

PART 1

IN MARCH

If I die now, I can live with it. I've long since bypassed or cleared away the things that once obstructed my view of death. My inner peace would be a bastion of boredom if I hadn't learned to appreciate boredom as a kind of satisfaction now and then. At my age that's a privilege. So I can't really say that I want to die, even though I'm at peace with myself and prepared for the final journey. But before that time comes, I'd love to have the strength again to climb the ladder to the top of the bookcase and get down *No End of Fun*, Wisława Szymborska's book of poems, and open it to page 102.

Nothingness unseamed itself for me too. It turned itself wrong side out...

The word "unseamed" used to move me, and I tried to picture nothingness unseaming itself. Today I have the feeling that I'm the one who's wrong side out, even though when we're young or middle-aged we always think it's the others who are living the wrong way around.

How on earth did I end up here – head to toe among the planets, without a clue how I used not to be...

I know the poem by heart. Sometimes I shift a few words around or leave a line out. Good poetry is always adaptable. What I miss is the sensuality of those moments in which I run the index finger of my right hand over the page, leaf through the book, look for a bookmark, clap the book shut, lay it aside, open it once again, jump from line to line as if by chance, and as always get caught on the phrase *Starry willy-nilly!* That's one reason worth getting healthy again.

The doctor said it'll be at least three weeks before I can leave the house again. When I asked him how long it would be before I can climb the ladder to get to the books on the top two shelves, he frowned and answered: "Let's face it, ma'am, at your age..." The rest of the sentence got caught in his gray beard. I asked him another time but he didn't give me an answer.

Before I had my accident, Szymborska would go untouched for weeks, until it occurred to me to dust the books and remove the cobwebs. Then I'd see her book of poems, and whenever I was in a wistful mood I'd savor those moments I now miss so dearly. Since my accident I'm constantly staring up at the shelf, counting the days till Karla gets back from her health cure. Szymborska will then come down to me, accompanied by Jan Skácel's *Woundwort* and Joseph Brodsky's *Hills*, and all three will take their place of honor at the right-hand side of my sofa, close at hand and ready for browsing, companions in time of need, and friends for better days too.

My hunger for words is stronger than my craving for things more substantial than poetry. Karla filled the fridge and cupboards the day before she left, but I feel incapable of cooking.

It's not that I'm fussy. If I had to I could subsist for days on old bread, or the snacks you can buy in those feeding chains like McDonald's. There's hardly anything that disgusts me. I'm indifferent to things that others find revolting. But I won't touch the six factory-packed apples in airtight plastic wrap, the ones that Karla brought and left on the living-room table before she went to Badgastein, because I know that in a week's time these apples will look just as poison-green as they did the day they were bought. I wouldn't give my weak stomach a miracle product like that.

Karla is a former colleague of mine. Just a few years ago she assumed the privileged position of being my best friend – for the simple reason that her friends as well as mine had

been dying off one after the other. In my middle years I sometimes feared the loneliness of old age, and I thought of ways to try and avoid it. Much of what I'd feared came to pass, and in the end I was so busy coping with each misfortune that I never had time to think about whether or not I was lonely.

I was contemplating Szymborska and food, wondering what Szymborska might have eaten before, during, and after she wrote her poems, when the doorbell rang. It's about time! My lunch was supposed to be here sometime between twelve-thirty and one, and it's already quarter to three. This time I'll have to give them a talking-to, those two young gentlemen who deliver my food. Actually, I've been very pleased with them until now, with their work and with their manners. Just two or three sentences, in a friendly but unmistakable tone. They're both very pleasant, even though they're always under so much stress that I wouldn't dare ask them to fetch my Szymborska. One is named Selim, the other Erwin or Erich. I don't mind if they're half an hour late, but two hours is really too much. Even in my younger years I was always convinced that it's our responsibility in life to live up to the roles we play, and if we do break character from time to time, it has to be a deliberate and credible performance.

The two fellows wear silly white jackets with yellow buttons that look gold-plated at first, stand-up collars with stylized crowns embroidered into them, and epaulettes with golden stars and stripes – as if they were officers in the U.S. Marines. All that trouble just to give a municipal welfare service of the City of Vienna the veneer of a fancy catering outfit. If you want to fool me with a hint of nobility, the least I expect is punctuality.

The ringing becomes longer and more insistent. This annoys me. Those two boys know I can barely walk. Do they think I'm still young and dynamic like I was at sixty? Shortly before she passed away, Szymborska wrote a poem about a decrepit old turtle that dreams about being

able to dance: when it finally risks a few steps and exuberantly spins around, the turtle rolls over onto its back and can't get up anymore. What was the name of that poem again?

I'm glad I left the commode in the hallway so I have something to lean on. What a dance!

Four short rings, followed by a long one, then a short one.

Or maybe it wasn't Szyborska? Sometimes I think the worms have long since eaten holes in my brain.

If only I had control over my body. But my left foot makes a half-turn to the right against my will, my fingers cramp while I fumble to undo the chain on the door, and just trying to turn my head feels like I'm being beaten with a cudgel. The pain I suffered that sunny February morning was harmless compared to the price I pay each day to expand my field of vision.

Or was it Urszula Koziol who wrote that poem? Hell if I know.

"For crying out loud! I can't go any faster!"

Maybe it was Ewa Lipska. I wouldn't put it past her.

Fifty years ago, I was just as impatient. Boy, did those old fogies get on my nerves when I was rushing to the tram stop, running up or down a narrow staircase, or when I visited my great aunt on Czerningasse and had to bang on the door for five minutes before she'd even open.

"Sorry to disturb you, Frau Binar..." A young person. Twenty, tops.

Scandalous that those two uniformed lads haven't come yet.

"I'm collecting signatures for a petition..."

The young woman's face seems familiar. I probably ran into her on the stairs once.

"I'm sorry, do we know each other?"

"Oh, excuse me, my name is Hasler, sorry, I just wanted..."

"You don't need to excuse yourself for that. You can't help it if your name is Hasler."

“Uhhh, no...” A sheepish smile, kind of sweet – red ears and a downward gaze that stops when it gets to my slippers.

“I live in 6A.”

“Since when is there an A on the sixth floor?”

“Uhhh... You’d have to ask the landlord. When I moved in...”

“Forget about it, it doesn’t really matter.”

No, probably less than twenty. Eighteen, nineteen at the most – petite, slender, almost ethereal. A pleasant voice: a velvety, almost solemn undertone. Judging by her accent, she’s not from Vienna but somewhere in the west; but not the far west, not from Tyrol or Vorarlberg or Pinzgau, probably somewhere in Upper Austria. Or is it a he and not a she? Jeans and baggy sweaters like that are worn by boys and girls, and a short haircut is no indication of gender either. Her (or his) face, hair and body begin to blur before my eyes. Maybe that’s why all the contours seem softer than they really are, and that’s why this blond-and-blue-eyed creature is Upper Austrian-androgynous to me. That’s all I can make out without my glasses. My glasses are on the nightstand, because however much I’ve thought about Szymborska’s poems these days, I haven’t actually been able to read one.

“What am I supposed to sign?” I ask. “If it’s about the homeless people loitering outside our building lately...”

“I’m a member of a society called Street Names Against Racism,” the person interrupts me. “We’ve drawn up a petition that includes our street on the list of those to be renamed.”

“The list of those to be renamed...” I repeat with a chuckle. “Speaking as one of those soon to be deceased, I have no problem whatsoever with the name of our street, just as I’ve had no quarrels with it for the last eight decades either. Besides, I’ve never heard of street names protesting against racism, not to mention banding together and forming a society. To me that sounds like Cats Against Castration.”

“But it’s an affront against our dark-skinned and Muslim fellow citizens, when names like Grosse Mohrengasse are taken for granted by...”

“What’s wrong with being a Moor? Ever heard of Othello?” I interrupt him. “The street was called ‘Great Moor Lane’ the whole of the last century, even when it was predominantly populated by our fellow citizens of the Jewish persuasion. I saw them stripped of their civil rights back when I was a child. They were herded together in this very street before being deported. First they stopped being fellow citizens, then they stopped being human beings. Haven’t you seen the ‘stones of remembrance’ outside the entrance to our building?”

“Yes, of course, but...”

“But what? Should we rename all the Judengassen, because ‘Jew Lane’ reminds us of an unpleasant past? Not to mention all the streets named after anti-Semites? Should we go through all the streets and squares to see if they sound politically correct enough? At some point all we’ll be left with is streets named after animals and flowers.”

“That’s a thorny issue. Some things have actually been renamed in recent years. Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Ring, for example, is now called Universitätsring. It’s hard to explain without getting into details. It’s complicated.”

“Don’t give me that Chancellor Sinowatz bull.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh dear... Forget about it. You’re right. Everything is complicated if you make it complicated.”

“We just thought that the word *Mohr*, similar to the term Negro...”

“What should our street be called, in your opinion? Grand Afro-Austrian Lane? Or how about Big Black Street, like the Viennese coffee? We could rename the street in honor of the beverage and open up a coffeehouse together.”

She – it must be a she – gets huffy, purses her lips and shakes her head. “I really hope that I’m never as cynical as you,” she mutters.

“Never give up hope.”

“It’s really just a symbolic gesture. A small step in the right direction.”

“Never mind, I get what you’re saying. ‘The Moor has done his duty, the Moor can go...’ So what do you suggest instead? Nelson Mandela Lane?”

“There are a number of suggestions, all of which you can find in our petition.”

“By the way, the names of our Austrian coffees – ‘Big Black,’ ‘Little Black’ – or ‘Brown’ with cream, depending – are presumably no longer acceptable in your opinion, because they’re discriminating?”

She ignores this comment and says, “Naming the street after Nelson Mandela is one of the options we endorse.”

“Nice of you to endorse it. Nelson Mandela would have surely appreciated it.”

“A number of residents on our street are one step ahead of City Hall by encouraging their friends, relatives and coworkers not to address their letters or packages to Grosse Mohrengasse anymore...”

“Rather?”

“They should address them to Grosse Möhrengasse. Add an umlaut. The post office will still deliver them.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! *Möhren* – Carrots?”

“Exactly!”

“Big Carrot Street? ... Grand Carrot Lane? ...”

“Frau Binar?”

“Ooohhh!...”

“Frau Binar!!! Are you feeling alright? Can I help you?”

“No, no,” I say, wiping the tears from my eyes. “I’m fine.”

I haven’t laughed this hard in months, and when I laugh the pain’s unbearable, everything goes black, the hallway windows to the courtyard become more narrow, the floor disappears beneath my feet, the ceiling falls on top of me, and I double up with laughter, as if the pain in my neck and head, and all the pain of the last years were concentrated in this laughter; but before long I suddenly feel light and free, and when I regain my senses I’m lying on the sofa in my living room and I feel a hand stroking my cheek, followed by the gentle touch of fingertips on my forehead.

“Frau Binar! Should I call someone?”

“There is no one,” I say, wondering how I managed to get to the living room so fast. I’m surprised that I can’t recall the intervening seconds (or was it minutes?), and that all of a sudden I feel stronger than before, even though I haven’t eaten for hours. The girl must have steadied me, but she surely couldn’t have carried me. She can barely carry herself.

“Do you want to sign the petition?” Her voice is not as friendly as it was before. She holds up a densely printed sheet of paper, but without my glasses I can’t read a word of it.

“Certainly not. I don’t like carrots. But you could bring me a glass of water.”

“I have to go.”

“Just a glass of water! If you’d be so kind.”

“Fine, but then...”

“The door on the left. The glasses are in the cupboard right above the sink.”

She goes into the kitchen. It occurs to me that she’s one of those people that Karla calls “figureless.” I can see that even without my glasses. You could draw a straight line from her shoulders to her hips. But this very thinness gives her a certain charm.

I hear something fall to the floor. She probably knocked over the pot that’s been lying for days on the dish rack next to the stove.

Had I been a little friendlier to her, I could have asked her to climb up the ladder and get down Szymborska's book of poems for me, and if I'd played the part of the sweet and needy grandma right from the start, she probably would have made me spaghetti.

She slams the water glass down on the table as if she were offended. Some of the water spills and runs in a serpentine line to the indentation in the middle of the table, where for decades the teapot and warmer stood. Ever since my husband died, I only drink tea in the kitchen.

"So long, Frau Binar. If you change your mind and want to sign it after all, you know where to find me. 6A."

She turns to go.

"Where did you grow up?" I ask before she leaves.

"In Upper Austria, in Schärding."

"May I ask your first name?"

"Moritz."

2

I was born on Grosse Mohrengasse – Great Moor Lane. I'll die on Grosse Mohrengasse too. Dying somewhere else surely wouldn't be so easy. The four-room apartment I've lived in since I was born was rented by my paternal grandparents, shortly after the five-story building went up in the 1890s. Before that, or so I was told, the spot was occupied by a yellow, two-story building with a slanted roof, low ceilings and dusty courtyard, a place that vicious tongues referred to as "*Gasthof zur Läuseschaukel*" – Inn of the Swinging Lice – since it was inhabited almost exclusively by kaftan Jews with long, dangling payot. The Jews had come to the capital from the eastern parts of the monarchy. Even the few tenants not belonging to the

“lice faction,” that is to say, the ones who weren’t Orthodox and didn’t wear payot, were supposedly Jews from the provinces. My grandmother, herself a native of Galicia, once told me she saw a Jewish neighbor, someone she knew from her village, coming out of the building. Here in Vienna he looked just as careworn and grubby as he did back in that dump of a village, where the summer always stank of excrement and illness, the winter of smoke and death. Grandmother never mentioned the name of the place where she was born. But my father managed to find out eventually, in the late 1930s, when he got his certificate of Aryan ancestry so he wouldn’t automatically be taken for a Jew just because he lived on Grosse Mohrengasse.

Grandmother was proud to be called “madam” and belong to so-called “better society.” In her eyes Grandfather was a “mid-level civil servant,” having managed in his lifetime to achieve the rank of assistant postmaster.

Before the landlord, Itzig Apfelbaum, had the old building razed, erecting in its place a handsome apartment building with Medusa heads, festoons, and half-columns as stucco ornamentation, with high ceilings and the tax-dodging in-between floors of *Hochparterre* and *Mezzanin* – before this new building was built, my grandparents had lived on Rotensterngasse, right around the corner, in a rented basement apartment. They never moved out of their district – just like my parents, and me, later on. Most of the time we seemed to have no need for the big wide world outside. The world came to us instead, and even if it was destroyed and rebuilt again on multiple occasions, even though it may have changed its texture, color and aura, it always ended up pouring itself right back into the same mold, like liquid into a bottle. Like many people from the Hapsburg Empire who were lured by the capital’s supposed riches, my grandparents and great grandparents got off the train at North Station and found cheap lodgings just a few streets away through the mediation of a fellow

countryman, who had gotten the rooms himself some years before through yet another fellow countryman.

I was five years old when swastika flags first flew on our street. I was nine when the last Jews in our neighborhood were deported, ten when the first bombs fell. I was twelve when the battle for Vienna was raging, followed soon thereafter by the end of the war. I was twenty-two when Austria became independent again, and thirty-three when the first guest workers appeared. Then some of the things I knew from before began to repeat themselves. At some point the Orthodox Jews even returned to our street, setting up a prayer room on the corner of Schmelzgasse whose entrance was guarded day and night by a policeman. A lot of things now are just like they used to be, even though it's not so common anymore to say things like *Läuseschaukel*, because – as the young people like to say – they're no longer “pee-see.” And what about real life? I'm afraid that Moor Lane and steamed chocolate pudding in whipped cream – the classic “Moor in a shirt” found on every Viennese menu – are not the most dire problems of Africans living in Vienna.

How often I've had to relearn things! As a child I was friendly to certain neighbors and would shake their hands; then from one day to the next, I was not even allowed to greet them anymore. The things I had to shout with enthusiasm as a twelve-year-old if I didn't want to arouse suspicion and put my parents at risk I couldn't so much as allude to, let alone openly discuss, by the time I turned thirteen. And my daughter, Barbara, explained to me not long ago with rancor in her voice that it had taken her several years of therapy to finally overcome her “biggest neurosis.” That neurosis, she said, was me. It was hard enough having a teacher as a mother, her therapist supposedly said, but all the more so a mother like me. My son says I shouldn't be upset about Barbara. Her biggest neurosis, he said, is due to the fact that even in the fanciest high-heeled shoes she looks like a pregnant hippopotamus on stilts. Markus always did have a bizarre sense of humor. Everyone except me thinks he's funny. He's no

longer on speaking terms with his sister. He sued her a couple of years ago over a loan she didn't repay. What are two dots on an o compared to that.

The indentation in the middle of the table is filling up with water. Before I had my accident, I would have immediately thrown a dish towel on the wet spot. Now the puddle doesn't bother me. The pain comes back. I'm tired, I'm hungry, I'm dizzy. Scandalous, isn't it, that they haven't delivered my food yet today. What was the point of my ordering and paying for it?

I drag myself from the sofa to the phone; it sits on the heavy, dark-brown commode in the hallway, the one I use to support myself on my way to the apartment door.

Karla wrote down everything for me. At the very top of the list, written in giant letters, is the service number of the company that brings my food. It's called *Rolling Dinner Table à la Carte, Not-for-profit Ltd. Co.*, and publishes a glossy brochure each month depicting for the most part rugged senior citizens dining on a terrace in the countryside, on the balcony of a villa, or in front of a swimming pool. Next to the service number of this non-profit and hence limited liability company, Karla wrote down two other phone numbers: the Vienna Social Fund and the Social Emergency Hotline, the latter as a last resort if all else fails. With a little effort, I can read all the numbers on the sheet of paper without even wearing my glasses.

Karla remarked facetiously that I'm the last person on our street without a cell phone. I didn't deny it, but simply told her I'm hopelessly old-fashioned, that an old lady like me should at least be entitled to that. The next thing they'll want me to do is start tweeting. At least I have a computer, with Internet access and an email account. Most octogenarian Austrians wouldn't even know how to use a ticket-vending machine or an ATM. My children, both of whom left Vienna years ago with their families, periodically send me emails and are not exactly happy when I call them on the phone every now and then. My son even installed a futuristic program on my computer called Skype – a practical device that allows

me to communicate with my children as if they were sitting in my very own living room. The only problem is, they're not really willing to Skype with me more than once a month. But it's more than I ever expected. Why does a senior like me need a cell phone?

I sit down on the stool next to the commode and dial the service number of *Rolling Dinner Table*.

"Rolling Dinner Table à la Carte, the mobile meal service with a heart and social conscience, welcomes you to our service hotline. If you're already a registered customer and need general information, please press 1..."

Oh boy, here we go.

"...if you're not yet a registered customer and would like to request any kind of information, please press 2; for questions about financial assistance from the City of Vienna, please press 3..."

Why do all these female telephone voices sound the same. They could have at least gotten an Austrian for this one instead of a German. We've been inundated with East Germans ever since we've been better-off economically than our big neighbor to the north. Even in venerable Viennese coffeehouses, you hear servers saying things like "*Tschüss!*" when you leave.

"...for other financial issues, please press 4; to request changes to your meal plan, please press 5..."

Unbelievable! If I'd sent them an email, they probably would have answered by now.

"...for medical issues, please press 6; for liability and insurance issues, please press 7..."

I'm gonna blow a fuse. This Prussian tone of voice is nothing short of obnoxious.

"...for suggestions and complaints, please press 8..."

Finally!

“You’ve selected the service hotline for suggestions and complaints. All our operators are currently busy. Please stay on the line and the next available representative will assist you.”

The next thing I hear is music – the bland, instrumental Muzak version of a well-known German pop song from the eighties. What was the name of that song? When Markus was a teenager he listened to it for hours on end, till my husband took away his tape recorder. It’s on the tip of my tongue, the name of the band.

Is it not an irony of fate that my parents and I never left the neighborhood, while my son now lives in Adelaide and my daughter in Zurich?

Spider Murphy Gang – that was the name of the band.

Adelaide of all places! Somewhere closer was obviously not an option. The song was called *Skandal im Sperrbezirk* – scandal in the prohibited zone. Or was it scandal over Rosi?

I may be her biggest neurosis, but Barbara did come all the way from Zurich to see me after I had my accident. She only stayed two days, and wasn’t much help, but of course I was happy to see her again.

In Munich there’s a big beer hall, but all the brothels have to go, ’cause in this finest town of all, to vice they gladly just say no...

Amazing how nonsense like this can be locked away in the depths of my memory for thirty years only to resurface today, of all days, in a situation like this.

But everyone is well informed, Rosi’s started advertising...

I can’t really fathom why the fusty eighties would be so in vogue with young people nowadays.

So if your wife is cold to you, be thankful that there’s Rosi still...

I won’t be able to get this bunk out of my head for hours now.

And just outside the city line...

Busy signal. I press the receiver to my ear for a couple more seconds before I realize that all my waiting has been for naught. Should I send an email after all?

I hesitate a while, then I press redial.

“Rolling Dinner Table à la Carte, the mobile meal service with a heart and social conscience...”

Yeah.

Yeaah.

Yeaahh.

Yeah, Rosi has a telephone, I've got her number written down...

Damn it to hell! I'm hungry!

I don't have the strength and I have no desire to boot up my computer. Besides which, my PC has been showing clear signs of old age lately.

The next number on the list is the Vienna Social Fund. They don't have a recording; the line is simply busy all the time, just like in the old days. I give up after five attempts.

Strange how often lately I've had a sense of déjà vu. Even fifty years ago I was always getting tired of having to call some office or other.

The social emergency hotline is my last resort. I know they've been around for a long time. In my teaching days, I had a colleague whose sister was employed as a social worker for the City of Vienna and spent hours a day just answering emergency calls. My colleague was full of praise for this hotline, whereas I felt pity for all the people who had landed in such dire straits that their only option was to call a hotline. Now I'm one of the pitiable myself.

I have no other choice.

Eureka! Only the third ring and already I hear a young woman's voice: “Social, mobile and always prepared, Service Center, you're speaking with Elisabeth, how can I help you?”

I say my name and tell her my problem.

“I’m very sorry,” she says, “but our representative for all issues concerning providers of meals on wheels isn’t in today. You can reach her on Tuesdays and Thursdays from eight to twelve in the morning and from two to five in the afternoon. Extension 8.”

“What, are you kidding me?” This is really unbelievable! “But today is Friday! By Tuesday I’ll starve to death.”

“I’m very sorry, I can imagine you’re in a difficult situation... That is to say... What I mean is...”

I can’t help smiling, despite my annoyance. “What do you expect me to do?” I ask.

“Have you tried calling the provider directly? They must have a service number.”

“Yes, I’ve called them, but all I hear is Rosi in the prohibited zone.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing, forget about it. All the lines are busy, that’s the problem.”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do for you either. Sorry about that!” Her voice becomes more strident and suddenly has an indignant, almost harassed undertone. “Don’t you have any relatives or friends?”

“If I had them I wouldn’t need meals on wheels.”

“Not necessarily. There are older people whose children or grandchildren don’t normally have time to take care of them but can make the time if they have to.”

“My daughter has enough problems of her own, and my son is in Adelaide.”

“Where?”

“Australia.”

“Social Services has a number, but of course no one will be there now on Friday afternoon. To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what to tell you...”

“Listen up, young lady, if you work at the Social Emergency Hotline...”

“We’re a call center. The Social Emergency Hotline doesn’t actually exist anymore. Most of it has been outsourced. My job is just to put you through.”

“Okay then, put me through!” I yell, exasperated. “I have to eat something, don’t I? Not just today, but this weekend too.”

“I’d appreciate a different tone!” she shouts back at me. “You’re the fifth one today to get nasty with me. It’s not my fault. What do you want me to do? I’m not responsible for your meals. Eat crackers or chocolate wafers till Tuesday. Good-bye! *Tschüss!*” Then she hangs up. And I think about how you can never be old enough to experience something you never thought was possible.

3

Alexander dreamt about his mother on Thursday. Or was it Friday night? He recalled the dream a week later, when he entered the high-rise and saw the woman behind the glass window of the porter’s lodge. She had short, reddish hair and slender hands that were always in motion, were always twisting or turning something, or moving back and forth as if each one held an invisible conductor’s baton. That’s exactly how Mother looked in his dream. Or something like that. Alexander tried to remember what had happened the evening before the dream, but however hard he tried, he mixed up that evening with the ones before.

It was the expression on her face, however, more than any real or apparent similarities, that linked the woman behind glass with his dream-mother and his real mother.

His mother was twenty-three when she vanished. Alexander was not even three at the time, but he remembered well enough how Mother’s girlish hand would stroke his cheek, how he’d turn his head and look at Mother’s finger nails, and how her clear nail polish reflected in the glistening light of the ceiling lamp whenever she moved her hands – the

fascination he felt observing the tips of her nails, which extended well beyond her fingertips. He could still remember Mother's lively green eyes, and how from one moment to the next they could suddenly become cold and hostile, as if they wanted to punish him for doing something bad. When he cried, Mother got up and left. He would hear the door slam hard, or incomprehensible words that weren't addressed to him but whose tone would forever be associated with the coldness of her gaze.

Alexander, Alex, Sasha, Xandi. What did his mother call him? Sashenka, like his aunts and most of his other relatives in Russia later called him? Sashka? Shurik?

The woman behind glass had an old face, even though she was probably not even thirty. Young people with old faces scared Alexander. He imagined the things they must have been through and was frightened by what he saw.

"Who are you here to see?" The voice was unpleasant, piercing.

"Wilhelm Neff Real Estate, Ltd. I have an appointment."

"Eighth floor."

"I know."

She looked up from the tabloid she was lazily leafing through, evidently with no particular interest.

"Take the elevator up, then take a left and it's the fourth door on the right."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I've been there before."

"You have an appointment?"

"I just told you."

A young woman walked past. The woman behind glass nodded. Alexander heard high-heels going around the corner. The woman put down the paper, raised her head, and looked at Alexander inquisitively. Beads of sweat had formed in the creases between her nostrils and

the corners of her mouth. Alexander thought he could make out a dark downy mustache in the hollow under her nose.

“Have a nice day,” Alexander muttered, rushing towards the elevator.

The building had gone up more than fifty years ago and had evidently never been renovated or reconstructed since then. It had fourteen floors – quite a structure in those days. The elevator smelled like sweat and perfume. Its dark-brown Formica-clad walls had black marks from stubbed out cigarettes. The marks were old and faded. Apparently it had been ages since anyone had had the bright idea of smoking in an elevator. The metal plaque underneath the buttons indicated the name of the manufacturer and the year it was built: 1963. Like most lifts built in those days, there was no cabin door, meaning you could see the walls of the elevator shaft, painted light-blue, pass by when going up, along with the silver-painted doors on each floor. The overhead light flickered, and someone had sprayed the words “up and down” on the gray linoleum floor.

“I have to get off at the eighth,” Alexander said to the young woman. She didn’t so much as glance in his direction, pressed the button and turned her back to him. The elevator made a clicking noise, gave a slight rattle and began to move.

Alexander tried to guess the woman’s age, looked at her hands and imagined she was in her late twenties. Her broad hands and delicate forearms didn’t seem to fit together, he thought. He regarded her slender figure, her shoulder-length dark-brown hair, the white coat with a fur collar, the black stockings, wine-red patent-leather shoes – and suddenly wished he could see her face. If she had green eyes, he’d like her.

If her eyes are green it will bring him good luck. If they’re blue, thought Alexander, I’ll have to be on my guard these days. Any other color is neutral. He loved little games like this,

the kind that turned daily life into a lottery. They gave him the illusion of tempting fate and being able to outsmart it.

The cabin shook between the third and fourth floors, slowed down for a moment, then sped up again. The woman cursed: “Damn it! Crap!” Her voice was high but not shrill. “This whole building is falling to pieces.”

“They should tear it down,” said Alexander.

The woman said nothing.

“Knock it down and build a new one. Don’t you think?”

Again, silence.

If she’d at least say something, anything at all. “*Exactly.*” “*Tear it down and build a new one.*” “*Yes, indeed.*” If she’d said something like that, no matter how trite, Alexander would have been happy. The talk he dreaded with Willi Neff and the oppressive memory of the dream and his mother would have been a little more bearable.

Between the seventh and eighth floors the cabin began to shake again, slowed down and sped up.

“This is unbelievable!” the woman grumbled. The cabin accelerated even more.

It passed the eighth floor without stopping.

“Huh? What’s going on here?!”

She turned around now and stared at Alexander with wide-open eyes. They really were green, but this fact no longer made Alexander happy. He shifted his gaze from the face of the woman to the wall of the elevator shaft, which kept on gliding down. They passed the door of the ninth floor, then the tenth...

Alexander made a rush for the buttons but the woman was faster than he was; she pressed the alarm button, the emergency-stop button, and all the other buttons too. To no avail. The lift just kept on going.

“Oh my God! I want outta here!” the woman began to wail, while Alexander stood there, unable to say a word.

At the twelfth floor they both pushed hard on the door, which didn't budge. At the thirteenth she grabbed Alexander's hand.

“What should we do?” she screamed. “What are we gonna do?”

Alexander pressed all the buttons in a panic, one by one from top to bottom, and then from bottom to top. The woman clutched him tightly. Passing the thirteenth floor, a door glided by with a large black D written on it. *Dachgeschoss* – Attic.

“What now?” the woman screeched. “What should we do now?”

“Well, we're not gonna shoot straight to heaven,” said Alexander, startled by how unconvincing his own voice sounded. A ridiculous fantasy flashed through his mind: the elevator would shoot through the roof and fly into the sky, higher and higher, beyond the clouds, where it blasted into a thousand pieces. “We'll stop in a second,” he whispered. “Don't worry, nothing's going to happen. Or maybe we'll crash.”

But instead there came another floor. The door had a T written on it.

“T! What could T stand for?” asked Alexander, and immediately realized how inconsequential the question was in a moment like this.

“*Tod* – Death,” the woman whimpered. “It's Death!”

“Nonsense!” yelled Alexander. It sounded like a cry for help.

At that moment the cabin came to a jolting halt. Alexander and the woman were hurled into the air and fell to the floor. A loud, penetrating noise – it sounded like a poorly functioning buzz saw – filled the elevator cabin. The walls seemed to buckle. The cabin shook like an airplane in turbulence, then it began to descend, slowly at first, then gradually picking up speed. Alexander embraced the woman. She threw her arms around his neck. They shrieked and clasped each other tightly. Alexander could feel the woman's lips on his

cheek. An earsplitting noise came from above, as if something were constantly tearing or breaking. Alexander wanted to pray, but never in his life had he learned a prayer. “Mama!” the woman screamed. “Mama!”

Not even in the face of death did it occur to Alexander to cry for his mother. The fear became unbearable and temporarily dazed him. Suddenly nothing mattered anymore, it was like he was under anesthesia. Then the elevator braked abruptly, stopped for a few moments, went up again, and finally came to a halt. Alexander and his female companion were pressed against the floor before being flung into the air. The glass of the ceiling light audibly shattered. A clicking noise. The harsh clatter of metal on metal. Then there was silence and utter darkness.

Alexander came to and heard pounding. It took a few seconds for him to realize that the pounding noise was coming from inside him, that his heart was racing and his breathing shallow, and that the young woman was lying on top of him, bearing down on his chest. He carefully rolled her aside.

“Are we dead?” she asked with a frail voice.

“I think the elevator crashed a little,” he answered hoarsely.

“You don’t say... Are you injured?”

“I don’t think so. But my head is ringing. And you?”

“Something hurts, but I don’t know what. At least I can move. I think... Where are we, anyway? In the basement? I can’t see a thing. Did we really crash?”

“If we did we’d be dead.”

“Maybe we are.”

“What’s your name, anyway? I think that, under the circumstances, we can be on a first-name basis.”

“Elisabeth. I work here in a call center. And you?”

“Alex. I have an appointment on the eighth floor. Had one, that is. Or maybe I still do. Maybe I missed it. Beats me.”

“What happened, actually? How can something like that be possible?”

“Do you really have green eyes?”

“Yeah. How come?”

“Because we’re still alive.”

“Huh?”

“And how old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Alright, let’s see if we can get out of here.”

Alexander got up, stretched out his arms and tried to gain his bearings in the darkness. He could barely stand up, had a splitting headache and a salty taste in his mouth. His tongue was bleeding, his right foot hurt, and he still had trouble breathing. Other than that, he had the impression he was still in one piece. He stretched out his arms; his fingertips touched Elisabeth’s hair. “I’m dizzy,” she said. “And I can’t find my shoes.”

“Do you have matches or a lighter by any chance?”

“I don’t smoke.”

Alexander ran his hands along the walls of the cabin and then the wall of the elevator shaft. Bare concrete, then something cold, smooth, made of metal: a door. He pushed against it. Surprisingly, the door yielded. He opened it and the light blinded him. He couldn’t see a thing for about five seconds.

He quickly took three steps forward anyway – anything to get out of that cabin! The world around him began to take shape and regain color, and he recognized a large black “8” on the corridor wall. He was on the eighth floor.

“My shoes are ruined.” Elisabeth was standing barefoot next to him, holding her patent-

leather shoes in her hand. The heels were broken. Her makeup was smeared. Strands of hair were hanging down her forehead. Her right cheek was grazed. Her coat, which used to be white and was now dirty gray, had shards of glass stuck to it, and the two top buttons were torn off.

“I’m never getting on an elevator again,” she said softly, trying to smile. Her gaze slid from Alexander’s face down his body. She looked away, embarrassed. He noticed the wet spot in his crotch. “Damn it!” he mumbled. He felt the blood rush to his face.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Elisabeth, blushing now too. “It can happen to anyone in such a... such a...” She faltered. “In such a dramatic moment of life.”

Now they both began to laugh, and Alexander could breathe more freely, could barely feel the pain anymore; he had the feeling there was nothing better than standing in this shabby hallway with solid ground under his feet.

“Can I invite you to a coffee?” he asked. “Downstairs in the cafeteria. On the first floor.”

“Like that?” Elisabeth pointed at his pants.

“I don’t really care at this point. And you?”

“You’re right. And I can drink my coffee barefoot. Who needs shoes to drink coffee in a grimy cafeteria? No one there would notice anyway.”

“After such a dramatic moment...”

“...anything goes.”

“Actually, we should report what happened.”

“Actually.”

“Let’s go downstairs. Is there even a stairway in this place?”

They started laughing again, and slowly walked hand in hand down the hallway, at the end of which was the stairwell.

* * *

[PART 2]

5

Alexander's first encounter with Viktor Viktorovich took place the summer Alexander's aunt died, when his tendency to fatalism was about to get the best of him and turn him into a drifter like so many others around him. Viktor Viktorovich changed his life, or so Alexander later claimed, albeit in a way the esteemed maestro probably would not have wanted.

For four long days that sweltering August, Alexander had been roughing it with the other teachers and the parents of his pupils. They slept in a barn, got to work as soon as dawn broke to take advantage of the cool morning hours, took a quick lunch break, then toiled away till late into the evening. A friend of the principal had arranged a truck, which they loaded up with the bricks they'd collected or salvaged from the ruins of the factory, which were then transported right to the school building. Their "foray" had been a success, all in all.

The abandoned factory was twenty-five miles from the city. The site was contaminated and fenced-off, the workers' colony long since abandoned, the access roads overrun with weeds, but no one paid any attention to that. The bricks were still in good shape. They would use them to patch up nearly all the holes in the walls of the school building. The problems of the present seemed more urgent than future hazards.

The older teachers had imagined the sunset of life differently. The younger ones asked themselves what they'd done wrong in life and what they could change. Others acknowledged "the circumstances" with a combination of patience and resignation. The Russian word *nado* (one must) played an important role here. You mastered misery with the same fatalism your grandfathers showed in the Great Patriotic War, attacking well-entrenched

enemy positions, heading for their certain death, hundreds of thousands of them at a time.

Nado.

“That’s not just Russian, you know,” countered Elisabeth. “ ‘What is to be, will be,’ my grandmother used to say all the time. Certain things are done without really thinking about them.”

“Sure, as long as it comes in handy for you, and isn’t to your disadvantage,” Alexander said. “The better people live, the stingier they get. Those who have something to lose, can’t give. Those who have nothing, can at least give themselves away.”

“Maybe,” Elisabeth muttered. She wasn’t particularly interested in Alexander’s stories. What fascinated her was not what he said, but how he said it: deliberate, struggling for words, with a heavy accent and the wrong intonation, in a somewhat eccentric but nonetheless correct German. She liked the antiquated words he used, that he wrinkled his brow, and after a long pause resumed his story with expressions like *nichtsdestotrotz* or *bezeichnenderweise*. What she liked even more was the way he would pace the room and gesticulate, the fact that she could observe his movements and facial expressions, and the way he would change his pace on his laps around the bedroom. She was waiting and hoping he would join her in bed again.

The old school building was on the verge of collapsing. The city did not provide money for renovations, and so the parents and teachers had to do it themselves in the summer months if classes were to start up as usual in September.

Someone got hold of mortar and paint. One of the fathers, a carpenter, was supposed to repair the desks, another would work on the doors, lay a new floor or replace the plumbing. The older students had agreed to paint the classroom walls at the end of August. And the

principal would make the necessary bribes so that everything was within the bounds of the law.

Loading bricks onto the wheelbarrow, it crossed Alexander's mind that the job of teacher wasn't half as bad as he'd feared it would be as a student back in the nineties, a period of decline and permanent disaster. Back then they would routinely turn off the electricity and heat at his university. On dark winter afternoons, students would attend class by candlelight, wrapped up in coats and blankets. The conditions a decade later were luxurious by comparison. The public school where Alexander worked had a computer lab, flush toilets that actually functioned, and a gym with halfway decent equipment. Still, Zainab, Alexander's aunt, often wondered why her nephew hadn't found a job at one of the more prestigious private academies like the other young and talented teachers did. But it was Alexander's opinion that children from ordinary working-class families also deserved a good education. Besides, he had neither the right connections nor the talent to present himself in such a way as to get one of the coveted, well-paid positions in the private sector. He shared the table in the teachers' lounge with Tanya, Olya and Natasha. All three had recently celebrated their fiftieth work anniversary at the school. All three were still employed, because there was no way they could live off their meager state pensions. Should he really abandon his pupils to the pedagogical notions and didactic skills of these old ladies?

Olya wore her hair in a bun, was always buttoned up to the neck, and made her students stand at attention when they entered the classroom each the morning. Tanya was in a wheelchair, and was pushed into the classroom by a younger colleague. Natasha – who could recite every one of Pushkin's poems from memory, and had read Rabelais in the original French – was beaten up by a fourteen-year-old in the schoolyard last spring. She'd had the audacity to knock a cigarette out of the boy's hand.

“What happened to the boy?” Elisabeth asked. “Did they press charges against him?” She had the bedcover pulled up to her chin.

Alexander seemed tired of pacing the room. He sat down on the edge of the bed with his back facing Elisabeth. “Handing over a young person to our corrupt legal system would have been inhumane,” he said. “We’re not murderers, you know. But the next day the boy came to school with a broken arm. Somebody asked him what had happened, but he didn’t want to talk about it. I saw two young male teachers standing in a corner of the schoolyard smoking, observing the student with a mixture of contempt and amusement; and I saw how the boy looked at them, intimidated. There were no more problems with that particular boy.”

“And his parents?”

“His mother was in prison for prostitution and procuring. What kind of kids do you think go to public schools in a neighborhood like that?”

The light was on in the hallway and the kitchen. On the table was a moldy slice of bread. The dirty dishes stacked in the sink gave off an unpleasant, sickly-sweet smell. Only after a while did Alexander realize that the smell wasn’t coming from the sink at all, but from the bedroom. It was spreading through the entire apartment, had eaten into the curtains and carpets, books and clothing. No sooner had Alexander entered the room, than the smell worked its way into his face, his hands, his skin, and most of all his hair, even stuck to the tiny hairs in his ears and nostrils, to his eyebrows and his eyelashes; and no matter how often he showered afterwards, scrubbed his face and body with the cheap, caustic soap his aunt had used – a soap that could kill any other smell and which left red blotches and a painful rash if you didn’t rinse it off fast enough – for weeks he couldn’t get rid of the stench, the smell of death on everything.

“Let me tell you something,” the emergency worker said, holding a handkerchief in front of her nose, a resolute woman in her mid-fifties with a face that looked like a wet rag, “this is the fifth one to expire on me today. You say your aunt had heart problems? In tropical temperatures like this, heart patients drop like flies. Your aunt has been dead for at least three days. And in this heat! I’d hang new wallpaper in the room if I were you.”

Elisabeth was sure now that Alexander would not be joining her in bed this evening. But the babysitter would still have to stay longer than they’d arranged. The way Alexander told his story, he’d need half the night to finish.

“Can I take you out for a drink?” she asked.

“I don’t drink. Did you forget that I’m a Muslim?” Alexander answered, grinning.

“But you’re Russian too.”

“Exactly. I wouldn’t mind a vodka, but tell me where you can find a good vodka here in Floridsdorf?” He wrapped the blanket around his body, sat down on the chair between the dresser and television, and continued his story.

His aunt had wanted to be cremated and not buried according to Muslim rites. After the fall of the Soviet Union, she’d briefly become religious, had studied the Koran and even taken classes with a mullah. But she soon gave up her newfound faith and reverted to her usual sarcasm, declaring one day that, “God, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, St. Paul, Hitler, Stalin, Brezhnev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and of course the countless popes, metropolitans and patriarchs – they all had one thing in common. They all claimed to have a monopoly on the truth, but in reality had only one thing in mind: to keep us down and exploit us, especially us women, since most of them obviously had a mother complex, or because they thought their dicks were too small. And now we suffer the consequences, for eternity.” When Alexander

disagreed with her and pointed out that God, for sure, was genderless, his aunt replied that he should try telling a devout Muslim that Allah doesn't have a cock and two balls and see what happens then.

That was a few years before her death, and now the funeral party proceeded to the sounds of Bulat Okudzhava's "Ballad of the Blockheads," his aunt's favorite song, from the crematorium to the cemetery plot where the urn was to find its last resting place. Alexander and two cemetery officials led the way, one of them carrying the urn wrapped in a black cloth, the other holding a CD player. They were followed by friends, acquaintances, and Alexander's three ex-girlfriends, two of them with their husbands and children. Then came the entire teaching staff of the school, followed by Zainab's former colleagues, and finally, at the end of the procession, a few relatives of his father, most of whom he only knew fleetingly if at all, but who'd still come to pay their last respects, because "Zainab Tagirovna was a good soul," gentle and obliging, even towards the kind of people she normally referred to as "pigs." Even Fyodor, a brother-in-law she hadn't spoken to in decades after "chasing him out of the house with a broom," owed his job as the janitor at a homeless shelter to Zainab Tagirovna's good offices. Fyodor, too, had a right to exist, Alexander's aunt had explained at the time. One sewer rat more or less didn't make a difference, especially considering all the other, much worse two-legged specimens running around.

Okudzhava's gentle voice and pathos competed with the noise from the highway that ran right past the cemetery. Sparse trees afforded little shade. The paths were dry and dusty after several weeks of drought. The air they breathed was so hot, it felt like it was straight from an oven. But in less than a month the temperature would sink by forty or fifty degrees. The first snow would fall by mid-October, ushering in six months of winter. Even as a child, Alexander detested the climate of his hometown, just as he detested everything else about this provincial backwater, with its multilane boulevards lined with prefab apartment blocks, a

town which had bloated into a metropolis thanks to the erection of prison camps and the brutal industrialization under Stalin. However much the city endeavored of late to refashion itself as a cultural center, it still remained dark and dreary, unable to shake off the burden of the past. Should he try, now that his aunt was dead, to apply for a job in Moscow after all? Alexander asked himself. No, he didn't want to abandon his pupils. What would become of them if all young teachers moved to Moscow or Saint Petersburg? he thought. At least he should stick around until "his" class, his homeroom students, had graduated, and that would be another two years.

The funeral oration was held by Professor Tatyana Konstantinovna Milyukova, director of the Department of Comparative Literature and Intercultural Communication at the local university, an elegant lady in her late thirties, clad in a white, two-piece suit with a red scarf and a pale-blue hat, the brim of which shadowed her face. Zainab Tagirovna had been her Russian teacher from the time she was thirteen until she was eighteen. Without Zainab's help, she wouldn't have made the grade in high school, nor would she have gone on to university, Professor Milyukova explained. For hours on end, often entire nights, Zainab Tagirovna would sit up with her in the tiny room she shared with three younger sisters, helping her study for her entrance exams until she could be sure that her pupil would get the best grades in all of her subjects. She bought her a new dress, and even helped scrape up the necessary bribe-money and distribute it to the right people. "Nothing I've accomplished in my life would have been possible without Zainab Tagirovna's help," Ms. Milyukova explained with tears in her eyes, which she wiped away with a yellow silk handkerchief lined with a frilly white border. "Her commitment and her drive for self-sacrifice were boundless. I gladly accepted that she sometimes slapped me, pulled my pigtails and called me a moron, or said that with my lack of intelligence and good looks I'd probably earn more as a hooker than I would in academia. I never construed her pointed and often apt remarks as insults. On the contrary,

they motivated me to try even harder. I wanted to prove to Zainab Tagirovna that I was more than just a potential whore.”

Alexander himself said only one thing at her graveside: “It’s a privilege to have been raised by my aunt. Anyone who knows me, knows that I often think the things she would have said. She was a better mother to me than my mother ever could have been.”

Elisabeth’s cell phone rang. “Who do you think you are?” screamed Maggie, the babysitter. “You can’t just do whatever you want with me. Am I your slave, or what? I have to go home. Everybody probably thinks that I...”

“You stay right where you are!” Elisabeth interrupted her harshly. “You’ll get paid double your normal wage for tonight, and don’t you dare move your ass from that apartment and leave my child alone.” Maggie was the kind of person who needed clear instructions. She got too big for her boots if you were friendly and complaisant with her. And ever since Elisabeth worked for Viktor Viktorovich, she could afford to sometimes pay her babysitter double or three times as much as they’d agreed to.

“Please, I beg you...”

“You do what I say. Period!”

Alexander’s stories had a curious effect on Elisabeth. Although they made her restless, it was a kind of restlessness she found pleasant in some peculiar way.

“Okay, but...”

“You’ll wait till I get home. I’m busy.”

Elisabeth knew that Maggie wouldn’t leave. She needed the money.

While the two cemetery officials filled in the grave, the mourners came one by one to Alexander, shook his hand and offered their condolences.

“She will live forever in our hearts,” said the principal of the school where Zainab had once worked as a Russian teacher. “None of us, and none of the many hardy men I’ve met in my lifetime, was ever as steadfast as she was.”

“I can attest to that.”

Alexander turned to his uncle, who, in spite of his hemiplegia following his third stroke, had undertaken the arduous journey by train in the accompaniment of his daughter, coming all the way from Irkutsk to attend his sister’s funeral. “Our father always said that Zainab was actually the son he’d always wanted, and that I was the daughter he never wanted,” his uncle explained, sobbing. “She was definitely something special, our Zina. Compared to me, at least. I should be the one in that urn. I’m two years older than her.”

“Women live longer,” Alexander murmured, and turned his back on his uncle.

“An extraordinary human being,” said someone.

“Frighteningly kind,” said another voice.

“If you got in her way... but she only had the best in mind... a woman with hard-hitting arguments, sometimes literally...”

“The debt will never be repaid... The things she gave could never be given back...”

“But when she did give you something, you had to learn how to deal with it first.”

“And yet it was all out of kindness, charity really. She gave herself away.”

“Herself and a few other people.”

“She never had a relationship as far as I know, so no family of her own, and not many friends, but her pupils and her younger colleagues were like children and grandchildren to her.”

“Her older colleagues, too, she treated like her children.”

“Oh earth, I am a stranger here and this by accident alone; dream-deep enigma’s trail does veer through woods celestial unknown.”

Alexander, who had spent the last minutes standing there with his head bowed and had no idea who was offering their sympathy, looked up in astonishment. “*Crawlers cowering behind which, feebly gleams a trail of slime...* Haven’t you noticed that too, dear Alexander Borisovich? The feeble but clearly reflective slime on enigma’s trail, veering seemingly endlessly through the thick celestial woods of our lives? Even on a radiant summer day like today, in this infernal heat, I’m reminded of another quote from the classics: *And star by star blown down to earth, lies in the fields like autumn leaves.*” The man momentarily shaking his hand had caught Alexander’s attention before. He’d kept apart from the others, smoking a cigarillo, took some pictures with his cell phone, and was smiling all the while: an imposing gentleman of about fifty years, dressed in a tail coat, lean and with a narrow face that could have been called immaculate if his nose weren’t so unnaturally wide, almost flat, as if someone had broken and smashed it. His hair was black with flecks of white around his part and on his temples, thick and wavy, down to his shoulders. His eyes were dark-brown, so dark that the iris was indistinguishable from the pupil. At first glance they made the impression you were looking at the ends of two dark tunnels; at second glance you wanted to look away.

“What comes to mind when I think of our dearly departed Zainab Tagirovna? *I’ll show you the way out of hoping, I’ll give life and power to you.*” The stranger’s voice was unpleasantly high and piercing, and somehow didn’t match his outward appearance.

“Knock it off with the poems already! I could never stand that oddball eccentric. Even in school his poems annoyed me.” Alexander spoke louder than he would have liked to. “Who are you, anyway? Do we know each other? Have we met somewhere before?” He wiped his hands on his pants. He found this man’s sweat disagreeable.

“Yesenin was not an oddball; he was severely depressed. But back then, in the 1920s, no one was able to diagnose it. And he was no more eccentric than all the other wackos in our

wonderful country. But to answer your question: surely we've met before, which doesn't mean that we know each other."

"And your name is..."

"Viktor Viktorovich."

"Surname?"

"We don't want to get sidetracked with formalities on a day like this. My condolences. Zainab was a very good friend of mine. Of all the people who were close to me then, she was the finest and gentlest person."

"I'd rather not meet those friends of yours in the dark," Alexander remarked.

"That all depends on you. But I'm afraid I have to excuse myself now. Urgent business. We'll see each other next week. Here's my card. And – oh, of course: do read Yesenin's poems, please. He was Zainab's favorite poet. Once again, my condolences. A great loss!" Before Alexander could say anything, someone else was shaking his hand already.

Judging by his slight accent, Viktor Viktorovich was Georgian. Or maybe Armenian? Or had Alexander simply imagined the accent? Just half an hour later, at the "Dancing Babuschka" restaurant, where the closest friends and a few relatives of Zainab Tagirovna had gathered a second time to see her off properly – which could only be accomplished, it seemed, with the aid of large quantities of hard liquor – Alexander reached into the inside pocket of his sports jacket and pulled out the business card his aunt's peculiar friend had given him.

Viktor Viktorovich Vint, Plumber and Metaphysician, Boulevard of the Working People 17, Oral/Uralsk 090011, Kazakhstan. This was followed by a cell-phone and a home-phone number, as well as by an email and a Facebook address.

Uralsk wasn't far, thirty hours by train at the most. Why hadn't Alexander ever heard of this Vint before? And what did he mean they'd be meeting next week? What did this person

want from him, anyway? Maybe he was just some kind of con man or sponger who was after his and Zainab's meager savings. But Alexander had no opportunity to dwell on this thought any longer, because his half-sister Ludmila, whom he hadn't seen in years, asked to have a word with him in private.

"What's wrong?" he asked, when the two had withdrawn to the little lot between the rear entrance to the kitchen and the wooden fence that divided the premises from the parking area.

"It's about Polina." Ludmila lit a cigarette, took a few hasty puffs and flung the butt in a wide arch, into the gap between the two garbage cans standing next to the door along the wall. "Something awful has happened, and I need your help."

[...]

9

The train ride to the other big city in the Urals took an afternoon and a night. When he disembarked from the train in the morning Alexander's legs were heavy as cement. He'd reserved a bed in a sleeping compartment, and although his three fellow passengers were neither drunk nor loud nor unpleasant in any way, he hadn't slept at all at night. He was haunted by the talk he'd had with his half-sister Ludmila after Zainab's funeral. Ludmila had left that very same evening. Alexander stayed on after the funeral to take care of the last formalities, and had to take two days off from work at school in order to make the trip.

Ludmila and her husband were supposed to pick him up from the platform, but he found them neither there nor in the ticket hall, nor in the large, semicircular entranceway, whose glass façade with murals pictured well-fed, happy workers and peasants who existed nowhere in the Soviet Union when these murals were made in the 1930s. Alexander searched the other

platforms too, but didn't find Ludmila and Pavel. He called Ludmila's cell phone, but only got her voicemail. So he asked a pedestrian for the way to the hospital, took the tram to a large square – which used to be named after Lenin, and was now named after an Orthodox saint – and got on a small private bus. The driver, a surly young man who seemed to hail from Central Asia, had only a vague idea how to drive his vehicle. He went through intersections on red, passed on the right, and slammed on the brakes at every stop. There were no straps or handles to hold on to inside the bus, the seats were wobbly and on the verge of coming loose from their moorings, and the door opened up a crack in each curve, letting in a draft and exhaust fumes. It wasn't long before Alexander had a headache. He closed his eyes after a while, and tried to hold his breath in the hope of conquering his pain.

“You know those little, beautiful moments in life, don't you?” he suddenly heard – an unpleasant voice in his ear that immediately made him think of a talking billy goat. He opened his eyes and saw a lanky blond man with a goatee, and curls hanging down over his forehead. Alexander hadn't noticed that someone had sat down next to him.

“What kind of beautiful moments?” asked Alexander, sullenly. “I'm happy enough to have moments that don't upset me. One moment after the next.”

“Well put, my friend!” the stranger virtually shouted, so loud that the other passengers looked in his direction. “Well put! One non-upsetting moment after the next. That way life remains an eternal backslide, without running off the rails.”

“Quite true.” Alexander pointedly turned his back on the stranger and stared intently out the window. Monumental buildings in the Stalinist wedding-cake style passed by outside, occasionally interrupted by cross streets and green areas. The broad avenue seemed endless.

“When I said beautiful moments, I had something else in mind than what you're thinking – not the euphoric moments of sensual abandon or the self-validation-on-loan we all crave

because we're needy, the kind we expect like a tribute, and which we only get when we least expect it. No, not that."

Alexander contemplated a modern glass palace, with a showcase of the latest Mercedes models taking up the entire ground floor. He stubbornly kept quiet.

"No," the stranger said, and gently laid his hand on Alexander's shoulder. "I mean situations in daily life, a little commotion on this bus, for example, the kind that can happen at any moment. Everyone's getting jolted around in this old clunker of a vehicle. One person falls down, another hurts himself, yet another is caught by a friendly fellow passenger before he hits the ground, and his rescuer asks if he's alright. That makes a person happy, doesn't it? It's ultimately not true that no one cares about what's happening before their very eyes. Not everyone runs roughshod over you then goes his or her own way, do they?"

"I don't run roughshod over anybody, I walk around them," grumbled Alexander.

"Fantastic!" his annoying neighbor shouted. "How right you are! We live in a world of walk-arounders. At least it's better than over the top, or single-mindedly and destructively going right through the middle, don't you think?"

"Surely," sighed Alexander.

"But this friendly fellow passenger, who was so obliging and kept you from falling and breaking your leg, and whom you thankfully follow with your gaze when he gets off the bus, this fellow has also had his fun, because a little while later, when the stranger's long gone, you notice what's missing: your wallet or your watch, or the wedding band you always wore on your finger. Those are the little, beautiful moments I meant. More little than beautiful. The beauty lies in the intellectual and emotional challenge of reacting appropriately to the situation."

"So what's your point?" another passenger a row ahead of them said, joining in the conversation. "What conclusions do you draw from all this?" He turned around and leaned

his forearm on the backrest. “We all know the chasms and abysses of our lives. If we’re not willing to believe that we’re nothing more than mere shadows cast by the eternal whole on this world, then we have to bear the burden of the material.”

Alexander noticed that the man was dressed like a bum. His brown-and-white checkered shirt had holes in it, the sleeves were frayed, and he smelled like a mixture of mothballs, sweat and alcohol. Indeed, the excessive consumption of alcohol seemed to be a cardinal feature of this gentleman. His face was red and swollen, his gaze had a dull kind of sheen. Countless broken blood vessels were visible on his nose. “Why tell stories like that?” he asked. “What knowledge can we gain from them? Nothing, that’s what.”

“Oh, you’re a wise man!” the stranger at Alexander’s side exclaimed. “That we don’t learn anything from them is the greatest lesson we can learn.”

“The more you drink, the lighter you feel, even though you’re actually heavier,” a deep female voice behind Alexander said. “Our lives are full of paradoxes like these.”

“Verily,” the stranger said, without bothering to turn around. “You’re robbed or offended, you trust someone and are disappointed, you think you like someone then turn away from them disillusioned when you find out who they really are. Then you go home, hug your wife and children, and while your wife takes care of the kids before falling into bed exhausted, you go into the bathroom, lock yourself in, whack off in the bathtub – standing or lying, whichever suits your fancy – look through the little window in the wall above the shower head, see a clear, starry sky and think: how beautiful, vast and mysterious life is, in spite of it all. Your anger subsides, and you remember there are humans all over the world who deserve the name human. And because you can think these thoughts, you’re a human being yourself.”

Alexander looked at his seatmate, speechless, and asked himself when this bus ride would end.

“Yes, the core of the moral personality, the inviolable self of man,” the female voice chimed in again. “Epictetus, the great philosopher of antiquity, claimed that the love of humanity should apply to all.” Alexander turned around and looked into the face of a toothless old hag dressed even more shabbily than the alcoholic, who repeated the word “all” in a meaningful tone. “Yes! To all.”

“All. But surely not the Chechens, with their stalls at the market where they rob us blind,” someone said.

“And the oligarchs even less. I’m not gonna give my love to them, that’s for sure. This Epicurus was an ancient Greek. Ancient Greece was a warm and civilized country, where the people ran around in sandals and had no need for underwear. If I’d lived in a country like that, I would have thought the same as that old windbag Epicurus.”

“Epictetus!”

“Once you’ve cleaned out the stall, you can love the ones who are left.”

“The only sure remedy against human scum is a loving Kalashnikov.”

“Against the Jews, too.”

“Against the dumb broads in high heels who get laid and make a killing.”

“They should kill all the pimps and whores.”

“But who’ll be left? This whole country is a brothel.”

“The most important thing is not to get angry. Anger gets you nowhere.”

“I’m not angry, I’m just upset.”

“Is that so? If you’ll allow me to say so...”

At this point the bus stopped in front of a hospital and everyone got off.

“I don’t want to suppress my anger,” explained Elisabeth. Alexander was in bed next to her. He was sitting upright with the pillow propped against his back and she had her head on

his lap. There was nothing going on there, and even though she'd long since accepted the fact that the evening would not go the way she'd planned, she was still a little bit disappointed.

"Why should I suppress my anger? Should I not be angry at that creep who ran over and killed my husband, the father of my child? I wish the same would happen to him. He should die right there where my husband died. In Nesselstauden. What's the point of this bus story, anyway?"

"I'm telling the story chronologically, one thing at a time," said Alexander peevishly.

"I just wish..."

"Be careful what you wish for."

"How come?"

He didn't answer her, but went on speaking.

The hospital corridors were like a labyrinth. There were so many beds you could hardly move, and when a corridor was unobstructed for once, it led to an operating room or a nurses' lounge, whose doors were inevitably locked from inside. Alexander asked and received rude answers. Everyone, whether nurse or orderly, doctor or patient, pointed him in a different direction.

The public hospital was completely run-down. The walls were full of cobwebs and hadn't been painted in years, the linoleum floor was cracked, the bedframes rusty. In a bed parked off to the side, next to the restroom entrance, sat a boy of less than ten years, his knees drawn up against his chest with his chin resting on top of them. His head was shaved, cheeks sunken, his skin gray and pale like the light on a foggy autumn evening. His arms were twisted in a strange, artificial way and offered him no support in the uncomfortable sitting position he'd chosen. He slowly rocked back and forth, and fixed his stare on an invisible

point in nothingness. Alexander passed him, and the boy looked up and asked him faintly:

“Do you have something for me to eat?”

“Where are your parents?”

“Papa’s in prison.”

“And your mother?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“No other relatives?”

“My grandma comes sometimes, but she hardly has anything herself.”

It was a well-known fact that patients in public hospitals were not provided with anything to eat. Family members had to take care of food, clothing, and most of the medicines too.

Alexander had a candy bar in his pocket. He gave it to the child and went on his way. He felt the child’s gaze on the back of his neck, and from there a pain that radiated throughout his entire body.

Polina was in a room with four other coma patients. Alexander didn’t recognize her at first. The tubes in her nose and mouth distorted her face, a face that was badly deformed as it was – by the deep wounds held together by stitches, by the many bruises, and by the bandages wrapped around her head. Alexander approached the bed with a mixture of uncertainty, repugnance and a bad conscience. If only he’d been home that afternoon when those two sons of bitches showed up, he might have been able to avert this misfortune. He could have paid them a visit months ago, showed his presence, staked out his territory, fought to establish a hierarchy. With people like Dmitri, the only thing that helps is a clear position, it occurred to him. That sets boundaries for them, and sometimes prevents the worst from happening. Or was it the other way around? It was tiring to even think about it. He had never made the

journey before, had never come to visit Polina and her husband. He would blame himself for the rest of his life.

An older married couple was standing next to one of the other beds. He was crying; she stroked his gray hair and tried to calm him. Alexander couldn't hear what she was saying, and from the corner of his eye could only see a vague outline of the person lying in the bed.

Polina's eyes were shut. Her eyelashes were stuck together. Alexander thought he could see the remains of mascara between the dried blood and ointments.

"Polina," he whispered, even though he knew it was pointless to talk to her. "Polina! You can't go like this. I won't allow it. We suffer all our lives in this shitty country, and you think you can take it easy in the biggest shopping mall of them all, Paradise. You wanted that so badly, Polina: enough money to spend a whole day shopping once. I laughed at you back then. Now I'd fulfill your every wish, no matter how trite."

He looked up and tried to find a doctor. But neither a doctor nor a nurse were in sight, and there was no button to press to call them. Suddenly there was no one at all, once the married couple had left the room. The hush in the room continued in the dreary landscape outside, extending from the grounds of the hospital to the hills on the distant horizon. Looking out the window, you could see the swamp water glistening.

Ludmila had told him it was very likely her sister would never come out of her coma. There was, however, a very slight chance that in a month, a year, or ten years, she'd come to again and go on living as if nothing had ever happened. On the other hand, neither she nor her husband nor any other relative could afford to pay for her treatment. In a public hospital she ran the risk of dying for the simple reason that no one took care of her. It made Alexander furious just thinking about it. He didn't have any money either. Zainab hadn't had any money. Hardly anyone in his immediate surroundings had any money.

Where was Ludmila, anyway? He called her, got her voicemail again, and finally sent her a text message.

“Handy gadget, these cell phones,” he suddenly heard a voice say behind him, one that seemed familiar. “But it’s only useful if you use it. Her sister must have left it at home or lost it, or maybe it was stolen. You can’t imagine all the things that are stolen in this country, and all the things you can buy! How insignificant, for example, a child seems when there are millions of them living on the streets, as everyone knows; yet how exceedingly valuable it becomes when you turn a child into a commodity and sell it on the free market.”

“You?” asked Alexander, bewildered, when he recognized the man standing next to him.

“I promised you we’d meet again soon,” Viktor Viktorovich said. This time he wasn’t wearing a tail coat but a white shirt and white pants. One could have taken him for a doctor at first, if pants and shirt hadn’t been so immaculate and dear – and if it weren’t for his black shoes, polished to perfection and without a speck of dirt or dust. It seemed like Viktor Viktorovich had flown in through the hospital window and slipped on his shoes when he landed in the room.

“What are you doing here?” asked Alexander.

“Zainab Tagirovna was one of my very best friends, so when she grew so fond of Polina, Polina became very dear to me too.

“So you’re a friend of Polina’s?”

“Oh, I have many friends. Some would rather not be my friend, others seem to want it more than anything. There are some who would love to be like me, others who wouldn’t dream of it, but who nevertheless – or maybe because of it – bear a certain resemblance. When you get right down to it, I’m pretty flexible, and more or less friends with everyone, or at least well acquainted with them. Take Vladimir Putin, for instance. He wasn’t someone I would have expected it from, and yet – life’s funny like that – he ended up becoming one of

my very best friends. Not that I tried to be his friend, or that our friendship matters very much to him personally, at least not at the moment. But others, for sure, have acknowledged our very warm, almost intimate relationship.”

Mental case! it suddenly flashed through Alexander’s mind. The guy broke out of some institution.

“Tragic!” shouted Viktor Viktorovich suddenly and with a whiny voice. “Oh, how tragic! Poor Polina.” He pulled out a snow-white handkerchief with the initials VVV embroidered on it and dabbed the tears from his eyes. “What a miserable creature a human being is when he does something bad to his fellow humans – or let’s say, something profoundly evil, that couldn’t be any more profound or more evil, even if it’s your own wife, or rather, precisely if it’s your own wife.”

The conversation was getting unpleasant for Alexander. He wanted to go, but Viktor Viktorovich was holding onto his sleeve. “Stay just a little bit longer, esteemed Alexander Borisovich. Even if Polina can’t hear you, she can still feel your presence, no matter how deplorable her condition is. Please excuse my careless remarks, which I sometimes tend to in a state of emotional exuberance and shock.”

“Everyone has his own style,” muttered Alexander, wondering how to get rid of this annoying individual.

“Do you know Austria?” Viktor Viktorovich suddenly asked.

“Sorry?”

“Austria. A tiny country in the middle of Europe. With lots of mountains and lakes, valleys, countless hotels that are much too big and swanky, and a few plains, as monotonous and melancholic as ours. All in all pretty idyllic, I’d say. And the water’s wonderful. You can drink it without even filtering or boiling it. It’s the home of Mozart and Stefan Zweig, Sigmund Freud and – unfortunately – Adolf Hitler. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger – you

know, the body-builder, actor, and has-been politician. The people there have manners. True, most of them are pretty superficial, always orbiting around themselves, and tend to have a certain nastiness so characteristic of people in small countries – though with small I don't mean literally and geographically, but in a figurative sense. But Vienna, the Pearl of the Danube, the city of cities..."

"I know where Austria is. I studied German language and literature."

"Would you care to accompany me to Austria? I can speak good German myself, of course, along with English, French, Italian and Spanish, which we all know aren't very hard to learn, but I do need an assistant while I'm there on business, one who can speak the language; and since our beloved Zainab Tagirovna has departed from us, and since you, I assume, are single and don't have children..."

"How do you expect that to happen?" Alexander could barely contain his anger now. "I have a job as a teacher and I don't want to lose it. I won't get a visa, and don't have the money to buy one either. I have some really good friends here, and then there's Polina..."

"Polina needs support. She could go into a private clinic or have a hired nurse to take care of her."

"You'd be willing to pay me a salary like that?"

"Much more than you think. And as far as the visa is concerned..." He folded his arms in front of his chest and shot Alexander a glance that made him think he'd be sucked into the insides of this man, where something dark and fearful awaited him. "As far as the visa is concerned, you don't need to worry about that. I'm professional to the core in everything I do, in all projects great and small, business or pleasure. I know who to bribe and who to brownnose if you need to come across as a man of integrity. I know when to whine and when to appeal to someone's conscience. In a nutshell, a Schengen visa won't be a problem in our case."

Alexander was hesitant. The man was obviously a nutcase. But weren't there plenty of nutcases in this country who'd suddenly struck it rich? If his offer was serious, it might save Polina's life, and would also be an opportunity to leave behind this dreary life of his for a while. What was keeping him at his school, after all, the one he'd been teaching at for years?

"What's keeping you at your school?" Viktor Viktorovich seemed to divine Alexander's thoughts. "A class you'd like to see off? With the money you'd make working for me in Vienna you can open a private school for orphans in the Urals, or a home for former waifs using nothing but the latest educational methods – instead of hanging the kids from the window bars with handcuffs, or beating the little souls out of their bodies with leather straps, like they normally do in Russian homes for maladjusted children."

This sounded tempting.

"How many homeless children are there in the Russian Federation?"

"About four million."

"You see!"

Alexander looked at Polina and had the impression her eyelids were twitching.

"What did the great Pushkin say in his novel *The Captain's Daughter*? *Better to drink living blood than eat dead flesh for a hundred years. Seize the opportunity.*" He pressed a fat, wine-red envelope in Alexander's hand. "An advance. At your disposal. It's yours, however you decide in the end."

"How do I contact you?"

"I'll get in touch with you in a week."

"Oh, by the way, what kind of work do you do in Austria?"

"I'm a magician, a facilitator of self-awareness, an expert on the Russian soul, a psychotherapist without a gun license – in other words, a charlatan of the highest order. Call it what you like."

Alexander stayed a few minutes with Polina. Then he followed Viktor Viktorovich out into the hallway, tried in vain to catch up to him, followed the endless labyrinth of corridors, found neither stairwell nor elevator, jostled into someone without apologizing, was jostled into himself, rushed on and eventually found the way out – just in time to see Viktor Viktorovich shake the hand of a blond man with a goatee beard and climb into a black car with him, an ancient but lovingly cared for Zhiguli. This man, whom Viktor Viktorovich seemed to treat with the greatest respect, was beyond a doubt the same man who'd sat next to Alexander on the bus.

– Translated from the German by David Burnett

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