



Photo by V. Snejko

Ilya Rudiak

Odessa 1975

***Stories***

***unLike***

***myself***



***Ilya Rudiak***

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## ***BALD SPOT IN THE WINDOW***

Our houses stand across from each other, with about a quarter of an acre between them. From day one at our ranch house, I haven't seen our neighbor's face – only his bald spot in the window. In the morning, when I would step out into the yard, the spot was already peaking out from the armchair. And the same way till the dusk.

In the evening the blinds were closed and lights turned on. If it were not for slight occasional turns of his head to left or right, or nodding, I'd think that it was a well-made plaster cast.

I started observing the "Spot" with binoculars. The round head, with ear lobes grown into his neck, was completely bare, with not a single hair on it. Round furrows of wrinkles ran from his crown and turned into folds of fat disappearing under a white collar below.

I got used to the bald spot in the window. It commanded my attention, and I'd be surprised if suddenly it was not at its usual spot. And it somehow annoyed me at the same time. I didn't know what it was thinking about or whether it thought about anything at all. Does it have a body, arms, legs underneath? Occasionally I saw Spot's wife, a tall, skinny crone, pulling their mail out of the mailbox. She would do it in a hurry, with her eyes down, and leave in a hurry, browsing through the pack of letters, newspapers and magazines on her way back to the house.

She appeared often in the window near the armchair, but what she was doing there, or what she was talking with Spot about, I had no idea.

One time, as I was focusing my binoculars at the bald spot in the window, I saw a fly strolling across the bald pate. It was quickly shuffling with its feet – a big dark fly.

And suddenly an ivory-colored prosthetic hand appeared above it. Five inflexible fingers were performing mechanical gyrations around the head as the fly continued to perambulate wholly unconcerned.

I went into the house and got my gun. I got the fly in its telescopic sight and pulled the trigger. The window shattered. Blood thickly filled the bald spot and flowed under the white shirt collar.

The fly was gone.

## **THE SQUIRRELS**

I'm from Moscow. I was born right there in Sivtsev Vrazheg, and I lived in that same communal flat right up to the time I emigrated. And squirrels – red ones, naturally – I have seen in pictures, movies and in the zoo. I considered them to be exotic, and treated them with delight and respect.

Now I've declared them to be "Reich enemy 1 . 1". My "Reich" is a modern ranch-style bungalow on an acre of land with about a dozen trees, mainly oaks, hickories, and pines. And they've got acorns, nuts, cones and plenty of gray squirrels. Well, go ahead, live your merry lives, chasing each other! But no: from early morning till late evening they are gnawing, and gnawing, and gnawing! It's not that I begrudge them those nuts, cones, acorns. Fine, gnaw as much as you want! But why must you litter my gutters, my patio, my driveway?

So I declared war. According to state law it is strictly prohibited to kill them; throwing stones at them is futile, and squirrel traps are not sold in stores yet. So, I devised my own. Logic: an attraction – a spring – a latch. A squirrel will reach for the treat, the trap will snap, and zap! Done! Which would be fine, but it creates a lot of noise. And the neighbors call the police.

So I developed a great anger toward these fluffy-tailed rats and drove myself nuts trying to devise a final solution. I started to see them in my dreams; it seemed that everywhere it was raining husks, and there was a constant whistling in my ears. So I made up my mind. After all, whose house is it? Who's making timely bank deposits, who's dutifully paying taxes? Me or them?

The saw was working fine. Nine stumps appeared on our lot – the branches and trunks I chopped into wood for the fireplace. It should be enough for a lifetime.

## ***A LITTLE GRAVE UNDER THE CEDAR***

She was looking at me with love in her eyes. She suspected nothing. I poured some fresh milk into the bowl the flowers had been in. She rubbed up against my legs, fluffing her tail, snuggling against my shoe.

I pictured how, for a plate of chemical-laced “catfood” she did the same thing with that fat dwarf Finkelstein, who lives across the street.

“Faithless pussy,” I thought.

Thirstily, she lapped the milk, breaking off at times to give a little purr of pleasure — thanking her owner of the moment.

“Next you’ll run to that ugly old cunt around the corner, and let her kiss and fondle you, won’t you? Filthy lesbian slut!”

I picked her up, and right away she pressed against me. She was purring loudly. I ran my finger along her back, and she arched up pliantly to meet my hand.

“And that dirty Hindu. Neighbors for two years, and he hasn’t managed to say two words to me. Do you let him put his fingers in the same places? Whoring piece of fur!”

My blood started to boil. This time I had to kill her. I started squeezing her throat, harder and harder. She didn’t believe that I was doing it on purpose, and delicately dug in her claws, as gentle a warning. It was too late.

The little pink tongue flopped out from behind her pointy white teeth.

Feeling peaceful and light-hearted, I went to get the shovel. I dug a hole out under the cedar, and carefully laid my little darling’s body in it.

## ***THE BOOKWORM***

I knew that man to be a dedicated book lover, the owner of a huge personal library. A smart mechanical engineer, he would put in the requisite hours at his job, and dedicate the rest of his time to his books.

When leaving Odessa, I left with him a couple of rare old books in exchange for some new ones, permissible to take out of the country. Even now, this is an irrecoverable loss for me.

One time, when I was passing through Philadelphia I discovered that my acquaintance now lived there, in a fancy suburb. He had become well-to-do businessman, a wealthy person.

I called him up. He arrived immediately in his convertible to pick me up, and about twenty minutes later we were at a charming estate with a small lake in the park.

He started a tour of the house, during which I couldn't tell a porch from a deck, a breezeway from a driveway, or a patio with grill from a Jacuzzi bath. I was waiting to see a library, mentally readying myself for the pleasure of browsing to my heart's content.

His study was crowded with electronics: a powerful computer, cordless phones, a CD player, and – no books.

I couldn't contain myself and asked:

“So, where are your books?”

“Books?” he echoed with a smile. “Let's go to the basement!”

The basement was a paneled room the size of a soccer field. It was occupied by a big billiard-table, a Ping-Pong table, workout machines – and again, no books.

The owner walked me to a fireplace, moved a carved fender aside, took a trident with a copper handle and poked the ashes with it:

“Here they are, my books! On the very bottom I set Gladkov’s *Cement* and Panferov’s *Whetstones*. I piled on Leonov’s *Russian Forest*, then went *In Search of Matches*. Oh yes, what a *Bonfire* it made. That’s just *How the Steel Was Tempered*, there’s your *Iron Flood*. “Rest in peace” I said to six volumes of Sholom Aleichem and eight of Aleichem Sholokhov – and right in after them went the poetry, art and architecture. How merrily they burned, the *Kizhi* shacks blazing away, the *White Birches* crackling – and you should’ve seen the smoke rising from the *Black Boards*! I never felt more pleasure than I did then, burning all that art and literature – burning my bridges behind me. And it was only when I saw the cold pile of ashes in the grate that I started to relax. I felt like new man – a phoenix! And once I had cleared all that clutter out of my life, I got down to business and started putting my energy into something I could get a return on.”

All this he spilled out in one breath. I was deafened by this cascade of words, by the passion of his speech, by the insanity of what was being said.

At dinner I was silent, and drank a lot. He was drinking a lot too, and when his wife and the teenage daughter went to their rooms, he waved a finger to follow him, and went into a spacious powder room. There he pressed some kind of button, and the mirrored wall started to crawl aside, as in a science-fiction movie, opening onto bookshelves loaded with books.

“He isn’t completely degraded yet,” I thought joyfully.

My hand immediately reached out for *Pushkin’s Companions* – and hit a board!

The books were painted on.

## ***THE SPLIT***

... I am falling swiftly from a boundless height all tangled in a net. I feel the chill of death as I am approaching the ground. Fear has seized my heart and my voice does not obey me. Another fraction of a second, and there won't be even ...

... and suddenly ... the net catches on the ledge of a huge iron tower and starts to spin like a top ...

... And I am also standing away from the crowd of idlers at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, and as I look up at myself, I am asking myself – “If I, the one who is there in that net, will fall and hit the ground and unavoidably meet death, will I, the one who is standing here, below, be left alive?”

... I am running along the shore, running under the bridge, running across an empty wide square with the windowless walls, running along the railway embankment – there is a long, skinny dog running behind me. We emerge at the garden near the stone quarry where one can already see the cupola of the church that stands across from the school, running up to the top of the hill. I see the shtetl of Dzhurin. Descending along the highway to the river, on the bridge I catch up with M, my distant relative. He is wearing the same greasy peacoat, exactly like ten years ago, when I saw him for the last time.

“How are the folks doing?” I ask him.

“They are all waiting for you,” he says.

“Mom too?”

“Mom, and Dad, and your brothers.”

“Didn't Mom die of cancer?”

“No, she is alive. They are all waiting for you.

My God, Mom is alive! I leave M. and run up cobblestone streets up to the house with the balcony. It has gotten dark outside. My heart is beating anxiously in my chest. Here are the limestone stairs, the shaky balcony, the tiny bedroom window, the narrow hall. The dining room door is open. There are my dad and two of my brothers sitting at the table. Mom is coming out of the kitchen with a bowl of chicken soup in her hands putting it down in front of my father. Her face is chalk-white. But she is alive! No one is surprised by my arrival. I am recalling why I rushed here from Paris and I am asking my older brother:

“Tell me, if I, the one in the net, will fall down and die, will I, the one who stands in front of you, still be alive?”

“You will certainly die too!,” he answers, eating.

... I am running down the stairs, running along the river, past the church, past the garden, along the train tracks. A long, exhausted dog is joining me there. And here is the square with tall windowless houses, the riverfront of the Seine. And, finally, the Eiffel Tower ...

I, in the net, feel how it slides down because of the endless spinning. I am falling into the abyss ...

... I am below. My heart explodes ... Darkness overwhelms my brain ...

## ***I HAVE LET MY HAPPINESS GO...***

My work is underwater cinematography. I went swimming in the sea till late fall. There were no more lifeguards on their posts – you could swim wherever you want to. There is a nerve-tingling sensation in swimming toward the horizon. What if you get a cramp, or a storm whips up all of a sudden? You're alone, and the dry land is so far away – scream all you want, no one will hear you, and no one will see you.

Returning to shore one time, I saw a girl. With the last of her strength she was swimming right towards me. Horror was in her face. She could not cry out for fear of choking. I caught her up and swam to the buoy. She clung to me, gripping hard with her arms and legs, afraid to let go. A frightened face, tears in her eyes, she evoked such a pity, such tenderness, towards her, that I started caressing her wet hair ... and kissed her puffy, still girlish lips. She did not resist, but gradually relaxing looked at me, her head tilted back a little, and kissed me back.

“Where are you from, Little Mermaid?”

“From Omsk.”

“And is everybody there blue-eyed, with braids, and lips that smell like fresh milk? And do all the little Omsk girls overestimate their strength ...?”

“I am swimming in the sea for the first time. I arrived at the sanitarium this morning.”

“So you're going to miss a month of school?”

“I've already graduated from technical college, by correspondence. I am working at a community library. I'm on vacation.”

I could not stop myself from kissing away her eyes, her forehead, her cheeks.

“Can it be like this, all of a sudden, not knowing anything about each other?” I asked.

“I guess it can be. Besides, I already know quite a lot about you.”

She suddenly blushed.

“But you don’t know the main thing, you ...”

“About what? Are you married? Do you have a child?”

“No, of course not!”

“You’re in love with the head of the drama group?”

“He is bald and stinks of tobacco.”

“So what’s the secret?”

“If you find out, your opinion of me will change immediately. ... Are you married?”

“Not at the moment.”

“So you were?”

“Some time ago.”

“And what do you do? Don’t tell me, let me guess. You’re an artist, and you like to paint the sea – right?”

“Almost.”

“Cool.”

She hugged me.

Unbelievable. I should just take her with me, immediately, do it now with no doubts, forget her age. Do not think of what my family, friends or enemies will say or how they’ll look at us. Just take her with me for the rest of my life, because something like this happens only once and odds are it will not repeat itself.

We had been in the water for quite a while, I realized; she could catch cold. I pressed her gently to me to warm her.

And suddenly she started crying.

“I beg you, please swim to the shore alone and leave, don’t turn around, please do this if you care about me at least a tiny bit.”

“Care about you? I like you a lot, a hell of a lot.”

“That’s the first time anyone’s said that. ... But still, please go ... Swim away, now, I beg you, and do not turn around...”

I obeyed. I thought she would calm down, I would wait, meet her in the only exit from the park.

On the shore I stumbled upon the crouches and two orthopedic boots barely covered with a blue polka-dot dress.

## ***THE MIRROR***

The public was assaulted by the posters, play bills, ads, and announcements – all of them mysterious, unusual and intriguing.

“*THE MIRROR* – the show of the century! *THE MIRROR* – a show of all times and peoples!” “Like nothing ever seen before!” “The show can be staged only once!” “*THE MIRROR* – the most expensive show in the history of the theater!”

From the interview with the producer: “*THE MIRROR* is an allegory on a universal scale. It is an *Apocalypse Now*.”

Asked what famous actors were taking part, the reply was: “On the one hand, none. On the other hand thousands of them.”

And it was impossible to elicit any further details.

Day by day, interest in *THE MIRROR* swelled. Ticket prices were set not according to row, but by turnstile number. Seats behind the first turnstile were \$10,000 each!!! Behind the last one – \$999,000!!!

An airplane hangar turned into an auditorium could seat fifteen thousand people!

And the show was sold out!

Some forged tickets turned up. But even that had been taken into consideration by the organizers. They issued repeated warnings that authentic tickets had special magnetic perforations that would react to a signal at the entrance.

Rumors spread that the show would not take place on the appointed day, that some kind of sophisticated props

weren't ready. The rumors were constantly denied. Probably the same people had spread them in the first place. At the peak of the furor, rumors flew that the main architect of the project had committed suicide by jumping from the rigging.

And finally the day of the show arrived.

There were mounted police around the theater, helicopters in the air above it, a line of cars making their way to the underground garage. Loudspeakers were blaring out orders from *The Mirror's* producer. One hundred and fifteen automatic doors opened simultaneously to the turnstile entrances. At each door, a clerk in corporate uniform was giving viewers a colorful heavy package which stated that it must be opened only at a special signal.

The hall was set up like a labyrinth. It began at the entrance to the last turnstile and ended at the exit from the first one. And there were no seats in that entire huge space. Everyone stood on footprints made with thick white paint on the floor.

Bewilderment and an expectation of something terrible hung in the air. Musical sound effects heightened this feeling. In the dim light one could hear the howl of the sirens, a grinding of brakes, dogs barking, cats meowing, tigers growling, women's moans, the howl of the wind, the roar of the ocean, monkey screams, gun volleys...

And suddenly it all stopped. There was complete silence. It went on much too long. And when it seemed it could not be endured any longer, fanfares sounded, the lights went on and the curtain started to crawl up. The entire stage revealed before the astounded viewers was occupied by an actual mirror – an immense mirror. All fifteen thousand people saw themselves in it and... froze. The mirror exposed their essence: their virtues and faults,

beauty and ugliness, power and weakness, courage and cowardice, kindness and anger – everything collected throughout life.

It was horrifying and unbearable.

And then a command: “Open your packages!” – which for once was given on time. There were rocks inside.

Woodwinds started up a march. And something inconceivable began to happen: with fury, with lust for destruction, with physical pleasure, people were throwing their rocks at the mirror, and every crack and tinkling of the splinters evoked a roar of excitement.

When the last viewer had emptied his pack, the mirror was totally destroyed.

And then there was a gaping emptiness.

## **THE HEAD**

It was around 2 a.m.

The gate was wide open, as usual, and windows were completely dark.

“Sleeping, the stinker,” I thought of my brother, and froze: there was a young girl in a short coat on the path, her hands stretched towards me. “Leeka is here at our dacha?” I thought. I reached out to touch her and then almost screamed with horror. My fingers met fresh, sticky clay.

“Ah, Rodin! What a devil he is!”

My brother had sculpted my unrealized dream, the touchy village beauty, Leeka.

Great. That’s all I needed.

I circled the statue. Her hair which almost reached her waist, was carefully braided and tied up with a ribbon.

It was her. The very image. Tall and slender, in front of our wreck of a house, and nowhere for her to go, no way to leave, to walk on by with her chin up, as if you were simply a log, a stump, a block of wood.

“Leeeeeka!” I drawled with a smile and hit her neck with the side of my hand as hard as I could. The head hit a rock and assumed the shape of a pancake.

I quietly opened the door and tiptoed to the couch. My brother was sleeping, the blanket pulled over his head.

I fell on my own bed and slept the sleep of the just.

A scream woke me. My brother’s voice.

“Barbarian! Scoundrel!”

I didn’t grasp right away what this was all about. When I glanced out of the window and saw headless Leeka, everything became clear. At once, he approached me.

“Have you seen her tonight? Have you?”

“Yes. I thought she was alive.”

“And that barbarian has blown her head off.”

“Who?”

“What do you mean, who? The “idiot,” that’s his work. He was watching me when I was modeling her. He was standing there, near the fence, staring. It’s him.”

He started to cry.

“Stop it, you silly. You’ll make another one, even better than this one.”

I found myself in a quite idiotic situation, but for some reason did not want to confess, especially since the blame had already fallen on our idiot neighbor. I tousled my brother’s hair and said as sweetly as I could:

“Come on, make a new one.”

The next night I got slightly agitated as I approached our cottage: had he done the head?

This time the gate was closed. It gave a long and rusty squeak as I opened it. The shadows of the trees were troubled, and the stars hung right above the roof.

He had! Here she was, my beauty, my darling, in all her loveliness. And her head was even prettier than before. I stroked her, readjusted her ribbon, buttoned one of the buttons on her coat and was ready to put raise my fist into her face when I heard footsteps. He approached us, readjusted his glasses, and asked quietly:

“What do you think?”

I hugged his bony shoulders, and we went into the house.

“No doubt about it, you’re a genius, Rodka.”

He tried to talk about yesterday’s incident, but I suggested that we go to bed, insisting that I was tired. He fell asleep quickly, pulling the blanket over his head as usual, so the light would not bother him.

I waited a little bit more and went out. Leeka was obediently waiting, stretching her hands towards me. I took them in mine and whispered:

“Hello, Leeka! So here you are, with me at last. Yup, the guy you turned up your nose at, the doofus drummer from Otrada beach. Remember when you were sunbathing on that roof and I was staring at you through my binoculars, and you were shouting: ‘Disgusting, what a disgusting drummer!’ and turned over with your butt up. And you even stuck out your tongue. Ah, you naughty girl!”

I hugged her. She didn’t resist, just stared in the same direction, as if she did not see me. Or, to be more exact, as if hated me.

I turned away from her and swiftly hit her in the temple with my fist. The head flew into the bushes and caught in the branches.

I woke up feeling that somebody was staring at me. It was my brother. His eyes, filled with despair and tears, sparkled behind his glasses.

“What?” I asked him.

“It happened again,” he said.

Does he know? I grew cold with fear.

“And just the head”, he continued, almost not moving his lips.

We stepped into the yard. Leeka’s head was lying at her feet, flattened by a blow, all creased from the thorny rosebush branches. My brother was looking at me, seeking consolation, but what could I tell him? It was impossible to confess now – too late.

The next day, the first fall storm washed away the bulk of the body, and there only was a small lump of clay left of what used to be a head.

My brother was spending whole days lying on the couch now, barely eating, his eyes sunken in. He was silent.

I tried to entertain him playing wooden spoons on empty bottles like a xylophone, but he did not react, only gave a crooked smile.

Returning home at nights, I missed Leeka's figure on our path. I began to beg my brother to make Leeka once more.

"Do it for me, please, just for me, you know how much I loved her. I still love her." He was silent.

"Listen, we'll guard her at night, just like in *Sivka-Burka*, remember? You loved that story as a kid. What do you say?"

There was just a hint of interest in his eyes.

"I knew you would agree.

"I don't have any clay."

"You shall have clay, Rodka, the best clay in the world."

With a shovel and a bag I ran down the slope into the clay-pit.

"I'll get you your clay," I shouted, shoveling clay into the bag. "I won't spare anything for my Leeka, just make her again, Rodka, sculpt her again, my dear."

I ran back with the bag up the slope as easily as if sails had filled behind my back. I made three trips and didn't get tired at all.

"Here is your clay," I told my brother.

He picked out the lumps, started to knead them, tossing them from hand to hand.

"Go away," he said.

"I understand. I don't want to disturb you. Go ahead, create."

In the restaurant the trumpet player glanced at me and asked:

"What are you so excited about?"

“I’ve got my reasons,” I said settling in behind the percussion and starting to hammer away at the cymbals and drums.

This time he had dressed her up in a summer dress (I particularly remember this dress with the chamomile-flower pattern), and her small pear-shaped breasts bulged out exactly like then, when she would run by, a straw hat on her head and an inflatable mattress on her shoulder.

But there was no head yet. He was tired, couldn’t finish it yet. Fine with me, I will wait. I pinched her on the nipple.

This time he worked especially long on the head. Doing it over, smacking and pounding it out again and again, looking for some special expression in the eyes. And he found it, the little bastard, and what an expression: a reproach, a blame, a shout.

The first night I found him sitting on the window sill, his arms around his knees, shivering with cold.

“Go get some sleep, Ivanushka, I’ll stand watch,” I told him.

“No, let’s stay together.”

I threw my jacket over his shoulders and sank into the armchair beside him.

“Tell me a story,” he said. “Tell me *Sivka-Burka*.” And I did.

By the time I got up to the third night, when it’s Ivan’s turn to stand watch, Rodka was dead out. I carefully picked him up and laid him down on the couch, took off his glasses and covered him with a blanket. He drew it over his head immediately.

“Don’t come near me,” the eyes were shouting at me, “don’t come near me!”

I started to shiver. I pulled a 259 milliliter bottle from my pocket, tore the lid off with my teeth and sucked down a big gulp. It warmed me up.

“Care to try some, straight from the bottle?” I offered it to Leeka. “I know, you’re too fastidious. Well, maybe that’s the right way. That’s what makes you untouchable, a pure beauty.”

With the first blow I knocked half of her head off and cut my hand – there was a sharp-edged rock inside. It only got me more furious: I pulled a plank out of our fence and took off the other half of her face.

And immediately felt limp. My finger was bleeding. I held it under the faucet, tied a handkerchief around it and fell down in the chair.

I was dreaming: I am walking in a park, and long, half-dead cats are crawling under my feet. I am kicking at them, but they do not disperse. My boots are all covered with their rotten meat and fur. Then, something disgusting and catlike jumps on me from the tree and sinks its claws and teeth into my shoulders. I want to throw it off, but I can’t. I don’t have the strength. “Serves you right, that’s just what you deserve,” Leeka shouts from behind the fence, laughing.

My brother was standing in front of the window, laughing quietly. When I opened my eyes, he nodded at Leeka, still chuckling.

It was a laughter of a madman.

## ***FROM THE NOTES OF A COCKROACH***

It is exactly a month since the Hindus moved out. What a wonderful time that was! How content, quiet and peaceful our lives were. There was quite a good reason for me to sob while watching them pack. I had a presentiment that it would never be that good again. Who else would ever leave a warm piece of pastry for my supper, or some eastern sweets, or fragrant spices? Yes, that family from Bombay had been a real find for all of us.

.There's been an Arab with a thin mustache, with a cigarette in his teeth, with a fat wife and four daughters. They made quite a hubbub, plenty of noise, and left. I am content. I wasn't pleased with him. When I got under the burner of the stove he exhaled smoke right into my face. Lout.

Then there was a young couple. He looked like an American Jew, and she had a cross on a chain at her neck and in a family way. Her belly was huge, but only one would be born. These people are strange creatures. That couple didn't like the bathtub. I'm glad they didn't like it. Otherwise there would be a baby here and it would cry at night.

Today is Saturday. Our landlord couldn't keep up with all the people coming. But no one's signed the contract yet. So, we're still "for rent."

Supplies left by the Hindus are almost all gone. If no one rents the apartment soon, all of us, especially Mom, want to move down one floor. I can understand Mom: She just had a litter of my brothers and sisters, and they all are hungry. And hunger is not something to be taken lightly.

... Today nothing of substance happened, except that my old great-grandmother on my dad's side died. She was devoured immediately. There was a Russian family here in the afternoon. Don't know what part of the world Russia is in, but our completely shriveled and probably insane grandpa said that the place was very far from here and quite cold.

The husband – tall, with a balding forehead and ears that stuck out, was following our Korean guy around the apartment, repeating – “Aai onderstand!” with quite a thick accent. His wife checked to make sure all lights worked, there was hot water, and the toilet flushed. Their plump son kept asking and the same question: where his bedroom was going to be? Their language is not complicated, but Hindu is sweeter to my ears. I think the Russians are going to move in. We all cheered up.

... The Russians are here. They brought their furniture, which they call *Helga* for some reason, and many sealed boxes. I darted about those – nothing edible, they smell like onions and mothballs.

Evening of the same day. Our folks have already taken up their positions along cracks and crevices, waiting for the food to be brought. Grandma is begging everybody not to peek out yet lest we scare the Russians with our numbers and greed. Of course, no one is listening to her.

... Yesterday, on Sunday, so many things happened, I don't even know where to start. The main thing is: they love to eat! They do it quite often, with gusto and abundantly. For breakfast they gobbled up a pot of mashed potatoes, a whole herring marinated in vinegar and onions, a round loaf of bread, two packages of creamery butter, and a salad of cucumbers and tomatoes.

The most terrifying thing is this: The mistress is compulsively orderly. After breakfast she did all the dishes squeaky clean, thoroughly wiped the table, collected all the food crumbs in a plastic bag, put it in the garbage can, and tightly closed the lid saying: “If we don’t watch out, there will be roaches and we’ll never get rid of that vermin.” I was steaming with rage. What a mean, nasty woman!

For dinner they had *borsht* with sour cream and garlic on the side, meat cutlets (each about the size of a saucer) fried in sunflower oil, the very aroma of which made us all drool uncontrollably, and for desert – apple pie with a flaky crust. And everything was licked clean again. Greedy monsters, soulless spawn! Their supper consisted of cottage cheese-filled crepes, apricot jelly and fragrant cocoa. The boy was swinging his feet under the chair and dropping crumbs on the floor. That witch immediately noticed and reminded him about roaches again, swept the floor under the table and, of course, didn’t forget to wash the dishes with hot water and completely dry them off with a towel. We waited till they went to bed. It is pleasant even to just run on plates: something could have been left on the bottom of a cup or the other side of a plate, or stuck between the teeth of the fork – and that is our feast, our sustenance.

Finally, the moment arrived. We flooded the sink, the stove, all the kitchen’s corners and crannies. Everybody was finding something, but it could not be compared with Hindus’ hospitality. We pattered about till midnight and dispersed still hungry.

I was falling asleep in my burrow when a bright light and then a shriek of the mistress made me peek out and find out what was going on. “Marik, Marik!” she was

screaming. “I saw how they ran under the sink! This is terrible, terrible, I can’t stand it. Roaches in my apartment! Marik!” The sleepy husband tried to calm her down: “Let’s go to bed, we’ll take care of it tomorrow.” “Tomorrow?! Tomorrow will be too late!” she started to scream again, “Get that boric acid out, we must cover all their exits and entrances immediately!” Not waiting for the beginning of the war that had been declared, I sneaked under the door to the porch and crawled into an old shoe. I could hear some noise, clatter and clamor, but I stayed absolutely still.

... Two nights I did not go anywhere. But the third I could not stand it: come what may, I had to know how our folks were doing. What I saw was like a scene from the plague. Our race had been totally annihilated. Tears choked me. I didn’t know where to go, what to do. A scream from the mistress brought me back. “One is still alive! Marik, there it is, there it is, on the stove!” I did not have time to run away. I was quickly trapped under a mayonnaise jar.

I thought he would crush me with his foot, and I prepared to die. Only one thought bothered me: not to let my notes be destroyed. They were the only way somebody else could find out how we had lived, what we dreamed of and we struggled for.

... This woman has thought up a terrible show, a cruel and unusual punishment. She left me in the jar, with the lid closed tight, and put it where everybody could see it – between the stove and a cabinet – as if to say, let them see how Russians treat roaches!

My strength is fleeting away from me as I write these words, my tarsi can not hold the pencil stub, the lines are

blurring, my body is totally exhausted... I'm thirsty,  
thirsty... I loved you, co...

Here the notes end.

*Editor's note.* Considerable interest has been aroused by these notes in literary circles. The unfinished phrase "I loved you, co..." was interpreted in various ways. Some think that the author meant "I loved you, Constance," as a reference to the name of the mistress of the house. This theory is apparently masochistic. Others say it is "I loved you, comrades." There is another theory by a professor of philology from Canada who insists that the phrase means "I loved you, Cossaks," and one professor from Cairo University says that it can be only "I loved you, people of the Qoran," explaining this "c" as a spelling error made due to exhaustion. And finally two pundits, the leading scholar of the Coptic language and one interpreter from the Greek insist that our hero meant to mention coriander, since he was so partial to Hindu cooking.

## ***TUZIK HAS BEEN STOLEN!***

I'm going home from the late shift in a half-empty subway car. An old lady is sitting opposite me, all alone. She has a blank kerchief on her head, and looks sad. She's set an "Othello" cake-box from on the seat next to her.

At Bursatsky station, a crowd of young revelers explodes into the car. Possibly they are coming from a drunk — or just about to go drinking. Stupid jokes, shouting, teasing, loud laughs. And in the same noisy way, a couple of stops later they debark. It's still a long way to my stop. I'm sitting there, nodding off and jerking awake.

Suddenly, there's a shout. "They've stolen Tuzik!"

I open my eyes. The old lady is darting about the car, crying "Tuzik, Tuzik! My Tuzik has been stolen!"

Gradually it comes clear. The cake-box contained the body of her little mutt Tuzik, her companion of fourteen years, whom she had set off to go bury.

## **THE MAN-POODLE**

The Man woke up with the first rays of the sun. He jumped to his feet, stepped out onto the balcony, stretched, yawned cavernously, and thought: “What a beautiful day!” He looked down from the height of the eighth floor: down there acacias are blooming, a housekeeper is watering the flower-bed, and off in the distance the vineyards stretch all the way down to the sea. It made one want to fly!

And flying – straight onto his neck – came a cigarette butt, painful for his back and burning a hole in his pajamas.

“What was *that* for??” the Man cried out.

The reason was that on the ninth floor a young Lover, after a hot night with the Boxer’s Wife, was having a smoke out on the balcony, and without any malicious intent, but simply due to his bad manners, threw his still-smoking butt over the rail and went in to have a cup of coffee.

The Man looked up – and caught only a glimpse of the shadow leaving the balcony. The Man was quite offended. Taking the ill-directed butt with him as evidence, he directed his steps to the ninth floor to seek justice.

He pressed the buzzer quite insistently and for a long time.

The Boxer’s Wife and the Lover didn’t expect this sudden return of the husband, who was out of town at a fight. Both were terribly frightened and didn’t know what to do.

The bell rang again, even longer and more insistent.

The Boxer’s Wife, trembling and suddenly pale, gestured toward the balcony, as if to say: “Jump, don’t stand there, or he’ll make two cutlets out of us.” The Lover remembered whose wife she was, and was sure she was right about the cutlet theory.. He pulled a sheet off the bed, tied it to an iron rod of the balcony railing, and

climbed down to the next floor. And from this moment, we really have to call him the Lucky Lover.

The Boxer's Wife splashed water on her face and, straightening her robe as if it has just been thrown on, went to get the door. So she opens the door, and there is the Man in just pajamas bottoms, a cigarette butt in his fingers, not paying any attention to her, running into her apartment, shouting:

“Where is he?”

The Boxer's Wife was happy to see events suddenly taking this turn. Naively and with a smile she asked:

“Who do you mean – he?”

The Man showed her the butt: “This one. Where is he?”

The Boxer's Wife has had completely calmed down and with her characteristic playfulness, replied:

“I don't understand you. There is no one here.”

But the Man rushed to the bedroom, looked under the bed and, not even knowing why, grabbed a bra off the chair and started for the closet.

At this point the Boxer, having been knocked out sooner than he anticipated, came home in a depressed state of mind, and was coming up the stairs to the ninth floor – the elevator wasn't working yet, since the building had only been commissioned only six months ago. The Boxer was of a gigantic height, wore size fourteen shoes, and took two or three steps at a time going up stairs. He comes to his door and sees that it is wide opened. “Funny! I wonder what's going on?” he thinks. He enters the living room just as a half-dressed man with a bra in his hand

comes out of the bedroom followed by the Boxer's blushing wife. "Nice surprise!" flashes in the Boxer's head.

The Man, who has finally spotted the offender he was looking for, comes up to him, shoves the butt under his nose and demands:

"What did *I* do??"

The Boxer takes the butt with his left hand and with the right – using all his strength raised to a power of jealousy, multiplied by defeat, hits the Man in the jaw, sending him flying through the corridor and out of the apartment. The door slams shut after him. The Boxer is left to sort things out with his wife one on one.

The Man grabbed his quickly swelling cheek-bone and, feeling even more offended and now also in pain, swaying, started to drag himself down to the eighth floor.

The Lucky Lover, having found himself on the Man's balcony, decided to start leaving the building quietly. He tiptoed to the door and started to eavesdrop on to what was going on nine. The screams of Boxer's Wife "Help, he'll kill me!" clearly did not promise anything good. The thought "Hurry, hurry, get out of here, now!" was pounding at the Lucky Lover's temples. He opened the door a crack and saw the beaten-up Man descending the stairs. The Lucky Lover pulled a white handkerchief out of his pocket and made as if he was wiping the dust off the door.

The Man started toward his apartment, saw the owner cleaning, and mumbled through his swollen lips:

"Sorry, wrong floor."

The disorientation of the Man in this situation is quite understandable: The Boxer had delivered him a head-spinning blow.

At that point, a bell rang, signaling to the building's inhabitants that the garbage truck had arrived. Everybody dropped whatever they were doing, grabbed their garbage pails and ran outside.

That was exactly what the Mistress on the seventh floor did. Her apartment was right under the dwelling-place of the Man and had exactly the same floor plan. Even the armoire stood in the same spot, and had been made at the same factory – *the S. M. Kirov* plant.

The Mistress left her door open from a habitual concern for the lock: opening or locking it one more time will only wear it out.

The Man entered the familiar environment and went to the bathroom. A quick glimpse of himself in the mirror horrified him: a bruise under his eye, his nose swollen, the lower lip crowding the upper one. He shoved his head under the cold water and that brought him quite a bit of relief. Then he took out of the wardrobe a shirt belonging to the Mistress' husband, who had departed at dawn on a fishing trip to Lustdorf, put it on and started to button it up.

The Mistress came back with an empty pail and seeing a strange man in her husband's shirt in her living room, was struck dumb, but not for long. With scream of "Thief!" she jumped on him, stuffed the pail over his head, tore the sleeves off the shirt and, getting even more enraged, lifted him up and flung him out the door opening as if he was a sack of flour.

The pail went spinning down the stairs, rattling and knocking, and the Man painfully hit the cement floor and this time didn't even ask "What was *that* for?"

He was lying face down and therefore, naturally, he could not see that the cause of his misfortunes, the Lucky Lover, squeamishly jumping over him with a full garbage bucket, but only heard someone's nagging voice above him "What a scoundrel, drunk this early in the morning. Ugh!" and the receding steps down the stairs.

The Lucky Lover chased the garbage truck around the corner, threw the bucket belonging to the Man into its jaws and, whistling the March of the Toreador from Bizet's "Carmen," was out of there.

The Man didn't remember how long he'd been on the landing. When he was chilled through, he tried to put his body into a vertical position. He succeeded in reaching the door across from the Mistress and propping himself against it – he didn't have strength to do anything else.

Behind the door a young Mom and Dad were cleaning house. Mom was mopping the floor, Dad was boiling diapers, and Baby was crying his eyes out in a play-pen. Mom shouted at Dad:

"Can't you see I'm busy. Quiet him down!"

Dad left the stove, started to make faces at the Baby, jumped on one leg, grunted, barked, and meowed. The baby cried more vigorously than before.

"Listen," Dad said sternly. "If you don't stop right now, I'm going to open the door and let Big Bad Wolf in!"

After this threat the Baby started to turn blue from his exertions. Dad abruptly pulled the door handle towards himself, and the Man fell down at his feet.

The Baby immediately got quiet, Dad got confused, soapy water started to run over the edge of the pot, and Mom appeared still with her washrag, thinking that her clumsy spouse had dropped their little one. But she sighed

with relief seeing the dirty beaten-up Man on the floor. Then, without uttering a word, Mom and Dad lifted the Man up by his arms and legs and dragged him down the stairs further away from their place, from prying eyes, away from trouble. They seated him next to the handrails and, overtaking each other, darted back toward the screams of the Baby.

An old, near-sighted Teacher, long retired, who never had children of her own, lived on the first floor. And she had a poodle named Romeo. She'd given him that name because her own name was Julia. This teacher walked Romeo several times a day. And now, while Julia was busy fumbling with the key and not succeeding at getting it into the lock, Romeo ran ahead, sniffed at the Man, understood that he was harmless, lifted his rear paw, finished his business, and ran outside.

The Teacher finally turned the key, got the collar ready and started to call softly for her poodle:

“Romeo! Romeo!”

The Man softly whined in response.

The Teacher threw the collar on his neck, and he obediently followed her on all fours. He immediately started to feel better. He felt loved, protected, and that everybody around him was exclaiming, “What a wonderful dog, what a handsome fellow!” and trying to pet him and even kissing his cold nose.

So from that time on, he started living at Teacher's place. Neither she nor anybody else ever suspected his sudden metamorphosis.

Romeo was picked up by dog catchers and, since no one came to claim him, was sold on the animal market for three bottles of vodka, to none other than the Lucky Lover, a great poodle aficionado.

## ***SUBMISSIVNESS***

As soon as I opened my eyes, I had the urge to review the dream on the monitor. I turned on MyDreams. I just can't get over what a brilliant invention that is. The screen started to glow...

I am standing on a corner of Alexandrov Prospect and Bebel. It is summer. It is summer. The sun is bright. There are children playing in the alley. That red Chevy I used to have is parked by the school. Suddenly there are several enormous tawny tigers about a hundred yards away. Because they are standing up on their hind paws, they make a terrifying impression. They appear not to have noticed me yet, so I decide to quietly make my way to the car. I figure I should be able to make it. It would also be nice to grab those three kids and stick them into the car too. The animals have sensed me. They are starting to run towards us hopping movements. My feet stop obeying me and remain rooted to the asphalt. I am pulling the car keys from my trouser pocket, and can barely move. The tigers are really close now.

And for the first time in my subconscious life – where I had always found a way out, where always, with words alone, I was able to deflect any danger, be it gangbangers, burglars, thugs – for the first time I submitted to fate. I sat down next to a tree, closed my eyes and waited. After all, it should all be over in an instant. They will rip off my head, and I will not feel or remember anything beyond that...

I succumbed to indifference...

... and woke up.

## Notes on the text

Page 3 (The Squirrels) Sivtsev vrazhek, an older neighborhood in Moscow, was made famous in the eponymous novel by Mikhail Andreevich Osorgin. *Vrazhek* is a diminutive of *ovrag*, ravine. In a communal flat, toilet and kitchen facilities are shared with several others tenants' quarters.

Page 5 (The Bookworm) Heaped on the grating in clever bonfire-building order are primarily Soviet literary works: Fyodor Vasilievich Gladkov's influential novel "Cement" (1924) describes a struggle to revive a cement factory. Fedor Ivanovich Paneferov's novel, usually translated as "Whetstones," can also refer to railroad ties; it is subtitled "A Story of Peasant Life in Soviet Russia." Leonid Maksimovich Leonov's "The Russian Forest" was set in World War II; the word *lyes* also means lumber. Maiia Lassil's humorous novella "In Search of Matches" is known in the West primarily from a 1980 film adaptation produced by Mosfilm. Konstantin Aleksandrovich Fedin's "The Bonfire" (1961) concluded his trilogy about the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Nikolai Ostrovsky's "How the Steel Was Tempered" (1935) is also a socialist realist novel set in the Civil War. In "The Iron Flood" (1924), Aleksandr Serafimovich describes the march of the Taman Army in 1918. The sarcastic "rest in peace" of this translation echoes the name of the Ukrainian author of Yiddish literature Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916) and his pretend namesake, Aleichem Sholokhov (Michail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov (1905-1984) winner of the 1965 Nobel Prize in Literature). The island of Kizhi on Lake Onega near St. Petersburg is known for its remarkable

of wooden churches, now part of a museum of wooden architecture and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Mikhail Serafimovich Bubenov, “The White Birch” (1947-52), another World War II epic. “Black Boards” (1969) is by Vladimir Soloukhin, a poet and writer remembered for his campaign to preserve pre-Revolutionary Russian art and architecture.

Page 12 (The Head) In the original, *labukh* refers to a low-end musical performer. Otrada, a famous Odessa beach, literally means “joy” in Russian.

Page 12 (The Head) *Sivka-Burka* is a classic Russian fairy tale, similar in plot to *The Hunchbacked Pony*, in which the youngest son, Ivan, stands watch on the third night, stays awake and is able to capture the horse. The horse’s name means “grey-brown” (possibly what would be called a mouse-dun colored, or grulla, horse).

Page 13 (The Head) In the original, the narrator pulls from his pocket a *merzavchik*, a common slang term for a 250 milliliter bottle of vodka. These bottles often have lids that cannot be screwed back on. The feminine version of the word, *merzavka*, means shrew or bitch.

Page 15 (Notes of Cockroach) In this translation, words starting with “Co” have been chosen to populate the “Editor’s note” – landlady Constantina, comrades, Cozma, people of the Qoran, Coptic scholars, and coriander. This parallels the structure of the Russian original, which contained the “Ta” words: Tatyana, tovarishchi (comrades), Taras (Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), Ukrainian poet), people of the Talmud, Tamil

scholars, and Tagore (Rabindranath Tagore (1891-1941), leading Indian thinker and winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature). The Russian word for cockroach is “tarakan.”

Page 17 (Tuzik Has Been Stolen!) “Tuzik” is a common dog’s name, similar to Fido or Rover. The name of the rich dark chocolate “Othello” torte, with its white middle layer, has led to the joke that you eat it in the evening and it chokes you during the night.

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