

## **Stalinka**

*Oles Ulianenko*

### *Part Two*

The tough old thug, ex-con, and recidivist Nikandrych died in the fall; on top of that, Maria Piskur fell ill—her legs gave out, and she could barely move; from the balcony she regarded the funeral procession with peculiar disapproval as it moved past; so many people had come to the funeral, people nobody in Stalinka knew; a priest, some neighbors, and a dozen of the deceased's blubbery-faced mobster pals—they were the ones who had fetched the priest, who was tripping and stumbling along in his cassock, batting his drooping eyelids over eyes the color of soy sauce; his face was puffy, and when he spoke he drew out his 'o's—all of this indicating that he was not a local. His rough, chapped lips stretched out into a spout; his troubled visage, flushed pink like a child's, would relax and glow divinely whenever a platter with fragrant stuffed cabbage rolls was carried in front of him, or a frosty-blue bottle of vodka. As for the deceased, people said what he liked most was polishing off the *kuknar* brewed from boiled-down poppies, though on hot days he preferred to sip bitter *chyfir* the color of machine oil. After drinking too much he'd take a nap in a sunlit room, his fabled plaid shirt unbuttoned, baring his powerful chest, thickly layered with fat, on the left side of which, right under the nipple, the profiles of Lenin, Stalin, and Karl Marx were tattooed. Nikandrych had lived alone, his home as empty as a yawn; all he had were a couple of stools, a few greasy aluminum cups, and stacks of newspaper clippings about amnesty and portraits of the leaders under whose rule he had served time; he died of a stroke, right on the gangway to the water plant where he had gotten employment thanks to the intervention of the district police chief, Major Syrovatko; he died under the shade of an American maple tree, right at dawn, and rumor had it that it was Ritka Machinegunner who had discovered the body, she who hawked stolen goods on the side and liked to smoke strong black tobacco; that same October the coffin, wrapped in green velvet (obligatory among mobsters) was carried to Baikiv Cemetery under a windswept and spring-like sky accompanied by the unrestrained lamentation of women, as damp windowpanes howled with the wind. Nikandrych's comrades wheezed and gasped as they strained their flagging deep voices to accompany the deceased on his final journey; lifting their hardened and bluish faces upward, they crooned "...gradually you

shriveled and quietly you set off on your journey ..." Now and then their voices abruptly fell silent as the silent gray procession, brightened by the flashy scarves the old mobsters wore around their necks, snaked on and pushed forward slowly, winding around the shabby corners along Vasylkivska Street, pausing for a moment as if to lower banners in respect; they turned down Kozatska Street, glided through the lower neighborhood (shadows falling on a wall of weeds as tall as a man), and rumbled down Dimievska Street, where the People's Rubber Factory buzzed mournfully in gulps of steam; rubbing the backs of their necks, the workmen removed their caps. And then at the cemetery, in the section where heroes of labor and of the fatherland are buried, as clumps of dirt mixed with chlorine thumped and banged the top of the casket, a jangle of guitar strings startled the congregated mourners who were singing "It was a dark and lonely night" out of tune: above the mound, tamped down with shovels and covered with still-fresh asters, water-sprinkled roses, carnations, and tea roses, half of their petals lost along the way, the shrill sounds of the song "... How Katia Fiddlestick beguiled the procurator and married him ..." squealed out like a nail scratching glass. Astonished, the priest moved off to the side, half extinguishing the censer—he even seemed to view the group of aging men in tweed jackets sympathetically. Kostia Runt from Kozatska Street brushed a sleeve across his lips, unleashed the drinker's gem "... If I had piles of money ...," and sidled over to the priest to kiss the cross, but was rebuffed. A sudden cold wind from the east tore through and then died down; a small crowd of mourners made themselves comfortable around the tables under the acacia trees: glasses clinked noisily, bottles were passed around, greetings were shouted across three or four people, the fragrant bouquets of asters were pushed aside—"what the hell are they here for!" Nikandrych, the last of the Stalin-era thugs, was being memorialized. Maria took sips from a wineglass, choking down spasms of nausea; at moments she felt like slapping someone across the face or screaming her head off; as if forgetting how old she was, she kept stroking the places on her head where so many years ago she had two girlish pigtails.

It was after that autumn, the sky sweeping into the unknown, the trees along Vasylkivska Street wearing crimson crowns, the birds assuming a silent mode, except for the sparrows chattering and scattering in rowdy gray bunches over the time-worn sidewalks; hemmed in by the motionless blocks of buildings and the many-hued hill of the Holosiiv forest looming on the horizon, banded with the already cooling asphalt pathways the sun hadn't truly warmed (the blinding white disc in the sky manifestly fading); it was in that time, when nights were illuminated by the bile-yellow glow of streetlamps and persistent showers bathed the hopelessly desolate days; where yards seemed to retreat in patches like snails into shells, muddy house plots turned over by the dozens of feet passing through, not yet the time for putting things in order—working days, sweaty times in Stalinka; it was in these yards, the air heavy with the tart odor of marijuana and the rancid smell

of unfermented brandy mush drifting from a hidden den (as sporadic gusts of harsh eastern winds broke through), and spiked with drawn out, hyped-up “jail songs” played on old-fashioned tape players—it was then and there that Horik Piskariov did his growing up. It coincided with the death of Nikandrych and the onset of Maria’s illness (misfortune likes company); on a balcony latticed with loops of wild grape vines and crisscrossed with clotheslines, in the grayish light of dawn reflected in the windowpanes, having just returned from partying (nice days mixed up with cold days), Horik took cover so his mother wouldn’t see him; he wanted to have a bit of private time, to roll a cigarette, to listen to the spoons clinking in teacups in the apartments across the way and to glimpse Nilka’s shadow passing across the windowpane; none of it came to pass, though, so Horik rekindled memories of those sunless, gray days when all of them—Vaska Glycerin, Khoma Redistributor, and Vovka Skull, a/k/a Moidodyr, a/k/a Mister Peps-Mare’s-Eye—passed the time playing 21 in a basement on Lomonosov Street cluttered with tattered old mattresses; the same basement, with the dance hall opposite, where prostitutes and their johns often hid from the somewhat drunk neighborhood watch teams, though it was generally acknowledged that the hideaway was the rightful property of the gang led by Horik Piskariov, who was at that moment sidling back and forth along the balcony’s wet railing and thinking about the gang, which at that time of day would have been slurping sour beer and finishing off the remnant of a joint of cheap grass, talking nonsense about women and future street fights. Usually, the conversation went something like this: “Who you kidding, that blondie is an unearthly beauty and a monocle-wearing friend … so I tell her, like I am a man—maybe not an intellectual, but I can do a whole lot more than those snot-nosed boys … and I told her lots of stuff, pouring the sweet stuff in her ears. I see it’s working; I swear.” “You’re making it all up!” “And I stuck it to her without taking my pants off!” “What a …” It was a miserable fall morning, with sleet falling; a thin film of ice glazed the puddles, the water plant emitted steam with a roar, the rooks beat their wings, slashing through the shadows that hung over the frost-bitten earth, their cries lost in the morning emptiness as they coasted in the air, tightening loop after loop, maneuvering to snuggle down in the poplar branches, sticking out their humped beaks at the yards and the playgrounds. The depressing grayness grew thicker, here and there sunbeams bounced around in the black holes of building courtyards, barely warming the stucco cornices once they broke through all the way; arched courtyard passages gaped vacantly like bottomless wells. A corpse lay supine opposite the stone steps of the water plant, a broken arm beneath it, covered with a big red cloth, hastily thrown over the deceased man to shield him from annoying looks; a blast of air shot through, lifting the edges of the cloth, revealing the silky-smooth, waxen face of Nikandrych, his blank glassy eyes reflecting clusters of yellow leaves. All night, mad with the busied racket of birds and the unsettled air, heavy with humidity from the east, the dogs furiously yanked at their leashes and wildly clawed the dirt, trying to break free; at dawn a

blinding gold spire burned through the air above the Holosiiv hill, and the massive buildings of the Agricultural Exhibit Center emerged out of the oily morning fog; the dogs yelped and then quieted down; whimpering, they crawled back into their doghouses. An ambulance droned close by, belching fumes; the puddles, like a blue haze, spread widely, fusing with the thin slash that was the horizon; after an instant as fleeting as the dazzling flash of an insect consumed in a flame, a soft, gentle warmth unexpectedly reached into Horik, probing his veins, sending tremors up his legs, filling his mouth, quenching it with sweet saliva. Ten of Nikandrych's mates in tweed jackets were carrying the casket; raising their gaunt, parchment-colored faces, they sang snatches of songs as they tottered forward, moving past the lopsided henhouses that in winter served as distilleries for homebrew, rental units, and a warehouse with a place for contraband beneath the floorboards; past dozens of gates painted green and past the birdhouse-filled quiet courtyards where Nikandrych took "protection" money from the residents and where more than one widow wrung her hands in grief before the portrait of her "provider"—Nikandrych administered justice quickly and brutally, but fairly; it was said that it was impossible to escape the hand of his just retribution. In these neighborhoods Nikandrych was the master. He served as mentor to the local punks, and many times he said to Horik, "You reek of sentimentality, kiddo," as he stroked the top of his head. The kid was repulsed and tried to stay as far away from him as possible, because it was said that the old hooligan had defiled many a boy; drunk on *kuknar*, he smothered the boys and, a cigarette in his mouth, humped them on a homemade mat. Afterwards, wiping his beet red face, he'd sit puffing and grunting, his pudgy hands in his lap (his short fingers a bunch of pink sausages); for the longest time he'd just sit there in the rusty half-darkness, staring at a greasy portrait of Stalin, mumbling something like, "Ye-e-es, hard times are here. And you, kid, keep it quiet ... shit happens"; and wagging a stubby finger he'd scold this latest victim who, half naked, lay cringing on the mat, pressing his legs together. This activity was brought to the attention of Major Syrovatko. The major fretted over the information for days, pacing back and forth across his office; people heard him talking to himself: "Maybe they're lying ... maybe it's completely ...." he muttered, sucking on a *Bilomor* cigarette, before finally picking up a sheet of white paper and writing an arrest warrant in rounded letters.

The next morning, he would pull it out of the drawer, lay it down in front of him, and, after a brief pause, turn toward the window, rip the warrant up, and throw it in the wastebasket. Cursing, he would wander off to hang around the boiler room some, nervously sucking on a cigarette: "Maybe that son-of-a-bitch Nikandrych isn't on duty today"; and hurling the cigarette stub away, he'd take off for the boiler room. Still walking at full speed (one leg still in the air), he'd blast out a warning, and after finally composing himself, after adjusting the lapels of his blue navy jacket, he would demand, "How many times, you old bastard—how many times do I have to warn you! I'll have you locked up—not in the zone, but in the venereal disease clinic on

Saksahanskoho Street.” The thug threw up his hands, “Why do you say that boss? It’s not true, I swear, Savielich ...” Catching his breath after that brash outburst, a stunned Syrovatko would remove his beret and wipe his forehead; he’d sit himself down on the Chinese wicker chair, light a cigarette, and, quietly sidling up to Nikandrych, say in a near whisper, as if trying to mystify him, “Don’t take this personally, Nikandrych, but I’ve received complaints. Manka Fomenkova. Her Petka has contracted syphilis ...” Innocently, like a helpless child, Nikandrych would spread his hands: “Boss, stop this bullshit. You think Petka hasn’t stuck it into all kinds of places?... And Manka, I’ve known Manka since my mates all passed her around that time—or was it the following year? What year was that boss? Huh, Savielich? Yeah, yeah—she was there hanging around the barracks all the time. As for me, boss, there’s nothing to be making a big deal about ...” “Where would he be sticking it, Nikandrych—that kid, that kid’s just twelve years old!” “And you, how old are you, Savielich? Huh? Why so quiet?” the tough old thug would snort, croaking and chuckling, his face suddenly hardening, his eyes glazing over as he dropped the familiar, malicious tone. “There you have it. Life is such a beautiful thing,” he’d say, turning up his pudgy palm—it was easy to guess what he meant by a “beautiful life”—“springtime is in the air—yeah, yeah, when I think back to my youth. First let’s enjoy some of that precious *chyfir*, Savielich; you know, we’re the same age, us two ... and not just that,” and here Nikandrych’s face would assume its usual expression; calming Syrovatko down—“we were bound together with a string, a string ... and that string knows so much, so much ... me, what’s it to me ... to me it’s all about prison anyway,” and as Nikandrych was pouring the *kuknar* or *chyfir* Syrovatko would back off, heading toward the door, “Well, I did warn, you,” he would force out of his mouth, fear flashing through his eyes, then adding, “Take down the Father of Nations. It’s time for Leonid Illich to go. And as for prison, neither one of us would last long there.” Nikandrych’s bachelor-button eyes will have frosted over, “You can’t win, Savielich—I swear!” And thus, empty-handed, Major Syrovatko would wind his way back.

Maria called on Syrovatko after each of his visits to Nikandrych, insisting that “that damned criminal” be put away; at first her appeals seemed odd, but eventually the district chief got used to her visits and her pleas, though Maria remained a puzzle to him.

Horik didn’t care that Nikandrych had died, and even though all kinds of things were said about him long afterwards, in the end none of it affected Horik. What won’t evil tongues say! Horik’s curiosity was aroused by talk that hinted at various clandestine criminal acts the deceased had been involved in—they filled him with a serene melancholy, as if a ceremonial tolling of an inner bell; he was confused; his almost childish appraisal of the old man, his respect for the suddenly mortal old crook, was destroyed. Something he didn’t understand unsettled him, something he couldn’t solve on his own; the neighborhood fights were starting again, which was to be expected, because Nosach, who worked part time in the summer at the dance

hall, had set the price of two hundred *karbovantsi* for the basement on Lomonosov Street; and right then something had come over Horik: for days he drifted about, dejected. On top of that, his mother would stagger in from work angered, as if she'd broken free off a leash, spitting out harsh words and acting tough: slapping down a wet rag, she'd sit herself down in the corner, her legs blue and swollen, gazing at Sio-Sio with vacant eyes, and sucking on a cigarette, while Grandma Piskur composed prayers: she had a remarkable knack for composing her own original prayers, insisting they were sacred—the passage of time had wiped her mind clean, giving the impression that a new life had started for the old woman. Besides, this was unfamiliar territory; no one understood what was going on with her; what's more, because there was so much else going on, no one paid much attention to the old woman.

So a bored Horik spent drab days between Kozacha Street and Vasylkivska Street; his thoughts were about Nilka, though not quite on Nilka: his musings resembled an ugly, artless collage, a murky warning about something Horik couldn't handle, like his own thinking; even Mister Peps Mare's-Eye was talking him into paying a visit to hairy-lipped Marfa on Kozacha Street, in the building built of white fireproof bricks where two female lodgers lived, paying rent by working nights, providing services for practically the whole city; though hairy-lipped Marfa was also a fortuneteller, divining the future by laying out the cards: the joker, the king, the ace, the queen—so maybe that was what Mister Peps Mare's-Eye had had in mind, after all. Most likely, though, his suggestion had to do with getting involved in the business with the girls who had lived in Stalinka so long that the locals virtually considered them family. One of them was Nadka, a hot brunette with an intense, dusky gaze, breasts as big as loaves of bread tumbling out of her blouse—just looking at them took your breath away; and the other one—so sunny, so delicate, as if she'd been bathed in sweet-smelling herbs, a pure untouched girl, though word had it that she was so good in bed, performed so skillfully, that the other, well-baked whores of Stalinka seemed like backward schoolgirls. Her name was Svitlana—it's true, she blossomed only later, but all the guys wanted her because aside from everything else, she told stories in bed, actually just one story in different versions: she was in love with a man, they were penniless yet, went to school together, and they desperately wanted to have it all: to experience everything in the world—to live a life rich with possibilities; but a female friend showed up, having ended up here after she'd worked in all the bordellos of the city; she had even worked at Sultan's, he's the one who taught her all manner of tricks; Mister Peps Mare's-Eye had mentioned Sultan once, telling Horik the story of how one day a stranger appeared, wanting to do business, a filthy *banabak*—an Azerbaijani, or an Armenian; he started doing business, the locals scowled at him, but he set out a whole crate of cognac to keep his spot, and the locals were appeased. Skull even showed the bloke Sultan to Horik from a distance: the day had unfurled in brilliant sunshine, with the sky, the windowpanes, and the people speckled with gold, and the guy they were now calling Sultan was walking along a big,

long-walled building on Vasylkivska Street; he walked like a man filled with confidence walks, his complexion glowing like yellow silk, his upper mustached lip turned up, revealing a set of fine white teeth, his body draped in a very proper loose-fitting black suit, very attractive, like his black leather coat; Mister Peps Mare's-Eye, a.k.a. Skull, a.k.a. Moidodyr, clucked: "Look at that ass now, after coming here all bedraggled with a single tattered t-shirt ... we should work him over, Klyk ..." Horik gave Sultan a quick look and felt disgustingly nauseous—the same queasy sensation he'd felt when he had looked at the dead Nikandrych. His head was swimming; he left abruptly and went home; until noon he watched Nilka brushing her hair through the crack she had left open in the balcony door; the wind played with her hair, tossing it over her shoulders, messing with its multi-hued strands while she stared straight ahead, as if she hadn't noticed Horik; as she kept brushing her hair, she threw him a blistering glance; he felt as if a dozen years had passed, as if she had never slept in his arms.

Things started to clear up for him when he heard talk, gossip, that Nilka, while having coffee and a smoke with a friend—the fleshy redhead Marta, who had already sampled being with a guy—Nilka had supposedly expressed some dissatisfaction, saying "He's sort of alright, that Wolf, but when you're in bed with him he stinks like an animal, almost like a dog ..." Narrowing her eyes, she blew out thin columns of smoke and suddenly felt embarrassed because in truth she hadn't been with a man yet. "Unlike Mesaib..."—and, later, by chance, right before the last day of school, Mister Peps Mare's-Eye ran into her at the post office: dressed all in white, her head half covered in satin bows, she was crying, smearing black mascara all over her pale cheeks, and scratching out curly letters that spelled "Mesaib." At the time Horik was completing his second year in carpentry at the PTU—the late Nikandrych would declare, "You'd think, kiddo, that all we have growing here is beautiful trees." Now, though, he couldn't care less about Mesaib (he *was* upset but felt detached): late mornings he'd fall into bed, pressing his exhausted body into the bedsprings, a sickening sweet queasiness pushed into his throat. That disgusting sweet queasiness stalked him, staying on to ambush him in his shelter; in his time alone Horik imagined the dark chipped windows on the building across the way, ready to pounce on him with full force; clammy with sweat, he shivered; he got up to walk around the room a bit and recover his senses, only to fall back on the bed, pulling his knees up to his stomach; still that sickly feeling of revulsion dogged him; a cold draft from the grave weighed down on him.

This time he felt faint—his arms felt soft, cottony, uncooperative—he felt like he'd been flung to the bottom of the swamp in which he'd been suffocating from the very beginning; as if deep inside he knew that he was unalterably drawn to that quagmire; in the sliver of a mirror he saw Nilka's delicate hand adjusting her braid, her bare back, water streaming down the groove: all of this disappeared, his consciousness dissolving like strips of color film; he saw himself flying over steep precipices, wrestling his way

across brown waves, wandering around unfamiliar places, plummeting into bottomless purple abysses brimming with something muddy, sweet, and slimy. Regaining his senses, he'd imagine Sultan standing straight and tall, like an English dandy, but he couldn't conjure up an image of Mesaib—he'd never been clever or imaginative; all through school, way up to the eighth grade, he'd copy all his tests and language assignments. In quiet moments, when he felt calm and composed, he'd lie on his bed spinning and re-spinning the same loop of images in his mind: Sultan walking down Vasylkivska Street, bathed in a golden glow. But nighttime came; swells of darkness washed over the windowpanes, the glass tinkling; Horik tried to sleep but couldn't; he smoked for a while, lying on his bed and listening to bouts of the gurgling, wheezing cough that tormented his grandmother; and as the stupor crept up and overcame him with its sugary taste and cold touch, he'd force his eyelids open; recovering, he realized that nothing was simple and clear-cut: Sio-Sio's breathing was alarmingly heavy; his mother was cursing obscenities, boxing the pillow with her fists: his teeth hurt; he lay like that for a long time, face-up in the dark, stifling the obscure loathsomeness that was contaminating him from all sides. There was no solution; he wasn't like Mesaib and Sultan. Something was budding inside, poking around his innards, something sweet and perturbing, deprived of form or name; his mind pushed him, urged him to dive into his memories, but he had so few of them; and that wasn't the problem: he felt a strong impulse, something that demanded (drilling inside his brain like a meaningless wish) that he look deeper and further, to experience that sweetness again and again. At times like that—be it night or day—he'd sit on the balcony waiting for Nilka to start brushing her hair, for the pale blue reflection of her trembling body (it was already cold), and he'd picture her hard nipples inside her bathrobe, the curve of her spine; she'd be brushing her hair and thinking about what Marta had said during a recent smoking break: "He pulls me toward him, that bastard ... shoving that ticklish silk at me, genuine Chinese silk, the stores haven't had anything like it for a long time, even the Armenians at the bazaar don't have it—o-o-o, I was so surprised my mouth dropped open and my legs spread automatically, but he's so old and so ugly and disgusting, you can see the wax coming out of his ears"—Nilka would brush her hair and then the entire family would clink their little spoons in their porcelain cups in the large common room where a large chandelier spreads out like a golden spider, casting shadows onto the furniture; her father was an accountant and her mother worked in a warehouse. "Look at those Kilinichenkos," Maria spat out, "drinking tea all winter and all summer. If you ask me, only lazy people drink tea in the summer ..."

As he watched Nilka, he crafted all kinds of images in his imagination: surprising her with armloads of flowers, taking her for a spin around town and into the country in a brand-new black Volga (to hell with a Mercedes), driving and chatting with Nilka sitting there beside him, offering her a Marlboro; and just as he'd be getting to the best part, Sultan and Mesaib

would suddenly appear; but since Horik had never seen Mesaib's face, Mesaib and Sultan appeared as one figure, after which something in his brain would snap and tiny beads of sweat would dot his forehead; in the end, though, he'd have time to pummel Mesaib and Sultan with his fists—he knew that Nilka was somehow a part of this Sultan-Mesaib partnership; a powerful surge of emotion knocked him over onto the bed; Grandma Piskur's voice, burbling quietly, like water boiling, seemed so far away: "Heaven forbid, they've put a curse or something on him—we'll have to take him to a conjurer or he'll be lost." She was crossing herself and, in her elderly confusion, mixing up the opening and ending of prayers. Horik had a splitting headache. At first he was moving through familiar places, but they seemed less impenetrable—there was a glimmer of something out there; he walked in wild places, alone—no one bothered him; he sank to the lowermost bottom of that ever-present brown murkiness, gradually adjusting to it; this time, though, it was as if the windowpane had cracked, pushed in by an elbow; overhead he saw a little lagoon of pale blue light and himself at the bottom of it; from above he could see himself arriving at a factory, pipes gouging the sky like a stylus, it's dark, damp, and somehow uncomfortable, a gigantic pendulum with belts and a wheel thrashes the air, and he comes in—not now, another time—and eats sweet, syrupy molasses in handfuls; the pendulum thrashes the air, his father stands a bit to the side—though he had never stood like that—and watches silently, attentively. Finally, Nikandrych emerges—Horik had been expecting him to appear, after all, and, what's more, had the feeling that someone was secretly spying on him; he heard the drone of the metro, felt something bitter on his lips, which then receded; wonders assailed him—everything he had ever seen in his brief life. And high up, above everything, there's Nikandrych, dispensing advice (but of a kind you would never have heard from the old thug) in a mocking tone, though articulating properly, in a kind, melodious murmur, like that of people talking at dawn, when the energy to tell lies has gone. And in a flash something struck him like a bolt of electricity, and Horik saw evenly-cut, unappealing slices of meat, and close by someone was talking, copiously asserting clever things that Horik, owing to his lack of education, could not grasp; a hole gaped to the left, and sticky, gelatinous bits that looked like clumps of ejected human sperm flowed into that opening; Nikandrych picked up a plate of meat and, after flicking off the specks of fat white maggots with his baby finger, offered the plate to Horik; all of a sudden the screech of a subway train sounded; green waves of light are flashing like glass shattering to bits, and suddenly Horik realizes that this is the second time in one day that he's seeing this: he is walking, tripping over his own feet, clinging to his father's finger; in his left hand his father is holding a bouquet of asters and Horik is an adult—his body is that of a child but in his mind he's an adult—and a tractor on treads edges toward them, emitting dense fumes of acrid diesel. Ahead, Horik sees a wet kitten, its fur bristling; underfoot, the ground rumbles, the noise intensifies, and the kitten raises its little head; overhead, the sky soars high above his father, above

Horik; above Vasylkivska street, a black shadow, resembling a man, is blocking out the sun's yellow sphere—a black shadow; to Horik it seems that the shadow is ignoring him; the tractor lets out a screech; the treads send chunks of asphalt flying; the kitten vanishes beneath the weight of the cast iron, bits and pieces of fur and lumps of hot flesh and blood stick to Horik's face, blood splatters the collar of his polo shirt and something bitter floods his mouth, and Horik wakes with a sweet, syrupy taste in his mouth; the sun is shining at an angle through the window.

Conscious of the grinding noise of the city beyond the window, stupefied and dizzy, slowly putting one foot in front of the other, Horik made his way to the washbasin; an eternity seemed to pass before his hand reached the bottom of the sink; something inside him was babbling, ruthlessly grinding up word after word, mumbling with a toothless mouth, but he wasn't paying attention—or was he mistaking his defiance for the dread he was feeling; it struck him suddenly that he was looking at stone lions and balconies adorned with standing female figures made of alabaster; he thought he glimpsed Nilka in the distance—so skinny, her cheekbones sticking out prominently; Horik switched on the light, his smallest capillaries feeling the wires in the switch making contact; gradually his body slouched as if preparing to leap across a stream of water, and as he pulled his splayed hand out of the sink the sun inched across, its rays broken by his protruding fingers, and who knows why an image of a towering autumn sky dotted with little cottonball clouds stood before him; at that moment Horik was ready (as happens after sleep) to purge himself of the night terrors, but they remained inside him, stubbornly standing their ground; yet that did not scare him—on the contrary, he felt carefree; he looked at his fingers, stiff with weariness, a fleeting, viscid weariness; the clock chimed, as if for the last time, mincing the silence. Horik squinted so hard he saw bursts of sparks; his Adam's apple bobbed up and down; his chest constricted, and he felt stabs of pain in his temples. He stuck his hand back into the water and felt the tender tickle of a heart-piercing chill: he watched as tiny bubbles formed along his skin and then popped. He raised his eyes and Maria Piskur's gaze met his, but she understood nothing, because her own mind was beclouded; a surge of horror tore through her gullet like a pair of aggressive little animals and something inside her shuddered: at that moment Horik looked exactly like Mykhailo right before he died, except that his eyes shone with an even, frosty luster: two molten lead plates with tiny black dots of pupils. Maria jumped off the stool and cradled Sio-Sio's head in her hands; his mouth, wet with saliva, sought her bosom; old woman Piskur tried to shush his persistent, dark braying. Astonished, she heard singing from above—quiet, like the gurgling of a spring brook or the downpour of a cloudburst in May; confused, she stared at the high ceiling, not comprehending where the voices were coming from; but look, over there—she spotted a group of boys and girls aged five or six holding sheets of paper in their hands and singing in voices so fine, so pure: "Halia, my young Halia ...," only to end abruptly, so that Sio-Sio's

bellowing was all there was. She got up on her swollen, festering legs, her eyes still fixed on Horik, who was leaning against the misty windowpane, watching the rain slicing off diagonal patches of autumn and washing the gray asphalt as screeching cars sped by and trees were dropping their leaves along its borders; suddenly it dawned on her: it was all over: all of it had flown past, all of it, this long life she had worked so hard to somehow paste together. A horrific howl broke loose from her sunken chest.

Despondent, the poor woman went out, rambling nonsensically, losing her footing down the grimy, sticky steps, breaking open the gangrenous abscesses on her legs; she quieted down after getting a view of the mountain of steps she had to climb down; at the bottom, on the street, under the ledge in front of the building by the cafeteria where, for “crazy money,” foreign tourists and students liked to drop in, she sat down on the wet bench and began bending finger after finger, counting up the years, figuring out how old Horik was, confusing him with his older brother. Sio-Sio thrust his face into her lap like a calf and crawled around in a puddle. Hour after hour passed; all at once she stood up, took her head in her hands, and wildly shrieking “Oh, my head, my head—help! I’m being devoured, the worms are eating me alive,” she tore off her blouse, as from every side she saw yellow worms the thickness of a human arm wriggling out and crawling up her body; she crushed them underfoot and then waddled off, as if going to work, along the bleached-gray street, talking to passersby, seemingly mistaking them for someone else—but who knows, maybe they really were acquaintances of hers; after all, Stalinka was like a village, and in her mind all the clerks at the market were Mykhailo’s lovers; wiping his hands on the startled passersby, Sio-Sio bellowed like a cow; he fell, crawled on his stomach, and got up, and, arms outstretched like a toy, holding the handle of a teapot handle in his big paws, he toddled onward behind Maria. At the fish store Rita Machinegunner pounced on Maria, yanking her hair and trying to bite her face; from behind Sio-Sio struck first one woman and then the other one with the teapot handle, wailing a wild, horrific “OO-OO-OO!!!” It started to drizzle; Maria left and roamed about, adrift in the wet, until morning; she was brought in from the street after somebody found her lying on the bare asphalt in front of a pub; Sio-Sio was standing over her, muttering strange, jumbled words in a language nobody understood. It was Major Syrovatko’s people that brought her in. They drove her home in a fever and called for help. A young, dog-faced doctor arrived, the smell of cognac on his breath; he gave her an injection, and, rubbing alcohol into his hands, took note of her abscesses: “Has she had those long?” “Not so long,” said Grandma Piskur, not liking what she was hearing and throwing up her hands, her frightened eyes darting back and forth. “Maybe a week.” “Her blood has to be tested, right away,” said the doctor and, pushing a fat needle into a vein, collected a full syringe of blood while Sio-Sio yelped at the top of his lungs. Leaving a bunch of prescriptions, the doctor went on his way. Maria lay in a dark corner, the same corner where Grandma Piskur always hung an icon that Grandpa would

promptly remove; she lay there, breathing hard while quietly telling Mykhailo about everything that had happened to her, while swatting at something in the air she was seeing through her clouded vision. An emergency vehicle drove up some five days later; orderlies in lab coats so grubby that they looked green laid Maria on a stretcher; apparently recovering her senses, she jerked her head up and yowled a long yowl; the orderlies carried her into the van and then stuck a thick sheet of paper in front of Grandma Piskur's face; flustered, the old woman broke out in a sweat as she put an "X" on the imposing "authorized document"; ignoring the orderlies, Horik stepped up and signed the document with unabashed flair; a young orderly, not much older than Horik, told him in a kindly manner that his mother—Horik's mother, that is—had syphilis and the entire family had to be tested, since it was a legal matter and if you refused you'd get hauled off in a halter. Horik scowled as a jumble of thoughts about justice and vengeance assailed him; vague visions of retribution, of bloody revenge, overcame him; imagining a reckoning, he could smell the blood and he saw black, but in the end the desire to settle scores trickled away, leaving him with a fierce rage in his heart; out there lay Stalinka, sprawled out in the late autumn afternoon, grieving in tune with the lamenting crows, reeking with the stench of disgusting corners and filthy walk-through courtyards, noisy with the sound of automobiles; a deceptive, early winter was setting in.

As fall was coming to an end, right around the October holidays, as a sullen sky bound into clusters of clouds stretched over the houses, as swarms of people, oblivious to all cares, incessantly chewing and drinking, intoxicated on just the prospect of three days off work, flocked everywhere—to the crowded, semi-dark stores, to the public washrooms, to the pubs where a *karbovanets* would get you a glass of wine or sometimes even a shot of *horilka*—in that end-of-fall moment, tinged with love and death, gray with the drizzle and mists that converged on Vasylkivska, wound up like a snake and clinging like a T-shirt to everything between elegant buildings encircled by triple-high fences—that was when Vaska Glycerin, who lately hadn't been getting along with Mister Peps Mare's-Eye, vanished. And it wasn't because they were so different that they weren't getting along: Vaska Glycerin wore white or brightly colored motley pressed pants and a bright orange neckband; he occupied himself with so-called "pinching," which is to say that his job was to pick pockets in the metro and the commuter trains; he was a friendly, easy-going chap, which was why he was known as Glycerin; as for Peps, the "minister without portfolio under Klyk," he dressed exclusively in expensive Romanian suits, but that had begun recently, for before he had always dressed sloppily and enjoyed smoking weed. His taste for marijuana had brought him together with Inka, a girl from the Chabany suburbs, the daughter of well-to-do parents; she dabbled in selling it to students in the dormitories on Lomonosov St. She was nothing to fawn over: skinny legs, big round belly, as if pregnant, impossible to tell where her torso ended and her legs began; add to that the pimply face of a bony peasant, adorned with a flattering, run-

of-the-mill, aspirationally white-toothed smile. Nonetheless, for Skull the only virtue of this white-lipped creature, brought down by her incessant pursuit of money, indistinguishable from dozens of other wan, repulsive girls, was that she was the daughter of prominent, wealthy parents and that she dressed in stylish and expensive clothes. Still, when Mister Peps Mare's-Eye suddenly decided to start a romance with Inka, the pimps and Nosach too voluntarily forewarned him: "Among us, Peps, you're like a lord, we've conferred so many monikers on you ... but show us your subordination: tread softly on sagging rafters, dude ....," which literally meant: do not, Mister Peps Mare's-Eye, stick your snout into someone else's trough; Inka (Skull's disastrous one-nightstand) made extra money by coordinating the flow of girls for the pimps: she'd pick up some over-painted airhead with dreams of Alain Delon and white sailboats and marble staircases descending to the sea and a desire for "decent company and some fun with intelligent guys, not like here," and then nonchalantly invite her to birthday parties or for a stroll in the country: "out there everything is just so exquisite—those people know how to live, not like our idiots!" The airhead's mouth drops open, she believes what she hears yet doesn't quite believe it; and then, after a bit of drinking, some names are dropped, like Pierre Cardin and Gerard Depardieu, with whom someone from their circle has drunk vodka, and if not with Gerard, then with Volodka Vysotskyi for sure. The airhead listens—where else would she hear anything like this—and when, in the middle of the night, she sobers up and shakes off the drunken stupor, she finds herself in bed with an Arab who curses and sends her, yesterday's princess, out to brew coffee. Lying sprawled out in a bed stinking of musk and marijuana, feeling bad about something unspecified, she rams her face into the pillow and says over and over, "I'm dreaming, I'm dreaming!" Then, in the morning, there's regret, moans, and the gnashing of teeth. It was generally too late, though: Inka had that rare talent of finding and picking up those girls who flung themselves into the flames recklessly and heedlessly; the worse things went for them, the more recklessly they destroyed themselves. Vaska Glycerin was lucky, though: fate dealt him a "joker," and he was happy—fools don't know any better. Getting to know Inka, Glycerin had to listen to her mind-numbing discourse on virtue, family, and cozy slippers; he watched her and yawned, as he let her passionate and endless talk about the importance of English-language courses in one ear and out the other—"It's imperative to go abroad ... here there's nothing"—after which he'd pick her up and cart her off into the dormitory's Lenin Room across from two overloaded garbage chutes; along the peeling, dilapidated hallway, with countless doors on both sides, illuminated with one miserable little lamp, students shuffled along, throwing absent-minded glances at the skinny intertwined arms and legs that looked like the limbs of a dwarf tree: the half turns of the mingled bodies, the muffled noises, the kissing, rubbing, turning, and rolling, spiked with thin mosquito-like squeals; none of it was news to the students: a heap of half-naked bodies, impossible to differentiate arms and legs—two pairs of eyes probing the

decrepit Lenin Room, decorated with rows of party leaders' portraits ensconced under imperfect blown glass and furnished with a mound of smashed chairs and dirty rotted mattresses, permeated with urine and mold; Inka laid herself out on a table top, thus hiding her nipples—her underdeveloped, juvenile breasts made her self-conscious; she slid around, raised herself on her elbows—"oh, that's no good," hid her diminutive bum, then stuck it out; taking mincing steps, Vaska Glycerin walked around to the left and to the right, not knowing how to approach her. Finally, Inka settled down on her back on top of some scattered, rumpled, and faded old "Communist Party Manifesto" brochures—a torn banner caught on her pointy knee; breathing hard and unhappily through her nose, she thrust forward her square chin, lightly bruised after a squeezing-out-pimples ritual, and biting her (even normally) pale, thin lip, she squealed like a bitch: this guy was her first, she had to suffer through this; who would ever think that she, Inka, such a clean and respectable girl who was saving herself for someone more worthy, would end up in the paws of this drug addict; why couldn't it be Klyk?... her thinking curved like an arc, overlaid with a thin veneer of disgust and despair: may this be the first and last time; she hated all the girls and women she knew: the ones with lovely legs, the legs of a doll, the just-right breasts and the perfect just-strong-enough thighs; she ground her teeth; an overloaded trash bin brimming with emerald green flies buzzed nearby; pools of ankle-deep red liquid, a combination of food waste and sludge and the juices of thawed out calf meat, had trickled out and lay ankle-high; several Negroes were cooking kebabs, shashliks, or a Romanian-style roast over a grease-splattered gas stove while Inka and Glycerin frisked about in the shambles of furniture in the Lenin Room; grievous resentment spilled out of Inka's eyes like snake venom, a profound bitterness at how her long-held, precious dream of her first man was dissolving, like foam, right at that moment; brusquely Glycerin flung his body onto the bundle of flesh and bones whose name was Inka, having no idea how fortunate he was; after that moment, straightening out, just as her rawboned figure started to relax, her body convulsed, contorting her neck, engorging her jugular vein; her hand tore at his straw-colored hair and everything turned green for her: she gasped and panted as a current of astonishment ripped through her, and the pain vanished, dissolving in a languid wave of, mad passion—Inka squealed like an animal, flashing her pointy knees and jumped backward as if singed; and, conscious of what she had accomplished and aroused by it, agony and pleasure gushed out of her half-naked body, out of her open pale lips. Things became foggy for both of them: the walls, the ceiling, the doors, the beams, the portraits—all receded in a fog and a boundless pleasure seized them, warm waves of contentment washing over them; the Negroes' chattering outside the Lenin room, in the hallway, and in the rooms along the hallway put Glycerin on alert; it made him stop, quieted him, forced him to prick up his ears: all at once Inka jumped off and pulled in her stomach; her jutting ribs flashed in front of him; the folds around her loin shook; hungrily, like a filly, she drew in the dormitory's

stench, which included her own scent, as if to pursue it: the two of them thrashed and wriggled even faster on top of a pile of newspapers, fresh brochures, and magazines studiously marked in with pencil, the banners rattled in the commotion. Inka got up; spasms warped her body; her sweaty hands untwisted Glycerin's legs, furry with short hairs, and she fell to the floor on her pointy knees....

This was what Mesaib, the Moroccan Arab, saw when he, seemingly accidentally, opened the door a crack; that wasn't because the clamor he heard from the kitchen annoyed him—he didn't mind that at all: he was so horny and jealous that he felt as though a fly were buzzing his temples; Mesaib wasn't alone in desiring a white woman—and this was just his first year of study at the agricultural academy.

After that a veiled enmity between Mister Peps Mare's-Eye, the intrepid fighter, and Glycerin began. Vovka would enter the basement and remove his jacket, hanging it on a chair, meticulously matching seam to seam; Glycerin, comfortable on the musty mattresses and puffing on an aromatic Marlboro, taking sips of beer to enhance his enjoyment, would lick his thick lips (was that a smile on his lips, or was he sneering?) and cast inscrutable looks at Skull as he squirmed like a worm under his deadpan gaze: you couldn't tell what was hiding behind that opacity; a bleached white collar with mismatched stripes reflected his greenish face; Mister Peps Mare's-Eye can't take it any more: he gives in, crumbles, and erupts in outbursts: "Don't you look at me like that—or I'll bust your skull. Stop looking at me, Glycerin," as Glycerin takes a delicious drag on his cigarette, blows out rings of smoke, and begins to narrate a long story about Inka, telling it in soft, drawn-out tones, as if revisiting what took place; Skull beats his fists into his thighs, and, hunched over, runs crazily around the basement while Glycerin keeps his eyes on him and rambles on and on about Inka: what she looked like yesterday, what she wore on Wednesday or Friday; and, clearing his throat Peps can't hold back: "Let's go, Glycer—let's slug it out," but Klyk cooled them both down, punching them in the chest and saying "A broad's not worth it"—Moidodyr gazed at him and gave him a strange look, one that was supposed to communicate a message: the significance of this state of affairs cannot be exaggerated; it was a malicious, wicked look, his eyes flittering like a rat's.

They stood like that for a good minute, stupidly blinking at each other, and Horik saw that Skull was pleased; as for Horik, things like that were beyond him; he was still a virgin, he hadn't had a woman. What he did understand, though, was this: those comments applied not only to the brigade but to him, Horik—they were meant to destroy something, to demonstrate superiority.

It was he, Mister Peps Mare's-Eye, who brought the news that Vaska Glycerin had vanished: disoriented by the October frost, walking unsteadily after a casual shot of vodka, all sleeked up with brilliantine like a rat, his face pockmarked with bluish scars from past pimples, he was all spruced up in a

gray coat and a pair of white pants rich with coffee stains; at that time the guys in the brigade were sipping rancid, bitter beer; through narrow, egg-shaped windows split in half by the asphalt poured a milky pre-winter twilight, and in that whitish-gray, lilac-toned autumn air, sleepy janitors, stone-drunk in their grubby smocks, walked back and forth, scoring the pavement clean with their short brooms; carrying an accordion under his arm and wearing his precious round sunglasses, the blind Sanych arrived at 4:45. Ninka Kryvoruchkova was putting a creaky, made-in-China wicker chair next to the in-wall heater where pinkish blood had seeped through last year as it leaked down from the floor above, where the butchering and the selling of meat took place; Ninka Kryvoruchkova picked up a rag, and, balking, cocked her head anxiously—from upstairs the sounds of bones breaking and wet meat being slapped could be heard, followed by the cadenced drone of a conversation keeping pace with the rhythm of the carcasses' skinning and deboning; a month after the death of Nikandrych, a radiator that roared like a jet engine was dragged in—the heater of old was sealed off with clay: the brown stain remained for a long time, and the trickling of blood from above never stopped; poisoning the air with its caustic odor, it oozed lymph-like onto the red tin plating that covered the floor by the giant range; the odor would settle in right around noon, melding in with the curses the drunks and butchers yelled out; a dense vapor hung heavily, like viscid clay, absorbing the smell of the fresh blood and the tobacco smoke: as usual, Ninka Kryvoruchkova brought Sanych a shot of vodka; tossing it down in a single gulp, Sanych said “Thank you—went down smooth as a lie,” pulled the leather straps of the accordion over his shoulders, and sent his virtuoso fingers flying across the keys as he sang along, jarringly and out-of-tune, to songs like “The Danube’s Waves,” “Seven Forty,” and “The Beer-Barrel Polka.”

Sipping sour beer, the brigade half-listened to Skull’s prattle: Skull had the runs and after every few words had to dash off; his pockmarked, scarred face had a green pallor; his caved-in eye sockets made it seem like black hollows in a human skull gaped at the interlocutor; Wolf, with stifled pleasure, his lips curved in silent delight, watched as Skull’s banged-up face transformed to assume a monstrous visage and expression; he clumsily tore off chunks of dried fish, admiring his pink, girly fingernails; he chucked the scrappy pieces of pink salmon into his mouth, his pearly white teeth chewing on them unenthusiastically, and licked his colorless (though nicely shaped) lips; the brigade sat around the same table where Nikandrych, Paul the Peacock (a thug from an adjacent neighborhood), and Noodle had enjoyed wasting many an evening together, Noodle always running over to whisper something into the ears of the woman behind the counter and Nikandrych intent on listening: his old acquaintances were sharing pieces of information in hushed tones among themselves; they knew Nikandrych was waiting for the higher-ups to signal when they would start using their big axes to break and smash pig skulls; Sanych stretched out the bellows of his accordion while Nikandrych slurped thick (like lubricating oil) tea, fanned out his nostrils,

raised his chin a bit, and smiled a crooked smile, just as Horik was doing now; Horik was also recalling Nikandrych's left hand, the one with the cherry-colored scar; its color had gradually deepened to purple, and the scar itself had swelled; after a while, a festering sore had formed on that spot; it would eventually open up like the petals of a flower, yellow at first and shedding a colorless gooey fluid, in the end turning brown with green cracks. Nikandrych would dab it with a handkerchief—he had a bottomless supply of them, and, once one got saturated with puss he'd throw it to the floor; a heap of handkerchiefs lay on the floor—small ones, white ones, yellow ones, brown ones, like a collection of butterfly wings; the old thug was partial to white handkerchiefs; during those hours the butchers upstairs performed their job with exaggerated zeal, chopping through the calf and pig bones more ferociously and more determinedly; Sanych squeezed the bellows, forcing out raspy, fitful sounds; completely off beat, he screeched the Marc Bernes song "Cranes"; the threesome stood motionless; for as long as they stood around like that, the people in the basement buzzed quietly among themselves, pulling in their heads into their shoulders, their eyes scanning the tables, trying not to meet Nikandrych's immovable cold gaze; and Horik thought of that old thug's watery, beet-red (like his sore) eye, its incurable mounting infection: virulent secretions filling it up faster every day, the eye ready to pop out from under his receded simian brow; the sore on his hand had stopped shedding fluid and no longer seeped blood, instead twitching with green, compacted puss; Horik was finishing up his beer; he felt tipsy, light-headed, fired up with self-love. Piskariov pretended to be listening to Skull's prattle but was in fact full of apprehension and profound sadness; it wasn't Glycerin Mister Peps Mare's-Eye that he was concerned about, he was there to wheedle the guys into joining him in a scheme of some kind; Horik dropped his head and ran his scarred fingers, greased with fish oil, across his crown; raising his head, he said, "Let's have a drink ... then we'll think of something," although it looked like he didn't know what he was saying. Skull kept chattering about Inka, Nilka, Mesaib; with that last name, ears perked up—"Dirty Sultan"; on the other side of the windows birds heavy as lead tumbled down, and heavily they rose, flapping their wings, rolling their bodies toward the invisible horizon behind the buildings; Horik raised his head as if listening intently; his disjointed thoughts focused on Nikandrych; to hell with Nikandrych, and anyway who was he, really? a bright glimmer: Glycerin, Mesaib, Nilka; the sounds coming from the accordion, an off-pitch tango, animated those present; Sanych stomped his foot to the beat, the pointed tips of his battered "Winstons" scattering the blood-soaked sawdust; casting a sharp look around, Horik made a wry face; in his mind he was adding two plus two, but somehow his mulling things over wasn't working: nothing made sense, helter-skelter thoughts rattled in his head like peas in a pod—Sultan, Nosach, Mesaib, Nilka; he saw an image of Sio-Sio's dim-witted physiognomy on a sliced-off movie frame floating across a yellow chasm; the off-pitch chords Savych played climbed ever higher; the cacophony sounded like nails scratching

glass. People puked, ejecting cascades of an unrefined “dragon,” a drink Maria Piskur had invented: a mix of tea, homebrew, and a quarter-portion of store-bought vodka; a plump Botsman, his skin a sickly pink, followed everything with his lascivious gaze; after snorting cocaine, he scampered off for some vodka; Horik sat, huddled against a chair, picturing the groove in Nilka’s back that gently merged into the round halves of her bum, and the way she swung her buttocks as she walked on the opposite side of Vasylkivska Street in her school uniform, holding an ice cream cone and licking it strangely, all dressed up in pink bows and white lace. And at sundown he would see a glimmer of her tender fragile form in the window, hunched over a book, lying there in her pink cotton briefs, her plump elbow supporting a cheek, her ash-colored hair hanging loose; he was sure he could smell her sweat, her body, her Scheherazade perfume. But his memory was still swirling in a black abyss, rubbing against basement windows; there was nothing, his only memory was Sultan–Nilka–Mesaib–Nosach–Inka; like an animal he smelled danger but, bound in some kind of mulish fatalism, he felt completely indifferent; his heart sank, Sanych played an off-pitch, saccharine tango, the tacky lights burned through the windowpanes, and suddenly Horik yelled out in a drawn-out hoarse cry: “More vodka! Vodka! Vodka!”; the cry rose in a whirling mass, the drunks quieted down, in the air even the raggedy green tobacco smoke stood still; only the butchers upstairs kept cursing nonstop, smashing apart the frozen bones and carcasses; Horik got up—he thought he saw a man looking at him out of the filthy and moldy corner, from under the sagging hoods of cobwebs: two green eyes shone feverishly; “That’s Nosach’s work,” someone threw in; for some reason, Skull stiffened; his eyes sank ever deeper into the darkness of his soul. A fawning Botsman set out a bottle; they drank shot after shot, puffing out blue smoke; bluntly and casually Horik stretched out a hand and got up—who knows why, or to whom he had stretched out his hand; pleasant swells of intoxication enveloped him; alcohol moved the blood inside Sanych’s deadened veins; Sanych glanced at Horik through his sunglasses and waved his hand as if protecting himself from a blow; Horik grew afraid, and before long everyone noticed Horik’s complexion turning white and then blue—that handsome, pleasantly-arranged face with perfectly-chiseled features, a perfect profile. He turned his head sharply, swept the surroundings with a dark and unseeing (as if in the middle of the night) gaze; the alcohol burned his innards and bitter saliva washed his gums, emptying something from inside him; again, Horik stretched out his hand, trying to grasp something invisible; in a surprisingly quiet and calm voice he said: “To Lomonosov Street. To Lomonosov Street. Let’s see who will end up on top.” “Yes, yes, yes,” Mister Peps Mare’s-Eye instructed. “Revenge for Glycerin.” “You fucking moron, you ass—why are you protecting him!”

For the first time in his life there was no fear or trembling in Redistributor’s heart when he peered into the deep chasms of Skull’s eyes—this was probably what boosted Horik’s confidence; the sun hadn’t yet

dropped behind the strings of buildings; a biting wind drove decaying leaves along the road for the last time, rocking the grimy streetlight; pre-winter strips of color mottled the sky; below the ground lay idly under the sky; the brigade lifted their faces toward the last rays of the autumn sun; their jackets and coats rustled as they clambered on foot between rows of yellow-red buildings, their faces silently reflected in the shop windows; along the way their numbers grew but they walked on, because a taxi was too expensive; Horik took in the whole of Stalinka as if for the first time; something solid and impervious, like the walls of dwellings, hardened in his chest; in whiplashes of wind droves of listless pedestrians scurried forward like the curved stalks of weeds; overhead low-lying red clouds tore on ahead; a blazing yellow orb hung suspended in the sky, making everyone squint uncomfortably; their strides sometimes merged, then diverged; fence boards crackled as they were torn off; uncorked bottles of cheap wine passed hand to hand; like a rotten old boat, the city softly sank into the purple twilight; the spire atop the Agricultural Exhibition building pierced the evening sky before fading from view; clouds leaned over the flat plates of rooftops; the air became dense and heavy, as if Holosiiv was being sheltered within the palms of hands; the flow of people dwindled, and those who remained, the ones heading toward Lomonosov Street, quieted down: they streamed along the gray concrete walls of the campus, along the rows of shops housed in miserable hovels, their neon lights sputtering until closing; staggering through the bare apple orchard, trailing puffs of exhaled vapor, the brigade approached the red walls of the dormitories; Botsman and Redistributor were sent out first, and the latter, creeping under the windows, slithered like a snake up onto a balcony; heavily exhaling vapor, the brigade quieted; sucking “Kazbek” cigarettes, they watched as the dark and hook-nosed figure, rumpled and stooped over, disappeared, its shaky outline discernable for a final time as it moved in front of the faded red bricks; the rooks clustered in the limbs of a tree looked like wet rags; it started to drizzle, shadows curled up and disappeared, the streetlights licked the charcoal of the sky; a bang; people shuddered; sensing the presence of dumb strangers, the rooks flapped their wings, lamenting and clicking their lacquered beaks; Vovka Redistributor sent out a signal—three short whistles—and one after the other the guys in the brigade pulled themselves up over the rails of the balcony and snuck into the dormitory: Skull, also known as Mister Peps Mare’s-Eye, and Street Musician, and Moidodyr, served as leader; Vovka Redistributor’s lips twitched nervously as he cut through the telephone wire—that wire had been used to fasten the door to the office where the administrator was snoring; outside, all skin and bones, the dogs barked; Horik turned his head, listening hard, trying to identify the sounds: Botsman and Redistributor were banging quietly on a door. A square of light dislodged a bit of the darkness from the hallway; Nosach’s face poked out, and without knowing who was there, he said “Yes”; instantly Skull put his foot in the door. Nosach tried to call out to someone, but Redistributor rammed his fist into his jaw; all five men burst into the room, where two more of Nosach’s

pals, Chechens, were smoking weed. Politely the Chechens stood up and got busy chewing spearmint gum; Peps started acting bullish, which was not a good sign; reassuringly he said, “Let’s chew,” and then head-butted first one and then the other one, knocking them over. Nosach was punched and kicked down onto his knees; his hands were tied to a bed: in a measured rhythm Redistributor pummeled him in the chest, growling, “You’ve taken care of yourself nicely, but where’s our little Sultan?” “Stop groveling. Where’s Sultan? And who set Glycerin on fire?” Botsman smashed the chandelier with a mop; cigarette lighters were flicked on to dispel the darkness; a noose was fastened to a hook; Botsman struck his cigarette lighter again and again, beating Nosach in the chest and anywhere else every time it flamed up—a sniveling Nosach smeared the slob all over his face. Spitting out his teeth, he did in the end blabber: “Upstairs they’ll know … it’s his people up there, his broads, his whores, … it hurts,” Nosach wailed like a child; “What’s the room number, asshole?” “Six-hundred five.”

“The main thing is to scream, kiddo—scream. Screaming at the top of your lungs is the most important thing”—those words spoken by Nikandrych flickered in Horik’s mind; clinging to that directive, he flew headlong through the long dormitory hallway, slipping on banana peels, breathing the heavy air, bitter with musk and the commingled fumes of marijuana and classy cigarettes; the rush of the hard-hitting, dense odor of garbage, the drumbeat of voices, the indistinct chatter in a foreign language disconcerted Wolf; he froze in front of the door; he’d wanted to smash it open or to break it down, but his skin broke out in goose bumps; he stopped, stung; the brigade came together, pale with the barely-concealed terror they were feeling, that profound terror; spasms jogged their muscles, twisted their joints; a distant train rumbled through the darkening night; the door cracked and opened; using his shoulder, Piskariov leaned against the doorjamb: a bitter ball of saliva irritated the roof of his mouth; a surge of passion blazed through him, from his testicles to his heart; his skull felt like someone had lifted the top and snapped it open; straining to see ahead, he made out pinkish-white smudges bobbing up and down, an astonishing proliferation of purple smears; and Mister Peps Mare’s-Eye a/k/a Skull a/k/a Street Musician a/k/a Moidodyr watched his team leader’s face harden, watched it become the face of a man who has lost everything on earth, and Skull, choking in a fusion of chaotic, stifling laughter and ecstasy, cried out, “Ahush!” and the snow-white, pink smudges assumed the contours of faces; something popped out of the room: “Get out of here! Get o-o-out of he-r-r-re!”; a wide-eyed Negro got up and stood over something disheveled, bushy, and long-legged, something surprisingly recognizable and intimately familiar, and in the orange glow of a night light Horik saw Nilka—breasts aroused, the brown nipples hard, her face hidden in an ashen mess of hair; to the right of her, the buns of her buttocks spread, ready for penetration, the fiery, red-haired Nadka shook her voluptuous body—“Shut the door, assholes!” the purple Negro kept repeating over and over, driving the awful stench of sweat forward—“Get out of here

... out!" "OK, Skull, let him have it!" With a big windup, Mister Peps Mare's-Eye, a/k/a Skull, a/k/a Moidodyr, a/k/a Street Musician swung a hydraulic rubber hose—the Negro's body coiled and flew through the air like a hoop; he shrieked; astoundingly, his tight chrome skin turned inside out, exposing raspberry-colored flesh; spurts of blood shot out onto the sheets, across the white jalousie blinds; it splattered flowery designs over the walls, ran down the patterned dormitory glasses—"ay-ay-ay"—the deep-set eyes slashed with fine cuts filled with awareness; leaning on her slender arm, the veins a pale blue, the fingernails dotted with nail polish, Nilka lifts herself up; she rises, the velvety skin on her back unrolling ever so slowly; so ordinary, this getting up; the Negro, the one beating Nadka's bum with a wide belt, grabs a knife, but Piskariov thrashes the Negro with a blow that lands him on the bed; Skull growls and, infuriated, moves away; fury ripping his throat, he inflates his chest like a bullfrog's; hooting triumphantly, he pummels the purple Negro covered in raspberry syrup; the Negro shuddered, raking the carpet with his fingers; the rest of them rushed out to get to the hallway, slipping away from the glow of the night lights—the purple, lilac Africans darkening, becoming chocolate-hued, coffee-colored and then black; their deep, primal wailing can still be heard in the room, as well as the smack of fenceboards on hands, heads and backs; Nilka rises naked, right in front of Horik, facing him, slim-waisted, with firm thighs; Horik remembers the grimy, filthy dawns of bygone days; a shove to his shoulder brings him back to reality: in a corner, in the jumble of white and black bodies, stands a man swaying and hiding behind a veil, his face paper-white, his eyes looking like green stars; the toothless mouth on the stranger's head opens, utters something incomprehensible, "Da-a-dabu-da," and vanishes. Horik sees lips that look like a torn flower: slowly he winds a bicycle chain around bruised knuckles, across the entire palm of his hand and around the wrist, spitting out the bitter globs of saliva in his mouth and licking his lips, his heart pounding frantically in his chest; Nilka sits down on the arm of a sofa and speaks in that voice, that voice ..., as when he watched her brush her ashen hair, lying in the construction cart, walking along the other side of the street; he wants to call out but the red flashes blazing before his eyes stop him: his head, the underside of his skin, is crawling with ants; Skull is bellowing, delivering the final blows to the brilliantine-groomed pimp Rozik; Nilka casts concerned glances, as though watching a small animal; Horik rubs a chain against his chin; in the hallway Skull is dragging Inka by the hair—naked calculating bitch with a big pussy: "The whore—watch it, Klyk! The cops!"—the lights in the corridor flicker feebly, wet branches lash the windowpanes; the sun has vanished, seemingly forever; Negroes pour out of all the rooms, wailing, hurling empty bottles, running off to a safe distance, yelling "Police police police!"; bits of rounded glass looking like the backs of little animals twinkle from the floor; slick pools of blood glisten; pieces of torn clothing and chunks of stucco litter the floor; in retreat, the brigade is swinging pieces of rusted rebar, crushing collarbones, noses, arms, and legs; the tar-black throng rolls back, spilling down the steps; the Negroes hiding

on the other floors crawl back to their rooms, the clicks of door locks the only sound; suddenly Skull, Moidodyr, and Mister Peps Mare's-Eye, Street Musician are hollering in one sustained tone, "We're under siege, Klyk! We're surrounded. We're betrayed! These aren't cops. They're Sultan's people ..." —and a purple fist has already torn into Peps's face, knocking him off his feet, a dozen feet are tramping over him—"Motherfucker," "betrayal, betrayal," "the voice perfectly relaxed, unaffected; swinging the hydraulic hose, Klyk made his way to Inka—"You bitch, just getting acquainted, huh?"—grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to the exit; the smack of a fenceboard, like a pop of gunfire, scatters pieces of clay and plaster; chalk dust rises in limp, scrawny puffs; a swirl of people chokes, roiling, gurgling; the Negroes scurry off like rats, and Piskariov's people mix in with Sultan's people: "Someone has paid for our betrayal!"—a blackness whirled and grunted outside the windows; a blow, another one, and another; blood seeps over a shirt, splashing across Inka's naked back; it feels like the end; scorching heat burns nostrils, parches throats, the stench of burning impedes breathing; sleet batters the windowpanes; in the air the constant residue of musk and almonds, and the voices of the Africans: "abu-abubub-bbbuuu"; pigeons perching along the window ledges, rising in flight, exploding in bright white comets; at the end of the hallway Skull waves a kitchen knife, his body jerking around like a puppet's against a yellow square background; "betrayal betrayal betrayal"; the air outside dense and cold; empty bottles whizz out of windows; the Negroes are jabbering "abu-abubub-bbbuuu" as band after band of noisy rooks settle on the aspens, take flight, then alight, again and again; Wolf, a/k/a Klyk, a/k/a Horik gathers the guys together and, knocking down whatever they encounter, they break through to the boiler, closer to the bare apple orchard.

First to break the silence was Redistributor; snorting through his nose he threw out a word here and there, as if hurling pebbles: "What's wrong with you, Klyk. That's what betrayal is all about." They were sitting on the windy side of the stop where buses 38, 80, and 84 arrived and departed; the light in the clattering lampshade drifted languidly in the breeze. The jittery edges of their shadows went from broken to smooth and then vanished; from the direction of Syrets the city blazed in an intense red glow; Mister Peps Mare's-Eye cursed; the quiet cough of a car engine was heard in one of the deep courtyards; Peps cursed again as he chased away a pregnant bitch with a drooping belly; her teats rubbed against the pavement as she wound around the three pairs of shoes. Peps struck her hard under the belly: the bitch let out a drawn-out, tedious yowl and trotted away, dragging her behind under an arch into the dark; close by a car appeared; a white shaft of light skidded across walls, windowpanes, fences; a bright, bursting bloom of fire ripped through the humid air with a bang: Redistributor roared out "oooh-oooh-oooh," shouting in a strangely inhuman voice, and Klyk saw him fly through the air, pulling up his knees and then straightening out, floating in the air for a second and then falling lifeless to the ground; his stiff arms, jerking

involuntarily, clanked against a metal rail—and then he was still; Horik and Skull lowered their eyes, and when their gaze met the ground, Vovka Redistributor, son of pharmacist Moses Abramovych Buscholz, seventeen years old, already lay in a puddle, brightly illuminated, a cold rain falling straight into his open mouth; the tiles on the single-story shop reflected the red lights; the car, having traversed lawns and sidewalks, was disappearing from view at the end of Vasylkivska Street. Skull breathed hard: “What was that Klyk? What? What? Him and us, we ...”; the bitch trotted up to slurp from the puddle in which lay Vovka Buscholz, who would forever remain Vovka Redistributor; Piskariov leaned over and picked her up by the scruff of her neck—she must have been hungry, since she was lapping up the bloody water; “They killed him ... Got him right in the head ... Can’t see his eyes ...” Skull spat out; the bitch’s back shuddered in fine ripples; she nipped Horik’s hand lightly and dragged her body over to the fence, her front paws patterning; Skull, a/k/a Mister Peps Mare’s Eye, suddenly found his voice: “I know, she’s homeless.” Licking where the bitch had bit him, through the hair flopping over his eyes, Horik looked toward Stalinka rising out of a pink mist.

And then he ran: from the opposite end of the city came a red glow, imperceptibly turning brown. He ran surprisingly fast, faster than usual, but to him it felt like he was caught stock still, standing upright in the rubbery half-light: the buildings, the cafes, the movie theaters, all of them were stuck together in the darkness. But downtown the city looked as if it had been set on fire from below ... He ran beneath the quadrangular blocks of windows, fluid and nimble and pushing his bare chest into the wind, choking on his own words, incomprehensible cries rising from his chest—fragments of phrases, the beginnings and endings of words; the rain continued; Horik felt a burbling in his bowels: the wind quieted down, playing halfheartedly with the roof tiles. Inside he was burning; the foaming and hissing of his lips muffled the noise in his bowels. His mind was frazzled. He squatted by the wall of a department store at the start of Chervonoarmiiska Street, not far from a tiny, cozy second-hand bookstore; a fighter aircraft roared overhead, leaving behind a velvety trail. Here a dense, acidic, and oily haze of coffee hung in the air almost the whole night. Cold clumps of meaningless human chatter dropped down on him. Swaying, he took a breath; his shaky, detached gaze wobbled across the low-lying sky corroded with red. He spat underfoot; the twilight bled faintly, stubbornly creeping up the buildings; rising, it blended with the noise overhead; his teeth hurt intolerably; looking for a place to pee, he felt out the space around him with his feet; something like a thought sped through his mind; its fine tentacles pried into his veins and scratched around with invisible wire twines: he wasn’t thinking of running away; he was just ambling on, in complete darkness, trying to convince himself: What the hell do I need Glycerin for, or Vovka Redistributor—has-beens with no sense. And suddenly he felt a bolt of electricity, as if a tiny door to the world had cracked open: Mister Peps Mare’s-Eye, who, squirming and wriggling, was trying so hard to replace Glycerin in the brigade: he had made that clear right

in front of Glycerin, there in the cellar he had said that Nilka was a bitch, but said it so cleverly that Horik got it only now. His thinking quickened, something pleasurable raced through him from the top of his head to his groin; the sky took on an orange tint then faded in the frost; the wind rustled, scattering the last wet leaves stuck to the windows of the kiosks where tram tickets were sold; gusts ripped the tattered posters; the walls of the buildings drew closer; the quiet rumble of train cars squealed ever more persistently on the rails, as if tearing flesh, and shooting streams of blue sparks that tore apart the snug silence. Piskariov caught sight of a small figure in a window, someone's wife, a graceful, fragile figure, a tremulous spot of mercury; the train cars were closer now, grinding the air, and Horik burst out in demented laughter: to die, like Nikandrych, of syphilis, to die every morning puking out your silicate-infused lungs, destroyed by the People's Rubber Factory; clumps of steam rose with every turn of the wheels, settling in dirty red strips over the windows and ribbed, crooked walls of the hotel; frightened birds fell off the rooftops like stones; puffing hard, the train cars hammered on, roiling the air; he wanted that woman on the other side of the pink window—he was tantalized, he desired her, he was flustered and confused; the drumming of the wheels stimulated his desire—"the kid has started to think"—pornographic black-and-white images glimmered like little wings in his memory: long-legged beauties—in that memory known as childhood—and Wolf mashed his teeth, crying out into the black mass of buildings: "Autumn! Autumn! Autumn!" and suddenly broke off; he ran—from Nikandrych, from Redistributor, from Glycerin, past the windows shuttered with blinds behind which green parrots jabbered and clever people slept, chockfull of wine, beer, and fine Ceylon tea, stuffed, like money bags, with good will; but all of it mere bubbling, mere froth, because: he was Wolf Piskariov.

Still, his slobbering sorrow was stifling; behind him a scurry of human shadows; even without turning his head he could see them: some Negroes and young women in brand new Volvos; a few of them gesturing with two fingers to hail a taxi....

Wrapped in a stiff leather jacket he arrived at hairy-lipped Marfa's well past midnight. Things seemed to have cleared up in his head; the dog, seeing Horik, curled up its tail; with dimmed eyes it sauntered about lazily on its chain. Horik knocked on the windowpane with stiff fingers, once, twice, three times and then banged on it with his fist. Marfa appeared and confronted Horik right at the door: "What do you want? There's no vodka—no vodka." The square of light behind her delineated her twisted form and her arms, bare to the elbow; it pained Horik to look at the light: "Let me in, old woman, I'm not looking for vodka ..." Marfa really did not want any visitors. "Let me in—it's me, I'm Maria Piskur's son ..." "Oh, my goodness, Horik—come on in, they've been searching and searching for you ....," said the old woman, and unlocked the door from the inside; using his whole body Horik pulled himself through the doorway toward where voices, with the smell of fermented brandy mush drifted out; he glanced over his shoulder, to the left, across the

whorls of black space that would be oozing and blistering, until morning, as Marfa obligingly pulled up a chair for Horik. “Here, a stool for you ... We were falling off our feet, we were so tired, looking for you, because your brother Sio-Sio strangled Grandma and set the place on fire—thank goodness the firemen came ...” “Tell me, tell me my fortune ...” “I’ll reveal such scenarios to you, such scenes ...”; his clouded gaze met her leaden eyes; with a sense of urgency she brought over a glass—“Here, snap out of it”; “I want a girl, the one called Sveta, I’ll pay you later”; with the edge of her hand hairy-lipped Marfa brushed a brown mixture off her elbows—“Why are you standing there, let’s have a drink then. Just sit here a minute.... Your mother ...” “Don’t nag me, old woman, I’ll pay later!” “Wait here a minute!” ‘Those aren’t our voices, must be banabaks, yeah, fucking banabaks, for sure’ thought Horik; but hairy-lipped Marfa was already back, “Let’s go, she’s been free for a while already—you’re in luck.” The two of them entered a darkened room. The switch snapped and the glow of a nightlight, like a lettuce-green string of beads, flowed out of a corner from under a picture of a seascape; something inside Horik tensed up, as if recalling a memory; he even stepped up to the window, but that familiar dread of dark windows stopped him and he went over to the bed, where in a plain knitted bathrobe, pink and trimmed with white flowers along the edges, all white and sweet, fragrant with family and home, sat Sveta, the same Sveta the gang liked to watch as she walked along on the other side of the street; she put her arms around him as if he were family and her warm meaty lips covered his mouth; he didn’t realize when it happened, but when they woke up the next morning they saw the first snow to have fallen and writhing black serpents that were crawling over it, all the way to the rim of a ravine: countless serpents, black and slimy, swiftly slithering off the hedges, swishing across the snow, and vanishing without a trace; Svetka took Horik’s hand and put it over her mouth; for some reason it filled him with rage; he began to slap her across her full, warm lips; someone tapped him on the shoulder; Svetka squealed, “Ooh, my Sultan ...” Hairy-lipped Marfa immediately put away the spoons and razors; Sultan sat down and swung one leg over the other, while behind him a toadying Botsman, holding something apparently heavy, couldn’t keep still; baring his teeth, Sultan took off a glove: “Do it”; and out rolled Mr. Peps Mare’s Eye’s head, like a head of cabbage, and then... Sultan’s lips moved: “Listen, we have to talk, you and me ...,” and they walked out onto the white snow; it blew in from the east; a cowering Svetka stayed behind on the cot, whimpering and rubbing off the blood on her lip while trying to make out what the men were saying; but as if to spite her, Marfa turned on the tape player and a spirited march filled the air: “And off I go, marching through the streets of Moscow.” It snowed and snowed.

It was sometime around the beginning of spring that Jonah thought he saw a white, sun-warmed wall, when the snow, black and tired, lay in the sun like the carcass of a large dead bird, spreading a mild odor of humus; he felt

an urge to inspect the premises, to walk through the house and yard, when it suddenly occurred to him that a fog had rolled in—a white mixture seemingly diluted with milk; the fog tightened its grip; Jonah stirred—his sense of weightlessness surprised him; overhead a rustle like a pigeon's wings hinted at something ineffable and gentle, as if someone were singing a soothing, sad song; Jonah still managed to see mute faces and a thatched roof; the train station hissed in the slush, hundreds of heels clicking; above, warmed by the pale sunlight, the dome glowed; again Jonah was hallucinating: something dog-like was grabbing him from behind and casually squeezing his whole back in its teeth; men and women appeared puppet-like in the steamy air, sitting themselves down, making themselves comfortable, chewing on sandwiches brought from home, as if they were fated to endure an eternity here at the train station; how Jonah's presence in this boiling cauldron of humanity would end no one could predict; Jonah thought to himself, "Even the rain is probably soundless, certainly the drops falling on the roof, on this inverted Roof, are soundless, as they thump and recede, the rains drumming out something. Thumping and receding." Then he relented and lost track—of fragments of events, of little islands of memory, little boomerangs, all united and glued together yet forever divided; at break of day, he was unbearably thirsty; ever more people were walking through—why were they there, where were they headed, spinning their webs of futility—from love to hate, or the other way around? Perhaps all traces of that have gone cold, and there he was, returning from somewhere, worn out with hunger and lice, his joints cramped; it was near Tambov that Jonah first glimpsed himself in a mirror, "an island, my green island"; the train station absorbed half the available light; the gloom drew people in, swept them up and sucked them in, men and women jerking their small paws around as if they were wound-up mechanical toys: fat-assed, voluptuous wenches sat on bollards where trinkets of all kinds were displayed on glass; people on benches, information boards, sluggish cops at a table—"Ya know, Petia, I gave it to that bitch, right up her tail, yesterday"—Jonah moved his mouth and turned his head as if he hadn't heard, but then maybe it hadn't reached him; he heard nothing—only when a bell tolled, first one with a resounding peal, then another soft and delicate, and then other bells filled the air, and still others ripped apart the silky midday lethargy dotted with black flies buzzing lazily and stitched together with bunches of dirty pigeons. Cautiously, Jonah took it all in: the city, the city, the city ... "He who has not seen the light has not been in the dark," "He who has lived in the dark has seen the light"; he had no urges, as if he'd been picked clean inside; it's good that way, he felt soft and compact, sort of like the small rubber ball a little girl was bouncing around: bounce, bounce, bounce ...; and that man over there and this man right here, and that man there. A stranger was watching. People who have gone through a lot watch like that. And those who have experienced power and a woman's love. Who have tasted hatred and murder. And love. Passionate love that is scorching hot, like the sun in August. Or a love like the salt in water when one is thirsty on a hot day. Those eyes are watching as

if ready to pour it out, get rid of it, no matter what the price. Jonah took a deep breath. Slowly, considering his every step, Horik walked along the side of the station that glowed red; Jonah's gray half-shut eyes were glued to the man with the pierced pupils; Jonah didn't know why he couldn't stop looking, he just couldn't...; before this Jonah had lived in a place in the Podil owned by a man with sun-burned fingernails and a shock of completely white and silky hair; paintings cluttered his studio; strangers dropped by every day—all kinds, big shots and smaller fry—who completely ignored both the artist and Jonah; they yelled out their enthusiasm while women fluttered about, lapping up champagne: "Bastards," the man whose name Jonah had forgotten would murmur—he'd get out only to come back just before dark, withered, angry, and always hungry—"Got anything to eat?" Jonah lay on the sofa, staring at the ceiling and listening to the sharp, drawn-out squeal pinging across the windowpanes, echoing in the courtyards, breaking up the silence as an invisible streetcar crawled through the darkness "around midnight," while the man on the other side of the thin partition, stripped of his former fears, reflected on the past, expecting nothing good of the future; only the nerve spanning Jonah's heart throbbed on that clammy night, beating out random phrases: "These are the streets I wandered, asking myself who can say 'no' to death—certainly only you alone can, for choosing between good and evil is our destiny." The Podil was awash in filth: pretty blond prostitutes, full of romantic fire, paraded along sidewalks caked with spittle, the wrinkles around their mouths obscured by the soft shadows; they hadn't been broken yet, they still had their youth; and the man on the other side of the partition sat opposite the window, combing his hair, full of determination to start a new life this very morning—"How can you live like this, Jonah?"—only to return every evening, steeped in the stench of the passageway, his drunk eyes darting around the studio as he recounted his day; a dark haze advanced, the dogs' whining sounding ever closer; the rooks flew off blocking the moon, and a voice said, "You have seen in order not to see"—a man with eyes nearly bursting with madness was sharing something about love with Jonah: a story about a yellow train station. The Minsk Station: under silver shafts of light he saw a girl running, straw flowers in hand, hair the color of crisp apple wine—he told and retold the story incessantly, from way back when they had first met on one of the streets of Makhachkala, heads shaven, tattooed numbers on their arms or backs: it was raining sheets, he said, at first everything was awash in rain, leaving uniform grayness all around, the rain turning into silver streams; "Oh what a girl she was"—he told the story more and more frequently, each time with fresh details, leaving no room for misgivings; the girl had died, she was hit by a car; but she had clearly existed, Jonah thought of her every day and even envied the man—"The thing is, Jonah, she wasn't running to me"; thus Jonah passed his days, at times moseying around the streets, looking upward, listening to the music breaking and tumbling out of the windows of the conservatory on Karl Marx Street; there were times when he'd sit along the walls of the Lavra Monastery, blowing into a simple flute,

his eyes hidden behind his mop of long curly hair; he would play without even taking off his cap. “There’s another young bum that doesn’t wanna work ...”; the light moved to the other side of the train station, so that now the man known as Horik Piskariov, the man with a scar straight across his face, walked in shadow, and even in the pervasive stench of the station Jonah could detect the scent of chromium on the man’s leather jacket, “his black steed with the shabby mane charging at the white one”; it seemed that Jonah had recuperated at the forester’s hut for only a few days; he recovered his senses slowly, as if someone had disposed of his innards: it was a small room, always dark, the walls hung with threadbare carpets; time and again someone’s big hunched back blocked the window, making everything look blue and plunging Jonah into that blueness; he’d drift off, dreaming that he was flying off somewhere through endless white space; the suddenly sunken sky drew Jonah out of the trance as it crushed every sound, even the quiet sounds; “A stand of linden trees, everything springing upward, where this was”—a waft of dense vapor, of steaming fresh milk; people milled about, looking like black tree trunks in a flood of velvet fog; “Has he regained his strength?” with a light hiss in the throat. “I think so ... But what I should do now, I don’t know ...,” said another weary voice, a voice trying to sound kind.

Jonah was on guard; he tried to lift his arms, but a grating pain was gripping his body twisting his muscles; people walked by, and Jonah felt good as he listened to their voices; he felt neither panic nor alarm; everything was fluid, pulling him along into whiteness: does it remind you of something? Then, a woman’s voice, a warm voice, a voice that touches the heart directly; he raised his hands, hands stripped to the flesh, blue-red hands. “What else you want? Halka!!! Halka! What? Let’s wait for Nurim, and then we’ll talk ... It’s so quiet there! No one will pay more ‘n three hundred for that piece-a dead meat, and this summer we gotta set Halka up in the city, for some kind-a education, or she’ll start hanging around here with the darkies”—the voice rose. “Quiet down, or she’ll hear you. Halka! Halka! Go see what’s up with that lost soul ...” The sweet, repulsive smell of steamed milk, an uncovered bosom, pink breasts tumbling out, hanging over Jonah—slowly, carelessly, a hand shoves them back; soft breasts that have tried everything there is to try, with large chocolate nipples; the blot that was a face started to hop around: “He’s breathing ... looks like he’s breathing ...” “If he could be well enough by next month...”—the voice quieted, slowly dropping in tone. “Nurim will be here tomorrow ... What d’ya tell ‘im ...”—this in a high-pitched feminine voice. “Why should I tell him anything? I might change my mind. It’s not as if we’re short of work. So, he’s feeble, so what? He’s tough ...”—something smelled of white, white and then red, and then as if he’d been struck by hail; Jonah could barely turn his head—a window and through it woods and a little farther on a hillock, a pine tree brushed with light, bluish snow; and, still farther, something that looked like a ravine, and more falling snow; a voice, a woman’s voice: “Old man! Old man! Have you gone completely deaf, or what? Here’s what I have to say and think—what the hell does Nurim need

him for? It's winter, there aren't any jobs in the clay pit. The sooner we get him up on his feet—we'd keep him busy." "What are you plotting? Who's master in my house? Yeah, yeah ... if you can bring him back to his feet, then okay. The whole world can hear you, you old bitch. I'm done, you've singed me for the last time..."—the despairing voice droned on. "Halka, put a dressing on his hands ... no, not on the old man's, on the one who wandered in ..." "I don't wanna. You go do it." "But if it's to wiggle wiggling your ass on the streets, you're first in line!" "Lay off, you old biddy!"—the sun oozed a red glow, at last a ray of light reached his eyes too: a door cracked open and through it he saw long white legs covered in goose bumps, shivering white legs; then the whole body of a girl in tight pink panties, her auburn hair falling to her shoulders—a strong body; it grew dark; the door creaked and opened wider—a shadow obstructed his view; "Come on, already, hurry up before Mother comes back"—it was snowing again: a voice weary, anguished, sweet; it kept snowing and snowing: snow piled up in drifts, sketching indistinct, mysterious outlines in the twilight—"I might as well sink in this immensity, where the warmth of your bosom fades away, where so many strange words have been spoken, yet too few words as well, too few familiar people; and too few bird cries—disgusting, all of it, like the waste from maternity wards—hope—vomitus, froth on the sea of humanity—he who saw the light lives in darkness. Gloom. And the nightingale, that bird, laughs heartily. And you, you fly into the fire like a lark, carried by the wind, swept up in the fumes, a gray clump spiraling through the overturned hell in the sky"; he discerns a rustle with the snow, a sob—where had he heard it? A flock of gulls flew before his eyes, their squawks falling to the lowest depths in the bluffs amid the low mountains, the tight swarm unraveling in the cliffs: then orchards burst into view, crunchy with the greenery of May; puffs of cherry blossom pollen, droplets of dew—"My little tenderness, now that I've become aware of your presence in me, why do you scatter?"; indistinct graceful shadows walked by, the stench of deathly heat in the air, the heart's unquenched thirsting, the sensation of vertigo: a distant shore, a magnificent luminous shore—at arm's length it was—the old, broad acacia tree, a smaller one behind it, a fetid swamp sunk between eroded banks, a stretch of wheat, flattened by the wind, baked in the sun, a figure fixed at the horizon, dark thunder clouds approaching; and he runs, the brittle nettles sting his feet, he skips over the stalks of weeds, bloodying his feet on the uneven ground; the white figure dissolves, looks like just a small disheveled cloud, but he's not heading toward it, his eyes are glued elsewhere; "Mama," he says—but it is something else, veiled in the light of a distant sun, a blue sky; it is only here and now in the semi-darkness that Jonah begins to realize; it spreads a chill, captivates him ever more, this innermost desire; the opening in the door turns rosy. "Come, quick, hurry..." the girl is saying as she lures someone in; a dark shadow dims the pink glow; "Leave it open, or Mother ..." the girl's voice goes on, playful, gravelly, the words coming out of her mouth in a single breath, eagerly, disgustingly; Jonah sees a plump, freckled hand

pulling down the panties, the hunched shadow takes fitful breaths, drawing in saliva with the air, swallowing greedily, saying nothing, constantly obscuring, obscuring the white patch of flesh, the roused loin. “Come on, do it!...” “Just like that?”—the snow falling in wide swaths, the bright flakes sticking to the window, erasing the black crossbar of the window frame; Jonah sees her entire body, standing erect, right across from him, the knotty hand edges in between her legs, undoing her with twisted fingers—“who was it then walking along quiet streets, shaking out her long, long hair, the fences and the clusters of flowers dappled with the fluid shadows of the linden trees, the clumps of flowers; who was it that spoke, who was it that loved you, Jonah”; with hooked hands he picks her up and pulls her down on top of himself; her long fingers embrace his neck, his short neck; a shameless look, a turbid look; the anchored feet push away from the angled door, springing this way and that way, head thrown back, lifted forward, well-defined in the red glow of evening; out of the half-open lips come words, as if addressed to Jonah, the eyes translucent, the eyes of a dragon—“Ah-h-h, good. Faster ... e-e-e-e, faster ...” “I ca-n-n’t ...” “Go-o-o-od”—surges of warmth inundated Jonah: a glimmer of white legs, a face leans over the shoulder of the invisible man; tightening the rings of arms and legs around the man, she moans a long moan, falls away and topples onto the bed; a heavy, sweet perfume of cornflowers, and bitter scent of almonds engulfed Jonah; a squeal, and another bitter smell—the stench of burning tires, the smell of leather army jackets; the military contractor Larysa Makhninenko had her established place on the sweaty mattress, an exclusive mattress, restricted to officers’ use—a striped, civilian mattress; the war had just started; Larysa, a radio operator who later worked in the mess hall, was first seduced by Azik, an officer from the special forces battalion, a dark-haired lieutenant, a Chechen draftee, who brought her marijuana every time; they fucked by the tent, and threw bottles—Azik copulated wildly, almost raping her. Eventually he disappeared, they said he was killed somewhere near the Panjshir valley—the mujahideen skinned him because Azik had wiped out a whole village of theirs, which was almost unheard of back then; an unkempt Larysa kept returning to the place where they had made love; she would sit there, crying, her infected eyes weeping yellow pus. The winter was cold that year, the sharp winds blowing sand; after bringing in wood for the stove, the soldiers would throw Larysa on that mattress...

From then on, waking in the morning, Jonah always listened to the creaking floor—an elusive rattle of the floorboards—as if something was sneaking up on him; overhead he saw a pale, vaguely transparent spot; he smelled a wearily familiar scent, something he had recently come across but hadn’t tried; smelling it, he found himself involuntarily immersed in decay and in joy—a luminous joy, wrought out of poison, and misery clawed at him, scraping underfoot, because he knew the source of that poison; someone’s hands touched him; soft little pillows slid across his chest; the stink of bad breath clung to his face; the scent of freshly laundered sheets

tickled his nostrils; the palms comforted him, and then they were gone. Daily and gradually, his fatigue diminished and in its place a corrosive restlessness set in; a sense of horror hardened in his chest: outdoors old Nykodym, Halyna's father, was cursing and thrashing a horse with the reins—all those years that had trickled by like sand between his fingers, the years saturated with a dismal madness and rampant, sickening ignorance; all those anguished, wrecked years had congealed inside; but the girl would come in to rub Jonah's body with a foul-smelling lotion; he'd wait and wait for her, impulsively counting the hours; images of blistering-hot gravel appeared to Jonah at times, sometime around St. Elijah's Day—green waves scattering sparkling droplets, the gromwell absorbing the sunlight, the hypericum growing firm, the birds piercing holes in the massive clouds pregnant with rain, the waves hurtling forward one on top of the other and then pausing; the gulls skirting the sun then imperceptibly dropping to the ground; inside, someone is lying between the pale blue walls, wrapped up in the folds of a bedsheet; outside, the chill of autumn was nibbling away at the shore—someone is leaning over him, but Jonah cannot remember—no matter how he tries; he just wanted to retrieve the memory of a woman: surrounded by the sea, with white flowers, and yellow flowers, standing tall, on a slope, a steep slope, from where the sand on the beach looked colorless, and birds were silently dropping down into the depths of the cliffs—and in the midst of the twisted brush, her overly elongated neck, entwined with snakes of yellow, slightly wilted lilies; Jonah searched his memory but the woman was lost—a cracked windowsill, a carafe on a table, the chatter of orange-gray birds beyond the window, the rain pelting the poplars at night; he almost remembers a hand but immediately catches himself, because the hand is all that crystalizes; darkness brims over like ink, it's raining hailstones over the rooftops, the wind picks up, the sea roars, tossing waves that eat away layer after layer of cooled pebbles, dead seaweed, and dead fish; in the twilight, in the blue twilight, he hears a loud noise and, surprisingly, this he remembers vividly: gentle ripples flirting with reflected heaps of beet-colored clouds, a white hand, the taste of something sweet in his mouth, the juice of crushed grapes; the black sun has plunged downward, and the sparrows, too; shadow enfolds the hands; the sparrows plunge downward, plunging with the sun; a storm approaches: a wild whistling from the east, tearing the air to pieces, beating a rhythm of ta-ta-ta-bam-bam-bam-ta-ta-m-m, like the thumping of train wagons, gnawing the flesh with cold, sucking the body (that miserable, tired body), into some kind of quagmire. The sun going down. The black sun. Jonah was coming round—the ugly, murky day was drying out, lapsing into bands of black and white; "So that's what it is," Jonah said to himself, the melting snow on the other side of the window frame peeling off like old skin, like blisters. Jonah felt himself somewhere else, his mouth the only thing moving: sweetened milk dribbled in; he sensed the dense stink of manure from the girl's clothes, she wore a flowery blouse and short boots: "He's coming to ... our poor fellow is coming round. Look at his sad face ..." "Put the ointment on his hands, smear

it on his hands ... we don't need someone with no hands..." Nykodym approached, a cigarette butt stuck to his bottom lip, his square, pallid face streaked with fine purple veins. Sitting down on a stool, stretching out his legs, his feet stuck in a pair of felt booties, he watched as Halka applied the ointment to Jonah's battered hands; from behind he crawled in under her skirt and pinched her, painfully: "Let's have some of this..." his filmy eyes floating like two plates; "Get lost ... can't you see I'm busy." "Busy-busy-busy," Nykydom muttered under his nose. The sun was setting; faces reddened. Halka pushed the hem of her skirt in around the waistband and leaned her hands against the edge of the bed—a solid bed, with curved legs, the color of burnished cherry—and shamelessly, breathing hard, the old man went at it—"Look at this, look at this"—huffing and grunting behind her; the bed barely squeaking; nervously the old man kept looking at the door. Halka looked out the window with vacant eyes, her meaty lips in a frown; the old geezer said something or other, his lame eye twitched, sweat rolled down his broad chest—"Are you all done?" Halka called out behind her. "No, wa-a-a-it." "Geez you're disgusting ... I'm sick of you ... that's it..." "M-m-m ... khr-r-r swee ..." "I'll tell Nurim, just you wait..." The wind tore the tiles off the roof; the weeds curved downward; Jonah caught sight of a gray mangy bitch, her engorged teats swaying, puppies playing with a tattered doll; the old man exhaled with a whistle, squealed "Done ...," and sat down on the stool, his pants still around his feet; Jonah felt drowsy: "Dreams, unfathomable and white, sought out in the beyond, dreams as memories, to spite ... and two crosses ... Why is your chest bare—and stop swinging your feet, you're rocking the devils in hell." "Rain. Grandma, rain—where does it come from, the rain?" "Tears from Heaven—God's tears." "You mean God can cry, Granny?" "Of course, my dear child, of course ... crying for us is all He does ..."; tatters of twilight reached across the train station, freight loaders in bespattered aprons hauled frozen calf carcasses, the Gypsy kids winding their way around them; from outdoors a deafening, dense whistle, as if tamped with wool, surged in, trailing Horik Piskariov; the whistle sounded again, and Horik stopped; his gaze met Jonah's; Jonah moved a shoulder, as if preparing to receive a blow, and raised his head up high: "His black steed charges toward the white one"; and again Jonah ducked into the little gray lagoon of the surreal—"Halka! Halka! What's with you? 'r you deaf, or what... may you ..." "What's wrong?" "Go, your father's calling you"—the sun rolled darkly and Jonah strained to breathe as he rubbed off oily sweat with his one good finger; Halka was sitting on the edge of the bed, the worn sheet tucked under her, breathing like a frisky colt; the bedsprings creaked, the air smelled of wilted herbs; out beyond the ravine lay patches of steppe, in which a lonely pine tree had broken through to reach for the sky, and the days gaped like black holes; a throbbing, washed-out sun rose, and the mind froze, drowning in the voiceless gray space—"I don't know why but it hurts, Daddy, and I can't remember you like you should be remembered, as if some evil person has come and one by one pulled out threads like vultures flying flying flying

look here a constant swell in the silver streams could it be your gift but I just can't recall something gleams and gets lost"; on the second to last day of autumn all the snow melted, and Jonah regained his strength; the wind blew in from the east, chasing the tumbleweed into the hollows; Nurim appeared; Jonah recognized him by his warbling, deep voice; Jonah was sitting in a chair across from the barn while old Nykodym hustled about, raking out slabs of frozen manure with a pitchfork: "O-o-oh ... the esteemed Nurim has arrived, we have someone special here ..." Halka blushed and stayed out of sight, her eyes scurrying all around; Jonah felt disgusted with her; the old man rushed about setting things on the table; the housewife kindled a fire in the stove using cornstalks—"Nurim likes the warmth of the stove"; the she-dog bared her teeth—"Stoppit, Laika, Nurim's fine"; Nykodym rushed here and there, repeatedly glancing at the door, then stealthily put a rifle under the mattress along the wall; flustered, Halka was all a-glow, radiant, dressed in tight jeans that clung to her backside and a blouse made of Turkish wool; her lips hung open like a child's, her still innocent eyes, made up with blue eyeliner, were misty as she gazed at Nurim—a short man, barely reaching Jonah's shoulder. Nurim took off his fur coat and dropped it to the floor, making himself comfortable on the bench next to the stove; he took out a nearly full but opened pack of Stolichnie cigarettes, lit up and puffed, didn't say a word and offered them to Jonah; his calf-eyes staring out the window, he remarked in bad Russian: "Yah, yah, this year coming was be a cold one.." "Not *was* but *will be*," snapped Nykodym, correcting him; he can't keep still, his black fingers fumbling over the white tablecloth, while his wife quietly hides Halka behind the door. Nurim narrows his naturally narrow eyes and finally poses the question that Nykodym has been expecting: "How much ya want for 'im?" He spits on the floor and goes on: "If that is wanted man, I won't give even ruble for 'im. You know damn well the times we lived in ..." "He's not tainted, no way. You gotta understand, Nurim, I'm an honest man. Not some slant-eyed Kazakh." "How can you prove it?" "How, how? Listen, if you don't want him, I'll find others who will." "There are no others. Alright ... let's have a snack after all that traveling ..." Unexpectedly a beam of light falls across Nurim's raised face, a face that looks as if it had been glued together out of two separate parts—two flat, colorless halves—the mutt of a pooch; Nykodym tried to get a conversation going: "Is it true, my dear Nurim, that for you eating pork fat is forbidden?" "Allah can't see what I do here ..." Jonah could hear them chomping already, pouring the vodka; light filtered in through all the holes; Nurim drank little, mostly he ate, his fingers dripping with fat. Nurim felt the muscles on Jonah's shoulders—"dzhigit"—outside the weeds bowed in the wind, and Jonah suddenly felt afraid. The wind howled under the roof; then a voice: "Let him stay with us till spring—he's half-dead." "Don't you worry, old woman—we don't have far to go, we'll make it." Jonah stretched deliciously and recalled that that was how kids stretched when they find an answer to a question, they couldn't find an answer to for several days—they grow calm, now that they have the answer. It hadn't

occurred to Jonah—or it just hadn’t sunk in—that this conversation had finally ended the crushing state of uncertainty he’d been in; of course, he thought to himself: “A person adapts quickly to whatever he’s allowed.”

Several days later, as Nykodym was busy skewering the frozen manure patties with a pitchfork, the red and green veins puffing up on his neck, and Jonah was sitting on the stool by the wall of the mud barn, specks of people came tremblingly into view in the far distance beyond the gray patches of shrubs. “It’s Nurim!” Halka cried out. “I won’t let that bastard have him.” In the blinding sun Jonah couldn’t see anything, except for the flicker of Halka’s plump freckled arms; a moment later the dogs began to growl, a pant leg ripped, a shot rang out, and one of the dogs edged away along the fence on three legs, pawing the ground. A clamoring rooster tore out of the barn and pitched forward, wobbling up and down, wildly flapping its dazzling wings, its feathers falling warmly across Jonah’s cheeks. Then the sun vanished. Nurim’s face, contorted and blue, floated before Jonah; something seemed to pour into his head; a sense of unease ruptured and settled in the back of his neck, a dull and almost paralyzing ache; the light of the sun went out, the noise stopped.

The camp was drenched in never-ending rain: to the left clumps of low overcast sky looked down, and a bit farther off lay clay pits and squat cliffs, though upon closer scrutiny it was plain that they were piled-up granite boulders polished clean by the wind and rain. Between the cliffs and the sky lay the camp, wholly exposed to the elements, and it was here that the residents, puppet-like, and soaking wet, sloshed around from building to building in the heavy fog. Jonah couldn’t remember how, when, or where he had ended up among the dozens of no-longer-young men who lived in a single barracks: they lay in rows under disgustingly foul-smelling blankets, pulling back nervously every time someone’s elbow accidentally touched them. They lay like that, freezing and famished, until they fell into deep slumber, as if switched off. “Nothing gives a man more strength than a sense of despair,” Jonah thought to himself, but how can a herd of cattle be made to realize that they have indeed lost everything they could possibly lose, and that nothing will ever come back. “Listen, guys,” he said, “What are we waiting for ... What are we waiting for ...”? “So, you start, and we’ll back you up.” They remained by the stove, trying to warm up, sitting in the heat that radiated from the hissing green wood; without giving Jonah as much as a glance, they crept back into their little corners, as cross-eyed Nurim’s half-blood assistant—his diamond-shaped head on its short neck looking as if it grew directly from his shoulders—flashed a light along the bottom of the propped-up tarp.

It was the middle of winter when Jonah was brought to the brick-making camp, or maybe it was at the beginning of winter; he wasn’t sure—a severe blow to the head had left him debilitated: “Your luck sucks, either your head gets it or someplace close—and whatever ails you, they ‘fix’”; nothing out of the ordinary happened at the camp: Khaliam, wearing pink silk motorcycle pants, ran up to him, his Adam’s apple bobbing strangely: “So-o-o, shall we

get to work? If we don't—zh-zh-zhzh," and with the side of his hand he made a slashing motion across his throat, bursting out in a rumble of laughter, at first lightheartedly but then hysterically, sounding like a vicious dog. The men stood around in a half-circle and snickered. They had all come voluntarily to this central part of Crimea, a good distance from the sea, where in deserted places amid the cliffs the Chechen Nurim's guys had built small factory-like settlements, for making bricks and mattresses and processing opium brought in from the northern part of the peninsula; in the summer, to keep the unpaid slaves occupied, they were forced to craft wattled fences out of cattails. Resistance or opposition was unthinkable—the supervisors and guards were selected from among the men themselves, and they ate whatever was available. If somebody suddenly perked up or thought of escaping, Khaliam was immediately notified, and he would beat the poor wretch within an inch of his life with a rubber hose. Even so, Jonah noticed, it was Khaliam's soft, fleshy hand, the edge of the palm of that hand, that provoked the greatest fear among the camp residents: narrowing his eyes like a cat and making a cutting noise Khaliam would pretend that he was slashing somebody's throat: "Zh-zh-zhzh." Before long, over a couple of days Jonah became fraught with horror: picking up a cup he had made out of a can of fruit, he sat down by the stove where Lotia the stove-minder always napped and, shoving his blue, abscessed hands into his shirt, Jonah asked, "Some bread—is there any bread?"; to which Lotia gestured with that same hand-slash across his throat: "Bread, a little bread"; Jonah was paralyzed by the cold, which penetrated him from head to foot. Over and over he'd recite from memory: "... It was just a few steps to the first bus stop, and right there along the road grew a copse of linden trees—green, young trees, not yet thinned out, offering cooling shade, even in midsummer, especially at noon; and noon it always seemed surprisingly deserted there"; Lotia hopped around the stove: "Help me wake the crew, smart-ass"; and the crew willingly got up, because "Husseinovich had promised to treat with a bit of vodka"; thus it went day after day. And then, the sun sent warmth through the clouds and March was near. Khaliam beckoned him over: "Come here, smart-ass. Here. You say you know a lot.... Okay, that means you'll be telling Husseinovich stories at night ..." He was a stray too not a Chechen nor a local; he'd arrived one day in his silk sport pants; word had it that after talking something over with Nurim, he'd just stayed on: he would sit around dozing, eyes nearly shut, or he'd wander around sticking his nose into every detail. Most important, though, he hadn't come empty-handed, he brought along his "bzhi-zhi-zhi." That was kept under wraps. One day Lotia, who was a nice, calm chap, decided to run off—turned out all he wanted was to get a bottle of vodka—so Khaliam beat the hell out of him and likely would have killed him, if Lotia hadn't named several accomplices. "An execution tonight," Khaliam announced, raising the palm of his hand and winking; the crowd of huddled figures jumped up and down: "Execution! Execution! Execution!" A bonfire was lit; a wave of excitement swept across the camp; Jonah watched the preparatory work for

the execution—three posts were dug into the ground, and not far away a soft spot was arranged for Nurim Husseinovich; at dusk five young guys, their hands tied, struggling to break free, were brought out—“Sh-sh-sh, boys—it’s all over.” Arms twisted behind them, the boys were seated back-to-back. A fired-up Khaliam joyfully yelled out and shouted something; huddled over, he took a quick look between his legs, hissed like a cat, leaped in and out of the construction trailer where he lived, downed some vodka, and rushed about, zigzagging around the bonfire. When he saw Lotia and his pals being brought out, Jonah was horrorstruck. Three of them were tied to the poles, the work detail all the while stomping their feet and gulping vodka—“execution execution execution.” Jonah almost knew beforehand what would happen; what shocked him most were all those wide-open, immense, almost child-like eyes. Khaliam yelled out a shriek: the granite boulders sent back an echo, and under the cold, low sky the spectators’ heads, looking like smudges of grease, bobbed up and down. All of a sudden, hearing a subdued “bzh-zhi-zhi,” they saw that Khaliam was holding a Druzhba chainsaw: again and again he started it, shut it off, and turned it on again, engaged the chainsaw, waved it over his head, crouched down, and shoving his mug between his legs, stuck out his tongue.

“Tragedy precedes catastrophe ...,” thought Jonah; and then, forcing himself to look away, he saw a puff of feather grass floating through the air, white, unsullied summer feather grass, its scent of maple syrup tantalizing the senses; a spray of blood and a head along with the end of a pole fell into a puddle. The next two victims screamed, as if scorched by fire, only to turn silent as stone; only the thin blue lines of their lips were moving; “bzhi-zhi-zhi-i” buzzed the chain-saw, and the spectators took another gulp of vodka as they discussed the event—obviously this wasn’t the first time they were witnessing something like this; they chatted about which way the other heads would fall and in what direction they would roll....

Jonah spat and stealthily, making sure no one would notice, snuck a look at the group of young guys; he thought he recognized one of them, though it might be that it just seemed that he did—the guys were so brutally beaten black and blue, and their ribs stuck out so abnormally; for a moment, the whine of the chain-saw broke off; Khaliam was dispensing advice to the last head: “God! God? God?”—he was hopping on one leg and wiping his splayed hand on his yellow silk pants. “Me! I’m the one! You hear? I’m the one taking on God’s role in the world ... and I must not forget, here in the barracks there is no God other than Allah. And for the time being I’m taking on the duties of your God”—a buzz of the saw; a head struck the puddle; new guys were dragged over to the bonfire where Nurim reclined on soft skins. The next morning, as Hlosik and Kosik, the Chechens’ assistants in charge of live goods, masturbated over the cover of *Soviet Woman*, one of the newly-arrived men, kneading his stiff body, still black and blue and bruised from all the beatings, settled in next to Jonah: “Listen, brother ...” Jonah shushed him to be quiet—that was the day it got underway: they worked prudently,

judiciously, calmly, even confidently, but that surprised no one, not even slant-eyed Khaliam, although he did run over to Nurim and spent a long time whispering something in his ear, as Jonah watched out of the corner of his eye—as if nonchalantly, as if Khaliam chanced to appear in his scope—a part of his gelatinous, silky-smooth neck ringed with wrinkles. With March about to arrive, Khaliam seemed wound up; he wandered around the camp, got drunk, and turned on the chain-saw, buzzing it over the heads of the guys laboring in the clay pit, his lips turned up in a sneer; he was anticipating something: rumor had it that some business would be conducted among the slant-eyed, some people from the Caucasus were expected, they would take the more lively ones with them, and whoever was left, as everyone knew, would be drowned in the swamps. The sky filled with darkness; the first spring rain was imminent. And against the backdrop of the dark sky, wholly unexpectedly, a figure arose, a silhouette against the ashen sky: it was Jonah. For an instant he wavered, somehow self-assuredly, and the shapes that a moment ago were mere specks bent down and retrieved the knives; something inside Jonah shifted, he felt a twang of joy: in the distance he saw swarms of mosquitoes suspended in the air, readying for the month of May—soon it would be summer, soon; knives cleaved the air, and Nurim made a dash for the trailer; Jonah ran at an angle to cut him off, for he knew that inside the trailer Nurim had weapons; they panted, running up the hillside; they dug into the gravel, displacing bits of space, losing sight of the sky—“God forbid, that’s where the weapons are”; they ran an eternity under an overcast, empty sky; they ran seeing no sun present, and when a shot rang out they turned their heads and saw no one, nothing, just gravel showering down and then collapsing in an avalanche under Nurim’s feet; snorting and wheezing blood, he crawled over to Jonah’s; Jonah, having broken a vertebra in Nurim’s spine, was already running toward the trailer—“bzh-zh-zhi-i”; the buzzing cut through the air; a gray shadow bent over something, moving its legs clad in yellow silk sport pants; all at once Jonah realized it was Khaliam: blood spattered over the walls of the trailer, a sawed-off hand lay like a snake among the stones, trying to grasp someone for the last time; breathlessly, Jonah jumps into the trailer, steeped in the heavy stench of musk, tobacco, and burnt tea; the pages of glossy porn magazines rustled; under a mattress he found two pistols, a rifle, and a Kalashnikov. In the distance—cries. The guards who had delivered the latest living cargo brought in by train and ships were still there. Draping the weapons over himself, stuffing ammunition into his pockets, Jonah clambered up the slope: two Chechens were shooting their rifles randomly. They were lousy shots but managed to bloody up some of the guys. A round from the Kalashnikov quieted things down. Gray shadows scrambled up the hill—“Hurry, hurry up! Nurim’s servant has escaped ...” Flashing knives penetrated bodies bluntly. There came the sound of flesh being ripped off bones.

For the longest time after the escape nobody saw the sky; the men followed Jonah through swamps, through marshes, through ash-heaps of

some sort—how many died, how many survived? At noon they stumbled upon a big stone cistern filled with water; a splash of red sunlight spilled across the plains; the vineyards gushed with the fresh green juice of grapes; Jonah dropped to his knees, went still, and then pulled out a small, tattered book; making the sign of the cross in the air with it in hand, he intoned: “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” The group simply repeated the prayer, and one by one set out to gather at the lake. Within an hour a raft was rigged up; singing psalms, Jonah took to the helm and aimlessly steered the unstable vessel forward; but maybe not so aimlessly, after all? How can you know what a person is thinking when that person hasn’t seen the sun for such a long time? “Thou shalt swim along desert shores, and they will not seem like desert shores, and the heart alone will rejoice.” On the third day, two more died; Jonah resisted a chorus of appeals urging him to turn off the chosen path and seek help from the authorities; pale, his lips turning white with tension and determination, he convincingly explained to them over and over, hour after hour, what would happen if they sought help. Overnight they lost one more, who was barely an adolescent; Jonah read prayers over him; afterwards, a menacing circle of men contracted around him; Jonah waved his hand: “Do as you think best!” He tossed them the weapons and let them disembark close to the nearest settlement, all white with cherry blossoms: “May God help you.” “And may he help you too, Jonah—and if we’ve done you wrong, forgive us.”

The following day, a helicopter hovered above the boundless gray water; the men who had stayed with Jonah looked up anxiously: “we told you to head for the seasonal road. Now we have to deal with cops.” The helicopters hovered in the clear sky for a good minute and then flew off, their blades clattering over a large village, apparently headed toward the sea; Jonah’s nostrils flared like those of a horse—the sea was close by. Somewhere inside his head, lights flashed on and off: he was recovering his memory, which washed clean over the ensuing days; determined to make it, they—the five of them—stubbornly rowed on, using boards cautiously and quietly and mostly at night; mornings, they lit scant campfires, over which they grilled mushrooms, bits of fish, and the occasional bird. Days became indistinguishable from one another; May was half over, but as usual they saw very little sun; three couldn’t take it anymore and left. The last man didn’t leave Jonah until the end of the month, and then, as soon as he tasted the salt of the sea on his lips, he gave a mysterious smile: “This is it, brother. It’s time. If you want, you can come with me. The contraband isn’t spectacular, but at least you’ll be able to eat. We’ll find you a partner, if ...” “Thanks.” “Well, as you wish.” The sun broke through the clusters of cottony clouds, a light wind picked up; “Sea breeze,” thought Jonah. “Trains didn’t want to carry me, so let’s try by boat”; it was in the second month of his escape that Jonah walked out onto a road, passing surprised grannies who were pulling their tethered goats, and vanished into the port. A gentle wind rustled old newspapers; the midday heat wove a diaphanous web; cranes slowly turned

their booms, scribbling aimlessly in the clear sky; the world was warm and peaceful.

“Listen, curly-head ...” Horik was rolling his tongue around his mouth. “Old Marfa’s incessant jabbering drove me nuts, so I wasn’t even aware of all the misery around me ... although—how should I put it—that wasn’t at all what I had wanted, no—not that, not that at all ...” Horik gnashed his teeth and punched his thigh with his fist; outside the windows flickered a dark gray dawn. “It didn’t even sink in that my family was all gone, that Sio-Sio was dead. It’s only recently, after all these years, that I’ve started thinking back and remembering all of them—Grandma, strangled, lying in the ashes, and Sio-Sio, wailing, crawling, all tangled up in filthy bed-sheets and curtains; but that’s not the point...That morning is still in here,” he said, and slapped the back of his neck. “Sultan leaned on me——that is, to work together; you’ve got to understand, there was no way out. No matter how you tried to weasel out of it... Sultan was forever driving me into corners and dead-ends; he’d gotten rid of all my guys, he bumped off Glycerin, Peps, Redistributor, all of them except Botsman—once a rat, always a rat; the asshole remains an asshole, the leader a leader, ... and he had bought his way in by using Nilka, you hear, by prostituting Nilka, but that’s all bull ... she’s not coming back, you can’t come back from that; so, okay, that’s not for me, but I won’t go where Nikandrych was sent, and came back, crawling, a syphilitic—fuck it, I wasn’t gonna end up there. Just so you see where I’m coming from, I had believed in all that shit, I trusted it would all turn out, and when you believe in what you’re doing, and do well at it to boot, then ...” Horik grew quiet and seemed to search his mind for something. Jonah, leaning on his elbow, thought to himself: “This is how lost pain and grief are recovered....”

After winter had passed, after the death of the last ruler, Jonah moved closer to the Lavra, to be with the monks; by sweat and prayer he earned his daily bread; in the evenings he murmured the words of the psalms to himself while following the lines in the Bible with his finger, and then, his stomach growling with warm memories of food, he fell asleep. And then one day an unexpected visitor with expressionless, utterly vacant eyes appeared before him, only a scar indicated it was Horik Piskariov: “Listen here, monk, my late grandmother recited prayers too ... and look, that didn’t save her ...” He turned his head, emitting a thick, appealing smell of vodka and laundered shirts; a sweet and somehow otherworldly fragrance wafted through the air: Jonah listened to Horik: how he raped women and girls by the dozens—waitresses right at the tables, the self-absorbed foolish daughters of professors; how together with Sultan, little by little, section by section, they came to rule over the entire neighborhood, and then a year later broadening their rule over yet another; how Nilka had never left Horik’s dreams, even as he’d get his hands on yet another stupid girl and screw her; talking on and on, he mixed in things that Jonah didn’t understand at all: “It wasn’t my success that spurred me on, but something bigger, completely ... well, how can I say it: misery can steer you in all kinds of directions, but I longed for a celebration

of the spirit.” Here Jonah had no idea what Horik was talking about, he just commiserated, nodding his head, while fragile as a sparrow Mykytka, who was preparing for monastic tonsure, remarked, “Damned criminal. Yuk”; and Jonah proceeded to describe, who knows to whom and to what end, the non-existent, lush green island that he had imagined so many times that he had gradually begun to believe in its existence; and as he finished telling the story, he saw how profoundly the story had affected his audience—they, too, believed that somewhere that island existed. Horik kept dragging on a cigarette and shaking out his bones, kept unloading his stories on Jonah, as if trying to clean out his insides: most likely he was trying to prove something to himself—at least, the non-existence of the world he was describing. He folded his hands in his lap, and Jonah noted his long, almost feminine fingers, with their pink fingernails. Jonah listened about how Horik had made contact with the big man, the boss, that is, the one they called Heraclius. He had offered his support to Horik so perfectly—this was in the days when fierce battles raged between new organizations, new alliances; when the new word “racket” became fashionable, replacing the old one, “shakedown”—truth be told, Nikandrych had reveled in using “racket” and did so frequently, smacking his lips deliciously as he did so; that very same well-fed Heraclius, in his ripped jacket, had taken Horik by the elbow and led him to a car, a long, black Mercedes that looked much like a hearse: “You and me, we need to talk...” Horik had looked at him stupidly, unable to believe that all that tiresome training he’d gone through with Sultan’s people, all that information gathering, even from Svitlana, who suffered in agony over her unbreakable longing for her pimp, would in the end bring him to the one and only Heraclius: “You want Nilka—you’ll get her, but ...”

From then on, Botsman did nothing but eradicate people, while Horik sat in the adjoining room, relishing the sounds of necks snapping. Sultan was last on the list. He yelled out something, Horik didn’t remember what exactly, something like: “I’m the one who made you a somebody.” Truth be told, Horik didn’t much remember Sultan’s death. He was bludgeoned to death, just like Major Syrovatko; memory of Syrovatko’s death had stayed with Horik: how the withered and spent old man lay dying in the white snow without uttering a word, only a rattle escaping from his throat after each blow ... whereas Sultan begged and writhed like a snake and oinked like a pig, until Botsman thrust a sharpened stake into his throat; afterwards, at night he would feel Nilka’s cold hands—he felt disgust, he didn’t know why, and turned over to his side; dry leaves tapped on the window pane, like someone’s hands: “Lord, how I wish I could sleep—oh monk, if only you knew...”; and he lay in bed until dawn, stubbornly trying to recall something, like trying to break through ice, keeping his distance, far from everything, frozen stiff—he blew on his frozen hands, not knowing what to do with them; the thought wouldn’t leave him that Nilka would never come with him, and not only with him, lying up there on top, nice and warm, not thinking about anything, not even about Sultan, probably with thoughts of better clients running through her

head; he was finally sick of all those women, and of that ice-cold body, too; and for the first time in his life he, Horik, Piskariov, felt pity for someone—he pulled out the short Uzi and fired a round into the heap of naked bodies.

“An irrepressible weariness has crashed down on me, and I have no strength to shout or cry; my life is a forsaken stream, flowing into the distance toward the desert, within desolate banks ...” Jonah sucked on the end of a cigarette; the sun was behind the clouds, behind the bell tower; the bells clanged; “He’s a bad man, that one who comes to visit you, Jonah.” “I forgot to ask you who should visit me and who shouldn’t.” “Those who come to see you reflect who you are.” “Yeah, sure—on crutches!” Horik came persistently every day, at first he sat motionless and then, quietly, he began droning out long narratives, his mutilated hands folded in his lap: “... and then we went along the slimy corridor of the morgue, a lamp buzzed overhead ... I paid dearly, and who will think of me?... Who will remember me? who?... Tell me, monk.” “I’m not a monk, I just live here.” “People don’t just live somewhere, monk. That doesn’t happen—people live where they feel good.” “Whatever.” “... She lay on the table, her belly sliced open—like a big blue blossom—but do you understand, the further she was gone, the more I wanted her ... No ... not that ...” Astounded, Jonah just looked at him over a steaming-hot cup; fatigue shot through his skull: “I need a nap.” “Go ahead”; but Horik didn’t leave; he stood against a wall of peeling red stucco, huddled in a corner, and sobbed; suddenly, abandoning his memories, standing tall under the peeling wall, he shouted: “So, Jonah, you say that we’re all God’s children... Look at these cripples with rotting stumps instead of hands and feet, with rotten holes instead of genitalia—this, ha-ha-ha, is a caricature of Christ ...” Jonah winced like someone who feels a stranger’s pain. “The city is entrusting me with its eggs—I can feel the larvae moving already. If they push up by sunrise, love will spring forth; and if not, snakes, dragons ... stepping quietly, overshadowing the moon’s leaden light, you will walk from window to door and back again... from the door, on stairs, along a path—obedient to the moon’s blue ray.” Jonah moved fitfully; Mykytka grabbed his staff and ran around in circles: “Get out of here, you demon! Out!” Horik burst out in carefree and what seemed to be composed laughter, picked up a brick, and struck his forehead until it bled—“There you are, priest, take a look—well, suck it out!” and off he ran; the sweat-stained walls, the low, sheltering cellar beckoned to Jonah. Nothing new was born, nothing new emerged, everything just receded, everything sputtered. And thus, they lived, delighting in the autumn beyond the windows, as it ripped apart the silken threads of dreams, and in autumn’s smooth puddles, where the sky had sunk, broken apart by dark red leaves that had unexpectedly fallen in the still air. Wrapped in a golden somnolence on his way home from work, Jonah saw a figure ahead of him: was it a man or a woman—it was hard to tell. A good feeling came over Jonah; he felt refreshed, tranquil. The creature moved its wings—it had a pair of wings—and in a confident, firm voice, a voice that didn’t seem like a voice, said “Look, Jonah!” And when he looked, Jonah saw a spot like a small

windowpane, shrouded in a lilac mist and floating in the air, but trembling, as if alive, and through the opening Jonah saw the yellowed steppe, grass the color of bile, bending in the wind; and he sees a person lying in the grass, chewing on an elbow until it bleeds; the person is moving, writhing on his stomach, rising and falling back on his stomach, retching in distress: Jonah recognized Horik Piskariov. Horik lies still for a long while; overhead, a wall of clouds passes over him; Jonah tires of waiting: suddenly there's a commotion, a blur of shadows, shaggy shadows; the person springs up; behind him are angry dogs, gulping mouthfuls of the chilly autumn air, sensing their liberty. At first Piskariov does not see the dogs, he simply smells their presence; as he slowly turns his head toward the willows, toward the river, the grief in his eyes dissolves; already he cannot make it, already the first dog has sunk its teeth into his back, with a second right behind; Piskariov struggles to get up but his legs curl under him; the dogs tear into his flesh, his skin, getting ever closer to the bones. Horik shoots at random, at the people, at the dogs; he runs along the curving spine of the steppe, falls and gets up, falls again; the warm veil over Jonah's senses dissolves, and he hears ferocious screams, the shots ringing out, the bat-like rustle of jackets and coats; laboriously the clouds inch across the sky; a fit of spasms convulses Horik Piskariov; all around him the grass turns beet-red, the wind sweeps clouds across the sun, and the dogs, seizing their liberty, released by the humans, ravenously rip into human flesh and chew glutonously; something ruptures, a skinny stream of blood flows from behind the ear out over the neck and behind the collar, a shimmer of white and blue sparks scatter about; Piskariov's head droops from his broken neck and falls atop the shoulder of a man in a leather jacket with epaulettes, the first to lunge at Piskariov with pistol in hand. And Jonah now sees it all from above: the mangled body, the caps of the militia and special forces, the leaden blue river, splayed out, wing-like, in an estuary, and all of it going on and on, coloring his view with the deep red of the forest; Jonah tries to move his leg but his body is totally numb and he doesn't register his body; and the voice again: "Do not be afraid. Follow me. You have passed into the other world. This is where your path ends." Chills run down his spine, but Jonah is not afraid: he feels neither fury nor horror; the dogs tear into the body, flames engulf the Lavra, the cross on top of St. Sophia slashes through the clouds passing by, and the city, a cluster of perspiring gray boxes, huddles close together, rail lines crowded with trams and steam engines, the threads of rail tracks holding the city together; and the souls—they realized immediately that they were souls—float upward like puffs of smoke over the ponds and the reservoirs; they flutter, they hover, veil-like, without disturbing the stagnant, brown, murky water; and then, something catches his eye: a balcony, a naked woman brushing her auburn hair, children's terrified eyes following a ball that's falling into a puddle, the large, solid ribbed shadow of someone dressed in blue fringed breeches hangs above a lamp, wheat fields streaming along a road, pine trees passing by, and the ball rolls on, cutting through puddles, the African continent gracing its

surface; a dog savagely flays open a man's gullet, lapping up the black blood; it turns dark; "... because, Lord, I'm not done loving yet, haven't eaten my fill, haven't accomplished any beneficent deed. Lord!" thought Jonah to himself, "I cannot go forth into the world a freeloader. I'm still young." "Look, Jonah, look!..."

Stirring awake, the first thing Jonah felt was hunger. Carefully he collected his belongings into a suitcase and recited prayers. As he walked out the gate, the church bells rang out, the sound licking the autumn air, rocking it out of its slumber; at first, the bells made a low, quiet sound, so soothing, a purr, making hearts skip a beat, and then, suddenly, the bells were rattling the windowpanes, which startled the pigeons, who broke out in flight; a woman sat on a bench reading a book; she glanced up at Jonah and lowered her head; fighter aircraft roared overhead. It grew dark. The fighter's black wings obscured half the sky, spilling noise over the courtyards and scaring the usually fearless ruddy rats in the dumpsters; passersby raised their faces—the shadows of the planes sank into the depths of their eyes, sharpened their facial contours. The woman locked her slant-eyed gaze on Jonah's eyes. Sunlight beat down again, spilling down from the sky and scattering bundles of light, armfuls of beams yellow and pale blue; pulling leftward, sketching an arc, the fighters vanished. The clicking of heels resumed. Bells pealed. Autumn barged in, bringing with it a scent of apples and the sweet taste of melons from far away. Autumn shrouded the woman; it slid down her shoulders; a gust of wind ripped up the puddle. Jonah's eyes lingered over the winding snake of a crowd, and he decided not to leave this place. No matter what, why should he run: overhead, pigeons coasted through the air and tumbled in warm, white clusters over the red, green, and blue rooftops; somewhere it was raining cats and dogs; puddles were glistening. Autumn. Not yet winter....

The woman was reading something on white pages opened wide like butterfly wings and embroidered with caterpillar-like rows of black print, something describing the sea, rain streaming down like crooked wires, and dense morning fog; she read about a wood building with breezes and sudden drafts blowing through it; about a single bed for two and a panting dog that came up to the door, its tongue flopping about; the couple lying on the narrow bed listened to the dog and the roar of the sea, which pleased the woman. Jonah turned his head, his gaze absorbed in the commotion of the street and a rising mushroom-shaped cloud: as if for the first time he noticed the haze obscuring the white columns and molded facades of the buildings with their alabaster angels; the quiet squares that became pleasant once again; his eyes even clouded over at this: "Autumn, but not winter...."

... It rained for who knows how many days; even musty old men and women lost count; the leaves had all fallen; like the sky, the earth was black, boundlessly black from end to end, crisscrossed and interconnected by narrow little canals, little tube-like streets and corners; the rainwater washed away all the filth, all the disgusting things; the windowpanes on the buildings, like the eyes of the dead pecked-out by birds, gaped into the emptiness of the

city squares and the vacant streets, where blasts of wind blew about solitary pedestrians and soggy newspapers.

A postman in rolled-up blue pants pushed the pedals of a bicycle; churlish and sweaty, he stopped next to a building—a tall black mass hiding half the sky and Holosiiv. Breathing hard, the postman climbed up to the second floor and pressed the doorbell's red button.

“Don’t you see that everything here is cordoned off?!?”

“Excuse me, but I have a certified letter.”

“I’ll take it—I’m the neighbor, we were friends. When he—Horik—comes back, I’ll give it to him.”

“Sign here.”

“Right there?... OK, there you are....”

Folds of flesh hanging, bands of ribbons encircling her body, shod in one red slipper and one blue one, the old woman checked the envelope with weary eyes, turned it over and over in her hands, licked it with her white tongue, opened it, and, putting on her glasses as she walked, started to read: then she stopped, sat down, and stopped breathing: at least, that’s what it looked like, though if one looked closely—she was praying.

... The woman glanced at the wet street, so strangely deserted, without even a single umbrella’s bulging black cupola; she opened the curtain a crack; Jonah saw her white shoulder, appearing nearly marble-like in the stark purple light of evening. She was studying the amber-colored gap in the window opposite.

“There’s an old woman in the window, and she’s praying,” said the woman as if in one outward breath.

“Stop making things up,” said Jonah indifferently, and turned over on his back, thinking it’s autumn already—thank the Lord it’s not winter.

The wind whipped about the tattered flag on the flag-post.

From the base of Vasylkivska Street came the howling of dogs.

Through the holes in the flag shone daggers of starlight.

*Translated by Olha Rudakevych*

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