Cocaine

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Part 1

1

The child cried and squirmed about in its messed-up bed, banging its head against the wooden walls of the cot and fitfully clenching and unclenching its little fists, which were getting thinner with every day that passed; tormented by hunger, it screamed desperately and hysterically, as if hinting that someone ought to feed it, but all for nothing: my wife's breasts had not produced any milk for several days straight already. It's not easy to walk impassively past a child squalling like that, pretending for seven days in a row that its abominable wailing doesn't bother you at all as you read the newspaper. It was hard during the day, but it was even harder at night. The spiteful child seemed to have set its mind on not letting us get to sleep: I stuffed cotton wool in my ears and my wife poured paraffin wax into hers – to put it in a nutshell, this could not go on for long. At the family council we decided to buy the child a tin of cheap baby formula. That was more or less how it all began. The lamentable beginning of a lamentable story, such a revolting story that I don't even want to remember it.

"Go to the store and buy our son a tin of baby formula," my wife told me.

"Yes, yes, my dear. All right."

"No, seriously, put down the newspaper and go to the store."

"Oh, for crying out loud! You've been hassling me all week! I've just barely crawled back home from work, dog-tired, and I have to drag myself off to some godforsaken spot! And in weather like this too."

And the weather really wasn't the best you could ask for – it had been pouring with rain for three days straight, or maybe even four. A strange kind of summer. And not just the summer – a strange kind of life. Last Sunday, for instance, I went off fishing. The evening before, my wife dug up lots of worms and sorted out the rods. And I sat there on the riverbank for about half an hour, then went back home: there was a dank wind blowing from off the river and fine, hazy drizzle – the kind of

rain there's no way you can shelter from – and the cigarettes wouldn't burn properly, they got damp in five minutes . . . A strange kind of summer. A strange kind of life.

"But you haven't got a job," my wife said. "How could you come back from work tired?"

"I just did. As usual."

"What does that mean, as usual?"

She caught me out there, that's for sure.

"Okay. I'll go. I'll go one of these days. Only get off my back. Let me read the newspaper. I'll finish this article and I'll go."

"And what's the article about?"

"About children dying of starvation in Africa," I said coolly.

"Stupid fool."

"Takes one to know one."

Oh, my friends, family life is a real funny farm. How abruptly marriage changes women, it changes them out of all recognition. And then there's a child bawling with hunger for a whole week. No wonder you start blowing your top and talking all sorts of drivel.

"All right," I said, dourly putting on my rubber boots and woolly hat. "Give me the money. And make sure there's enough for some beer."

2

I walked along, sinking into the snow almost right up to my knees, hiding my face behind my upturned collar: a nasty blizzard was whirling about in such sharp gusts that after half an hour my face was stinging painfully, my eyes were watering, and I couldn't even stir my fingers in my thin gloves. Where had this blizzard come from? I'd glanced out the window just before I left: the sky was clear and the stars looked as bright as if they'd been specially polished up with fluffy rags and toothpowder.

"Don't you notice anything?" an unfamiliar passerby asked out of the blue.

I started in surprise.

"Why?" I replied. It was already quite dark in the street. "I do notice a few things. There are people standing at the bus stop over there," I said, pointing with my hand. "And an old woman walking out of the shop over there. See? She's going to slip and fall now. And over there – that way, in the passage between the buildings, there are children sliding on the ice under a broken street lamp."

"That's not what I'm talking about," the stranger said. "I mean, don't you notice anything strange?"

"Strange?" I pensively repeated after him. "No, I don't think there's anything strange. It's just very cold, and the blizzard started up all of a sudden."

He smiled. It was a bad kind of smile: only his lips shifted their position on his dry, sallow face, extending sideways towards his ears.

"Look round."

I looked round.

"Well?" he asked.

"I already told you," I began, getting a bit annoyed. "The old woman over there, walking out of the shop, she'll come clattering down off the steps in a moment, the children over there are sliding on the ice, and over there – see, people standing under a broken street lamp in the passage between two buildings, very probably waiting for a bus."

I suddenly realized that I'd seen this man before somewhere. I'd seen him somewhere. And his teeth in particular seemed quite strangely familiar to me: thin and long, very regular – like a dog's – standing in pink gums.

"Well, okay then," I said. "I think I'll be going."

"So quickly?"

"And why not?"

"Yes indeed," he responded.

And he held out his hand in a double-layered mitten.

I shook it firmly.

“Look after yourself. You’ve got a good warm hat, don’t lose it or you’ll catch cold.”

Strange, I immediately thought to myself, why did he suddenly mention my hat? Maybe he’s one of those people . . .

“It’s a pretty good hat,” I said.

“A beautiful hat.”

“I’m happy enough with it.”

“Did your wife knit it?”

“Oh, sure. Some chance. My friend gave it to me before he flew off into space.”

The stranger was surprised at that and shook his head.

“I’d never have said that. It feels like your wife knitted it.”

“No way! She’d never knit anything. She sent me out, sick and tired, to the store! And I was reading the newspaper.”

“I know, I know,” he said with a strange smile.

I won’t lie: at that moment I got a bad feeling. How could a stranger know details like this? He knew about the newspaper, and about my wife, and about the hat. The hat really was knitted by my wife, although I’d hidden that fact for all these years.

“And what was I reading about?” I asked with bated breath.

“About Africa,” he replied coolly. “About children starving to death there.”

I stopped walking.

“How do you know all of this?”

“Well, I know all sorts of stuff.”

“How?”

He shrugged and smiled, displaying the crooked, pinkish teeth in his mouth.

I suddenly snatched a hammer and nail out of my pocket, set the nail to his head and swung the hammer back.

“Tell me quickly,” I shouted, “or it’ll be worse for you! Tell me, you bastard!”

“I just read it, that’s all, don’t get so worked up!” he shouted and spat angrily into the snow. “I read your book, you halfwit, in a library. I wanted to ask you for an autograph! I was thinking I might even buy the book, I wouldn’t mind the hundred roubles.”

He spat again – this time at my feet. Then he swung round and went away.

There’s this word: “ashamed”. Well then, I felt very ashamed. Terribly ashamed. Kind of painfully ashamed. In the first place, he was a reader, and in the second place, he’d been going to buy my book.

Oh, how badly it had all turned out!

After helping the old woman up out of the snow she had fallen into and dusting down her coat, I asked her in a low voice, looking round:

“What’s next? What should I write about next?”

Going up on her toes, she whispered:

“A cat with kittens . . .”

And she grabbed up her shopping bags and ran away from me, looking back and scattering the snow to both sides with her thick felt boots . . . She ran along the storefront, along the path that was lit up by the display window, the path the old yard keeper had cleared in the morning, she ran past the stop where the people were huddling together as they waited for a bus, she ran past the children sliding on the ice under the broken street lamp in the passage between two buildings, she slipped and fell, but immediately bounced up, as if she were made out of rubber, as if she were tightly inflated with compressed air, grabbed her heavy shopping bags and ran on, past the bus stop, past the store with the brightly lit window, past the street lamp with the children on the ice, past the people waiting for a bus, past me, as I followed her amazing run with keen interest, past the children, past the store, past the bus stop, past the unfamiliar passerby, chewing pensively on the end of a papirosa broken by the wind and peering into the distance with his eyes narrowed, past a tram standing on the opposite side of the street at three o’clock in the morning, past me, past her shopping bags – left in the luggage lockers – past the café with the cloakroom and the cloakroom attendant who took tips, past the hotel with the sign that read “World,” past the poor little children sliding on the ice under the broken streetlamp in the passage between two buildings that had been built on my street, on the street where I grew up and slid on the ice under a broken street lamp, where my childhood was spent, where my mother lives, where my sweetheart, who left me, used to live, where the woman who won’t ever love me (and therefore won’t ever leave me) lives now, where I’m standing in a deep snowdrift, sheltering my face behind my collar from the terrible blizzard, where no one remembers me any longer, where they’ve put up a memorial to me – not very big, but silver – where the shop is, the one the old woman ran past, stamping in her felt boots, breathing loudly, raising clouds of snow behind her, forming eddies and strange currents of air, in which the children and the bus stop and the street lamp and the buildings all quiver, she ran past, swinging her shopping bags and breathing loudly – straight to the metro. So that’s where she was running to! And I thought . . .

The mysterious old woman whom I had helped to get up and whose coat I had dusted off, a greenish coat with buttons that were greenish too, only darker. A mysterious old woman.

3

Coming towards me along the sidewalk heaped up with snow was a cat, with her kittens scampering along behind her really, really quickly on their weak little paws. Small in their winter fluff, they squealed touchingly as they sank into the snowdrifts, and then the cat went back and fished them out of the snow with her teeth.

Only what was this?

I'd have to get new glasses, because I couldn't see very well in these ones.

In actual fact it wasn't a cat at all, but simply a rat, a repulsive rat, a sewer rat in her long winter coat, with her fat, lazy, little baby rats scurrying after her in a row.

It was their squealing that I had mistaken for the kittens' miaowing.

Although basically the sound is quite similar.

And then the rat crawled up to the edge of the street and stopped there. The rat was agitated and perplexed, anxiously concerned for the baby rats and herself, and that's understandable from a human viewpoint too: who wants to kick the bucket?

When the rat seemed ready to turn back, help unexpectedly arrived: a policeman suddenly climbed down the ladder from his little glass booth. Frowning in order to dissemble his tender feelings, he walked out into the street and held out his striped baton, which lit up like a little lamp on a New Year's tree. Skidding on the ice, the rat extended its little claws and tumbled heavily over the kerb onto the roadway. The line of baby rats followed her, the entire family waving its little tails. Once she was on the other side, the rat waited for everyone, then jumped up into a litter-bin and dangled her winter-hairy tail down from there. Her little children scrambled up it into the bin.

I was mesmerized by the sight.

4

Soon a café appeared on my path. Without giving it a thought, I took hold of the massive, twisted handle and pushed on the door. The little bell above the door greeted me in friendly fashion with the Chinese word “dzing-djang”.

The cloakroom attendant who worked here was an old, very thin man with a wrinkly face that looked like a dried mushroom. He peered sternly at the customers and never spoke to anyone, maintaining his dignity. I took off my jacket on the move and held it out to the cloakroom attendant. While he was hanging it up, I pulled my hat off my head (the woolly one, knitted by my wife, which the chance passerby had recognized), and when the attendant came back with my tag, I handed him the hat. An entire eternity, metaphorically speaking, passed before that bastard shook his stupid goat’s head.

“Won’t you take it, or what? They’re hanging up over there, look . . .” I gestured timidly towards the pegs, where hats really were hanging, but such hats . . .

Like unto the morning mist or fine little clouds of smoke they floated in the air, some of them bluish-gray, some of them darkish, either sable or even chinchilla, soft and gentle, even on the eyes, almost immaterial and exceptionally expensive.

Ah, why didn’t I leave, why didn’t I run like a whirlwind, while he was still just shaking his head? Where was that much-vaunted intuition, where was the natural sense of self-preservation familiar to every tiny little beetle! I should have run, flown, taken off, decamped, I shouldn’t have insisted, I shouldn’t, for after all, I was already oppressed by an unpleasant metallic taste in my mouth from a dreary sense of impending catastrophe, but I stayed where I was.

“Where are they hanging?” the old bastard asked.

I pointed my finger – my trembling finger – at the pegs.

Would you like me to tell you what was in his eyes?

Contempt, that’s what was in his eyes.

“But those are fur,” he said in a loud, expressive voice. “And you’ve got . . .”

He was at a loss to choose an expression, as the author himself is at a loss, and if the author himself is at a loss – then how can some pitiful cloakroom assistant fail to be at a loss, when he has only three classes of schooling and a complicated employment history, when it’s a struggle for him to read a newspaper (and he mostly limits himself to the headlines, which are set in large type), and he can only count as far as thirteen, and then only in German?

“And you’ve got some kind of mosquito.”

That was what he said, please note that. And the sheer, flagrant baselessness of the accusation – what kind of mosquito could it be, if it was a hat? – was doubly insulting.

“Heh-heh, hee-hee, ho-ho,” customers chuckled unctuously behind me.

“How come?”

I was crushed and roundly disgraced.

“How come, how come,” the cloakroom attendant repeated mockingly and pulled a repulsive face: “That’s how.”

He didn’t look at me again. For him I had disappeared . . . well, in the way that mosquito would have disappeared if he had deftly swatted with his hand. Literally only just a second ago, I was flying about, full of myself, flaunting my wings in all directions – and suddenly I completely disappeared. Someone handed the old man a coat – and he went to hang up that coat, but I was still standing there, staring stupidly into empty space; and then, stumbling and bumping into people, I plodded into the hall of the café . . . I don’t remember what I ordered, especially since my appetite had disappeared. It seemed as if everyone on all sides was whispering about me. I simply took no notice of the waitresses, and they carried on darting between the tables, as supple as gazelles and experienced. I clutched a knife tight in my hand. If I had not restrained myself at the last instant, I would have dashed into the cloakroom and killed that scumbag. Everyone was dancing. Only one pathetic old man, who had only one leg, so that he used a crutch, hopped awkwardly from one table to another and, like the great Nekrasov during his period of poverty, hid behind a newspaper as he ate leftovers off the plates.

I burst out laughing.

5

This was the way I laughed:

“Ha-ha-ha!”

No, probably not like that. Like this:

“Ha-ha-ha!”

That is more like the way I laughed, but to an author who remembers his laughter as if it rang out only a moment ago, the similarity seems inadequate. The author would like the identity to be absolute. Like so:

“Ha-ha-ha!”

No, that’s still off-target.

Strange. Earlier, in my younger years, I used to just blurt something out – and it was spot on. Apparently as the years pass by, the pen starts misfiring. But let us not be disheartened. Let us try once again.

“Ha-ha-ha!” I laughed.

See, brother, that’s better already.

“Ha, ha!”

It’s true, isn’t it, you too can already feel that it’s better?

“Ha-ha, ha!” I laughed.

On the other hand, maybe it would be better to try like this?

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

He laughed.

Who is this “he”? Now the reader is already scratching his noggin in anxiety and bewilderment: who is this mysterious “he” and what in blazes is he doing on the pages of this narrative?

Keep calm, dear reader, all will be made clear.

That is to say, let us continue. Where did we stop?

We stopped at the point where the old lady went into the bathroom and took a warm shower, after which she dried herself with a fresh towel and went out onto the balcony. In principle, that is the end already.

(At this point, it must be said, the following has happened: the curious reader has mentally slapped the author on the shoulder and, twirling one finger beside his temple, asked: “Have you completely lost your marbles? Maybe you should give up this kind of work – it doesn’t bring in any money, or any well-deserved fame, and it throws a weak psyche off balance . . . Or should I call an emergency ambulance? You know, the kind with big, hulking attendants?”

“No, no,” the author cries out in fright with a shudder. “Anything but the attendants! We know what those attendants are like! Please, please! Two massive brutes will arrive and they’ll guzzle all the tea and use up lots of electricity, and trample mud around the place and pilfer the spaghetti out of the cupboard! Why don’t I just tell you about the poor old woman, who locked her daughter away in a trunk when she was still very little and then fed her through a little hole for the rest of her life . . .”

But the reader will sternly slam his mental fist down on the table: no old women, that’s from a different novel too. You take a swig of kefir, brother, and carry on about the way you laughed!

“All right,” I’ll reply modestly to that.

It shall be done.)

I laughed so sinisterly, it sent shivers down my spine.

This is the way I laughed:

“Ha-ha-ha!”

(Note the way the author insistently, relentlessly searches for the only coloration that will sparkle and glitter, galvanizing the page into life. This insistence alone is already enough to make the reader aware that he has before him the work of a true Master.)

So on we go, follow me, Reader!

This is the way I laughed:

“Ha-ha-ha!”

By the way, a man’s character can always be determined in exhaustive detail from his laugh. No matter how hard he might try to conceal himself, to hide under the guise, for instance, of a campaigner for freedom or the environment, no matter how hard he pretends to be a sportsman, a teacher of literature, or anyone else at all, the moment he opens his trap and laughs, his laughter will give him away, hook, line and sinker. The author, for instance, was told the story of a certain director of a bank: a respectable sort of fellow and nice kind of guy, apparently a good family man, who was parachuted in here fifty years ago – and when he laughed one day, they immediately saw straight through him: no, you’re not a nice person. He hit back, shouting: it’s just that I’ve got a split lip. I can’t stretch the skin, otherwise I would have laughed full and hearty! But they told him: we know the way you would have snorted with laughter! And he said: yes, I would have snorted with laughter, how I would have snorted with laughter! And they told him: we know, we know the way you would have snorted. And they all narrowed their eyes.

And he said: just let me get better, and then I'll really snort with laughter for you! So they told him: okay then buddy, come on, in brief, get better and then we'll see. And he said: thanks, guys, thanks for that! And they told him: it's okay, no big deal . . . And he said: really, no shit, I'll snort with laughter so loud! And they told him: listen, we've had enough of you, shut up now! And he said, no really, no shit, I think I'm going to snort with laughter right now. And that, naturally enough, frightened them all: no one had been expecting a twist like that. They told him: listen, you haven't recovered your strength yet, get some treatment, go to a sanatorium, here is a voucher for a health resort, build up your strength and then snort away with laughter to your heart's content! Ah, but no way! Oh no, said the guy with the lip, with this dirty little smile on his face, I think I'll just go right ahead and snort with laughter.

And that phrase rang out so ominously in the silence that had fallen that it gave everyone the willies. And they all gradually left and went home, and at home they locked themselves in and climbed under their beds.

And they made their wives guard the windows during the night.

In short, just to make sure no one gets any strange ideas, the way I snorted with laughter was as follows:

"Ha-ha-ha!"

6

I dashed towards the stage like a whirlwind, smashing and overturning tables and chairs along the way. People all around were fighting. It was stuffy, and women were screaming. I danced beautifully. Naturally, everyone was paying attention to me. A tangle of people fighting went whirling past me: arms, legs, heads, tatters of clothing. Someone's sliced-off or simply torn-off ear fell on the floor at my feet. As a writer and a humanist, I couldn't give a damn for the whole lousy business.

A terrible crack, and then a crash, drowned out the music: it was the huge metal chandelier that had fallen off the ceiling. Instantly there were screams and squeals and pungent-smelling rivulets of scarlet gushed out from under the chandelier. Abandoning their guitars and drums, the musicians rushed to the chandelier, dropped to the floor and started greedily lapping up the blood, choking and spluttering.

A moment later the blood-sated musicians set their strings thrumming again, and the whirlwind of the dance swept me in behind the bar, where the gazelle-waitresses, experienced and supple, were lying in a neat row in puddles of beer . . . One of them wasn't taken. I downed a glass of something sour and flung myself on her, the gazelle.

The magicians started playing a grand flourish.

Don't tell me that writers are impractical people who easily lose their heads in a moment of enthusiasm: I managed to grope in her pocket. There was a moment when she imprudently became distracted and took away the hand with which she was squeezing her greasy pocket shut. Only just a few seconds! But for me, with my lightning-fast reactions, that was quite long enough.

Unable to restrain myself, I exclaimed three times in a loud voice: "Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!"

When it was all over, I thanked the waitress demurely and set off towards the door.

7

I don't remember at all how I ended up in our town's department store and went up to the third floor. I must admit that I was feeling bad. I think I'd developed a temperature: I felt dizzy and I had a headache, sometimes I got this repulsive darkness in front of my eyes, and at those moments my legs turned weak and I had to stop so that I wouldn't fall down. I started feeling a little bit better at the department with the enticing name "Do it yourself".

Strangely enough, before then I had never killed any living people. What's more, at that time I didn't even know exactly how people usually killed each other. I was young and a little bit nervous, and I had absolutely no one to ask for advice.

The salesgirl – a young woman with flaxen hair, a pretty young woman in a rather short, lettuce-green coat – glanced at me indifferently when I was about to walk up to her and ask the question that was bothering me. It was fortunate that I stopped in time . . .

In short, there was a terrible downpour when I found myself back out in the street. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed blindingly. On the Kremlin's Spassky Tower in a distant city the chimes inaudibly struck 21.00. From behind the corner of the building opposite, I watched the exit of the café. I won't lie, I don't remember how that man came out into the street, or how the pursuit began and then ended when he reached the building where he lived – the "Comrade Khrushchev" glass and concrete skyscraper. It was dark, thick snow was falling, I could barely set one foot in front of the other, my thoughts were a confused tangle; I don't know how I managed not to pass out.

After scraping his feet over the grille to clean off the mud that had stuck to his soles, the old man opened the door and disappeared inside. A few seconds later I also walked in the entryway, fumbling in my pocket for the nail I'd got from the salesgirl. I heard footsteps from the next floor up. I walked after them up the dimly lit stairs.

The footsteps fell silent. He was standing on the landing in front of his own door, taking his keys out of his pocket. Spotting the apartment, I moved back into the shadow. The door opened: the scoundrel walked into the hallway, slamming the door behind him.

It's strange, but I never once gave any proper thought to how I was going to carry out my appalling intention until the very last moment. Certainly, I'd bought a nail and a hammer to go with it, but how could I get into his home? How could I get as close to this bastard as I needed to in order to strike my blow?

Pulling my woolly hat off my head, I wrapped it in a plastic bag and tied it tightly round with string. I walked up the steps. There was no bell-push on the wall. I knocked, quietly at first and then more loudly.

No one responded from behind the door for a long time.

Only I suddenly got the feeling that he was standing behind the door, in his dark corridor on the other side, and listening. I could just see him there: fat, with his jacket unbuttoned over his paunch,

and sweaty, he was listening with his ear pressed against the door, feeling afraid and scratching his hairy chest through his shirt.

We stood there like that for a long time – me in the stairway and him in the corridor – and listened, licking our lips in exactly the same way, almost simultaneously, with our eyes half-closed in order to hear better.

He gave way first and opened his door, which turned out to be on a chain for some reason.

8

“What’s your door doing on a chain?” I asked.

“Why, isn’t that allowed?”

He took a cheese sandwich out of his pocket, bit off half of it and started working away with his jaw, snuffling through his nose and looking at me sullenly. His eyes were brown and set too close together.

“I asked you why you closed the door on the chain,” I said.

“No particular reason, it just happened,” he replied.

“How come it ‘just happened’?”

“Just like I said,” he laughed, but immediately choked and started coughing, spitting sandwich straight into my face.

I told him this:

“Not even kittens are born because it ‘just happened’.”

And I repeated my question.

“Why have you gone and closed all the doors here on the chains? Eh?”

And I wiped my face with my sleeve, keeping my intent gaze fixed on him.

“What’s it to you, you pushy jerk?” he forced out through his coughing, spitting and spitting all the time: it was amazing how much of that sandwich he’d managed to stuff into his trap in one bite.

“I’m asking you for the last time, you lousy piece of garbage: why did you close all the doors on the chains?”

He coughed and spat, spat and coughed. And he looked at me in a sulky sort of way, as if he secretly mistrusted me.

“Isn’t the lock enough for you, then?”

My strength was running out. I had to hold on to the wall to stop myself from falling.

“No,” he snapped, took another bite of the sandwich and started coughing again.

What kind of an answer is that? It was clear at once that he was pretty dimwitted.

He coughed.

“I’m counting to three,” I said. “O-one . . .”

He started bending down his sweaty fingers that looked like sausages.

“Two-o,” I said.

He bent down another finger.

“Two and a quarter . . .”

He hesitated and bent down a third finger a little bit.

“Two and a half.”

The fat man bent the finger down halfway.

“Two and a half and a quarter.”

His finger was already almost touching his palm.

“Well then, are you going to tell me or not? I’m not going to wait any longer. Tell me quickly, you garbage! If you don’t tell me . . . But then, I couldn’t really give a damn. I actually came here for a quite different reason.”

The fat man breathed out in relief and ran his hand over his forehead. He had obviously gotten seriously frightened.

Without saying anything I held out the package tied round with string.

9

“What’s this?”

“It’s a hat,” I replied, and suddenly realized I’d better alter my voice to speak to him, so he wouldn’t recognize me as the recent visitor to his café.

“Take it, please,” I said in an altered voice.

“What’s wrong with your . . .” he didn’t finish ther question, peering at me suspiciously.

“My voice is breaking.”

“Uhu,” he said and turned his attention to the package.

Stuffing the rest of the sandwich into his mouth, he started investigating the package: he rustled the plastic, examined it against the light, crumpled it and groped at it, bit off a little piece and pondered, chewing and sucking on one tooth in a special, professional kind of way.

I patiently waited for the expert evaluation to end.

“No,” he said eventually, shaking his head.

“You won’t take it?”

“No,” – was the curt reply.

I knew how to proceed: I took out the small change I was keeping ready in my pocket and held it out through the crack. The money immediately disappeared behind the door, but there was still a glint of mistrust in the old man’s eyes.

“Come tomorrow, we start work at ten. Come at ten o’clock on the dot, and I’ll take it from you right away. No waiting in line.”

“There’s no way I can make it tomorrow at ten. The thing is, I’ve got classes. That is, I’m a student. And tomorrow I’ve got this crucial class. I mean exam.”

“Maybe tomorrow, all the same?”

“Take it now: I’ve explained already, I won’t have any time at all tomorrow . . . It’s a good hat, expensive,” I lied.

“Okay.” The old man took off the chain and swung open the door. “Come in.”

I followed him down a long, dark corridor into a room in which there was a round table on curved legs, several chairs and a sofa with the seat worn into holes. Two portraits – one of a repulsive old woman in a lacy cap and one of a sickly-looking man with a beard and sunken cheeks à la great writer of the past Dostoyevsky – caught my eye immediately.

“What did you fasten it up so tight for?” the old man asked irritably, tugging at the string. “Okay. You untie it here, and I’ll go and bring a tag.”

The old man dropped the package on the table and walked out of the room.

I promptly strode in pursuit, taking the nail and the hammer out of my pockets.

The old man suddenly appeared in the doorway again.

“Listen, that thing of yours isn’t infectious, is it?”

“What thing exactly?” I asked, puzzled.

“What thing? The thing with your throat, the breaking . . .”

“Oh no, of course it isn’t!” I reassured him hastily. “It passes off with age, old pal.”

“Okay, wait, I’ll just bring the tag.”

Feeling understandably impatient, I set off after him.

10

Late that evening I got a call from a friend to whom I had given this amazing novel to read a few days earlier. His voice sounded kind of perplexed.

“What are you doing right now?” he asked me.

“Nothing. Watching TV . . .”

I was bragging a bit there: naturally, I don’t have any TV.

“And what’s on?”

“I don’t know.”

“Uh-huh,” he drawled. “You’re lucky. But I don’t have a TV . . .” – I don’t know why he lied, I know for sure he does have a TV.

“That’s okay. Come over and we’ll watch mine.”

“You mean you’ve really bought one?” he asked then, sounding kind of baffled.

“No.”

“Uh-huh. I get it,” he said. “There’s something I wanted to say to you. Your, mmm . . .”

He said nothing for a while.

“That little novel thing of yours, I’ve already read it.”

“Well, what do you think? Great isn’t it?”

“Well, you know . . . Maybe we’d better get together? Why talk on the phone? You know, you can mortally wound someone’s feelings that way.”

“Wound someone’s feelings?” I was flabbergasted. “Hang on, you mean you didn’t really like it that much?”

“How can I put it? The weather’s been so terrible just recently.”

“Don’t you go muddying the water,” I said coolly. “Bitter truth is better than sugary falsehood. Take a good, hard swing.”

“I’m sorry,” my kind friend said in a quiet voice. “I can’t.”

“Hit me,” I told him. “Have no pity.”

“Why don’t we just get together somewhere,” he suggested, after pausing for a while. “We can sit and talk everything over . . .”

“All righty. I’ll just turn off the TV and run over straightaway.”

“Right, do that. See you then,” said my friend.

“See you, good buddy.”

“Don’t you feel sad.”

“I’m not feeling sad.”

“You’re right not to.”

“You bet.”

We hung up simultaneously. After turning off the TV, I pulled on my jacket, put my hat in my pocket and ran out of the apartment.

* * * * *

“You know . . .” – those were the first words my friend said. “Your novel’s kind of weird . . .”

“Well that’s really cool!” I exclaimed and slapped him on the shoulder.

He winced and rubbed his shoulder with his hand.

“Don’t slap me on the shoulder that way again, or I’ll tear your head off.”

I knew my friend wasn’t joking.

“It’s an idiotic kind of feeling: you read and read, and you understand damn all about what’s what and what the point is. Just when you think you’ve got it, just when you think you’re dragging it along by the tail . . .” – he showed me how he dragged something by the tail – “. . . you turn the page and it just gives you the finger.” He extended one finger and showed it to himself. “You understand bugger all again.”

“That’s a problem,” I said.

“I simply don’t understand why anyone writes novels like this, to be honest.”

He looked at me compassionately.

“Neither do I.”

“You should have, you know, written about rabbits,” he said, delighted at his own idea.

“How do you mean?”

“These two rabbits sitting in a little burrow, a husband and wife, all fluffy and grey, and the wife has put her head on his shoulder, she’s eating a carrot and rubbing her ears up against him. And he says to her . . .”

“What do you see, my dear, on this wall calendar?” I concluded for him.

“In what wall calendar? There wasn’t any wall calendar there.”

“All right, I’m sorry. That’s from the next chapter.”

He took a sip from his glass. He was obviously offended by my remark.

“They’re sitting in a little burrow, eating their carrot, affectionately rubbing their ears against each other . . .”

My friend stopped talking and turned away; I saw that his eyes had turned red and filled with tears.

“And she says to him: ‘How good it is, my dear,’ he said, suddenly speaking in a woman’s voice, ‘that you chose this very meadow to build our little burrow in . . . I’ve never seen such a lovely meadow before.’ And he answers her: ‘I’m, like, prepared to do anything for you, dear, I’ll work myself to a fucking frazzle,’ he says, ‘just to keep you satisfied according to plan.’

“She says: ‘When I think about our little children, it just makes me want to cry right away.’ And he answers her affectionately, looking, you know, down at her: ‘My darling, you’re such a wonderful mother, and I want to give you an expensive present.’ ‘What sort of expensive present is that?’ she asks, blushing.

“‘This summer we’ll go for a vacation in Nice, my little sweetie-pie. I’ve, like, already booked a luxury room in a five-star hotel.’ Well, you get the idea . . .”

My friend turned away and inconspicuously wiped away his tears with his sleeve.

“Joy, kisses, hugs, tender words . . . The kiddies are sleeping. And just then . . .” – he started speaking in a terrible voice – “there’s a flood.” He looked straight ahead of him with his eyes wide open. I’d stake my life on it that he could see that flood. No, it wasn’t him sitting there with me at the table – it was a shade, a phantom, call it what you like: he was standing on that little meadow and watching the billowing waves in horror.

“And then the waves roll right up to the very brink of their little burrow.”

His voice turned hoarse from agitation.

“She asks him: ‘What’s that, my darling, like a sudden, damp draught from somewhere?’ And he answers her: ‘The river’s close by. The wind must be blowing from the river.’”

My friend lowered his head onto his arms and covered his face. I could see his shoulders trembling. I was afraid to break the silence.

“And she says: ‘But why’s the wind whistling like that?’” he said in a thin little voice, lifting up his face, flooded with tears, “‘I don’t know, my dear’,” – that was in a deep, fearless, manly voice. “‘Maybe I should go and take a look?’ ‘No, don’t. Stay here, it’s cold out there’.”

“She was so desperately concerned for him,” my friend explained with his lips trembling.

“And then what?” I asked tentatively.

“And then the cold March water gushed into the little burrow . . .” – he showed me with his hand how terribly the water gushed into the little burrow – “. . . and . . .”

“Well,” I said, terribly intrigued. “And what happened then?”

“And . . .”

He kept a grip on himself for a moment longer, but then he dropped his head onto the table and put his hands over it – and he started sobbing and thrashing about.

I tried my best to comfort him.

* * * * * *

“I’ll definitely write a novel like that,” I promised him as we parted. “And I’ll never write any more like this one.”

“Do you promise?” my friend asked, looking searchingly into my eyes.

“On the word of a writer,” I said firmly.

“Thanks, old buddy. That’s a relief. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” I said – and casually slapped him on the shoulder. And I slapped him real good! The poor guy barely managed to stay on his feet.

“I warned you not to slap me on the shoulder again!” he yelled, stretching out his neck and opening his mouth so wide that I could easily have stuck a small melon into it. “Did you forget that, then, you stupid jerk?”

“I didn’t forget anything. Why don’t I tell you about the poor old woman who locked her daughter in a trunk when she was still very little, and then fed her through a little hole all her life.”

As I spoke, I backed away and looked round, hoping I could spot someone and call for help.

“Don’t you look round, don’t look round, you scum,” he said in a very nasty sort of way and punched me in the face for the first time. Before I lost consciousness, I counted nine hundred thirty-five blows/punches to my body and a hundred seventeen to my face.

* * * * *

That’s what meetings with readers are like.

Brother writer, better avoid these people, readers are an unreliable tribe, cruel and unpredictable. They either borrow money and don’t give it back, or they lead wives away, and don’t bring them back, or they just simply get into fistfights.

On the other hand, writers are sly folk themselves.

They lead wives away, and take your money, and get into fistfights.

Bastards everywhere you look.

11

Then there was the bad weather. It would come in one day when the winter was over.

It was like this: first thing in the morning I looked at the wall calendar, and it clearly said: January such-and-such a day, in such-and-such a year. There couldn't be any mistake, because I called my wife too and asked her in this emphatically neutral kind of tone: what do you see on this wall calendar, my dear?

My wife is a stern, taciturn kind of person. After glancing at the wall calendar, she answered me unhesitatingly: January, such-and-such a day, in such-and-such a year.

Just to be sure, to make quite certain we weren't mistaken, we called our little daughter.

"Right then, little daughter, take a look at this good old wall calendar of ours – what do you see?" my wife and I asked in a neutral tone of voice, so as not to put any psychological pressure on her.

I pointed to the wall calendar with my finger.

Our little daughter narrowed her eyes.

"Why, can't you see for yourselves?"

"We can see." My wife and I looked at each other, smiled and took each other by the hand. "But we're curious about whether you see it."

"Well, I see it," our daughter said, sitting down in an armchair and lighting up a cigarette.

"Then tell us, dear, don't keep us in suspense," my wife and I said, smiling affectionately, and my wife laid her head on my shoulder. I turned towards her and kissed her hair: my wife said quietly: "Darling . . ."

"But why do I have to say it?" our daughter asked.

My wife smiled.

"Because your daddykins is asking you," she said and ruffled our daughter's hair.

"Daddykins," our daughter said, with a strange kind of expression on her face.

"What do you mean by that? Daddykins, of course!" I said.

"Daddykins!" my wife exclaimed, backing me up passionately, and blushing for some reason.

"We know all about these daddykinses," our daughter said with the same expression on her face.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" I asked.

“Nothing special,” my daughter said dismissively, gazing pensively out the window; she sighed.

My wife leaned down to me and whispered in my ear: “Oh, I’ve got this feeling in my heart, something’s not right with her today.” We looked into each other’s eyes and nodded simultaneously. My kind wife squatted down in front of our daughter.

12

“Tell us everything,” my wife said in a voice that, I must confess, instantly brought tears to my eyes: There now, look at the way maternal feeling shows through! I thought.

But our daughter carried on sighing, taking deep, frequent breaths, and said nothing.

“No, daughter, no shit,” my wife said and touched her on the shoulder. “Tell us . . . And you’ll feel better.”

“Ah, mom . . .”

“No, daughter, tell us,” my wife said again. “Me and your father will only find out anyway. And that will be worse.”

She turned towards me and gestured for me to take off my belt.

The buckle was already unfastened when our daughter dropped her cigarette on the floor and crushed it under her shoe . . . and suddenly she flung herself on her mother’s neck!

At that my wife and I simply froze!

“Is it him?” my wife shouted, “Well! Tell me, is it him?”

“Yes!” our daughter shouted. “Yes, mom, it’s him!”

“He slipped you one?”

“He pounced on me like a whirlwind!”

Our daughter wept bitterly and wiped away her tears with her hands, smearing emerald-green snot across her cheeks.

“He promised to marry me!”

“And you believed him?” my wife asked.

“Mom, what else could I have done? After all, I love him . . .”

I carried on pulling off my belt, trying to do it without making a sound.

“Are you . . .” My wife stopped and nodded eloquently at our daughter’s stomach.

“Yes, Mom,” she said, blushing.

“And when?” my wife gasped.

“Mom, sit down,” our daughter said, starting to turn her towards the armchair. “Sit down, or you’ll fall over.”

“Oh no, no need, I’m not going to fall over,” my wife said. “Stop it.”

“No, mom, sit down, or else you’ll fall over,” our daughter said. “Sit down, mommy, really, sit down. It’ll be better that way.”

I looked at the clock. This business was dragging on.

“Wife,” I said. “Really, you’d better sit down. Or you never know, you really could fall over.”

“Really?”

“Yes, of course, mommy.” Our daughter lovingly ran her hand over her mother’s gray hair.

“Sit down, wife,” I said. “Take the weight off your feet.”

“Maybe I’d better just stand up for a while?” my wife said, giving me a timid look.

“Sit down, I tell you,” our daughter said, starting to push on her shoulders.

“No, my dearest ones, I think I’d better just stand up for a while after all.”

“How can you be so stubborn!” I exclaimed in amazement. “Just sit down, will you? How long can you carry on holding everyone up?”

“Why do you keep trying to sit me down?” my wife asked us. “It’s like you’ve conspired against me.”

“Daddy and I haven’t conspired,” my daughter said. “Have we dad?”

“Damn right we haven’t.”

We really hadn’t conspired.

“Sit down quickly,” I said.

“Come on!” said my daughter, raising her voice. “Did you hear what father said?”

“Well now there’s no way I’m going to sit down.”

That was the answer my wife gave.

“Well, all right then,” I said. “So that means you . . .”

“Aha-a,” said our daughter. “Come on, now.”

“I won’t sit down.”

“Why not?” my daughter asked, getting agitated and looking my wife in the eye. “Just think how stupid your resistance is! What are we suggesting you should do? Jump off the balcony? Lie down under a train? Put out for the neighbor? Answer me, you egotist.”

She shouldn’t really have mentioned that about the neighbor, though.

“I won’t sit down,” my wife said with a stubborn shake of her head, “and I won’t answer any questions.”

“You’re a strange person,” I said, suppressing the trembling of my voice. “You’ve been told in words of one syllable: sit down! Sit down, I tell you! Sit down quickly! Well! Sit down in that armchair there!”

“Which one?” my wife asked.

“This one,” my daughter said, pointing with her finger.

“It’s rude to point,” my wife remarked.

“Ha, ha, ha,” said our daughter. “Just look how well-mannered we all are here.”

“Come on, sit down, you little birdbrain,” I said, cracking the knuckles of my fists. “No one’s going to do anything bad to you.”

“That’s what you promised me last year too,” my wife said mystifyingly.

“I’m amazed at you,” I said and shook my head.

“So am I,” our daughter said and shook her head.

My patience was exhausted.

“I you don’t sit down right now, you bitch . . .”

I stood up on my toes, so that my face was level with my wife’s face, and shouted:

“I don’t know what I’ll do! I’ll smash your head in! I’ll cut your ears off!”

Synopsis Part 1, Chapters 13 – 22

A huge surprise is in store for the author, who is tired and would like to go on holiday: his daughter (who is still a pre-teen) confesses that she is eight months pregnant and shows her parents a photograph of her soon-to-be-born child. Rather disconcertingly, it vaguely resembles the cloakroom attendant who so gravely offended the author earlier in the novel. There's not enough time for the author to properly grapple with his feelings, nor does he get the chance to give his daughter the hiding he believes she deserves: she is about to go to school, and the author's wife sends her off to get her schoolbag ready.

We are picking up the narrative thread from chapter 9. The author enters the cloakroom attendant's bedroom and finds the insidious attendant searching the nightstand for his tag. He smashes a giant nail into the attendant's head. The evil cloakroom attendant falls to the ground, spasmodically jerks his legs, and then lies still. "Stop the machine," says the author, satisfied with the good deed he's performed; after all, a writer's sacred task is to be a nurse to society, to guarantee its mental health, to rid it from evil.

The author's meetings with the characters from his novel continue with a romantic walk through the forest with his first love, Nadezhda. But nostalgic memories of their shared past are quickly replaced by a discussion of his novel, for like all other characters, Nadezhda has also read and an opinion about it. At first, she is not particularly enthusiastic – she is appalled by the cruelty of the murder of the cloakroom attendant – but her view of the novel gradually changes. "You've written a brilliant novel," she says eventually and concludes, "you are a genius." The author is shocked by the clinical precision of her assessment both of the novel and of the extent of his talent. At the same time, Nadezhda points out a striking logical mistake that the author himself hadn't noticed: how come that at the beginning of the novel he goes out to buy baby formula for his newborn son, when it turns out that he has an eight-year-old daughter, a pregnant one to boot, who clearly doesn't need any baby formula? The author, crushed by this inconsistency, decides to destroy the novel, but Nadezhda explains to him how his annoying mistake can easily be corrected.

There's only thing that the kind Nadezhda is embarrassed about in the novel, which is that at the end of her scene she and the author/protagonist are supposed to have sex. At the request of the author, who has in fact not yet finished writing this scene, she tells him where exactly the sex is going to take place, but their idyllic walk to that very place is rudely interrupted by the cloakroom attendant, who turns out to be Nadezhda's husband. He removes the nail the author had driven into his head and reaches for a hammer, only to discover that he has forgotten the hammer at the store. The cloakroom attendant rushes back to the store, taking Nadezhda along with him, and the author takes the bus home.

At home, he finds his wife, who of course has also read his novel, in tears. She accuses the author of cheating on her with his first love. The author is not able to reassure her, nor to convince her that there was no betrayal at all. His wife is inconsolable; the author's explanation that everything that is happening in the novel is fiction, including her, does not persuade her either. On the contrary, she concludes that after his betrayal she can and will no longer live with him. It is at this point that the author notices a mustachioed man in army underwear, with a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste in his hands, listening in on their conversation. Taking advantage of a pause in the conversation, the officer walks over to the chair on which he has hung his uniform and, displaying a startling amount of self-control, begins to get dressed. The author, suddenly realising what is going on, can't help but approve of the officer's choice: his wife is a fine person. He tries to communicate this to the officer, but the problem is that the officer too has read his novel and so knows about the author having attacked one of his characters with a hammer and a giant nail. The author tries to calm down the officer, but he does not believe the author and pulls out a service pistol. At which point, extremely inconveniently, a hammer falls out of the author's pocket. Pulling back, the officer stumbles over a bunch of suitcases, falls, and in a panic fires a shot. Fortunately, he

misses. The officer and the author's wife get into a car and drive off, leaving the author guessing about where they are headed.

Next, the author visits his publisher, who – like everybody else – has already read his novel. His verdict: it is a work of genius. However, a couple of scenes in the novel don't seem to be essential to the narrative. Getting rid of them, the author will be able to raise the tempo of the novel and make it better still. As the discussion unfolds, it becomes clear that the publisher wants every single scene in the novel gone, without exception. He explains the meaning of the term "dramatism" to the author (who hadn't been familiar with it until now) and then advises him to write a new novel, based on the one good and truly dramatic episode from the deleted novel, about rabbits in love, a sorrowful tale that had moved the publisher to tears. Explaining his vision of the new novel, the publisher throws the author a treat, which the author beautifully jumps at and skilfully catches in his mouth, and encouragingly strokes his head. The wise publisher's recommendations greatly inspire the author, who, in all his naivety, has one question: what to do with the current scene, namely, his visit to the publisher?

The author fulfils his promise and writes a dramatic and heartbreaking novel about rabbits in love, which ends with a bizarre deus ex machine-like intervention from outer space.

By this time, the novel has also been read by a group of stereotypically Russian men with long beards. Eating blini with caviar, washing them down with vodka, smashing glasses against the wall – that is, performing the standard repertory of clichés about Russians – the peasants mercilessly dissect both the novel and the author. Their verdict is severe: Russia has been ruined by the Jews and the intelligentsia, and the author and his novel are furthering their cause by glorifying homosexuality and praising anti-Russian sentiment.

Suddenly noticing a banner with the inscription "The Conscience of the People," the author understands that he is being tried before the people's court. What great honour, but also what huge responsibility! After conferring with each other, the Conscience of the People call in the KGB.

Part 2

23

That evening as I was getting close to home, I suddenly felt an inexplicable anxiety, almost fear. When I walked into the dark entranceway, my heart was pounding as if I had run all the way. I was angry with myself, trying to find an explanation for the state I was in, but I couldn't. At the apartment I stopped, leaned down and pressed my ear against the door for a long time. Then, after opening the door and stepping into the hallway, I stopped again and started listening carefully. I flicked the light switch – there was no power. A candle was lying in the cupboard just two steps away from the door: I found the candle and lit it, shielding the feeble little flame with my open hand, and went into the room.

It was only after I put down the candle in the middle of the table and collapsed, exhausted, into an armchair that I noticed the sinister dwarf there in front of me.

Or rather, first I saw the shadow of his head on the wall, trembling in the fitful light of the candle: mussed up hair, huge ears, a hawkish nose almost fused into the chin, gigantic, crooked, sharp teeth protruding from the trap of his mouth. I gave a start and grabbed at my heart.

"Who is it?" I exclaimed.

"It's me," he replied.

Indeed it was, I could see that for myself now.

I released my bated breath and ran a trembling hand across my forehead.

"And I thought . . ."

"What did you think?" the sinister dwarf asked.

To be quite honest, he had such an unusual face that in the darkness and in my fright I had taken him for something monstrous – something, say, like those terrifying zombies that eat people's brains in horror movies.

"I don't remember," I replied, deciding not to offend him again unnecessarily. "What difference does it make, anyway?"

I took out a pack of cigarettes and lit up.

"How's life?" the dwarf asked.

"What can I tell you? They took me and put me in jail. I don't know what for. They beat me. My wife left. Do you know how painful that was . . ."

"When your wife left?"

"No, not that, when they beat me," I explained to the idiot.

The sinister dwarf nimbly jumped down off his armchair, walked over to the cupboard, clambered up a stepladder and took a bottle off the bottom shelf.

"Why don't we have a drink?" he asked, holding out a glass to me in both his hands.

I nodded.

The liquid burned my throat like fire.

"What is this, vodka?" I asked, choking and coughing.

“What gives you that idea? Mineral water,” said the sinister dwarf, clambering up a stepladder back into the armchair.

Strange, how could I have confused mineral water with vodka?

“So what else is new?”

“I’ve written a novel,” I replied.

The sinister dwarf somberly filled the glasses.

“Better drink that up then, fucking writer.”

“With pleasure.”

I instantly tossed back the full glass of mineral water, downing it in a single gulp, and put the glass on the table, wiping my lips with my sleeve.

The sinister dwarf looked at me . . . What would be the best way to put it? In perplexity. In amazement. Well, and also in undisguised admiration.

“Ver-ry good mineral water,” I said.

“What mineral water? That’s vodka! Forty-five per cent! That’s some throat you’ve got. I’ve never seen writers guzzle vodka like that before!”

“Hang on, I’m totally confused here. What did you pour me the first time? Vodka?”

“Water.”

The sinister dwarf lifted up his glass and took a couple of sips.

“And the second time?”

“Vodka.”

“Out of one and the same bottle?”

“You mean you didn’t see for yourself? Look, there’s one bottle standing in front of you. I’m no conjurer, to go hiding bottles up my sleeves.”

“Hang on. The first time it was water.”

“Water?” the sinister dwarf asked.

“You just told me so yourself.”

“Yes. The first time it was water. Mineral water.”

“Borjomi?”

“Fuckomi,” he said, mocking me. “I told you in plain Russian. Mineral water. And he wants fancy Georgian Borjomi. I reckon you can survive without Borjomi.”

“All right. And the second time, then?”

“The second time was vodka.”

“From one and the same bottle?”

“Fuck it, I’ve told you a hundred times already: yes, from one and the same bottle!”

“From this one here?”

“From what other one?” the sinister dwarf shouted, starting to lose patience. “Do you see any other bottle on the table?”

“No,” I said, after looking round.

Just to make sure, I glanced under the table too.

“Then why in hell’s name are you asking?” he shouted, thrusting out his teeth in all directions, like a porcupine thrusting out its spines when it gets seriously agitated.

“Hang on, stop. I have to get this straight. Calmly now. You poured me water.”

“The first time?”

“No. The second.”

“A-ah,” he drawled. “You should have said so right away. No, of course not.”

“There, you see.”

“The second time I poured you water.”

“Now I’m beginning to understand. And the first time?”

The dwarf pondered.

“The first time, probably vodka.”

“So that’s it,” I said pensively. “But out of one and the same bottle.”

“Naturellement,” the dwarf replied in French.

“You should have said that right away. Instead of giving me that jumbled garble.”

“I’m sorry,” the sinister dwarf said with a shrug. “I’m tired. My mind went on the blink. Especially after vodka on an empty stomach. A whole glassful.”

“But where did you learn to drink like that?” I asked. “A whole glass in a single breath! I didn’t know that dwarves swilled vodka like that.”

“But surely it was you who drank it?”

“Me?” I asked in amazement.

“It was, wasn’t it?”

“OK, midge, who gives a fuck?” I said in English. “Pour away.”

“To you. To your great novel, my friend,” said the sinister dwarf. “I’ve never read such a fascinating novel in all my life.”

We clinked glasses and drank simultaneously.

“So you’ve read it? And you mean it when you say that?” I asked cautiously. “If you’re just looking for a laugh at my expense. . .”

In his . . . again I don’t know the best way to define it . . . In his maw, I suppose, something seemed to sparkle. Could it be a gold tooth? I hoped fleetingly. On the other hand, how could a . . . Now this is awkward, I’d like to avoid offensive terms . . . How could this ragamuffin afford gold crowns? Except maybe some kind of filling made of so-called “gold” wrapping paper?

“I mean it, my friend. You really are a genius, brother. And that story about the guinea pigs . . .”

He shook his head and smacked his lips.

“About the rabbits,” I prompted him.

“Yes, right. Miraculous, simply miraculous. Drama, anguish, subtle grief and sweet sorrow. And the ending! Fuck it . . . I wept. My daughter burst into tears. My wife blubbered. Never mind my wife, the entire household was drowning in tears.”

“Since when have you been married?”

“What makes you think I’m married? Who would ever marry me? They say my teeth are a bit too crooked.”

“Lies. Vicious people’s lies, don’t believe it. You don’t have any gold ones, do you, by the way?” I inquired, switching on a dental lamp and examining the appalling maw just in case.

“They also say my ears stick out a little bit and my head’s slightly too large.”

“Lies,” I replied, disappointed by the lack of any gold teeth. “The ears can be glued or nailed down. And the head’s fine. The important thing is that it fits through the door.”

The dwarf nodded in agreement.

“If I soap it up, then it does.”

“And you don’t have a daughter?” I asked.

“Where from?” he asked with a wave of his hand. “I’d have to get a wife first.”

“One piece of advice: don’t be in any hurry to get married. You can get married any time. Wives are . . . How can I put it? They’re terrifying. Better get yourself a hyena or a crocodile for starters, so as to get used to it gradually.”

“I don’t agree.”

I was staggered.

“Why not?”

“A hyena or a crocodile both need to be fed. I’d rather get myself a cat. A cat doesn’t need to be fed. It eats mice. And it carries your slippers in its yap.”

“Well, that’s up to you.”

Of course, a wife can be trained to carry your slippers around in her yap too, but it’s very difficult: wives are aggressive and stupid and don’t respond well to training.

“You know, my conscience is tormenting me. For what I did to that guy, the violinist . . . You read about it. Put a nail in his head. Basically an innocent man, a virtuoso, his grandchildren’s favorite . . .”

“What are you talking about? What grandchildren’s favorite?” the sinister dwarf interrupted. “You mean you don’t know, then? Don’t you read the newspapers?”

“Of course I don’t read the newspapers,” I replied.

“That virtuoso, he was . . .” – the dwarf looked round, glanced under the armchair, climbed down the stepladder, ran round the table with his feet drumming a tattoo on the parquet, clambered up one of my trouser legs and whispered in my ear – “. . . a serial killer. Have you heard about N the ripper?”

“As it happens, I haven’t heard about N the ripper,” I said, picking up his fear despite myself.

“In the daytime he worked as a violinist in a symphony orchestra, but in the evening . . .” – the sinister dwarf started trembling and looked round again – “. . . but late in the evening he took an ax and went out into the street.”

“And what did he do with an ax in the street late in the evening?” I asked, also in a whisper.

“Guess.”

“He planted mushrooms,” I replied after a moment’s thought. But then, why the ax? An annoying mistake.

“Cold.”

“He played the accordion. Where people passing by could see him.”

“Not quite, but warmer.”

“He . . .”

I was beginning to feel seriously afraid.

“He took a black boat and sailed to the middle of a black pond. There, on a black island, he moored the black boat to a black stake, took a black hammer and a black bag of black nails and walked over the black ground to the other end of the black island. After waiting for complete darkness, he put black gloves with long black fingers on his hands, opened a black box of black candy made from black syrup and chewed it with his black teeth. Then he took off his black hat, smoothed down his black hair with his black hands and went back.”

“Hot,” the sinister dwarf whispered, trembling.

And then he went up on his toes in order to reach my head and whispered in my ear for a long time.

“Seriously?” I whispered in reply. “That not possible!”

We looked at each other, our wide-open eyes filled with horror.

“A hundred fifty-seven MILLION?” I repeated in capital letters, horrified. “And he skinned them all?”

The dwarf nodded in confirmation.

“Alive?”

“Alive, my friend . . .”

“And then roasted them on a campfire and . . . ate them.”

“With no seasoning?”

“Absolutely none.”

“And without salt?”

“Completely.”

What frightful horrors. A hundred fifty-seven million people skinned, roasted alive over a campfire and devoured, completely without any seasoning! And what if he broke in here right now and ate me, for instance? Could I buy him off with this sinister dwarf? Judging from that head one a half meters across, he must have a lot of brains inside him . . .

“So now they’re looking for you,” said the dwarf, interrupting my train of thought.

“Me? Who is?” I shouted, getting really frightened now. “I’m not guilty of anything! Mama!”

“Don’t cry,” said my sinister friend. “They’re looking for you to award you the Nobel Prize: you saved the planet from the most appalling arch-villain who has ever existed, anywhere. In France alone he ate more than seventeen million men, not counting women and children. And he devoured Germany almost completely.”

“What about Lichtenstein?”

“Last week they flattened it all with bulldozers and flooded it to make a floodlit skating rink – there was no one left there anyway.”

My eyes filled with tears. I hadn’t expected this. How delightful. The Nobel Prize – I’d been dreaming about it all my life, hadn’t I?

“You’re not joking?” I asked, suddenly feeling frightened.

“Of course not,” the sinister dwarf laughed. “Here, read it for yourself.”

He handed me a newspaper cutting with the heading: “Nobel Prize laureate, dear man, where are you?”

Why here I am, my dearest ones, here, sitting in this armchair, drinking mineral water, shaking the hand of a sinister dwarf without a single gold tooth in his mouth – and crying, my friends, crying, my brothers in reason, crying uncontrollably in my happiness. Here I am, my dearest ones. To Sweden post-haste, to Stockholm on the very first train. I’ll pack my suitcase and head north. To Sweden. To Stockholm. To the Nobel Committee.

Won’t that give them all a start: the Nobel Prize winner has come to the ticket office to buy a ticket!

And that is how this chapter ended.

And the next one gradually started beginning.

24

I'd like to say a couple of words about the sinister dwarf himself, my neighbor and conversational partner on that memorable evening.

He was born about thirty years previously in a certain little town, where he spent the greater part of his life.

He was born a good-looking boy: his parents and the nurses who performed the delivery were absolutely overjoyed with his black hair and average size. Immediately after the successful birth the nurses severed his greyish umbilical cord, washed him properly, weighed him, swaddled him in nappy pads and diapers and tenderly transported him in a special baby carriage to the ward where other infants who had appeared in the world slightly before him were already lying.

His father called himself the happiest father in the world. His mother wept uncontrollably in her happiness. Even the hard-boiled, veteran nurses were amazed, the little boy was so handsome. And not only was he handsome, he was remarkably intelligent, which everyone around him noticed. He moved his hands and stirred his feet in a way that made the experienced nurses see a special meaning in his movements. He produced sounds that an ordinary child only begins to master as it approaches adulthood. And the first little teeth were already sprouting through his tender pink gums – an indubitable sign of early maturity.

But there was a mystery, which was this: the attentive observer was struck by a wistful sadness in the boy's eyes, a strange expression uncharacteristic of infants his age. So clear was this sadness that at times his mother was tormented by it despite herself.

"What could he have to be sad about?" she wondered to herself. "He seems to be perfectly all right, lying in the warmth, with all the milk he could want, his father's taken a shave and given up drinking, and sworn to stop stealing, starting next year. It's a mystery."

The doctors attributed the boy's strange expression to a particular arrangement of the bones of the skull.

A black angel had been flying from the West to the East and had stopped above the child's crib, where he was invisible to everyone except the child himself – after all, it has already been scientifically proven that children, especially very young infants, can see spirits, which is why they get frightened so often and cry for no apparent reason at all.

The boy was so incredibly handsome that the black angel's heart was filled with malice: evil spirits simply cannot tolerate beauty – the visible manifestation of divine harmony.

Sinking down onto the floor beside the crib, he began observing the little boy, the nurses and the happy mother, who was entirely unaware of the angel's presence as she fondled her handsome son.

In the hideous head of the black angel a baleful intent was born.

But more of that in the next chapter.

25

In the hideous head of the black angel a baleful intent was born.

But more of that in the next chapter.

26

In the hideous head of the black angel a baleful intent was born.

But more of that in the next chapter.

27

With an exceptional effort of will the author pulls himself together and stops acting the buffoon.

And so.

In the hideous head of the black angel a baleful intent was born.

But more of that in the next chapter.

A joke.

In a nutshell.

In the hideous head of the black angel a baleful intent was born.

But more of that . . .

The author takes a swing and gives himself a resounding . . .

No, better give it to the sinister dwarf.

The author lashes the sinister dwarf across the cheeks: stop acting the buffoon, you scoundrel! At your age, other men have led regiments into the attack! Had their portraits hung on boards of honor! Run departments in universities! Earned billions! Written decent books! And at your age, you're a nonentity, a pitiful buffoon! Time to become more serious. One step aside to the left or the right, and it's the hammer for your forehead, got that?"

The sinister dwarf, his face streaming with tears, hastens to agree.

Taking the hammer out of his pocket and showing it to the sinister dwarf so as to maintain order, the author unanimously decrees that the narrative be continued immediately.

And so.

28

In the hideous head of the black angel a baleful intent was born.

Having dressed up as a doctor, hung a stethoscope across his shoulders and stuck a ballpoint pen with a red refill into his breast pocket, he walked into the ward where the woman was lying. After examining some papers on the wall beside the bed for the sake of greater verisimilitude, he approached the mother of the infant.

“My dear,” he said in a sweet voice, “how are things going?”

”Things are going splendidly,” said the unsuspecting woman.

“Aha,” he said. “And how is your little son?”

“Oh,” the woman replied and smiled in a way that set the dark angel’s heart aching excruciatingly. “My boy is developing quite splendidly. Soon he’ll start walking, soon his little teeth will grow, all the little girls will like him, he’ll be a little scamp, he’ll be the happiest little boy in the whole world!”

The woman said all that with a smile.

“Are you certain about that?” the angel inquired in a strange sort of way, sort of speaking through his teeth.

”About what exactly?” the woman asked.

“About him quite definitely being the happiest little boy in the whole world.”

“Of course!” the woman replied passionately. “We’ll do everything for him! We won’t spare any effort, we’ll part with every last thing we have, just as long as he is full of joy, as long as he is healthy and happy!”

“Is that really so?” the angel asked in a soft voice.

“Doctor, you ask strange questions,” the woman remarked.

“It’s part of my profession,” he replied, indicating his stethoscope with a sharp fingernail.

As it happens, something about the appearance of this benign doctor was beginning to bother the woman, but what exactly it was, she just couldn’t understand.

“From what you say, I draw the conclusion that you love your son very much.”

A strange conclusion, a strange doctor . . .

“Very much,” the woman confirmed.

“And tell me, your husband – does he share your feelings?”

“Of course. He even calls himself the happiest father in the world.”

“My dear.” The doctor sat down on the very edge of the bed and gazed sweetly into the mother’s eyes for a long time. “I have a certain interesting and mutually advantageous proposal that I should like to put to you.”

The doctor especially emphasized the difficult phrase “mutually advantageous.”

“I will pay you handsomely.”

The woman’s heart sank ominously.

“Listen . . .” she began, but the doctor stopped her with a sudden movement of his rubber- gloved hand.

“No, you listen to me. This is my proposal, and I don’t intend to repeat it for a second time. Give your boy to me, and for that I will pay you. Give your boy to me, and for that I will pay you. That is my proposal, and I

don't intend to repeat it for a second time. Still less will I repeat it for a third time: give your boy to me, and for that I will pay you. I will pay you so well, there will be enough for the rest of your life, and not just for you and your alcoholic husband, but for all your future children and grandchildren and greatgrandchildren, and the greatgrandchildren of your greatgrandchildren. Give me your son, and for that I will pay you. That is my proposal, and I don't intend to repeat it."

The woman was dumbstruck.

Only now did she realize what exactly it was about the doctor that had been bothering her all this time: his stethoscope! The stethoscope was lying on his shoulders the wrong way round! Usually doctors put their stethoscope with the earpieces on the left and the sound pick-up on the right. But this doctor had it the wrong way round. He's in disguise, the woman guessed. But actually it was already too late. The woman was so frightened, she couldn't shout out. The false doctor leaned down so close to her face that his true, demonic guise began showing through his human features.

"Well then, is it a deal, my darling?"

The doctor took the black ballpoint pen with the red refill out of his pocket.

"You only need to sign here and here," said the doctor, pointing out two columns with his long-nailed finger and marking them for easy identification with red ticks that instantly clotted. "Your signature, your autograph – and the boy is mine. I will take him to my castle, which stands on a mountain peak, and make him my son. I will teach him to fly in the clouds, I will put wings on his back for him. He will become the ruler of the black country of Night, the Great General of the ravens. I will give him the whole world for his inheritance."

"No," said the woman, finally finding her voice, "I won't give you my son. And if you don't go away right now, I'll scream and they'll catch you."

"They'll catch me?" he laughed. "Who will catch me?"

"The nurses," the woman replied.

"The nurses?" He flung his head back and roared with laughter. "They can't catch me, my dear. They can't catch me. Well then?"

"Go away!" the woman shouted.

"Is that your final word?"

"Get out of here, you filthy vermin! I'll call my husband!"

"Your husband isn't here," the black angel roared horrifyingly, shedding his false doctor's appearance. "They won't let him into the maternity ward!"

"I won't let you have my beloved son!" the mother exclaimed.

"Oh, won't you!" the angel burst out, shuddering with unutterable malice. "Very well. This is my answer to you: he shall become a hideous boy, the little girls won't even look at him. He shall turn into a sinister dwarf!"

And, bursting into laughter, he disappeared, dissolving into a dense cloud of heavy, foul-smelling smoke.

From that day on, everything started changing. Changing for the worse. The boy's head began expanding strangely, while his little body, and especially his little legs, started withering and shortening. He no longer moved his hands or pronounced the sounds that had astounded the nurses only so recently, and the most terrible thing of all was that his teeth became sparsely set, long and terribly crooked, and immediately turned brown for some strange reason. His mother wept, even his father shed a tear or two when they told him on the phone about the frightful metamorphosis that had come over his first-born, and the doctors put on surprised faces. A boy who had been developing marvelously well, an exceptionally handsome infant,

had changed in a single day, not even a day – in an hour! A phenomenon entirely unknown to science. Incidentally, beneath the feigned sympathy, it was noticeable that the doctors were actually glad. Of course they were, this was a first in the history of medicine, such an astounding case, such organic alterations in the bone marrow! After only a month, three doctoral theses had been completed, and no one even counted the master's dissertations. They introduced little tubes into the boy's nose, took blood samples for analysis, kept him in a kind of glass box with a special microclimate and little windows that could be locked shut. They received foreign delegations, organized conciliums, developed a potion and fed him through a probe, pumping some kind of pap directly into his stomach. His mother had long ago discharged herself from the hospital. After grieving for a while, she went to work, to distract herself, as she told everyone. At first she visited her son regularly, bringing him chocolates and chickens wrapped in silver foil, then the gaps grew longer and longer, and the visits grew shorter. And somehow it just happened that the boy was never collected from the hospital.

He developed terribly slowly. At six months he couldn't speak a word. At eight months he couldn't walk. But then his sparse teeth were so sharp that he could bite in half the bottles with infant formula, which the nurses fed to him, filled with loathing. He didn't exactly live in a cage, but for everyone around him he was more of a little animal than a little boy. And they kept him in a separate ward at the end of the corridor, right beside the toilet. He was a scruffy boy. At the age of two, he couldn't read or write. He cried a lot and got very thin.

At the age of twelve he had to earn his own living: working in a coal mine finally undermined his weak health. He had a naturally amorous disposition, but in all his life not a single girl returned his affection. After a while he moved into the same building as me, in the apartment next to mine. He gave me a terrible fright that first evening when I ran into him on the stairs. To tell the truth, I avoided him as much as I possibly could; at one time I was even thinking of moving to a different apartment: living next door to a sinister dwarf like him seemed creepy to me. But we gradually grew close. As solitary souls, we picked each other out from the crowd. One day, after some heavy drinking, we told our stories to each other. I was moved to the depths of my soul by his bitter fate. As they did in chivalrous times of old, we swore eternal allegiance to each other. I went out onto the balcony and sang songs of friendship out over the sleeping town. My new friend clambered up a stepladder and puked from the balcony: he had drunk too much. Having finished the songs of friendship, I went off to sleep, but the sinister dwarf lost his balance, slipped off the stepladder and fell from the fifth floor. Smashing through the asphalt with his granite head, he got stuck deep in the ground and shouted and swore, as if calling for people to come and help him, drag him out of the ground and set him back on his feet, but all the good people were sound asleep, and those who weren't asleep were bad people. By midday the sinister dwarf was spotted by the kids in the yard. What exactly the little kids did to him, after lighting a fire and skinning him, I don't remember, but I do know that most of them are still doing time now (and half a lifetime has passed since then, as the great writer Bunin would have written).

Synopsis Part 2, Chapters 29 – 41

The author comes to Stockholm and meets the members of the Nobel Committee, who turn out to be an amazingly cool bunch of people. They get the author into the Committee Bentley – where beautiful Sarah, one of the Committee members, promises him to write the acceptance speech he has failed to write himself – and take him to a fancy restaurant, where they all get terribly drunk. After the memorable meal, the Committee members take the author to another establishment, where they are being served by naked girls. The author wakes up the next day with a terrible hangover, but his suffering is alleviated by Sarah, who is clearly attracted to him. Kurt – also a Committee member – barges into the author's room, still visibly drunk, with a huge black eye and some highly disturbing news: the Grey-haired – another Committee member – has disappeared. Said Grey-haired is later found in the same establishment with the naked girls, after which the Committee members take the author to yet another restaurant. There Kurt suddenly spots the man who gave him the black eye, and rushes his offender with a bottle in his hand. The remaining members of the Committee join in, and an epic fight ensues, which the author watches from afar with great curiosity.

The next time the author wakes up is pretty much like the time before: he has a hangover, only it's way more gruesome this time around, and beautiful Sarah is obviously trying to seduce him, despite the fact that the author is horribly sick and on the verge of throwing up. Severe attacks of nausea are not the only reason for the author's passivity: for some reason, even though Sarah is undoubtedly a very beautiful woman, he is not attracted to her at all. While the author desperately tries to figure out a polite way to get rid of Sarah, she crawls into bed with him.

As Sarah cuddles up to the author, who urges himself to man up and satisfy her desire, he makes a shocking discovery: Sarah has a huge penis – which presents the author with a conundrum, namely, to what sex does this person belong?

Things take a decidedly bizarre turn when Sarah confesses that in fact, she is neither woman nor man, but a she-chair. Admittedly, to become a full-blown she-chair (with a lyre-shaped backrest elegantly growing from her backside) she still has to undergo a number of complicated surgical procedures.

The author ridicules and ruthlessly mocks the character of his novel, only to realise later that Sarah really is a chair. The resemblance is striking: the same voice, the same hairstyle, the same expression of the eyes, the same shape of the ears, the same manner of pronouncing the "r" in the French style – only the backrest is missing!

The conversation with the chair ends in chair hysterics and Sarah's physically attacking the author, who has no choice but to put her outside in the hallway.

The next day Kurt informs the author about the disappearance of Sarah (the chair was last seen jumping from a bridge into the river, leaving Kurt with a feeling that something might have gone wrong); he also delivers the exciting news that the author has been granted an audience with the Chairman of the Nobel Committee, a man with a highly peculiar past. To say the least.

Two orderlies transport the Chairman into the room. He's lying in a hospital bed, and at a first glance, the man, whose jaw is taped shut with scotch tape, seems quite dead. Soon, however, the author manages to discern signs of life. The oldest member of the Nobel Committee is able to open his eyes and beckon Kurt with a finger. Kurt falls to his knees in tears and passionately kisses the Chairman's golden ring in order to get his blessing. Pretty soon the old man looks quite dead again, and the two orderlies roll him out of the room.

Taking advantage of Kurt's completely hysterical state, the author leaves the room and follows the Chairman and his orderlies into an operating theatre. There the author witnesses an unusual ritual: after devoted kneeling, diligent bowing and passionate kissing of the Chairman's ring, the orderlies cut the Chairman to pieces with their axes – the Chairman's finger and the ring are carefully cut off and put on a

separate table – after which the Chairman is ground up in a meat grinder and packaged in cans with purple labels.

In a state of shock, the author manages to escape from the operating theatre without being noticed.

Getting back to his hotel room, he finds Kurt waiting for him. After briefly questioning the author about his impressions of the Chairman – the author doesn't mention the curious ritual – Kurt calmly tells him about the coitus he had with his own daughter that very same evening. She herself seduced him, coming into his bedroom in a transparent nightie. As his bitch of a wife can wake up at any moment and find out what has happened, Kurt presses the author to remove his wife from the novel. He plans to spend the rest of his life with his daughter. The author rejects Kurt's request, upon which Kurt tries to bribe him. When this also fails, he threatens the author with a pistol. Unable to withstand the stress, Kurt fires at the author – who, of course, cannot be hit by bullets of his own invention.

His last resort having failed, Kurt leaves the room and in the hallway shoots himself. Before he goes, Kurt shakes the author's hand, leaving him to ponder this handshake for a long time.

In a dark, cosy café, the author once again meets his first love, Nadezhda, just as he dreamed earlier in the novel. He is there incognito, wearing a false beard and massive glasses, pretending to be his own best friend. They talk about the circumstances that ended their relationship, and Nadezhda eventually tells him the true story of how she betrayed him. For the first time the author learns exactly why and how his first love left him.

Nadezhda invites the author back to her home (still unaware of his real identity). On the way, the author, under her spell once again, feels that he won't be able to keep us his façade, he's afraid he'll confess his true identity and ask Nadezhda to resume their relationship. At home, after pouring herself a glass of wine to get up her courage, Nadezhda tells the author the price for a half-hour session with her.

The author leaves, relieved his first love doesn't follow him.

Synopsis Part 3, Chapters 42 – 50

In the dark hotel lobby, Kurt's wife Gretchen comes rushing toward the author sobbing theatrically, although her eyes are festively made up and absolutely dry. Behind her stands their daughter, timid and anxious.

The inconsolable woman brings the author shocking and unsettling news: Kurt has inexplicably disappeared from home. The daughter confirms that only a few hours ago she saw him lying in bed in his pajamas when she went to his bedroom to say good night.

Now that he has disappeared, the grieving widow is desperate to get proof of her husband's death, better still, of his violent death, because a violent death will mean a much higher pension for her. Gretchen proceeds to enthusiastically describe the elaborately imagined scenario of his painful and terrible death: Kurt falls into the sewer, where he is first pierced by poisonous spikes – one through his spine, paralysing him, another through his neck – and then finds himself viciously attacked by giant ferocious rats that eat his eyes out and devour his insides while he's still alive. Her detailed, chilling account of her husband's removal from the novel could hardly be more imaginative than her husband's bloodthirsty plan to eliminate his wife from the novel.

As Gretchen's story reaches its climax, Kurt walks into the author's room. When asked by his wife what happened to him, Kurt recounts how he fell into the sewer, was almost pierced by steel bars – one just about went through his neck – then found himself viciously attacked by giant ferocious rats, one of which even managed to bite his finger. He barely escaped the rat attack alive.

Realizing that the author is mocking her, a furious Gretchen leaves the room, taking Kurt along with her.

After their departure, their traumatised daughter, whom the author has decided to also call Nadezhda, comes into the room. The author, moved by her sorrowful and tragic fate, tries to console her, and then puts her to bed.

After the girl has fallen asleep, the author takes a bath, reading a book in which the protagonist, S.S., is also taking a bath and reading a book after a day full of unpleasant incidents. S.S. falls asleep – and is awakened by a door slamming, unable to distinguish whether the sound is real or a dream. Coming out of the bathroom, S.S. sees a strangely asymmetrical man, vigorously eating a sandwich, on which he puts raw meat from a can with a purple label.

After being put through a series of highly confusing questions, the asymmetrical man makes S.S. an unexpected proposition: to marry an extremely attractive woman – we can vaguely recognise Sarah from his description – and live a life of luxury. His life completely failed, with nothing to lose, and still not convinced it's not a practical joke, S.S. gives in and agrees to marry a woman he has never seen before.

A tram takes S.S. and the asymmetrical man through a forest and over a rumbling steel bridge to the place where the wedding is to take place. They stop near a building resembling a church, and S.S., getting increasingly worried and afraid, enters the building, which is filled with people dressed in black. As he walks towards the altar, a group of men carrying a stretcher also approach. To his horror, on the stretcher S.S. sees a twisted finger with a golden ring.

S.S. runs out of the building in a blind panic. Fortunately, the tram he arrived on has not left yet. S.S. jumps on, hearing behind him the asymmetrical man pursuing him, and then a strange order: "Hack!" Looking around him, he barely manages to evade the blow of an axe wielded by a man with a predatory beak instead of a nose.

At this point, the author, like S.S., is woken up by the sound of a door slamming, unable to distinguish whether the sound is real or a dream – he seems to be increasingly losing control over the characters and stories he has invented...

Returning to his room, the author sees the Chairman of the Nobel Committee – lying in the same hospital bed in which we encountered him before – the very same Chairman (with the very same golden ring) who was hacked to pieces and turned into minced meat earlier.

Eating sandwiches with minced meat from a tin can with a purple label, the Chairman reproaches the author for his bad behaviour towards Sarah, and, like the asymmetrical man in the book the author recently read while taking a bath, the Chairman puts the author through a series of highly confusing questions, which somehow make the author realise that the Chairman is about to persuade him to marry Sarah and live a life of luxury, and that he will be taken to his own wedding by tram. The Chairman, confirming the author's premonition, and gradually weakening, first asks, then vehemently begs the author to make him a raw meat sandwich. Failing to give him the raw meat sandwich, the author sees the Chairman losing consciousness, and in a panic rolls the hospital bed out of the room and into the elevator, descending to the lobby, where the Chairman's orderlies are watching TV with the doorman.

In the lobby, the desperate author calls out to the Chairman's orderlies for help, after which one of them runs to the hospital bed, while the second one rushes out of the hotel, only to return with a meat grinder. While the first orderly inspects the Chairman's physical condition by checking his heartbeat, opening his eyelids, etc., the second one fixes the meat grinder onto the hospital bed right above the Chairman's head. Returning to the doorman, who is completely absorbed by the television, the second orderly tears off his arm and, returning to the meat grinder, passes the arm through it in such a way that the mince falls into the Chairman's mouth. Initially, the resuscitation of the Chairman of the Nobel Committee doesn't seem to work, but as soon as the orderlies push the first portions of meat into the Chairman's throat, and especially after they have coloured his cheeks with red lipstick, the Chairman starts showing signs of life again.

When the Chairman, still semi-conscious, starts to get hostile towards the author, the latter decides to leave the scene. Returning to his room, he finds a girl sitting in an armchair opposite the door, eating a raw meat sandwich; at this point, the author screams – and comes to in the bathtub.

Leaving the bathroom, he sees Kurt's daughter, Nadezhda, sitting in front of the TV.

At three o'clock in the morning, the author takes the tram waiting in front of the hotel and makes the exact same journey he read about lying in the bathtub during his first dream.

Getting off at his stop, the author is met with a solemn welcome – fanfares, flowers, a chorus, a laurel wreath; in the crowd, he spots characters from his novel: Kurt, his wife, the Grey-haired. A welcoming committee takes the author into a theater-like hall and leads him to the stage. A stretcher is soon being rolled onto the same stage; on it, the shocked author believes he can discern a dead man.

The Grey-haired asks the dead man to stand up from the stretcher – and the dead man complies. The Grey-haired tells him to separate the flesh from the bones and eat the meat – and once again the dead man complies. The audience reacts ecstatically.

Recounting the circumstances of the ancient murder of the Widow's Son, as he calls the dead man, and the recent discovery of his lifeless body, the Grey-haired states that they need help from the author.

Astonished, and thinking they might have the wrong man, the author asks whether they know who he is. Muffled, but with a single voice, the audience answers: we know who you are.

Synopsis Part 4, Chapters 51 – 58

Back in his hotel room, the author tells Kurt and Gretchen's daughter, Nadezhda, that he has decided to go home tomorrow: he does not belong here. Nadezhda first asks and then begs the author to take her with him, but he refuses: he has to act responsibly, she is just a fourteen-year-old child, and he is an adult. Offended that she is once again mistreated, Nadezhda chases him out of the room in a hysterical rage.

After a couple of hours of sleep on the couch, the author collects his things and goes to the train station, leaving Nadezhda asleep in the bedroom.

As he has a couple of hours before the train leaves, the author decides to go to the only café at the train station that's still open this late at night. He is having second thoughts about Nadezhda: what if she really does love him? True, she is only fourteen, but then again, he is the author of the story and could easily turn her into an adult. Eventually, the author decides to return to his hotel room and offer Nadezhda to come with him.

Still at the café, he is invited to join a table occupied by a boy and three old women: one with purple hair and golden teeth, the other with grey hair and silver teeth, and the third with black hair and plastic teeth. The boy is cool, collected, reasonable, curious in a reserved kind of way, bold, but above all, sad. As he explains to the author, he is always sad, but today his sadness has a special reason. His mother has died. He cannot recall when exactly she passed away, but the strange old women help him out: it happened just yesterday. They decided to take her off life support to save money, explains the boy calmly, because she could easily have lived for dozens of years; she was only 35 years old. He adds that he didn't bid farewell to his mother; he doesn't understand why anyone would want to say goodbye to dead meat. Baffled by the boy's inhuman lack of empathy, the author asks him whether, when he is old or sick like his mother and entirely depends on his loved ones, his doctors, his family or, who knows, even his children, he would like to die the way his mother was left to die. The boy replies that he will never die, and, pointing at the three old women, continues: they told me so.

Returning to his hotel room, the author walks into a strange kind of reception: men in formal suits, women in evening dresses, all of them wearing cheap children's masks. One of the guests (in a piglet mask) turns out to be the Grey-haired. He offers the author a glass of the red wine that is being consumed by all the guests; fourteen years old, explains the delighted Grey-haired, with a magnificent bouquet, but the author refuses: this heavy red liquid smells way too meaty to him.

Among the guests the author also identifies the other members of the Nobel Committee and sees a masked boy with a familiar golden ring. He doesn't realize that this is the same boy he just met at the café at the train station.

After having said good-bye to the Grey-haired, the author encounters Kurt, who is coming out of the author's bedroom, checking whether his fly is fastened. In the bedroom, the author finds Nadezhda: the girl sits naked on a messed-up bed. When the author invites her to come with him, his proposal is met with bewilderment, surprise and mockery: Nadezhda has chosen to stay with her father after all, who will remunerate her generously for her services.

Nadezhda then makes the author her own proposal: not to leave but to stay with her. Kurt will buy her a house, she explains; she'll be rich, and her father won't object to her having friends of her own. It will be fun!

The author is unconvinced and leaves – only to find himself once more in the strange operating theatre from Part 2 of the novel.

"We know who you are," says the doctor to the author in the operating theatre.

The problem is, the doctor further explains as he points to the naked man by the operating table, that they managed to revive the dead man only partially. He moves like a robot. To revitalise a dead man completely,

you need real eyes – since the soul lives inside the eyes – and a fresh heart to pump the blood more effectively.

Shortly afterwards, Nadezhda is brought into the operating theatre in a wheelchair. At the very moment that she recognises the author and reaches out in order to tell him something, one of the orderlies splits her head in two with an axe. Rummaging around in her crushed head, the attending doctor delightedly removes what looks like a meatball and orders the other orderly to take out the author's eyes with a sterile spoon.

Taking advantage of the general confusion, the horrified author makes a break for it, dashes into the same dark corridor along which the Chairman of the Nobel Committee had previously been transported to the operating theatre, comes into the hall where he had his audience with said Chairman and from there into the vestibule with its gigantic crystal-clear mirror, breaks down a locked door, and runs to the train station.

His train is already moving, but the conductor, seeing the author running alongside the platform, opens the door, and someone drags him into the carriage. After closing the compartment door, the author lies down on the bunk, falls asleep...

...and in his dream is transported back into his bathroom, where he comes to, tired and broken. At the bottom of the bathtub lies a soggy book. It is only in the living room that the author remembers about the train he wanted to take; there is still enough time before its departure, though, so he decides to take a nap.

An old woman comes into his hotel room, serves tea, sits down and, while knitting, tells the ancient Russian folktale of One-Eyed Evil, about a blacksmith who lived such a good life that he did not know what evil was, and thus went looking for it. Along the way he was joined by his friend, who also didn't know what evil was. They walked and walked, until they reached a little hut in a dark forest, where a tall old woman – skinny, crooked and one-eyed – killed the blacksmith's friend with a knife, put him in the oven and ate him. Pretending to mould a new eye for the woman, the blacksmith blinded her with a nail, and managed to escape. But Evil was not done with him quite yet. Pursued by Evil, the blacksmith found a golden hammer, grabbed it, but could neither lift nor let go of it. As Evil approached, he had no choice but to cut off his arm. And so the blacksmith returned to his village. His friend having been eaten, and without his arm, he now knew what Evil was.

The train conductor comes into the compartment, throws some lumps of sugar on the table and puts a glass of tea on it, then wakes up the author. On the opposite bunk, an old woman is crying, not realising that the train has stopped and it's time to leave. The author turns to her, but she doesn't appear to hear him.

Outside, it is pouring.

The author notices Nadezhda, who came to meet him at the station, before she notices him. When she does see him, she runs towards him in the pouring rain, but then rushes past him towards a man who emerges from one of the last carriages. Nadezhda embraces the man, takes off his elegant, slightly old-fashioned hat, and strokes his hair tenderly, carefully avoiding the spot where a giant nail sticks out of his head. All of a sudden, the man cries out and rushes towards a group of railway workers who have dropped his nickel-plated wardrobe racks along with his precious tags.

Leaving his suitcases in a puddle, the author starts walking along the railway tracks. Behind the station, he remembers, on the round and dreary square with its sickly trees, is where the bus terminal used to be. Nobody is there to pick him up – he's all alone. He is soaked. He longs for some hot coffee. He wants to die.