost masculine, hands pulled him down to the feather quilt; the rain licked the windowpane; the wind intensified, and a petrified Jonah saw a hollow and a strong gust whirling across the gorges, and above the roof the aspen trees roared, across the wooded valleys the exposed poplars swayed in the wind. "The Judas Tree," a drowsy Jonah heard his own voice: his fingers sank into soft, velvety tissue; his hand recoiled as if burnt; the mistletoe on the aspens creaked, and the woman's long, thin fingers warmed in his groin; two breasts leaped out, not large and not too small, the engorged nipples rubbed against Jonah's flat chest; the wind danced stubbornly close to the ground, rustling the yarrow. The cat let out a meow, a long, drawn-out meow. The air felt heavy, oppressive. Spasms like an electric current struck Jonah, hurtling him to the floor. His stomach churned; he crawled like a crab on all fours to the bathroom; he was alarmed. The woman rolled over on her back; she lay half-naked; tears washed away the blush on her cheeks in two glacial streams. "You're not an escaped prisoner ..." "Such insight ... Lord, such insight. And what sense is there in shedding tears for a husband in front of a stranger?" Jonah slid out of the bathroom and returned to the feather quilt in the same manner. "I'm a woman. Calm down." Jonah looked at her long fingers; the woman had picked up a book; and on its cover, imprinted in gold letters, he read B-I-B-L-E.

He wished it would rain, but it snowed. Enjoying the warmth of a woman's shoulder, Jonah saw, he clearly saw, that he was being pursued; but that didn't scare him; that was far less scary than leaping into the wilderness known as woman, diving into a deep well, scooping handfuls of pure water and realizing that you were being stripped of the last bits of your good common sense. "Calm down ... have confidence in yourself ... have confidence." "Twenty insulin shocks—twenty—and I held out, I held out." "Control yourself, control yourself." But he lost control over his thoughts; he even followed one of them: "The times aren't liable for the label people give them; it's not people's fault that they become the sacrificial lambs of

the times”; a hot sweat washed over his chest; both of them speechless and astonished; kind words—suddenly, kind words; a tear quivers; a cooling down; snow; and he wanted to live and to die; a hot breath on his earlobe: “Who were you before the madhouse?” “I remember—but I stole memories when I buried Lopata. I stole my own memories, as well as love, and I don’t want any of it back, I don’t want any of it to return; on the contrary, I want to cast it out of myself, not to pollute you, because you’re so kind—or is it that I so want to see you as a kind person? I know already where it will lead: memory that has been organized and assimilated turns into hatred, and hatred consumes.” The woman listened carefully, intent on his muddled chatter: “It must be hard ... To feel you’re God-knows-what, instead of a man.” “No, it’s something else entirely.” “Yes, something else entirely. To have faith, and to lose faith. Out of the flames and into the fire. Insulin shocks—the insulin shocks.” “Who’s Lopata?” The woman propped herself up on her arms, and behind her he saw a chasm; Jonah’s teeth chattered; the woman lay down flat on her back, naked; biting his lip, Jonah turned over on his stomach. The woman looked at his round buttocks. Her breath on the back of his neck, her tongue sliding ever lower, and then: “Hurt me, hurt me”; and Jonah turned over on his back and lit a cigarette that crackled and tickled the nostrils with the pleasant scent of smoke; he shook the ashes onto the carpet. The woman climbed up on the windowsill and settled in—a head and bare legs. Three marks on the Bible, three marks her fingernails had left. Darkness. “How do you manage? How can you appear in public with that?”

The snow piled up; in the dark, the crackling sounds of cockroaches falling on their backs. A city, there’s a big city close by, Jonah decided. “Have you ever given anyone flowers?” His cigarette fizzed out in the pool of wine still in the glass. “Yeah, ages ago ... ages. I liked to give flowers to the people I hated, mostly.” “That—that’s horrible.” “Not at all. A defense mechanism for a small man. They sense it, and then they die of venom-filled hatred. They kill each other, like scorpions. And besides, flowers are for funerals.” “Any chance you’re a pedophile?” “I’ll shut that mouth of yours,” said Jonah, and punched the woman; drops of blood fell to the floor; he lay down on his stomach again: which time was he in? From which time was he brought here, into this present one—wasn’t it better to go back to the other one? What had he, Jonah, come here for? The woman sprang to her feet and stopped in a half-turn: firm breasts, a triangle of hair, the glint of a gold wedding band. A spasm rolled across Jonah’s body and he grinned in a fake smile: “You stinking bitch, so this is what you crave.” “Don’t get excited, don’t get excited,” he heard, already in a fog. The last phrase bothered him; Jonah did not stop looking at the woman; first a wave of disgust washed over him; then he felt pleased; and finally, he, Jonah, felt genuine desire for the woman. But what was most terrifying was that he started thinking, and the more he thought, the more intensely he thought, and he didn’t know what to do with the thoughts, as if they were the

thoughts of a stranger, and it wasn't that they bothered him, on the contrary: in a way it was thrilling. "Go to the bathroom—take a bath, shave," the woman suggested, and Jonah went; and along the way he looked out the window, trying to determine where he was: the dark pools of water, the woods, the clusters of dachas; not a soul; Jonah even said it out loud, "Not a soul"; startled birds flapped their wings obliterating half the moon; looking out the window, Jonah hoped to be able to study the woman from memory, especially her marble-white bosom. He had no other need: the gush of a little bit of warmth, that was all. A stabbing pain cut through him, from the crown of his head to his heels, surprising him; Jonah kept his eyes fixed on the windowpane until, still not moving his eyes, he walked away. Softened and relaxed by the bath, Jonah's skin turned rosy; it struck him suddenly that he, too, could experience pleasure; another stab of pain pierced him, from his head to his armpit. He saw squares of white buildings. "Behold," he murmured, and again remarked that he really was a bundle of joy; the radio squawked the news that the ruler had died—Jonah blinked; the radio announcer stammered, made things up, itemized the pain and suffering the tyrant had gone through; the woman, appraising the ruler's domination, yelled out into the air, be it to Jonah or to anyone else: "Look, cretins, we've had enough already, enough of your exporting everything abroad, while here it turns out a syphilitic was ruling over us." Jonah focused on the tone of her voice: hoarse, breaking apart, hysterical; he was drowsy after soaking in the bath; a gluey, liquid lethargy stupefied him; mouth wide open, Jonah became a kind of goeey mass in the confining streams of drowsiness; his throat felt numb, his temples felt compressed—there he was standing in line near a trash bin, hoping to find a cigarette butt, the orderlies supporting his back, the odor of lysol creeping out from under the ceiling, and, if one were to look closer, it would turn out that it wasn't the madhouse after all: the wind roiling through a gray corridor, twisting white puffs of down through the stinky air; suddenly the woman emerged, bustled around in his mind, became real—Jonah could smell her perfumed skin and thought to himself that he had forgotten Lopata too soon; but no, Jonah told himself, on the contrary, Lopata will be occupying his mind for a long time to come, possibly too long, and nothing could be done about it. Lopata had connected Jonah with something bigger than he'd thought—he wanted to return to the woman, after all. And he returned quickly, like a man coming back for what he deserves. But the image would not leave him: the old Jew copying something onto his folded-in-four piece of paper. With bent knees slightly apart, the woman lay on a heap of white bed sheets: "Look, you've always had a bit of luck," Jonah thought, as with the tip of his tongue he nudged her hard nipples, conscious of the angled space edging into his vision. "And this country with shutters instead of windows will forevermore stop torturing me, my innermost self, and will return inside me once my hands bathe your hair in gold, and you, Jonah, will love again, and not in the expectation of a quick death but a long one. This country will show you not mere windows,

but a bunch of fresh asters, full fresh asters, because one must believe—one must love—one must forget forevermore within oneself the word ‘hope,’ so that it doesn’t exist at all.” He was a bit surprised by these thoughts, and then he was pleased, because he’d had them before. Jonah moved around the bed playfully, flopped onto his back, the woman inhaled with ease, and somehow he, Jonah, knew that at this moment a person who was able to understand him completely was there for him; maybe today would be his lucky day. “Amen,” Jonah proclaimed to himself, and fell asleep.

There was nobody around when he got up the next morning; a cup of warm milk, a piece of buttered, dark-flavored white bread; in place of his own ragged clothes he found fresh clothes, previously worn but still perfectly good. The emptiness disconcerted him, Jonah; something under his heart twitched—on the other side of the windows a thin layer of snow covered the ground. Jonah sniffed the air—it still smelled of woman; he hid his face in his hands and let out a feeble moan, but he did not cry; he sat like that for a long time, and when it started to get dark, Jonah noticed a rosy glow on the other side of the dacha, where he hadn’t been. And Jonah realized that it was a city. A big city. He sat like that until the next morning, and then got ready to leave: he put the leftover pieces of bread and a pack of cigarettes into his pockets, and finally, without knowing why, he pressed his face into the bed that still smelled of a woman’s sweat; he walked through the rooms amid the shadows and then, as if detecting a bad omen, he walked out. A fine layer of snow covered the fields, all the way to the dark hill of the forest.

Translated by Olha Rudakevych

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