

The Class (excerpt, chap. 27)

Pavlo Volvach

Pavlo had already heard that Mohammed was dead. He was shot at night outside the door of his building. Now the market vendors will be made to cough up the money for the funeral. The racketeers will visit Khomiak's neighbor from "The Amber Shop" who pays them regular tributes because his shop is registered as a private cooperative, while Khomiak runs a state-owned business and just rubs his hands in glee after each time the neighbor cries on his shoulder about the latest shakedown.

Ours is surely a strange kind of mafia, Pashok often mused. Out there in the West petty hoodlums and macaroni sellers were surely not on a first-name basis with the mafia dons. But the local *capos di tutti capi* are such regulars among the common people that everyone seems to know them by sight, as well as their girlfriends and the kids from their second marriages. Even Pikhota and Artyukh's dilapidated white Mercedes is greeted with deferential whispers. Incidentally, Mohammed's mistress lived at the Shevchenko 2 complex, and his car was often parked behind her building.

Pashok preferred the ascetic ways of old-time mobsters, which he knew only from yarns and his own imagination. Those times seemed idyllic to him, and those muggers quite affable. On coal-black nights with moonlight reflecting off the train tracks, these likeable fellows would go out on their secret business, to grease the wheel, and between jobs they'd swagger in their creased high boots all around the railroad station or *bahn*, as they used to call it. Or they'd stroll around the park, puffing on their cigarettes between steel-capped teeth and reminisce about Siberia: "tomorrow morning we leave the jail to be transported to Vorkuta." Even their switchblades, when it got to that, stabbed bodies without pain or death, as if cutting into a mannequin.

Pohon from Charivne, himself an old thug of about fifty, had once told Pashok how in his childhood some toughs used to come to Shevchenko Park and treat the kids to ice cream and lollipops. Maybe they also killed some people, but Pohon didn't talk about that. Pashok had read how inmates in a labor camp had sawed off someone's head with a two-handed saw, but Pohon didn't mention that either.

Today the thugs are called bosses. Such was Pundyk, who hadn't even done time. To be sure, Pundyk sent a cut to the prisons for his cronies, but he himself belonged to an entirely different breed, a new social stratum. "Shopkeepers and Komsomol leaders," Pitoma sighed disapprovingly. "It's all screwed up now." But what could Uncle Vitia do about it? He was just

spent material, as Prokhor called the likes of him.

A mafia was needed, Pashok was convinced, but not this kind. A mafia of his own. He'd been thinking about it for a long time and even talked to Sashko Chernenko. Some interesting guys gather around Sashko in October Square, and Sashko himself is an outstanding fellow, a born political leader. He'd been locked up in the spring for failing to make alimony payments, but lots of people demanded his release, including some dissidents from Kyiv and Lviv, so they let him out. "I've thought about this already," Sashko told Pashok, "and we're slowly working on it. But..." Sashko peered significantly into the distance. "Politically active people are, as a rule, helpless as criminals. We've got to come up with something different."

This might be true. However, the faces of many of Sashko's guys suggested otherwise. After Kapulivka, where Pashok had seen hundreds of serious types, he was convinced he was right. There was no reason why they couldn't do what Pundyk, for example, had been able to do. Rumor was that all those kiosks on Ivanov Street were no longer state owned but belonged to Pundyk, as did the marketplace itself. Pundyk acquired them on the sly, by teaming up with Katia, the store manager who has now also taken over food store No. 54—she either bought or leased it, God only knows which, because plain people, Pashok included, didn't know a damn thing about it. In any case, all they needed was to take over some business, some resource, and then there would be enough dough for that newspaper Sashko published from time to time and the flags for rallies and something else too. Pashok had only a general idea of how this could be done. But if Chernenko enlisted the support of such people as Proshka, it would instantly be serious and real. Only how do you persuade him?

Pashok prided himself on having unearthed Prokhor. He'd seen countless men like him—self-assured, arrogant, often with square jaws and tattooed backs. And like a whale straining plankton through its baleen, Pashok had sifted them all, on the lookout for someone special. And Proshka *was* special, Pashok was sure—one hundred percent. Right now, Prokhor was unoccupied, as if waiting, like a motionless animal before it jumps its prey. He had even quit his job. It was high time he tried something real big. He was certainly as good as any of the former and present underworld bosses that half the city was whispering about.

Before Mohammed there had been Chort with those two "men of honor" from Zelenyi Yar—Charlie and Pronoza. Before Chort there had been Korchma. As to those who had been earlier, Zhenia Ostrovsky talked, in low whispers, about a Jackson, Kuchma, and Uncle Vania Kursky. Chort had recently turned up with several thugs at "Bida." Pashok had figured Chort was no longer around—too far gone with the needle. But here he was holding a gun, barrel down, rushing from room to room looking for Yegor, who should not have picked on that kid, a minor, a son of Chort's old buddy. Yegor had the shakes for two weeks after that visit.

Pundyk was a constant. He was only a district-wide operator, but a long-lasting one. As Yura Boyko joked, Pundyk was steady. Supa's fortunes declined after a jaw-breaking blow he received (rather than gave) outside the grocery from no one other than Pundyk. Pundyk was a bodybuilder who didn't follow the law of the street but a business acumen hard as steel, or, as Yura the intellectual would have put it, the considerations of economic expediency—in plain words: profit. "Watch and win!" the sprightly guys used to shout—some still did—around the district. "Just watch which way it rolls. There's a special bonus for those with hundred percent eyesight!" They were all Pundyk's men. They "worked" for him, as they put it. And there were no bonuses here for those who hoped to seize Fortune by his fiery tail. The marble which must surely be under this cup is, in fact, pressed between the fingers of the "bottom man," the one who manipulates those cups on a piece of cardboard or plywood while the other cheat, the "top," distracts the suckers making bets. Yura Sadovskiy had once been present at a celebration attended by the entire district élite—the deputy chairman of the District Council, head of the Trade Department, bosses of underground manufacturing businesses, and assorted company executives. Also among them were Pundyk and Katia the store manager. So, he had progressed beyond the marbles-and-cups stage. And Yura said that Pundyk had even made a speech at that gathering. On his part, Yura, introduced by his sweetheart, the university's female dean, as a young *avant-garde* poet, read his poem: "In the ancient, abysmal abode of Amazons..."—stuff like that. The public nodded approvingly. Pavlo did not understand what made Yura do something like that. *He* wouldn't have done it for love or money. Certainly not for those fat swine. Go fuck yourselves, you bastards.

It was ages since he had last seen Muddy, thought Pashok as he watched the backs of Beck and Perinsky, who were heading somewhere—most probably to Peredatochna Street, where Beck's large family lived. Yura had been so full of vague talk and muddy ideas that Pashok had nicknamed him Muddy. Yura's latest idea was to write a book about the best known of the local hoods, one that would be both thoroughly documented and highly artistic. *Criminal Zaporizhzhia*—how's that for a title? Yura had invited Pashok to coauthor it, and Pashok even got the opening line ready in his head: "Chort crossed the tracks, gravel crunching under his feet, and descended from the embankment to the village..." Maybe not Chort, but somebody else—what difference did it make? But all that was rubbish. What Pavlo was really interested in was poetry.

Pashok figured that because Muddy hadn't made it big as a poet himself, he was always critical of others. But Yura's views were interesting and, what's more important, all his own, not borrowed.

"Your Kholodnyi is like a Party poet, only turned inside out. Kordun is a mumbling ninny. But Vorobiov is so amazingly interesting that it's hard to believe he's actually a Ukrainian bird," preached Yura. "That's what we need,

something never heard before: the rough talk of a prophet.”

Pashok stared absentmindedly toward the playground where Pavshuk and Bludnia were still talking about something. “Rough talk from a prophet”—that sounded pretty good. That goddamned Yura, murky-headed Yura—would he ever stumble onto the right track? His parents were common hard-working folks from the Kherson or Mykolaiv area, just one generation beyond the village. The scent of melons was still deep in the pores of their skin. When Pashok last saw Yura, the poet had Marquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* under his armpit and laughed heartily while describing his visit to his parents’ home. When he had showed up, Vovka was there distilling home brew: industrial workers were also partial to home-brewed vodka. His dad didn’t unbolt the door for a half hour, he was so scared he didn’t even recognize his own son through the peephole. Anyway, his parents were plain folks, and Yura was a snob and an aesthete with manicured nails who rattled on about literary groups with odd names and “lofty inarticulateness.” Pashok had once come across a thick book by Yuri Lotman that was about such things, but he had found it tough going and gave up

Judging by Yura’s vague hints, he had become involved in some shady business, something to do with counterfeit dollars or real estate. A highbrow swindler who reads Dali’s *Diary of a Genius*, enjoys Paul Delvaux, and rhymes *avant-garde* doggerel—*pourquoi pas?* Nothing wrong with that! At least Yura was not one of the “official” versifiers from the local writers’ union whose poems Pashok sometimes reads in the papers, but only if there’s no dedication. For such authors had a bad habit of dedicating their pieces to steelmakers or team leaders, or to mark official anniversaries. “Stuck in newspaper mode,” Muddy scoffed, “and not even in *Komsomolska pravda* but in the local Huliai-pole rag at best.” Muddy had been dying to go to Moscow to meet Andrei Andreievich, as he called the Russian poet Voznesensky, but had recently cooled in his admiration for the glorious capital, not least because of his arguments with Pashok. “True, we aren’t the same as the Russians, after all,” he would concede somewhat reluctantly. “We are something else. We are Makhnovites.” And Pashok gladly agreed. “Makh—no—vites”—it would echo in his mind, syllable by syllable.

Translated by Ivan Kovalenko

Original publication: Pavlo Volvach, *Kliasa*, Kharkiv: Folio 2010.