Through The Dark Woods

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An extract

Original title Achter de donkere wouden
Publisher De Geus, 2025
Translation Dutch into English
Translator Max Lawton

For every child taken from us

PART I

1

Your letter made me very glad, it meant that you were not angry, that, not knowing the reasons for my leaving ten years ago, you forgave and perhaps believed there had been reasons, that the reasons were serious enough, that they had nothing to do with you, that I loved you, loved you ten years ago and love you now, and always will. "Made me very glad," of course, is a hopelessly weak phrase, even with the "very." Your letter shook me. All at once it lifted from my soul the burden of guilt before you — too heavy to bear, guilt that for ten years had seemed impossible to atone for and was now, suddenly, just like that, forgiven by you with a single letter, my boy, the good son of the bad father.

What did you write in your first letter, a letter that struck me so deeply that, after reading it the first time, I understood nothing and remembered nothing, and had to reread it a few more times just to calm down, to believe what had happened, to accept — accept your gift, an undeserved gift, a gift all the more desired? What did you decide to tell me in that very first letter of ours, written after ten years apart? What did an abandoned fifteen-year-old son want to say to his father before anything else?

Very little remains in my memory. Not only because of that first shock, but simply because twenty years have passed since I received that first letter from you, and much has been erased by time, the father and executioner of memories. But above all, I not only never reread that letter after they killed you exactly ten days later, but, going mad from absolutely unbearable pain — the pain of losing my own child, the pain of losing you, my beloved son, after ten years apart and, at the end of them, the unexpected joy of ten days of being in touch with you, ten days of happiness at its most intense, the happiness of having my son back — I did everything I could to stay sane, to reduce the pain to proportions the heart could hold and the mind could bear, not to burn to ashes, to survive in the most literal, not allegorical, sense — and for that, among many other things, what was needed was a ban on memory, a ban on going back, in memory, to what was dearest and therefore murderously painful — painful enough to destroy the mind. That first stretch of time left almost nothing behind except the constant pain lodged in memory, pain that did not leave me for a minute,

neither by day nor by night, pain that became the essence of my life — so I did not do badly at hiding memories from my very self, shielding myself from memories, destroying memories.

That is why I never read your letters again — not the first, the most important and most moving of them all, nor the ones that followed. I don't even know whether I still have them. Can you imagine? Only now have I understood how great the fear is — an echo and blood brother of that original fear — how alive the pain still is in me, so alive that all these years, right up to this very day, I still cannot bring myself even to look — to see whether they are still there, whether they have survived — let alone read your letters again.

You wrote that, with your natural magnetism, you had charmed your teacher and, out of the blue, passed the hardest exam with top marks. It stayed with me because, even in that moment of strain, I laughed: that was exactly how I too, your father, had gone through life — by the inexplicable workings of natural magnetism, passing every exam with top marks, in my day, on a named scholarship at a Moscow university, a straight-A student who session after session came away with top marks, but in reality a hopeless, chronic, passionate loafer and ignoramus.

The resemblance both made me laugh and warmed me: my flesh and blood, my kindred soul... Ah, how many wondrous, astonishing things you might have lived through thanks to your natural magnetism, my handsome boy, my beautiful son.

And perhaps this was what you were truly proud of, though you mentioned it almost in passing: you were already driving pretty well, my strong, my brave son, though, out of modesty, you added: but reverse parking still isn't quite working out.

Ah, never mind, I thought as I read: just a matter of time, you'll learn. And time, as it turned out, you had none left, not only to get better at parking a car, but to breathe, to laugh, to push your hair back, to love, to drink water, to be loved, to lie in the grass at night and watch the emeralds pulsing in the black sky.

I think that was all I remembered: natural magnetism and driving.

Your wild excitement as you wrote that first letter was most likely mentioned in one of the later ones.

Life as a series of defeats.

Can a father imagine a defeat more grave, more criminal, than the violent death of his own child — a child he did not protect, for whom he did not give his life? In my case, a child I was not even beside — not beside him through the first ten years of silence, then through the ten days we were in touch, and finally not there on that terrible night.

I once heard about a South African doctor whose little boy climbed high up a tree and, before his eyes, fell to his death: this man, this father, did not feel like a man. I felt the same after your death: I had not been able to protect you, had not done the one thing I most had to do as a father and as a man, and had lost the right to call myself one.

"I am not a man" was not the main thought then, nor the main pain, but it was one of the thoughts that shaped that time, one of the most tormenting — shameful beyond measure. To protect, to save a child, a woman, anyone at all, at the cost of my own life if it came to that — that, to me, was what a man was for, I no less than any other. I do not know how many times I said, and meant it, that to die defending, saving, seemed to me almost a reward, more than that, the crown of life.

But I could not protect my own son.

I cannot remember, cannot even imagine, what I wrote back to you. Most likely some clumsy nonsense, out of shock, out of plain confusion, out of shame, out of the ordinary fear of baring my soul and speaking, from the very first word, about what mattered most, the one thing you wanted to hear, the very thing you had written to me for.

If I were writing that letter today — the letter I wrote twenty years ago — I would ask your forgiveness and write how deeply I love you. Only these two things belonged in that first letter of

mine: my guilt before you and my love. But instead of what mattered most, in response to your magnetism and reverse parking, I told you about my own magnetism and reverse parking, and more than likely it came out lively and funny. Maybe you laughed as you read my reply, perhaps hiding from yourself — perhaps not — your disappointment at the absence of real words, words both of us needed to live, words you had not heard from me for ten years, words I never got out.

Yes, I know: your magnetism and cars were no accident, nor were my magnetism and cars. This is how we hide shame, pain, confusion, and fear. All the more so because there is always so much time ahead, bottomless seas of endless time, more than enough time to search for the right words, to realise how necessary they are. But you wrote about magnetism as a child, and I as your father. And as a result, you did not hear from me the words you needed so badly. And I did not say the words I myself so badly needed to say.

It would be very simple to say it now.

Forgive me, son.

I love you, son.

But I let time slip away, I wrote about magnetism — and to ask forgiveness and speak of love now…

Yes — and too simple, and too pompous, and somehow false, though not false at all, and somehow cowardly.

And so, my dear son: there is no counting how many exams I have passed in my life solely thanks to those same forces of natural magnetism.

I failed only the most important one.

2

On the morning of August 13, almost twenty years ago — the worst day of my life — I was sitting at the computer; what exactly was I doing that morning, what was I writing? I cannot remember, and it does not matter.

That morning I received a message from your stepfather. The message was very brief — I think he wrote me just one sentence.

I have not reread that message since that very cursed August day, and — as with your letters — I do not even know whether it has survived. Just as with your letters, I only understand now that I never reread it, that in all the years since then I did not try to find it, and that even now, as I write all these words to you, I still cannot bring myself to do it.

Something terrible has happened, your stepfather wrote to me, Vladimir has been killed, the funeral is on Friday, come at once.

That is how your father learned of your death — the death of his abandoned son.

What I remember very well is how I looked at the screen and reread and reread that sentence again and again, and my mind refused to understand and accept what I had read, refused to believe what was written: only three days earlier I had received a letter from you in which you wished me a happy birthday a day early and apologised that you would not be able to on the right day, because you had long since arranged with your classmates to go to the dacha, with shashliks and the forest and swimming and other simple childhood joys, and there was just no way you could deny yourself all that for the sake of the dreary necessity of staying home and sending your father, on the right day, a birthday email full of kind words — kind words he did not deserve.

A mean joke? That was the first thought, but of course I knew it was no joke.

His number was in the message — the number of the person who had taken my place with you.

I do not remember the call. I do not remember dialling that unfamiliar Moscow number, do not remember the sound of his voice, do not remember a single word of the terrible thing he had to say.

I can reconstruct what he said from everything that followed.

Of course he confirmed the horror I had already read in his message. Most likely he said that phrase that exists in all the languages of the world, the phrase people say to those close to the departed, a phrase honed by centuries of grief, centuries of suffering, centuries of death, centuries of the deaths of children — children beaten to death for hours.

On August 11, my birthday, you and your friends came to the dacha. On the evening of the 12th, after a late dinner, you decided to go for a walk. You were walking along a country road when a car stopped behind you. An adult voice, a man's voice, ordered you to stand still. Like obedient, well-brought-up children, you stopped and turned toward the voice; blinded by the headlights, you could see nothing, neither the car itself nor the people getting out of it.

You and your friend stood in front, facing the car and the people coming toward you. Behind you were your friends, six children like you, boys and girls. The first man came up to you — in all that time they had not said another word — and hit your friend on the head with a bottle. If your friend had not stumbled at that very moment, had not accidentally lost his balance, he would have been killed first, killed or maimed, and as for you, who knows, perhaps you might have saved yourself, who knows, perhaps you might have run... But that did not happen. Luckily for your friend, the bottle only grazed his head, without even breaking, it seems.

At that very moment it became clear to all your friends how terribly frightening, how terribly serious it all was, and all at once they scattered, your friend too, who had only just, so luckily, escaped death; the saving forest was not far — and you remained standing before three people who that evening felt like killing someone.

Why did you stay?

None of your friends, running for the forest, had time to notice anything or understand anything. Late that night, when it was already dark, they came out of the forest onto the road, where there was no longer any sign of you, or the car, or the terrifying men, and went back to the house, where the drunk owner of the dacha, the father of one of your friends, lay asleep; after conferring briefly, they decided that you, a fifteen-year-old boy, had decided to go back to Moscow in the middle of the night — on a bus that did not run at night. With that, everyone lay down to sleep.

My boy, why didn't you run?

This is not the most important question of that night, nor the most terrible, but it is one of the most important, one of the most terrible. You could have survived. You could have stayed alive. You could have escaped all the terrible things they did to you that night, the last night of your life.

It seems to me that you did not run, my strong, my brave boy, because your child's sense of honour, dignity, and courage — so pure, so ardent — and your idea of how a real man must behave in your place demanded that you stay, that you not let the scum see you were afraid: a real man knows no fear, a real man does not run even in the face of mortal danger, and above all a real man will do everything he can to draw the killers to himself, to protect his friends, to give them a chance to save themselves, to reach the forest, to hide in it as deep as possible; not to disgrace himself, not to lose face, not to betray his friends — friends sleeping peacefully while they were killing you.

My proud, my pure boy, how alone you were, how defenceless, how monstrous was the horror you had no choice but to endure, how beautiful you were and are and always will be in that surge of your astonishing, brilliant courage beyond reason: a defenceless boy who cherished his honour too much, who loved his friends too much.

You managed to save them, your beloved friends; occupied with you, the three killers did not run after them.

You gave them so much, your beloved friends. Each of them finished school long ago, finished university long ago. Each of them loves and is loved, and if one does not love and is not loved, that is a matter of time. Each of them laughs and cries, hurts and comforts, kisses someone's lips and looks into someone's eyes, brown, blue, dark, light, is expecting a child or is not, makes plans for the future, falls ill and recovers, hopes for the best, breathes, walks in the fragrant autumn park — thanks to you, my beloved boy, lying in the earth now for almost twenty years.

When I am unbearably lonely and unbearably afraid, when I have no strength left to live, you know who I turn to for help?

Yes. Exactly.

To you.

And you, my generous, my fearless boy, smile your beautiful, your tender, slightly shy childlike smile and hold out a hand to me: don't be afraid, Dad, if I could do it, so can you.

3

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday... I wrote that you were supposed to be buried on Friday, but most likely it was Thursday — on the third day af-ter your death. Yet for some reason it was Friday that stayed in my memory. In any case, I had two days left to get to Moscow and be there as they put you into the ground, my tender boy, my beloved son.

To get to your funeral, I needed an entry visa. After twice refusing to pay a bribe at the consulate, I was never granted Russian citizenship, so I could enter Russia only with a visa.

What can I call the state I was in as I rushed to the consulate? Madness? Utter horror, utter despair, a bottomless guilt nothing could ever atone for — and hideously much else besides, a black chaos of all that was most sickening, most tormenting. I was burning alive, my arms, legs, eyes, tongue, lungs, heart, consciousness, soul all burning away — only no one else could see the fire, and I was not screaming, and to anyone watching I probably looked perfectly normal.

The consular official, after hearing out my insane story, said some-thing I could never forget: the death of someone close is no grounds for issuing a visa.

No, he had not understood. You were not someone close, you were my son, and you had not died, you had been murdered, and I had not seen you for ten years, after abandoning you when you were still only a child, and your letters promised forgiveness I could never even have dreamed of, atonement, time together, many years, a future, laughter, talk, my hand on your shoulder, the calm in your brown eyes as you lis-ten to my words and laugh at my jokes, so openly, like a child, your eyes beginning to shine, growing wet with laughter, and I laugh too — God, how I wanted to hold you, to press you to me, to laugh with you, to laugh till we cried, to hold you, to press you to me for a long time, forev-er — and if I did not get to your

funeral, if I did not see you before they put my son's coffin into the ground, how was I to go on living?

So I kept repeating my story, in pain and haste, the words all wrong, while the man in the black suit behind the greenish glass — three cen-timetres thick, cracked in the lower right-hand corner — stayed aston-ishingly calm.

Have your son's relatives arrange an invitation and send it to you. Then come to our consulate with it. We will process everything, call you in later, issue you a visa, and only then will you be able to fly legally to the Russian Federation. Four to five weeks.

Yes, but the funeral is already... I simply can't—

You are not listening. Once again: there is no other way. It is the only legal way to obtain an entry visa.

I had abandoned you ten years ago, when you were a trusting boy of five — and now not even say goodbye? Not say goodbye before a parting, this time forever, one no miracle could undo, one that left no hope — never see you again? How not to scream, how not to shriek, how not to bang my head against the wall? I did not scream, did not shriek, did not bang my head against the wall, and just the same, that man could not see the flame that engulfed me.

A good man helped me — a famous Russian literary critic, then chairman of the Russian PEN Centre. In a single day he secured for me a special, ultra-urgent invitation under which I was to travel to my son's funeral within the framework of a cultural exchange between the King-dom of Belgium on the one hand and the Russian Federation on the other.

In support of cultural cooperation — even though the invitation had been issued directly by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs — the cautious consular official demanded a document officially confirming your death, my boy — a sheet black from repeated faxing, on which one could barely make out my murdered son’s name and surname, the designation of the prosecutor’s office that had issued it, and the name of the major-crimes investigator who had signed it.

Boys don't cry, do they? You did not cry, did not cry that night, I know that now. I am not to cry either.

Wednesday, Thursday.

Thursday, probably. Late evening. Beyond the airport windows, it was completely dark. When your stepfather heard I was going to stay with a friend, he asked me to come with him: everyone was waiting for me, and we had to leave very, very early the next morning. Gentle, po-lite, courteous — and all of it genuine, sincere.

A night with people I had never thought I would see again: your mother, her mother; my former father-in-law did not come out to see me and was, it seemed, very drunk. Much too drunk. Or too angry with me. Too angry and too drunk.

A short, sleepless night. Early in the morning my younger brother arrived, and my friend from Moscow. Little by little those closest to you gathered — strangers to me, neighbours, relatives, I don't know. They cried as they looked at me, astonished by our resemblance: it turned out you looked so much like me.

What a thing — to learn on the day of your funeral how much we re-sembled each other, son.

A shower from a torn hose with no shower head. A bathroom door with no lock. Someone constantly coming in by mistake.

The bus, the road to the morgue. Of that journey, nothing at all re-mains in my memory.

“They’ve come for Skorobogatov!” As I step through the doors of the morgue, I hear someone shout, and am astonished: how could he have known so quickly that I was already there — and who could have come for me, and why?

Then I understand that, of course, they mean you.

You are not ready yet. You still have to be dressed and moved into the coffin.

Naked bodies on iron tables. One of them is you. My defenceless, my tender boy. My son. My son is one of the corpses, naked on the iron tables.

In unbearable horror I walk out, I run out of the building.

A little courtyard paved with asphalt. A small bus, just like ours. As I pass its open doors, I see them inside: drinking, pouring vodka into glasses, quarrelling, cursing foully about someone's death — the death of the man whose body they, like us, have come for. The vodka, the quarrel, the swearing shock me no less than the shout just before, that we had come for you — why?

In the little wood behind the morgue's wire fence there are too many vodka bottles to count, most of them broken, drained, and thrown over the fence by the loved ones and relatives of the other dead.

Why does this revolt me so, why does the foul swearing from the bus cut into my soul, when all of it is nothing beside what I myself have done — I, the father who abandoned you, strolling about the little court-yard, waiting around until they dress you and move you from the iron table into the coffin and call us to take the coffin away.

Thursday or Friday?

I never got to see you in the morgue. I was not there as they dressed you, as they moved you into the coffin, as they closed the coffin with the lid, as they carried it to the bus: they asked me to hurry into some shop and buy something needed for your funeral, some little wreath they were supposed to lay on your forehead.

We set off.

Besides you and me, there are only two other people on the bus: the driver and someone else, some man he seems to know well, judg-ing by the way they talk.

You are lying at the very back; the bus has been specially fitted out to carry coffins, with some kind of fastening in the floor; I sat down be-side you, laid my hand on the coffin so you would feel you were not alone, that your father was with you, don't be afraid, I am here, with you, here, don't be afraid, don't be afraid, don't be afraid, don't be afraid, my hand on the black lid, down by the foot end, your feet, your toes a centimetre from my palm, are they bare or did they put socks and shoes on them — Lord, don't be afraid, I am with you, don't be afraid, I am with you — and beyond the rear window is my friend's car, it comes no closer and falls no farther back, and behind it, probably, the bus with all the others.

That is how you and I met again.

When I walked away from you that last day, I promised you I would be back in a couple of hours and take you to the zoo. And I came back ten years later — taking you to the cemetery.

Where they will put you into the ground.

Only now, at this very moment, for the first time in all these years, do I think that it was no accident our bus, yours and mine, was empty, no accident that no one else was in it, none of your relatives, no one close to you, not even your mother... They gave me, the bad father, the chance to be alone with you — a generous gift I did not deserve; just like that, without my asking, without my even realising what was hap-pening, they handed me these last minutes with you — your last minutes on earth, not under the earth, our last moments alone, so that I could say something to you, ask forgiveness, lay my hand on the coffin, comfort you, don't be afraid, son, I am with you, don't be afraid, son, I will not let anyone hurt you, don't be afraid, son, I am with you, I am with you, I am with you, I am with you, I am with you.

I was not lying to you. Every word I said I could scratch into my own heart with a rusty nail. Only what use are my words to you, however desperately sincere, when you lie in a coffin and I am taking you to the cemetery?

Forgive me.

Please, forgive.

Even if I didn't earn forgiveness.

4

The bus stopped: in this ground I would leave you forever. I remember the terrifying bewilderment, the inability to take in what was happening, to grasp what was expected of me, to do on my own whatever the situa-tion, whatever tradition required — but I did not know the tradition, I did not understand the circumstances, I could do nothing.

The doors opened, someone dragged out the coffin, I was led off the bus. There, on the cemetery grass, I stood before people I knew from that vanished life, from when you and I were together. I was mor-tally ashamed to look them in the eye, I wanted to leave, to run away, but they looked at me with pity, uttered kind words, tried to comfort me — whom were they comforting, were they comforting me?

Comforting the father who had brought his dead son to the ceme-tery?

You had many friends, my boy, dozens, perhaps hundreds of boys and girls your age; they were everywhere, all over your small cemetery, hemmed in by tall apartment blocks. Many adults too.

The coffin was already open, but again I did not get to see you: sev-eral people lifted the black box you lay in, set it on their shoulders and started toward the church, at first unevenly, out of step, awkwardly. I tried to stand beside them, to shoulder your coffin, but someone stopped me, with disapproval and fear: parents are not supposed to... it is not allowed... impossible... terrible...

But what if they stumbled, what if they tipped the coffin over, what if they dropped you on the ground?

When I saw the lid, which had to be carried separately from the coffin, I tried to grab it, but even this I, your father, was not allowed to do.

A very bad sign. A very bad omen.

A bad omen of what? What more terrible thing could happen to you, my boy, what could surpass the unbearable horror of what had hap-pened, of what was happening? Life, of course, is generous with sor-rows and misfortunes, but a more terrible misfortune I cannot imagine.

That morning, as I came out of the room where I had spent the rest of a sleepless night, I happened to glance through the open door of the next room: with the eyes of a beaten, crippled mutt, a withered old man looked at me from the edge of the bed — a stump for a leg, his right arm half dead, a face disfigured by the convulsion of a stroke...

Once I had pulled myself together, I tried to pretend I had not no-ticed him, that I had looked that way by accident, absently, mechani-cally, and walked on down the corridor without saying a word to him, without greeting him.

My former father-in-law — only ten years earlier a fearless, strik-ingly handsome man I wanted to be like, unbelievably strong, strong in every respect, courageous, proud and formidable, a man cutting through life with the same absolute, merciless force with which a

thou-sand-ton icebreaker crushes and hacks through age-old ice, leaving behind defeated, naked water — this proud and formidable man of just ten years ago had turned into a feeble old man, crippled, his right side paralysed and disfigured by a stroke — and, well, finished off by your death, my boy — hence that pitiful, bewildered, frightened, humiliated look: yes, our eyes give us away, guts and all — me and him, two men who did not fulfil their main duty, who did not give their lives for you, who did not save you. Only he had been with you all those years, and it was not this morning that life had made him a helpless cripple.

I take him by the arm. He leans heavily on me. So together we walk behind you, behind you laid in a coffin — a cramped, narrow, hard coffin. Are you lying comfortably in there, my beloved son? Aren't the sides pressing on your shoulders — still a child's, narrow, not yet a man's? Doesn't your back hurt from the bare boards beneath you? Is there enough room for your legs? Did they at least put a pillow under your head?

He tells me something good, something kind, and it strikes me how undeserved his kindness is — now I do not remember a single word he said.

It was good to feel how hard he leaned on me, how he, crippled, trusted himself to me. Only, this is not forgiveness — don't hope it is. Our terrible grief brought us closer, burned away for a time the ines-sential, the details, hatred, disgust; after all, he does not know why I left his daughter. I never told him, and never will.

The coffin, the lid, us, the rest behind us, graves on either side, ahead a tiny church.

If I thought I had already lived through the worst — the news, the morgue, my hand on the lid of the coffin in which my son... But I did not think that, so I was not wrong.

The little church is tiny indeed, just as it had looked on the way there. There is no room. Dozens, hundreds of people press against one another, as in a city bus at rush hour. Free space — a step, two, no more — only before your coffin. A lad of a priest sings the panikhida, swings the censer.

You have only just come from the morgue, my son. They dressed you beautifully, laid you out beautifully. They put makeup on your face — that is how it is done, so that the person in the coffin looks good, so that it is not too frightening for those seeing him off, not too painful for those close to him, so that in their memories there remains... I do not know how to put it more precisely: the beauty of a beloved face? Not alive — yet how beautiful, how peaceful, how graceful and serene the face of one departing... Departing in peace, as nearly as possible, giv-en the circumstances.

Your face is covered with terrible bruises — huge dark-blue, black contusions. They are all over your face, that tender, young, girlish face; they cover it completely, disappear into your hair. You are monstrously disfigured. I do not understand why, or how it is possible, but the work-ers at the morgue, who surely know their work well enough, who put makeup on dead people by the dozens every day, could not hide these monstrous bruises, the traces of the monstrous torments you suffered that last night — and I do not know how the others bear it.

But that is not all.

I want to scream.

I don't recognise you, my son.

Not one feature of your dead face reminds me of the familiar fea-tures of that beautiful, trusting five-year-old boy I abandoned ten years ago.

I try to do something very strange to myself, to make some strange effort and recognise you, to make out in your disfigured dead face the familiar, unforgettable face of my boy, my son, my own, my own flesh and blood, my beloved son — I strain terribly, wet with sweat, I can barely stand, my legs can hardly hold me, I look at you and look, I do not take my eyes off

you, trying to perform this very strange, perhaps un-natural exercise, to lay over your dead face the living face of the boy I knew, to bring the features together and recognise you, but my strange, terrible, feverish work is pointless, I am only driving myself mad, I do not know you, I cannot recognise you, I was away too long, I missed your life, it passed entirely without me.

Did you take on another face, the way one takes another surname?

My dead boy, please, I beg you... You did write to me, didn't you? Didn't that mean you had forgiven me? After all, they all said how much you look like me...

But I don't want to look like you.

I don't need your face.

I refused it.

I don't need you.

I don't want to know you.

You are a traitor.

I was killed because you were not there.

A black coffin lined inside with white fabric. A white shirt with long sleeves. Dead arms with black, terrible bruises, folded forever on the chest into which you can no longer draw breath.

5

Your forehead is piercingly cold and damp. That sensation struck me. At the time I did not understand that they had kept you in a refrigerator all those days. I understand it only now.

I know everyone is looking at me, I know everyone knows who I am: a runaway father who met his son at his funeral, a criminal, a traitor, a Judas.

My turn to go up to your coffin, to touch your forehead with my lips: never again to touch you, to see you, to kiss you, to take you by the hand, to look into your eyes, to hold you, to protect you, to comfort you, to make you happy, to make you laugh, to feed you, to quench your thirst, to give you a pill for a headache, to patch a punctured tyre on your bicycle, to buy you a new shirt, to put you to bed, to wake you early in the morning, to send you to school, to blow on a bruise so the pain will go away, to see your smile, to hear your laughter, to lie beside you in the grass, to look at the stars together, to hear your stories about your first love, to explain that the girl will come back, that the girl is a fool and does not deserve you, that you will meet and love another, that all will be well, that everything always turns out well, no matter how bad and frightening it may seem now, never again to tell you why I aban-doned you.

The touch of my lips against that icy dampness your forehead had become, the fall — already familiar to me, never ceasing through these days — into a black abyss that has no bottom, and never can, the des-pair about which you know only one thing: it will last forever, and now I am to live my whole life with this guilt, never to atone for it, never to efface it, never to bring you back to life, I will never forgive myself — I wanted to stay with you a little longer, to do something with you, some-how take you, somehow embrace you, press my face to yours, lay your head on my shoulder — a father's, broad, strong — protect you, stop the evil nightmare, the evil rite, revive you, say or do something special, something right, I almost know what, but cannot recall, and you will open your eyes, and sigh, and sit up all at once, look around, recognise me at once, smile shyly, seeing so many people around you and this

man with a censer and a pectoral cross — but I only pressed my cheek, then my forehead, to your icy forehead, kissed you again, and how I wanted to kiss and kiss, and never say goodbye, and be with you now at last, together, together always, how sharp this gnawing pain is — it is called heartache, the heartache of a criminal father burying his be-loved, his abandoned son, and this pain will be eternal — but to stand beside you and look at you and embrace you and press my forehead to yours, hot against icy, to stand like that forever is impossible: caring, strong hands took hold of me from behind, one on either side; all these people, dozens and hundreds of people, had to come up to my son too, touch their lips to his forehead, embrace him, touch him, look at him one last time, say goodbye.

Grief is not mine alone.

Stay with me, don't go.

Stay. I will set everything right, I will atone for everything.

Please.

I beg you.

There is nothing I would not give for you to stay.

To step away from you is impossible, physically impossible, im-possible because if I step away, everything will start spinning and whirl-ing, the mechanism will resume its course, all your friends, boys and girls, people you know and people you don't, children and adults, will pass you, will fly past you, the coffin will be closed, they will take you away in it, carry you away forever.

I don't remember how I tore myself away from your coffin, I don't remember how I walked to the doors.

An explosion of sun, painful to the eyes, your stepfather stands be-fore me.

The man who replaced me for you. The man who for ten long years fulfilled my role, my duties. The man who raised you. The man who be-came your father.

I step toward him, hold out my hand, and shake the hand he holds out in return: thank you for everything, I say to him, I say to him some-thing like that, thank you for everything you did for him.

I break here.

The tears I had been able to hold back all these days, every night — boys don't cry, isn't that so, my strong, my fearless son — the tears in one brief instant engulfed me, and at once there was no strength left in me to keep any hold of myself, to behave as a man should, to hide my tears, to hide anything at all.

I was not crying — I do not know what to call what happened to me. All defence mechanisms, all dams and barriers and walls and pilings and everything else that had kept me within some acceptable bounds collapsed, and then some shameful, revolting, foul howling began...

I ran at once, feeling there was no stopping what was happening to me, I ran anywhere, just anywhere, I ran blindly, seeing nothing ahead of me, making no sense of anything except that I wanted to run as far away as possible, to hide from everyone, so that people would not see how the traitor weeps, how the Judas howls, how the father who turned up only after your death, who came to you to put in an appearance at your funeral, dissolves in tears.

A man these people can only despise — at best, despise.

I ran and ran, howling revoltingly, foully. I ran as long as my strength held out. I did not know the cemetery was really so large. At the last ebb of my strength I saw some stone, a boulder grown into the earth.

I fell onto it, with no strength left, no longer able to take another step, and here, knowing that no one could see me there, here...

I did not know a person could lose all power over himself so com-pletely.

I did not know that I could howl so foully, so uncontrollably, scream, scream at the top of my lungs, choke and suffocate in this screaming, stream with snot, scream and scream, choke and suffo-cate, feel the snot running over my lips, flowing into my gaping mouth, sliding down my chin, and howl and howl and scream and hide myself from the world behind my hands, so that it would not see me, despised, so that the world would not see.

Despair, despair alone, despair undiluted, not a single other feel-ing, not a single thought.

Through the howling and snot and tears and screaming I hear and feel someone sit down somewhere out of my sight on the same stone where I had fallen, spent from running so long.

Puts a hand on my shoulder, gives me a little shake.

“Sasha, calm down,” says the man who replaced me as your fa-ther.

Someone else sits down behind me, strokes my back.

“Sasha, don’t cry, Sasha…”

It’s her. She calms me. She sits beside me and embraces me. Is it possible to sink to greater humiliation still, to become even more pa-thetic, more revolting, not a man, a rag, a weakling, screaming at the top of my lungs, swallowing snot, streaming with tears, pathetic, a con-temptible traitor, a non-human.

She embraces, she comforts — and he comforts too.

But I cannot stop. I have no power over myself. I do not know what is happening to me. I had never felt such horror, such heartache, such guilt before you.

“Sasha, you really do need to calm down,” one of them says.

“Everyone is waiting for you.”

Everyone is waiting for me? Who could be waiting for me — and why?

“It’s long past time for us to go. Everyone is waiting.”

I turn to him — or to her: a nod toward something behind.

I turn farther round and look where he or she is pointing.

God.

A huge line, dozens, hundreds of people, your coffin — all of it ten steps from me.

All of them, every one of them, children, boys and girls, adults, men and women, every one of them saw everything, heard everything.

Only my shame is deserved, of course. Fully.

But how could that be? After all, I had run for so long, I had run and run…

For a long time I cannot pull myself together, cannot still all the foulness that had shattered me.

Then together we go to the people, and she and I take our place right behind your coffin. The coffin moves off, and behind it we all walk. Far, far away, beyond the dark woods and deep seas, there lived a boy with golden hair, with a soft broad wave in the gold of his hair. The boy wore it long because it was terribly beautiful and suited him unbelieva-bly well. And the sun in the high sky could not look its fill of him, and all sorts of animals came out of the dark woods to admire him, and even the fish that lived in the bottomless sea stuck their wondrous heads out of the water and looked at the golden-haired boy for as long as their strength held out — then dived back into the water to catch their breath, and once they had caught their breath, stuck their wondrous fish heads out again. The boy was so beautiful and graceful that time and again someone would ask me: isn’t that a girl you have there? The sun would ask, the trees would ask, the proud eagle in the high sky would ask, the blue whale would ask, the elephants and leopards would ask — and once even the Fiery Lion asked.

"Really?" you ask with incredulous delight.

"The honest truth."

"And you weren't scared?" — now simply with delight.

"Of the Lion, you mean?"

You nod, quickly, quickly, impatiently, impatiently.

“Well, of course I wasn’t scared!”

Enormous eyes, pride and delight — for the fearless, strong daddy.

“And what did he say?”

“He said that if you don’t get under the blanket right now, close your beautiful eyes and go to sleep, he’ll bite your finger.”

The golden-haired boy howls with laughter, terribly pleased with the Lion and his cheeky words, and — apparently — with daddy being fearless too.

“And you?”

“And I swung like this, and turned like this… See what a huge fist I’ve got?”

You examine my fist carefully.

“A huge fist,” you say with respect and pride.

“You bet.”

“Did you slug him?”

“The Lion?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I thought I’d give him one wallop, send him flying a good fifteen metres and straight into the dentist’s chair, where they’d be resetting his jaw for the next year and a half…”

My boy howls with laughter, simply howls with laughter, he doesn’t laugh — he howls with laughter.

“But then I felt sorry for him. He is so beautiful and kind, and he doesn’t eat poor, weak little creatures, he only protects them… And besides, he is right. Time to close those little eyes.”

He pouted, frowned.

“One more minute.”

“I’ll call the Lion.”

“And he’ll bite my finger?”

“Exactly.”

“And you’ll swing and hit him with your huge fist?”

“That’s right.”

He sighed bitterly.

“Well then, I’ll go to sleep. So you don’t hit the Lion.”

I kiss the forehead, I kiss the forehead, I kiss the icy forehead.

My tender, my trusting boy, my defenceless son.

The coffin with your tender body, which I bathed so many times there in the tub, in snow-white tender foam, held in my arms, rocked before sleep, saw in the azure sea water, stroked and cherished and admired, choking with especially sharp attacks of fatherly love, a metre from me.

Your eyes are closed.

The Fiery Lion will not come and bite your little finger.

And not only because I am just a step from you.

The Fiery Lion would not bite the dead boy who closed his little eyes forever.

My gentle, my endlessly good, my trusting son…