

A photograph of a young man in profile, facing left. He is wearing a green camouflage military jacket and a brown fabric helmet with black straps. He is holding a lit cigarette in his right hand. The background shows a cityscape with two tall, cylindrical industrial chimneys and a building with a spire under a clear sky.

The Moscoviad

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*Translated from the Ukrainian
by Vitaly Chernetsky*

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SPUYTEN DUYVIL

New York City

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Summary: Surreal misadventures of a Ukrainian in Moscow during the late times of the Soviet Empire.

Both the protagonist and each character with whom he comes into contact presents a comedy of universal

error that occasionally morphs into a tale of horror.

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THE MOSCOVIAD

let them this time as well
hunt down nothing that is ours

HRYHORI CHUBAI

You live on the seventh floor, having covered the walls of your room with Cossacks and WUPR¹ officials, from the window you see the roofs and joyless poplar alleys of Moscow; you can't see the Ostankino TV tower—it can only be seen from the rooms on the other side of the building—but its close presence can be sensed every minute; it radiates something soporific, the viruses of sluggishness and apathy, which is why in the morning you cannot force yourself to wake up, you move from one dream to another, as if from one country to another. You sleep selflessly, most often until eleven o'clock, when the Uzbek guy on the other side of the wall turns on at full volume spicy Oriental music of the style "one stick two strings." Cursing good-naturedly our unfortunate history, the friendship of the peoples and the 1922 union treaty, you realize that going back to sleep is ruled out. Especially since the Jewish guy on the other side of another wall has already returned from a shopping expedition, having bought for the umpteenth time, say, pantyhose for his innumerable old-testament kin in Birobidzhan, for all its generations. Now with the righteous feeling of mission accomplished he will sit down to write new poems in the medieval language called Yiddish and will indeed write them, seven before lunch and three more in the afternoon. And all of them will be published in the journal Sovietish Heymland as living testimony to the state's tireless care for the culture of small peoples.

The Jewish guy on the other side of the wall is a living and instructive reminder to you, you son of a bitch, that you too must be doing something—buying pantyhose, writing poems. Instead you are lying in bed, studying God knows how many times the portrait of the dictator Petrushevych, while the Oriental music behind the wall turns ever more passionate and monotonous, it streams on like water in irrigation canals, it is really a great outing with camels and elephants, cotton plantations, blues for the hemp mafia.

And you, the Ukrainian poet Otto von F., you physically sense pangs of conscience eating away at you, gnawing ever larger holes, so that one day you will walk out into the dorm hallway already fully transparent, holy, and not a single Kalmyk will even greet you.

But one can't do much about it—your poems must have stayed behind in the atmospheric fields of Ukraine, while the Moscow fields turned out to be too dense for their nightingale-like penetration.

In the meantime the local characters are already filling up the hallway; actually they are writers, indeed "from all ends of the Soviet Union," but for some reason they resemble not so much creators of literature but its characters. Characters from potboilers baked according to the blandest recipes of the great realist tradition.

You distinguish their writerly voices—and each one of them, according to the letters of recommendation from the places of previous activity, is "endowed with his/her own unique voice that cannot be mistaken for any other"; these voices i

the hallway—they tell each other something, they copulate, they say the kettle boiling, they sing “dontpoursaltovermywounds,” quote Vysotsky (Zhvanetsky), invite someone to come over for breakfast, inform that the whore from the distance learning division (third floor, room 303) spent this night in room 727 and so forth.

In inviolable dialectical unity with the voices appear the smells—a bouquet made up of garbage disposer, hangover, and sperm. Frying pans hiss, buckets and keys clank, doors slam, for today is Saturday, no lectures, and no bastard will force me to do something I don't want to. And may all of them go to hell!

Thus gradually you enter reality, remembering that the whore from 303 spent the night not in 727, as was mistakenly announced in the hallway, but in 729, that one of the Chechens (or most likely all of them together) yesterday gave a nice thrashing in the elevator to the phys. ed. guy, Yasha, that the Russian poet Yezhevikin, who lives at the opposite end of the dorm, yesterday spoke on TV, for the fifth time now, and used the word “spirituality” no less than nine times, wiping eight times with the back of his hand the hangoverish sweat off his brow, that you should call home, that the session of the Supreme Council³ will start Tuesday, that the Ukrainian translation of Sonnets to Orpheus is possibly the best among those known to you, that the second year of your Moscow sojourn nears its end and you still have not visited the beer hall on Fonvizin Street; remembering all these things that have no connection with each other, as well as a gazillion other things in no way related to the earlier ones, you nevertheless get up and, having paced back and forth across the room in your underpants, having contemplated the same lame landscape outside the window, with the same poplars and dark heavy rainclouds, you force yourself to do some morning exercises—one, two—until your muscles begin to hurt, as if this is the ultimate justification for you, for Moscow, and, moreover, for your existence in this world. A rather pitiful existence, by the way, of the kind that Someone Above Us could very well not bother with, were it not for a few successful lines in several general unsuccessful poems, which, naturally, is absolutely not enough for the great national cause.

And here are some of the earlier mentioned characters. Their voices irritate you so much in the morning that now you can get even with them, von F. Depict them in the most acerbic way possible, old man.

Well, enjoy then. Two women, two flowers from the far provinces of Russia. Two poetesses, or rather women poets, no, I beg your pardon, two poets, for now in their circles it is fashionable to repeat after Tsvetaeva-Akhmatova (Horenko?) that the word “poet” has no feminine form; thus I, old pervert that I am, imagining all these womenfolk with sizeable penises and, most importantly, testicles down there.

But that's not what it's about. We have two women from the far—an equidistant from Moscow—Russian lands. Two swans, two ethereal creatures, one of them slightly over forty, the other slightly under forty. One of them married, the other not, but I forget which one.

This is the exposition. Now the development of the action. Both placed too much on this voracious altar. Each dreamed half her life to get here. To get to Moscow for an entire two years! To get to Moscow where, doubtlessly, one will at last be noticed and elevated! To get to Moscow and to stay there forever! To be buried (cremated) there! To get to Moscow where there are shitloads of general secretaries, foreigners, patriots, ESP's! And most importantly, bananas aplenty! .

This dream arises with puberty. And powerfully accompanies one's entire life. For this sake alone it was worth it to go through all the circles of shitty provincial hell. To intrigue. To make phone calls. To throw dinner parties. To sleep with impotents.

After many defeats and desperate acts—it happened! It came true! Both arrive almost simultaneously, having covered, independently from each other, a sizeable chunk of the Russian plains. They naturally make acquaintance, no trace of cunningness, they are genuinely very pleased, for they are the fellow fortunate ones. Already from the first words they exchange they find out that both have a weakness for Yesenin, not Pasternak, for Rubtsov, not Brodsky, for misse polyester dresses with inlays both in the front and in the back, zipped pockets in the seams, a pleat in the back, with a belt. The same day, filled with the sweet frisson of anticipation of total changes for the better, both pay a visit to the Pushkin monument, to lay flowers, just because, for personal reasons. For both love Pushkin and even consider him the greatest Russian poet and their teacher. Pushkin pensively examines the toes of his shoes. Below, underneath him, guys in gray uniforms and black berets pummel some longhaired freemasons who call themselves “the Democratic Union.” Offended for Pushkin, the gals from the provinces go back to move into the dormitory.

The dorm superintendent turned out to be a darkie, although not a bad one, Daghestani, and still rather young: well physically developed, broad shoulders, the chest undoubtedly covered with abundant growth, thirty-four years old, manages to give each one a wink without the other noticing, the teeth straight, the eyes brown, Murtaza Ramazanov, or perhaps the other way round, Ramaza Murtazaev.

Ramazan (Murtaza) lets them pick a room on the seventh floor. Any one of them can be theirs. There's a room with the windows opening onto a liquor store, and another opening onto a greengrocer's. There's one with new parquet flooring. One with a broken window. One near the toilet. Each room is attractive in its own way.

But there is an option that both take without a moment's hesitation. This is the so-called “boot,” two adjoining rooms separated from the rest of the world by a small separate hallway. Fantastic! They move in and immediately invite each other for tea. And talk until late in the night about Pushkin, about Yeltsin, recite their own poems, exchange compliments, then poetry collections published by regional presses on recycled paper. And not a slightest hint of lesbianism.

Thus we have approached the climax.

And the resolution? As time goes on they understand more and more that the

have done something utterly stupid. The “boot” turned out to be a trap. A trap for the foolish cows who God knows why dragged themselves into this bedlam. The greatest misfortune is that they are not yet ripe for group sex. Thus they fail to seduce either a general or even a Daghestani. And thus, constrained by each other, they lead an utterly nunnish life, gradually getting angrier and grinding their teeth, and the former genuine sympathy evolves into a barely concealed bottomless hatred that grows ever more evident with each passing day.

The night from Friday to Saturday I dreamt I was having supper with the King of Ukraine, Olelko the Second (Dovhoruky-Riurikid). The two of us sitting at a pleasantly set table in a Baroque loggia made of light blue stone, from time to time the dignified servants appear, mostly Indians or Chinese, with gilded tridents⁵ on their tuxedo lapels, imperceptibly change trays and plates, dishes, knives, forks, lobster shell crackers, tongs for extracting mollusks, scalpels for dissecting frogs, and equally imperceptibly, without any noise, they leave. The view from the loggia is luxurious: the sun is setting somewhere in the clear waters of a lake, the virgin peaks of the Alps, or, rather, the Pyrenees, shine with the last evening sparkle. And the king and I sip various exquisite wines, cognacs, liqueurs and infusions and prattle about this and that.

“Your Royal Mercy,” I turn to him, filled with veneration, “Commander and Ruler of Rus-Ukraine, Grand Duke of Kyiv and Chernihiv, King of Galicia and Volhynia, Master of Pskov, Peremyshl, and Koziatyn, Duke of Dniprodzerzhynsk, Pervomaysk, and Illichivsk, Great Khan of Crimea and Izmail, Baron of Berdychi of Both Bukovynas and Bessarabias, and also the Supervisor of New Ascania and Kakhovka, Archseigneur of the Wild Field and the Black Forest, Hetman and Protector of the Don, Berdyansk, and Kryvy Rih Cossacks, Sleepless Shepherd of the Hutsuls and the Boikos, Lord of All the Ukrainian People including the Tatars and the Pechenegs, and also the Malokhokhols and the Fat-eaters, of all the Moldavians and the Mankurts that Dwell in Our Land, the Patron and Pastor of the Greater and Minor Slobozhanshchyna, and also of the Inner and Outer Tmutorokan, heir to the glorious millennial dynasty, in other words, our glorious and honorable Monarch, Your Mercy, wouldn't You like to remain forever in the golden tablets of universal and human memory?”

“I would indeed,” says Olelko the Second. “But through which deeds?”

“And through those deeds,” I answer, “through which all the kings attained eternal unpassable glory.”

“So perhaps through wars?” asks Olelko the Second, arching his millennia-old eyebrows and wrinkling his aristocratic forehead.

“Even a fool can do it through wars, my Lord, and a president can.”

“Then through wise laws and decrees, through just charters and declarations,” I guesses Olelko.

“And this too is crap, Your Mercy, for this the madmen exist, and also the parliamentarians,” I intrigue him further.

“Then maybe through young wives and concubines scandalous in number, through loud drinking bouts and bullish fights, through all-pervasive luxury and gluttony and other acts of ill repute?”

"And this is not new, oh Great Ruler, all the same you cannot outdo the commies," I taunt him the best I can.

"Don't torture me then and tell me, through which deeds?" Olelko the Second says, a little plaintively, and also commandingly.

A Malay servant takes away the last plates, a bowl with live, still squeaking, unfinished oysters, empty Malvasia, Ymiglycos and Kellergeister bottles. Meanwhile an Ethiopian servant brings candles in bronzed candelabras and an ebony box filled with the most exquisite cigars. Twilight. Fragrant aromas waft from somewhere in the Alpine meadows. Below, under the loggia, a fountain, or perhaps a spring, sings its song. Two little black boys lead by the hands an old blind bandura-playing minstrel.⁶ The king and I light up, and the bandura player barely audibly touches his strings, sitting on a stone ledge, next to a relief depicting a dancing faun. The first stars appear in the sky.

"So tell me, you fool, what did you want to advise me?" the king says in an outburst, irritated by my ambiguous cigar puffing.

"Be patient, Your Mercy, and kind," I tell him. "Do not offend even a shitty worthless bug. Attend church on Sundays, but don't forget about prayer on weekdays either. Give Your wealth to the poor, smile to widows and orphans, don't kill stray puppies. Think about the good and the beautiful, for instance about my poetry. Read my poetry, eat my body, drink my blood. Give me a stipend, say, in German marks, and send me traveling around the world. Within half a year, Chiarissime, You will receive from me a panegyric so glorious that it will raise You far above all other monarchs. Within another half a year the people of Ukraine will be filled with desire for Your return and, following a successfully conducted referendum, You will enter Kyiv in a white Cadillac. Truly, truly I tell you: give me a stipend!"

The blind bandurist plays on some tune. Below, amidst the evergreen myrtle thickets, water gurgles and calls to take a trip around the world. The stars in the sky grow bigger, closer, one can even distinguish on them some strange cities, fairytale forests, wondrous palaces, columns, towers. Their radiance promises so much that one wants to jump out of the loggia and, as a poet said, to die a little.

"For nothing in the whole world is as superfluous, senseless, and ridiculous as a good poetry, but simultaneously nothing in this world is as necessary, meaningful, and unavoidable as it, Your All-Ukrainianness. Take a look at the history of a great nations, and you will become convinced that it is the history of their poetry. Take a look also at the history of nations that are not great. Of those that will cease to exist tomorrow. Take a look and tell me: do poets need a king more than the king needs the poets? Are kings worth anything without poets? Don't the kings exist by the grace of God only so that they support those who are poets by the grace of God?"

The sycamore trees rustle in the darkening twilight, the candles flicker, monasteries ring their bells, girls sing while walking. Strange evening birds, or perhaps bats, fly around the loggia. Sweetly disturbing fragrances waft from the far away mountains.

The king finishes his ice-cold champagne, which he drinks from a glass with

tall Masonic stem, and says, slowly, wisely, weightily,

~~“And do you know what’s the Spanish for dick?”~~

“What, Your Mercy?” I ask, filled with curiosity.

“Pinga!” cries the king and claps his hands.

Then two tall Senegalese men grab me by the shoulders and arms and throw me from the loggia downward. I am flying—and suddenly I remember that his real last name is Anjou. My mug all flayed by the evergreen shrubbery, I hear the gray-haired blind bandura player crying and sobbing.

Grimacing and spitting, and hating yourself, you recall this dream, while forcing yourself to do your exercises on the floor. To sell oneself like this! Shamelessly insolently, cynically. “Give me a stipend, Your Sovereignness, give me a sti . . . What a low and vile lackey spirit, the inner nature of a prostitute!

Finally the muscles are taken care of. Now it’s time to gather all the stuff necessary for the shower room and descend triumphantly in the elevator to the dorm’s underground, where a team of janitors (Sasha, Seryozha, and Aroutiun) blue from guzzling liquor, have their little closet space, not so much for work but for leisure purposes. But what’s their place in all this?

In the hallway you wave your hand at someone unknown (that is, someone you know but can’t identify, as he is at the far end of the opposite wing of the building some two hundred yards from you), the stranger replies with a similar handwave, probably also without recognizing you, and the mood improves. The wait for the elevator is not that long, five minutes tops. While going down, you study the various inscriptions, drawings and scuff marks on its walls and floor—both old and recent, some brand new, the blood of Yasha the phys. ed. guy whom the Chechen yesterday beat to a pulp for having a “beeg ass,” or something like that.

Elevators provide a special pretext for the dorm populace to show off and do some crazily original stuff. That the Chechens like destroying their enemies there is known to everyone, including the district cops. Everyone (except for the district cops) also knows that three relapsed ex-cons, one of whom is a student in the poetry seminar, and the other at the seminary, fucked there a talented young woman playwright from Novokuznetsk. But only a few initiates know what Vasya Mochalkin, a Yakut writer, did there. So, Vasya Mochalkin, the founder of Soviet Yakut literature, a fourth year student and an honorary reindeer herdsman, once filled himself up with booze to the brim and stepped into the elevator on the first floor. Having pressed the button with the number of the necessary floor (and for Vasya Mochalkin, essentially, it was of no importance which floor it was—he was loved and accepted as a brother everywhere), he, to use some florid verbiage, ascended. However, under the impact of unavoidable kinetic changes he not so much managed to stay on his feet but rather, conversely, fell down, or as the poet Yezhevikin would say, fucking fell down. This happened at nine in the evening and at nine the following morning Vasya was still to be found inside the elevator. For having fucking fell down at nine p.m. he immediately and happily fell asleep and spent the whole night ascending and descending. At half past midnight, truth be told, the hardly more sober Belarusian short story writer Yermalaichik tried to drag his friend out of the elevator so to lay him down somewhere in a proper

Christian manner, but the attempt ended with Vasya vomiting on Yermalaichik's collar, thus the latter, having given up all moral qualms, dragged himself over to the room of Alka, the one with the amputated right breast, and spent the night there. And only in the morning, around nine thirty, people finally succeeded in shaking Vasya Mochalkin up. This happened on the first floor, where the fairytale vertical journey had begun the night before. Having come to his senses after a heavy reindeer herder's dream, Vasya finally crawled out of the elevator and stumbled over to the beer hall on Fonvizin Street to greet the light of the new day.

And now you too, Otto von F., are on the ground floor. Stepping out of the elevator, you take a left and go down the stairs, hopefully there will still be enough hot water for you in the filthy shower stalls with their peeling walls.

In the changing room, as always, it's dark, and while you are feeling for the light switch masked by cobwebs, you see, or rather sense, a pile of old rags stir in the corner of the "antechamber." The pile stirs in an increasingly nervous fashion more energetically, as if a dozen subway rats, lately so often written about in the papers, have nested there. But the disheveled bearded mug that appears above the rags simultaneously with the lights coming on clears all your biological horrors and doubts: Ivan Novakovsky, nicknamed Novocain, or according to another version, Vanya Cain, the hounded and lumpenized (that is, turned into a lump of dirt by the changes) litterateur, publisher and culturologist, a bum who for the last fifteen or so years has been trying to sleep illegally in the dorm, for which purpose he even went through a church wedding in Maryina Roshcha with Vasilisa the epileptic, a legal resident of the dorm (a fourth year student, seminarian of the holy fools), but this marriage displays undeniable signs of being fake, since Novocain usually makes his home in the showers or the laundry room. They say Vasilisa used to beat him on the head with a desk lamp. Others say that it wasn't a desk lamp but a blowtorch, which she allegedly rammed into his rectum. Whatever the truth may be, he moves around in a fucked-up postapoplectic manner. However, he is usually quite talkative, quotes himself by the stanza, and carries through gestation ever-new publishing projects.

"Hey man, buy a poetry collection," he lifts from the pile of rags his hand of an old masturbator that holds a gray photocopied brochure. "Excellent poem by Nikolai Palkin, just one ruble, of which ninety kopecks go to the author."

You study the oily softcover. The "Russian Idea" series. Founded 19... NIKOLAI PALKIN. The Birch Undid Her Braid. Third Rome Publishers. The cover displays a birch tree, a crossed out Star of David, and a lively two-headed eagle who, it seems, is about to take off and fly away, scaring the crap out of the surrounding celestial fauna, angels included, by its mutant monstrous appearance. While Vanya speaketh uninterruptedly on various subjects, that is, while he goes on telling quotes and jokes, you manage to read the first stanza:

Mother Russia bleeds all over . . .
Tell me in the name of God,
Why Her Eagle is being tortured
By the Judases and whores?!

Overcome with growing delight, you move to the next one:

Tell me now, oh Baltic lands,

Why you hate our Holy Rus?

Freeze, Estonia! Tremble, Lithuania,

Russia's dick is coming at you!

But for some reason the word "dick" is crossed out by hand, with the word

"sword" written above it, which in turn is crossed out as well, and "tank" is

written in. You return the poetry silently to Novocain. You are on your way to

washing yourself, taking care not to step into the slimy cold puddles on the

crumbling floor of the showers. Novakovsky's head again disappears under the

rags as he goes back, perhaps to reading—or to jerking off.

What a reward it is that at least here, in this dirty basement, covered with

spittle, bits of soap, and old hair, hot water is in existence, what a high it is, almost

incomprehensible to many peasant and proletarian writers—washing yourself

with soap, brushing your teeth! How one wants to stay here forever! To forget

about everything, close your eyes and give yourself to water as if to a lover. Most

of your poems you create precisely while you are in hot water. For in the hot

water you can be great, kind, a genius and your true self simultaneously. And many

all of them go to hell!

Across the wall, in the women's showers, nothing but laughter and giggles

Seems like there are some forty thousand of them there. Why do they always

chatter so loudly when they wash themselves, those darn lesbians! You cannot

decipher even half a word out of this bird-like chatter—it is as if while bathing

girls acquire a different language known to them only. The secret language of the

primordial times of matriarchate. Full of haughty condescension towards the low

male breed with its billygoat-like needs and desires. Which is why they hate

when someone from that slavish tribe tries to spy on them—or even worse

secretly makes his way to them during the sacred bathing ritual. Such things are

punished far too severely, the way the occult punishes those who abuse its

secrets. The poet from Suzdal, Kostya Seroshtanov, your classmate, even wrote

a poem describing how angry girls scalded his boyish prick for spying on them at

the village bathhouse. Not a bad poem by the way, the best in his entire collection.

A poem of remembrance, the retrieval of lost time. For he was in far too much

pain, Kostya Seroshtanov.

But now the voices behind the wall gradually die down, and with them the noise

of the water. Perhaps the ritual has been exhausted, the magical séance ended

and it was time to change languages. But someone still remains there, for you still

hear the water running, at least from one faucet.

Then a singing starts. A lonely female voice and nothing else. A strange

miraculous song, not one of those that Russian girls sing when overcome with

youthful feelings and springtime dreams. No, this is something else, this is not

even a song, but an ecstatic luxuriance of human voice, the most sophisticated of

all musical instruments (well put, von F., but this is from Lorca). All this—hot

water, music, and your own greatness—brings you to a state of supernatural

trance, the voice behind the wall torments you sweetly, as if it were Philipina

massage, it torments every cell of your body, down to the smallest one, actually it's already time to get out, but you can't, you can't! What sort of siren is over there? Should you block your ears with soap, or what? But the further it goes, the stronger the sensation that you are caught. The voice does not leave you in peace, it wounds and beckons you. Finally you realize: you have no other escape left.

You slide past the pile of rags under which hides Vanya Cain, destroyed by his tough luck, into the changing room, water streams off your body, and the heart tries as hard as it can to jump out of your mouth in some unknown direction. You wrap yourself in the large fluffy equatorial towel you brought with you from home. Oh lambada, madonna, quetzalcoatl, popocatepetl! If someone else had told you you wouldn't believe . . .

You open the doors into the subterranean corridor with utmost care (and the voice is audible even here, what a delicious and tormenting mirage!). It is almost dark, and nobody there. Then—to the right!—commands from the skull, or rather from somewhere in the groin, your own private field marshal. To the right, and leaping, no more than ten leaps down the corridor. You leave wet prints of bare feet behind you. The janitors' closet is categorically locked—natch, it's Saturday, and what cheap moron would sit here?

And here are the other doors—behind them the cave where dwells that voice taken captive by the dragon. You enter decisively, as if going to your own execution. Then you are conscious of little, only quickly noting with surprise that the women's showers' layout is the same as men's, as if the two belonged to the same species. Somewhere there, in the changing room, you unwrap and for some reason take great effort to shed your towel. For it holds on to you, hangs on your hook, gets between your legs, at this point you are its ideal hanger, but finally you free yourself and step over its striped selva that rests on the concrete floor.

She stands under the shower, with her back towards you, soapy water runs down her body in fragrant streams, her skin is like golden-chocolaty silk, her legs like young tropical trees. You come as close as you can and put your hands on her shoulders. The singing cuts off.

Instead—a light muffled cry, like the sound of exhaling. Too bad you have stopped singing, my bird. For if you had continued singing, we would have done something altogether different, something nonhuman, unusual, heavenly. Too bad you have stopped singing. Now I'll have to eat you.

You pour shampoo and liquid soap from various bottles over her body. You pour them over her and over yourself, from the bright fragrant southern bottles, and lather her body, although the flying water immediately washes off all your efforts, but this makes her body slippery and impairs her sight, and you bury your head in her primordial black hair. Then she, without having turned around once, slow, but obedient, leans forward. And this is an invitation. Or a challenge. The black orchid lets you in. And your skull is now splitting from the bolts of lightning inside, for you have begun. Too bad she stopped singing.

And in these hellishly hot streams of water, under this eternal waterfall the two of you rock together in some African rhythm. You do not sense resistance, but you don't sense encouragement either. She yields to you as if she were a slave girl.

although you cannot know how slave girls do it, perhaps, on the contrary, they resist or encourage. But already in a minute you hear that her voice is returning. Not the one with which she sang, but a living and mysterious one. Perhaps, even more passionate one. There is something pleading, even something prayerlike in it. And it is precisely the voice, its emergence, its demanding vibrato, that takes away your self-possession and endurance, and you no longer can hold on, or stop or prevent. This black orchid will destroy you, melt you, crumple you . . .

But she is doing something unknown there, some imperceptible internal movement, changes something there, inside her, she knows all the ancient tricks she was a talented girl, studied well, the sophisticated priestesses of love prepared her for a tall coal-black prince on a special, forbidden island where they copulated on a bed of palm leaves, and you find in her a possibility to control yourself. But the voice, the voice! It will indeed finish you off, it won't allow you to run across this savanna to the end as you should. It penetrates you like steam into your skin, your much lighter Central European skin. And now—the final salvation—to close your eyes. Since even for the eyes there's too much: stars in the skull, lightning bolts, and this chocolate, and these hot streams from the sky. But in the closed eyes, too, all of it comes alive, pulsating. And you shake like a volcano, hearing your own voice, and understand: that's it. Too bad you started singing.

. . . In the changing room you wrap yourself again in the towel. You lick the remaining chocolate off your lips. You peer into the corridor almost confidently although you make a mental note, surprised, of the speed and power with which the reality returned. You press yourself to the wall, and in a few leaps return to the male side of the universe. Although you leap not only for precaution. Rather you leap like a hunter who has just shot with a victorious arrow a golden antelope.

You greet Novocain the second time, he again arises in all his dishevelness and offers "verse." You hang the towel on a hook. In the meantime, a few Mongols have appeared in the showers. They snort like stallions, washing the dust of the Great Steppe off their muscular shoulders. They galloped for a week, carrying the khan's letter, these young toothy horsemen. Bow-legged archers.

You soap yourself the second time. And then you hear there, behind the wall, her starting her song again . . .

Disillusionment has settled for good inside these walls which, by the way, will never be covered with memorial plaques. But that's not the main thing. The main thing is that this is the house of smashed foreheads. Local plots are so uniform and repetitive that what we are dealing with seems to be a mere myth. Or a scheme with two, maximum three versions. Here's one of them.

A seventeen-year old lyrical youth, let's call him Slava, composes rhyming stanzas, which he copies into a thick notebook that he hides in a secret place behind the toilet tank. The poems, as a rule, bear titles derived from romantic women's names: "Aelita," "Consuelo," "Angothea," "Isadora," "Lolita." Of course behind them one and the same creature is hidden, most likely Lusya or Nyusy, his classmate, who probably has no inkling that there exists a thing called sublimation.

Then the day comes when Slava the youth secretly sends the poems with women's names, these spiritual sperm discharges, to a competition at an institute in Moscow. At the dawn of spring pimples and freckles abundantly cover his face and exactly at that time he receives the reply from Moscow. Shivering with anticipation, he tears the envelope and learns that he successfully passed the competition. The nationally famous name that he frequently came across in textbooks signs this letter, making our youth happy as a little lamb.

In the summer he leaves his lice-covered, godforsaken boontown of Partizanskiy or Mukhomorsk, hub of the chemical industry, on his way to conquer Moscow. He hides the photo of Lusya/Nyusya in the most unexpected places.

Naturally, he successfully passes the entrance exams. But this is where a poetry ends. The rest is not even prose. The poems went away, for such was the will of the One Who dictates them. The love for Lusya extinguished itself when he realized that she too used the toilet. At the lectures and seminars even flies die from boredom. As for visiting some Jew-ridden theaters or reading some drooling banned fin-de-siècle writers like Merezhkovsky—he is just not made for that. As for admiring St. Basil's and Lenin's Tomb—you can't do that forever, and what's there to admire, after all? So he grasps something else: the harsh—like the wicked stepmother—schooling of dorm reality. For weeks he does not cross the borders of his floor, or if he crosses them it is to fetch for his buddies some booze bought from the Vietnamese or from the conveniently closely located taxi garage. He sometimes sleeps in direct proximity of the garbage disposer, sometimes with his head in the sink and his feet facing north. Alka, the one with the amputated right breast, makes him a man, after which he loses the desire for a long time. Then Voldemar from Daugavpils, a veteran of various youth movements and pilgrimages to the East, introduces him to a sleepless desire for dope. By his third year of studies Slava already resembles an old pederast, much battered by fate with an aching body and an emptied soul. Sometimes he steals pieces of meat from other people's soup pots at the communal kitchen. His body reeks of piss and cheap tobacco. Up to his fifth year of studies he tries to rhyme something with something else, but the result is pure crap. Actually, it was always nothing but crap. The day comes when he is ready to slit his wrists. But never mind, never mind.

There also exists the version of "national" (that is, non-Russian) poets. By some miracle these guys from the Caucasus get in in large crowds, and move about also exclusively in large crowds. No one actually knows what they are up to, but only an endless laugh would be the appropriate response to the thought that they spend their time writing poetry. They buy boomboxes, leather jackets, girls, guns, grenades, gas masks, jeans, land, cognac; they periodically drive Mercedes cars across the high mountain ranges, down the Military Georgian Highway. They drink but never lose their heads, and do not refuse themselves some small joy either, taking six-foot-six fashion models to cloud nine. Perfect from every side, true oriental knights, strictly observing the codes of honor, following the centuries-old commands of the elders and the Sharia. If, for instance, eight of them are pummeling an unfortunate blond boy inside the elevator, this is never

without a reason, but only in accordance with the laws of the jihad and for the sake of higher justice. But the groan of despair hovers over them as well, for you cannot beat up all the blond guys, buy up all Mercedeses, or screw all the fashion models. Thus green Mohammedan sorrow weighs on their exhausted, scar-covered foreheads.

And such is life in this cursed hole, the literary dormitory, invented by the state order for its own justification and reassurance, in this seven-floor labyrinth in the midst of the hellish capital city, the rotting heart of the half-alive empire. For although the Russian poet Yezhevikin claims the mere word "empire" makes him come, all good things come to an end, and you, Otto von F., simply sense with your very spine the slow bursting of this empire's seams, with countries and people crawling apart, each of them now acquiring independent relevance, cosmic or at least continental in dimension.

And so it is with vodka, too—the further on, the more problems. For some reason—for the first time in the history of Russia—there isn't enough of it to go around. It has to be conquered through long hours of waiting in lines, through pushing and shoving, through self-deprecation and debauchery. Perhaps all the available vodka is now consumed by the Kremlin giants, or perhaps it is being amassed there in the famous deep dungeons for a rainy day, while the plebeians, that is, the people, although actually neither the plebeians nor the people, receive pitiful tears, the exhortation, so to speak, of the food industry. Murders in the lines for vodka have become as habitual as—the veterans of the battle for Berlin won't let me lie—frontline deaths from enemy bullets. Vodka has become the absolute, the sacred goal, the heavenly currency, the Holy Grail, the diamonds of Golconda, this world's gold.

About a year and a half ago, late in the fall, you tossed in your bed until three in the morning, unable to fall asleep, but not for some poetic reasons like, for example, love, nostalgia, universal sorrow, astral spleen, somnambulism, and cetera, but for certain other reasons that one is even embarrassed to name. But having heard a delicate knocking on the door, you decided that your insomnia came at an opportune moment. For, as you had been informed, in this dormitory where even the walls and the chairs are soaked in cheap and slimy depravity, there are many so-called wandering girls that at night simply move from door to door, seeking their man. The seventh floor especially attracts these creatures, for it is populated by rich members. I mean, members of brotherly writers' union, especially from Central Asia and Transcaucasia, refined in their Kama Sutra skills. Besides, each of them has his own private room, that is, leads a harsh and lonely man's life. Thus at night there is no need to crawl from one bed to another, so that everyone would have an equal share of love, as it is custom in students' rooms on the lower floors. Moreover, the inhabitants of the seventh floor, as a rule, are older and kind, one can even stay with them for a week or so, in case the money blockade has boxed you into a corner, or if district police is looking for you at their usual haunts. Thus strange young women from neighborhoods unknown appeared on the seventh floor, having been picked up in beer halls or at grocery stores; they were the true companions and muses of the southern rhapsodes; still, the

sad day invariably came when they abandoned their hosts, taking with them something valuable as a memento.

And so you too, Otto von F., decided in the midst of your insomnia that now your turn had come, and this knocking at three in the morning meant that you were about to entertain a lady guest, quite possibly, a VD carrying one. But having opened the door, you saw not a young “wandergirl” with unwashed hair and lips red as a flag, but a rather good-looking, and no less drunk, young man.

“Hey, boss,” said the boy, “sorry for bothering you at such a late hour. But I’ve gotta have some vodka.”

“And that’s it?” you asked, Otto von F., disappointed in your hopes.

“Hey, boss, let me finish. They call me Ruslan, by the way. And you?”

“Ivan,” you answered, Otto von F.

“OK, Vanya, let me speak. I wanna go buy some vodka at the taxi garage. Here’s the money,” and he showed me a handful of bills, as if that could be of any importance.

“But the front door is locked, boss. I ran through all the floors—you alone have to let me in, boss.”

“So?” you asked skeptically.

“Let me finish. From your room I’ll go to the taxi garage.”

“From my room you’ll go fuck yourself,” was the answer.

“Nah, you don’t see it, boss, and talk bull. You have the fire escape going by your window, understand? I’ll climb down,” he showed with his arms, and also with his feet a little, how he’d climb. “I served in the marines, got it? I can bring you some booze too.”

You wavered for a little bit, but Ruslan’s confident, handsome smile and powerful build did their job.

“OK, go,” you decided.

“You’re the man, boss, I saw it,” Ruslan’s face lit up.

He came up to the window, opened it widely, and the freezing November air saturated with the smells of autumn rains, dead leaves, neglected cemeteries, Pushkin’s poems, in other words, the smells of late fall, Moscow-style, flooded the room, so that you started rubbing yourself and shivering from cold.

“OK, go now!” you shouted.

Ruslan stood up on the windowsill, waved to you, and made a big step into the night. You peered out after him. He was already hanging on the fire escape to the right of your window, as if he were a drunken circus performer testing the nerves of the foolish public; another moment, and he planted his feet on the ladder.

“Hey, and how will you get back?” you asked, suddenly coming to your senses.

“You still don’t get it, boss? Through your window! I won’t be long—there and back again, like an anti-tank missile . . .”

The ladder uttered a metallic moan under his feet. He was rather agile for a drunk climbing down. He didn’t play hooky back in the marines. But you kept cursing everything in this world: the wandering girls with their ill-timed love, your insomnia, and the young, alcoholism prone motherland defender, through whose graces you’d have to wait by the window for some twenty minutes at the least.

The night, as it has been already mentioned, was slimy and cold. Pro-imperial dogs barked out their fierce discomfort in some faraway backyards. Time dragged slowly, and you, having nothing to do, even got dressed and smoked a cigarette or two. On a lower floor a squeaky female voice suddenly yelled out, "You fucking bastard!" Then the ringing of broken glass, muffled blows, as if someone was hammering nails into the wall with someone else's head, and then a low male voice informed, "You're a fool, Zinka, can't you see I love you!" Then everything grew silent.

Finally you heard again the moaning of the ladder. Ruslan was on his way back.

He covered one floor after another, and somewhere between the fifth and the sixth floor he stopped to take a breather. Looked up and saw you leaning out of the window.

"I'm already here, boss," he informed joyfully. "Sorry I took so long. Imagine even the taxi garage didn't have any. The racket hit them today. Then I went to Volodya, but his coffers were empty too. So I had to get some from the Vietnamese guy, for twenty-five. That narrow-eyed bastard! I could kill him! But that's all right, now we'll have some, Vanya . . ."

And he went up the ladder. At the seventh floor he stopped, took another breather, adjusted the bottle in his pocket to make sure it wouldn't fall out. Then he made a large step from the ladder onto the windowsill. But last time it was much easier: there was something to grab with your hands, something to hang on to. Now there was just the wall in front of him and the slippery tin-plated windows beneath his feet. You managed to stretch your hand out to him, but were unable to hold on to his fingers that were slipping out. He lurched with his entire body and for a moment balanced above the abyss, like an angel preparing to take off. Then there was his long echoing cry. And the fall from the seventh floor. And death.

And you were running about, waking someone, calling the ambulance and the cops—all of this was already of no importance. All of this was like in a dream. Or like in a banal melodramatic movie.

Oh Ruslan the Magnificent, you were saying, how shall I mourn your loss, my brother?! You were fearless, you were used to being first in everything, you had countless hours of parachuting experience! All the girls who knew you loved you and those who didn't prostrated themselves at your feet! You radiated light, oh Ruslan the Handsome, and your muscles were magical! If I were gay I'd do anything to sleep with you, my brother! What have you done, Ruslan the Victorious, to whom you abandoned this fucked-up world, where there is such a shortage of perfect creatures like you?!

Then you had all kinds of interviews with various sleuths and bloodhounds who tried to clarify the circumstances, smelled for things, sneezed, lifted their paws, made attempts at civic censure. But that doesn't matter.

Why do you lock the front doors, you wanted to ask in response. Why should a young artistic being, an ex-marine, risk his life in your fucking country for a bottle of vodka? Why are you so saturated with the stink of unfreedom? Why do you leave so little freedom that it is enough only for the fall from the seventh floor?

Why are you now grabbing me with such gusto, as if I were the only one guilty in his death, as if you want me to atone for my sins by jumping at long last from the very window?

But these questions just hung in the air. For the bloodhounds themselves, to whom you could address these questions, today were no longer able to give an answer. The empire was changing its snakeskin, was reconsidering the habitual totalitarian assumptions; it discussed, imitated a change of laws and of the rules of daily life, it improvised on the topic of the hierarchy of values. The empire toyed with freedom, thinking that this way it could preserve itself through renewal. But it wasn't worth changing the skin. This was the only skin it had. Now, having crawled out of its skin, the old bitch is in the throes of agony.

At last everyone let you be. You proved your right to be guilty. The bloodhound barked from a safe distance and powerlessly clanged their fake teeth.

About three months later, on a late winter evening, you were typing something at your desk, when from there, from the outside, something knocked on the window. It can't be a snowball, you thought, nor can it be a stone, for who could throw a snowball, a stone, or a lump of earth to the height of the seventh floor? But when the fire escape uttered the familiar metallic moan, you suddenly had a sickening feeling. You came to the window and drew open the curtains. Ruslan was outside the window.

"Vanya," he said with his lips. "Would you let me in?"

He was almost the same as the other time, only pallid yellow in color, with black circles under his eyes, and a thin red stream coming from the mouth and disappearing somewhere down his chin.

You opened the window.

"On all the floors the windows are sealed, yours is the only one that isn't," he informed, sitting down on the windowsill.

"Aren't you cold?" you asked. "It's winter now."

"I am not cold. I feel nothing," was the answer.

"And generally, how is it over there?"

"You'll learn some day. Everything is not the way you guys imagine it."

"You've preserved well."

"Thanks. They taught me how to fall in the marines."

"Why have you come back?"

"The familiar place draws me back. Familiar smells. You. I thought about you."

"Thanks. By the way, my name isn't Vanya."

"I know, Vanya."

"It ended up being a rather foolish death, don't you think?"

Ruslan gestured with his hand.

"It didn't change anything in this world. My father is a famous film director. They gave him a big prize."

"Would you like some vodka?"

"Thanks, I don't drink."

"Sorry, I forgot . . ."

"That's all right. Today I'll fly to Simferopol. That's where my girlfriend is. In the

morning she'll think she dreamt of me."

"Want my winter jacket? I have another one."

"Stop it, boss! I don't feel the winter. It's all the same to me. You can't even imagine to what an extent everything can be the same."

But it was getting cold in the room, and he understood this.

"I won't keep you. Be well. Some day, perhaps, we'll meet again."

"Sure. Although I didn't believe you guys existed . . ."

"Existed?" he shook his head. "Who knows. You see, you were the last one I saw when I was still alive. You remained forever in my eyes. Your reflection. If you look closely into my eyes, you'll see your reflection. I thought you'd be able to catch me by the hand . . ."

"I'm sorry, old man . . ."

"That's all right. This had to happen. It's a shame though that it looked so lame. Scattered brains, pieces of ribs, thighbone sticking out through the guts . . . But I'm not the first one, nor am I the last. And that's the main thing. Close the window, Vanya . . ."

He made a graceful, weightless step to the side and stepped onto the ladder.

"Close the window," he repeated.

You did as he told and even drew the curtains.

At night some sort of life was going on around the dorm. At times you hear screams, scuffle, someone getting beaten up. At times the fire escape suddenly moaned in the familiar way. You tensely listened to these approaching sounds. Fourth, fifth, sixth floor. Will it reach the seventh? I am not here, you repeated. I am not here. And pulled the blanket over your head. You weren't there.

There you have it, von F., you fool, this is what happens when you go to the shower room and forget that you shouldn't leave your room's door unlocked! Now they are sitting at your place, all three of them, smoking royally, chatting and giggling. The mugs are swollen, but the mood is fine. Your closest friends. Last night you sat drinking together till one-thirty in the morning. Eight five-ounce brandies bought at the greengrocers, two bottles of "Salyut" bubbly, then two Polish "Polonaises" won in a game of pool from some fool from Novosibirsk at the Central House of Writers. The finale took place already at the dorm. Surgical alcohol from the strategic supplies. At first you guys cut it with "Pepsi," and the result was reminiscent of armagnac. When the "Pepsi" ran out, came the turn of the domestic sweet carbonated stuff by the name of "Sayany," but you prudently excused yourself from this joyride. And probably did the right thing.

Undoubtedly, they are now suffering in torment, but do not repent; on the contrary, they desire beer and circuses. And where can one find beer and spectacular circuses? And you can find them at the beer hall on Fonvizin Street, so named after the classic Russian playwright. And you, by the way, have not yet visited the place. And today you still have this chance—and tomorrow it will be too late.

This is what they are like, your brethren in spirit, that is, in spirits.

Yura Golitsyn, a forty-year-old poet, a graduate of the university and of the prison, although he looked into the eyehole not from the side of the cell, but from

that of the hallway. He wasn't a warden, a "dog," and didn't beat anyone in the kidneys; on the contrary, he was an educator, but still couldn't take it after while, grew a beard and resigned. Now he writes rather sarcastic verse, for instance, "Reflections in a Cooperative Restroom." In appearance he resembles Ivan Turgenev, but as a beginner, and much classier than the real one.

Number two. Arnold Horobets, southern Ukraine, russophone population, playwright from the sixties generation, popular with the ladies, and only with them, a professional actor, a drunk, a fool, a card player, a guy with his soul on his sleeve, a smartass, a drunk once again, a fox, a true friend, a jokester, a dancer, mug-puncher, a cook, a carnivore, a sweet tooth, played Julius Caesar in the theatre and still recites his monologues at a certain stage of drunkenness, diluting them with Latin words, swear words, and quotes from Party documents. Often falls asleep dressed and completely exhausted, but wakes up before anyone else.

The third is, of course, Roytman, but not the one who works at the Russian (has Service of Radio Liberty. He's Jewish. He'll be the last Jew to leave this land, but one day he will leave it. For Czernowitz is not the same as before, and nor is Odessa. He has luxuriant, graying hair; in his eyes you can see the reflections of all the generations from Adam to Christ. His poetry reminds you of shtetl summers: it is full of grass, old stones and sweet dust. It is full of small barbershops and cemeteries overgrown with forgetting. It is a violin solo. Yesterday he got sick already after the alcohol cut with "Sayany."

"Oh, you've already washed yourself clean, dahling?" greets your arrival in your own room Turgenev-Golitsyn.

"And even twice," you answer, but they wouldn't get it.

Your bed still isn't made, and so you sit down on it, randomly as it were. And all this because when you went to have your sheets changed, they gave you a sheet on which, judging by all the signs, someone took someone else's virginity. And the stain can't come out in the wash. So it's better to cover it to avoid unnecessary noises on this topic.

"It would be nice to have some breakfast," you say just in case.

"And I've been saying the same," picks up Julius Caesar. "Yesterday we made plans for the Fonvizin?"

"Yesterday we could have made all sorts of plans. Even for a state coup." You try to resist it somehow, since you have so much stuff to do, since this swim in the Beer Sea doesn't bode well, since it will be yet another defeat sustained by your spirit in the fight with the temptations and the monsters, the harpies and the furies, but as always, spineless creature, you know that there's no escape for you.

"Besides my hair is still wet."

"I will lend you my yarmulke," says Roytman, and everyone laughs.

"I will lend you a hat, an umbrella, a policeman's cap, a tank helmet," suggests Golitsyn.

"Listen, von F., the pipes are burning, let's go," adds Horobets temptingly.

"The pipes are calling," adds Roytman.

"Then shove them up yours," you express your wish in a none too offensive tone.

"You see, it doesn't matter to us whether you are coming with us," reasons

Horobets convincingly, "whether you want beer or not. We only want to protect you from bad company and harmful influences."

"Our souls ache for you," says Roytman.

"We love you like our youngest brother," sighs Golitsyn. "By the way, how do you find virgin girls in this mess of a place?" he nods at your bed.

So he saw it! With his old prison educator's eyes. What could this noble-looking monster teach those poor guys in the slammer, I wonder?

Instead of an answer you whistle some sad barcarole.

"There's no need to tell us this is the result of a nosebleed," keeps provoking you Golitsyn.

"Well, to hell with it. Let's go," you say to change the subject.

"But your hair is wet," grins Roytman.

"All the same it's raining outside."

And outside it is indeed raining. The stormclouds that have been hanging over the city like a heavy cloth finally burst. And rain surrounds you on all sides. A cold rain, although it's May. It's May, but still the air's so cold, as the poet said.

Lately one has had to bring one's own jars while going out for beer. This resembles life-risking trips to fetch water by the defenders of a besieged medieval castle. It somehow happened that the empire suddenly didn't have enough mugs to go by. Perhaps they took all the beer mugs to the Kremlin, just in case there is a civil war? And when the rebellious masses will go storm the Kremlin walls, the Politburo members will pelt them with beer mugs filled with sewage and shit. Perhaps these very mugs, or rather their absence, provides the ultimate manifestation of Mother Empire's unviability?

Whatever the case may be, you are now ambling under the cold May rain, your bodies covered with empty jars; cars and trolleys swim by you across the puddles; they appear to be made not so much for transporting people but for splattering the rare raintime passerby with dirty streams. This is not May but some sort of eternal autumn. The bitter hour has come when everything breaks, and nothing fits. Only the stooping figures of a few chronic alcoholics in front of the seriously padlocked grocery store number forty symbolize some theoretical possibility of rebirth and a better future.

You thought, Otto von F., following the tracks of old-time Galician notions, that the beer hall must be a cozy and dry cavern on an old cobblestone street, marked by the sign of a cute little Devil with a round indulgent belly, where the lights and music are low, and the bartender uses the unfathomable expression, "What would be the gentleman's wish?" You hoped your buddies would bring you into some such amber-saturated paradise that the rain, thunder, boom, pestilence, fear, putsch, famine cannot reach? Instead you have the beer hall on Fonvizin Street, an incomprehensible construct, a Lego pyramid, something like a hangar in the middle of a great Asiatic wasteland overgrown with the first May weeds. A hangar for the drunks. From here they fly out on patrol missions. And it can fit a few thousand of them. An entire drunken division with its own generals, colonels, lieutenants, and newbies, just like you.

The beer hall on Fonvizin Street is a monster the size of a big city train station.

but it is more like Moscow's Kiev Station, not the Savyolovo Station: a colossal waiting area in front of the gates of hell. But that's not all. There also exists a parcel of the flatlands that is smaller in acreage; it has no walls. Only barbed wire plugged into the electric current.

In order to get here, one must pay a ruble. One's duty to Beelzebub, whose interests are represented at the entrance by a criminal-looking young guy in formerly white clothes. Moreover, each ruble taken by Beelzebub is not something hopelessly lost. It is returned to you, it is rendered unto you in the form of a fish, a joyless gray dead fish you'd never consume if you had the right to receive your beer without it. The fish is the pass for the beer communion, the sacred stinking symbol preserved perhaps since the days of early Christianity. Preserved and distorted, for a sacrilegious mass is celebrated here, apocalyptic entertainment for throats and bladders.

Oh well. The fish is caught, but this still does not guarantee anything. Beer! For its sake one must wait in a long, but fortunately very dynamic line, replete with attractive swearing and fighting. The line that ends in front of an extremely narrow window. And there, inside it, is where beer lives? Perhaps some beer archbishop sits there and gives out communion, with a teaspoon, to all the thirsty. No, von F., beer doesn't live there. It rumbles inside the vending machines that stand along the opposite wall of this terrarium. And there, in the window, something else takes place: the exchange of the paper trash called "rubles" for the freely convertible twenty-kopeck coins.

"Well I never!" you want to exclaim, like a character from Soviet Ukrainian prose.

Golitsyn's face is stern and decisive. And extremely focused. This is how true masters of their trade look while carrying out their taxing duties. Surgeons at the operating table. Sappers clearing minefields. Sky divers at the moment when the parachute opens and the dynamic kick makes the sling hit them painfully in the balls. Golitsyn gives short, abrupt commands, as if for flag signing: no dawdling, no arguing with the locals, prepare a trundle each and watch for the freighting tables while I, guys, fight at the vending machines.

For there one indeed has to use force. Every coin thrown into the machine's slot produces only a short inexpressive spit in which there's more foam than any other desired components. For getting at least a pint, theoretically you need to put in five coins, and in reality seven or eight. Beet-colored mutants hang around the vending machines for hours with saliva-coated jars in their hands, fighting for justice in this most unjust of worlds. It seems to them that the vending machines do not give out enough beer per serving. That the beer is too watery. That this isn't beer. That the people around them have particularly vile mugs. That it wouldn't be bad to take some of them and . . .

Meanwhile you are moving towards the cherished window. Three-ruble bills sweat in your hands in anticipation of the outcome. Where are you, the cave of wonders, the coin mountain? How far you still are! How many times you'd still have to snarl menacingly in response to some guy's cynical attempts to get into the line ahead of you, ahead of them, ahead of everyone? No joking here. To

much is at stake.

~~And now look carefully at who is here. Other than the four of you.~~

And here we have the society. How their chests are itching, how their throats are burning, how their eyes are watering! What voices bounce off the plastic ceiling, filling the space with an endless monotonous humming! Something like Gregorian chant for the lost souls. The oratory for the last day.

Back in the days you had been taught that the Roman Empire fell under the blows of the slaves and the freedmen. This empire will fall under the blows of the drunks. When all of them come out on Red Square and, demanding beer, go for the Kremlin. They will be fired at, but bullets will bounce off their alcohol-saturated, bulletproof chests. They will sweep everything away.

Especially the women. They are the true adornment of this blessed place. They wear 1972 bellbottoms (or perhaps these are the bellbottoms of the coming year 1992?), with unzipped flies. They have mangy hair. They are proud of their bruises and swellings. They smell of the cesspool. Their legs are most likely as hairy as those of the Queen of Sheba. They might even lie down with dogs, but the present crowd includes their boyfriends. If they are not poured beer in time, they will tear this place down together with all the KGB dungeons in the Lubyank Square (that is, the Inner City, the City within the city).

Thus the empire ought to take care of its drunks in a timely fashion. Not fight the windmills of liberalisms or nationalisms, not hunt down the witch of religion or the ghost of human rights activism, but do just one thing: take care of its faithful drunks. So that they would always have what to get plastered with. So that they would love their monstrous women. So that they would produce children that are just like themselves. And that's it.

But the empire betrayed its drunks. And thus doomed itself to disintegration.

For now they drink va-banque, now each bottle is procured through risk and blood and sweat. Now for its sake people simply die, for example, by falling from the altitude of the seventh floor.

And so you have successfully completed the road to the fair window. And there on the sacks of twenty-kopec silver, sits, it turns out, a sexy enough fury (or houri?), with eyes full of beer, and like all cheap Moscow girls, she's a bleached blond. A girl with pearly hair. Arnold, as always, makes an impression. They even manage to flirt through the window, although the heavy impatient hangover and the breath of Saturday heroes that are pressing from behind weighs on the back of the neck.

"Nice girl," stresses Arnold, moving to the side.

"Did you count the coins?" Roytman asks distrustfully.

"It seems she had nothing under her robe," answers Caesar, licking his lips.

You guys have no less than sixty coins. They say that in the united German Soviet people put them into payphones instead of the ten-pfennig coins. If this is true, then with the money you have one could call the whole world, including Macao and Honolulu. But for that one first must cross several borders and somehow make it, say, to Munich.

Roytman holds in his hands the plates with the murdered fish. Golitsyn fights for

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