

# Hrihir TYUTYUNNIK

*Cool  
Mint*



**DNIPRO  
PUBLISHERS**

**Hrihir  
TYUTYUNNIK**

**Cool Mint**

**A COLLECTION OF STORIES**

**KIEV  
DNIPRO PUBLISHERS  
1986**

У2  
Т98

**ГРИГІР ТЮГЮННИК**  
**ХОЛОДНА М'ЯТА**  
Оповідання та повісті

Translated from  
the Ukrainian  
by *Anatole Bilenko*

Printed in the USSR

Т  $\frac{4702590200-220}{M205(04)-86}$  220.86

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cover design.  
Dnipro Publishers, 1986

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## A PORTRAYER OF TRUTH

Hrihir Tyutyunnik has been acknowledged by contemporary readers as a brilliant writer of short stories.

No account of modern Ukrainian fiction would be complete without his work. Though not many in number, his stories are truly superb in terms of craftsmanship.

His life was cut tragically short on March 5, 1980. For many who knew him, Hrihir Tyutyunnik remains a young writer. He belonged to a generation that reached adolescence at the end of the war and so had to undergo the hardships of those years and, in many cases, shoulder the burdens of adults.

Hrihir Tyutyunnik was born on December 5, 1931, in the village of Shilivka, Zinkiv District, in Poltava Region into a peasant family. After seven years of elementary education, he entered a trade school in Zinkiv and studied to be a fitter. He worked in a factory, on a collective farm, and on construction sites. From 1951 to 1955 he served in the Navy, and after being demobbed worked at a railroad depot and continued his studies at night classes. In 1962 he graduated from Kharkiv University.

A remarkably turbulent life lies behind these particulars, few and brief as they are. His personality was formed through early trials and grim toil during the years of hardships and privation following the war. Probably nothing could have brought the future writer as emotionally close to his workers' milieu and made him so keenly aware of his organic unity with his people as did these very trials during his formative years when his perceptions were sharply acute and left a lasting imprint on his soul. There is a large body of Soviet Ukrainian fiction devoted to the life of the postwar trade schoolers who contributed to the revival of the country's war-ravaged industries, but in Hrihir Tyutyunnik's stories they have perhaps received the happiest treatment — no other writer has portrayed their life with such penetrating psychological insight. He seemed to have glorified his peers studying to be workers, although the word "glorify" is not entirely compatible with his manner of writing, for he addressed his readers for the most part in restrained, simple language, and the clear-cut episodes in his stories have about them the quality of forged metal the author had to deal with so often in the course of his life. There is also, of course, irony in his stories, at times a bitter irony which is an integral feature of his style.

He extended his most affectionate sympathies to the modest "builders of life," the working people whose sentiments he knew so

well, for he himself was essentially one of them. From his early childhood he came to know the value of hard-earned, rationed bread and experienced the bitterness of injustice. But equally early in life he discovered the value of the friendship of his comrades, the considerateness of the people he worked with, and the healing rays of human warmth nothing in the world could replace. He knew how to value these things and so sided with indomitable people. That is why the characters of working people with the generous hearts of collectivists and true comrades are some of the most distinctive in his stories.

Not impressive ostentation or grandeloquent phrases, but a person's actions, life, and attitude to parents, comrades and his civic duties were the things that counted most for him in assessing a man and his trustworthiness. Soft-spoken, and the possessor of a refined lyrical vision, Hrihir Tyutyunnik could often also be scathing and ruthless. His stories breathe withering sarcasm and scorn when he dwells on characters who disregard the moral standards of socialist society, defile their conscience and the wisdom of national traditions, and aspire to live the totally egotistical lives of grabbers and parasites.

Hrihir Tyutyunnik chose a form of writing which has long-standing traditions in Ukrainian literature — the short story. The choice was not accidental, for it accorded with his temperament: he wanted to be "traditional" and made it his rule to work unhurriedly, with scrupulous exactitude, never succumbing to the temptation to relax his professional standards. Some of his stories are genuine literary gems.

Having absorbed the best features of classical national literature, the realism of his writing is at the same time truly modern. In it the reader unerringly discerns the world outlook of a writer of the new socialist era; he is a committed writer for whom the truthful portrayal of his people's life is a humanist belief at once in the transforming power and constructive mission of art.

The authenticity with which he represents people's characters and his superb craftsmanship in depicting their actions and feelings have the greatest appeal to the reader, giving his work a lasting quality.

The portrayal of truth — this seems to be an appropriate definition of his artistic principles, of the whole "structure" of his soul and, consequently, of his undeniably brilliant style of writing.

Not everyone who writes succeeds in winning the recognition of his contemporaries, and not every piece of fiction leaves a deep imprint on the hearts of readers. Hrihir Tyutyunnik introduced himself to his readers as an honest and trustworthy writer, and so won their lasting friendship.

*Oles Honchar*

## COOL MINT

Over meadows inundated by the April floods, an orange-tinted evening was turning cool, dipping the distant flame of the clouds in the shallow waters by the willow-tufted riverbank. The lower the sun sank behind the hills, the lower and narrower grew the evening glow reflected in the water in a fiery strip that the waves seemed to warp as they approached the bank.

Andriy got up from the stump he had been resting on after wading through the dense mud in search of his boat which he had found between the bushes. The water had subsided in the course of the day: where it had been in the morning, there remained only a crest of dry reed quills, budding twigs and empty snail shells. The boat, sucked in by the silt, lay on the bank. The chain with which it had been fastened to an alder tree was stretched tautly: the flood must have tried to take the boat along with it as it receded, but could not get the better of the tether.

Andriy unwound the chain that had left a red band on the alder bark, and pulled the boat toward the water, his boots sinking into the green silt.

By the time he had reached the floodlands, he was drenched with sweat, and so settled on the stern for a breather. He was in no hurry to get home, although he had grown terribly hungry and tired working on the tractor throughout the day, taking litter to the cowshed and helping the women pitch the heavy stacks of straw on and off. Even now he gave off a fusty grist of old straw, grease, and cold sweat.

On the far bank of the riverbed loomed a village on a dry rise hemmed in on almost all sides by a freshet that was as orange-tinted as the sky. From that direction came the mumbling of a radio, the crowing of roosters, and a low-creeping smoke that filled the meadow air with the bitter smolder of last year's vegetable tops.

Andriy recognized his own house as well, but it didn't evoke in him the sweet, poignant yearning for home, which only recently had made him want to break into a run to get there.

Ever since he had been demobbed from the Navy and become a tractor driver, his mother-in-law had developed a keen hatred for him, and started to address him formally, and the house, as if in collusion with her mood, had turned gloomy with listless disdain.

Whenever Andriy returned home now, his mother-in-law invariably met him in the hallway with an admonition:

"For goodness sake, don't bring the dirt into the house! We've just cleaned up." Then she would walk ostentatiously past him into the yard, wearing on the lapel of her jacket a polished Merited Worker of Public Education badge that looked like a Scythian jar with two upward curving handles.

Andriy would back into a dark corner, hugged the wall to let her through, and seethed with fury: she seemed to meet him in the hallway intentionally so as to drive him into a corner and thereby humiliate him. Then he took off his boots, holding on to the door jamb, and entered the room.

Klava would get up lazily to meet him and stretch herself languorously so that her shoulders clicked, rising on tiptoe and glancing furtively at herself in the mirror.

Supper was disposed of in silence, as if after a quarrel.

"Where the hell do the likes of you come from, I wonder?" Andriy grumbled at night, his cigarette glowing in the darkness. "To live in a village and be so stuck-up."

"The same place you come from!" Klava snapped back, as if she had rehearsed it, and turned to the wall in a fit of sulks. "If we're not to your liking, go and find yourself someone better."

At such moments he hated everything about her: her slender, well-groomed waist, voluptuous legs, and even her name, Klava — what the hell!

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, after they had had a shoddily patched-up physical reconciliation, she would weep and complain about her missing Vladivostok and the Navy's merry amateur theatricals, about mother mocking him behind his back by referring to him as an ex-officer, and calling her a gaping fool for choosing such a husband.

This would make Andriy jump out of bed and chainsmoke, as he paced up and down the room, bumping into chairs and knocking them over till his mother-in-law started moaning from the adjoining room:

"Goodness gracious, let me have a moment's peace."

The west was growing dark.

Andriy launched his boat and was about to push off when a twig cracked in the alder grove and a breathless girl ran out onto the meadow.

"Take me across, too!" she cried out. Then, as she came closer, and obviously recognized Andriy, her long eyelashes effaced her jolly boyish expression.

"Oh, that's you. I thought it was Porfilo."

The girl shrunk back, and Andriy realized that she must have impulsively lied, because no one in the village but he wore a naval officer's cap and an old conventional naval jacket. He remembered seeing the girl once before, but she had been different then. It must have been two years before when he had been home on leave. He walked through the village in all his officer's regalia, with a group of senior school children tagging behind. The girls had tried to overtake him for a closer look, exchanging low whispers and giggles. One of them said aloud:

"See, Lesya simply can't take her eyes off him."

Andriy glanced round and saw in the group a girl in a calf-length school dress, her eyes pure and slightly confused. Those eyes seemed to plead with him to stop, as if they wanted to say: *Just look how beautiful we are.* Andriy had seen all that in passing and forgotten about it, but the eyes remained imprinted on his memory.

And now there stood before him a girl it was impossible simply to cast a glance at, yet admiring her frankly, the more so for him, married man that he was, would not be fitting as well. In her hands she held some books, but what she was dressed in gave her a far from schoolgirl appearance: she wore a pair of men's rubber boots, a plain gray jacket, and a flower-patterned tassled shawl covering not half of her head, as was the custom with village girls, but pulled low over her forehead like with a young woman.

This observation stung Andriy unpleasantly. *Here's a schoolgirl, but already married perhaps,* he thought. *And the clothes she's wearing are her husband's.*

"Get in," he said with surliness which surprised even himself, and waded to the stern through the water.

The girl, however, waited until he had settled in the boat and pushed it off vigorously, and only then jumped in.

"Where have you been so late, to miss your ferryman?" Andriy asked, to amend for the unwarrantable hostility at the outset of their meeting.

"At school. Then I was digging potatoes at Grandma's."

"You're Lesya, aren't you?"

The girl gave a quick nod. Her eyes, shaded by the shawl, flashed ardently like a woman's.

"What grade are you in?"

"In eleventh."

"And what then — after graduating from school, I mean?"

Lesya smiled, lowered her hand overboard, and turned away.

"Who knows..."

"And what do your teachers advise? Who's your homeroom teacher?"

"Stepanida Trokhimivna," she said, and added a key lower, "your mother-in-law. She said we should go in for livestock breeding, because soon even this trade will be impossible to engage in without a degree."

Andriy started to row faster and with rising fury. For all that, the oars did not flay the water or weary his hands. The boat glided evenly and smoothly like a bird on steady wings, and the houses in the orchards seemed to skid his way.

*So that's it — agitating in favor of working in the cowsheds,* Andriy thought. *A shrewd lady, my mother-in-law.*

Over the horizon the glow of the setting sun was subsiding. These were the moments of early dusk when the air turned transparently limpid and even the hitherto inconspicuous oak saplings protruding here and there from the flooded fields took on sharp contours and were reflected in the still water, creating the impression of a fathomless depth. The dew extracted from the damp grasses a thick odor of frost-withered freshwater sponge, wilted chervil, and wet, rotten hay that had stuck to the shrubs from last year's mowing.

The black earth on the rises between the flooded fields was redolent with a vernal craving for fecundity, along with the dead grasses, smoldering sere wood, and young twiglets; it smelled of eternity and of a transient season.

Among all these odors Andriy unwittingly failed to catch one that would have reminded him of his childhood, the pasturage on the tussocks with a bottle of milk and a hunk of bread in his bag, the first evenings with Klava here amid the meadows, Whitsuntide at Grandma's home freshly white-washed for the occasion and bestrewed with cutting sword-

grass — it was an odor that conjured up for him his entire life, except for his service at sea.

Andriy stopped rowing, inhaled the air deeply several times, and was still, as if he were trying to pick up some terribly faint sound.

"It's mint," Lesya whispered. "Cool mint has sprouted."

Andriy had a feeling that Lesya and he had uttered this word in unison, the only difference being that he had done so in his mind, while she had said it aloud.

"Well, you see —" he begun and fell silent without going on. He wanted to say that it was a shame that people labeled others both in speech and in their minds: "ex-officer," "cattle breeder," "machine operator" — they should not think and live like that when the earth smelled of last year's grasses and young mint, of eternity and an instant.

Andriy looked openly and boldly at her for the first time, feeling he was doing so with a pure heart, and he did not recognize her: she had rewound her shawl in maiden fashion and immediately become as young and virginal as the earth on the rises.

"Let's go and get some mint, if you like," she proposed. Andriy noticed again the lively boyish sparkle in her eyes.

"But it hasn't come into leaf yet," he said somewhat confused, regretting at the same time his turning down the proposal. "It's still young..."

"It's bigger along the riverbed," she said timidly. "The banks there are steep, so they haven't been flooded this year."

Andriy turned the boat in the direction where the river flowed darkly into the forest. Shortly after, steep eroded banks rose on either side, and down them sturdy elm roots hung into the water like swollen veins, groaning at the slightest touch.

Lesya jumped nimbly out of the boat and disappeared into the forest, the brushwood cracking under her feet. Soon she returned, carrying a little bunch of cool mint, with just one leaf sprouting on each stalk.

"That's all right," she said, hiding her eyes. "It'll grow fast in a jar and put out fine little white roots. Have some, if you like."

The boat cast off on its own and smoothly glided to the middle of the river.

"Do you remember me?" Lesya asked suddenly when he had buried his face in the green bunch of mint. It was really

cool and smelled of the milk bottle in his bag during pasturage and of Whitsuntide at Grandma's house bestrewed with cutting swordgrass.

"I remember you, too."

The current carried them toward a cove. He forgot about the oars lying at his feet and was afraid to stir lest he frighten off her voice that was as soft as the freshet and as pure as the breath of the rises amid the floodlands. And yet another scene he saw in his mind's eye was a boat with a tautly stretched chain — the boat under which the water had subsided, failing in the end to get the better of the tether.

That night Andriy could not sleep for a long time, because the room was bright with the light of the large stars in the sky, and the cool mint gave off a potent fragrance.

## IT'S MEALTIME AT THE KRAVCHINAS

Yukhim Kravchina's home stands just by the flood plain. The field is flooded every year, and nothing worth its name grows on it, except for mangel and hemp. But the hemp grows the thickness of an osier and is fit more for kindling than for yarn. Not much more could be said of the potatoes either: feed potatoes — worthless stuff. Every autumn Yukhim takes them to a market in the district town or in Poltava — with town folk it's only the size of the potatoes that counts — while for his own family he buys field potatoes grown in sandy soil.

Kravchina's hay, however, is the best — thick and luxuriant, you can hardly pull the scythe out of the grass when it's ripe.

"Nowadays it's like this: he who's got the hay has got the money," he says smilingly to his cronies, looking down at his feet and stroking his chin lightly with his fingertips.

All his cronies agree with him, for they know how much it is if you multiply four or five ricks by sixty or seventy roubles a rick and then by three yearly hay crops. A vegetable plot does not bring in that much. They agree and praise him — to his face. But behind his back they make fun of him: now what kind of a farmer is he if he can't keep mum about his profits? Does a clever man behave like that? If you're clever and you've built yourself a good house, for instance, don't go round bragging about it; it's best to keep on complaining: "Oh Lord, what a barn I've built. In winter it's so cold it's like a dog's kennel! The bricks haven't been baked properly."

If you have a good tomato crop, say: "This year the tomatoes are the lousiest I've ever seen; they've set the size of pimples." Everybody knows it's a lie, but they respect you as a man with brains. That's a real farmer for you! Or take another example. You've got some money saved up for a rainy day, and a neighbor comes for a loan. Swear by bell, book and candle that you haven't enough even to buy a grain of salt for yourself. Lead your friend courteously to the

threshold, and beyond it, and add by way of parting: "Do you think I wouldn't lend you money if I had any?"

Yukhim is not that sort of a man. The very contrary. If his one and only paradise apple tree promises to bear a couple of dozen apples, he boasts in company: "What an apple harvest I'll have! Like a swarm of bees the apples have covered the tree; can't see the leaves for them." Or: "Did my beets come out good this year. Big as buckets. Each one weighs thirty pounds or so."

When he goes fishing and comes home with or without a catch, he brags anyway: "This morning I found a cozy nook by the river. Didn't stay long there before I had two panfuls of fish."

The good-natured only nod their heads in ascent, but the more spiteful, hiding a bored smile, ask with a pretense of sincere interest: "Yukhim, come and tell us how you hooked that burbot a couple of years ago."

Yukhim rolls himself a cigarette and slowly starts on his story: "Oh well, one day at dawn I went to the river. I'd just cast the line and was lighting my cigarette, when — it pulled, the end of the rod was already bent down to the water. I jerked and pulled in the line. Something fat, I felt. When I pulled out the line, there was only the head of a burbot on the hook. Must've jerked it too strong, I guess."

At that all his listeners, even the spiteful and glum ones, burst into a roar of laughter. And, between fits, the one who had asked the question would add some fuel to the fun with something like: "Listen, Yukhim, if I were you, I'd shake down those apples from the tree right away, 'cause some darn day they'll break all them branches."

And they laugh and make fun of him, because nothing, except his apple tree, will grow on his allotment (no matter how hard he tried to grow things, they got water-logged), because of his hay crop, and his supposedly good beets, and the fish, of course.

Yukhim blinks his reddened eyelids, offended, leaves the company, and slouches back to his smithy, followed by laughter and nasty cracks:

"Ha-ha-ha... that'll teach the old windbag how to draw the long bow!"

Yukhim lights the forge that had grown cold during the chit-chat, pumping the bellows so vigorously that sparks fly out of the chimney, and mumbles: "Very funny! Very funny, you damned hicks! Just you wait till you come running to

me: 'Yukhim make me this and make me that.' Like hell I'll make anything for you!"

But after a day or two he forgets the offense and refuses nothing to anybody. Besides, the men know how to make up with the old blacksmith. All one has to do is stand by the threshold, cough once or twice to attract his attention, and then say in a placating tone: "Hello, Yukhim! How's the forging and hammering going today? Went out of my house this morning and heard your little hammer clink-a-clanking. Sounded like bird song to me. God surely gave you a talent to do such a job!" That's how the sly ones do it. Those who don't want to beat about the bush, or simply can't, usually start like this: "Listen, Yukhim, don't feel bad about yesterday. We didn't really mean it; we were only joking."

"Do you think I didn't know that myself?" Kravchina says peacefully, and he has a lump in his throat — so moved and pleased he is. "All right, what is it you want me to do?" and he makes a latch for one, door hinges for another, a cellar hatch for a third. When there's no urgent work to do, he closes the smithy and goes for a walk in the pine grove to get a breath of good, clean air. The grove starts just by the smithy and continues along the river all the way to the village of Birki. Yukhim stomps through the sand, feeling every pine cone under his boots, and listens to the woodpecker. When he catches sight of the bird, he stops nearby, rolls himself a cigarette, and looks at the woodpecker drumming away at the tree bark.

How d'ye like him? That's a real smith, he thinks, puffing on his cigarette. He walks further, to the marsh from which the breeze wafts the smell of decay and water-soaked brushwood: here is where you can breathe easiest, and it's much cooler than in the smithy. After such walks he would say to the first person who came into his smithy:

"Do you know which is the most industrious bird of all? You don't, huh? Well, I'll tell you. It's the woodpecker." And he knocks the anvil with a horny fingernail that has long needed to be trimmed. "A sparrow, he's a thief, man. Comes flying into the yard, skip-hop among the hens, peck-peck, stuffs himself full and flits away. A dove is a loafer. Puffs up its crop and struts around, waiting to be fed. A magpie, that's a cutthroat, pounces on everything alive. A jay is like a gypsy; whatever it sees it steals and stows away for winter. A starling invades the orchards like a pest.

But the woodpecker — man, that's a real worker! Day in, day out, summer and winter he pecks and pecks like a carpenter with a chisel or me with a hammer. Tell me, how come his head never aches?"

Kravchina has perhaps the largest family in the whole neighborhood: he and his wife Motrya, who as a girl came to the village from Katerinoslav \* in the 1920s when there was a famine there, five children — only the youngest ones, that is, who are still fledglings in their parents' nest, and his ancient grandmother. The whole family is well dressed and fed (the rare trade of a village blacksmith is profitable, and Kravchina makes good money), and the children do very well at school — the youngest at the village school, and the older ones at a secondary school in town. Yukhim likes to praise his children, just like his household, but he never does it in their presence.

"You won't spoil stew with gravy, but the children with praise you certainly will," he mildly admonishes his Motrya and the elder sons and daughters who are already married. That's when Yukhim is in a good mood. He always is, unless he's hungry, of course. But when he *is* hungry, you won't find a man angrier than Yukhim in the whole neighborhood. That is why a couple of hours before lunch, when the clink-clank of his hammer still echoes across the meadows, there is a hubbub of activity in his home: a low round table is brought out into the yard, for in summer, when the weather is fine, Kravchina likes to eat in the shade of the apple tree; a pail of cold water is drawn from the well (should the borshch be too hot for him, the pot is lowered into the pail to cool); the wooden spoons are time and again washed and wiped dry, although they are clean as they are; an embroidered *rushnik* towel is prepared for him to cover his knees with; and his bench is placed by the table. All this done, Motrya sends her youngest boy, Kolya, to the graveyard to watch out for Father from there. Kolya, a neatly dressed boy with clever eyes, runs barefoot along the path through a sunflower field, buzzing as if he were a truck. To look out for Father coming to lunch is the most joyous and honorable of tasks inherited from his elder brothers and sisters. Kolya runs into the graveyard which dominates the whole village, sits down on the sun-warmed thyme between the graves, and

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\* Now the city of Dnepropetrovsk — Tr.

looks toward the farm on the other side of the gully, pricking up his ears to catch all the sounds coming from there. Then suddenly the hammering in the smithy stops. Kolya sees his father closing the door, the noise of bolts barely audible to him, but he is in no hurry to run back home: he waits till Father reaches the gully.

Kravchina walks in a dignified manner, his hands clasped behind his back, without looking around or stopping for a chat with anyone: he's done his share of work and is now hungry. When he starts descending into the gully — first his knees disappear, then his chest, then his shoulders, and finally his head — Kolya takes to his heels like a frightened rabbit and runs back to the house so fast the crosses and gravestones jump before his eyes.

“Dad's coming! Mom, ye hear me? He's coming!” he shouts, panting, while his eyes burn like two hot charcoals on his happy face: he was the first to see Dad!

The children fetch their stools, which Father made for them, and put them by the table, but nobody sits down. Motrya brings a small jug of hot water, a towel, soap, and a small, smoothly polished piece of brick.

Upon entering the yard, Yukhim looks around sternly, and noticing the absence of one of the children, asks:

“And where's Polina?”

“She's got six classes today,” the other children answer promptly.

Yukhim rolls up his sleeves — up to his wrists his hands are bluish-red from smoke and dross; higher up, they are white: he's too busy a man to get them tanned — takes the soap and piece of brick out of Motrya's hands, and starts scrubbing off the soot. In silence, the children look on respectfully as their father grimly rubs his hands, and then one of the elder ones says:

“Pa, maybe we should buy you a bunch of hard bast? They're selling it in town.”

“There's nothing harder than a piece of brick,” Yukhim retorts.

After he's washed himself, he takes his place at the table, followed by his grandmother, a scrawny, stooped old woman with thin hands, neatly dressed as ever in something long and wide. The children sit down last.

Yukhim tastes the borshch, and when it is neither too cold nor too hot, asks:

“And where's the pod?”

One of the children gives him the cayenne pepper pod hidden under the brim of the large glazed soup bowl, and adds cheerfully:

"Here, Daddy; it hid itself!"

Yukhim breaks the fiery-red pod, throws it into the bowl, together with the seeds which have dropped into his palm.

"Isn't that too much?" Motrya asks concerned. "The kids'll burn their tongues."

"If it's too much, they'll say so themselves," Yukhim retorts.

The children eat in silence, for who would say anything if Dad is eating such borsch himself?

Yukhim scoops up a spoonful of borsch, slowly raises it to his mouth, glares at it a moment, and then, slurp! — loudly, angrily and quickly like a crack of a whip — the spoon is empty. Then, slurp! slurp! — quietly at first, then aggressively as before. If one of the older children fishes out a hen gizzard or liver, Yukhim says, interrupting his slurping:

"Give it to Kolya, for he's younger than you."

And Motrya adds for her part:

"He's been a fine boy today, fetched me the wood and ran to look out for Daddy."

Yukhim accepts this comment in silence: there is nothing wrong with praising the boy once in a while.

Grandma eats out of a separate plate, because it takes her a bit longer to munch the food. At table, Yukhim is very attentive to her, and if she does not eat up all of the borsch, or stewed potatoes, or porridge, he asks:

"Why are you eating so little today, Granny?"

"When you're my age, child, you won't want to eat either," she replies. "When I was younger, I wanted to, but there was nothing to eat; now there is, but I don't want to."

For Yukhim's children it sounds strange that Grandma calls their father a child, and one of the elder boys asks with a courteous smile:

"But Father isn't a child, really?"

"We all are children. The old ones, and the young ones, and the middle ones," Grandma replies and laughs — mutely, with no audible sound.

That's what their "peaceful" lunch is like. But there are days when Motrya displeases Yukhim for one reason or another. Mostly the reason is the borsch being too hot. Then all hell breaks loose. Yukhim grabs the pot, runs around the house with it, looking for a draft, and when he does find

it he starts fanning the borshch like mad with the spoon, the way they winnow grain for the mill, and he yells so terribly that all the dogs near and far start yelping in alarm.

"Don't I get roasted enough at the forge? Not enough, eh?"

When there is no draft at all, he lifts the cast-iron pot, which is the size of a bucket, and carries it to the well.

"I told you to lower it down into the water! Into the water, you understand?" he snaps at Motrya while he makes a noose for the pot.

"What's up over there?" wonder people who do not frequent this part of the village.

"Oh, it's mealtime at the Kravchinas," they are told indifferently by the locals who are used to it all. They are so used to it that whenever anyone starts shouting at someone else, they say: "You're yelling as if you've taken a gulp of hot borshch."

After lunch, however, Yukhim immediately becomes kinder and gentler and more talkative than ever.

"What homework have you for tomorrow?" he purrs to one of his sons or daughters, gently stroking their hair.

"It's about the *perpetuum mobile*, Dad."

"What's that?"

"It's an eternal engine, Dad."

"Hm," says Yukhim and muses lengthily. "Well, and is there really such an engine?"

"No, Dad."

"Exactly what I thought," Kravchina says, pleased. "Nothing is eternal."

"And what about you, Daddy?" Kolya asks.

Yukhim laughs and replies:

"But I, son, I'm eternal. I'm like that perpetmobile, or whatever you call it. When you grow up you'll be an eternal engine, too. Anyone who works is like an engine."

"And whoever doesn't work, what about him?" Kolya inquires.

"Those who don't work, they whistle," says Yukhim, laughing.

What he likes most is teaching his youngest son the ABC. He stands to attention like a soldier, his arms pressed to his thighs, and asks Kolya:

"Tell me, what letter is that?"

Kolya turns his head sideways, screws up his clever little eyes, and answers readily:

"It's an 'I', Daddy, but without the dot on the top."

"And what's this?" Yukhim lifts his left and right arms.

"A 'T', Daddy."

"And this one?" Yukhim calls out with a ring of excitement in his voice.

"That's a..." Kolya deliberately hesitates, while Yukhim waits anxiously, and when a slightly discernible shade of disappointment appears on his face, Kolya says with a giggle:

"That's a 'P', Daddy."

The elder children who have been through all this themselves, hug Kolya and praise him, but Yukhim knits his brows sternly and says:

"All right, now everybody go and do his homework. I've got to get back to my job."

The children leave reluctantly — it is not so often that they can all be together with Father — while Yukhim, his cleanly hands clasped behind his back, goes to the smithy. On the way he eagerly stops for a chat, if he meets someone, and offers his services to make something which nobody except for him, the smith, can do in the whole neighborhood: when Kravchina isn't hungry, he's glad to do a favor; and never grudges a piece of advice to anyone, not even to those who mock him. Then till eventide his hammer beats the anvil, and the jolly rollicking sounds invite people to the soot-covered smithy by the pine grove. And when the clink-clank dies down, it means that Yukhim is tired; he takes off his stiff tarpaulin apron burned through with cinders, and rubbing his right arm which has lately been frequently going numb, he goes to the marsh for a breath of the cool freshness of the alder wood.

## THREE CUCKOOS WITH GREETINGS

*Dedicated to heavenly love*

As I rounded the clubhouse, wearing a cheap brand-new suit (bought with the money I earned unloading three flatcars of bricks together with my fellow students) and carrying a small suitcase, the first thing to catch my eye was Karpo Yarkovy's cottage, and, in front of it, young pine trees growing in straight rows out of the yellow sand. On the porch stood Martha Yarkova, following me with her eyes. She was without a kerchief, her hair gray and thick — once her braids used to glitter like gold in the sun, but now they had lost their sheen. Hair must be the first part of a person to die, I thought. I came closer, bowed to her, and standing between the young pines, said:

“Good afternoon!”

She moved her lips in reply and continued to follow me with her eyes until I came to the “big” pines, or “the ones your Dad planted,” as my folks also call them.

When I reached our home, my mother met me, rejoicing, weeping, and bringing up her blue lips for me to kiss.

“Mother, why does Martha Yarkova look at me that way?” I asked after I had told her my scanty college news (passed my term exams and bought myself the suit).

Mother lapsed into silence, then gave a sigh and said:

“She loved your Dad. And you look like him...”

Martha (then called “little Martha” for her diminutive stature) sensed with her heart whenever a letter from Dad arrived. She must have sensed it coming when it was far away: probably still halfway from its destination. And she waited. Slender, fragile looking, and dressed in an old embroidered shirt, she would come to the post office, sit down on the steps, her ample skirt reaching down to her bare feet, and wait, her blond curls shining from under a black kerchief: she must have run either from work at a threshing machine or from the mowers in whose wake she had been binding sheaves, or else from the meadow where they were ricking hay.

She sat on the steps and plucked the petals off a daisy, say-

ing under her breath: "It's come — no, it hasn't; it's come — no, it hasn't..."

When our postman, the one-armed Levko, who was incredibly tall and as lean as a rake, came out of the post office with a canvas bag hanging over his sharply prominent shoulder, she would rush up to him, and looking up into his eyes, ask him quietly:

"Uncle Levko, is there any letter from Mishka?"

"No," Levko would reply, his eyes roving above Martha's golden hair showing from under the kerchief.

"Don't you fool me. There is..."

"Well, yes, there is... not for you, though; for Sophia."

"Uncle Levko, let me hold it in my hands at least."

"No. To give away other people's mail is against the rules. It's prohibited."

"I'll only hold it, then I'll give it back to you."

Martha's blue eyes filled with tears and turned even bluer when she looked up at Levko.

Levko would turn round to see whether anybody was in sight, breathe a weak sigh from his puny chest, and beckon Martha behind the post office building. There he'd take the triangular letter out of the bag and hold it out to Martha.

"Here you are. But don't you breathe a single word about it, because I could be fired for this."

"No, no, I won't!" Martha gasped from gratitude. "Honest to God, I won't."

She would snatch the letter from Levko's fingers, the tears rolling profusely down her cheeks, press the paper triangle to her heart and kiss the return address.

"Mind you don't smear the ink with your tears," Levko said, turning away, and waited.

When nobody was around, she would be slow in giving the letter back, and would whisper all the while:

"See, I haven't done anything to it. Now you can take it to Sophia. I haven't really done anything to it. Thanks, dearie, thanks a lot. Now take this here and drink to his health."

She would take a crumpled one-rouble bill from behind her shirtfront and shove it into Levko's hand.

"If it's to his health, that's all right," Levko would mumble. "Otherwise I wouldn't take it — not for anything."

After that he would make his way to the village, sticking out his angular shoulder with the almost empty bag on it.

Martha would run back to work, or rather fly like a bird

to finish binding her daily quota of sheaves, but no wind could dry the tears in her eyes for the rest of the day.

“Who told you about all this, Mother? Was it Levko?”

“No, he held his tongue. I saw and heard it all myself. I, too, used to run away from work just as she did, stealing through one gully after another to get to the post office, and there I’d see her already sitting on the steps, waiting. Every time she was the first to guess when your dad would write.”

“Did you get angry with her?”

“In grief, my son, you can’t put anybody or anything into heart... except grief.”

“But how did it happen that she guessed and you didn’t?”

“Who knows, son? People’s hearts aren’t alike. Her heart was made to foretell, and mine was different. She was much younger than your dad. He was thirty-five, while she was nineteen. After she had lived with her Karpo for two years, it was enough to make her feel she’d lived over a hundred. Your dad, though, didn’t seem to age somehow and looked the same whether he was twenty or thirty. He was a falcon, swarthy and handsome, and with eyes so pitch-black they seared me to the quick. When he looked at me — just looked and nothing else — it made my heart miss a beat. Maybe it was because he didn’t often raise his eyes. Mostly he kept them covered with the palm of his hand when he was brooding over something. The last time I saw him his eyes weren’t searing me any more, but only caressing me — so sorrowful they looked. It was as if I was seeing them through a mist.

“Karpo and Martha used to visit us every evening. We chatted or quietly sang a song — your dad in his baritone, me second voice, and Martha first. Her voice then was just as fragile as she was herself; you had the feeling it would snap any minute, but it was lovely all the same. Karpo, though, was a horror to hear. So he sat either gazing at the ceiling or puffing into his mustache — first into his left and then into his right — to fluff them up. I’d set a bowl of dumplings in front of him (he surely loved to line his stomach), put a spoon into his hand, and let him eat. My, did he shovel it down his gullet. While we were singing, he’d be getting his mustache full of steam and snorting so violently the wick lamp on the table almost went out. ‘I love dumplings stuffed with potatoes,’ he’d say. ‘You must put more potatoes into your dumplings.’ He had a fat face, fat

legs. and — goodness gracious! — such red hair it looked like overripe straw. Compared with him, Martha was like a tiny quail. When she shot an occasional glance at him eating his head off over the bowl of dumplings, she would fetch a sigh in the middle of the song and turn her face away, tears trembling in her eyes like two little blue candles. Then she would turn to your father; that much I saw. And he would cover his brow with the palm of his hand and continue singing or smile at you lying in the cradle as he rocked it lightly.

“‘You should respond to her look once in a while at least,’ I said. ‘You see yourself how her face lights up at the mere sight of you.’”

“‘Why make her suffer more than she does already?’”

Mother’s eyes were dry, her voice didn’t tremble in the least, which made me realize that her memories did not either oppress or pain her — they had simply dulled.

#### The Last Letter from Father

*Dear Sophia,*

*Yesterday I looked into a fragment of mirror a friend had given me and didn’t recognize myself. Not only the hair on my head but my eyebrows as well have turned gray. At first I thought it was hoar frost, for it had happened out of doors, so I tried to rub it off, but it wasn’t hoar frost.*

*I won’t look into a mirror any more.*

*In my dreams, I often see myself working, making window frames, panelled doors, tables, benches and things of that sort. After this my hands just itch to carve spoons for the men in my free time. But my hands won’t obey me. The wood here is very good; in our parts, they’d be building fine houses with it. It’s damp, though. Besides, the tools aren’t as good as the ones I had at home. I wonder whether you’ve sold them by now. If you’re in a tight spot for money, don’t regret parting with them. Sophia, if you only knew how much I want just to survive! I don’t seem to be far away from home, but it is a long way to get back.*

*You ask how we’re being fed and clothed for the winter. We get such delicious soup that Karpo Yarkovy would have surely wolfed fifteen platefuls of it and asked for more! The clothes they issue us are nothing unusual for a peasant.*

*Last night I dreamed about my pine tree. It must have already grown to my knees or maybe higher. I dreamed I saw the pine and behind it the blue wing of the river. For some*

*reason neither you nor our boy, the youngest shoot on our family tree, have appeared in my dreams for a long time now; I have only flashes of you.*

*The man sleeping on the bunk next to mine prays in his sleep, but he doesn't utter the name of God. Who is he praying to then?*

*Sophia, don't judge me harshly, but I've never told anybody a lie, and I won't tell one now: every day I sense Martha's unhappy soul roving somewhere around here. Sophia, go tell her that I've sent her three cuckoos\* with greetings, as the old bandura player used to sing at the country fairs in Zinkiv; but I don't know whether they'll fly across boundless Siberia, or drop to the ground in the frost.*

(The words *boundless Siberia* were crossed out with deep black ink by an irresolute hand, and over it the same hand had written again: *boundless Siberia*.)

*Sophia, my one and only love in this world, go and see her. Maybe she'll call back her soul and then I'll have a moment's peace at least.*

*I clasp you in my arms and carry in my hands the cradle with our son to the end of my days...*

All this happened long ago, but I keep thinking to this day:

How could they — Martha and my dad — sense each other. How?

And there's something else I think about:

*Why didn't they marry, sensing each other as intuitively as they did?*

*If so, you wouldn't be here, one of my dad's "big" pine trees rustles in response to my query.*

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\* In Ukrainian folklore, a cuckoo is a harbinger of parting and sorrow — Tr.

## KLIMKO

### Chapter 1

Klimko was wakened by the cold dew on his bare feet (he must have turned in his sleep) and saw overhead a sky of dull lilac, the color it was at sunrise in autumn — without any trilling of larks, without any gilt-rimmed cloudlets on the horizon or the radiant joy of daybreak. He drew his feet in under his jacket to warm them, and pushed aside the straw round his eyes with trembling hands numb with cold. He had spent the night in a strawstack.

The sun must have just risen, because the strawstack was casting a long shadow across the stackyard and further on through the stubble sprinkled with blue-gray dew; the air carried a sweet smell of sprouting rye and dry mouse nests. In the evening, the mice had tickled Klimko, as they scampered up and down his arms and legs, squeaking with the fun, and he had kept chasing them away: he kicked and hissed at them angrily, until he fell asleep.

In his dream, he saw a huge flock of yellow crows mingled with yellow sparrows. Actually it was neither a flock of birds nor a weird midnight dream, but the whirlwind that had swept up big maple and little cherry leaves and hurled them into the air over the settlement when he came out into the steppe behind the station and looked back at it for the last time. The column of leaves rose higher and higher into the sky until it thinned, dispersed, and disappeared.

Where had the leaves settled afterward? Or could they still be drifting in the air?

Klimko propped himself up on an elbow to have a better view of the road he had to travel, and a shiver shook him so strongly it made his teeth chatter with the bitter chill that had gathered in his body.

*Never mind,* he thought. *I'll run a furrow's length and get warmer.*

It was quiet in the steppe. The stubble fields glistened in the sun as did the wormwood by the roadside; cobwebs thickly spangled with dewdrops stood out in silvery mazes. In the distance, between the telegraph poles and rounded mounds, rose-tinted hills flared like flashes of fire. Some-

where over there by those hills, as Klimko had heard people say, was the large town of Slovyansk, and between the hills were boulders of salt lying right there on the ground — you could take as much as you were able to pull off. Klimko had also heard that a glass of salt could be bartered for all sorts of goodies: a bowlful or two of corn, a pailful of potatoes or even a loaf of real bread.

Klimko walked down the road barefoot. He was dressed in short pants, an old middy blouse that had once been blue and had now turned gray, and a work jacket which had been his Uncle Kirilo's. It was a "hundred years old," as his uncle said, and had withstood all the wear and tear only because grease had hardened it throughout the years. Rain, snow, or shine had had no effect on it. The jacket smelled of locomotives. During the night it was cool, but by day it steamed in the sun, giving off a heavy smell and burning Klimko's back and shoulders.

Ever since Klimko was orphaned, he lived with Uncle Kirilo. They quartered in a barracks just by the railroad track. When a heavy train rumbled past, the barracks also seemed to jolt into motion: the walls shook, the floor trembled, the windowpanes rattled, as the barracks rushed headlong. After the rumble of the train had receded, the barracks came to a halt again and stood there as before, with the sparrows chirping behind the windows.

Uncle Kirilo was an engineer on a big FD locomotive and had no regular shifts: he left for work either in the morning, during the day, or at night when Klimko was asleep. He always came home unexpectedly, carrying a steel box and smiling at Klimko with weary eyes.

"How's my little helper doing here? Scared being alone all night long?" he would ask, taking off his leather cap with two crossed hammers on it. The cap left a deep red mark on his forehead and never faded by his next shift.

Then he washed himself over a large brass basin, rubbing his fingers vigorously for a long time, although he and Klimko knew that this wouldn't make his hands any cleaner no matter how hard he rubbed.

"When you grow up, Klimko, you'll join us on the locomotive," Uncle said. "You'll learn to be an assistant engineer, and then we'll live grandly, going to and from work together. As it is, I don't even see you growing up."

After having washed himself, Uncle put on a clean shirt and sat down at the table.

“Now let me have a look how you’ve been extending your frontiers of knowledge.”

Putting his homework exercise books neatly filled with writing in front of Uncle was the happiest moment for Klimko. While his uncle studied the exercise books, Klimko busied himself around the house, carried the basin with the greasy water outdoors, wiped the wet floor dry, and furtively, lest his uncle turn round, filled a plate with hot, savory soup he had prepared himself for Uncle to eat. Klimko was never worried about his exercise books, because it was only in penmanship that he occasionally got unsatisfactory marks.

“Hey!” Uncle said, surprised, and straightened his back. “And what’s that supposed to be? You should’ve written ‘cold’ and here you’ve got ‘cocold.’”

To which Klimko replied, embarrassed:

“You see, Unc, my hands froze during lunch break, and that’s why I made the slip.”

Pleased to have found a mistake, Uncle put the exercise books aside and started to eat the soup.

“How delicious!” he praised him, slurping the soup out of his spoon. “Oh, not every cook could have done such a fine job. Go and take the present I brought you from the steel box.”

Klimko knew that his uncle would say these words, but every time he was excited: what if he didn’t say them this time? What if he forgot?

In the steel box, which smelled just like Uncle’s jacket, his cap and Uncle himself, there were large and smaller nickel-plated wrenches. Klimko never touched them. He only looked them over; these were the tools Uncle used on his locomotive. The steel box also contained a hammer, a hank of white thread, a large mug Uncle drank his tea out of, and a knife he cut bread with. It was in the mug Klimko usually found the present — meringued ginger cookies, a bunch of transparent lollipops shaped like roosters and tied together with white thread, or something of the sort.

In the evening, Uncle Kirilo, in a clean shirt, cleanly shaven and beaming, left for the station again with his steel box, and Klimko saw him off right to the locomotive. The FD, still hot from the previous run, stood on a sidetrack. Tiny wisps of smoke curled over its funnel, steam issued quietly from its pipes and enveloped the weary wheels — the FD was resting, its black sides gleaming with grease and

polished brass. It was warm by the locomotive even in winter.

"Now keep house nicely, Klimko. Don't be afraid sleeping alone at night," Uncle said. "At night it's just the same as by day, with the only difference that it's dark."

While Klimko ran back to the barracks, Uncle smiled at him from the locomotive and waved him goodbye with his fingers.

As a matter of fact, Klimko wasn't afraid of the dark, because the people in the barracks almost never all went to sleep at the same time. There were a lot of them living in the barracks; they all worked at the station and returned home at different times, so there was always someone who wasn't asleep. Besides, the barracks stood in such a bright place that it was illuminated on all sides — from the railroad station, the car-repair shops, the coal mine — which made it look like a ship sailing amidst these lights on a silvery sea.

And what a multitude of noises the station harbored at night. The car buffers clanged with their steel plates, the switchmen tooted on their whistles and waved their lamps as they coupled the cars, the trackmen tapped their hammers against the wheels, and somewhere high over the station the ventilator of the mine hummed away in an endless monotone. Inside the barracks, it always smelled of coal dust, steam, and the wormwood growing under the windows. The lights streaming through the windows from all directions etched large varicolored flowers on the walls opposite Klimko's bed: the red lights were poppies, the blue cornflowers, all of them trembling and changing color as flowers do in the steppe breeze. Those were fantastic and the happiest nights in Klimko's life.

He would have grown up like that in the flower-spangled nights, if other lightless nights had not descended. All that remained of them were the ordinary sounds, but in the darkness they had become gloomier, duller, and reached his ear as if from a deep abyss. In those black-faced nights the trains passed more frequently and faster than before, but they did not give off the smells of pine planks, warm wheat, wet coal newly dug from a mine, or brick dust swept by the wind off the flatcars. Instead, they gave off medicines, the smoke of field kitchens, and the sun-scorched wrecks of warplanes and guns.

On one such night Uncle Kirilo's FD had not returned to the station, although a new crew had been waiting for it

for a long time. Klimko wandered around the station the whole night through, listening intently to the frightened locomotive hoots in the distance, but he did not hear the familiar whistle. The whistle of Uncle's FD had a ring all its own Klimko would have recognized among a thousand.

At dawn, a rail car arrived at the station, carrying Uncle Kirilo, his assistant Kindratovich, an old railroader who had driven locomotives even in czarist times, and the stoker Slavko. The rail car was surrounded by the trackmen, greasers and switchmen on duty. He saw that all of them had taken their caps off and dropped their heads; he yelled and pumelled their backs with his little fists.

"Let me through!"

The men recognized him and made way for him. Klimko saw only Uncle's shock of gray hair sticking from under the tarps; he took hold of the side of the rail car to climb into it, but somebody held him back by the shoulder and said:

"You'll see him right away, son. We'll take him down first and you'll have a closer look at him."

"It was a direct hit in the tender," somebody was recounting rapidly. "They were smashed by the coal."

By evening Uncle was lying in state in the barracks, with the doors wide open. It was windy outside. The first autumn leaves from the public garden by the station rustled in the corridor and settled in quiet corners. The weary railroaders with grease-grimed hands came in, took off their caps, bid farewell to Uncle under their breaths, and left to work again; the women who had gathered from all over the barracks sighed and sobbed silently, and only one of them, Motya, wept bitterly and pressed her cheeks against Uncle's black hands that even in the end could not be washed clean and now lay folded on his chest. Quite often she used to bring Uncle clean ironed shirts which smelled of cheap black soap.

At Uncle's head lay bunches of marigolds from the flowerbed by the depot, asters from somebody's garden, and dried yarrow and feathergrass. The flowers exuded a faint fragrance of incense, while Uncle's new suit brought to Klimko's mind the odors of weekends.

By the time Klimko reached the cemetery, he was no longer weeping but shivering with cold in his chest and sighing. The red sun, tinted with a rosy twilight haze, was setting. The wind plucked the yellowed leaves off the young poplar trees and wafted them between the graves. The leaves stuck in the enclosure grilles, clung to the tombstones or flew

into the steppe, tearing apart as they went the thin cobwebs that had not yet become taut as they usually do in autumn.

The men put Uncle's leather cap on top of his grave.

After the burial, Motya saw Klimko to the barracks; by the threshold she burst into tears and said:

"What about moving over to my place? Where can you go now? Who'll be looking after you?"

Klimko shook his head and entered the barracks. Looking after himself — cooking meals, cleaning house, laundering — was something he knew, and had known long ago.

Klimko rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with cold dirty fingers and sat upright in his straw burrow. Not a soul was in sight up and down the road. He heard only the rumble of wagons ringing resonantly in the morning air far away beyond the fallow whence he had walked to this strawstack the day before. The rumble fell when the wagons rolled down into a gully and rose again once they reached the hilltops. Shortly after, a long string of German wagons appeared alongside the line of telegraph poles. Steam burst from the nostrils of the sleek bang-tailed draught horses. The heavy wheels of the iron-bound baggage wagons with brakes up front rumbled down the beaten road. On the last wagon slightly lagging behind the rest, a soldier slouched in the front; he must have been dozing, because his forage cap had slipped onto his ear, his shoulders drooped, and his face was pressed against the upturned collar of his greatcoat. Opposite the strawstack he raised his head, said something to the horses and they stopped. Klimko buried himself deeper into the strawstack just in case; the soldier jumped awkwardly down the wagon, turned round to the sun that caught his glasses in a red flash, and went toward the strawstack. After a couple of paces, however, he returned for his carbine.

He moved warily like a crow. Through the straw Klimko saw the soldier's unshaven, wrinkled face, thick drooping lower lip, and jutting shoulder with the slinged carbine on it. He was fairly old and probably heading for the strawstack to get some straw to make bedding for his puny frame. Klimko realized that when the soldier stood his carbine against the stack and tried to pull straw out of it, mumbling something under his breath. Then the soldier saw a pile of drawn straw (Klimko's hideout) and made for it. Klimko froze, undecided whether to jump to his feet, scream, or stir.

When the soldier raised his black brogan to knock off the top of Klimko's den, Klimko, without thinking what he was doing and seeing nothing in front of him but a glistening heelplate, got up on his knees with a jerk. The sight of the dirty, shaggy-haired boy covered all over with burs made the soldier freeze, then utter a faint shriek and jump aside. He grabbed his carbine and aimed it at full arm's length at Klimko. The latter looked speechlessly at the little black hole of the carbine muzzle — it trembled, aimed at the bridge of his nose. Klimko unclenched his fists and showed the thin blue palms for the soldier to see.

"Don't be afraid," Klimko said haltingly for the cold. "See, I haven't got anything in my hands."

The soldier gave an oxlike snort and sighed loudly, but without lowering his carbine.

"I told you I haven't got anything," Klimko showed his hands again and even spread his fingers wide.

"Oh-h," the soldier said, his thin eyebrows rising over his glasses, and burst into laughter — at first it was stifled like a woman's and then he went off into such a wild roar it made the blue-winged rollers take off toward the telegraph poles and fly further off. Klimko remained on his knees, looking into the soldier's gaping mouth with its tobacco-stained upper teeth, and also tried to laugh, but it sounded more like a hiccup.

After the soldier had calmed down, he rubbed his eyes under the glasses with one finger, and asked:

"Who are you?"

Klimko kept silent, surprised at the soldier's accent which didn't sound German. Then the soldier pressed the carbine between his knees, and bending the fingers on his free hand one after another, he started to enumerate:

"Ivan, Alexander, Peter..."

"No," Klimko said. "My name is Klimko."

"Oh-h, Klimko!" the soldier guffawed. "Klimko. *Rozumiem* \*. Your home here is?"

"No," Klimko shook his head. "I've only spent the night here. I haven't got a home anywhere now."

"So," the soldier said and went off in a rapid chatter. He spoke at length, jabbed Klimko with a finger as if it were a pistol — "Bang! Bang!" — and repeated the word "par-

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\* *Rozumiem* (Slovak) — I see (understand) — Tr.

tisan" several times. Only then did Klimko realize that the soldier, apparently a Slovak, was afraid of partisans and could have almost shot him by accident.

"I'm going for salt that way," Klimko pointed to the white hills. "I need salt, you see," he said, imitating salt being poured from his fingertips onto the palm. "Salt..."

"Oh-h, salt! *Rozumiem... Khleb-sol* \*..."

He looked at Klimko's dirty feet covered with red spots and beet-red from the cold, asked him to wait a while, and went over to the wagon.

The sun had climbed higher on the other side of the strawstack, making the shadows shorter and warmer.

The white puffy clouds hovering over the steppe in the distance betokened good weather.

The Slovak returned without his carbine now, carrying a bundle wrapped in a faded camouflage cape with ginger and green spots, and held it out to Klimko.

Then he picked up an armful of straw, turned to Klimko again, shook his head, saying, "*Voina, voina... Plokho* \*\*...", and went off to the horses, his shoulders hunched, as he dragged along his brogans that were too heavy for his old feet.

The wagon rolled down the road after the caravan, which was already far ahead, and disappeared in a gully soon afterward.

Klimko undid the package. In it was a pack of greenish crackers rattling drily in a transparent crackling paper wrapping and a little black round box with about a handful of salt in it. He tore off the paper, took a cracker, bit into it, and started chewing it rapidly. The taste of it made his mouth tart and cold. A sickening pang of hunger gripped the pit of his stomach. Klimko sniffed the cracker and abruptly stopped chewing: the cracker smelled of mint and incense just like the dry flowers he recalled lying around his dead Uncle Kirilo. His hunger vanished right away, leaving only a dull colic in his stomach.

Klimko got to his feet, covered the crackers with straw, and with the camouflage cape and salt under his armpit, quickly made for the road, pricking his feet on the cold dew-drenched stubble. He had gone a considerable distance when he turned around and ran back to the strawstack,

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\* *Khleb-sol* (Rus.) — bread and salt

\*\* *Voina, voina... Plokho*... (Rus.) — war, war... too bad — Tr.

recovered the crackers, and wrapped them in the cape. *Maybe I'll exchange them for salt or something else*, he thought.

He crossed the road, down which the echo of the receding caravan resounded faintly, and walked along a footpath toward the white hills.

## Chapter 2

Klimko had been walking for eight days now.

On the first day the going was easy, even merry. The feathery dust on the road warmed his bare feet, in his jacket pocket he had six rusks of white bread and a sizable bag for the salt. Besides, there was the rolling steppe full of marvelous sunlight. The breeze tickled the feathergrass and swayed the wormwood, making it smell stronger. Not a soul was in sight as far as the eye could see. There were only lizards weaving through the grass and between the warm stones on the barren mound tops.

Klimko had got the rusks for the road from Bochonok, a pharmacist at the railroad station and his late Uncle Kirilo's friend. Bochonok\* — and that's exactly what the kids in the settlement and around the railroad station called him — spent every day, including Sundays, in the settlement pharmacy by the market (you could see him through the window), weighing medicines on tiny scales or standing behind the counter, leaning against it with his huge pot belly. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him. Gray-haired, mustachioed, and tubby like a real keg, he loved to stroll around the market every morning. He wore baggy striped pants, and a long blue Russian shirt that reached almost to his knees and was girded by a twisted silken cord with white tassles, and huge yellow boots. Bochonok never bought anything, but only exchanged banter with the marketwomen and laughed gustily in a low voice from under his bright fluffed-up mustache: "Hee-hee-hee! Haw-haw-haw! Oh, my best compliments to you!" When he laughed his paunch rose like a big puffy cushion and shook in the process. The tassles hanging down his silken cord also came into motion. Right there in the market people complained to him of their ailments, to which he would say with an air

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\* Bochonok (Ukr.) — keg — Tr.

of importance: "Cualcex, my friend, drink cualcex." Or: "Auspirini, my dear, take auspirini. One tablet three times a day. Chalk cannot be begrudged to anyone!"

For some people, however, Bochonok prescribed medicines which sounded strangely mysterious and solemn:

"I'll prepare drops of the King of Denmark for you, most honorable sir. Look in some time."

Hurrying to school past the market in the morning, Klimko frequently turned into the market just to tag along behind Bochonok and hear those mysterious words of his — "cualcex," "cinchona," "auspirini." What he liked most was the way Bochonok pronounced his A's: hollow and low-toned like an echo in a draw well, they rumbled in his throat like little kegs.

The day after Uncle Kirilo's death, Bochonok visited Klimko in the barracks, shed a silent tear, leaning his plump shoulder against the jamb, and wiping his eyes, sat down at Klimko's side on a stool that literally groaned under his massive frame. Then he took a wad of red thirty-rouble bills out of the pocket of his immensely broad pants, and put it on the table in front of Klimko.

"That's for you to buy a loaf of bread at least. For the whole lot, because money isn't worth its name nowadays. It'd be still better if you went to the country and settled with some granny as a help and sat out the evil times there. I'll give you some food for the road."

Klimko told him that he was getting Uncle's rations at the railroad station, so there was something he could live on for some time. Besides, classes would start at school soon.

"They won't start," Bochonok said with a sigh. "The Germans will be here any day..."

Soon afterward German planes had bombed the station. That day Klimko went with the boys to have a look at a downed Soviet plane beyond the gully, and from there he saw the bombs raining on the station, railroad cars, and the water tower which swayed and then slowly sagged to the ground; after every detonation fragments of rails whizzed through the air above the smoke with a ghastly howl. A bomb hit the barracks, smashing it to pieces, and what remained of the walls and piers burned down quickly like wood splinters before Klimko's eyes. Nobody tried to extinguish the fire, because the entire station as well as the *dépot* and the coal mine were ablaze; two locomotives which the engineers had managed to get beyond the shelterbelt of trees by the ceme-

tery tooted their differently pitched whistles plaintively and sadly.

That's how Klimko was left with only the clothes he had on.

The sun had climbed high and was scorching his back, but the ground was cold and numbed his feet. When they froze to the point of burning and he could not stand it any longer, Klimko would sit down right in the middle of the road, rub and huff at them, alternately pulling a foot up to his mouth, and rub them again.

Ahead of him appeared what looked like a forest growing out of a gully. It could have also been the roofs of a lowland village. Klimko noticed a thin ribbon of smoke rising over the yellow and green tree tops. The smoke did not melt or fall to one side as it usually did during windy weather but swayed gently in the morning calm. It made Klimko happy and he directed his steps toward the smoke.

A fire smoldered close by the road in a potato field hemmed in by yellowing aspen and maple trees. On either side piles of moss-blackened rock lay on the boundary strips — somebody must have labored many a day here cleaning the ground to make it yield a pailful or two of potatoes. By the fire was a pile of crushed potato tops mixed with leaves, and running past it were the deep ruts of cart wheels. The potatoes must have been dug the day before, because the holes in the ground were still damp. Klimko stirred the fire with a stick and two coal-black potatoes rolled out of it. Their rind was so burned it had come off the rosy and deliciously smelling pulp. Klimko quickly ate the potatoes, even forgetting he had salt about him. The potatoes excited his hunger so much that tears welled up in his eyes against his will. He shook the rusk crumbs out of his pockets, lightly blew off the shards and straw chaff, and treated himself to the last tasty morsels. He had eaten half of the last rusk in the morning the day before, and since then neither food nor drink had passed his lips. The truth was, he had come across a fruit-laden hawthorn bush in a little roadside wood. Klimko had picked it clean and eaten so many of the berries it had made him sick.

The rusks would have lasted some day yet if they had not been worm-eaten and if he had got them out of Bochonok's hands instead of his wife's. She was a lean, habitually cross, and stingy woman. Every time Klimko and his uncle visited Bochonok's home, it seemed to Klimko that

the mistress of the house did not just set the plates with the holiday food on the table, but almost threw them onto it, to which the old man only grunted and fidgeted on his chair, without saying a word of reproof.

When Klimko came running into the pharmacist's home and told him about going to the country (he kept mum about the salt, afraid lest Bochonok would talk him out of leaving or, still worse, talk him into staying at his place), the old man went out into the kitchen where he talked at length with his missus in a timidly low voice. Klimko was about to steal out of the house when the pharmacist and his wife, carrying a plateful of borshch in front of her, entered the room. She threw the plate on the table and closed herself in the kitchen again.

"I'm not hungry," Klimko said, shoving the plate aside, and dropped his head so as not to look at the borshch.

"Eat it," Bochonok said, guiltily blinking and pulling first at one, then at the other end of his mustache. "Don't mind the old lady. She won't change."

Klimko did not so much as stir.

A heavy odor of medicines hung in the house. The floor was covered with a thick carpet, large beautiful paintings in gilt frames hung on the walls, a cat with a large fluffy tail lounged by the cushions on a large bed; the smell of freshly baked bread came from the kitchen.

Somebody tapped lightly on the windows from outside, the pharmacist got to his feet heavily, looked over the curtains, and gave a nod.

He went out onto the veranda without closing the door behind him, and Klimko heard a woman's weary voice through the crack:

"Things aren't getting any better with him. He's burning all over. Give him something that'll really help. To make it up I've brought you some eggs and a piece of fatback."

"No, no, you'll have to deal with the old missus on that point. I'll give you the medicines right now."

"Who's there?" Bochonok's wife asked, coming out of the kitchen.

"A woman's come for medicines. Her husband's unwell."

"Unwell, unswell," Bochonok's wife aped back. "They're all unwell and get what they want for a thank-you."

"Why for a thank-you?" the pharmacist snapped angrily. "You can go and take your kickback."

"Here are some eggs and fatback," Klimko heard again through the partly open door.

Then the old pantry door creaked — the old lady was apparently stowing away the payoff for the medicines.

When Klimko was already on the porch, she caught up with him, carrying six rusks in her apron; she crossed herself quickly right in front of her eyes and whispered something to herself through her thin, mean-looking lips.

Bochonok saw Klimko beyond the gate and said:

"Be careful on the way. The best thing for you would be to join some evacuees — there are quite a few kind people among those unfortunates — and stick with them. Countless multitudes of evacuees are on the move now." He looked at Klimko's bare feet with a grieved expression. "I could have come up with some footwear for you — walking barefoot in autumn is bad — but my feet are so big that just one boot would be enough for you to hide in it."

On parting, he kissed Klimko, pressing him against his big paunch and tickling him with his whiskers, after which he took a handkerchief out of his pocket and started wiping each of his eyes by turns.

Klimko broke the first rusk after walking some twenty-five kilometers from the railroad station, and sat down for a rest — his legs throbbed with fatigue, his soles burned, wounded as they were by the little stones he stepped on in the dust, and his whole body ached sorely. When he broke the rusk, he saw that it was swarming with worms inside. Wincing at the sight, he picked them out with a straw stalk, broke the rusk again and picked out the worms as before. All he had left to eat were crumbs. That was not the worst thing that happened, however. The worst thing happened when he got to his feet after the rest and fell trying to walk on: his feet wouldn't hold him upright. They seemed to have been paralyzed. No sooner would he get up than he fell down. Klimko got scared, rubbed his calves and thighs, pummeled them with his fists and shouted:

"Come on, get going! Come on, get going right away!"

In the end, he managed to get himself up and walk, barely dragging his stumps along in the thick dust.

It happened every time after a breather, and Klimko realized it was better walking slower without stopping than hurrying and, spent with fatigue, falling to the ground every five kilometers or so.

- His legs ached most in the mornings after sleep. But Klimko knew by now that instead of beating them he had to massage his legs and walk the first kilometers at a slow pace. Further on they did not ache and obeyed him, although every tendon labored under numbness.

Klimko added some potato tops to the fire, blew on the embers, and warmed the soles of his feet for a long time, now and then bringing them up right to the flame. After warming them, he would rub the soles vigorously with both hands, and put them closer to the flame again. This he did until the chilblains disappeared completely. Then he took the stick he had been stirring the fire with and walked into the potato field, digging in hole after hole.

"One!" he exclaimed joyously, as he came upon the first potato. "Oh, a second one! Oh, a third one!"

The sun was getting hot — not too much, with an autumnal hotness; Klimko was so carried away digging that his middy blouse had stuck to his back with sweat. He took off the jacket and resumed work. Right by the boundary strip he found a couple of potato plants trampled by a child's feet (*So that's who roasted potatoes!* he thought). Digging them up, he repeated from time to time:

"So you wanted to stay in hiding, eh? In hiding from me!"

By midday Klimko had dug fifty-seven potatoes of large, medium and small size. The smallest of them — twelve in all — he roasted in the fire. He ate slowly, dipping the potatoes in the box with the salt: it was a very slow meal lest his stomach ache again. The hawthorn berries had taught him a good lesson: to eat real slow when hungry, for otherwise he could get sick.

Having warmed his feet pretty well for the road, he threw the bag with the potatoes over his shoulder, and walked on through the gully, hoping to come upon some water. Indeed, a brook did wind between the stones on the bottom of the gully, washing the sides of the stones, rinsing the green grass extending in even wisps deep into the water; and carrying yellow leaves on its way. Klimko got down on his knees, drank of the cold, sweet water, washed himself, and then dried his hands and face with the tie on his middy. Over the brook hovered a yellow-green calm of autumn which seemed to be shedding its leaves as in a dream. It was so serene and snug over the gurgling brook that Klimko didn't get up right away but remained kneeling there.

Right behind the gully, on a hillock, stood a settlement with neatly cobbled streets, white cottages in little orchards turned yellow, a mushroom-shaped water tower further on, and curling columns of smoke over it; a locomotive gave a thin, brief hoot. Confused and frightened, Klimko stopped in his tracks: since he had been wandering down roads he did not know, he could have trudged back to his point of departure — the railroad station. But no, this was not the case, for the water tower at his settlement had been knocked down by a bomb, whereas this one was intact. He didn't see either the spoil heap by the coal mine or the cobbled road running from the station. The road had been built shortly before the war and stretched from the station past the market only as far as the stores and barber's shop. Everything else that opened to his view now was very much the same as back home. As he walked with the bag over his shoulder along the fences of an unfamiliar street, Klimko recalled his station as well as every day and every hour of its life.

In the morning, long before he went to school, he was roused from sleep by the bread carrier and the water carrier. The first thing to rumble down the cobbled road past the barracks and further on to the bakery was the empty green box wagon hitched to a pair of sturdy horses that were smaller than the Germans'. In windless weather it left the smell of bread in its wake which lingered in the air for a long time afterward. The box had large white letters on it, reading "BREAD." In front sat a man in a black smock, dozing fitfully, catching up on his night's sleep, while his horses plodded on of their own accord along the way they knew so well.

Shortly after, the four-wheeled wagon with the long water barrel came rolling up to the barracks with a clatter and spatter. For all his years, the water carrier called out in a merrily ringing voice: "Wa-aa-ater!" All the doors in the barracks were flung open, followed by a clatter of pails, lively chatter and witty banter with the old man. This procedure was always of a cheerful nature, probably because the ruddy-faced carrier was always cheerful; the water glimmered radiantly under the morning sun and was as clean and cold as if it had been drawn from an ice-bound river. In winter the water arrived on a sleigh, the barrel covered with clusters of shimmering icicles. The carrier's whiskers were also encrusted with tiny icicles. Waiting until Klimko

filled up his pail, the water carrier would then take it from him and carry it into his quarters. "Uncle Kirilo still at work?" he would ask in a thick Byelorussian accent. "Best regards to him when he gets home. Tell him it's from Simon." In winter, when it was still dark at this time in the morning, Klimko saw flickering yellow lights that looked like glow-worms moving from the station across the railroad tracks toward the settlement: those were the lamps of the miners returning home from a night shift.

After that a whistle, at first hoarse and hissing and then clearer and louder, blew from the car-repair shops, calling the people to work. Klimko set off to school then, past the mine's grading yard grimed with coal dust, the noisy crowded market and the pharmacy further on. By the club house, opposite the projector shed, he would stop to listen to the gaily chattering soundtrack of a film the movie operator had rewound after last night's showing of either *The Ballad of Cossack Holota*, *Shchors*, or *Chapayev*. How recent, only two months ago, it had all been, and now it seemed a thing of his preschool days of long ago.

Klimko stopped by a fence; a big branch from an apple tree hung down into the street over the fence and a pea shrub. Between the sparse leaves hung two wrinkled apples that had stuck together, probably because of worm dust. A flock of sparrows had gathered on the sunlit side of the pea shrub. *Must be warm there*, Klimko noted, *and there's no cat to spoil their fun*. Chasing after one another, the sparrows darted in among the branches of the shrub, knocking off the leaves with their wings. The apples as well as the spray they clung to rocked with the commotion. Klimko put the bag with the potatoes on the ground by the fence and sat down, saying to himself, "I'll rest a while," but as he did so, he couldn't take his eyes off the apples.

Craning his neck, he sat like this for a long time until it ached. The sparrows swarmed noisily among the branches, but the apples just rocked and did not fall, as if they had been tied to the twig with string. Klimko got up, threw the bag over his shoulder, heaved a sigh, and looked at the wrinkled apples once more. *No, they won't fall so soon; let them be*, he thought. He walked on along the fence without raising his eyes, for otherwise he could have been overwhelmed by the urge to have a similar "rest" under another apple tree.

Behind the township the steppe spread before his eyes in one endless expanse. The sun had drifted past its midday point, shedding its rays slantwise, and Klimko's shadow crept across the ground in the late afternoon sunlight. The hills drew nearer and nearer, becoming larger and a dazzling yellow in hue. Shortly after, Klimko saw a large town in a valley below. He stopped and took it in for a long time, squinting up his eyes against the sun, which was already quietly singing its red evening song. Klimko looked round: he had to find himself a shelter for the night, for it was unlikely he would find one in the town. Far off in the field, about a furrow's length away, he spied a low black stack of hay or straw probably of last year's harvest, and turned off the road.

### Chapter 3

It wasn't a stack but an old shanty in a watermelon field of wilted stalks and late-set little melons the size of apples. Klimko cracked them against his knee and ate the cool pale-pink pulp with relish: lo! the sun hadn't set yet, but the ground was already cold. Autumn had set in.

Inside the shanty there was a lot of hard packed straw the watchmen had leveled with their bodies. Klimko separated a tight layer from the pile to cover himself, stirred up the rest of the straw to make his bedding softer, wrapped himself in the camouflage cape, and lay down. At first he shivered, not so much from the evening chill as from the cold melons he had eaten, but then his breath warmed him and he stopped shivering. He looked at the big lifeless red sun setting opposite the shanty entrance just then. It was setting behind the mountains which had grown darker on this side and were dimmed by a blue shadow. *Soon the night will creep out of them*, Klimko thought, *and blanket the whole steppe*. It would reach the station and the site where the barracks had once stood and where nothing but a black heap of rubble, ashes and charred wood now remained.

On that August day of stifling flames and smoke when the station had burned to the ground, Klimko found refuge in what had been a weighman's office at the mine's grading yard. Outside and inside, the thick brick walls of the little office were darkly grimy: outside, with coal dust that had gathered in big piles right by the threshold, and inside, with the soot and smoke from the potbellied stove whose funnel

consisted of a rusty pipe vented through a tin plate in the window. The room still had a desk at which the weighman had once sat and weighed coal hoppers; the desk was covered with big and small ink blots.

From the communal cellar at the barracks Klimko brought the provisions he and his uncle had stowed away for autumn: six pails of "pink" potatoes, two chunks of old fatback that was yellow on the upper side, and a dozen onions. Living alone as he did, he frequently had company within the soot-grimed walls of the weighman's office, when his merrily mischievous school pals from the settlement dropped in and, at times, stayed late into the night. Zulfat Gareyev, the grandson of Gareyev from the bakery, spent almost every other night at Klimko's new home. The boys took a liking to Klimko's low-ceilinged abode standing amid the piles of dust coal at a considerable distance from the settlement which made it seem like Robinson Crusoe's island. They would sit on the floor in Turkish fashion and chat away in the darkness to the flickering rainbows emitted by the potbellied stove, turned cherry-red from the burning logs. Or they would suddenly fall silent of one accord and listen intently to the distant rumble of a night battle.

But that happened later on. During the first two days Klimko felt so uncomfortable and lonely in the office that his spirits plunged to zero. From the pit under the weighing bridge a mouldy dampness came through the cracks in the old board floor; rats scurried in the corners and along the walls, and the stove gave off a smoke-laden, oppressive warmth as the fire consumed the rust. When heated excessively, the stove made the air overhead so hot he grew dizzy, while waves of chill from down the pit danced around his feet.

For two nights Klimko slept on the barren desk, chasing away the rats by beating a stick against the walls. Having obviously got used to being absolute masters in this place long since, the rats were scared and quietened down, but no sooner would he close his eyes than they raised their squeaky, pattering and scratching rumpus.

It was only on the third night that Klimko fell asleep serenely, because the rats did not bother him any longer after his old pal Zulfat Gareyev managed to chase them out. He discovered Klimko's whereabouts by the smoke curling out of the funnel. Short of breath, he came running into the weighman's office, his swarthy prominent cheekbones glowing

with a fiery flush, and was so overjoyed at the reunion he grabbed Klimko's whole body and carried him about the room in a rib-crackling embrace. Zulfat was a strong boy, although he was about a head shorter than Klimko.

"I've been searching for you high and low throughout the whole settlement," Zulfat said animatedly, his words running into each other. "Up and down and back and forth I went, phew! I asked everywhere about you. But nobody had seen the sight of you. And here you are. Grand! Oh is it grand, boy!"

Klimko only smiled in response. He, too, was overjoyed to see Zulfat and kept silent, for he was always taciturn in the company of others. He liked to listen and smile wanly, or else grew sad, or tensed all up, picturing in his mind what his pal was telling him about.

"I've got rats here," Klimko said. "They're so big they thump."

Zulfat squinted his black slitty eyes (he did that every time he had to think something over), and the next moment they blazed with a fiery flash.

"Want me to get rid of them right away?" he exclaimed boisterously. "I'll smoke all of them out into the steppe. How about it?"

Zulfat quickly located all the ins and outs of the rat holes, scraped the coal embers out of the potbellied stove into a pail, and went stuffing them into every hole with a stick, wiping the tears from his eyes for the hot acrid smoke.

"Now let's stuff them tight with rocks so the smoke won't get out!" he called to Klimko. "That's it! Hear them sneeze? Now take this and this too!" He himself sneezed time and again and laughed through his tears.

After that they brought sawdust from the sawmill at the mine and covered the floor with it in a thick layer to keep out the draft from the weighing bridge pit; in a shed by the barracks they found an old bed with nickel-plated knobs on the head and foot, brought it into the office, and made themselves some bedding of hay the pit horses hadn't had time to eat up completely: the mine had been flooded by now, and the horses had been taken to war. By evening Klimko's gloomy abode had grown brighter and warmer, and the sawdust gave off a yellow-honeyed odor of pine. To mark their house warming as real householders are supposed to do, the boys cooked potatoes in their jackets to go with the old fatback for supper. It was a really grand feast!

A fortnight later — it happened in the morning after a brief battle — Italians arrived at the station from the steppe. The whole day through they chased after chickens in the settlement, shot at them with their carbines and machine pistols, and carried on like Gypsies. (Prior to their arrival neither Klimko nor Zulfat had known that chickens could fly no worse than any other birds, albeit low over the ground.) After making short work of the chickens, the Italians went from door to door in groups of no less than two or three and sought food for money.

“*Marka, Marka!*”

Nobody in the settlement understood what that was supposed to mean, and those who had any postage stamps brought them out to the Italians\*. They got angry at that and shouted in a jumble of Italian and German, their black Gypsy eyes bulging:

“*Dummkopf! Soldato Italiano... geben Sie Marken... Denaro della... Grossdeutschen Reiches, und sie müssen für dieses vertvolle Geld, lutte, burro, formaggio... Mangiare! Essen!*”

Klimko learned about it from Zulfat whose home the Italians had visited.

“We’ve got coal and nothing else,” old Gareyev told them.

So the Italians took to plundering and started taking away not only the food but the best of the clothing they could lay their hands on.

After a week they left the settlement — and hunger struck.

On the little market square gloomy people stood from morning till evening, holding in their hands the newest things they still possessed: suits, overcoats, dresses, rolls of textiles, footwear and watches. All of these goods were not sold but bartered for any scrap of food. “Salt. Has anybody got salt? I’m giving for a glass of salt...” was the most frequent call in the crowd.

Once after wandering around the bakery where not so long ago hot loaves had spilled from the yellow wooden chutes like from a sleeve and the odor of bread still hung in the air, Klimko and Zulfat turned into the market. They would probably not have done that — they had had their fill of seeing hunger-stricken people with a childishly sorrowful glint of hope in their eyes — if a noisy clamor had not erupted at the market.

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\* In Ukrainian and Russian *Marka* means also a stamp — Tr.

By the old wooden counters they saw a wagon. It was surrounded on all sides by shouting people raising over their heads whatever they had to offer.

"Take mine! Look, it's brand new!"

"Take my suit. It's cheviot; only been worn once."

"Want some box-leather boots?"

"Here's thick woolen cloth for an overcoat. Just try how heavy it is. It'll make an overcoat for a lifetime."

A huge bearded man stood on top of the wagon hitched to two horses, and droned in a conciliating way, his eyes groping over the goods:

"Quiet, quiet... I'll take everything what I need. And I'll choose it myself. You just be quiet, citizens. Hush! Hey you, go away and don't paw those sacks or I'll rub you down with this here whip. What's the idea anyway? You with the woolen cloth, come up. What do you want for it? I've got flour, corn, white Slovyansk salt..."

The crowd became noisy again and swayed into motion.

"If only our miners were around they'd clothe and shoe you all right, and girdle you into the bargain," a woman said quietly. In her hands she held a worn children's overcoat.

The bearded man overheard her, his stony eyes located her in the crowd, and he said:

"You might as well not stick around here any longer. And don't you come near, because I wouldn't take gold from you even if you had any. Here I take pity on you, deliver the food, and you bare your fangs at me."

Presently Klimko saw Natalia Mikolaivna, who had been his and Zulfat's teacher. She stood with an infant in her arms, pressing it to her breasts along with a dress that was as blushingly rosy as a hundred roses. Klimko had seen Natalia Mikolaivna wearing that dress only twice in the whole year — on September 1st and on the last day of school. Whenever Natalia Mikolaivna met her students or saw them off on summer holidays, she was so excited the roses on her dress glowed on her cheeks as well. Last spring during their last lesson she said with a sad smile: "You'll enter adolescence with other teachers now, while I will return to such little mushrooms as you were when you came to first grade. Remember?" And tears, two drops, rolled down her cheeks, but she did not feel them and kept on smiling. Then she said, "The lesson is over; goodbye, children," and turned away to the window. The children, though, remained standing at their desks for all the merry noise that came

from the corridor: the school year was over, outdoors the sun had flooded the heavens — so who wouldn't be merry!

Natalia Mikolaivna, diminutive and pale-faced, stood aside from the crowd clustering around the wagon, and looked at the bearded man with wide-open eyes that didn't express either contempt or anger, but only frightened amazement. One of her eyebrows, gilded by the morning sun, was tensely raised and quivered. Klimko and Zulfat approached her (without her noticing it), and choking with excitement, said, interrupting each other:

“Good morning, Natalia Mikolaivna!”

She started and dropped the rosy dress. Klimko and Zulfat swiftly picked up the dress, light as a feather, and, embarrassed and happy, remained standing there with smiles on their faces.

“Klimko? Zulfat? Oh, did you scare me.” Her eyes beamed them such a kind and warm-hearted look that both of them had a momentary feeling that everything around was just as it had been before, without any war, without the gloomy bearded man on the wagon, without the smashed windows in the stores, without the lifeless bakery behind the gray board fence, and any moment now a locomotive whistle would hoot at the railroad station, and the bell behind the clubhouse, where their school was located, would invite them for the first lesson.

“Hey, you, woman, with the red dress!” the bearded man shouted. “Come over here: I'll take your dress.”

Natalia Mikolaivna slowly turned round and said quietly, but loudly enough for everyone in the crowd to hear and look back at her:

“Oh no. With you I won't trade it for anything.”

The bearded man squinted his stony eyes, and said with a wry expression on his face:

“Big deal, you nose-uppy duchess. Go and croak of hunger for all I care!” He had obviously taken a liking to the dress.

“Let's go, boys, and see me off a little,” Natalia Mikolaivna said to Klimko and Zulfat.

They left the market. The bearded man asked somebody from the crowd:

“What is she? A teacher you say?” Then he called: “Hey, you, teacher! The proud one! Come here —”

He hadn't finished when he ducked on the wagon and clapped his hands over his head, for a stone whizzed over his head and hit against the wall of the pharmacy. The crowd

recoiled from the wagon and looked bewildered at Natalia Mikolaivna and the boys. Zulfat trembled with rage and yelled:

"I'll kill him! People like him should be killed!" He picked up a rock, squinted, and was about to throw it.

"Don't you dare, Zulfat!" Natalia Mikolaivna ordered, and Klimko grabbed his friend's hand and said, "Don't, Zul, or you might hit somebody else, too."

"See, what she's taught those brats!" the bearded man said in a hoarse voice. "Some teacher for you." The danger over, he straightened up on his wagon again. "See, what she's taught them!"

They had walked quite some distance from the market, but Zulfat was still trembling violently, time and again looking round angrily with flashing eyes. Natalia Mikolaivna lightly stroked his close-cropped black hair with her pale, blue-veined hand, and said:

"Enough, Zulfat, cool down... my little Karmelyuk \*." She laughed quietly and kindly, and the boys, as if they had been waiting for a signal, were all smiles too. Then Klimko asked timidly:

"May we have a look at your baby boy?"

"It's a baby girl," Natalia Mikolaivna said, her cheeks coloring with a barely perceptible hue of light pink roses. "Her name's Olga." She slightly raised the tip of the lilac-colored swaddling cloth, and Klimko and Zulfat bumped their heads, as they bent over to have a look. What they saw had a tiny face, pale to the point of being chalky, with tightly closed eyelids twitching in the sunlight, and dark purple lips that were constantly moving as if they were seeking something.

"You'll have it in a moment," Natalia Mikolaivna whispered to the infant.

The boys did not understand what she had in mind, and kept on smiling at the baby girl, calling her name and smacking their lips.

"Where do you live now, Klimko?" Natalia Mikolaivna asked, looking sadly into his eyes. "I've been told about everything that happened that day and... I wanted very much... I had to see you, but Olga was born on just that day."

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\* Karmelyuk, Ustim (1787-1835) — Ukrainian peasant rebel, who led a number of antifeudal uprisings in Podolia during the first half of the 19th century — Tr.

Klimko became sad in the face, and Zulfat, too, dropped his close-cropped head.

"Zulfat and I live together now," Klimko said. "Well, we drop in to his home every day when we go for water or to dig up coal from the spoil heap. Everybody's digging in it. After that, it's back to my place. We live in the weighman's office at the grading yard. By the piles of coal dust — know that place? The Italians never poked their noses here a single time. It's fine there, warm, we've got a stove, potatoes..." Klimko exchanged glances with Zulfat, who understandingly closed his eyes for a moment and then quickly bobbed his head in agreement. "Natalia Mikolaivna —" Klimko stopped and extended her the dress he still carried under the flap of his uncle's jacket. "You don't have to go around bartering for anything, but move over to our place — both Zulfat and I ask you. We'll help you and look after the baby."

"We'll help you in everything!" Zulfat exclaimed, flashing ardent faithful eyes at her. "I'll bring a carriage for little Olga. I've got one back home. It's made of steel. My father made it himself at the depot when I was a little tot. He bent it at the forging shop and welded it together!"

Natalia Mikolaivna smiled and dropped her eyes.

She really had no place to live. When the Italian soldiers settled in the school and created havoc there (they smashed the school desks, built fires throughout the school orchard, and roasted chickens to riotous laughter and songs), Natalia Mikolaivna stole out of her room with the baby and a suitcase which held her clothing and a few rusks, and went to the settlement never to return to her looted and defiled quarters. The school itself resembled a barracks, and a nauseating stench of fried onions hung in the classrooms. It was more than just unfit to live in — the old squat school with the smashed windows that looked like black bruises was a dreadful and sorry sight.

"Thank you," Natalia Mikolaivna said quietly, and added a key lower, "I'm glad for you, my boys; I'm simply happy."

Klimko and Zulfat handled the problems of moving quickly. From midday till evening they brought from Natalia Mikolaivna's room everything that was left in it: bed, chairs, books scattered on the floor, bookcases, and bedding (the pillows had been ripped). There was still a branchy silken-leaved rose bush in a large vat. The boys did not want to leave it behind either, and so under cover of dusk, lest anybody see them, they carried the vat to the weighman's

office, stumbling and panting and stopping now and again for a rest on the way.

It was already fairly dark outdoors when Zulfat brought the baby carriage. It was adorned with flowers and all sorts of wire embellishments. Rust showed in the places where the pleasant blue paint had peeled off; when Zulfat pushed the carriage with a finger, it rocked for a long time like a pendulum, as if to show what a fine nanny it made.

Shortly after came Gareyev, a short bony-shouldered old man in quilted pants, woolen socks and sharp-pointed miner's rope shoes. He brought a little bag with rusks, put it on the table, and went back to the threshold to settle down there. Zulfat quickly brought him a chair to sit on. His hands and chest propped on his cane, the old man silently watched how Natalia Mikolaivna, diminutive, the hair on her shoulders shimmering with the reflections from the stove, fed the baby tea from a bottle.

"You'll feel fine here, Natash Mikolavna. Life's bearable in this place," he said in clumsy Russian. "Oh, what a shame to feed the little one with tea! No good. Give little one milk. Old man give tea to warm his bones. Yeah... The German is sly. He went to Rostov, there's something to eat. Here he sent Italians — here nothing to eat!" He gave a hoarse laugh. Then he motioned at the rusks with his gray close-cropped head: "Non-standard rusks. Bread non-standard — rusks non-standard. Took loaves out of oven, picked up one, and its tip fell off. Without tip loaf is non-standard. Defective product. But bread is not defective product. Bread never defective product. Yeah, life still bearable! The young ones must live, the old go down there!" He knocked the floor with his cane. "Go easy on rusks!"

"Don't talk like that!" Zulfat exclaimed angrily.

"Hush!" Gareyev rejoined still angrier.

He stayed for a while yet, nodding his head to sustain his invisible thoughts, then he got to his feet and squinting his eyes, looked into the face of the baby in Natalia Mikolaivna's arms.

"It needs milk!" he said sternly.

Natalia Mikolaivna looked at him with guilty eyes.

"I haven't got any," she said. "It disappeared, Mussa Shafarovich."

Gareyev turned round to Zulfat and pointed the cane at him.

"You go to the Faizulins. They've got milk."

"Right now?" Zulfat jumped to his feet.

"Tomorrow," the old man said.

"Oh no, please don't worry," Natalia Mikolaivna said pleadingly.

"Hush!" Gareyev cut her short just as angrily as he had Zulfat, which made the boys feel awkward before Natalia Mikolaivna, who responded with nothing but a smile to the rebuke.

Without saying goodbye, Gareyev opened the door with a creak and motioned Zulfat to follow him.

Klimko caught up with them beyond the piles of coal dust. Gareyev's gray head showed up white in the darkness and bobbed from his fast pace; Zulfat minced alongside him like someone invisible. Klimko tugged him by the sleeve, and they fell behind a little.

"Know what an idea I got, Zulf?" Klimko said excitedly. "I'll go away to get some salt."

Zulfat stopped.

"Where to?"

"To Slovyansk. Did you hear that bearded bully saying at the market, 'White Slovyansk salt?' That's not far away. Uncle Kirilo often took his trains there. He left in the morning, and by evening he was back." Klimko hurriedly continued in a whisper, lest Zulfat interrupt him: "What have we got but a little potatoes and fatback? Let's just hope it'll last us for two months at least. There'll be winter soon. Now it's still warm, so I've got to go. I'll barter some food on the way back; maybe some milk."

"You won't go alone," Zulfat said firmly. "I'll go with you."

"What about the milk you've got to bring? Who'll stay with the baby and your Grandpa? And what about Natalia Mikolaivna? We promised to help her, and here we'd run away. Besides, they won't let you go anyway. But I've got nobody to hold me back."

"You're right, they won't let me go," Zulfat agreed.

On parting, Zulfat asked:

"You going tomorrow?"

"I leave at dawn when everybody will be sleeping," Klimko said. "Then you'll tell Natalia Mikolaivna where I've left for."

Zulfat took Klimko by the shoulders with a strong grip, pressed him to his chest and held him like that for a long time. Then he whispered excitedly in his ear:

"Want me to give you an Italian dagger for the road? What about it?"

"You pinched it?"

"No, I exchanged it for four eggs. The Italians would've given away their carbines for food! I know."

"I don't need a dagger," Klimko said. "I'll do without any. Who'll touch me?"

He got up very early when the sky was just turning gray. Natalia Mikolaivna was asleep, having curled herself up.

The baby was lying at her side. It had been whimpering almost the whole night through, and now it was slumbering sweetly, its cheeks touched with a faint blush of sleep.

Klimko quietly threw some coals into the stove (a procedure he had been used to at night when he lived with Uncle Kirilo in the barracks), took a clean notebook, pencil, and wrote the following: "Natalia Mikolaivna, I'm leaving. Zulfat will tell you everything. I'll be back soon, Klimko."

He stole out of the room on tiptoe, breathed in the morning air of the steppe as if he were drinking water out of a well, and went toward the settlement to Bochonok.

A pale waning moon stood over the melon field and the shanty. It was past midnight. Klimko wriggled in the straw and coughed so hard tears ran down his cheeks and chilled them.

Half asleep, he wiped the tears off and drifted into slumber, which was soon shattered by his own coughing.

Here and there in the field, the little melons glistened with dewdrops.

That night September ended and October set in.

## Chapter 4

Klimko got up with the first sunlight. He coughed for a long time, sitting on the straw bedding, and tightly wrapped the spotted cape round himself. A deep fatigue had enveloped his body, and yellow spots swam before his eyes, which made the air outdoors seem yellow as well.

*I could get sick*, Klimko thought. It made him scared: what would happen then? If he had any matches or at least steel and flint he could have built a fire of straw, warmed himself, and baked some potatoes. Maybe he would have felt better after some hot food. But he didn't want to eat.

He took the crackers out of his bag, held them in his hands just to see that he had them, and put them back into

the bag. *Let them be; might come in handy still*, he thought, and again a hectic cough shook him.

Tears trembled in his eyes as did the gray dewdrops on the weeds and melon stalks; his hands trembled so violently he interlaced his fingers and pressed them between his knees.

*I have to get moving fast*, he thought. *Over there, there are people at least.*

No sooner had Klimko got up than the blood in his legs throbbed and grew hot and he reeled but did not fall or sit down on the ground again; holding on to the shanty roof with both hands, he stepped outside. The ground was cold. The shining sun played with the dewdrops in a game to decide which of them would outsparkle the other, but it did not give off any warmth. The breath escaped from his mouth in clouds of steam as he coughed and shivered, holding onto the shanty. No, he wouldn't make it far across the frigidly cold ground for all the closeness of the town which seemed so near he just had to reach out for it and the pink-tipped hills behind it.

Klimko returned into the shanty, picked up the camouflage cape, and clenching his teeth with effort, ripped a sizable piece off the cape. Then he tore it in two and had what amounted to a pair of foot clouts.

*I'll still be cold once they get wet*, he thought.

Then he picked up some dry straw and made himself two thick pads to fit his soles exactly. He wound the rags tightly around his feet and pads and tied the ends above the ankles. Back on his feet, he walked round the shanty — his new footwear was soft and light — and said to himself just like old Gareyev did:

“Life's bearable!”

After resting by the shanty for a while, he threw the bag onto his back and went down the road, now and then doubling up for his fits of coughing.

On his way he turned over in his mind what to do next: walk directly to the hills to get the salt, or turn into the town market and see what Bochonok's money could buy. The wad of fifteen thirty-rouble bills was in the inner pocket of his jacket. Lest he lose them, he pinned together the edges of the pocket with a piece of copper wire and twisted its ends. He could make a try at the market. Salt should be here in such plenty he'd have much as he wanted just for the asking. If money wasn't worth anything now, salt shouldn't be more expensive either.

*I'll make a try*, Klimko decided and quickened his pace.

At the edge of the town stood little houses in orchards just like in any other settlement. On the fences by the wicket gates hung wooden letter boxes topped with little roofs against the rain. They all were empty. Sparrows chirped as they hopped down the brick-paved sidewalks. On one fence walked a ruddy cat squinting its green eyes in the sun.

All the shutters were closed — either because it was still early, or because the ones facing the street weren't opened at all during the daytime.

Klimko walked down a rusty streetcar track, stepping from tie to tie. He had taken off his footwear on the edge of the town — it would have been somehow awkward strutting along in foot rags, for people might have taken him for a beggar.

He came across very few people. Once in a while, a wicket gate creaked open, a child poke out its head, and snapped its eyes up and down the street: there went some jailbird with a sack on his back; a lean, dirty, barefoot type with large blue roving bloodshot eyes. Bang! — the gate shut close.

"Hey, boy or girl!" Klimko would call out. "How do I get to the market?"

Instead of a reply he heard only a bated breath behind the gate. Then — thump, thump, thump! — somebody's feet scampered back to the house.

"What strange people," Klimko said with a sigh and walked on, coughing now and again.

Then followed bigger and taller buildings of three, four and five stories. They were gray and silent as if nobody were living in them. More and more people appeared on the street. All of them moved down the street, pushing carts and carrying bundles big and small. It was difficult to tell whether they were evacuees or locals. Klimko followed them and soon saw the market. On its approaches a dense line of beggars was sitting or standing along a green faded fence. It was a gathering of sighted and blind, legless, armless, old and young, holding mugs, caps, hems of skirts, or stretching out their cupped hands.

"Gi-ive... give... give..." resounded from along the fence like the words of a monotonous song of grief and sorrow.

"Come on, sister, don't walk by; look back at your brother and extend him your helping hand!" a young man without a leg called out insistently. He had mean eyes that glimmered burningly in every direction.

Clang, clang, clang — the coins dropped into the mugs.

“Thank you, child, and may God help you reunite with your husband or brother.”

“Hey you, old one, don’t let your tongue run away with you, because the police might scoop us in on your account!”

“What did I say that was so bad?”

“What, what... We heard it all right, we’re not deaf.”

Klimko stopped by a terribly senile granny who chattered to the passers-by in a quiet, feeble voice, not dolefully but as if she were recounting a fairytale.

“Weakness has come, good people. So look at me and you’ll see what weakness is like. I tell the earth: open up and take me, old woman that I am. But it won’t open up. I beg and I plead but it doesn’t want to and that’s that...” In the hem of her skirt she had three potatoes, a small onion, and a dozen or so ten-kopeck coins. She looked at Klimko with her watery faded eyes and said: “Move on, boy, that’s no story for your ears.”

Klimko dug one thirty-rouble bill out of his pocket and put it in the hem of her skirt, after which he walked away quickly.

High in the sky about fifty or more German bombers droned past in tight wedge formation. They glittered in the sun as if they were made of glass. The beggars quietened down, and everyone raised their heads, even the blind who asked the sighted, alarmed:

“Are there a lot?”

“A lot.”

Silence also fell on the market. It was only from behind a broken stall by the market gate that somebody’s thin voice (similar to the voice of the prewar icecream vendors Klimko remembered) whined away annoyingly:

“Who’s willing around me start milling and have his fortune told. Zinochka here will read you your fortune.”

Klimko walked up to the fortune teller and stopped opposite her, warming his feet in the sunlit dust. The woman sat on a little stool, holding an elongated box stuffed with much-fingered paper slips in the hem of her skirt, and an odd creature with small cunning eyes.

Klimko touched Zinochka behind the ear and smiled.

“What do you want?” the woman asked angrily. She had thick red cheeks covered with a dense maze of purple veins. To Klimko’s utter amazement she spoke in a bass voice.

"Nothing," Klimko replied. "And yet, do you tell fortune for German crackers? Or for potatoes?"

"Let me have a look at them."

Klimko put the bag in the dust and pulled a handful of potatoes out of it.

"They're too small," she said. "For such I wouldn't."

The sight of the crackers, though, enlivened her with animation:

"Oh, they're fine for tea!" And she ordered the critter: "Zinochka, get down to work!"

The critter jumped swiftly onto the box, sniffed it here and there, gave a snort, and pulled out with its teeth a paper slip covered with scrawly, childish handwriting.

"On your early lifepath you'll meet your future husband," Klimko read.

"But that's not intended for me, but for a woman," he said, handing the paper slip back to the woman.

Pretending she had instantly gone deaf, the woman did not even look Klimko's way; she put Zinochka back under the hem of her skirt, and rocking on the stool, whined in a disgusting, thin voice again:

"And who else is willing to have his fortune told?"

Klimko was about to go his way when a man with a red bruise from nose to ear popped up from behind the stall and asked the woman in a hoarse voice:

"Well, how's it with the customers today?"

"Lousy," she rejoined gruffly.

"I'll check on that," the man said as if he were threatening somebody. He produced a beautiful green bird with a hooked bill from his shirt front, sat it on his little finger, and glancing round with a squint, called out merrily:

"Eustrallian parrot! Foretells fortune to a tittle! For a moment of pleasure get a lifetime treasure! Come up and fall on it! First come, first served and free of charge into the bargain!"

"Who's willing around me start milling and have his fortune told," the woman broke in, but he outshouted her:

"Come all of you, but don't you crowd. Get in a line and crush your doubt!"

Laughter and coughing fetched Klimko at the sight of the man with the parrot: here was a slicker as rascally as they come. Then it suddenly crossed Klimko's mind: *What am I wasting my time here for? Was this my real purpose?* He struck his fist against his forehead with a sweeping move-

ment, as Zulfat used to do when he wanted to punish himself for his foolishness, and went to the stalls. Behind the gray, faded stalls stood women and old men who glanced warily round as they quietly invited potential customers to buy the wares. There were old worm-fretted icons with saints surrounded by colorful flowers; gleamingly polished rings and earrings; thick old books; red corral necklaces with coins, and icons again, old and of later date, in frames and without, but all the saints in them looked like brothers, and all of them had their eyes directed not at the people but over their heads.

Further on followed stalls displaying bowls with rye, corn, millet, glass jars with flour, soda, damp salt (*There it is!* Klimko noted with joy), sacks with potatoes, cabbage and beets. And all these goods were not sold but bartered for clothing, kerosene, soap and matches.

*Looks like nobody needs money around this place as well,* Klimko concluded with alarm: he wouldn't get anything here.

The people did not trade merrily as they used to before the war, but with a sort of gloomy insistence as if they were fighting one another, without getting the better of the other:

"How much do you give?"

"Five mugfuls."

"But take a look what a good skirt this is."

"If you don't agree, I'm not forcing you."

"Make it six!"

"Nope."

"I'm driving a sick kid on a cart to Poltava..."

"All right, have it your own way."

"Cigarette lighters, locks, flints, sponges!"

"...is the lining of wadding or tow?"

"Oh no, man! Look, look here, it's wadding."

"It's worth eight kilos!"

"What?!!!"

"Salt large-grained! Factory-made soap! Only for *Marks!*"

"...well, is it a deal?"

"Hardly. I'd rather drop dead."

"What a bunch of people you are! Seems like there weren't such as you before the war."

"Trouble spawned them..."

The stalls ended. Further on there was a littered stack-

yard, and beyond it, by the stores with smashed windows, stood people with carts. Klimko made his way there.

*If they won't take money here, too, I'll go to the hills,* he decided.

By the nearest cart with wooden wheels he saw a girl wearing an old black kerchief reaching down to her eyes. In her hands she held a neatly arranged bouquet of marigolds. On her shoulders was a huge shawl with brightish red and green flowers and dark cherry colored tassles of silk that almost touched the ground. The kerchief covered her cheeks crosswise as with an old woman who had toothache, and her thin little fingers holding the flowers ran tremblingly over the green stalks.

"Buy my shawl. Look how fine it is," she offered in such a small voice and so timidly that Klimko stopped by her. "I'll give the marigolds into the bargain. Buy my shawl."

Undecided what to do, Klimko shifted from foot to foot, and said:

"You're a strange sort. Who needs those marigolds of yours now?"

The girl gave him a frightened look, her fingers clutching at her flowered shawl.

"Don't be afraid of me," Klimko said, and remembered that he hadn't washed himself that day. "I'm no crook; I came here just to get some salt."

The girl turned away and stood there silently.

"The boy's telling you the truth," a man sitting by a store said. "You'd better put your cart at my side, go to the stalls and barter there whatever you need instead of offering your marigolds."

She looked at him as frightenedly as she had at Klimko.

The man was sitting on the ground, his feet covered with an old woolen blanket. A dense, curly growth of gray hair framed his temples, and his entire face was furrowed with wrinkles, in each of which, as it seemed to Klimko, there lurked a kindly smile. In front of the man stood two neat rows of rubberized slippers — big and small and tiny ones for babies. He was obviously a shoemaker and the slippers were of his own manufacture.

He beckoned Klimko with a finger.

"You from afar or are you a local?" he asked.

"I come from the Donbas," Klimko said.

"I see. You and I are from the same parts. So you've come for salt, you say?"

Klimko gave a nod.

"And what do you have for the salt?"

"This here bag," Klimko took the bag off his shoulder.

"Oh no," the shoemaker flashed a smile which rippled across each of his wrinkles. "I mean what you're bartering for or buying? Do you have any decent clothes, or *Marks* perhaps?"

"That I haven't got," Klimko said with a sigh, looking at the slippers (*What if I try bartering for them?* he thought). "I've got prewar money, but nobody's selling anything for it. I'll have to go to the hills over there" — he waved his hand — "and get the salt for nothing, won't I?"

"Why are you barefoot?"

"To make it easier walking," Klimko slightly twitched his lips in an attempt to smile. "I've got some potatoes — they're small, though, to tell you the truth. Would you give me a pair of slippers for them?"

"Try these on."

Klimko tried on a pair. His feet felt comfortable right away.

"Take a bigger size for the foot clouts to fit in," the shoemaker advised.

Klimko picked out a bigger size, and then was about to unstring the bag.

"Don't," the shoemaker said. "Have them for nothing, since we hail from the same parts."

He rolled himself a cigarette, lit it with a lighter made out of a cartridge, and said, his face enveloped in smoke:

"As for the salt, sonny, you've missed it by going fifty kilometers too far. The salt's at Artemivsk. Ever heard that name? (Klimko had heard about it and even seen that town from a distance three days before). There's a railroad station there called Sil\*. That's where the salt is. Here, though, there's only chalk, soda, and salty water in the lake and that's something you can't put in a bag. You've missed your salt, sonny."

A stinging heat swept through Klimko's body, and his legs grew numb and weak as they did after a day's trek. He sat down on the broken wooden porch of the store and kept silent, his cheeks cupped in his hands.

"Well... I'll have to walk back then," he said with an

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\* *Sil* (Ukr.) — salt — Tr.

effort, choking on a lump stuck in his throat, and burst into a fit of coughing.

"Oh, what a nasty cold you got." The shoemaker placed on Klimko's shoulder a big hand pockmarked by coal splinters, the traces of which resembled speckles of bluing. "Never mind and don't look sour; we'll think something up."

Presently two local policemen in black uniforms, with carbines slung behind their backs and flat German bayonets at their belts, appeared from around the store. They came up to the girl with the shawl and stopped.

"Clear off!" said the one in the round fur cap, up the front of which his shock of hair curled like a drake's tail feathers. His knees had come up against the girl's cart as if he hadn't any other way to go; he scowled at her with a fixed stare.

The girl took the shaft and pulled the cart closer to the store with trembling hands.

The policeman walked past the shoemaker and Klimko, without so much as looking their way, and the one in the fur cap said to the other:

"Seen that chick? What if we nab her now?"

"We've got enough time for that yet! Where can she disappear anyway?"

The people standing between the carts buzzed with excitement:

"What are they supposed to be?"

"Policemen, or don't you see that yourself?"

"Are they ours or German?"

"They're Turks!"

"Ha-ha-ha..."

"Hush!"

"They're the new power..."

"More likely the new stooges," the shoemaker said, which made people turn round at him — some frightened, others with furtive smiles.

"They're up to something," the shoemaker said and motioned with his head. "Look, what a lot of them's spilled out. Like platoons of geese."

The policemen — about forty of them — walked briskly among both fences in an evenly spaced file.

In the silence that fell with startling abruptness, the market square became a dismally gloomy place. Klimko noticed that people, at first one by one and then in little groups, started to walk out of the market across the stack-

yard. They walked unhurriedly as if they had already achieved the purpose of their coming here, and then they quickened their pace more and more. Suddenly a woman's ghastly shriek rent the silence.

"What are you doing! Let my child go! Le-e-t it go-o-o!"

Instantly, the market swayed out of its frozen torpor and turned into a wild-scrambling crowd — people rushed in every direction, knocking one another off their feet, tearing bags, sacks and bundles from shoulders.

"Ah-h-h!" an eerie chorus of multitudinous voices swept across the market square.

A word Klimko hadn't known before crept through the crowd of people clustering by the carts: "Round-up! Round-up!"

The gray human wave broke against the fence with frantic shrieks. The fence bent outward as if made of rubber, broke with a sharp crack from end to end, and crashed to the ground. But on the street outside the fence stood a compact line of German motorcycles and trucks parked almost wheel to wheel. A number of automatic bursts rang out — obviously fired into the air — and the crowd surged back to the market square, scattering in every direction.

"They're after the young ones," the shoemaker said, squinting as he looked keenly at the turbulent crowd.

He turned to the girl with the shawl:

"You, daughter, come and sit by my side here. Hide away that shawl, because its colors stick out too much."

The pale girl, her huge hazel eyes screaming a nameless anguish born of fear, crumpled the shawl with trembling fingers and hid it under the flap of her jacket. She sat down between Klimko and the shoemaker, covered her face with her hands, and burst out crying.

"Hush," the shoemaker ordered sternly. "Sit there as quiet as a mouse."

In the middle of the square, thirty or so girls crowded in a huddle, and standing a head taller than the rest was a pale-faced boy. Sounds of weeping came from this group. The policemen, holding their carbines at the ready, surrounded the captives and led them off to the market gate. Behind them followed a number of wailing women, carrying bags and bundles on their backs, and a gray-haired old man hobbling on a wooden peg leg. He swung the peg leg quickly and waved the cap in his other hand in time with his pace, obviously afraid to lag behind.

"...there are only old people here. We've already checked this place," Klimko heard somebody say and recognized the voice of the policeman in the round fur cap. There were three of them. As they approached, their eyes probed every face in the line of people standing by the carts. "Now where's that chick with the flowers? I told you to nab her right away, but you were against."

"That would have been super!" argued the other in a blue cap curved at the top in German fashion. "She'd have raised a howl and frightened away the rest."

The girl whimpered feebly and whispered to the shoemaker:

"Save me, save me..."

"Hush, hush," he told her rapidly. "Don't be afraid."

Klimko jerked the waterproof cape out of his sack, stretched it out so that it would conceal the girl, and started to examine it, mumbling worriedly the first thing that came to his mind:

"If it weren't torn a little, it would've been longer. But it's torn, you see..."

And all the while the thought hammered away in his brain: *If only they'd pass by, if only they'd pass by.*

"Hey, that's where she's hiding!"

Klimko saw a hand in a black woolen sleeve reaching over the cape. The hand took the girl by the chin with three fingers and pushed it upward. She raised her head and looked at the policeman with tear-filled hazel eyes.

"Tut-tut-tut... she's crying. What's the matter, my little flower? Anybody hurt you, eh?"

"Don't touch the child," the shoemaker said quietly but imperatively.

"Wha-at?" the policeman asked, his insolently merry gray eyes casting a sidelong look at the old man.

"Don't touch the child, I said," the shoemaker uttered hoarsely.

"On your feet!" the policeman stiffened. The other two also scowled at the shoemaker. "Get up, I told you!!!"

"I've nothing to get up on," the shoemaker smiled back. He didn't look at the policeman but somewhere past his knees.

The policeman hit him abruptly in the face with an open hand.

The shoemaker swayed backward but managed to arrest his fall with his hands.

He pressed his palm to his smashed lips, while the policeman kicked the blanket aside and backed away a step with a wry face. The shoemaker was sitting on a wooden cart with ball bearings for wheels. At his side lay two little wooden boards with leather-bound handles he used to push his cart with.

"You snooty squirt," the shoemaker said evenly from under his hand, looking past the policeman as before. "I lost my legs down in the mine to make your living warm, and here you punch me in the teeth for that."

The policeman coughed into his clenched fist, wiped with it his lips as if setting right his wry mouth, and turned to the girl again:

"Well, do I have to invite you, or what?" he said through his teeth, grabbed her by the hand and jerked her upward.

The girl cried out (the shawl slipped from under her jacket and spread out on the ground) and got onto her knees. Klimko let go of his cape, grasped the girl's hand, and yelled:

"Let off! That's my sister! My sister, you hear? She's like a mother to me!"

"Stepan, leave those beggars alone," the third policeman said, glancing warily at the people who had left their carts and were closing in. "Let's go. One customer less won't spoil the fair."

"Ugh-h!" the policeman in the cap snorted angrily. "You won't get far anyway. Mark my word!"

The policemen walked off to the empty stalls and presently disappeared behind the gate.

"See, the danger's over," the shoemaker said to the girl, wiping his bloodied lips with a palm.

The girl remained standing on her knees and looked numbly at the shawl spread out on the ground. Klimko held her firmly by the hand with pallid fingers and trembled with a raking cough.

A woman gave the shoemaker a handkerchief to wipe the blood, but he refused to take it.

"Thanks, but there's no need. Why spoil a clean thing. I'll just lick my lips — they'll heal faster that way."

Uttering words of sympathy, the women gradually dispersed, with furtive, frightened glances. The ungreased wheels of the carts squeaked piteously toward the gate: the market had lost its principal attraction.

Suddenly the girl seemed to have come to her senses: she

grasped the shoemaker's hand, stroked it with her thin fingers, and kept whispering through her tears:

"Thank you, kind man, thank you. How they hurt you... because of me... I won't forget that as long as I live. Thanks..."

The shoemaker freed his hand with a light movement.

"Why are you crying? The danger's over — and forget it; be happy it's over. Do you have to walk far back home?"

"To Sumy Region. I was at the mines in the Donbas when the war started. Now I'm trying to get to my mother."

"You'll get to her," he said, his eyebrows knitting in a kindly frown. "Sure you will. But put on some old rags and cover your head with a big kerchief so it'll hide as much of your face and eyes as possible. And don't go through the center of town to reach the road. Keep to the deserted streets. Once you're on the road, you'll have a lot of people for company. I'll see you through the back lanes on my machine," the shoemaker smiled, touching the edges of his cart.

The girl listened to him and quickly nodded her head in a childlike way.

Then she turned to Klimko, looking at him guiltily and bashfully with her tear-stained eyes.

"Thank you, boy. At first you scared me. Are you going my way by any chance?"

"No, I'm going back the other way to the Donbas," Klimko said through his coughing.

"Otherwise you could've really been for my brother," she said with sorrowfully raised eyebrows. "My mother and I haven't got anybody else. You could've lived at our place."

"I've got to go back," Klimko said.

Presently a woman in a long blue raincoat, her bare feet stuck into galoshes, pulled her cart past them.

"Listen, you wanted slippers for some salt. You can have them," the shoemaker addressed her.

"Yes, I did," she said, and stopped. "But you asked at least five glassfuls of flour for them. I haven't taken any along, as it is."

"That's all right; I'll do without it. This boy here" — the shoemaker nodded at Klimko — "comes from the same place I do. He walked two hundred kilometers from the Donbas for salt. But where can you get it here?"

The woman shot a swift glance at Klimko.

“I’ve bartered all my salt, mister. Many asked it by the handful it wrung my heart. I’ve got only about ten glassfuls left.”

The ten glassfuls conjured up in Klimko’s mind a fairly big pile of salt. He quickly fumbled in his pockets for the money.

“Back home I’ve got quite a lot of it. I brought two sacks from Sil just as the war broke out. But here there’s only a scattering of it.” She lifted a yellow rough canvas bundle from her cart.

“Give me what you got,” the shoemaker said, “and choose the slippers you like best.” After a moment’s thought he added: “What if the boy helped you pull the cart back home, and there you’d give him some more salt, huh?”

“I’ll fetch water for you, chop wood, and do anything else you say. I will, ’pon my word I will!” Klimko hurriedly undid the wire on his inside pocket and extended to the woman all the money he had, looking up at her with cold-infected eyes.

The woman gave him a sad look.

“I don’t need your money, boy. You’ll get half a *pood*\* of salt and even more if you manage to haul it off.” Then she asked the shoemaker hopefully: “What’ll be our lot further on?”

“Just what it has to be,” he replied. “Our troops will return in no time, I’ll make fancy boots with a creak for the three of you, and play a jolly tune on my fiddle or accordion. And you, for your part, will sing me a song or perform a dance. I loved to dance once!” His face broke into a smile. “That’s how it’ll be. It just can’t be otherwise.”

Everyone smiled as well, looking at the mirthful wrinkles around his eyes and all over his face, which seemed to have made the gloomy space of the garbage-littered market square a brighter place. The shoemaker produced an old army knapsack from under his cart, put the remaining slippers in pairs and the blanket into it, tied it tightly, and threw the straps over his shoulders.

“Well, shopping’s over, so let’s get moving,” he said. “You girl, follow me; I’ll show you the place where you have to turn off.” He picked up the wooden boards, pushed them vigorously against the ground, and was the first to move toward the gate.

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\* *Pood* (Rus., Ukr.) — measure of weight=26 pounds avoirdupois

Beyond the gate he turned to the woman:

"Help the boy in whatever way you can. Tell me your name at least, compatriot. Klimko? So long, Klimko, and keep your chin up on the way, because it's not that short. So long." He waved a board on parting.

Without turning his head round, he drove down the sidewalk of chipped brick sparsely covered with fallen leaves, the ball bearings under his cart going click-click-click-click. Behind him the girl, her head bent low, pulled the cart.

"Let us go, too," Klimko said to the woman. "Together it'll be jollier, won't it?"

"You're a sharp one, aren't you?" the woman remarked.

"I don't know," Klimko replied, embarrassed.

He took the cart shaft and looked for the last time at the retreating figure of the shoemaker rolling slowly along the sidewalk across the patches of sunlight and shade. The clicking of the cart wheels grew ever duller in the distance.

## Chapter 5

The first thing Klimko saw when he opened his eyes was the huge, perfect circle of a red sun looking in through a window (it shone as if through a mist); he started recalling where he was. After he had found his bearings, he asked:

"Auntie Marina... what is this — morning or evening? Where are you?" His question was uttered so quietly he barely heard his own voice.

"I'm here, sonny, right here," she bent over him and touched his forehead with her warm lips. "Thank God your head's cooler," she said with relief. "You were as hot as an ember. It's morning now, child; the sun's just risen."

"Did I sleep long?" Klimko asked.

"You didn't sleep but came down with a raging fever. You've been unconscious for almost three days. The fever made you toss in bed so violently I didn't know what to cover you with. You must've caught a terribly nasty cold."

Klimko stirred under a heavy covering and said:

"I must go."

He wanted to get up, but neither his back, neck or hands obeyed him — the fever persisted and beaded his forehead with sweat.

"Lie still," Auntie Marina held him back. "Where can you go in such a state? You must get a bit stronger first. Lie still, and I'll go around asking for some milk. When you

want to eat, reach for the food I've left you here on the chair. Mind you don't get up, though."

"Three days!" — the news made his eyes burn just as they had back in the ravine when he chewed the last of Bochonok's rusks; he shut his eyes tight.

Three days — that's half the distance home he would have covered by now. Or it could have been more than a half perhaps, because with the salt about him now, he'd have walked much faster. His pace would have been just as fast as it was when he and the woman left Slovyansk and he recognized the shanty far out in the steppe where he had spent the night, and further on, the station and neat settlement where he had sat at the fence and waited for the sparrows to knock off the pair of worm-eaten apples. Anyway, he was on his way back home!

"We're going the same way besides!" Klimko had said then and started to pull the cart so heartily and easily, stepping broadly in his new slippers slapping lightly without the foot clouts, that Auntie Marina — that was the woman's name — barely kept up and wondered:

"Where do you get the strength from after walking all this way plagued by hunger and cold?"

In gratitude, he told her whence and for what he had come here. By evening, when he was already in her home, he suddenly started to tremble with shivers so dreadfully he could barely utter a word. He still remembered washing himself in a tub filled with lukewarm water, the cake of soap bumping against his thin ribs, and then changing into a big, clean man's shirt which, just like Uncle Kirilo's, smelled of cheap soap — after that the fever overpowered him. The only thing his memory retained of the subsequent course of events was drinking something bitter and his teeth clattering against the edge of a steel mug.

Klimko opened his eyes. Auntie Marina was gone. He threw off everything he was covered with — warm blanket, old overcoat, a woman's jacket and his own jacket — and sat upright, lowering his feet to the floor. The room was clean and bright with sunlight, colorful embroidered *rushnik* towels on the walls, and red mallows and geraniums blooming in flowerpots on the sill of every window. On a chair by his bed lay a slice of bread smeared with lard and sprinkled with gray salt and two red-cheeked apples. Restraining himself, he slowly ate up the bread and one apple, putting aside the other one for the road. He saw his clean clothes, middy and

pants (bleached the whiter after the laundering) stacked neatly on a bench, got up and dressed himself. Then he put on his jacket and went outdoors. The sun stung his eyes, and two teardrops rolled out of them. Klimko wiped them off with a finger. A smell of garden smoke hung in the air. That's exactly how the air smelled in autumn in his settlement.

*They're burning leaves, Klimko thought. Now I, have to get down to work, because I promised the woman to do this and that.*

He found an old long-handled broom and swept the ground by the threshold and the narrow footpath running through the knotgrass to the wicket gate — he did it the way he had seen his schoolyard being swept every autumn and spring. Then he walked round the house, plucking the weeds growing along the *prizba* \* — without the weeds, the house at once seemed to have grown taller. He looked around for anything else he could do and saw behind the barn a thatched outdoor cellar that was also choked with weeds. He went to the cellar, grabbed the largest weed stalk with both hands, and suddenly heard a muffled squawking from deep below. The hens also went off in a cackle but not as loudly and angrily as the rooster — their cackling came from deep below as well. *Oh, I see, Klimko guessed, smiling at the discovery, and left the weeds alone: let them grow to conceal the cellar.* He went then into the house, made up the bed, and sat down to rest because of the fatigue that had overcome him. *How am I to move on if a broom's made me exhausted,* he thought, and found comfort in having eaten heartily to regain his strength.

Shortly after, Auntie Marina returned — merry, her cheeks ruddy, eyes smiling. In her hands she held a small yellow pitcher painted with flowers on either side, and over its top rose a cap of milk froth.

“So you got up, after all?” she asked, surprised, and her eyebrows curved sharply (when Klimko accompanied her to her home her eyebrows had also flown up like that every time she was surprised at something). “You're a fast one! Is everyone just like you at the place you come from? Look, and he's tidied up the yard. How can you work, being so sick? You've got to stay in bed for a long time yet.”

“I have to leave,” Klimko said quietly. “Today. Or else I'll miss one more day.”

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\* *Prizba* (Ukr.) — bank of earth round a Ukrainian peasant hut serving as protection from the weather, often used for sitting on — Tr.

Auntie Marina put the pitcher down on the bench and looked at Klimko, frightened at first, then her face grew wry with sadness, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"What if you stay for good, sonny?" she asked, a ring of doubt in her voice. "Who will you go back there to? The idea crossed my mind on our way here, but I didn't tell you about it then, seeing how sick you were. As to the teacher with her baby, she'll take care of herself, since she's living among people as it is. I would've clothed and shod you properly. Thank God I've got food — the Germans only show up occasionally, so they haven't fleeced us yet in this out-of-the-way place. When my husband Petro comes back from the war — may the Grim Reaper spare him — the three of us will live together and you'll be as dear to us as a son. I'll send you to school. What about it?" Hope shone in her eyes, and something else extremely kind which Klimko could not grasp. He pitied her, and so he said:

"As soon as we recover from the famine, Auntie Marina, I'll come to you. I'll come by all means. But now I have to go; they're waiting for me."

(Klimko did not know that Zulfat walked beyond the railroad crossing in the steppe every day and gazed sadly with his black dejected eyes at the road and across the gullies and mounds, from the direction Klimko had to come; frequently he was joined by Natalia Mikolaivna and her little Olga, and then they would silently look down the road, each tormented with remorse: Zulfat for not having talked Klimko out of leaving, and Natalia Mikolaivna for failing to hear him leave. Numbed with hunger and grief, they would return to their quarters at the weighing shed toward evening, expecting to see a smiling, taciturn Klimko there.

But he wasn't there.

Klimko didn't know that. The only thing he knew was that they were expecting him.)

Auntie Marina sighed, brushed away the tears from her eyes, and said, this time in a different, worried voice;

"Sit down and drink your milk then, while I prepare you a bundle of food."

She brought a glass into the room and filled it with warm fragrant milk.

"Auntie, you'd better kill the rooster, for he'll give away the hens as well," Klimko said.

She gave a low laugh and looked at him with love-lit eyes.

"I keep wondering who could've brought up a boy like you. Why, can you really hear the rooster?"

"When I came near him, I did, but from the yard you don't hear him."

"Outdoors he used to be an unruly and blustering type. I thought he'd calm down in the cellar at least. What a tramp!" she said with a sigh. "I didn't tell you about the fowl, thinking you'd stay. The Germans sent off a freight train to the Donbas, to Yenakiyevo or Horlivka. I don't know exactly. This evening another train will be leaving from our station. (Klimko found it hard to breathe for the excitement that constricted his chest.) I was told this by the man who gave me the milk. Before the war he was a trackman. Though he's old, the Germans forced him to work, for otherwise he'd have his cow taken away if he'd refused to work. Maybe he might help you get on that train if I talked it over with him. What about it?" And she answered herself: "I'll have a talk with him. Drink your milk now and have some sleep till midday at least — it'll do you good. I'll go and kindle the stove."

Klimko took a gulp of milk, then another one. A third of it disappeared from the glass. After some thinking he added water to it out of a mug standing on the table. He took another sip and added water once again, then one more sip. In the end, he had a bluish liquid in his glass.

"What are you doing?" he heard and raised his head: Auntie Marina was standing in the door.

"Adding water," Klimko replied, ashamed.

"Water?!"

Klimko dropped his eyes and gave a nod.

"I'd like to take home at least one bottle of milk," he said under his breath. "Maybe I could manage to get it there, after all."

"You'll have it! I'll boil it for you and you'll take it along. Go ahead and drink it; I'll get some more." She returned to the stove and heaved a loud sigh there.

Klimko drank another glass of milk, this time undiluted, undressed quietly and got into bed. He kept looking at the window for the advent of midday until he fell asleep.

It was already dark when Klimko and Auntie Marina arrived at the railroad station. There wasn't a single light on, nor did they hear any voices. Only an old locomotive was panting hoarsely and throwing feeble sparks into the overcast sky.

*They're throwing coal into the firebox: otherwise the sparks wouldn't be flying like that,* Klimko thought. The sparks only flew out of the funnel when the locomotive was chugging along or when the firebox was stoked to raise the steam. Klimko knew that since childhood from Uncle Kirilo's stories. In the meantime, the red reflections in the cabin had disappeared (the lid of the firebox had been closed), and the shovel had stopped grating against the coal. Klimko started to worry, because the train would start soon. He was still sitting by a shed with his bundle; Auntie Marina had left to find the trackman.

The soft ringing sound of a hammer came from the end of the train and drew nearer. When the sound approached the shed Klimko was sitting by, it ceased, cinders crunched under somebody's feet, and Klimko heard Auntie Marina whispering:

"Are there any empty cars, Hnatovich?"

"They're all empty," an old, hoarse voice replied. "Take your passenger to the second from the end; there are some people there already. The car's clean: it carried timber. But open the door quietly."

Klimko saw the small black shadow of the trackman holding a long-spouted oil can — moments later the hammer rang against the wheels as before.

Auntie Marina materialized out of the darkness like a shadow as well, and said in a whisper:

"Let's go, sonny. We're lucky thanks to kind people."

She easily threw the bundle over her shoulder and took Klimko by the hand.

"We'll go this way around the station so as not to bump into that low-down rat. There's a new station master around this place now."

By the second last car they stood a while, listening alertly. Then Auntie Marina tapped lightly on the door and said in a low voice:

"Friends here, don't be afraid."

The door rolled quietly open, forming a black gap in the side of the car.

"Want some help?" a man's voice said from inside, and extended a hand.

Auntie Marina gave the man the bundle, started crying quietly, kissed Klimko, wetting his cheeks with her tears, and whispering feverishly:

"Farewell, sonny. I wanted you to stay so much; you've

become so dear to me ever since we walked from the town and you fell ill — I would've given my whole heart to you. Do come back. Don't walk, though — it's far. Come by train."

"I won't forget you, Auntie Marina," Klimko said in a broken voice. "I... thank you... I'll come... Honest I will." The locomotive whistled thinly. She kissed Klimko once more, whispering something to herself, and the train jolted into motion with a clanging of buffers.

Inside, the car smelled of old pine shavings. The car rocked and creaked as it rolled over the switches. When it had picked up speed, it started to lurch wildly, and now instead of creaking it moaned.

The man — probably the one who had taken Klimko's bundle — kept striking a match, and when at last it spluttered to life, Klimko saw a pile of wood shavings in a corner and about five women sitting by the pile with sacks and baskets. Their gleaming eyes looked directly at the lighted match.

*They're our Donbas people*, Klimko thought, which made him feel easy, warm and comfortable in this lurching car.

The man lit up his cigarette and said to Klimko, out of the darkness now:

"Put some shavings under your side and have a nap on the way."

"That's all right; I can sleep sitting," Klimko said cheerfully.

He sat down by the door, leaning against the side of the rocking car that seemed to be lulling him to sleep, and looked at the sky through the open door. The black, low-hanging clouds stood still, or so it seemed; but judging by the way they blacked out the small lonely stars now and then, and the way the stars would reappear for a little while, Klimko was able to conclude that the clouds were scudding by.

The train rolled along unevenly: now it jerked and picked up furious speed, then it screeched to a halt just as abruptly as it had gained momentum, or simply stopped in the steppe and stood there for some time, while the sound of the Germans jabbering could be heard from the front car behind the locomotive. At such moments the man sitting in the corner by the women extinguished his cigarette. He smoked a lot, and the flare of the matches lifted an old wrinkled face with bushy eyebrows out of the darkness.

The train moved on, slowly, cutting gropingly through the night, and whistling thinly to God knows what purpose.

Uncle Kirilo's FD locomotive didn't go like that. It whizzed through the station like a hurricane. On hearing its mighty whistle way off before the semaphore, Klimko would barely have time to rush out of the barracks, wave to Uncle Kirilo in greeting, and watch him smile and wave back, as his light-colored flop of curly hair fluttered in the breeze. The FD had been a merry and wise locomotive. It could tear along, dashingly spew billows of steam under the car wheels, or sneak furtively right up to the barracks like a long black pike, set Uncle Kirilo with his tool box on the ground, then its funnel would give a loud chug as if it were bursting into rollicking laughter, and quickly return to the station after that.

There were times, though, when the FD disappeared somewhere for a day or two, and Uncle Kirilo stayed at home. That happened mostly on holidays when the depot, mine, station, club and school were festooned with red, blue, yellow and green garlands that shone in the night and went out as late as at sunrise; gramophone music poured out of the windows in the settlement; and in every room at the barracks there was a humming holiday noise penetrating the thin walls. Uncle Kirilo — wearing white ironed trousers, white canvas shoes, and a blue shirt girded with a silken sash — dressed Klimko in a middy, sailor's cap, and creaky new sandals, took him by the hand, and they went to the stores to buy ice cream and "Shrimp Tail" candies in striped wrappers. The ribbons on the sailor's cap fluttered in the wind and tickled Klimko's neck. Klimko would stuff his pockets full of candy, lick on the round ball of ice cream while Uncle would squat in front of him and say:

"Hop off home now. I'll stay with my friends for a while."

His eyes always smiled sadly — never did they flash in a merry smile, and his light curly hair shone like silk in the sun.

*Zulfat and I will plant a cherry tree on his grave*, Klimko thought, his head pressed against his knees. It'll bloom white in spring, glisten with berries in summer, attracting flocks of browsing starlings, and blanket the grave with red leaves in autumn.

The car lurched ever more violently, and softly and gently the ribbons of his sailor's cap tickled and tickled Klimko's neck.

The clatter of the opening door roused him from sleep.

At first Klimko did not see the German standing in the car against the background of the showery sky; the German did not have his cap on, he was unarmed, and wore long gloves reaching to his elbows. He swung the beam of his flashlight into every corner, remained silent for a while, standing there with outspread legs and a dead flashlight, and then suddenly emitted a yell that cracked like a shot:

*"Heraus!!!"*

The first to make for the door was the old man. He carried a basket and a small bundle. The German waited for him with an intently concentrated scowl. When the old man came near, the German threw his shoulders back, wheeled on one heel, and kicked with all his might. The blow landed above the old man's knee; he gave a broken moan and went hurtling out of the car. The German took up his former position and waited for the women. Klimko tried to open the door on his side, but it must have got wet in the rain and did not yield. A woman cried out, another shrieked, a third... The German hit them just as he had the old man — without uttering a sound, and with all his might. The bundle on his back, Klimko got up with a great deal of effort and went to the door. He had noticed that the German was hitting out only with the right foot, so he wanted to slip past him on the left. The German watched him out of the corner of his eye, and Klimko did not take his eyes off his enemy either. Three steps from the door, Klimko crouched into a ball so low that the bundle slipped onto his head, moved a little bit further to the German's left, and flew out of the car. He tumbled in the air and slipped head first down the steep wet embankment right into a puddle below, the bundle pressing painfully against his neck when he came to a halt. The German, for all that, had hit him in the chest with his fist when he was tumbling out of the car. Klimko tried to get up but such a sharp pain stabbed his chest and knees that he gave a moan and had to crawl on his elbows out of the muddy puddle, pulling the bundle after him. By the passenger car behind the locomotive stood a group of Germans. They were smoking and roaring with laughter. When they were joined by the one who had been kicking the stowaways out of the car, they surrounded him and exploded in still wilder laughter.

Shortly after that the train moved on.

Klimko rubbed his chest and knees — it was a good thing Auntie Marina had given him a pair of pants (big as they

were for him), for otherwise he would have bruised his legs horribly. He got onto his feet and scrambled up the embankment. About three kilometers from his vantage point he saw a railroad station he recognized: it was Debaltsevo.

Now he had sixty kilometers left to go. Klimko turned round the shelterbelt of acacia trees and saw in the steppe an old man with a wicker basket and women carrying sacks on their backs. They walked slowly and bent wearily under their burdens. Klimko followed them.

The damp steppe smelled bitterly of wormwood and rustled quietly in the breeze. Low-hanging clouds drifted over it.

## Chapter 6

The next day Klimko was approaching his station. The dying day was bright after rain. Raindrops gleamed on the withered roadside grass, and the sun, which was already barely touching the farthest hillock, sparkled pinkish in every raindrop.

Klimko walked slowly, because his burden had exhausted him completely.

The sack with the salt and food in it (including the bottle of milk which had survived his fall from the railroad car by some blessed miracle) he had tied in two, and carried it first on one and then on the other shoulder.

When it rained he didn't halt anywhere to wait till it was over, but walked on and on, covering himself with the partly torn camouflage cape.

The other reason he walked slowly was that he hadn't to hurry any more: in front of him the settlement sprawled dreamily through the leafless trees of the shelterbelt, and further on beyond the rusty rails was the big steel tank of the toppled water tower and the curling smoke over the spoil heap. Here and there thin smoke rose from the chimneys in the settlement and melted over the shelterbelt.

Home, home! He was home at last.

He decided against walking through the settlement. At the railroad crossing he would turn left and reach the weighman's shed by walking along the tracks, then past the station, the depot, the sooty site of the burned down barracks, and the bakery. Then he would quietly rap on the door. "Who's there?" Natalia Mikolaivna would ask. "Come in, please." Klimko smiled and, without noticing it, quickened his pace.

Suddenly a dull shot cracked in the settlement. Then a

machine pistol went off in a short burst. *Are the Italians really back?* Klimko wondered.

Last time too they went after the chickens with such wild gunfire it seemed there was a battle raging in the settlement. But where were the chickens now, as they had been decapitated to the last?

Another shot cracked, nearer now, and a bullet buzzed over his head.

Presently Klimko saw a man running his way from the railroad crossing; he was barefoot, wore soldier's breeches with untied strings at the ankles, and a service shirt without a belt.

As he ran, he kept looking back all the time. Two men in black appeared at the crossing.

One of them dropped onto one knee and fired. The running man dodged.

Klimko understood everything then.

"Run that way!" he shouted, pointing to his right. "That way! There's a gully!"

A long burst of automatic fire exploded from the crossing. Something hit against Klimko's chest and burned him so painfully and sharply that fiery red flashes blinded him.

He grasped his jacket at his chest, cried out, and dropped to the ground.

From a bullet hole in the sack the salt poured onto the road in a thin white trickle.

"Klim-ko-o! Klim-ko-o!" he heard through the hot darkness, and then his hearing failed him.

From the direction of the crossing, tripping and falling, Zulfat, his hands raised, came running toward Klimko.

## THE SIEGE

### Chapter 1

As I walked across the weed fallow, time and again skirting deep shell craters filled almost to the brim with muddy water by a thaw that had set in three days ago, I listened intently into the mist to catch either the creak of a draw well winch or, perhaps, the fragrant smell of straw smoke drifting just above the ground as it usually does in a mist.

But there was silence all around. The only sound that reached my ear was the twitter of a tomtit or the occasional rustle of a flock of rooks passing invisibly over my head like the wind through a pine tree.

"Caw! Caw!" I heard out of the mist, and shortly after from somewhere, farther on and duller now, there came another "Caw! Caw!"

I picked up a thawed clod of earth and threw it at random into the dense gray mist.

"Shut up!" I shouted at the top of my voice, because I had learned from the grownups that cawing rooks portended evil, and also because that phrase had a wild sweep to it.

I had heard it when I was riding a forage train bound for Znamyanka, a large railroad junction that had been destroyed by an air raid. Who had shouted it I don't know, because it happened at night, but I took a fancy to the phrase just as I used to derive pleasure from snapping my whip at a herd of cattle before the war.

When the flock of rooks had flown far away and it was quiet in the mist, I stopped and pricked up my ears to hear what was going on ahead of me. More often than not there was nothing — only silence. Occasionally something rustled or flopped into the water, which made me tense all the muscles in my neck, forehead and temples and cry much more wildly than at the rooks:

"Halt, who goes there!"

There was no one. I knew that for sure. For all that, I had an urge to holler, because I got the willies being alone in the steppe amidst the mud and mist and the cawing rooks.

I moved on. The wet snow squelched under my feet, the

water purred as it struggled along to get into a gully, and tomtits fluttered from weed stalk to weed stalk. Once a hare jumped right from under my feet, throwing dirt into my face with his hind legs. He dashed off some five paces from me and froze like a stake: his front paws at his chest, his ears pricked up, a moment later he made himself scarce for all he was worth. He was so lean and sopping wet he was a fright to look at. It was wet all around, you see. Here I was wearing stogies and puttees reaching right to my knees and my feet were pretty soggy, whereas he was barefoot, after all. And he ran away, that silly. Would I have hurt him in any way? I would have just had a closer look at him (interestingly, what color were his eyes?), after which he could have scampered off to the four corners of the earth for all I cared.

“Four corners of the earth” is just a way of saying, because there are not four of them but an immense multitude. Just then I was walking straight on and, consequently, moving toward one corner. If I wished, I could have turned back — that would be heading to another corner. I could have just as well turned right or left. That would have been four corners already. And should I have walked the field crosswise — how many corners would that be altogether?

That’s the kind of little diversion I amused myself with on the way. The mist was like ashes incessantly falling on me. At other moments it seemed like a sticky shroud that settled on my shoulders, eyelids and brows in tiny gray dewdrops.

So as not to be bored on the way, I started recalling my life before the war. I recalled my grandpa, the pasturage, our home with the icons in the corner of honor — for some reason the most memorable icon was that of the Holy Virgin with kind eyes and an infant in her arms. Besides, we had embroidered *rushnik* towels from Romny with red fringes, a trunk, a clothes rack, a clay stove, and a yellow ceiling girder onto which Grandpa had burned a cross. I didn’t know Grandpa, because he died when I was too young even to cock a snook at Grandma. One day he ate his fill of fresh bread with ground corn cobs and died. Then Father disappeared as well. After that Mother left our home and “went loose,” as Grandma Martha put it. For some reason Grandma didn’t like to recall her. So I was left to live with Grandma.

We lived very well together. Every day in summer I bathed in the river and ran to the thresher for lunch —

Grandma cooked the meals for the people working the thresher; in winter I went into the fields to knock out dry stumps and gather twigs for firewood, pick guelder rose berries to flavor sauerkraut and as a filling for patties, and skate between the bushes where the ice was not so bumpy as on the river.

But what was most impressed on my memory were the winter evenings. Outdoors the snowstorm brawled and lashed and frost covered the windows, while Grandma and I pounded millet and baked millet patties in the hearth niche so as to economize on firewood. After supper we got down to work — Grandma hackling flax and me braking hemp until a cough fetched her and she said: “Enough, my boy, because I’ve breathed my fill of dust.”

We slept on the stove, or rather it was me sleeping, for Grandma kept turning from side to side and mumbling something to me, to herself, or to God. Come morning, she would boast: “This night I was visited by Grandpa and he beckoned to me to follow him. Wait a while, I told him, till my grandson here is on his feet, and then I’ll join you. He must have been angry because I didn’t pray for him this year.”

Then her monologue was addressed to the pots and the flames in the stove:

“Vasil, I wanted to remember you in my prayers, but it didn’t turn out the way I wanted. I walked all the way to Opishnya, because our church doesn’t exist any more: half of it was taken apart, and from the other half a village club was built. I came to Opishnya, see, and started asking questions. As it proved, there wasn’t any divine service performed, because the priest had been hauled off, and the one that replaced him was a godless man and a drunkard. I learned that when he lost his whip he used to scourge his horse with his breast cross. Was that the proper man to talk with God? He was more fit to converse with the Devil! So my journey was in vain. But I bought a basketful of plums and a glazed bowl. Oh, God the Lord, forgive us sinners...”

From that point on I didn’t want to cast my mind back into the past, because there was nothing really good to recall, save perhaps what Grandma had said to me before her death. It happened at the close of day, when the wick lamp was already on in our home. She called me to her bedside and said through quiet tears: “Don’t worry, Khariton, God’ll see that you grow up without a grandma. Don’t be scared when I die, but run to Auntie Nastia and tell her what’s happened

and let her take my shirt and skirt out of the green trunk in the pantry. There she'll also find a length of linen and a kerchief. As to my footwear, tell her I don't need any: there are no stubble fields where I'm going. And don't you cry, don't rouse God's wrath, but live a humble and virtuous life. You'll get on among the people. The big wide world, my child, is as thickly peopled as a teeming field of poppies: somebody will look after you, too."

After her death they wanted to put me into an orphanage. Our house had already been signed over to the collective farm, and the chairman of the Village Soviet had taken down the icons, when war broke out.

From that time on I was roving like this from village to village, from hamlet to hamlet. I spent the night wherever it overtook me: in houses, strawstacks, and barns; and ate whatever I was given as a handout.

At first the handouts were miserably meagre, because I didn't know how to beg. I'd mumble under my breath, "Give me something to eat," and then make myself scarce. I'd get it only if they stopped me, which didn't occur too often: once you ran, you could just as well run your feet off.

Then I learned.

It happened last autumn when night overtook me in the middle of the steppe. The sun seemed to have set only a moment before and I could still see the footpath, when suddenly it grew dark, stars spangled the sky, and a mist, gray and sparse like the Milky Way overhead, blanketed the ground. I broke into a run from fright: there weren't any people or houses around, and I had lost the footpath as well. There were only the stars and the mist and the odor of damp wormwood. I must have been running a furrow's length or so when I felt a chill in the air wafting as if from a pond or river. It proved to be neither a pond nor a river, but a ravine. All around me were shoulder-high weeds, and in the middle of them the ravine. A mist clung to the bottom, and through the mist I heard people talking and children crying. I made myself a pillow of wormwood and grass and lay down in a secluded nook. I felt warm and comfortable as if on a stove, with the only difference that I had the sky for a ceiling. Soon, however, the sky disappeared as well. I had sunk into slumber.

Then I heard a droning plane in my sleep. Somebody said out loud, "Ours." The drone receded, and a flare hovered

over the ravine. The mist at the bottom turned blood red. The sky turned red as well, and dribbles of red pitch started to fall from the flare.

The people grew silent and pressed their backs against the walls of the ravine. Suddenly three mighty crashes burst in succession. They thundered somewhere nearby, because clods of earth came rolling at me from above. The drone of the airplane returned, but this time further away. The people found their tongues again and bustled around, preparing to sleep for the rest of the night. I heard a woman sing to her baby quietly, almost in a whisper, about a kitten that had caught a mouse and thrown it into the cradle.

I recognized that song at once — Dad and Grandma had sung it to me.

When the drone of the plane ceased altogether, someone in a nook close to mine stirred, mumbled, and started breaking brushwood. Presently a flame flared up, licking at the mist. I looked and saw a bearded old man sitting by the fire on a peg leg.

Shouts rained on him from everywhere.

"Hey, old man, what do you think you're up to? Do you want all of us to be smashed to pulp, or what?"

"Cut it out and snuff out the fire!"

"How do you like that hero?"

"Tut-tut-tut," the old man said. "What's made you blow off like that? By the time he's reloaded for a second hit I'll have baked myself some beets!"

Without heeding the warnings, he started throwing beets — thump, thump, thump — into the fire, sending the sparks flying high.

Then he turned to me:

"And what makes you stick around this place, little squirt?"

"I lay down to sleep here," I answered with a grin, because I saw that the old man was a jolly type: everything about him was merrily aflutter — eyebrows, whiskers, and the stump in his pant jerked repeatedly as if he were dancing.

"I see. Want to eat?"

"Sure."

"Don't drop off then — the beets will be ready any time now."

The old man raked up the embers and covered them with dirt lest they glow.

"Begging?"

“For what?”

“For food.”

“Yes.”

“Do you get it?”

“It depends...”

“Which means you don’t know how to beg.”

“Makes me feel ashamed, you know.”

“Hm... ashamed. You swelling with pride, or what? If you are, you’ll have a tough life. Oh, a tough one indeed.” After a spell of silence, he added: “The proud ones are always the worst off.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone wants to be proud, but not everyone is capable of it, and so the ones who’re prouder are being humbled by the rest because of envy.”

“Do you really have to know how to beg?”

“Sure! Now, for instance, you’ve come to a farmyard where a man and his wife are busy doing something. You come closer and say, ‘God help you.’ They’ll start thanking you. After that you lay it on: ‘Do you have anything for a bite by chance?’ Keep looking them in the eyes, straight in the eyes. Don’t let them turn away, don’t let them break loose like a fish from a hook. The first thing you got to do is look into the eyes, to glance into the spring well of God. Then, mark my words, you’ll get the food!”

In the ravine the people quited down and fell asleep. There was only the gurgle of water lapping against the stones at the bottom of the ravine and the rustle of bats’ wings in the air.

“There’s also begging the merry way,” the old man resumed. “You can do it like this: ‘Hello, my poor old dears. Let the smoke come out of your chimney day in and day out, may you have a morsel on the table and a thick gruel to make your sleep the warmer!’ Then you get down to the point.”

I wasn’t fated to eat the baked beets that night, because after the plane’s second sortie a bomb landed in the ravine, killing the old man and throwing me out of my corner.

Afterward I started to beg in the merry fashion. It was easier that way: I didn’t have to look people in the eyes and got the food anyway. The people laughed, shook their heads — here, boy, take what we’ve got.

A village came into view at long last. It was a black, gloomy village looming out of the mist like a stack of buck-

wheat straw. I went up to a house on the edge and climbed over a stile. In the yard were some people looking through the door, windows, hallway, and keeping silent.

"Hello there, my poor old dears!" I cried out merrily. They looked round rather strangely and it made me wince inside. Then they started crossing themselves, wiped their tears, and were silent as before.

"Go inside, sonny," and old woman told me, "there's a boy just like you lying in there. Bid him farewell. Don't forget to take off your cap and to cross yourself, and you'll be given some *kutya* \* and a patty. Go in there, go."

I entered the house, and violent shivers ran down my spine. On a bench, under framed photo portraits, lay a boy, his yellow waxlike hands folded on his shirt front. His head was wrapped in an embroidered *rushnik* towel, with only his sharp nose sticking out on his face. By the bench stood a kneeling woman, probably the boy's mother, silently rubbing her forehead against his hands. A little child, its shirt reaching no lower than the navel, was sitting at the feet of the deceased boy, tugging at his big blue toe, and whimpering:

"Petko, open your eyes. Do you hear me, Petko?"

Somebody bent down to me and whispered:

"See that? Now mind you don't touch any military gadgets you come across, God preserve you if you do."

In the house there was an odor of something cold reminding me of the odor of the earth in the ravine. The boy on the bench was silent and so was his mother. I heard only murmuring people, their eyes searching for the icons.

No, I didn't want any *kutya* or patties either for that matter. The best thing was to return into the steppe and the mist.

I retraced my steps to the gate without glancing round, when somebody called from the house:

"Where are you going, boy? Have something to eat at least. You look hungry. Make him come back, Tanya!"

"Leave him alone. He's scared."

At the last farmyard, which I barely had enough courage to walk into, I was given three warm potatoes, a big flat cucumber, and a hunk of black bread as sticky as putty.

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\* *Kutya* — a dish of wheat boiled with rasins served on Holy Night. A similar dish, called *kolyvo*, is traditionally served after a funeral or mass for the dead — Tr.

Right there by the wattle fence I sat down on a log that must have been quite old, judging by the moss that covered it, quickly ate up the food, and moved on into the steppe almost at a jog. When I looked round, I could no longer see the village, as if it had sunk into the dense gray drizzle.

## Chapter 2

The mist dispersed at midday. The sun peeped out from behind the clouds, revealing distant gray villages set among barren trees, sparsely wooded copses sprayed with rime, and a black band of a road that scrambled uphill through the snow ahead.

A rumble came from somewhere behind the hill.

As the frost got more intense, the snow and ground turned hard and crunched under my feet. It became easier to walk, and I even ran a length of the way, although I had nowhere to hurry to: ahead of me, behind the hill, was the front line.

Many a time I had been asked why I wasn't walking away from the front line but in its wake. Why should I have walked back and who to? What was I back there? An orphan, a beggar, a vagrant, who could be bundled off to an orphanage or some other similar place. But here I was my own master: if I wished I could attach myself to a military unit where I could peel potatoes, wash trucks or feed horses, thereby earning my food; or I could lodge with some feeble old granny, haul water for her, chop wood, clean the yard of snow, and come spring, dig her kitchen garden. Who would chase out such a helper? I had been wised up on that point by a soldier who gave me a pair of puttees: "You just follow the front line, sonny, as a crested skylark does a herd or horses. Then you'll live in a really grand way!" Was he right! So there was no sense walking away from the front line.

I broke into a run again, for I had to get up that hill before sunset. Whatever village I spotted from there I'd spend the night in.

Presently the road dropped steeply into a deep gully swept with snow and filled with trucks. By the trucks were campfires around which soldiers huddled to warm themselves. The engines throbbed, somebody was calling out orders in a hoarse angry voice, and the air smelled of gasoline, of earth thawed by the campfires, and of a sharp evening frost. The trucks stood in a column. A tractor belching dense black

smoke was pulling trucks with guns coupled to them up the hill one after another.

I came closer and saluted smartly.

"How do you do!"

"Ho-ho!"

"Ha-ha!"

"Howdy, howdy!"

"Where you going, squirt?"

"Ahead, to the West," I replied eagerly and pushed closer to the campfire, stretching out my beet-red hands toward it. The soldiers parted to let me through, slapped my back, and looked me over from all sides, which made me look at myself as well: I wore sturdy American red-leather stogies, a pair of puttees, which though new, were splashed with mud, and a green padded jacket girded with a tarpaulin sling from a .375 rifle.

"Swell kid!" they praised me. I blushed and grinned in a way that suggested my lips were frostbitten: that happened whenever I was praised.

I knew by now how to conduct myself with them: with the younger soldiers I had to joke and be merry, because they didn't like sourpusses; as to the other men, most of whom weren't too eager to laugh and looked at me with commiseration and sad glances, it was better to turn away and smother my grins, because otherwise it wouldn't win me their favor.

"Whose boy are you, eagle?"

"Nobody's. Everybody's if you like."

"What's your name then?"

"Khariton Demianovich!"

The soldiers laughed. Their greatcoats, short sheepskin coats, and pea jackets steamed; their boots, which steamed as well, were covered with dry white blotches.

"Want to eat?"

"No, I had my fill over there," I motioned behind me.

The campfire hissed: the damp wood, corn stalks and straw were more fit to give off smoke than kindle flames. When the fire shrank a canful of gasoline was emptied into it, and then the flames spurted up in a column, making the soldiers' faces red and merry; the eyebrows of almost all of them were reddish and singed and so were their eyelids that kept coming together for want of sleep.

Fewer and fewer trucks remained in the gully, and the number of men around the campfires had dwindled as well.

Most of the trucks were on the top of the hill by now. The Studebakers with the guns in tow — 75 mm AA guns, that I knew for sure — slowly crawled after the tractor, their bumpers plowing through the miry black earth mixed with snow, and behind them the artillerymen plodded up the waist-deep ruts.

“Well, Khariton Demianovich, are you coming with us?”

Of course I would go. They'd take me to some shelter. So as not to lag behind I also went up a rut. It was so deep it almost reached my armpits.

On top of the hill there was less snow and the road was much better. A gentle red sun hung over the plain ahead; the rumble of the battlefield came louder now, although the sky over that area was clear and cruelly frosty.

I was lifted onto the last truck covered with a faded tarpaulin and with no gun in tow. There were four soldiers in the truck: three of them were young and the fourth was an older man who badly needed a shave, had a sad looking face, and was obviously not the talkative type. They made themselves comfortable along the sideboards, and drew their heads in between their shoulders which stuck out so high it made their shoulder straps arch while I took in their military gear: collapsible antenna, storage batteries, crates wrapped in felt, and, lastly, submachine guns with round cartridge discs fingered to a glitter.

The truck occasionally skidded to left and right, which made the men's heads bob slowly, as if they were silently agreeing with somebody. The older soldier was the only one who didn't sleep. He kept looking back somewhere onto the steppe covered with gray rime-ribbed weeds, shot sidelong glances at me from time to time and kept his peace.

“What are you?” I was the first to break the silence.

“You mean them?” he nodded at the sleeping men. “They're radiomen. I'm a letter carrier.”

“A letter carrier?”

“Exactly. I carry around letters and newspapers, when anybody gets them.”

The discovery surprised and disappointed me: here was a man at war and just carrying around the mail. I recalled our village postman, the one-eyed Klim Chichkalo. My late grandma used to look out for him at the gate every day, and no sooner would he come out of a neighboring street, carrying a flattened canvas mailbag, than she invariably invited him to drop in for a while. Klim would approach the gate. His deep-

set shut eye had a tear glistening on it and twitched frequently. "There's nothing for you, Auntie Martha." He always said one and the same thing. "If there had been, you'd be the first to get it. I know you're waiting for a letter." "Still, take a good look in your bag, son," Grandma would ask. Klim cocked his head and looked sideways into the bag with his only eye like a hen. Then he produced a number of envelopes, and bringing them up to his sound eye one by one, read in syllables: "Pi-li-pen-ko... Hu-ziy... Shab-liy. Now this one I can't make out but it isn't for you anyway. As I told you, if there were a letter, you'd..."

Then he moved on, trying to figure out who the letter was intended for, after all: "Likh? No. Is it Mikh? Now try and make out whether it's a 'mi' or 'li'! They must think they're God knows what highbrows!"

When he disappeared between the willow trees on the dike, my Grandma would wipe her eyes with the corner of her kerchief and go hunched into the house. I knew who she was expecting a letter from for the third year running — from dad.

"Why aren't you on the front line?" I asked the letter carrier. "See what a lot of guns there are..."

He gave a reluctant smile.

"I was a reservist, that is, resting. And now as you see I'm on the move." He lapsed into silence, and then asked: "And where does such an inquisitive sort as you come from?"

"I'm from Poltava Region."

"A dumpling eater, that means?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm from Lyubotin, by Kharkiv. Ever heard of it?"

"No."

He looked again sadly, even sorrowfully, I'd say, onto the steppe and slowly rubbed the dense blue patches of stubble on his chin.

"Where are your parents?"

"Mam and Grandma died, and dad's at war somewhere," I lied quickly and determinedly, bearing well in mind Grandma's advise: "Khariton, my dear, better don't tell anything about daddy, because there are all sorts of people in this world: some will understand you, others will turn away and point a finger at you behind your back besides. God be their judge..."

"How do you like that?" the letter carrier looked at me

with mild reproach. "Your daddy might be looking for you and worrying what's happened to you, while you've disappeared from the village without a trace. What will your relatives write to him?"

"I haven't got any relatives," I answered angrily, because before I ran into this man nobody had given me a piece of his mind, but only taken pity on me.

"Well, the Village Soviet might write him: this and that, but your son's not around. Do you think that'll make things easier for your dad?"

Easier, not easier... Nobody would write dad a letter, because nobody knew his address. I didn't know it either. If I did, I would have gone to him a long time ago.

The sun must have set by now, because it was darker under the tarps, a sad bluish haze had enveloped the snow-fields, and the two black ruts I had seen running behind the truck right up to the horizon just a while ago had disappeared.

The letter carrier lapsed into silence and lit a cigarette. One of the younger soldiers woke up and yawned loudly.

"That you, Kalyuzhny, poisoning a soldier's sleep?" he asked hoarsely.

"It's me, Kostya, me," the letter carrier responded from the dark.

"Kaly-u-zhny," the soldier moaned with feigned annoyance. "How many times do I have to tell you: I'm not Kostya, but Kotya. Ko-tya, got it? Oh, those learned prissy professors or whatever you were before the war."

"A school principal," the letter carrier parried with amusement in his voice. "I taught history."

"Oh, a principal," Kotya exclaimed as if he hadn't been sleeping at all just a few moments ago. "A principal, a learned man, and you don't understand that our heartily comradely relationship makes Kostya sound too formal and, I would say even offensive. So mind you: I'm holding you back from committing a bad deed, as the Interior Service Regulations demand from real soldiers."

Kalyuzhny smiled silently, while Kotya cleared his throat in a theatrical way and sang two or three lines of a blithe song in a sorrowful tenor, apparently imitating somebody.

"Well, Kalyuzhny, when do you reckon we'll get to the front line and the devils — or whatever lives in the nether world — will start dancing on my stalwart chest?"

The letter carrier dragged on his cigarette and made it flash in the dark.

"We haven't long to go. As for the devils, it's hard to say. That depends on the judgements of Fate."

"Oh, my dear principal and teacher," Kotya sighed. "Don't you ever mention in my presence those romantic words — judge and judgement, because they invariably draw me to my native Debaltseve. Have you ever been to this remarkable railroad station? No? You've missed a lot, Kalyuzhny. Yeah... When I used to go out on the platform, there'd be an enormous crowd, lights, locomotives whistling, glittering rails running to all the corners of the earth — Poltava, Stalino, Voroshilovgrad, Zverevo. In the park by the depot music would be playing, there'd be lollipops shaped like roosters on sale, and a bouquet of nice little fillies — auburn-haired, brunettes and blonds — walking around. My knee would touch somebody's cute suitcase — if it were heavy, it surely contained cereals, flour, fatback. Nope, that's not what I was after! I'd touch another suitcase — it was light, which meant the man was travelling to a mine to earn some money. That suitcase didn't interest me either. I'd touch a third one — of medium weight. That was just it! Of course, if the owner of the suitcase was a person with manners and had a pocket watch: say, a manager of a mine or a chief physician."

"But you were still a child then, Kostya," the letter carrier remarked.

"Oh, a whopper of a child I was indeed!" Kotya argued waywardly. "By that time I was sixteen years old, had spent a year in an Anton Makarenko children's colony, and had two damozels for sweethearts."

"Kostya, you would have made a wonderful actor. Last night you introduced yourself to the telephone girls as the fiancé of a girl shockworker. So what are you really?"

"Really? If you please: I'm a human being with a capital H and a capital B. To be more precise, I'm a lathe operator, master of ceremonies, prompter, platform boy and activist, and currently Guards Private in charge of a radio station of a type that's hush-hush even for friendly troops."

Kotya got to his feet with a jerk, and walked firmly to the tailboard, though the truck swerved erratically.

"Seems it smells of a village," he said after a while, looking intently into the darkness. That moment the truck moved sharply to the left. Kotya snatched a three-colored German flashlight out of his pocket — by its red light a bent

telegraph pole and a white arrow-shaped road sign with the inscription Vil. Tridoli \* flitted past us.

"Three fates for one village — isn't that too much?" Kotya wondered ironically.

Shortly after, the column came to a halt. The engines died one after another, and in the silence that fell so abruptly it hurt my ears, we could clearly hear not only the din of the cannonade, but also the shots of separate artillery pieces and the dull rat-tat-tat of heavy machine guns.

We stood on a large square in the middle of a village. Dry snow, tinted pale-pink by the flares from the guns, drifted to the ground with a barely audible rustle. Here and there we saw the outlines of cottages, trucks and wagons etched clearly against the orange backdrop of the sky. Horses snorted along the leeward side of barns where it was warm and smelled of hay.

By every truck along the column groups of artillerymen thumped their boots to keep themselves warm, the glowing cigarettes in their cupped hands flashing intermittently. The doors of the nearest cottages were rapped and pounded at to make them open reluctantly and throw yellow shafts of light through the narrow chinks into the darkness outside.

"Occupied!"

"Don't you hear what you're told: oc-cupied!"

The artillerymen cursed, begged, threatened, in the end they ordered on somebody's behalf — and the doors opened. Eventually the first trucks turned onto the farmyards.

A smallish officer in a short snow-white sheepskin coat crisscrossed with glittering shoulder straps appeared unexpectedly out of the red-tinted darkness.

"Stovolos," one of the radiomen said quietly. They were on their feet by now and huddled around the truck radiator which gave off heat and spewed steam.

"Is Kuzovchikov here?" Stovolos inquired tersely and sternly on approaching the truck.

"Yes, Comrd Senir Lutnant!" Kotya, tall, broad-shouldered, his cap pulled low over one eye, replied dashingly, though he didn't snap to attention nor salute.

"Kuzovchikov, find some cottage for a billet," Stovolos ordered, keeping his hands in his sheepskin. "Preferably on the western edge and on higher ground. Set up your station there and get in touch with our troops."

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\* Tridoli (Ukr.) — lit. three fates — Tr.

"Start her up, Antosha," Kotya called to the driver, while Kalyuzhny came closer to the CO, and said, stumbling on every word:

"We've got here... a little boy, Comrade Senior Lieutenant... A stray boy... What about taking him along with us?"

"The stray boy will take care of himself," Stovolos remarked drily, and after walking off a few paces, turned round: "What if something happens, say, if we get pinpointed — who'll be held to answer for the boy, Mikhailo Vasiliovich?" Moments later he disappeared into the darkness.

"Well then, so long, Khariton," Kalyuzhny said, putting a hand on my head so that my cap slid down right to my eyes, and then, bending to my ear, he whispered: "Visit us tomorrow. Wherever you see an antenna on a roof, drop in. The best thing, though, would be for you to go back to Poltava Region, huh? All right, we'll talk about that later. Run to that house over there." He pushed me lightly in the back, got onto the foot board, and the truck drove away, flinging mud from under its wheels.

Something tickled inside my throat, a hot mist covered my eyes, but I knew it wouldn't hold long. As soon as the truck disappeared from view, the feeling would pass.

The square emptied quickly, the engines went on droning in all parts of the village for some time yet, and then silence fell. Only the dogs barked wildly, and the glow of the explosions behind the cottages slowly gained in intensity, illuminating the low-hanging snow clouds from underneath.

As I walked along the wattle fences, I looked into every farmyard in the hope of finding a home in which few men would be billeted. But everywhere I saw trucks, field kitchens, prime movers; the air smelled of cold steel, lubricant, warm smoke floating from the chimneys, and charred ruins of houses a raging fire must have destroyed not so long ago.

I turned into a narrow street running steeply uphill, reasoning that not every truck, let alone a wagon, could negotiate it, and stopped by the very last house: smoke curled from its chimney, the little windows were not curtained tightly, and through them a strange, muffled noise reached my ears. Could it be packed with people as well? I rapped loudly at the door. Moments later a door creaked in the entrance hall, and an excited female voice asked cheerfully through a hole over the latch:

"Who's there? We've got a full, full house as it is, my dear!"

I pressed my nose to a chink and said in an intentionally gruff voice:

"I'm alone here, ma'am, so I won't take up much space!"

The bolt was pushed back slowly with a squeak, the door opened, and I quickly stuck my stiff American stogy in between the door and threshold.

"I'm all alone, I said, alone," I almost choked on the smoke and thick odor of moonshine that came from inside.

The woman, her blouse unbuttoned and her loose hair spread over her shoulders, became angry: "What the hell are you traipsing around here for at midnight? Scram!" and pushed me in the chest. "Off with you!"

I was about to draw back my foot — I hadn't come across such an unkind woman before! — when the door of the living room opened and a soldier appeared in it. Holding on to the jambs and trying to keep his heavy, drowsy head up, he asked:

"Wha's the matter?"

A row of drooping medals on his chest jangled slightly, while behind his back hissed a gramophone record, a bewildered voice recounting merrily, as if mocking itself:

*Brought her rye, and brought her wheat,  
Corn and lentils,  
Piglets, ducklings,  
Chickens, geese,  
And money, too,  
For her black and haughty eyebrows...*

"Want to be taken in for the night here, huh?" the soldier asked and dropped his head again. "Let the boy in, Melania. He'll sharpen the gramophone needles for us."

She wavered.

"Do you have any lice on you?" she asked, easing her grip on the door.

*...it made you say pooh!*

the gramophone record cried out in the smoke.

"Oh no, I was deloused not so long ago!"

"All right, come in then."

Inside, I walked into a wave of warmth and smoke from a little stove which had obviously not been whitewashed for

a long time, because there was a broad streak of soot over the oven door. At the table, loaded with snacks made from soldiers' rations and varicolored bottles, yet another soldier was sleeping, his head resting on his arms. The gramophone standing on a bench in the corner was hissing, for the record on it had finished. I quickly threw off my coat by the threshold, unwound my puttees which were frozen at the ankles and crackled as tiny icicles snapped off them, went up to the gramophone, and brought back the needle head.

"Put on the same side again, the other's worn off," the woman said, "and come have a bite."

She was already sitting by the table and cutting a loaf of stale soldier's bread. For all her untidy appearance she had a slim figure and pointed breasts.

The soldier, my benefactor, was pouring moonshine into the mugs with one hand and rousing his mate with the other.

"Kolyasha, reveille! Ye hear me? Re-veil-le, I shaay," he mumbled. "Let's drink to Melania!"

"Serhiy, my darling, lay off and let him sleep," the woman said, leaning her head against the soldier's bemedalled chest.

"Yeah? All right. Sit down, squirt!" The soldier offered me a mug with a strong-smelling liquid and shoved a freshly opened can of tinned stew toward me. "How old are you, Vanya?"

"My name's Khariton," I replied with a smile, because I had taken a liking to Serhiy, drunk that he was. "And I'm fourteen years old."

"Fourteen?" he said, surprised, arching a beautiful brow slashed by a scar. "Oh no, then you're too young to drink" — he took the mug away from me. "Get cracking with the canned stew."

I hastily wound up the gramophone, in which something was creaking and tinkling, set the record rotating with a finger, because it wouldn't start turning otherwise, and got down to eating right there on the bench, realizing that I had only one job — to keep the record spinning.

The soldier and Melania were drinking and hugging each other at the table; I fished the delicious smelling meat out of the can with a bread crust, holding a palm under my chin lest I lose a crumb, and in the meantime the record sang in the same bewilderedly surprised voice:

*Once a widow I did woo,  
Brought her presents, which I rue;*

*Brought her fatback, brought her candles,  
Brought her meat, and brought her ribbons...*

There were only two needles, and both were as blunt as shoemaker's tacks made from wire. I sharpened them on a hone by turns: while one tracked the grooves, I sharpened the other one to the point where it was so hot I couldn't hold it in my fingers, after which I inserted the hot one in the needle head and ground away at the cold one again. The soldier praised me, the mistress of the house felt for me on learning I was an orphan, and put my puttees on the stovebed to dry, while I, in gratitude for their kindness, turned away every time they kissed and sharpened the needles with greater zeal.

This tiresome procedure went on till midnight: me sitting by the gramophone (my fingers becoming so sore I couldn't feel them) and they sitting at the table with the bottle of moonshine. Then, wearied and dizzy from the smoke and the one endlessly repeated song, we cheerfully carried Serhiy's friend to the stovebed — they holding him by the legs and arms, and me supporting his waist — and went to sleep. I clambered up the stove and made myself a bed out of all sorts of rags and my clothes, and the exhausted Serhiy and Melania dropped onto a broad worm-fretted bed of wood with colorful pillows. From behind the windows came the sound of dry snow being driven against the panes, flashes from the explosions intermittently cut through the darkness of the room, and Serhiy and Melania whispered in the dark. She laughed often and long, or else fell silent abruptly and burst into sobs for no apparent reason.

"You'll be going back there tomorrow, too?" She kept on asking. "How shall I live without you? Oh..."

"There'll be others," Serhiy rejoined indifferently, the rejoinder followed by an instant slap.

"Well, maybe you'd like to say that again?" Melania went after him in an angry whisper.

"I will," the soldier mumbled back, "because I'm sure..."

"Ugh-h, you!" Melania laughed somewhat oddly: in that laughter there was both offense and a reluctance to offend and accept what must inevitably happen. And again, but this time more tenderly and softly, I heard another slap.

I covered my head with a pillow that gave off an odor of hot clay dust, and instantly sank into slumber as into a warm dry mist shifting and trembling quietly around me.

### Chapter 3

In the morning I was roused from sleep by the sun. Its honey-colored rays trembling feebly on the wall revived in my mind a momentary recollection of the quiet, long forgotten joy with which I had hailed winter mornings in my Grandma's cottage: window panes traced with frost, cheerful flickering flames in the oven by which Grandma was already busying herself and invariably murmuring something to herself, the peaceful glow of the icons bordered with silver filigree and wax flowers under the glass. On hearing me wake up, Grandma, flushed and languid from the heat of the oven, peeped into my corner and asked: "And what did you dream of, grandson?" I invented all sorts of fiddlededee, for I wasn't visited by any dreams then, or else I declared bluntly to make it sound like the truth: "Steel ice skates!" and waited for the response with bated breath.

Then Grandma would keep quiet for a long time, and at length, pretending to be incredibly surprised, would say: "Humph... Of all things for the child to dream of! Well, nothing will come of it. To get the skates I'd have to go all the way to Poltava. So you just tell them skates not to appear in your dreams." And she chuckled at that. Everything about her — the wrinkles on her face illumined by the flames, her shoulders and breasts — joined in the chuckle. "You better get up and we'll have some tasty *kulich* gruel."

I remained lying on the stove, smiling at the ceiling, when suddenly, as if in my sleep, I heard the sound of drawn-out weeping that resembled a dirge. I sat up in my warm den of a bed and looked into the room over the stove funnel. Her back turned to me, Melania was sitting at the littered table, facing Serhiy's photograph leaning against an empty bottle: in it one of his eyebrows was sharply arched, and the other seemed to tremble either from pain or impatience, as he looked at his arm bandaged above the elbow and somebody's fingers tying a knot in the gauze. I guessed that neither Serhiy nor his friend were around any more.

Probably sensing my eyes on her back, Melania started and fell silent. She must surely have forgotten me, because when she turned round I noticed an expression of fear on her face.

"Oh, it's you," she said, seeing my eyes over the stove, and gave me a wry, forced smile. Her face was perceptibly swollen, her beautiful humid eyes shone with a sadness that

made me feel miserable looking into them, while her lips, which only the day before had seemed ample and sensuous, were also swollen, raw red and trembling. She took the photograph from the table, hid it in her bosom, and called me, without turning round:

“Come have a bite, gramophone player.”

It was only now I saw that she was not a middle-aged woman, but a young girl. Probably the effect of drink and her untidy appearance must have made her seem much older to me. As we ate the remainder of the soldiers' rations for breakfast, Melania tried not to meet my eyes and did not mention the lodgers; only occasionally, as if fingering the buttons on her transparent blouse, she touched the photograph, cast stealthy glances at me, and kept silent. Then she sipped a little of the moonshine, made a wry face in a funny childlike way, and regained her former cheerful mood.

Shortly after I learned that she came from the Donbas. She had been motherless since childhood, her father had died in a mine accident, and she had lived with a step-mother.

“A hateful shrew, she was,” Melania said, knitting her glistening brows which the sunlight seemed to have gilded. “After Father's death she took to drinking besides. Back from a shift in the mine, she wouldn't so much as wash or tidy herself up but went straight to a canteen and got herself drunk. She came staggering home around midnight and flopped on the bed in what she had on. I chased her off the bed, washed her, changed her clothes, while she yapped: ‘Bad luck that you aren't my daughter, you brat, but that other one's. Do you think I'd have drunk then? I would've clothed and shod you like a doll. But since you're not mine, I don't want to do it! My heart just wouldn't be in it! And I don't want to fool people. If there's no love lost between us, why pretend?’”

Melania gave a sigh and took another sip from the mug.

“Then the Germans arrived. They started registering volunteers to go to work in Germany. I registered, too, believing I wouldn't be much worse off than with my step-mother. Besides, I had a yen to see how people live in other lands. What a fool I was. I would've probably been taken all the way there if it hadn't been for a German who escorted our train. He was so handsome, that fiend. He — well, how should I put it? — chased after me. No sooner would the train halt somewhere on its way than he was in our coach.

He sat down and chattered away in his language, handed out chocolate to the girls, gave them a wink, and — slip! — they disappeared into the next compartment. But he wouldn't let me out, though. He wrenched my hands so violently they ached for about two weeks after that.

“Once our train halted in the middle of the steppe. The girls were fast asleep, that German was nowhere in sight, for the first volunteers weren't guarded too closely. I went to the coach door; it was already dark outdoors and warm, the crickets were chirping, and I saw a red light ahead: the semaphore was down. I jumped to the ground — there was nobody around but the engineers chatting by the locomotive — and walked away from the train in the direction of the first star that caught my eye. I had made up my mind to become a hireling in somebody's home, marry a cripple, if only he was of my own people. And so I went wherever my legs carried me.”

Melania squinted at the frost shimmering yellow, red and green on the windows and smiled in a bitterly mocking way at her own follies.

“The man I met then lives with his parents not far from here. Once I dropped in to their home in the morning for a drink of water — the sun had just broken, but it was already horribly hot. I arrived when they were having breakfast, and they insisted on me joining them. I took off my jacket and kerchief. At that time I wore the kerchief low over my forehead, so nobody would even see my eyes. Well, the father and mother started treating me generously, as our people are wont to do, and asked how I had come to these parts, took pity on me, and praised me for having run away. Their son, though, didn't say a word. He put his spoon on the table, and didn't take his eyes off me. He had a handsome face, although it was a bit glum, and all the time his eyes flashed at me from under his shock of hair. Whenever I looked at them I grew numb inside. I couldn't eat, my lips just wouldn't open — I had never felt anything like it in my life before. Why aren't you at war, young man? I thought. He was surely of military age. When everybody got up from the table, I saw the reason: he was lame and crook-kneed in one leg. He walked sort of sideways like someone planting potatoes behind a plow. Now who had put the hex on me and made me go just into that house. And they say you can escape the spiteful fist of Fate.

“I stayed for a while (it would've been improper to

disappear right after the meal), thanked my hosts, and made to take leave of them. Nothing doing! They wouldn't let me go. Live with us, they said, and that's that. The family wasn't large, they had enough food, and I'd be one of the family. That's how the old folks argued. But he (his name was Kirilo) was silent and had turned as pale as a ghost. He didn't look at me now, but at his feet, and kept unbuttoning and buttoning up his collar.

"I stayed, reasoning that I'd have to find myself a refuge at somebody else's place anyway. Well, it's my way of justifying things, because it was for him — I know that for sure now — that I didn't turn into a vagrant. Maybe it would've been for the better.

"Soon we were married. It was a real wedding party, except that it was held at night: I wore a bridal veil and wreath, he had a flower in a lapel buttonhole, there was moonshine and a wedding loaf on the table — everything just as it should be, but without people and behind blacked-out windows, because his parents didn't want anybody to know about me until our troops arrived.

"At first, for about a year, we lived well and merrily, as if we had a holiday in our home every day. My mother-in-law didn't let me touch cold water. My father-in-law seemed rejuvenated humming songs to himself all the time as he waxed thread — he was a cobbler, you see. Kirilo was a different man. He seemed to have grown taller right away, started walking much straighter, and there wasn't a trace of gloom in his eyes any more. At night when he used to snuggle up to me he did it as if he were grabbing at me, afraid I'd disappear any moment. And all the time he asked: 'Do you love me? Do you love me?' At first I said I did, or instead of a reply — you get bored saying the same thing over and over again — I fondled him as best I could. Once I went and made fun of him. Really, I was like a kid when it eats the skim on the milk and then asks mother whether it's good or not. 'You better move your leg away, because I feel cramped,' I said. I just forgot that he was lame — so much had I become accustomed to it.

"That was the end of our holiday. We seemed to have acquired a dead man in our home. Kirilo kept silent the whole day through, not even speaking to his parents, and looked daggers at me from under his brows. Come evening, he got drunk to have more guts while humiliating me. At first he buttered me up, did everything he wanted to me, and

then quieted down. Moments later I heard him sleeping. I was happy — *thank God, it was all over*, I thought. Nothing doing! Around midnight, when his old folks were fast asleep in the other room, he'd jump out of bed like someone stupefied and grab me by the neck for no reason at all: 'Do you love me?' I wept, wound my arms round him, and swore I did love him. 'You're lying,' he hissed. 'If you loved you wouldn't have made fun of me!' I tried to explain how it had happened, but he wouldn't listen. He clapped my mouth shut: "Stop your twaddle, you slut! German scum!" Choking on my tears, I reminded him what I had been when he took me.

"He'd fall silent as if he had come to his senses. But then he'd jab his fingers so hard into my breasts it made my blood boil under his fingertips: 'Maybe the next thing you are going to tell me, you bitch, is that he wasn't around here as well, eh?' It was the German he was hinting at, for I had told him every little bit of my dreadful experience. 'Keeping mum, aren't you?' he laughed, pleased that I couldn't say anything in reply.

"That happened every night. Come morning, the old folks didn't give me a glimmer of hope of things getting any better either. The father-in-law was so-so, kept his peace, and vented his spleen by hammering away more angrily than usual, but the mother-in-law made up for both of their wasted opportunities of heckling me: now I wasn't sitting where I should, then I wasn't standing in the proper place, she wished my hands would become twisted and my legs shriveled, and where had such a tramp as me dropped on them from out of the blue. Plainly they took their son for granted, while I was his evil fate, the more so since I only complained to them: after living with my stepmother I had got out of the habit of complaining."

Melania fell silent. I heard her teeth chinking against the edge of the big tin mug, and without raising my head, I said:

"Why do you drink so much, auntie?"

Melania burst out laughing, and leaning over the table, raised my chin with her soft, sickeningly scented fingers.

"It disgusts you, doesn't it?" She looked at me with her dull, liquor-sodden eyes — I couldn't even make out what color they were. "Look what a cute little boy. You must be kind, judging by your tired eyes. Yes — kind. But who needs kindness nowadays? Ha! Besides, I'm no auntie for you. I'm no more than twenty years old!"

Close by in front of me, I saw her slightly parched lips

trembling in a smile, soft white dimples over her collar bones, and a corner of Serhiy's snapshot peeping out from her bosom.

"How did you find yourself in this place then?" I asked, embarrassed and even a bit unfriendly: for what reason had I been taken so tenderly by the chin like a kid and examined! It was a long time since I had been used to being drawn into a game of pat-a-cakes.

Melania looked through the window for some time, squinting and smiling into the sun. It was obvious that she didn't want to go on with her story.

"What did you say?" she asked absentmindedly. "Oh!... I ran away from them last week. During the night when they were all asleep. I only became my self when I reached this house. A lonely old granny lives here. The day before yesterday, when our troops came in, she left for Kryukiv to see her relatives, and I'm watching her house here until she comes back."

"And what about your in-laws?"

"They show up every day, trying to talk me into returning. Or else, when evening falls, they tramp under the windows. Snooping on me, you see. They'll come today, too. Well, enough of that, for it makes me sick."

Melania got up and started doing the room. I pulled my warm dry rags on, inquired where I could get some firewood around this place — I had to repay her kindness for the food and board — and on learning that there was no wood anywhere nearby and that the locals heated their homes with spiny boxthorn, I went outdoors.

The sun was high in the sky, but the frost still persisted. From my vantage point I could see the entire village — a large community set clumsily between gullies and sloping hills. Short dark streets and lanes snaked from house to house and, not finding any outlets into open space, led either to an abyss or to thickets of boxthorn hemmed in with snowdrifts. There I saw bustling people and black patches of cleared scrub. The smoke of the soldiers' field kitchens rose here and there in the farmyards, horses neighed, blowtorches smoked under the engines of the white-colored trucks, but hard as I looked I couldn't see any 76 mm guns. The artillerymen must surely have left during the night. As the thought of the radiomen flashed across my mind, I felt no pain whatever at their absence: where would they be now — on the front line or in some other village?

From a group of women guffawing with the soldiers at a well with an ice-coated curb, I learned that the front line had moved further on to the area around Kirovograd, and that a silent film would be shown that day in what had formerly been a school. I decided to tell Melania about it.

The soldiers, women, and teenagers were chopping boxthorn for the most part with shovels. The children romping beside their mothers quieted down at the sight of me and looked at me with curious eyes, the reason for which I didn't at first understand, until someone in the group said:

"Hey, Lyonka, go and ask him whether he's come with the Katyusha \* crews."

"Oh, come on," someone derided the idea, "such ragamuffins are only found on unit trains!"

"He-he... Train rat!"

"Look at his boots; they're like wooden mortars!"

"Hush, maybe his dad or mum was killed and here you..."

Then I was approached by a serious-looking neatly dressed boy, apparently a teachers' son. After watching me handle a boxthorn bush with my bare hands, he suggested:

"What about helping you? We've got a hatchet."

"Never mind, I'll do without," I said rather haughtily and hurried to give him a smile lest he take offense (he was about ten years old).

"Well then, goodbye," he said, also politely, albeit a little studied, and rejoined his pals.

He was instantly surrounded by small fry, who exchanged whispers for some time and then started playing pat-a-cake.

I didn't long for their company. Ever since Grandma died I had amused myself by playing in the weeds somewhere, or in a meadow out of everybody's sight, and kept more to the grownups. Each in his own way, they lectured me on how to live, but it never turned out the way they wanted it: directed to steal soap from the Germans and barter it for food or clothing, I'd be caught and given a drubbing; sent to the richest man in the village to beg for food, I'd be refused it and called a crook to boot. Mostly they lectured me by means of proverbs and sayings: *Don't quarrel with your bread and butter, Doing is better than saying, Caution is the parent of safety, God helps those who help themselves*, and the like.

I simply didn't understand how I could quarrel with my bread and butter when I had none, or in what cases it was

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\* Katyusha — multiple rocket launchers — Tr.

better doing something rather than saying something, and much as I tried, I failed to work out what a parent had to do with caution, and so I simply lived on my own as best I could.

Since the boxthorn was frozen, I had to break it with my hands, and when I tucked them under my armpits to warm them, I knocked the twigs with my stogies, then bound them up with the rifle sling that served me as a belt, and carried them to Melania's house.

Melania, nimble, chipper, and wearing a new green padded jacket (*Serhiy's present*, I concluded), chopped the twigs into faggots, humming all sorts of ditties.

"Enough. We won't be staying here for ever!" she laughed. "As soon as it gets warmer, I'll move out of this place."

"Where to?" I asked.

"To the Donbas."

"To your stepmother?"

"No. I'll get myself a job in a mine, earn some money, buy decent clothes, and get married. Here they'll hound me for having been a volunteer with the Germans!"

At sunset a flying boxcar \* appeared in the sky over the village. It was a weird plane with two tails and black-and-white crosses on its twin fuselage. The soldiers fired at it with carbines, flares, light machine guns, and swore. Some yelled to make the men hold their fire, and others kept aiming at it from their knees. The flying boxcar wheeled low over the village and rolled, showing the pilots in their black helmets and goggles gleaming red in the sun. After buzzing the village several times, the plane righted and started to retreat.

"Now they'll bring in the others," the soldiers remarked excitedly in the neighboring yard, having slung their carbines across their shoulders and lit their cigarettes.

But by that time a spurt of dull gun fire had broken out around the flying boxcar. Four little snub-nosed Soviet fighters had surrounded it from all sides, spitting fire balls and green traces of machine gun bursts at it. The soldiers watched the air attack from below, shielding their eyes from the sun with their palms, but the sun light was so bright and the snow on the horizon such a blazing red it was next to impossible to see anything.

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\* Reference to the German twin-boom Junkers 88 reconnaissance plane — Tr.

Presently the flying boxcar reappeared, buzzing almost just over the ground, and on either side and above it flew four fighter planes. The raucously rattling engines had their throttles down.

"Hurrah! They've intercepted it and they're guiding it for a touchdown!" the soldiers called out joyfully. The village seemed at once to have burst into life. People shouted from every farmyard, waving their caps, guns and blow-torches.

I shouted something too, waving my cap and dancing around, while Melania, pressing her palms against her flushed cheeks, muttered tenderly:

"Oh, my falcons, my dear ones..."

In the evening, when we had blacked out the windows with all sorts of rags, we baked potatoes in the stove. As smoke had filled the entire house from the ceiling to the windowsills, just as it had the day before, we were sitting on the floor. Melania looked after the embers, raking them up from time to time, while I tried to break a huge hunk of salt with a hammer. The salt was gray and hard like flint. Whenever I failed to chip off any salt, sparks flew from under the hammer. The smoke swayed slightly over our heads, and with it swayed the flame of the oil lamp. The stove gave off a smell of glowing embers, burned potato peel and steaming boxthorn. For a fleeting moment I suddenly felt it wasn't me kneeling there chipping the much-fingered hunk of salt, but somebody else, at once a stranger and seemingly familiar. How had I got there? What for? In my imagination I was back in my village, where every weed stalk, every patch of ground was known to me. There by Grandma's house grew a sinuous pea tree, the like of which didn't grow anywhere in the village. In the tree, bees droned in dense swarms, crawling from flower to flower, sucking in the nectar and trembling with effort amidst the yellow flowers that had begun to droop in the sun. In the shade, under the tree, I had my den, my "shack" hemmed in with elm twigs and adorned with little wheels and cogs from the wall clock hanging over Grandma's trunk. In the empty hull of the clock laced with cobwebs in which dry flies had been ensnared, Grandma used to hide money when she had any.

Presently lazy shouts of "Gee-up!" would carry from the bridge, wheels would creak slowly, and shortly afterward wise-looking Opishnya oxen hitched to a cart would appear from behind the willow trees. "Gee-up!" someone exhorted

from the bottom of the cart covered with wilted sedge, stalks of which trailed behind the axles; the driver was almost out of sight, and only his patched knees stuck up above the sides, as he lay on the bottom either dozing or gazing into the sky.

Oh, if only you knew how wonderful it is to have a roadside house just by a dyke with a well in your yard besides. Whoever passed by, whether in a wagon or on foot, would drop in. He watered his animals and drank his fill, sat down on the *prizba* for a chat with Grandma, and on spying me, would reach into his wicker basket or bundle and produce a present for me — a ginger cookie, an apple or a whistle. Even without lending an ear to the sedate conversation of the old people, I knew all the events in the entire area — who had died, how and when, who had married who and when and hadn't given a ransom for the bride, because he "came from a race of inborn misers," where generous rains had fallen and where they had moistened "but the fringes" of the plowlands, who had been taken to "town" or had gone there on foot — I knew everything.

When had all that happened — today, yesterday, or long ago? How and for what purpose had I come here, when somewhere far, far away, there was my home, the pea tree, and Grandma's grave on the sandy Thyme Mound facing the spreading pine with the broken crown.

"What's the matter with you — didn't you hear me?" Melania shook me back to reality. "I told you let's eat, and you kept your mouth shut. It made me really scared."

We peeled the charred potatoes, blowing on our fingertips when the potatoes burned our hands too much, and looked at each other with feeling.

"Is it hot?"

"H-o-ot."

"It'll make us warm at least."

Holding a potato in her hands, she broke into childlike laughter.

Melania's teeth were pink from the reflections of the flames in the stove. The potatoes were also pink inside and steamed when you broke them, because it wasn't sufficiently warm in the house yet.

The salt had to be licked off the big hunk: it was so hard it could have been beaten properly only in a sack, and a burlap sack for that matter.

"It's good we've got that kind at least," Melania said.

"Did you ever eat borshch with brine or pickled cucumbers?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered. Borshch like that is really nasty."

The potatoes made me warm inside, and their smell — bringing to mind the steppe, autumn, and prewar times — made me so dizzy I had only one wish: to have more of such potatoes.

But we didn't get a chance to enjoy the potatoes. We heard footsteps behind the windows. Then they stopped and someone rapped on the window three times.

"It's them," Melania whispered, frightened.

"Who?" I asked, not understanding what she meant.

"The Lichaks. The old man and Kirilo."

"What if we won't open the door?"

"No, no. Hop over and open it, because they might smash the windows. They're a crazy lot."

I went into the entrance hall and groped for the bolt.

"Who's there?!" I asked in a low angry voice.

Behind the door there was silence for a minute or so, and then somebody coughed in momentary indecision.

"Oh-h, uh-h. It's us, Comrade... your neighbors."

I pulled back the bolt and stepped into a dark corner. Two men entered. The one in front was taller and, apparently, dressed in a sheepskin coat, because it reeked of sour wool. He looked closely at me in the darkness and muttered insinuatingly:

"He-he... Excuse us for bothering you. The thing is, we want to see the mistress of the house. But if you object, we..."

"What if we come another time, Pa?" the smaller man, probably Kirilo, interjected.

"All right, come in, come in, if that's what you're up to!" Melania called angrily from the room.

We all went into the room together. The old man, seeing that I wasn't a soldier but God knows what — and that's just what his look suggested — stepped resolutely toward the bench and sat down. Kirilo leaned against the jamb of the door and hid his lame left leg behind his right one. He was finely dressed like a young village beau: jacket, box-calf boots, and a white silken scarf partly covering his swarthy clean shaven chin. Kirilo looked at his feet, and that's why I couldn't see God's spring well — that is, his eyes.

"Well then," Lichak Sr. said amiably, a smile touching his

cheek, while I noticed Melania start, "how long will we be playing tug of war with you, daughter-in-law?"

Melania shrugged almost imperceptibly.

"Not for long, because I'll be leaving this place soon."

"Without knowing where you're going, I guess?" the old man inquired.

"Exactly."

"Uh-hu... Well, we'll have to see that happen yet."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Melania straighted up and stuck out her breasts in a challenge.

"Nothing." The old man looked at her with a squinting eye, his head inclined toward one shoulder. "I'm here to tell you that mother's crying her eyes out day and night, and this here child" — he nodded toward Kirilo, while Melania threw her husband a disdainful smile — "wears a look of naked misery. Doesn't that concern you at all?"

"You should've had more respect for me, when I respected all of you."

"My, my, as if we didn't respect you!" the old man made a wry face. "We caressed you almost like a child."

Melania's eyes narrowed.

"I never wished you ill, my former father. But now I'll tell you. If you were caressed in the other world as I was by your child in this one, you'd..."

Kirilo's left leg slipped from behind his right one. He coughed in embarrassment, and hid his lame leg again.

"Thanks for this sort of kindness at least, my daughter," Lichak Sr. said with malice and bowed low from the waist. "A father, old coot that he is, might tolerate everything. That's what he's a father for. But why do you discard my child for no reason at all?"

"Oh, for no reason you say!" Melania exclaimed, quickly unbuttoning her blouse with trembling fingers. "Have you seen that? No? So have a look then."

Her bra snapped open and for a fleeting moment I saw Melania's breasts covered with big black and blue bruises, and turned my eyes away.

"My, my..." Lichak Sr. curled his lips. "Aren't you ashamed of showing soldiers' pinches to an old man? Do you think people don't know that you've got a new lodger every night?"

"Get out of here," Melania said quietly, and pointed to the door.

"Let's go, Father," Kirilo muttered angrily.

"Shameless tramp," the old man whined. He was already in the hallway, putting on his cap. "Soldiers aren't enough for her any more, so she's taken up with children. You damned slut!"

What happened next I found out only at dawn, when I woke up after a heavy sleep that had had the effect of a hideous nightmare on me. The morning star was peeping through the window; a cold bluish haze hung in the room. I recalled that after Lichak's last words the hammer I had been breaking the salt with was in my hands, and I had thrown it in the direction of the old man's voice in the hallway. Also, I remembered hearing someone moaning under the windows, cursing, and beating the window frames with his fists. Then someone shouted: "Hey you, over there! What's going on? Get out of here or I'll shoot you!" After that everything was silent as if all the noises had dropped into an abyss.

The moment I tried to stir a moan escaped my lips.

"Lie still, lie still," Melania whispered and bent over me, putting something cold on my forehead. "Does it hurt? Where does it hurt you, huh?"

It hurt me everywhere: in my temples, shoulders, chest.

"My God, did you go wild last night! I never thought you were such a bold spirit. Well?" Melania smiled faintly, looking like a wraith in her white nightshirt. "And goodness gracious — how you fought! With your fists and feet and head... And you yelled like mad, with the hunk of salt in your hand!"

"Where did they go?" I asked, listening intently to my voice which I didn't seem to recognize as my own.

"They left. You pushed them outdoors and bolted the door! Then you went into a long fit of crying and kept breaking out of my arms — until you fell asleep." She asked me cautiously: "Is it a malady of yours, or what?"

"I don't know."

"Don't be afraid. Today they'll be as humble as saints and won't touch you. You'll see. Now go to sleep, it's early yet."

I looked at the wall growing bluer and seemingly higher every minute, and made up my mind to get out of this house today come what might. *I'll go and look for the radiomen*, I decided.

Then I fell asleep quickly.

## Chapter 4

In my dream I saw the flood I remembered from childhood, probably because on that day — the last day of my childhood — my mother had run away from home; or perhaps because Grandma had frequently told me about that “terrible thing” in a rather subdued whisper, and after her story, she would fervently cross herself facing the icons, and plead: “May the Lord ward off calamity and protect us...”

The water had inundated the meadows as far as the eye could see — from the solitary pine trees on the sandy hill right up to the unmowed Basov Isle where the windmill stood stock still and held up its black broad cross-shaped vanes over the level flood. Storks waded around in the freshet so slowly they seemed to be swimming, because the water reached up to their chests; you could see their red legs and the soft silken movement of the young after-grass through the water.

Then it became too deep for the storks, and they flew away. The haystacks that had stood firm up till then, were lifted by the water, and swirling slowly as if in a mild whirlpool, their puffy sides collided and they passed each other by like living creatures.

“Floo-o-od!” the alarm sounded over the village in the hot languid silence, and the echo hurled back a dull, earie moan — co-o-od” — out of the deluged willow scrub.

Bells started tolling at the church.

Bong... Bong... Bong...

Where had they appeared from? They had been taken down a long time before. I remembered them falling and turning over in the air like huge wounded birds; they tolled in midflight and were dumb when their tongues went deep into the ground on impact.

Bong... Bong... Bong...

“Do you hear, do you hear?”

Who was that? Oh, it was Grandma.

People from all corners of the village spilled out onto the hill. They stood silently, pressing infants to their breasts and those without infants had their hands pressed to their chests.

The storks wheeled over the flood, their red legs straight as arrows, and the bells went on booming.

Dejected men waded into the water. At first it reached to their ankles, then to their knees, and presently it was almost up to their chests.

I seemed to have known them all from the cradle.

There was Ida, a taciturn clodhopper, who was the village's best thrasher and mower, sawyer and cooper, and with a "handy" wind around, a miller besides. He always sawed logs with my father, handling a two-handed saw and standing below, which made his dense eyebrows, permanently peaked in surprise, fill with sawdust, while his hands and clothes, just like dad's, smelled of birch malt. Dropping in at our house for a drink on a Sunday or some holiday, he used to say to dad: "Demian, I like you so much Ida move heaven and earth for you if I could get my hands on them."

Then there was Marko-Hot-Ziggity-Damn in his perpetually faded shirt and sweat-stiffened collar. I remembered that collar well, because Marko visited us every evening for a chat or an occasional haircut. After dad had snipped his mane and given it what he called a "truck tyre cut," he'd had enough of looking at the man's stiff collar and say: "Marko, take off that shirt of yours and let the women wash it, while you wear mine in the meantime." Marko would not resist the idea for long, and mumbled: "Let them wash the collar at least, because — hot ziggity damn — it's rubbed my neck raw."

Marko was a confirmed bachelor, and the women — even my mother, who, as it seemed, held people in contempt — took pity on him.

There was also Artem Pearsnatcher, famous in the village for the ludicrous incident that earned him the nickname. Once he was asked to bring us a cartload of pears from his relatives. The pears were meant to be dried for winter. On his way, Artem regaled himself on the delicious fruit so gluttonously he left only enough for "two servings of stewed fruit," as he himself put it. When my father asked him why he had brought so little, Artem said: "How should I know? Well, I ate about a little potful, and the rest... I don't know about. Maybe they got scattered along the way. He-he-he-he."

Father gave him such a sound drubbing with the reins he had hidden during collectivization that Artem sniveled like a kid, although he was married and had two children himself, and the women consoled him like a kid as well. As all this had happened in the presence of our neighbors, they reported the

reins to the chairman of the Village Soviet, which had them confiscated.

The men stacked the hay in the boats by the armful, threw the boat chains over their shoulders, and pulled the boats to the shore, with water up to their armpits. Among the people on the hill there was Palazia, a crack-brained old woman with sparse gray bristles on her upper lip and chin. She walked around in the crowd, wagged a gnarled finger in every face and chattered away like a magpie: "Didn't I tell you I'd let the rooster out? \* You didn't believe me, did you? Now get a load of what you had coming. Shoo-shoo-shoo... Bring the coals here, by birdies! Burn all those fiends, burn them to death! Shoo!"

The haystacks flared up one after another, catching fire, and drifted toward the village. And instead of storks wheeling over our heads, there were blazing red roosters with coals in their beaks.

"Ah-h-h," cried Palazia, convulsed with laughter. "You'll all disappear, you'll all be wiped out!"

Bong... Bong... Bong...

Then the water reached our house as well. I heard it sucking greedily at the *prizba* with a savage slurp and pieces of clay plopped into the water from a dry wall, while the bees drew the nectar from the pear tree, and having had their fill, became heavier than before, dropped into the water like cockchafers, and grabbed hold of the hay stalks. But not for long: the flood drowned them or swirled them into the dirty foam and carried them off.

"May the Lord ward off calamity and protect us," Crandma pleaded in a whisper.

"Dad-dy!" I cried out so loud that I woke up for a moment and realized I had only been dreaming.

"Call him, call," Grandma said when I sank back into the nightmare. "Maybe he'll listen to you at least."

And then Mother appeared from somewhere; she wore a black kerchief tied low over her forehead and her undone blond braids hung over her breasts.

"That's it, now you're shouting your heads off!" she said, looking down on Grandma with scorn. "Ugh-h, you skunks! You ruined my life with that convict of yours, and now you're whimpering, aren't you? So it's 'Call him' now. You

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\* Lit. translation of a Ukrainian and Russian idiomatic expression meaning "to commit an act of arson" — Tr.

damned lot! I told him: clamp up, freeze, don't breathe a word — and did he listen to me?! You bunch of smart alecks — it'd be better if you croaked! I'm getting out of here to a mine, to Kharkiv, to Alma-Ata. I still want to live; to live! Pah! Thank God I'm not fifty yet, but twenty-five!" She rushed over to the trunk to pick up her things: shirts, blouses, skirts, necklaces.

"And what about the child?" Grandma weeped. "Mind what you're doing, daughter."

"My, my," Lichak Sr. smiled crookedly. "Running away from a living husband, you slut!"

Bong... Bong... Bong...

"Daddy!" I shouted, and that instant I saw him.

His hands folded on his chest, he stood leaning with his broad shoulder against the little elm tree growing in the middle of our yard, and his indifferent, half-shut eyes looked at the black smoke spreading across the shining flood and at the roaring flames.

"Daddy!"

I hugged his leg firmly and froze in horror, for the leg was hard, cold and stiff.

"Oh, my God, what's the matter with you!" a familiar voice moaned so close to me that it made me tremble and slowly open my eyes as if I were coming up out of a cold abyss.

I saw Melania bent over me, her eyes filled with tear.

"Why are you weeping, eh? Does it hurt? Oh my, why did you have to stick your nose into my affairs? They just would've bellowed a bit and gone their way. And now — what am I to do with you now?"

Already dressed and standing on feebly trembling feet, I thanked Melania for the lodging and told her I was leaving. She kissed my forehead and had a little cry.

"Where will you go, my pale, sick little dear?"

"To the Red Army soldiers," I said, turning my eyes away. "I've got some acquaintances there."

"I see. Well, as you like, I'm sorry to part with you, though. You made such fine company. I felt I'd acquired a brother. We baked potatoes... It was fun, wasn't it?" She became disconcerted, her eyes shifting left and right. "If you want, you can stay..."

For all her tears, I felt she'd be happy at my departure.

"Goodbye," I said, my hand on the latch, and tried to

smile, but I failed: something previously unknown to me, something cold and indifferent just like daddy's eyes that I had seen in my dream did not let me smile, but only twisted my lips. "As for the Lichaks, you'd better not open the door to them any more."

Melania nodded quickly and wiped away her tears.

As I descended the street running downhill and holding on to a wattle fence lest I fall, I heard how cheerfully — as if she hadn't been weeping just a few moments ago! — she called to her neighbor:

"Halya, come tonight and listen to some gramophone music!"

I realized that the invitation was intended not so much for Halya as for her lodgers who had just then spilled out of the house for a smoke with their service shirts unbuttoned and their padded jackets thrown over their shoulders.

"Look at that fine blond bird, Grish," a gaunt, tall wisecracking sergeant said to a ruddy-cheeked young soldier in a distinctly Byelorussian accent. "You could have a look at her gramophone, eh?"

The young soldier merely smiled bashfully at the suggestion.

"And why not?" a third one added, screwing up his eyes against the smoke. "They staged a fine concert over there last night, so the sergeant had to kick out the wild audience. You tell her that you rescued her so, dear lady, one good turn deserves another. Ha-ha-ha."

The whole group burst out laughing.

## Chapter 5

When Melania's house had disappeared behind the others, I felt an unpleasantly sweet pinching sensation in my heart such as I had already experienced during my two years of footloose existence, and when I recalled Melania's gentle words on parting — "my pale, sick little dear" — it made me choke and squeak thinly like a mouse with pity for myself, so that I looked round in alarm to see whether anybody had heard me. This feeling of shame took a load off my chest, and I recalled the advice the jolly old man with the peg leg had given me in the ravine just before the nazi planes attacked us for the second time:

"Don't listen too much to all those compassionate types.

They feel sorry for you — all right, let them rattle on and talk the hind leg off a donkey. But you do what you've got your mind on: if you fall, get up, and hop along as before. As Jesus Christ said, do what the priest says, but don't do what the priest does. Feel as sorry for anyone as you wish — but never for yourself. Once you start feeling sorry for yourself, you won't make a human, but God knows what — a whiner, a booby, a gaping fool and a milksop! Oh yes, remember one more thing: the greater a man's compassion, the bigger a liar and Pharisee he is."

"What's a Pharisee?" I had asked, because I was hearing this word for the first time.

"I told you: a liar," the old man muttered angrily.

Those were his last words.

Eventually, he proved to be right. Once, hungry and weary, I approached the first house I came across in a village to beg for food. By the house, bees buzzed over an apiary surrounded with an enclosure of reeds, a dog rattled his chain behind the gate, somebody must have been carpentering in the yard, because I heard a plane swishing, and by the wattle fence sat a hunched woman with a pock-marked face, feeding chickens. After hearing out my incantation about *kulish* gruel, she smiled sadly, bent her lizzard-like little head sideways, as if she wanted to say, "Cuckoo, my little chicks," and then started inquiring how, why and when I had been abandoned to live "without a mummy and daddy like a blade of grass in a field." She knew a lot of compassionate expressions, adding them to almost everything she said, and pronounced them with delight as if she were chanting her most favorite song.

"Oh, my poor homeless and hapless little dear. God Almighty, this here child's lived but thirteen years, but endured things fit for more than twenty... Oh, where are you looking, compassionate God, without having mercy on us..."

I was already within a hair's breadth of crying, so moved was I by her words. Seeing my reaction, she seemed proud and happy, and summoned a tear. She was about to raise the hem of her ample flowery skirt to dab her eyes, when suddenly she jumped to her feet and shouted, baring her short yellow teeth:

"Oh, may you croak, you damned, accursed pain in the neck! Olga-a-a-a... May you go to blazes!"

"What's the matter?" the man asked from the yard.

"A magpie's nabbed a chick."

"I told you you were a gaper," the man said indifferently and went back to his work.

"If those beggars hadn't been traipsing around here just then —" she grumbled, and then checking herself, said to me out loud: "We haven't got anything to give you. There's only half a pumpkin, but where would you cook it? Better drop in to the priest in the neighborhood. He'll surely give you something. But mind you tell him you're baptized."

The priest didn't seem to care whether I had been baptized or not. He brought out a hunk of flat rye bread cut in half, with a cold fried egg sandwiched in between, and asked me whether I had been to anybody's house before I came to his.

I told him about my encounter.

"Ha!" he gave a hearty laugh. "A wonderful place you picked to ask for food. Those people have been shiteaters ever since they were born." He threw back the skirt of his worn cassock with the practiced movement of a young man, took out of his pocket a crumpled cigarette that must have been rolled a long time ago, licked it, and lit it up. "Well, I see you're naked and blessed and lacking worldly goods in equal measure. If you ever chance to be in these parts again, drop in at my place right away. Be it night or midnight, I'll feed you, give you shelter and the rest."

Walking along the wattle fences afterward, I heard the womenfolk gossiping about him: "What sort of a priest is he? Fie! He swings the censer like a sword..."

About four months later, in winter, I revisited the village, but the priest wasn't there any more: the Germans had killed him for some reason, and on the site of his house only the black ice-coated shaft of a chimney stuck out of the snow.

In the middle of the square where I had parted with the radiomen, I stopped, undecided where to go next. Outdoors there was an early spring thaw; sparrows chirped merrily in the orchards and boxthorn bushes, sitting on the twigs in dense gray clusters like the leaves of an oak tree in winter; and when the sun peeped out from behind the clouds for a moment, they started to play noisily in the puddles, their wings splashing each other with water. Here and there children romped by the gates just as merrily as the sparrows; there were only a few soldiers around, and the ones I saw looked rather slothful and flatfooted — most likely they were from the unit trains.

I wandered around the village till almost evening, but I didn't find any houses with antennae.

"Did you go farther down the gully over there?" an oldish soldier asked me, learning who I was looking for. Everything he was wearing was military, albeit secondhand, but on his head he had a faded black cap pulled down over his ears and on his feet battered home-made boots. "There are some soldiers stationed there."

I walked through the gully in the direction the soldier had shown me; a much louder rumble reached my ears from there. The narrow footpath running between the dense shrubs twisted like a hare track. At first I even had the feeling I was going round in circles. But soon there were fewer shrubs, and ahead of me I saw about two dozen houses in a dell. Over one of them I caught sight of an antenna glittering in the setting sun, which made me so happy I was about to break into a run, but the next instant I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Oh-h!" I gasped and the hair under my cap seemed to stand on end: on a sown field right in front of me stood four tanks, their cannon sticking sideways into the snow, and a thick, freshly hewn pole topped by a black tankman's helmet showed over a snowdrift nearby. On the helmet sat a rook tearing white rags out of it.

"Shoo!" I tried to shout but only a hiss escaped my lips.

The rook turned his head toward me, cawed, struck the helmet with his wings so hard it made the straps swing, and flew away.

Barely moving my leaden legs, I went up to the pole. On a board nailed under the helmet was an inscription in red fuel oil:

"Eternal memory to the heroic tankmen Sr. Lt. Kozarenko, Sgts. Faizulin and Sitnik, Pvts. Marchuk, Laskin, Kanovets, and 3 unidentified men. 1.1.'44."

I walked round the tanks. They smelled of burned iron; from the open hatches came a cold and nauseatingly sweet odor that reminded me of my deceased Grandma lying yellow-faced across two tables, and the boy with the sharp little nose, and the jolly old man the people had buried in the morning among the weeds by the ravine, while I kept crawling on all fours around the nooks that were still damp after the night mist, for some reason looking for his missing peg leg.

The rook I had chased away was wheeling over the tanks,

cawing angrily and hoarsely, as if he were pecking my head. It looked as if he was chasing me away. Jamming my teeth together to stop them chattering from the cold in my chest, I ambled toward the house with the glittering antenna. I didn't care by now whether they were "my" radiomen or not; I just wanted to get to people as fast as possible.

The red sun, calm and bleak, was on the point of setting. From time to time, the little black dots of a distant flight of birds moved across it. They appeared and then disappeared, all heading in the same direction — toward the rumble.

I looked round at the tanks: the rook was sitting on the helmet again and tearing white rags out of it.

I had seen it all once before — a torn helmet on a pole, a setting sun just as calm, red and tragically bleak, but without the birds always flying in the same direction.

I was frightened, realizing that the already familiar persistent sadness and weariness caused by the bleak sun and the rooks' shadows against it was taking root and growing somewhere deep in my heart, which was itself just as weary of my helplessness in the face of the doings of grownups. Their relationships always left me with a sense of ennui as sticky as a cobweb — which probably explained why I was so attracted to bright, simple people whom I understood and in whose actions I found the answer to the question: "Why?"

"Go, Khariton, and take it all in, but don't take everything to heart," the feeble old man across the Dnieper had advised me. "Turn away; run, if you have nowhere to turn away to, because what you'll see might make you destroy yourself. At such times recall something of your own, from your childhood years, or indulge in happy memories — then you'll forget the bad things."

Happy memories — if only I had them!

"Caw!" cried the rook, gluttoned and pleased, behind my back.

And again I saw in my mind's eye a sunset, a riddled helmet, and a brand-new service shirt flapping in the wind, as if it wanted to break loose and fly into the dusky evening sky.

I had spent the night in a little hamlet crammed with German motorcycle troops. In each farmyard, along the walls of cottages and barns, stood three or four motorcycles with sidecars on which were mounted machine guns covered in

tarps. The only house there weren't any motorcycles around was a squat, ragged looking one inhabited by "fingerless Lenka," as I was told. It hadn't either a kitchen garden, orchard, or even a lilac bush—only waste, withered spurge and clover. Old red nettles as high as the windows grew around the *prizba*, and inside there was stench and dirt: the barren walls were speckled with fly spots, gray bags of dust-laden cobwebs swayed in the corners, and only over the wainscot footworn to a waxy gleam hung an old rust-colored *rushnik* towel with a gloomy inscription embroidered in black thread: "Under the cross my grave is, and on the cross my love."

Lenka let me in into the smaller room with a tumble-down stove: there was also a grindstone and a worm-eaten carpenter's bench which must have stood there unused for years; the lopsided little window that almost reached the floor was covered so thickly with dust and cobwebs it barely stood as a gray patch in the darkness.

"You won't get any food from me, because I haven't got any for myself," Lenka said, the smell of moonshine on her breath. She wanted to close the door on me but failed, because the bottom of it had stuck on the clay floor.

Then she swigged moonshine from a bottle, ate some peeled overripe cucumbers, dipping them in some salt spilled straight onto the table, laughed hoarsely, cursed, mimicked somebody, and after having had her fun in this way, struck up a sad song about a young horsekeeper. The song moved her to tears, and she said:

"Hey, you bastard! Come over here and have a bite."

I said I wasn't hungry.

"Squeamish, aren't you? What a stuck-up guttersnipe. For your information, I'm the cleanest housewife in this village. D'ye think I've been a cripple all my life. Make it thumbs down. Before the war I worked in a mine. I tipped a loaded coal car with only one hand, for your information, until my fingers got jammed. Oh, and did I have boyfriends — where they good lookers! And did I have dresses — nobody's ever worn anything like them in her lifetime around this hamlet!"

She heaved a sigh, threw the bottle under the bench, and sang in a hoarse feeble voice:

*Nigh-ght, black as pi-itck,*  
*Nigh-ht, black as pi-itck,*  
*No light but that of the street lamps....*

I had noticed long ago that grownups loved to tell me their worries and all sorts of troubles, damping them on me as if into a hole-riddled basket, without caring whether I had to know them or not. Once they'd finished, they seemed to become merrier and reborn, which was as much as to say: "Oh well, looks like I've got a load off my chest."

The sun peeped into the window of the little room, flushing it deep red, and threw the cold rays of the evening glow onto the pot-holed floor. Under the carpenter's bench mice scuttled and squeaked in what was certainly a fight over some crumbs. Lenka had another fit of snivelling and munched her cucumber — never before had I seen people eating and crying at the same time. She's drunk, so I'd better get out of here, I thought. But where could I go now that it was dark outside? I started to make myself comfortable on the carpenter's bench.

Somewhere nearby a motorcycle sputtered, coughed by the windows, and went dead. Moments later two helmeted Germans came into the house. They had machine pistols hanging on their chests over crumpled, grimy field jackets.

Lenka quickly swept the bits and pieces of food off the table straight onto the floor, slapped her palm down on the bench, and grinning clownishly, mumbled: "Come in, *Herren*, *komm zurück*, *setze sich* by the *Frau's* side!"

The Germans spoke angrily between themselves and looked into the room, without seeing me in the dark. They wrinkled their noses in disgust. Then one of them went up to the besom standing by the stove, kicked it to the middle of the room, and gestured to Lenka to sweep the floor; the other, who had a bandaged left arm, of which only a dirty blood-sodden stump stuck out of his sleeve, smashed two upper panes in the window with his machine gun, sat down on the bench, and carefully put his wounded arm on the table. He was very young, about four years my senior, and kept glancing round the room with the quizzical eyes of a pup.

"Does the arm hurt, my dear?" Lenka sat down next to him with the besom in her hand. "See, what a mess you got yourself into. Russian Ivan bang-bang, and now it hurts. Good thing it didn't hit here (she jabbed a finger at her forehead), and if it had — *Aufwiedersehn!* No? Do you speak at least a little bit of our tongue, or don't you fancy it at all?"

The German unbuttoned the jacket on his chest, carefully stuck his dirty arm into it, then he leaned toward Lenka

and hit her with the back of his hand. She dropped the besom, pressed the crippled palm against her cheek, and said: "You dumb cluck from a cuckoo's nest. Why, you dirty brat, I'm fit to be your mother, and here you poor goof... If you'd just crossed my way in a mine, I'd... You bastard!"

Proudly tall, with unwomanly brawn in her shoulders, she stood in the middle of the room, and that moment I believed that she really could have tipped a coal car singlehanded.

"*Verfluchtes Schwein,*" the German muttered, cradling his wounded arm.

Lenka threw a kerchief over her head, and without turning my way, said: "Hop out of here through the front door, because those beasts might kill you once you're spotted."

"Shut up or you'll regret it yet. *Weg! Verfluchte,*" the German shouted, apparently under the impression that she was still cursing him, and grabbed his machine pistol.

At that moment the other German came into the room, carrying an armful of bottles and two packs behind his back.

"*Los, los,*" he cried out merrily, a gold tooth flashing in his mouth, and lifted his foot to kick Lenka, but didn't after all, finding his timing awkward.

I slipped out of the hallway. Immediately after me Lenka came out of the house, stooping and clutching her breasts with both hands.

"That bastard got me with the gun muzzle," she said and smiled as men usually do when something hurts them, and turned round the corner of the house. "Let's sit it out somewhere: maybe after they've gorged themselves, they'll leave."

The Germans, however, didn't even think of leaving. Having failed to call her in, they drew water out of the well themselves, stripped down to their shins, and started washing themselves right in the middle of the yard, quacking like ducks.

By evening they had visitors — motorcycle troops billeted in other houses — who arrived with bottles as well (from the few German words I knew, I made out that the two had been at the front line, and their return was now cause for celebration). A booze-up commenced with shouts, whistling, songs, and cigarette smoke billowing out of the smashed windows.

Shortly afterward, the whole company spilled out into the yard. I heard them arguing who the better shot was — Horst or Friedrich. The wounded soldier brought a bundle out of

the house and threw it on the ground, saying: "*Das ist unsere Trophäe!*" That's our booty!

The Germans fell silent, squatted round the bundle, and then gave vent to a wild roar:

"Bravo, Friedrich!"

"*Das ist aber fein.*" That's wonderful.

"*Einen Moment, einen Moment.*"

One of them rushed into the house, and brought out a wooden bread shovel, and all the men started building something, their effort punctuated by fits of raucous laughter.

"What are they up to?" Lenka asked. She had been sitting in silence till then, her eyes staring fixedly ahead.

"I suppose they'll compete to see who's the best shot," I said.

"Oh, if he'd crossed my path in the mine," she muttered, rubbing her bruised breasts, "I'd have..."

Lenka uttered such a dirty oath I had never heard anything like it before.

The Germans had finished rigging something up but we still didn't know what it was. The shortish character who had brought out the shovel straightened up from the ground, and to the sound of laughter, stood a scarecrow at his side. It was made of a brand-new Soviet service shirt with several orders over the breast pockets, a shoulder belt, and a map case slung over one shoulder.

"*Achtung!*" he cried, and dexterously shooting a hand from behind his back like a circus performer, pulled a ribbed tankman's helmet onto the scarecrow.

The company clapped their hands and walked away from the house. Carrying the scarecrow high over his head like a holy shroud, the shortish soldier walked up front and counted the number of steps:

"*Einundzwanzig, zweiundzwanzig, dreiundzwanzig. Genug?*" Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three. Enough?

"*Also gut.*" That's all right.

The sun touched the horizon. Fragments of it seemed to have come away, as if it had melted. Against it the doleful cruciform figure of a tankman, as clearly silhouetted as a living person, stood amid the weeds. The service shirt flapped feebly in the evening air, the sky was turning crimson, and from the direction of the Dnieper behind the village, came the rumble of the front line.

The first to fire — with a captured Soviet TT pistol — was the wounded soldier. He took his time aiming, one of

his legs planted forward and his head thrown back (he must have been taught to do it that way), but he hit the target a single time. His pals laughed at him and urged him to give the pistol to somebody else. This made him angry, and he flung the pistol far off into the weeds, grabbed his machine pistol with his sound hand, and cursing his head off, pumped bullets into the scarecrow until he had riddled it with holes. It swayed and toppled to the ground. The Germans stopped laughing and looked at their wounded comrade with fear.

Roused by the shooting, the people from the neighboring houses came outdoors and looked on silently. When the scarecrow fell, Lenka buried her face in her hands and burst out crying.

We sat in the weeds till morning. The night was dry and warm, as it is before a thunderstorm. The stars shimmered serenely, cobwebs tinged red with the glow of faroff explosions drifted toward the ground — Indian summer had set in, and by the Dnieper, or even closer perhaps, on this very bank, guns fired away at random and in the distance flares hung low above the ground.

Lenka was asleep, her head resting on a rolled up kerchief; she moaned, sobbed, and muttered all sorts of dirty words and curses in her sleep, while I kept looking at the glow — to me it seemed to be roaring with laughter and dancing as crazy old Palazia used to do by the village club every Sunday. My loneliness and fear of the silence around (the village seemed to have died out) made me sink into such deep and utter dejection that I couldn't so much as stir and grew numb. This had happened to me before when Grandma told me about the flood, during dark bottomless nights, or when an eagle owl hooted at the cemetery or dogs howled in a yard. Grandma never failed to comment: "If they howl at the sky, it means there'll be a fire, and if they howl at the ground, that's a sure funeral." I had tried to imagine what sort of eyes the dogs had when they howled, but nothing came to my mind and I asked Grandma about it.

"Their eyes are sad, my child, and let them be whatever they are," she answered and furtively made the sign of the cross on me. "Sleep. Or better still, think what game you'll play tomorrow."

Eventually I was to spend many a night alone on the steppe with only the moon, straw, and mice scurrying under or over my legs for company, or in an abandoned house that

echoed to my step; I had frequently been beaten and humiliated to the point of tears, but never had I been as infinitely lonely as I was then among those weeds. I seemed to have been poisoned that night.

By the time I reached the hamlet it was completely dark. I approached a big house with two chimneys and two doors, over which rose gleaming antennae, and stopped by the wicket gate. Behind the wattle fence spread a black orchard in which the twigs whispered quietly as they usually do in spring (a mild breeze wafted from the gully with the burned tanks) and the air smelled of damp cherries and weeds.

By the first door, which was open and led into a hallway, somebody was smoking and quietly coughing.

"Come in, whoever's there," the man said.

I recognized Kalyuzhny's voice, and barely able to drag my feet forward, came closer. Kalyuzhny bent down, looking closely at the recent guest:

"Khariton Demianovich..."

He said it so gently, goodnaturedly and, indeed, paternally, that without understanding what had come over me, I pressed my face against his chest and burst into tears.

"That's all right," the letter carrier mumbled, lightly clasping me to his bosom. "Such a jolly boy and... Come now... never mind the tears. That happens to us sinners, too."

## Chapter 6

Stovolos was the first person I saw on crossing the threshold. He was sitting on a low stool at a proportionately low table, eating mashed boiled pumpkin with a wooden flower patterned spoon; the collar of his service shirt was unbuttoned, the straps of his shoulder belt had been loosened, and the way he ate made it look more as if he were hewing wood or threshing grain.

A fire was going in the stove which was painted blue up to the funnel. At the hearth a shortish, gray-haired woman with puffy pendulous cheeks that reached her chin was busying herself. Through the wide-open door to the second room I saw Kotya sitting with earphones on his head and speaking quietly but clearly into a microphone he held at some distance from his lips:

"Birch this is Grass... Birch this is Grass... How do you read me? This is Grass. Over."

The floor in both rooms was bestrewn with copper-yellow buckwheat straw, the windows were blacked out by sturdy, apparently recently woven rugs with black and red stripes, the white wall was edged with a straight band of green clay — it was a clean, cozy home such as I had not seen for a long time.

Kalyuzhny pushed me gently in the back as he had done on the square, and said:

"Come in, don't be afraid."

I took off my cap, greeted everyone quietly, but did not move in the shade by the threshold, so nobody would at least see how mud spattered I was.

Stovolos turned, and probably not recognizing me, gave an indifferent nod; Kotya flashed his teeth affably at me and went on speaking into the microphone:

"Birch this is Grass..."

"That the one?" the gray-haired woman asked Kalyuzhny as she looked me over. Her eyes had a damp glitter in the reflections from the flames in the stove, but her cheeks were horribly pale and flaccid.

Stovolos put down the spoon, also gave me an intent sidelong look, then a severer look at Kalyuzhny (I hastily pulled on my cap) and said kindly to the woman, smiling unctuously as he spoke:

"Thanks, ma'am. This mashed pumpkin tastes more like honey." He bent down to kiss her hand, but she freed her puffy little fingers from his long and obviously tenacious digits, tousled his shock of wavy blond hair, and said:

"All right, enough of the soft soaping. Go and do your job."

Stovolos still managed to kiss her wrist, went quickly into the other room, and asked Kotya:

"Hear anything?"

"Poorly. Just like out of the nether world. The damned Krauts are jamming them."

"Have another try."

Kalyuzhny took the cap off my head, wound his hand round my shoulder, and pressed my cheek to a cold button on his greatcoat.

"So are you taking the boy in, Kindrativna?"

"Why not." The woman came up to me and touched my flop of hair (she gave off the hot smell of the oven flames).

“But where shall he sleep? Maybe with Katerina up on the stove?” She laughed. “Are you cool with girls, young man, or not? Won’t you tickle my junior miss to death?”

I attempted a smile, but it must have gone away, because the woman averted her eyes, her cheeks gave a twitch and seemed to have dropped even further.

“Come, come, I didn’t mean any offence. It’s just a joke. Now take off your coat and eat some mashed pumpkin while I boil water for you. It’s a long time since you’ve had a good bath, isn’t it?”

I mumbled in reply that I had been deloused not so long ago, but since I was once too many that day, in the end I had failed to bath. This explanation, however, sounded more like a fib than the truth. I got angry with myself, and said outright:

“Autumn last year.”

The woman gave a quiet laugh:

“That was long ago, I’d say.”

While I was of two minds as to how to tackle the mashed pumpkin (if only that Stovolos hadn’t been around!), Kalyuzhny brought in a bucket of water with cherry leaves and icicles swimming in it, the woman emptied it into a big pig-iron pot (I heard the icicles tinkle against the brim) and shoved it into the oven. Then both of them pulled out a broad wooden trough from under a bench, talked in whispers about what to change me into after the bath, while Kotya kept calling into the microphone:

“Birch, this is Grass. How do you read me, Birch? Over, over...”

The mashed pumpkin really did taste like honey, sweet and fragrant. Feeling the woman’s quizzical eyes on me, I ate slowly at first, dipping only one side of the spoon into the mash, but then I bent lower to hide my eyes and started packing it away, burning with shame at being unable to restrain myself: it seemed to me that everyone was looking at how quickly I was swallowing the food, which made me choke, cough and wipe away my tears. After I had scraped the last bit off the bottom, I remained sitting over the empty platter for a long time, not daring to raise my head.

All this time nobody had paid any attention to me: the mistress of the house was hanging a big piece of cloth across the corner by the stove where the trough was already steaming, Kalyuzhny was fumbling in his knapsack, out of

which he produced *makhorka* shag, soap, and a new set of crumpled underwear.

Shortly after I was splashing in the trough, feeling my body grow lighter with every minute, pinching pleasantly and smelling of black soldiers' soap, as my head got dizzier and dizzier. Behind the cloth the wick lamp flickered in the steam, the woman talked with Kalyuzhny under her voice, respectfully calling him Mikhailo Vasiliovich, the stove radiated intense heat, and on a stool by the trough I saw a set of really clean underwear. My heart contracted at the idea that I could have missed this house that night, but I was afraid to rejoice, because I had noticed that in joy's wake there always followed distressing trouble.

It was clean and whitewashed on top of the stove like a little room the mistress of the house had shown me into. Kalyuzhny even helped me up with a smile, and his fingers tickled my pathetically bony frame unintentionally, as if in fun. There was a smell of recent whitewash and dried cherries from the chimney on which I saw pans crammed with dried fruit. A spray scratched lightly like a cat against the little round window puttied in from outside, and I heard the wind droning through the trees as if a whole forest and not just an orchard grew behind the walls. The underwear did not fit me tightly but bunched and smelled of *makhorka* shag; my body seemed small in it, and that is why I imagined myself a child for a moment, although it was a long time since I had regarded myself as a child; I even had an urge to jerk my legs and touch the ceiling or my ear with my big toe. "Come, sonny, touch your ear. That's it, that's it, my little dear!" my father used to teach me once.

In the other room, the receiver of a field telephone jangled.

"Receive message from thirty-fourth," Stovolos said wearily and started to dictate, pronouncing every numeral distinctly. "Eight, three, one... Four hundred and two, six hundred and forty-four... I repeat... What? You've fallen behind! Listen more attentively! I repeat..."

"How old is your older boy?" the woman asked Kalyuzhny.

"About the same age as this one."

"What's this one called?"

"Khariton Demianovich. At least that's how he introduced himself."

She gave a quiet laugh.

"And the younger one?"

"I don't know. About three and a half, I guess. He was born when I was already away. It might well be a girl, not a boy."

"Any news from them?"

"No. I've sent them five letters now."

The woman sighed.

"Never mind. God willing, they'll answer," she said and added quickly: "What a windy weather we're having today; it's droning like on St. Mary's Day \*\*"

I pressed my palms to my temples to shut out the light in the room and looked out the window. The twigs in the orchard writhed like snakes, whipping against the tautly stretched bracing wires of the antenna poles and howling dismally in tune with the wind in the trees; white snow shone hazily between the low trunks of the apple and cherry trees, and stars — tiny, and seemingly afraid — twinkled here and there between the firetops.

I was again gripped by a sense of uncertainty, alarm, and sinister foreboding. I buried my head under a warm coarse blanket, wedged my palms between my knees (this posture always made me feel cosy and evoked a host of childhood memories), and started to recall my joys of long ago: how Father had once brought in a hedgehog from a field and rolled it round the room with a besom, because the hedgehog was prickly; on another occasion he had brought in a melon covered with dew that threw sharp sparks of sunlight across the room. His eyelids drooping slightly, Father said: "That's not a melon for you, but a king's crown. Look how it shines!"

Father loved to cut my hair. He'd sit me in the middle of the room on a high chair he had made for me, wrap a starched towel round my neck and shoulders, and — clip, clip! — went the scissors behind my ear: "Don't be afraid, Father won't cut the child, oh no" — clip, clip! — "see what a beautiful little round head you've got, just like a bowl. And now let's trim the nape" — clip, clip! — "Look, Mama, ears exactly like yours, like flower petals. They're so thin the sun shines through them. And there's just one twirl of hair on his nape like with daddy, which means he'll only marry once. Yes, son? That's a clever boy..."

"Ugh, you smartie. Get lost!"

Why did she address my father that way? What for? Previously, as I remembered dimly, she often used to come to

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\* The church feast of St. Mary the Protectress (October 1) — Tr.

see him in the pantry where he carpentered in the evenings by the light of a wick lamp, his mop of hair held in place with a neat hemp string round his head, while I played in the odorous saw dust or shavings; she placed her arm, beautifully bent at the elbow round his neck lightly like a wing, and slimmer than usual (she was on tiptoes) she would order him: "Kiss me. Again, again. Oh well, thank God, I got what I wanted after forcing myself on you," and laughed in his face.

Then I would take hold of daddy's leg, press myself against it, dance around and laugh loudly for some reason, but my mother would gently, but persistently push me away with her round cold knee and say, displeased, even angry: "Wait a minute, I won't gobble up your daddy. What a pair of kin..."

At other times there was something the matter with her, which seemed strange and offensive to me: she kissed daddy reluctantly and in an affected way, remarking: "Fie! You reek of pine tar like a corpse — it makes me sick. And of sweat... Fie!"

While uttering these words, she put on a smile, but it always had an unpleasant effect on me and I pitied my father for some reason I could not explain. He, however, bent his head and said quietly: "I don't know, but I like the smell of pine tar."

"She didn't love him, nor our entire family," Grandma once told Marko-Hot-Ziggity-Damn after Father was gone. "What she loved most of all was herself. You see, the Korotkys were all of the same cast: what they lacked in brains they made up for in arrogance. To make matters worse, she had learned to read, although it wasn't much to speak of. After carpentering in the daytime, Demian would pump the rudiments of the ABC into her head. Every day he was lost to everything but work, whereas she, God forgive me for saying so, yearned to play like a lazy cat. Goodness gracious, she even lay down on the cushions like a cat, stretching this way and that and yawning. Fie! God forgive me, the idler might at least have played occasionally with the child. Now she'll have her fill of everything, what with the pair she's found herself..." Grandma leant over to Marko and whispered something to him unusually fast, while his eyebrows kept jumping up and down. "In short, it's as they say: what comes with the wind goes with the water. Oh well, let God be her judge. Let's go into the house, Marko, and I'll give

you a shot of cherry brandy so that our Cossack hiccups the easier on recalling us in his other world.”

Marko didn't decline the invitation. After a glass of brandy, he sat at length under the icons, kept silent, wiped his eyes with a sleeve, and blinked intermittently. Then Grandma would treat him to another glassful, and he started talking about dad with respect, firmly stringing word to word. Probably that was why I remembered his stories so well:

“Once we were mowing beyond the ravine. He was up front — a first-class mower, he was — and I was behind him, although I didn't let myself be bettered by the others. So we were mowing and mowing. The sun was already setting and would touch the horizon any minute but we still had work up to our ears. Suddenly I saw Demian squat, put his scythe aside, and start talking to himself under his breath. I came up to him — he had found a quail feather and was looking it over. He was fondling it as lovingly as if he were holding a tiny bird in his palm. ‘Look, Marko, what a feather,’ he says. ‘You'd die trying, but you wouldn't be able to make anything like that with your hands.’ ‘Sure,’ I says, ‘because it's God's creation.’ What was it to me? Just a feather and nothing else. But, see, for him, it was more than that...”

Then Marko would take another sip, hide his eyes under his palm, and say: “Oh, Demian, Demian, my hapless friend...”

I loved such smooth-flowing, kind stories about my father, which I heard from a lot of people. Frequently I wondered: why didn't anybody stand up for him then? But I didn't dare ask, because Grandma had forbidden me even to “breathe a word” about it in the presence of others, and wagged her finger in admonition: “God forbid you say anything! Whether you've seen or not, heard or not, keep your mouth shut.”

Later on, when I had grown up and Grandma was no more, I plucked up enough courage to ask, but received an answer I didn't understand: “Such were the times, son...”

By now the wind behind the round window was raging with wild abandon; the orchard did not drone as previously, but moaned, and the spray did not scratch but rapped against the black windowpane as if someone were calling someone from outdoors in fear and warning of the coming danger.

I was already dozing, when the door of the hallway closed with a bang; then I heard a girl's ringing laughter and the low animated voice of a man with a thick Caucasian accent.

"Now off with you, and stop wearing yourself out," the girl said.

The door creaked again, and the man pleaded in a hoarse, drunken voice:

"Kata! Ka-a-tusha! Don't go, my dear. I can't live a minute without you! Take my life, but don't go! Kata..."

"Oh, get lost," the girl choked with laughter. "Off with you, and let me go!"

Then the girl and a boy with childish dimples skipped into the room, quickly closing the door behind their backs. The girl had her face hidden in her hands and laughed; I only saw her mussed hair carelessly plaited into a thick, puffy braid the color of gilt-edged smoke at sunset.

"Katusha!" the man scratched in the hallway searching for the latch in the dark. "Stay just a minute more..."

"How many times do I have to tell you to keep away from that roughneck!" Kindrativna said angrily, and lightly slapped the girl's thigh. The girl drew back lithely with a swish of her skirt, and went off in a peal of still louder laughter.

"And where do *you* have your eyes?" Kindrativna arched her brows at the boy. "Some good-for-nothing chaperon..."

The boy dimpled merrily.

"Why blame me?" I told her, 'Iet's go,' but she was just nuts about his weird way of speaking. He got drunk and wanted to kiss her all the time. I wouldn't let him, so he said, 'Take my dress breeches with stripes, take my cap, but only let me.' And Telniov, his orderly, wouldn't let him either, and so he said, 'Get out of my way. You're my servant, not my master.'"

At long last the man, who had been groping around in the dark entrance hall, found the latch and, bending low in the door, entered the room. He was a crooked-nosed captain so tall his head reached the ceiling, and he wore blue breeches with the broad stripes of a trooper. The eyebrows over his sharp black eyes merged in a band as broad as the stripes on his breeches, the front of his service shirt was unbuttoned, the shoulder straps had slid down his back, and a bluish triangle of thick curly hair showed on his breast. The captain

leaned on a sheathed sword, reeled and smiled at everyone from above, revealing long teeth as yellow as pumpkin seeds.

“Katusha... Ma’am, Mummy! Take my heart” — he jabbed his fist into his curly breast — “but let me kiss your daughter Katusha only once! Only once, I said! Well? You must understand me: tomorrow I, Captain Djenjibarov, will go into battle and die, and a kite will peck out my eyes... Allow me, ma’am...”

His hoarse drunken voice booming from under the ceiling rolled through both rooms, drowning the howling wind behind the walls, the static from the radio station, and Kotya’s wearily alarmed inquiries to his distant contact:

“How do you read me, Birch, how do you read me? I can’t trace you, I can’t trace you! Over.”

Stovolos, his shoulder belt done up tightly and he himself slender and with an unnatural little wrinkle between his eyebrows, quickly stepped up to the captain, and said sharply, looking at his chest:

“You are obstructing us in our duties, Captain. I ask you to leave.”

“Why make it so stern, Senior Lieutenant?” Djenjibarov reeled and wanted to hug Stovolos, but the latter dodged.

“I repeat...”

“Well, if you’re making it a question of principle, I’ll make it one too,” the Captain flared up and sat down on a bench, stretching out his legs almost to the middle of the room. “That’s it. I won’t leave at all!”

“I’ll order to have you... thrown out!”

“Jealous, aren’t you?” Djenjibarov put his chin on the hilt of his sword and squinted. “Jealous, aren’t you? I understand. Of course. You yourself kissed her in the orchard last night.”

Stovolos stiffened and took a step toward the bench. Katia gave a little scream, Kindrativna’s puffy cheeks turned pale and trembled, and a scowl darkened the boy Ivanko’s face.

“Get out, Comrade Captain,” Kalyuzhny said amicably. “You’re really interfering with our work.”

“What?” Djenjibarov said in surprise. “Never in my life have I taken orders from a corporal!”

In the other room, the earphones dropped onto the table with a click, and a moment later Kotya was standing beside Djenjibarov. He smoothed back his dense crewcut with both hands, and smiled at him in a polite manner.

"Excuse me for being openly insubordinate, Captain, but I'm afraid we'll have to..."

What followed next resembled the rapid succession of scenes in a silent motion picture just before the film tears apart: the sword clattered against the floor, the Captain went into the air with thrashing arms and legs, then gave a broken gasp, gnashed his teeth — and went flying into the hallway.

"That takes care of him," Kotya said, putting in order his service shirt and beaming everyone an apologetic smile. "Let's have something for supper, ma'am, while Kalyuzhny listens in to Birch, all right?"

"Telniov, come here!" the Captain shouted hoarsely in the hallway. "Bring me the pistol! Raise the squadron to arms!"

"All right, enough of that... You better take a nap," somebody mumbled considerably behind the door and groaned with effort.

"I'll kill those dogs!"

"That'll do, I said. Why did you have to... It couldn't have ended otherwise..."

Then the door leading into the other half of the house banged shut, and everything was quiet.

Kotya led Kalyuzhny to the radio station and explained quietly:

"Birch is transmitting right here, so don't you move the needle a micron to either side, because everywhere else German stations are bellowing. If you hear the number thirty-four — that's an urgent message — call me right away. Good luck."

"And I wish you a good meal," Kalyuzhny said.

In the meantime, Stovolos, his eyebrows raised high, was lecturing the boy:

"Vania, you're not taking things seriously enough. We're teaching you to enlist you in our unit as radio operator, and here you are traipsing around. Can't you understand that an untrained, unseasoned person has a very slim chance of getting to the front line. He'll be killed in the very first battle — it's as simple as that. You're a bold, self-denying boy who doesn't spare himself, but you must give a thought to your mother..."

Kindrativna looked at him with gratitude and pleading, sighed and wiped an occasional tear from her eye with a handkerchief, while Katia sat there dejectedly. When she

raised her head for a moment, her eyes shot cunning glances at the senior lieutenant. He saw her look, turned graver, his cheeks blushed with poppy-red blotches like a girl's, and his voice, which hadn't much of a manly ring to it, became even more high-pitched.

During my wanderings I had seen many people in love and knew their reactions to it. They did not hide it from me, simply not paying me any attention, and so judging by the way Katia met Stovolos's eyes boldly and even saucily, I realized that she was teasing, not loving him.

Kotya ate his food elegantly. He held his spoon gracefully without hovering over the plate as almost every peasant and soldier, even Stovolos, did it, and without working his jaws incessantly; they seemed not to be moving at all. He talked with Kindrativna and Katia who sat with hanging head and nervously fingered the unplaited end of her braid:

"Djenjibarov is still a child, but a spoiled one for that matter. Power — that's what's done it. Do you know how old he is? Twenty-seven. He's already a captain, and has got an orderly, or what you might call a batman otherwise. Besides, he's got decorations, stripes on his breeches, a sword, a felt cloak... Of course, Kalyuzhny is no more than a corporal for him. If he hadn't offended Mikhailo Vasiliovich, believe me, madonna" — Kotya pressed his free hand to his chest and gave Katia a light bow — "I wouldn't have ever touched him."

Katia got abruptly to her feet and snapped angrily:

"Turn off the light, Mama, and let's go to bed!"

"Let the man finish his meal at least."

"He might as well take his plate and finish in the other room."

Kotya gave a quiet laugh, picked up the plate and went out, closing the door behind him with the tip of his glittering box-calf boot.

I rolled to the wall, covered myself with the prickly blanket, and shut my eyes tight. Outdoors the wind was rattling some steel object, the antenna mast creaked, and the orchard droned sadly.

"...the REM-64 radio station can work in two modes — microphone and telephone," Stovolos explained in the tones of a teacher in the other room. "The microphone is used when... Listen attentively, Vania, because that's a very important part of..."

Kindrativna whispered something to Katia who reacted angrily:

“What a thing to think up!”

“Never mind, he’s a quiet boy, no more than a child.”

“Oh, what a...”

Then somebody blew out the wick lamp, and it was dark; only a dusky yellow light came from over the smoke funnel.

“Birch this is Grass, how do you read me?” Kalyuzhny said in a friendly voice, as if his contact were somewhere nearby.

Bare feet shuffled across the stovebed, a match scratched and flickered to life, and I saw Katia right in front of me: her half-closed eyes glittered coldly behind her long thick eyelashes, her hair hung down her cheeks, and the broad white nightshirt stretched tightly on her breasts.

For some time she looked at me huddled in the corner, then she gave a laugh from low in her chest, and two deep dimples danced on her cheeks like two little crescents.

“Look what a pair of eyes he’s got! They’re not eyes but tadpoles,” she whispered in surprise. “Will you let auntie spend the night here?”

“Lie down.” I wanted to move still farther aside, but there was no room any more.

“Well, well, what makes you shy away from me. I won’t bite you!” Katia slipped quickly under the cloth and wanted to put an arm round my shoulder, but I pushed it aside.

“Don’t, I’m warm as it is.”

“Oh, you’re a proud one besides.”

Katia yawned, nestled down, and instantly fell asleep. For a long time yet I listened to the noises around me: Katia’s breathing that sounded like the rustling of leaves on a summer morning; Stovolos instructing Ivanko in an undertone, time and again ordering him not to doze; Kindrativna making her bed in the other room; and the radio static crackling wearily.

During the night I was roused from sleep by an insinuating whisper just above my face and a nasty stench of vodka that took my breath away.

“Kata... Katusha...” Rough grasping fingers ran hastily and painfully across my thighs and belly and froze for a moment in a cold plierlike grip on my chest.

“What? Who’s here? Katusha!”

On seeing the big eyes glittering in the dark and the savage sheen of bared teeth right in front of me, I gave

a little scream and made to jump up, but strong hands pushed me down.

“What? Who’s that?”

Suddenly the hands holding me relaxed, and a wide-eyed groaning wraith with gnashing teeth started to move away from me, melting in the darkness. From there I heard Kotya’s mocking reproachful whisper:

“Oh, Captain, Captain. You’re no luggage, and I’m no porter for you. Don’t you really understand that, you pathetic Romeo. Humph! Your hands, brother, are thin as shin bones. How do you wave your sword with such dukes?”

“Hush! Sh... sh,” Djenjibarov hissed. “Why get so excited?”

At my side, by the chimney where I had fallen asleep, Katia was choking with laughter. How come she was there and me here?

After a brief chat in the entrance hall, the latch on the door clicked shut, straw rustled under somebody’s feet, and Kotya came over to the stove.

“Scared, weren’t you, Khariton?” he asked. “Never mind, the man’s drunk and so he bustled about. Go on sleeping, brother.”

Katia lay still in the corner, holding her breath, while I, trying to contain an inward shiver, covered my head and bit my lip lest I burst out crying with fright and humiliation: was I for all of them — first at Melania’s and now here — some sort of stopgap, or what?

I didn’t get any sleep in the end, because sometime around dawn Stovolos, who had replaced Kotya and Kalyuzhny at the radio, called out loudly and with a ring of fear in his voice, or so it seemed to me in my state of drowsiness.

“Kuzovchikov, Kalyuzhny, reveille! Kotya, my dear, to the telephone at the double! Mikhailo Vasiliovich, stand by to duplicate! Birch this is Grass, I read you loud and clear, loud and clear... Kotya, transmit...”

Clothing rustled, the telephone receiver jangled, Kindrativna was roused from sleep as well.

“What’s the matter, boys?”

“Never mind, ma’am, go on sleeping. Nine, seven, four three...”

“Our square?”

“The neighbors’ and ours... One, two, eight...”

“A breakthrough?”

“Looks like it.”

I pressed my face against the window. Outdoors I saw pointed shadow-striped snowdrifts, a red moon kindled the snow-covered branches, and under the moon the red glow of explosions flashed time and again through the dull rumble of cannons.

The moon waned quickly and so did the stars, the twigs gained ever sharper outlines against the brightening morning.

I peered round the smoke funnel into the other room. Stovolos was not dictating numbers any more, but writing them on a narrow slip of paper. Kotya sat at his side, holding the end of the slip in his fingers and reading into the telephone:

"Two, one, six, four, zero... Here's the last: November, Uniform..."

"This is a duplicate, receive duplicate from thirty-fourth," Kalyuzhny said slowly into another telephone, but there was a ring of alarm in his usually calm, steady voice. "What? Yes... Seems like it's the neighbors." He started to repeat the same numbers as Kotya.

Somewhere close to the village, the Katyusha rockets howled heart-rendingly as they zoomed off their guiding rails. Through the windows I saw flashes following one another in rapid succession. Their harsh green light brightened up the sleeping space on the stove, making Katia's face look as colorless as chalk. She slept on her back, her hands thrown out behind her head, which made it seem as if her fingers had become entangled in the greenish hair scattered across the cushion. The shirt on her breasts alternately stretched tautly and fell.

Then I realized that a hot cloying surging sensation in my chest had arrested my eyes on her heaving breasts too long, and I quickly turned towards the window, feeling my cheeks flush with a pleasant shame I had not experienced before.

The cannonade did not abate till morning. But judging from Kotya and Kalyuzhny's ever decreasing and calmer telephone messages, I understood that far away where the thirty-fourth was stationed, something horrible was about to happen or had already happened.

The morning was windless, virgin snow was falling quietly, and the orchard seemed to be resting in its drifting snare after the nocturnal snowstorm; not a single spray stirred in the trees. From the west, clouds which seemed to smell

of smoke drifted almost just above the ground across a corn field that must have been cultivated before the war broken (black corn stalks stuck out of the snow here and there), and a bleak yellow sun peeped through the cold mist in the rifts between the clouds.

I walked into the orchard — the twigs grazing against my shoulders and cap left white flowery patterns of feathery snow — and looked down the road, along which I had come to this big village in the gully the day before yesterday. The arrow-shaped road sign looked like a lopsided cross in the snow; from it two ruts ran dreamily uphill towards the horizon where they merged in a wedge; on it something black and moving was receding into the distance, growing smaller and smaller until it disappeared altogether on the tip of the wedge. The Dnieper was somewhere over there. It was still ice-bound, and although no bridge spanned it, you could walk across the ice to the opposite shore. And farther on was Poltava Region: Manzhelia, Pisky, Shishaki, Artiliarshchina — in that area I knew not only all the roads, but all the footpaths and trails as well.

Settling on a pile of sunflower stalks, I stuck my hands into the pockets of my tattered coat, pulled my head in to make my breath warm my chest, shut my eyes and dozed in the cold to the rustle of the newly fallen snow in the apple-tree twigs. In front of me were wilted orchards, an alder tree festooned with clusters of black berries, adobe huts behind wattle fences, and an endless sea of sunshine that melted the shadows of the heated dust-laden trees; on the humps I saw yellow pumpkins lying amid gray fallen leaves, and lower down there was a pond scattered with glistening spangles. In the middle of the pond was an exhausted duck, and on the shore stood policemen, who popped off their carbines at the duck, guffawing drunkenly and cursing lazily, because the heat had bridled their tongues; the duck didn't quack any longer, or beat the water with its wings in its attempts to evade the bullets, but only croaked feebly and barely paddled its tired yellow legs; in the end, its head dropped into the water and the old gray bird froze with one wing out stretched; then a policeman rolled his blue woolen pants above his knees, waded out to the duck, and shouted to his friends on the shore:

“It's still warm like piss, ha-ha-ha!”

I had observed this scene in Artiliarshchina, a village neighboring on ours, where I had sat down for a rest in

the shade and experienced my infinite loneliness, perhaps because I was surrounded by strangers for the first time in the twelve years of my life, or it might have been the sight of the wounded duck and the mute withering orchards that had made me succumb to my loneliness. I don't know really. But it didn't last long, for a sense of boundless freedom and the joy of exploring a strange big world where no one was my master made me get up from the warm ground by the wattle fence and move on past the willow trees down the narrow street, walking in and out of the shadows the trees cast on it. And nobody asked me who I was, whence I came, or where I was going. It made me feel more cheerful, I threw the bundle with the food I had managed to scrape together somehow higher on my shoulder, and even hummed a song, as my feet kicked up the warm dust. I seemed to feel light-hearted at leaving my empty home in which there was nothing left but spiders, bread shovels, a table, and white traces from the icons that had hung in the corner of honor.

Beyond the village the road went steeply uphill. On either side of it bushy tufts of windfallen rye, millet and buckwheat shed their overripe grains, but mostly there were sun-scorched leafless weeds and cobwebs glittering coldly between them. Not far from the road somebody was ploughing with a single ox, breaking a black furrow through the gray weeds.

When I reached the hilltop, I turned around; far down in the dale beyond Artiliarschina my home village sprawled dreamily in the haze as on the palm of a hand — the river snaked in narrow bands across the meadows, the houses stood in white rows like marbs of unburned brick laid out by children, the sandy slope by the cemetery stretched in a yellow strip (it always saved the village from the floods), and a little farther on, in the deepest distance, stood a windmill resembling a little man who had run beyond the village, and its two high raised vanes, like two arms, seemed to wave me over: come here, come here.

I jogged down the other side of the hill, the bundle thrashed my back and slid towards my head like a yoke, and my eyes burned and smarted like from smoke. When I turned round breathlessly for the second time, the village had disappeared; only the two vanes showed over the horizon, but they did not wave me over any more.

How many years had passed since then — one, two, or three?

The snow crunched faintly behind my back. Ivanko had come up to me.

“What are you sitting here for?” he asked, the dimples playing on his gentle girlish cheeks. “Let’s go and catch tomtits.”

“How?”

“I’ll show you how.”

On the way he told me all the news from his world the radio operators were “sawing logs” because there had been a hurly-burly last night and they hadn’t slept their fill; his mother was baking bread; and he was set on catching tomtits which he did every winter (only this year he hadn’t because he was hiding in the cellar from the nazis lest they cart him off to Germany for forced labor). I also learned that he tied lengths of straw to the tomtits he caught and then let the birds loose.

“Why straw?” I asked.

“Just for kicks,” Ivanko guffawed. “It’s funny to see how the straw dangles in the air!”

He brought what looked like a butterfly net out of a shed, put it on the snow with its bottom up, threw a handful of millet under the net, then produced a stick from his pocket, tied a long string to the stick, propped up one side of the net with the stick so that a bird could easily flutter in under it, and in the end he had a kind of a collapsible snare. He did all this in a hurry, his protruding tongue locked between his teeth. When he had finished, he dragged me into the hall, and we hid behind the door to wait for the prey.

Two yellowhammers which up till then had been joyously chirping on the snow-covered twigs (they already sensed spring in the air) fell silent, cocked their heads quizzically, looked for some time at the millet from above, then got bolder and fluttered down to the ground. Ivanko shifted from foot to foot excitedly, his breath coming loudly between his parted puffy lips; he was concentrating so intently his saliva ran from the corner of his mouth.

The birds hopped warily closer and closer to the net, and presently one of them pecked a grain of millet near the stick.

"Come, come, come," Ivanko whispered, clutching the string so tightly his knuckles turned white. Suddenly he gave a jerk: "Whoop! It's ours."

The bird jumped up, hit the net with its back, fell to the ground, thrashed with its wings, then its head got stuck in the net, and it opened its little beak and squaked thinly. Ivanko took it out of the net and holding it in his clenched fist, froze for a moment, grinning:

"Oh, does its heart pound! I can feel it through the feathers. Here, listen to it."

"I don't want to."

This game wasn't much to my liking and I wanted to go into the house, although I was afraid: I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to look Katia in the eyes, because I was angry with her and couldn't figure out why.

"What if you let it loose?" I asked Ivanko irresolutely.

"Uhuh."

He opened his palm, and the bird darted off like a little bullet.

"There's no need to tie straw to it, is there?" he looked into my eyes. "It might get entangled somewhere, eh?"

I heard a sigh.

At that moment Djenjibarov appeared on the porch; he wore a round fur cap perched on his head at a rackish angle and a felt cloak reaching to his heels.

"Hello, boy!" he called out merrily, flashing his long yellow teeth. The moment he saw me, his face went awry, he squinted one eye, spat through his teeth, and asked: "And where did you come from? Who are you?"

"Nobody!" I said angrily and turned away.

"How do you like that!" Djendjibarov exclaimed in a jolly way and added indulgently: "Hoodlum."

"Romeo!" I countered, putting as much contempt into the word as I could, although I didn't understand what it meant, and also spat through my teeth.

Djenjibarov blinked in embarrassment, and turned away, pretending to be looking somewhere far off, and worrying at that, after which he pushed the fur cap down onto his brows and went to the wicket gate, kicking the tails of the felt cloak that almost trailed in the snow.

"Comrade Captain, Comrade Captain!" a thickset little soldier with a bald pate and large ears overgrown with bristles skipped out of the hall, and waved a box-calf boot pulled onto his hand.

"What's up?" Djenjibarov turned reluctantly.

"Our neighbors the radiomen asked yesterday for a horse and sleigh to get some wood from the forest, because the old lady hasn't anything to kindle the stove with, and you, being pretty well oiled yesterday — sorry! — promised them. So do we give it to them, or not?"

"Aaf coase," the soldier aped back (that must have been the Captain's orderly, Telniov). "He primises and I have to run to the squadron and beg!" He disappeared just as suddenly as he had appeared.

"Why did you talk like that to Djenjibarov?" Ivanko asked, and again looked up into my eyes as little children do.

"Because he was pawing me during the night, thinking I was Katia."

At first Ivanko arched his brows in surprise just like his mother Kindrativna did, and then he burst out laughing:

"So what? Big deal! Can't he have some fun?"

"What a crank you are," I said amicably, so as not to offend him, although such people as Ivanko didn't know how to be angry, and silently we went about picking up the snare.

## Chapter 7

The nag plodded through the steppe with drooping head, now and again sinking into the snow almost up to its chest. Whenever the sleigh ran into a snowdrift, Kalyuzhny jumped to the ground and smacking his lips, urged the nag on blandly as good drivers do and helped it by pushing the curbed end of the runners.

"You keep sitting up there, Khariton," he said, breathing heavily in my ear. "You're not that heavy a load."

The frayed edges of his greatcoat skirts were covered with icicles which beat against his kersey boots and jangled like pieces of glass.

Kotya walked whistling behind the sleigh, the tails of his padded jacket thrown behind his back. Rooks strutted importantly and unhurriedly across the steppe like worried churchwardens in gray waistcoats (when the Germans were around, all the rooks had little paunches and wore waistcoats as well); ahead of the horse, hares jumped up from time to time and bolted off across the plain with low-lying ears, Kotya whistled shrilly in their wake and shouted or

threw snowballs after them. When he swung his hand far back as if he were hurling a grenade, the medals on his chest flashed dazzlingly.

The sun was high in the sky already, and I could feel its warmth through my clothes; the horse's pelt gave off steam, and as it dried on the thin ribs, the pelt became striped. Far ahead showed a black forest fringed with a gray strip of snow-covered shrubs of either blackthorn or young hawthorn. We drove onto a road, the nag picked up speed, clattering over the glittering packed ice.

Kotya leaned against the side of the sleigh, propped his head in his palm, and started to sing quietly. After Kalyuzhny had settled on his canvas mail bag (on the way back he had to drop into the "division" deployed at the little railroad station of Treshivka and pick up the mail), he leaned me against his side with his free hand, and said:

"Well, Khariton, you'll stay with us for another night, and tomorrow we'll equip you for the road. You'll go home to your Poltava Region, all right? Come, come, don't be angry. Don't think anybody's chasing you away. I understand you're already a grownup boy, not so much in years as in your makeup. You don't need any lecturers because you've seen a lot as it is but, still, heed my advice. Tell me the truth, though: don't you really have any parents, or did you just run away from them to see the world, huh?"

He looked so intently and at the same time so kindly into my eyes that I didn't take the slightest offense at his suspicion and deep inside I felt warm, as hands do when the pain after chilblains disappears.

"It wasn't me who ran away from them, but the other way round," I said, feeling that I couldn't and didn't want to lie any more — I was tired of it. Besides, who else had I told the truth to, who had ever been interested in it throughout these past three years? If anybody was interested in it, it was only for the sake of diversion: they clacked their tongues, felt sorry for me, brought out a hunk of bread — and go your way, lad.

"How did it happen?" Kalyuzhny asked after a moment of silence.

I recalled how I had hung on to Mother's skirt when she stole out of our home at midnight, how I had grasped her warm red necklace on her high neck whitened by the moonlight, and the necklace snapped and the beads scattered in the grass in the middle of the yard, how Grandma went down

on her knees and wept, her hands outstretched, as if she wanted to block Mother's way, how she begged Mother to come to her senses — I told Kalyuzhny everything I remembered or had heard from Grandma during the long winter evenings, and everything I had made up when I played in the weeds or sat in the darkest corner on the stove, which made it seem to me bigger than the truth itself. In this way I had invented an imaginary father, and when Grandma showed me his photograph which she had taken off the wall and hidden in a trunk under all kinds of rags, I couldn't believe it was he, because "my" father was taller, broader in the shoulders and had a long, thick mop of hair and large moist eyes.

He had come home in a sullen mood that night, washed himself, combed the sawdust out of his hair, and, turning down Grandma's suggestion that he eat his evening meal, went into the pantry where his carpenter's bench stood and the fragrant yellow shavings lay so thick they reached to his knees. But he had not got down to work as usual. He sat on a stool by the window, picked up each tool, looked at it, stroked it with his palm, and stacked them all in a neat pile: when Grandma Martha came in to see him, he said: "Get me a bundle ready, Mum, because it seems I'll be leaving tonight."

"Goodness gracious, son, what are you talking about?" Grandma said, frightened, and burst into tears.

Instead of comforting her, Father seemed to have grown angry:

"There's no time for weeping, Mum; get my things ready."

I told Kalyuzhny everything as it had happened.

Before dusk when Father and Ida were finishing sawing the last aspen log and were in a hurry, our neighbor Danilo Ptakha drove up to them on his wagon. He stopped the horses, took a long custom-made cigarette out of the pocket of his new leather jacket, and lit up, puffing the smoke and squinting his eyes first at Father, then at Ida. Then he asked: "Which of you men has it easier, in fact — the one who's below, or the one who's above?"

Ida pulled the saw without saying a word (him dropping a word or two even in company was a rare occasion), while Father replied, wiping the sweat off his brow:

"The one who's asking."

Ptakha stopped puffing at his cigarette, screwed up one eye at Father, and said slowly: "As a matter of fact, Demian,

you wear your hair too long. Mind you, somebody might shorten it." He lashed the horse and drove off.

Then Ida said: "Demian, Ida suggest you touch him less, and he'll stink less then."

Next morning Father was gone.

He didn't even say goodbye to me, but only kissed me while I was sleeping and told Mother and Grandma: "Look after the boy. I'll be back safe and sound; I'll stand my trials."

I only remembered how he was taken to Poltava. It was on a cold drizzly day in late autumn; a heavy mist had obscured the willow trees on the dyke, the river, and the road which the rain had hollowed out down to the hard loam. From early morning the villagers had come out of houses and stood by their gates, not in groups but singly. Grandma held me in her arms and wept, but Mother kept silent, staring stonely ahead with her head raised high. To me it seemed that we had been standing like that for a long time. Now and again I asked when and from which direction Father would be coming, and Grandma wiped the tears off her eyes and whispered: "It'll be soon, my child, soon."

Suddenly I heard wheels clattering in the mist hanging over the bridge, the people at the gates stirred and walked to the river, and then Ida and Marko-Hot-Ziggity-Damn appeared beside us from somewhere and took off their caps.

Horses pranced in front and on either side of the string of wagons, but through the mist we saw only the outlines of the people in the wagons drifting past us.

"Natalia, my daughter, please look hard, because I can't see anything," Grandma whispered feverishly and pleadingly to Mother, shedding tears on my collar. "Oh my God, Marko and Yavtukh, look really hard."

Father was in the last wagon. I didn't recognize him through the mist, but only saw somebody standing in the wagon, obviously on his knees, and waving his raised hands. Then I heard his voice: "Sonny, Khariton my dear... Natalia, Mama, farewell, farewell! Marko, my friend, I swear on my honor that —"

The wagon driver clapped his mouth shut, shouted something, and Father fell silent, waving only his hands until he disappeared completely in the mist. Then Marko took my hand and all of us ran along the wattle fences after the wagon. Grandma kept slipping on the soggy ground, caught hold of fence poles and trees growing along the gardens and

said to me breathlessly over and over again, jabbing her finger into the mist: "Look, Khariton, there's your Dad. There he is, see him, see? Demian, my poor child... My God, was it for this I brought you into this world!"

We ran after the wagons all the way into a field beyond the village, but our way was blocked by a broad, water-filled dell, and we stopped at it as before a sea.

"Let's go back," Ida said. "See, we can't go any farther!"

We turned back. A little to one side Ptakha's wife walked with her child in her arms and wailed hysterically: her husband had also been taken away.

Marko sat me on his shoulders and trudged along with hanging head, repeatedly wiping his eyes wet with tears, and Ida sighed heavily like a tired ox, slapped the skirts of his wet woolen coat turned gray with hoar frost, and muttered: "If they've hauled off Demian, they might as well take me, too... and... and... Oh my, it serves us right."

The men stayed with us till dusk. After wrapping Father's tools in grease-soaked rags, Ida packed them in a cask and said: "If everything goes all right, they'll come in handy, so to speak... and if... you can sell them. They're good tools, and have been in hands of gold."

Marko sat at the table, his head clasped in his hands, and kept silent. When dusk descended, he got up, stood there hunched by the threshold, and said: "Who'll cut my hair now, huh?"

It was only then I realized that Father had not simply left somewhere for a while, but that's I wouldn't see him ever again. I buried my face in Grandma's apron and burst into tears.

The autumn that year was unusually long. Throughout the day it rained, in the night the wind howled in the elm tree in the yard and lashed against the gate so furiously it seemed it would tear it off its hinges any moment. The evenings were as gloomy as wakes. We would light the oil lamp to dispel the dusk for a while, kindle the stove, and go to bed. Grandma moaned on the stove and prayed in a whisper; Mother sighed and looked at the ceiling with eyes gleaming weirdly in the dark; but I seemed to hear somebody in the house working with a carpenter's plane — swish! swish!

When the frosts set in and the roads got better for walking, Mother took some papers she had written and rewritten several times, went to the district center, and only by evening was she back, tired and indifferent to everything.

"Nothing will come of that scribbling," she said to Grandma.

Another time she flung the papers on the table and shouted through her tears:

"He should've thought first and then shot his mouth off. But no, he was too smart-alecky to keep his trap shut. 'The one who's asking,'" she aped Father.

Grandma looked at her, frightened and overwhelmed, and said after a moment's pause: "Don't go there any more, daughter, because you're courting more trouble than doing any good."

But Mother kept forwarding her petitions. She did it the whole winter through. One day in spring she came back home in a cheerful mood — she seemed to have grown younger a day.

"Things are taking a turn for the better. They promised to appeal to the highest instance on my behalf," she told Grandma. From that time on she treated me more attentively and kindly, even played with me and started reading me fairytales in the evenings. When she came home late, she picked me up in her arms and kissed my cheeks, forehead, and eyes, hugging me frantically like someone gone mad.

At first it made Grandma happy, because she had thought Mother was too indifferent to me, and once she even said to Marko in a whisper, but loud enough for me to hear: "She's not a woman, but a poulard." Then she regarded this cuddling with mingled fear and disguised anger. I didn't understand what was going on, but I stopped nestling up to Mother with the ease and trust I had before. Once when she was standing in front of a mirror before leaving, Grandma asked her casually: "Why are you smartening yourself up so, Natalia — going on a visit to someone, or what?"

"Do you suggest I walk around in rags?" Mother replied, surprised, and I saw her face in the mirror blush and the hand holding the powder puff start.

"I see..." Kotya said, jumped off the sleigh and walked by our side. "So who did she — well, hm... hm... latch on to?"

"Kostya," Kalyuzhny looked reproachfully at him, but I didn't understand why and answered eagerly:

"Who knows. Grandma said it was the manager handling the appeals about Dad."

"We wised her up all right!" Grandma would add, and laugh like mad; in the evenings she didn't pray any more

but heaped abuse on God; then realizing she was committing a sin, she begged His forgiveness.

I was cold, probably because I had been sitting on the sleigh too long, or because something had begun to tremble violently inside me once I started on my sad story. It had happened to me before — at Melania's when I hurled the hammer at Lichak Sr. I must really have been ill with some disease.

"I see-e-ee," Kotya said, glancing at Kalyuzhny. "All right, I understand everything as far as your mother is concerned. But as to your father there's something fishy there, brother. Either your Grandma's kept something back from you, or you've forgotten it. It is incredible for a man to disappear just like that! No, no, that can't be. Am I right, Mikhailo Vasiliovich?"

Kalyuzhny dropped his head and was silent, jerking at the reins now and then.

"But if it had happened that way," Kotya was getting excited, "then... Now he tells us about those two friends of his father, and the way it comes out, they were good people. But as I see it, they're no more than a bunch of hicks! 'Who'll cut my hair now...' '...they might as well take me, too...' Well, aren't they hicks, after all? I'd twist off the head of anyone who lays a finger on a decent man, if I knew he was really decent, the more if he were my friend, a toiling man just like me! Well? Oh damn it! They took their caps off. Do you call those people, eh? 'The word *Man* has a ring of pride to it!' Doesn't it? Hicks, that's what they are!"

Kalyuzhny smiled sadly.

"You, Kostya, are a knight... and no more. Besides, a knight without a shield for all that it makes you look fine and wonderful."

By the forest the snowdrifts grew higher, the road wandered between bushes weighed down with heavy lumps of frozen snow that had thawed at the edges and glittered with sunlit drops. From under the bushes gaped black fox or hare burrows, and the freshly fallen snow was densely pocked with tangled tracks. On the edge of the forest, on either side of the road, some people were moving about, digging into the snowdrifts as the rooks did back in the steppe.

"What are they doing there?" I asked.

Kotya and Kalyuzhny exchanged glances.

"They're looking for the dead," Kalyuzhny said. "Last night there was a battle here..."

We came level with the truck that stood on the road, purring quietly and puffing blue smoke from under its wheels. An officer in a brand-new greatcoat sat in the cabin with a big notebook, placed on the steering wheel and jotted down something quickly, and around the opened door crowded soldiers leafed through tattered documents and reported:

"Milensky, Petro Fedorovich, soldier's book number 3462800, year of birth, 1922, Private..."

"Is she cute," a soldier clicked his tongue, as he looked at a snapshot. "I wouldn't mind fooling around with this one, ha-ha!"

"You're an animal, Petrov. That's what you are."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just make yourself scarce."

"Hey, mind your lip!"

"You lunkhead!"

"Cut it out!" the officer shouted from the cabin. "Next!"

"Dyatlov Inokentiy, book number..."

"Angry boys," Kotya said with a somber smile.

"That's because of their job," Kalyuzhny said.

A religious silence hung in the forest. Light puffy clusters of snow fluttered inaudibly from the trees and settled on the snowdrifts; the sun's rays fell slantwise through the naked twigs, here and there the trunks were pitted with fresh soft yellow notches from shell splinters, and it seemed that these wounded trees were moaning faintly, caressed by the sun's rays.

By the edge of the forest Kalyuzhny and Kotya left the nag (its hind legs immediately buckled under as if it were sitting down, and it dropped its head) and went to look for dry wood, sinking into the snowdrifts on their way.

"And you jog around the sleigh and warm yourself, Khariton," Kalyuzhny said and smiled in a way that made me start: in his smile there was something remarkably familiar and dear to me, which I had forgotten and must have been in my dream a long, long time ago.

Father! I remembered suddenly. Yes, that's how Father smiled. It had happened in a forest, and in winter as well. And we, too, had a jaded nag. And Father had said to me then: "Hop around, sonny, while I go and chase palsy-wolffy out of the forest."

What if he had said it on another occasion? Could be. But I knew for sure that it had been, it had.

When I saw Kalyuzhny bent under a long dry tree (its broken trunk was red inside) at the edge of the forest, I ran to him, grabbed a twig and gave him a hand, gasping and tugging more vigorously than was necessary, because I wanted to make his load much easier.

"Don't pull that hard, sonny" — that's exactly what he said: sonny! — "because it makes me stagger. I'm an old winded horse, eh?"

"No, no!"

"That's all right. I see you've got firm, strong hands."

We put the tree on the sleigh and stood facing each other, catching our breaths.

"Why do you look at me that way, sonny, as if you recognized me just now?"

"Fa..."

Kalyuzhny dropped his eyes, hastily took a tobacco pouch and piece of newspaper out of his pocket, and started to roll a cigarette, his fingers trembling from the effort it had cost him to carry the tree. Two large beads of sweat rolled down his temples from his gray hair and meandered onto his wind-browned neck lined with small red veins.

"Never mind, Khariton," he said, wiping his temples with his sleeve. "When the war's over, we'll live together, both of us. What about it?"

"I don't know..."

"Why not? You'll go to school. How many grades did you finish? Four? That's all right, you'll catch up. Then you'll enroll in a college or trade school — there are a lot of them in Kharkiv — and you'll get on in the world, a human among humans, as Shevchenko once put it. Do you know who that is?"

"I even know a poem of his."

"Which one?"

"This one:

*I grew up far away from home,  
My hair is graying there.  
A lonely man, I did believe  
That nothing in the realm of God  
Could match my glorious land  
And our Dnieper's grandly strand.  
But then I saw that all is well  
Wherever we don't dwell...*

Kalyuzhny listened attentively, and then he said:

"Well, that's not a poem but more like a maple leaf trifling this way and that. The war in it looks like a game. But is it really so? You've seen it for yourself, so you know. It isn't like that, is it?"

"Uhuh."

"Still, you'll have to get out of here as fast as possible, because the front line isn't there any more" — Kalyuzhny motioned with his head towards the west — "but on either side of us. Hear what was going on last night? See. The Germans wanted to cut us off and encircle us. Today they failed, but tomorrow they might succeed. That's it. The first thing you must do once you're home, ask around or go to the Village Soviet and find out whether there has been any mail from your father: right now everyone who's lived through this mess is looking for their dear ones, and only those keep silent who... If there's a letter from him, let him know that you're safe and sound, attend school, remember and wait for him. In a word, send him a cheery letter. As regards Mother, don't write to him what's happened for a while. Think up something. Well, for instance, that you've lost each other somewhere; there's been a war on, you know, and anything might have happened. Come on, stop scowling: I'm not so much concerned for her as for your dad. If there isn't any message for you, don't leave the village anyway, because I'll be looking for you after the war. And now let's write letters. What about it?"

"And what if they encircle you?"

"Don't you worry on that score. We'll slip out somehow. It's not the first time for us."

Kotya came up, lugging two trees on both shoulders, threw them into the sleigh, and wiped his face with his palm.

"Oh, what a fine thing work is, Mikhailo Vasiliovich, I'd just like to bend the bow and think of absolutely nothing else."

"You miss work, don't you?"

"You bet."

"And what about the suitcases — light, heavy, medium weight?" Kalyuzhny said, squinting his eyes. "You told us about them so vividly and with such deep knowledge of the subject."

"Suitcases?" Kotya gave a gay laugh. "Mikhailo Vasiliovich, those were just summaries of the observations I made on the station platform in the evenings after work. In the

Donbas a platform and railroad station are generally a place of leisure, rendezvous, and amusement: trains, passengers, beer, engineers carrying steel tool boxes... I don't know how it is at other places, but in our Debaltseve it was a custom to meet them. Women and children stood at the end of the platform by the warehouses, waiting for husbands and fathers to drive in the trains. They unmistakably recognized the hooting of the engine whistle which roused them even in their sleep. The women would say: 'There goes my man.' The parents: 'That's our Petro or Mikola.' The kids: 'That's Father whistling.' My most cherished childhood dream was to become a driver of an FD locomotive and drive armored trains. I'd be wearing an old leather jacket, the peak of my cap low over my brows, shells exploding ahead and behind the train, I'd slam on the brakes abruptly, grasp my wounded shoulder but wouldn't let go of the levers. 'You're wounded,' the stoker would shout. 'Comrade Kuzovchikov, let me bandage your wound!' 'Later, there's no time for that now.' I'd say through clenched teeth... Oh well... There's only one thing that doesn't sound serious for such a scene — it's my name which I don't like. Now imagine: Chapayev, Holota, Zhukhrai, Korchagin, and then... Kuzovchikov. Wouldn't you call that a tragedy?"

We returned to the unit when the sun was already at its zenith. In the middle of a field a number of soldiers were digging a huge pit, while the rest were bringing the dead to it, carrying them by their arms and legs. The truck was standing on the road as before, in the cabin the officer was sleeping, his arms and head resting on the steering wheel, the opened notebook with straight columns of names was lying at his side on the seat, and his body was trembling in time with the running engine.

"One hundred and seven dead," Kotya said, glancing into the notebook as we passed by. "And that's only after an hour and a half..."

The black mound in the snow, where the communal grave was being dug, was rising fast, probably because the earth wasn't frozen underneath, and the diggers were standing in the pit up to their shoulders.

"War, Kostya, like any other dangerous, fear-motivated period on a man's life, is horrible in that its primary victims are self-sacrificing people who live by the principle: 'If I exist only for myself, why do I exist at all?'" Kalyuzhny said, putting the flattened mail bag across his shoulder

(ahead showed the road running to the railroad station where the black mushroom outlines of a water tower rose above the snow). "A petty, egotistical man, who's motivated by caution in regard to himself and to his strictly personal interests — a philistine, in short — survives, because he's a parasite better adapted to life and has a more developed instinct for self-preservation. Every violence against the spirit and body of man is the best nourishing medium for a philistine, like, say, manure for a worm, and it's the most favorable circumstance for his self-assertion and prosperity. 'I survived, because I was apt' — that's his formula and gospel and behest to posterity. How he managed to do it is of no consequence. He might have kept his mouth shut, hidden behind someone's back in battle, played the fool, or else lacking brains or tack like that Ptakha, grabbed power and abused it. In the end, what difference does it make? When you think of it, who started this war — Hitler, Goebbels, Ribbentrop? Oh no. The philistine, the *Spießbürger* did it. From the outset Hitler staked on the philistine's gluttony, conceit, and his so-called *Patriotismus*, destroying thereby not only the citizen, but the very concept of citizenship. Mankind knows the theory and practice of class struggle. That's a great discovery. But it doesn't yet know the theory or practice of fighting the philistine, because he doesn't belong to a class or clearly definable social category, he's just a social type. If we manage to do away with the philistine and the conditions that breed him, that is, violence, then we humans will be able to say: we've bettered the animal in ourselves once and for all."

"I see you've missed your profession as well," Kotya remarked.

"I did, to tell you the truth," Kalyuzhny agreed. "I haven't held a single history book in my hands for the past three years, but, believe me, I seem to know the subject much better now than I did before the war. I've felt it with my own skin!"

"Just like I did the work today," Kotya concurred and looked at me with reflectively serious and clever eyes. "That's it, Khariton Demianovich," he added. "You and me've got to learn, brother, to learn..."

*Doesn't Katia really see that he is the best of them all?* I thought. Then and there I vowed never ever to look at her the way I had the previous night. Suddenly I felt easy at heart and joyful in this first secret in my life. Only once

had I experienced something similar when I had given away my best toy (the cuckoo from Grandma's clock) to Ptakha's daughter, although at the time it had made Grandma angry. "Of all the people to give such a present to," she had said.

At the crossroads between the village and the railroad station, Kalyuzhny tied the ear flaps of his cap under his chin (the evening frost was setting in), hid his hands in his sleeves, gave Kotya and me a smile, saying, "Goodspeed," and trudged on through the snowdrifts, pressing the empty mailbag to his side with an elbow. Then he turned round, gave a nod, which, as I understood, was meant for me, and walked on, shortish and hunched in his long greatcoat girded below the half-belt.

We had driven up almost as far as the village when a long column of people in civvies came marching in our direction.

"Are those evacuees, or what?" Kotya said, looking intently.

We turned to the roadside and halted.

The column, led by a number of military, was quickly approaching. It was a mingled crowd of old, young, tall; short men with smiling, glum and nondescript faces; they wore padded jackets, sheepskin coats, faded tarpaulin raincoats pulled over warm winter clothing of white, black, one-colored, or coarse woolen cloth, with knapsacks on their backs, the snow crunching rhythmically beneath their feet.

"Hey, don't tread on my heels!" somebody said from the column.

"Walk properly then, without gaping around."

"Mitka, lift the right foot!"

"I've got my own feet, so why should I lift another? Ha-ha!"

"Quit your chattering!"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Silence!"

"Did you hear!"

"He started it, not me."

And suddenly: "Uncle Kostya, Khariton! Here I am! I'm here!"

Almost at the end of the column there was Ivanko marching. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes glittered with excitement, and the corners of his mouth were depressed into dimples.

"What the hell!" Kotya exclaimed, ran up to the column, and pulled Ivanko out of it. "How do you happen to be here? What was Stovolos doing? How come they took you?"

"Why not?" a cheerful Ivanko asked wonderingly. "They took me and that's all there was to it. A captain came to our home, asked my name and whether I wanted to join up. I said I did. So he told me to get my things ready and come to the school. Stovolos interfered: 'He's staying with our unit, Comrade Captain.' To which the Captain said: 'Come on, Lieutenant, stop that amateurish recruiting business.' It all ended in a row. So what? I think it turned out for the better. We'll be issued uniforms and submachine guns, they told us. All of us will be submachine gunners! And after a training course we'll be manning the defences."

"Catch up!" a voice called from the column.

Kotya ran off with Ivanko, holding his arm round the boy's shoulder over which hung a white canvas bundle, and gave him hasty advice as he waved with his free hand. But Ivanko must have been an unresponsive listener, because he turned round and shouted to me:

"Khariton! Do you hear me? The net's in the barn, and the stick and string, too, behind the door. If you want to catch tomtits take all that. Do you hear me?" His voice broke into a tremor.

I tore the cap off my head and waved him goodbye. Kotya hugged him, kissed him, and kept on advising. In the end, Ivanko ran off, turning round time and again, tripped, his stride faltered, and when he joined the column he flashed us a smile for the last time.

"The boy'll be cut down before his time," Kotya said, turning, and kept silent all the way to our billet.

Dolorous dusk filled the room. Kindrativna and Katia sobbed quietly, their heads close together, and each time one of them suggested they stop crying, they burst out anew.

"He'll perish, my little falcon. He's so silly and reckless," Kindrativna whispered. "I hope he'll at least have a good friend who's older and cleverer to look after him and advise him when necessary."

Stovolos sat in the other room, the earphones clapped onto his temples, and stared at the green light of the radio station pulsating faintly in the dusk — there was something alarming about his posture which seemed to convey

the foreboding of a coming storm, probably because the station remained silent. From the other half of the house came the whining voice of a drunken Djenjibarov singing a melancholy song.

Kotya, who had been silently busying himself with a dismantled telephone by the light of a kerosene lamp, said to Stovolos, without turning round:

"I would've gone to the divisional CO, to Army Group headquarters, but I wouldn't have let the boy go."

Stovolos jumped to his feet from behind the radio station, knocked the earphones to the back of his head, and exclaimed in a thin voice:

"Comrade Kuzovchikov, you may well not respect me, but you must respect my knowledge and not interfere in my actions!"

Kotya gave a shrug, and bent lower over the dismantled telephone. There followed a lengthy silence, after which Kotya said quietly:

"I'm sorry, Roman, I realize you couldn't do anything about it, I'm sorry..."

The dusk inside the room was deepening, detonations thundered dully somewhere nearby and airplanes dashed past, alternately droning maddeningly and then fading abruptly away. I looked out the window: the glow from the explosions rose in two columns over the white wraith-like trees beyond the orchard; they rose quickly, gained in breadth, filling the room with fitful black-pink reflections.

Djenjibarov continued wailing his song.

"Goodness gracious, if only he'd shut up," Kindrativna moaned. "God forgive me, he's howling like a dog before a fire. Katerina, black-out the window and light the lamps."

Kotya slowly got up from the bench, and covered the windows, while I found an oil lamp in the darkness, lit it, and sat down on the floor by the stovebed, without taking my coat off. After talking over something in whispers with Stovolos, Kotya entered the smaller part of the room; that same instant Katia dropped her head and her fingers started running across the tassels of her black flowerpatterned kerchief. Kotya said:

"Today, ma'am, our boys'll be back from the rear in a truck, so you'd better pack your things, what you need most. The Senior Lieutenant will tell the driver to take you away from here to, let's say, Znamyanka. Have you got any relatives or good friends there?"

"Thank you, son," Kindrativna said. "I haven't any relatives or friends anywhere. Even if I had, I wouldn't budge from this place."

"You must understand that staying here is dangerous now," Kotya said sternly. "Any day, if not any hour, there might be a battle here."

"Oh, we'll sit it out somehow," Kindrativna said with a sigh. "We've been here through the whole war, and now you suggest... How can I leave with Ivanko not far away?"

"Ivanko's a soldier now, and you can't be of any help to him, Ma."

At the last word Katia shot him a quick glance and blushed.

"No, no," Kindrativna shook her head. "Don't you even take the trouble."

"And will you be staying here when the battle breaks out?" Katia asked in a barely audible voice.

"We're soldiers, too, dear little Katia," Kotya smiled at her. "We'll be where they order us to be."

At that moment a truck chugged outdoors, and voices were heard. Then someone rapped on the window.

"Open up, the trucks's here!"

Kindrativna turned up a corner of the cloth on the window and looked outside.

"I'm coming, my dears," she said and went to open the door.

"Come in, boys!" a man called from the other side of the window.

A lot of feet thumped by the house, the hallway door creaked open.

"Carry in this way... So, lift it higher..."

"Oh, my God, who's that?!" Kindrativna cried out and gave a moan.

The door opened and soldiers carrying something heavy covered with a greatcoat in a cape, came into the room backward, their boots sweeping aside the straw on the floor. Kindrativna came running into the room behind them, knocking her shoulder against the door jamb.

"Tell me, tell me, who is it!" She fell on her knees and pulled the greatcoat away.

On the cape lay Kalyuzhny, his legs huddled up like a child's and the mail bag pressed to his stomach; his cold blank eyes were wide open, blood had seeped in between the fingers clasped over the bag, his neck was stretched out

unnaturally, which made the stiff collar look like the hoop of a sieve.

Kindrativna let go of the blood-stained greatcoat and whispered:

"Mikhailo Vasiliovich, why couldn't you be more careful, huh? Oh my God."

Kotya went down on his knees, took Kalyuzhny by the hand and pulled it lightly, but the fingers would not unclasp and crackled instead.

"Feeling the pulse?" Stovolos asked. "What, there's none?"

"What pulse are you talking about!" Kotya replied angrily. "He's cold. His hands must be folded and the eyelids closed."

One of the soldiers huddling by the threshold with caps in their hands (I recognized two of the men who had been sleeping back in the truck when I joined them), said:

"He — well, slipped away back at Trepovtsi. Small wonder — with such a splinter in his stomach. An entire bomb stabilizer hit him."

Kotya glanced at me and said:

"Take off your cap, Khariton."

I got up by the stovebed, and without taking my eyes off Kalyuzhny's dull gaze, went outside into the orchard. A cramp as stiff as noose had constricted my throat; I didn't cry but made what sounded like a squeak, and when I tried to clear my throat the squaks only became thinner; my head filled with something hot and my ears and neck started to hurt. The last thing I remembered was falling and plunging into the warm miry mush of the night; I seized a cold apple tree twig but failed to hold on to it.

## Chapter 8

A young vernal sun blazed glaringly over the steppe. The black strips of earth exhaled swimming vapors which distorted the outlines of the houses, trees, and telegraph poles in the distance, and through the gullies and wooded valley streaks of snow looked like white handkerchiefs waving farewell.

Leaning on a stick, I was barely able to drag myself along. After walking the length of a furrow or two and spying a dry patch of ground, I sat down for a rest. My legs felt weak, little hammers kept tapping away somewhere

in my temples, and it hurt my eyes to look at the trembling air, so I shut them tight and put my head on my bent knees.

The food I had about me was scanty: a stale loaf of soldier's bread cut in large uneven hunks, a piece of margarine, and a matchbox with salt. As a matter of fact, I couldn't wish for more, because I didn't feel like eating what I had. I'd break off a piece of bread, dip it first in the margarine the sun had melted in my knapsack, then in the salt, chew it all, drink some water from a dented aluminum hip flask, and move on at a sluggish pace. I had been on the move for two weeks now, but I still hadn't reached the Dnieper. Everything was heavy for me: the knapsack with the food, the clothes, my legs, and even the stick. I tried to walk without it, but I reeled, for my illness had made me pathetically weak. But now things were on the mend, as Grandma Martha used to say. With every passing day the memories of the last night at Tridoli, when I had been taken ill so unexpectedly, surfaced in my mind as if out of a mist with ever increasing frequency.

I didn't remember how long I had lain in the snowdrift in the orchard. I only heard somebody calling me as in a dream, people talking nearby, saws swishing, hammers beating, shovels ringing against frozen ground, but I couldn't either get up or respond to the call, let alone move, because my body seemed to have broken into bits and pieces, none of which would obey or submit to the other.

It was Kotya who found me. He picked me up in his arms (I had a feeling I weighed no more than a feather) and carried me into the house, huffing me in the face:

"Oh my, you've really gone to pieces, brother Khariton. That's no way to take things."

The house was filled with soldiers. They rummaged in the blood-stained letters that had spilled out of the bag right onto the floor, and pushed towards the oil lamp to make out who the letters were addressed to. Kalyuzhny was lying in a coffin made of old gray boards — he was lean as a boy, gray-haired, his eyes already shut. Kindrativna sat by the coffin, Katia wasn't around, for she must have hidden on the stove, while in the other room the radio operators were bustling, telephones were ringing, and the lights on the panel of the radio station were pulsating hectically.

Then Telniov, Kotya and another two soldiers carried out the coffin. A reeling Djenjibarov kept looking into it over

their heads, and mumbled: "Oh my, my... the old man didn't look out, huh? He didn't look out at all."

What happened next I didn't remember, because I must have fallen asleep. I woke up in the back on the truck, my head bumping against something hard and blunt. The sky was turning gray, the truck swelled into a snarling roar, shells were exploding somewhere close by, the splinters whistled and clattered against the cabin of the truck. Somebody pressed me to the iron-bound platform of the truck and yelled:

"Ma'am, Katia, keep your heads down, your heads! Come on! Lie down I tell you!"

It was Stovolos. One side of his body was on top of me with his elbow stuck in my chest, while with his other hand he held Katia by the shoulder and pulled her toward him. His mouth was twisted to one side, the cap over his ear was torn, and from under it a narrow rivulet of blood ran towards his chin.

"What about Kotya, where's Kotya?" I cried out, pushing away Stovolos' shoulder with both hands. "Where's Kotya, I'm asking?"

"Lie still, kid!" Stovolos angrily threw me down and pressed me against the sideboard again.

The truck was thrown to all sides, some pieces of iron clattered, crates slid back and forth and jumped up, and I kept pushing them away with my feet. Then a red column of fire flared up almost by the sideboard, I was tossed into the air, powder smoke bore down on me, burned in my eyes, and that instant I started to breathe easier, because nobody was pressing on my chest any more.

*That's good. If only we'd drive on like that,* was the last thought that flashed through my mind, and then a warmth as soft as sheepskin enveloped me.

I came to in a house, lying on powdery straw. On either side of me people were lying in white bandages, an oil lamp was fluttering (it was hard to tell whether it was morning or evening), a sharp smell of medicine hung in the air. By a bench knelt a woman; her forehead pressed against the bandaged chest of a soldier.

She cried, repeating in a whisper:

"Dmitro, my darling... Don't keep silent... Say a word at least, you hear?"

I recognized Melania and wanted to call her, but my voice failed me — no more than a hiss escaped my lips, and

again I was lulled to semi-consciousness in the warm sheepskin. I only heard someone entering and going out of the house, waves of cold rolling onto my legs and settling there, someone touching my hands and covering me with something heavy. Then a man said in Russian in a firm, slightly hoarse bass:

"Take that woman away!"

"All right, so what's the matter? Is he your husband or brother? Oh, just an acquaintance? Go out, go out, please! Unauthorized persons are not admitted here. What? Take care of who? We've got people to take care of him!"

I, too, must have been saying something, because I was lightly roused, someone bent down so close to me I smelled tobacco on his breath, and asked:

"What are you talking about, boy? Kotya, Kotya... What nonsense. Who are you asking for? Oh, Stovolos, I don't know, my dear, I don't know."

Then the man said to someone else in a stern angry tone:

"I believe I ordered that no one let anybody in! What? To see the boy. All right, let him enter."

I opened my eyes. Kotya stood by the threshold. His face was pale, unshaven, and his gray sickly lips flashed me a smile. One of his arms was bandaged and pressed to his chest, and in the other he held his cap. Kotya took one step toward me and squatted at my side.

"Safe and sound I see!" he said with a lopsided smile. "That's a fine lad."

"You wounded?" I asked and heard my own voice for the first time.

"Been pecked a little."

"What about Katia, Kindrativna, Stovolos — where are they?"

"Katia's dead," he said in an indistinct voice and turned away. "The Senior Lieutenant is dead, too. Both of them were cut to pieces so horribly it was difficult to recognize them. You were brought here by our truck driver. Kindrativna is alive, though. Ivanko, too. He's laid up in a neighboring house. A splinter got him right in the knee cap."

"What happened that night?"

"There was a breakthrough as we had expected. And Mikhailo Vasiliovich... Remember? Come, come, don't cry. We've got a war here, after all. There's nothing you can do about it."

## A BLINKING FIRE FAR ON THE STEPPE

We were admitted to the trade school together: the three Vasils — Vasil Silka, Vasil Obora, Vasil Kibkalo — and me. My name is actually Pavlo, but I'm nicknamed Pavlentyi. Well, to tell you the truth, that nickname is something I'm to blame for myself.

The Vasils were accepted right away, but I was rejected on the grounds of my being still young. The boys were dressed in school uniform then and there: brand-new khaki forage caps, brand-new service shirts also khaki, with a breast pocket (not two pockets like with military shirts, but one) trimmed with thick white thread, pants, brogans, broad tarpaulin belts, and even two pairs of socks which we had only heard of but never worn in our lives. In addition, they were told that apart from all that, they would eventually receive gray greatcoats of soldier cloth and winter caps.

But I remained in what I had come in — I won't say what I was dressed in, because that isn't too cheerful a story anyway.

The boys were brightly happy, fingered their uniforms, tried to recognize one another in their new garb, and were so flushed with joy that their forage caps had slipped down the backs of their heads. On looking himself over in his new clobber, Vasil Silka clapped his hands, wheeled round on his heel, and exclaimed with what sounded like a neighing of a colt:

“That me, or not? Or is it a brand-new coin?”

I, too, fingered their uniforms and tried to smile as well, but I can't have managed to do more than twist my mouth, and my eye started to twitch. Whenever I felt bad, my eye started to twitch.

On the way back to the village, the Vasils comforted me, saying that I'd certainly be accepted next year, by which time their uniforms would be worn, while mine would be new; they'd keep on being my pals — together we'd steal straw from the fields at night, knock down stumps in the meadow for firewood, and play the balalaika in two parts on Sunday evenings, with me playing the tambourine. At

that time I had a home-made tambourine, with dog's skin stretched over the frame, and beat it to the tune of the Vasils' balalaikas: I had a poor ear for music, so the only instrument for me was the tambourine. They went on comforting me to a point where I nearly burst into tears. Well, somehow I managed to keep myself in check in the end.

*What would I say back home?* I thought. It would have been better had I not come home at all.

"Well, Pavlo, how did you leap the fences?" Auntie Yalosoveta asked me the moment I stepped across the threshold, and looked at me with such hope my eye started to twitch again.

"I wasn't accepted. Too young, I was told," I barely managed to get it out for the lump tickling my throat.

She sat down on the much-used plank bed adjoining the stove, with two uncovered pillows at the head, and burst out crying.

"What'll happen now?" She looked at me with wretched eyes filled with tears. "What'll happen now, huh?"

"I don't know. Guess I'll have to find myself a job."

"Dressed in those clothes? Just take a look at yourself. And what will we eat? The grain we threshed wasn't even enough to meet the state delivery quota." She burst into tears again, covering her eyes with the palm of her hand.

She loved to weep.

I stole quietly out of the house, found a rope in the hallway, and made for the river bank: maybe I would come across a piece of dry alder or willow for firewood — I had to raise her spirits, so that she wouldn't cry throughout the night at any rate.

Auntie Yalosoveta was my stepmother. She married my dad "for the child" when I was nine years old, and had lived with him exactly one month when the war broke out, while with me she was worrying her head off for the sixth year now. I didn't call her Mother but once — my tongue somehow couldn't stir to say that. If dad had been around, maybe then... She was hurt on that account, believing that I did it on purpose to spite her. Oh well, I had to find her a piece of dry alder and she'd get over crying. She was always glad when there was something to kindle the stove with. But first I had to find the piece of alder — that was the trick! I told her more than once that she should remarry, and I would get along on my own somehow. She wept. All right,

let her have her way. I'm not forcing her, after all. We lived with her in crammed quarters, because the bigger part of our house had been blown away by a bomb. Half of our villagers didn't have houses to live in — so fierce were the battles in these parts. Never mind, I'd chop some wood, she'd cook me something to eat, and then we'd see. She wasn't likely to cry with a spoon in her hand!

Twilight was creeping upon the river and the air was growing colder. The glow of the setting sun had pierced the river right to the bottom and was shining from down there. Here and there between the water plants grew dense clusters of white lilies, like gulls that had settled on the water. Here I once fished out the logs from our ruined house. The door was floating there almost intact and so were the boards. As for the windows, there wasn't a single splinter. I caught a board and steered it to the shore, kicking with my feet. My teeth were chattering and I couldn't close my lips for the icily cold water. Auntie Yalosoveta picked up what I had steered to the shore and carried into the farmyard. For a month thereafter I suffered with a cough, since I had caught a cold. Next summer, with the harvest being better, we'd patch up the other half of the house. But right now I had to find some dry wood to cook the evening meal. Never mind, she'll cry my failure away and get over it.

Next day Auntie Yalosoveta took me to the school. I myself wouldn't have had the courage but she certainly had!

We went straight to the director.

The director was in his office by himself. Standing by the window with his back to the door was a shortish man leaning on a shiny lacquered cane and looking out into the schoolyard, from which carried the discordant commands to "fall into columns of four." It was September 1st.

When we had come in and stopped by the threshold, the director glanced round. His clothes were completely military with a sword belt across one shoulder, but without any shoulder straps: on his service shirt were two orders and decoration bars. He looked first at Auntie Yalosoveta, then at me. There was a sort of frozenly attentive look of surprise in his gray prominent eyes.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Auntie Yalosoveta burst into tears right away and started telling him that our house had been "blown into the river by a bomb" and that we lived in this house like in a den,

without any clothes and food. I stood there, staring at the floor, my clammy hand clutching my rolled-up documents: application, birth certificate, record card for fifth grade, and autobiography. I was embarrassed by Auntie Yalosoveta telling everything about us, true as it was, and making much of me besides:

“He’s an obedient and hard-working boy. Don’t mind him being small. He’ll grow up. He studies well and gets only excellent marks. If I had the means to support his further studies, would I have brought him here? But as it is, it might look like I’m getting rid of the child...”

“How old are you?” the director asked, shifting his attentive and surprised look from Auntie Yalosoveta to me.

I handed him my documents. He ran his eyes over them and smiled. Auntie Yalosoveta was looking pleadingly at him.

“There’s nothing wrong with him being small.” The director sized me up, while I stood there afraid to breathe. I stood stock still and held my breath. “We’ll make him a footstool so he can reach the machine tool. But he isn’t fifteen yet...”

“Oh, he hasn’t much to go — only one month to fifteen.”

The director looked my record card over once again and my application (I had written it in my best handwriting, almost drawing the letters in all their details), and asked suddenly:

“What’s that name you’ve got here — Pavlenti?”

Auntie Yalosoveta also looked at me in surprise.

“Why Pavlenti? His name is Pavlo Trokhimovich.”

I fixed my eyes on my dusty bare feet, feeling little needles pricking my ears, cheeks and neck, and making me burn all over for that matter. Of all the names to call myself — Pavlenti!

And here’s how it happened. Once our neighbor, the old woman Pron, asked me to read her a letter she had received from her daughter Olga who lived in the Donbas. Well, I read everything there was to read in it, including the date below and the signature: Olga Pavlovna Pron.

“How do you like that?” the old woman said happily and became stuck-up. “While she was a pig tender here the only thing they called her was Olga Pronka. But now she’s mixed with people, she’s Olga Pavlovna!”

Later on, when I was writing the application to the trade school, I thought that once I got there, I’d be associating

with real people as well. So instead of Pavlo I went and dashed off Pavlenti.

"Well then, Pavlo... Trokhimovich," the director said. "Now you're my responsibility. We'll make an excellent student out of you."

His artificial limb stuck in a box-calf officer's boot and creaked as he went up to the desk, dragging the limb after the cane. After writing something in red pencil on the application, he held it out to me. He smelled of the sun-warmed sword belt and of *Kazbek* \* cigarettes.

"Take this to the supervisor of the storehouse here in the schoolyard in the basement. Tell him I've asked him to find a uniform of the smallest size for you. But mind you, we've got strict discipline, almost like in an army. I'm telling you that so you won't get any ideas of dropping out. Come tomorrow for classes in the fifth group. You'll be with the keenest group — the fifth."

Auntie Yalosoveta bowed to him really low and said through her tears:

"Thank you, kind man!"

The director looked at her sternly, the surprise in his eyes chillier than at the start of our meeting.

"Stop that," he said, adding then in a kinder tone: "This is not my private school, woman."

On the way to the storehouse I asked her angrily:

"Why did you have to bow to the man?"

"How do you like that, smart aleck!" she flared up as well. "How else could I thank him?" Her fit of anger didn't last long, and she said with relief: "Oh, thank God!"

Even the smallest uniform was too big for me: after I had girded up the service shirt it bulged on my back, and the pants were too broad and about a quarter longer than they should be, so I had to shove the lower edges into the socks. The brogans and forage cap, however, fitted me perfectly.

"That's all right," Auntie Yalosoveta kept saying, tugging at my uniform on all sides; I felt her fingering the cloth. "It's sturdy. We'll go to the tailor and have it shortened." Then she asked the storehouse supervisor: "What about the meals around this place? Are they three times a day?"

The supervisor, with a pock-marked face and quick-shifting eyes, replied merrily:

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\* *Kazbek* — brand of Russian cigarettes with cardboard mouth-piece — Tr.

"Three times, lady. Although all of the meals are watery, they're hot. Also, there's seven hundred grams of bread a day. That's no joke for you; it's just a little less than a miner's ration."

We walked home quickly, because Auntie Yalosoveta had asked leave from work only for half a day. By the Pisarev Forest a thresher was rattling away, and a cloud of dust and chaff hovered over it. The day was sunny and bright.

"Oh, how sunny it is!" Auntie Yalosoveta said and pushed her kerchief back onto her shoulders in a girlish manner. "That director is handsome, sort of unusual-looking. He's different from our men; a cultured person, I'd say..."

"I told you to go and marry. But no, you won't listen."

"You're too silly still to offer me advise," she said without taking offense. "All people are beautiful when they're kind." She walked with a light tread, and radiated joy. Time and again she looked at me from the side.

"You know, you look taller in the brogans, as if you've grown up right before my eyes. That's because of the heels, I guess."

"After I've got an education I'll buy you a pair of high-heeled boots, too," I said. I was so joyful at heart that I even tried to say "mother" in my mind, but nothing came of it. So I walked on silently. The uniform rustled on me as if it had been starched. *Never mind, it'll cling to me in no time*, I thought. I reached into my breast pocket and groped for the new pencil we had bought for twenty kopecks in a bookstore, for according to the schedule, we were to have a class in engineering drawing next day.

And here I was, standing in my fifth group in the very last line called "shrimp line." The commands "Dress!" and "Attention!" rang as the foremen, after having heard out the reports of the class monitors, reported to the director on who was present or absent and why. Those in front of me turned their heads in response to the command "Eyes center!" and snapped to attention, while the deeper lines hummed and giggled and pushed one another — nobody cared about them, which was especially true of our group, because we had already been studying for five days but didn't have a foreman yet. The reason why was explained differently — some boys believed that one hadn't been found yet, while others said that foremen were available but none of them wanted to take

on our group. That was why the other nine groups — including the “mechanics” and “joiners” — who had foremen instructors had already had production practice, while we marched off to an old two-story building called study building for “theory” every day after breakfast. The classrooms were small and stuffy with little elbow room at the desks; writing was next to impossible, and if you tried to write, you brushed against your neighbor. The classrooms here were called “lecture halls.” We had already had two classes in political studies, engineering drawing, physics, technology of metals (that’s about what metals there are and what’s done with them), and a dictation in Russian.

We were commanded by a monitor called Grishukha, a lean, stern-looking boy from an orphanage, who had red down on his upper lip. Almost all the boys in our group had come from an orphanage. There were twenty-three of them and each stood up for the other, looked straight and boldly at you, and called us seven country boys hicks or bumpkins, not in an angry way, but one that seemed more for fun. Occasionally such a boy would approach his country classmate, clutch a button on his service shirt and start twisting it, looking straight into his eyes: “Got an orchard back home, hick? So bring me some pears and I’ll stand up for you. Oh, you don’t have any? Now what sort of a hick are you then?” Me they didn’t pick on. Once one of them was about to press me to bring some “eats” from home, but Grishukha stopped him: “Come off it; he’s one of our lot.” Apparently he knew our biographies. I felt myself a stranger in this fifth group and shivered inside, although the sun was shining and the trees around the parade ground were ash-gray with sparrows chirping and warming themselves in the sun. I wanted to steal away from the “shrimp line” past the rows of backs to make it look as if I had to relieve myself. Then I’d skirt the clubhouse — and off home. I imagined myself walking to the village down the road lined with telephone poles. A thresher droned in the field, the smoke from the steam engine floated over the ground and smelled of warmth, by the forest a tractor was plowing up a field that had been under millet. I’d walk into the forest, drink water from a spring, and eat some wild wind-fallen pears. They were matted with leaves at this time of year. I’d cover the leaves with the palm of my hand — and there I’d feel something hard underneath. If it wasn’t a cartridge, it’d be a pear — soft, brown inside, and melting in my mouth. The

next day I'd bring back my uniform while it was still new. Well, how do you like that! Here, I, Pavlenti (of all names!), had begged for admission myself and seen the director about it, and now I wanted to drop out. Oh no, fellow, you stay put! I tiptoed to see my Vasils in the first group of "mechanics of agric. machines," which was the oldest and best educated group. I didn't see the Vasils, because all the forage caps looked alike as did the close-cropped heads.

Shortly after, the groups, starting with the first, marched off across the parade ground to the mess hall one after another. Up front were the foremen, and to one side of the columns walked the monitors, commanding "Left! Right! Left!..." The columns marched with a clumsily awkward tread, stamping the ground in time with the commands "Left! Right!" The director and teachers saluted each group with a faint smile.

Our fifth group, though, remained standing on the parade ground. We stood not in formation by now, but in a bunch.

"Hey, what's the matter?" the boys from the orphanage shouted.

"Grishukha, lead us off for chow!"

The monitor, who stood with his back to us, turned round and said slowly, with a whistling sound:

"Husssh!"

The orphanage boys must have been rather afraid of him, because they clammed up right away.

Suddenly someone called out:

"Brothers, there comes the foreman!"

Out of the schoolyard, into which the last, tenth group had marched just then, the director was walking our way, quickly dragging his left foot behind his lacquered cane. At his side, barely keeping up with him, a little old man was mincing along. He was dressed in a school uniform so brand-new it bulged much more than mine; the front tail of his service shirt reached below his knees, and as he walked it flapped like an apron; the tarpaulin belt with the nickel-plated buckle inscribed TS was girded right under his chest; his pants swept up the dust, and a long boot string kept jumping out from under one pant leg with every step. When he said something to the director and turned sideways to us, we saw... Oh no, he wasn't a hunchback at all, as it seemed to us at first glance, but he stooped so much it looked as if an accordion was hanging over his shoulder under the shirt. The old man was swinging his arms in military fashion,

very funnily, like a boy pretending to be marching in formation.

We froze and held our breath, just as I had done in the director's office some day earlier. Grishukha shot out his right hand and commanded:

"In two ranks, fall in!"

While we were shoving and pushing one another to get into the front line by any means, the director and foreman had come up. We hadn't lined up properly and Grishukha hadn't dressed our ranks yet, when the foreman put his fingertips to his right ear, stuck out his chest as much as the "accordion" behind his back allowed, and shouted in a brisk, thin voice:

"How do you do, comrade students of Group Five!" Then he flashed at us a completely toothless smile.

Everything would have been all right, if he hadn't clicked his tied brogan against the untied one in such a dashing way he almost knocked himself off his feet and the loose string jumped to one side of his boot.

"How do you do, Comrade foreman!" we shouted back in discordant and cheerful response.

The foreman took his hand away from his ear, and laughing in a senile way, said hoarsely:

"Well, we've met at last!" He bent down, stuck out his "accordion" in our direction, and started tying the loose boot string.

The director smiled as well. A moment later he assumed a sterner mien and commanded, "At ease!"

"Comrade students," he said and waited until the old man had finished tying the string and straightened up. "At last we've found a foreman for your group. Fedir Demidovich Snip is a toolmaker of the highest category. Besides, he's a gauge pattern maker which means that he can make anything out of metal — from a hammer to the tiniest parts of a watch movement. During the war Fedir Demidovich was an armorer and made machine guns for the front. At present he's on retirement. Yet, heeding our urgent request, he has agreed to take on your group. I do not ask, but order you" — the director raised his finger in an emphatic gesture — "to respect his hands of gold, his advanced age, and his status of worker-instructor. Many of you have handed in applications, requesting to be transferred to the mechanics group. Comrades, this group has already been filled by those who've got a more advanced education than yours, that is,

by sixth- and seventh-graders. Besides, I want to let you in on one thing: what's a mechanic, after all? In two years he studies two tractors — *Stalinets* and *Komunar*, and that's all. After graduation we'll deploy them throughout the districts of our region. But you, you'll have the education and trade of factory intellectuals — toolmakers! We'll send you to the big plants in the cities. Your future is that of the working class, and an enviable future I must say, boys! Also, the foreman is to be regarded as your teacher and father, and to him all of you are equal, as equal as to any other father, although most of you" — the director dropped his eyes and voice — "probably don't remember their fathers..."

He shot a glance at the foreman who nodded in agreement, while his quick, clinging eyes grazed against each face. Strange as it may seem, even the orphanage boys could not hold his eyes — there was so much of acute directness and old man's pain in them.

We marched to the mess hall with a measured tread and proudly raised heads, for now we, too, had a foreman-instructor. And we wouldn't be some "agric. mechanics," but factory intellectuals working in big cities!

Our group ate breakfast at three tables, with ten boys to a table. In front of each of us was our ration of two hundred grams of bread and a steel plate of oat-soup we called "whee-ee broth," in imitation of a horse that neighs at the sight of oats.

The foreman also ate with us at the first table, having settled on the very edge of a long bench, although the foremen had a separate table in the corner of the mess hall that was as small as our classroom. He put his forage cap on his knees like everybody else and ate as old people usually do — quickly moving his slightly protruding lips and jaw.

Then we were served tea in aluminum mugs: ten mugs on aluminum saucers to each table. We started clattering with our spoons, stirring the reddish-colored piping hot brew, some with the handles, others with the bowls of their spoons. It wasn't that simple to hold the hot mug with your fingers, so we took the forage caps from our knees and put them round the mugs. The tea was more unsweetened than sweet: after the first sip it seemed to have sugar in it, after the second sip, however, there seemed to be none. At this point of quiet tea drinking, as we blew gustily into our steaming mugs, the foreman suddenly said aloud, raising high his mug wrapped in his forage cap just like our mugs:

"The tea, kids, must be stirred in both directions: first to the left and then to the right — that'll make it much sweeter."

Ours and the two other groups at the neighboring tables burst out laughing. And so did the other foremen. Only the cooks standing behind the "firing bay," as we called the window out of which the food was served from the kitchen, kept silent.

We looked at the other tables with the air of victors: see what a fine foreman we had, small and elderly as he was!

We never ate breakfast with bread. Whatever we were served, soup or gruel, the bread remained untouched. Moments before the command to "Get up!" sounded, we passed round a salt cellar with coarse gray salt, each took a pinch and sprinkled it on the bread, after which the grains were pressed into the bread with a thumb and the ration hidden in a pocket. This procedure was practiced by the whole school, because neither before nor during breakfast were we as hungry as after breakfast.

On the way from the school to the machine-and-tractor station (MTS), where our training shops were located, we marched with a song; when we passed the pharmacy, granary, and market place we kept silent. Farther on came a waste, and behind it was the MTS. On this stretch we walked silently and out of step.

We moved out of the schoolyard in five columns, the foremen two paces ahead of each group, and the monitors walking to one side.

"Strike up a song!" the commands rang.

What followed was a confused jumble of words and tunes, because each group had its own song. The first sang *The Swarthy Girl*, the second, *Oh, Let's Recall the Days, Kuban Cossacks*, the third, *In the Steppes near Kherson*, the fourth, *The Cossack Galloped 'Cross the Dale*, and with us it was *Far Eastern Army*. The other five groups that usually remained behind for "theory" also had their own songs.

So every morning, from eight to nine o'clock, when the groups marched off for practice training, the little district town — half-ruined by bombs and shells — we passed through throbbed with songs. Halfway we met the girls from Trade School No. 40 marching down the cobbles, in formation as well, to their practice training at the dressmaker's shops. Orphaned during the war, these girls had been brought together from many districts. They wore black or blue dresses,

glittering narrow belt buckles inscribed TS-40, and black berets with two white crossed hammers like the ones on our forage caps. There were girls with black hair, blond hair, pale girls, thin girls. They, too, had little types shuffling behind in their "shrimp lines" like me. They, too, marched with songs — or "squeaked," as we put it. Once we were level with them, we jammed their singing till it made our throats hoarse:

*On guard we stand through day and night,  
And when the country tells us to fight:  
Bring under fire and strike the foe,  
Far Eastern Army, inflict the blow!  
Red Banner Army, charge into the fray!  
Charge into the fray!*

Shouting our heads off in this way, we saw how the girls in the middle ranks and "shrimp lines" covered their ears and indicated with all their mien and giggles that they graciously accepted us as He-Men who were much stronger than they. But the taller and older girls up front winked at our right flankmen, that is at those who were much bolder yet still bashful — they dropped their eyes and their cheeks colored. I, too, understood a thing or two about such things at that time.

We kept singing up to the waste behind the market. There we took the salted bread out of our pockets and ate it silently. The monitors did the same. As to the foremen, they gathered in a group and walked to one side to chat about their own affairs. But our foreman didn't join them. He jogged away from the column and bending to the ground, his "accordion" sticking upward, started to pluck something in the grass and quickly shove it into his pockets. The other foremen watched him and smiled.

The shop we were led into "from right flank one after another" had nothing unusual in it — neither the amazing machine tools each of us had pictured in his mind, nor any tools laid out on the shelves, or technical drawings and charts hanging on the walls. There were only five rough-board workbenches moved together, each with six vices, three on either side. Near each vice lay a hammer, chisel, file, and a thick steel plate. In one corner stood a drill with a large wheel (to drill steel with), and in the other corner was a hand-driven grind wheel. All that we had seen at the

collective farm smithies when we had been still kids, and probably that's why we were in such a downcast mood: some shop for you! The only thing that surprised us were a hundred or so shell cases stacked neatly by the wall. They were turned to us with their pierced prime caps. The workbenches were of different heights: the first two were higher than the second pair, and the fifth and sixth were the lowest. The foreman sized us up and then saw us to our places fussily and almost on the run. He took each by the shoulder and lightly pushed him on, saying all the while, "This way, this way..." I and five other undersized boys were positioned at the lowest workbench.

After having arranged us in our places, the foreman minced over to his workbench placed athwart to ours, took up position behind it, and said solemnly as from a rostrum:

"Comrades, attention please! At-ten-tion! In front of you are your working places. Right now they are still strange to you, but before long they'll become dear to you..."

We listened to him impassively, time and again glancing out of the windows, behind which the "mechanics" busied themselves around a combine harvester in the yard. The instructor intercepted our glances: color rapidly flooded his face, and he yelled in a thin voice as children and old people usually do in such cases:

"Now don't you get any funny i-de-eas into your heads! Tomorrow your me-chan-ics will be doing right here the same things you'll be doing today. Everyone will start out by using his fingers and fingertips! There won't be any lords around this place. At-ten-tion! The subject of today's lesson is chipping metal with a ham-mer" — he picked up a hammer from his workbench and raised it — "and chis-el. Here it is." He showed us the chisel, holding it in the middle with two fingers like a toy. While he was introducing us to the chisel and hammer, his face was radiant; his gestures were abrupt, his eyes shone, and we started listening to him not so much out of curiosity — hadn't we ever seen a hammer or chisel in our lives, or what? — as out of surprise: what made him so happy? What might have also set our minds at ease was the realization that the mechanics hadn't jumped that much ahead of us, since they, too, wouldn't escape being lectured in this workshop.

"And now, everyone, take your cute little hammers in your right hands. Anyone who's left-handed take it in his left. Don't be ashamed of that. The great Lefthander — read the

book about him? — also used his left hand, but he shod a louse for all that.”

We picked up the hammers.

“In the world there exist three” — he raised his index finger in a meaningful gesture — “only three hammer strokes. The first is the wrist stroke, when the hand bends only at the wrist. Like this. Everyone does as I: one — and, one — and, one — and...”

We swung the hammers only with our wrists.

“The second is the elbow stroke, during which the arm bends only at the elbow. This stroke is much stronger than the first one. Now let’s try it: one — and, one — and...”

We swung our hammers again.

“The third, and the strongest is the shoulder stroke. We won’t need it yet. Now about the chisel. It’s held not with two or three fingers, but in the fist, so that it won’t slip out after a blow and hit your neighbor. Let’s take the cute little chisel, grasp it with all your fingers. That’s it. To chip metal you’ve got to be brave. If anyone of you strikes his finger or knuckles by chance — and that happens — don’t be frightened: we’ll apply plantain to it, and the pain will be a lesson for you what to hit — chisel or finger. Pain adds to intelligence, you know! That’s the theory. Now let’s get down to practical work. All of us have to take a shell case, split it lengthwise with chisel and hammer, chip off the bottom with the prime cap, and flatten the steel so that it’s as smooth as a sheet of paper.”

The shell cases were wide in diameter, but not too long. We hammered away outdoors, kneeling or sitting on the grass by the workshop, because the foreman had said that earth was the “best mass” against recoil. Almost all of us had bruises and abrasions on our fingers and knuckles by now; we licked them silently and furtively from time to time, and exchanged smiles whenever anyone hit himself and started hissing from pain and blowing on his left hand. The foreman was rushing about in the midst of us, cooing gentle words, showing each one how to chip properly, and handed out of his pockets the slightly wilted, soft leaves of plantain which he must have plucked back at the waste.

“Careful, care-ful-ly does it!” he exclaimed. “Being crack at a thing doesn’t mean cracking your knuckles. We’ve got no iodine. Iodine’s been sent to the front line.”

Then he got on his knees as well, quickly ripped two shell cases open with abrupt and seemingly light taps of his

hammer on the chisel, and the "accordion" behind his back moved as if someone were trying it to see how its bellows were working.

We straightened the ripped shell cases first against our chests, holding onto the jagged edges with our fingers, after which we trampled the cases and then straightened them out with our hammers. And everyone tried to finish the job first.

The sun had climbed high, a smell of warmed grease and oil hung in the yard, and by the mechanical workshop an engine was chugging and discharging dense smoke, as it drove the broad and narrow belts of some unknown machine tools showing through the holes hacked in the walls. Behind the MTS spread a field breathing dryness.

At such moments during "theory" we would have already wanted to eat, but here — nothing of the sort. At work we had forgotten both about ourselves and the food. It came to our minds only when the foreman called a break and took us back to the workshop to show what tools we would be making with our own hands soon. We crowded around his workbench.

Out of the bottom drawer he barely managed to lift a little chest, its corners bound with old bluish copper. After he had fussily opened the little padlock, gasping hoarsely in the process, and raised the lid, we were dumbstruck: a blinding glitter burst into the sunlight out of the little chest. On the stands in the classroom where we studied engineering drawing we had seen all sorts of tools and knew their names, because they were labelled. They were ordinary black tools, except for the fact that they had not been manhandled and affected by rust.

"Want to hold them in your hands?" the foreman asked, putting a pair of round steel-rimmed glasses over his shaggy, shortish eyebrows. We nodded in unanimous agreement. "Here you are, but hold them firmly." He started to hand out hammers, pliers, nippers, compass, punches, chisels, screwdrivers, manual vices the size of a matchbox, outside calipers, inside calipers, groove chisels, shears for thin metal plate... There was enough for everyone. I got flat-nosed pliers, which I simply could not hold in my hands: they slipped about like quicksilver; I juggled them from palm to palm until they settled in the cup of my hand, and then the sun's rays streamed across them like a transparent haze on a mirror. The boys who got tools without handles went through the same thing: they juggled them from hand to hand like

embers, and laughed explosively as if they were being tickled. The foreman laughed as well. As he threw his head back you could see the small flickering tongue in his mouth. The sun's rays, reflected from the palms of our hands, were dancing all over the windowpanes and walls.

"These are polished tools," the foreman said, after having had his fill of laughing. "That's why they're so slippery."

"And can you do anything with them?" someone asked.

"I work with them. What would I be making them for otherwise? Now when I get home after your classes, I get down to work. Just for fun. You like to play, say, with a ball, don't you? Well, I do it with metal. The old, like the young, need some amusement."

"And can you ploduce needles?" asked Ivan Pirih from the hamlet next to our village (he slurred his *r*'s which made them sound like *l*'s).

"Don't you have a needle at home?" the foreman asked.

"We did but I bloke it and Mom gave me a thlashing," Pirih replied and gaped at the foreman. His lips were too small to cover his mouth.

The foreman took his forage cap off his head, bent the flap to one side, unwound the thread round a needle sticking into the flap, and extended the needle to Pirih.

"Here, give it to Mom so she won't be cross at you."

The boy took the needle and opened his mouth still wider to indicate that this was meant to be a smile.

One of the orphanage boys nudged him and whispered in his ear, but everyone heard it: "Ugh, you hick, wheedled it out of him, after all!" Pirih made a wry face about to crumple up in tears and mumbled back:

"But I didn't ask him fol it."

"Hush," the foreman said amicably. "Anyone else who doesn't have a needle, raise your hands. Be frank about it and don't be ashamed."

No one raised his hand. The foreman nodded understandingly.

"I also make needles. Why not? And I can drew thread too... silver thread."

"What do you make a needle's eye with — bore it with a little drill?"

"I've got little pliers with a tooth in the upper jaw and a socket in the lower one. I heat the thicker end of the needle and — crunch! — the needle's eye is made. Then I temper it again."

“Tell us how you made machine guns.”

“Machine guns? I didn’t make them, actually. I only finished them and did this and that... so that they would work faultlessly.” He started to glance around, embarrassed, sniffed the air, and jumped to his feet. We also glanced and saw three of our boys at the drilling machine, pulling on a cigarette butt and passing it around.

“At-ten-tion, everyone round up!” the foreman called, and before we had time to bat an eyelid, a brogan went hurtling toward the drilling machine. Turning in the air with its swirling strings, the brogan hit the wheel and fell to the floor.

The boys who were smoking bolted to the door.

“Come back!” the foreman yelled in a thin voice. “Bring me my brogan.”

He stood there by the workbench, holding on to it with one hand and balancing himself on his left foot, the right foot raised with only a sock on it.

The threesome warily brought him the brogan. He put it on his foot, stamped on it, and said casually:

“That’s it. I couldn’t possibly continue instructing you standing on one foot, could I?” He took a watch of prewar vintage out of his pocket, looked at it closely and then from a distance for a while, and again called out in his thin voice: “Break is over!”

We carried the tools to the workbench, but hard as we tried to stack them, they scattered. So we left them lying in an untidy pile on the workbench, glittering like silver in the sun.

The foreman took a tin template out of his drawer, put it on the steel sheet we had flattened out of a shell case, and laid out the pattern of the template with a thin scriber. The pattern looked like a shield from a textbook on ancient history, and over the shield was what looked like wings. Some thought it was an element of a combine harvester, while others said it was for the plowshare on a seeder and had to be bent and welded.

“Chisel a milimeter away from the outline,” the foreman declared after having finished laying out the pattern. “But this time it won’t be on the ground outdoors, but on the steel plates on your workbenches. He who chisels it straightest will have it easier working his blank with a file. So down to work ev-ery-body!”

And again our fingers got a beating, and we hissed with pain and licked our bruises as before. But this time the

pain was much greater, because we hit ourselves again in exactly the same places we had before the break.

After we had finished chiseling "along the outline" on the workbenches and with our blanks gripped in vices, we picked up the files and raised such a racket in the workshop it chilled my innards. Our Katyusha multiple rocket launchers and the German six-barreled mortars must have raised less of a din on the battlefield.

An hour and a half before lunch, the foreman and Grishukha took our blanks worked with conspicuously varied degrees of perfection, and carried them to the smithy in the opposite corner of the MTS yard. By the time they were back we had to clean up our working places. We swept up the chips and filings, raising a cloud of metal dust that glittered in the sun; then we turned the drilling machine, that is those turned it who could reach the handle; others tried to sharpen pieces of steel on the grind wheel or a pen knife if they had one. In a word, we were driving away our hunger as best we could.

The MTS engine whistled for lunch, chugging away slower and slower until it stopped altogether. The drive belts also stopped. Silence fell in the yard. We sat in the sun along the wall of the workshop like drowsy sparrows, with only one image in our mind's eye — the line in front of the mess.

Just at this moment of creeping group numbness, the foreman and Grishukha emerged from the mechanical workshop by the smithy. Each of them carried two bundles of wire-stringed shovel blades with elongated humps in the middle, grooves, rivets, and nail holes for the handles — well, with everything a real shovel should have. We jumped to our feet by the wall and crowded around the foreman and Grishukha with the shovels.

"Here you are," the foreman said, putting the bundles on the ground, and wiped his sweaty brow with his forage cap. "That's your first output — and of the finest quality, I must say. Your shovels don't bend, nor do they break. So" — he suddenly straightened up just as he had in the morning when the director introduced him to us, clicked his right boot with the left so hard it made him sway, and putting the palm of his hand to his ear as old people hard of hearing do, shouted: "Congratulations, Comrades, on your first shovels!!!"

You can't imagine how we carried on. We nudged one another in the chest, not painfully, of course, but lightly, slapped backs, laughed, and asked one another: "What's your

name? Ivan? Incredible, I'm Ivan too!" I nudged someone as well, inquired his name, and said that mine was Pavlo.

We marched back to the school, not through town but through what had been a park in which there were only stumps and branches of felled trees. Not in formation did we march, but in a bunch, each carrying a shovel blade, and each trying to identify whether it was his workmanship or not. But they looked all alike — gray after the forge and slightly sooty. There were thirty-two shovel blades. Thirty of ours and two of the foreman's.

By now we already had toadies in our group. What such types were like I knew from back at school where they played up to the teachers. They literally hung about the foreman. Pirih even got under his feet as he kept running ahead of him, looking into his eyes as he tried to ask:

"Will we wolk the metal the day aftel tomollow, too?"

"No, we won't," the foreman said aloud for everyone to hear, "because the day after tomorrow you'll be unable to hold either hammer or chisel. Let your bruises heal and your hands rest first, and then we'll continue chiseling. You'll have your fun yet."

"This is inteesting wolk; it's like cutting the fablics with a knife!"

In the end, someone got the good idea of pushing him away from the foreman, and he walked to one side of him with an offended gaping mouth.

Our group lunched the last, because we had to carry the shovel blades to the storehouse. For first course we had borshch, for second, millet gruel seasoned with sauce of meal and onions that had been fried black, and for third, there was tea. The orphanage boys got their bread rations of three hundred grams, for they would be receiving another two hundred for supper, while we, that is those who went home after classes, received five hundred. We didn't stay for supper, though. The orphanage boys divided our meal — bean soup or corn flour gruel — between themselves, which came out to less than half for each.

For the first time in five days we ate amicably, without spitting fire at anyone who might have hit our spoons by accident or hooked our feet under the table. We bit into the black damp bread in our bruised hands which smelled of rancidly sour gunpowder from the shell cases, and giggled, because the spoons trembled so obviously in our hands and it took us some effort to lift them to our mouths.

The first practice training equalized us — perhaps that was why we ate so amicably. *If it hadn't been for Pirih with that needle of his, it might have been a still better day,* I thought to myself. He had behaved as if he alone didn't have a needle! I didn't have any at home either, so that we borrowed a needle every time we needed one.

After lunch it was announced that we'd have parade again. Why? we wondered. We had never had parade in the day-time before. We fell in, lined up, and chattered away merrily, our stomachs full from lunch. In my pocket I had a half of my ration of bread: 250 grams for supper with Auntie Yalosoveta. The first day I brought it home, the lump had gone flat like a black wallet. I put it on the table. "Oh, my God! Where'd you get that?" she asked. "That's what's left of my ration," I said. "Eat it, I brought it for you." She broke off a tiny bit, chewed it slowly to savor its taste, and said, "It's good!" while her eyelids went into a flutter. Oh, she was about to release another flood of tears. What a habit! I went outside to rake up the potatoes in the kitchen garden.

"Groups, d-dress right! Ten-shun!" Senior Military Instructor Bushny commanded. He always commanded at parade and saluted smartly, his body like a taut string.

The lines froze as the director, foremen, instructors — all those who were present at morning parade — entered the parade ground. In one hand the director held his cane, and in the other, one of our shovel blades. He said something to Bushny, and the latter, saluting in response, commanded:

"School... dress right! Ten-shun! Group five, ten paces forward march!"

We thumped ten paces ahead of the line.

"A-about face! Ten-shun everybody!"

"Comrade students!" the director said more loudly and solemnly than was usually the case. "Today Group Five under its foreman Fedir Demidovich Snip (the latter nodded to confirm his identity) showed itself to be persistent both in studies and in work. It can be said that it showed its mettle in a heroic way. In four hours of practice training they fulfilled the first order for the national economy: thirty-two shovels like this one." The director raised the shovel blade over his head. The ranks broke into a hum and started to sway, as the second line pushed ahead to have a look at our shovels.

The director spoke at length about the war, the hard year,

and the country's great hope of us — the labor reserves. In conclusion, he said:

“Of the three hundred coveralls we had to receive for everyone of you, only fifty have been delivered to the storehouse so far. I order Group Five to be awarded with coveralls!”

By the schoolyard the Vasils were waiting for me. We quickly made our way beyond the town, and there, in a field with nobody else in sight, we took turns trying on the coveralls — pitch-black, gleaming, of sturdy cotton. They were beautiful coveralls, with large pockets above the knees intended for the most handy tools, as our foreman had told us.

When we approached the village, Vasil Silka begged me:

“Let me walk in the coveralls as far as your house, and there I'll take them off under the bridge.”

That's how we walked into the village: Vasil Silka in the coveralls that made him look like a tankman, and the three of us in our khaki uniforms.

Autumn that year was dry just like summer — without a single drop of rain. The dirt road had cracked, the grass on either side of it had wilted into a ruddy tangle; even the drought-resistant yarrow had turned rusty and brittle. The earth was a mesh of black cracks all around, and it seemed that they too breathed heat. Only by Pisarev Forest did the air waft some coolness, because in the thickets down the gullies there flowed many brooks, large and small. On the blackthorn by the forest cobwebs gleamed in the twigs and hung from the wires between the telegraph poles. It was barren everywhere, except for a squat little haystack standing in a field here and there, and the cobwebs. Even the hares had disappeared. We hadn't seen a single one since we started walking to school.

Once, on our way back home, the Vasils and I sat down on the wilted grass for a rest, and one of us started brooding on a sudden thought that had come to his mind: how many kilometers would we have to cover in two years of schooling, if we left out Sundays and holidays?

We multiplied the figures with a stick on the ground (to do it in one's head was next to impossible): 250 days by eighteen kilometers — nine kilometers from the village to school and nine back. It came out at an exact 4,500.

The figure stunned us. We sat there and looked at each other speechless. Then Vasil Silka, whom we had nicknamed

That-Me-Or-Not since the day he put his school uniform on, jumped to his feet and yelled, or rather neighed like a colt, through his broadly set teeth:

"Whee-ee-ee! Cheer up, fellows! It's a lot for two years, but bit by bit every day it's not that much after all!"

"Indeed!" we concurred, surprised, and our spirits buoyed. "It's only a lot in a lump!"

We continued on our way.

Everyone of us got merrier, and our tread became instantly lighter. Vasil Obora, the most tightlipped and strongest among us, said, stammering with joy:

"My bro-ther Vo-olodya will bring me a pa-air of sli-ip-pers from Khar-kiv in spr-i-ning! Wi-ith rub-ber souls from tru-uck ti-iers."

Whenever Obora was angry or happy in the extreme, he stuttered.

I couldn't contain myself either and went and told them how I had dignified my name in the application by writing Pavlentiya instead of Pavlo, which made us burst into roars of laughter.

But Vasil That-Me-Or-Not rejoiced most at his discovery. He didn't quieten down all the way to the village, proudly spitting through his teeth, laughing in his shrill way, and asking repeatedly:

"But you were scared by the four and a half thousand, weren't you?"

"You bet."

"And here I see my boys scared, so I thought: take it easy! It's a hell of a distance when you walk it as a whole, but bit by bit every day..."

We had divided the way from the village to the district center into stations. The first, just beyond the village, was called Ravine or Mill (behind the ravine stood a windmill on a hill). The stretch to this station went steeply uphill along the cobbles, and farther on there was a dirt road running right to the district center. The second station was called T for the telegraph pole that looked like the letter "T." The third station, A, had two similar poles with a transverse beam. The fourth was Aspen, the fifth, Willow, and then followed Bridge, Oil Mill and so on all the way to school. With these stations our trek became merrier. No sooner had we approached one station than the next one came into view.

"Now if anybody's got to walk far," That-Me-Or-Not reasoned aloud, "tell him to invent such stations: that'll make his road shorter, won't it, bo's?"

"Or let him buy himself a scooter," Vasil Kibkalo added slothfully. His way of walking, moving his hands, and the expression on his face looked dully sluggish to the point of being irritating. Everything about him seemed to have been stretched: long hands, long legs, long face, and a forehead that wasn't so much long as tapering toward the hair line; his eyebrows looked like a pair of wedges that stood almost on end, and you couldn't tell whether he was utterly astonished or on the verge of tears. When Kibkalo was silent and not chewing anything, the corners of his mouth always drooped so that the sight of them drugged you into boredom. Maybe that was just how I saw him, because he (or was it me with regard to him?) was, well... what you might call a rival.

The three of us trudged along barefoot, with our brogans, which still had to do us for the winter, tied with strings and slung across our shoulders. Only Kibkalo didn't take them off, because he had another pair for winter and felt boots with galoshes. Besides, he had an officer's field bag. We carried our notebooks in our hands or tucked into our shirtfronts, while he had them in the bag hanging on a gleaming narrow leather belt. In it Kibkalo always had some food stowed away and ate it on our way to school in the morning. Not a single time did we see what exactly he ate. Even when he pulled it out of the bag we didn't see what it was because when he wanted to eat, he overtook us by about three paces, pulled the bag up front and rummaged in it, bending his head like a hen, after which the bag was pushed to its former place and from behind we saw his jaws snapping away. The sight of it gave us an empty feeling in the pit of our stomachs for hunger.

"Li-isten Va-asil, if you have to pu-ut on yo-our fee-eed ba-ag, so wa-alk be-behind us," Vasil Obora would say dully and then remain silent all the way to school. His eyebrows, thick and black, grew right over his eyes, his shoulders bobbed up and down when he walked, and his legs were plump and shorter than his torso.

Kibkalo dropped behind our group.

Silent and gloomy, we trudged along when suddenly Vasil Silka exclaimed as if he had just been roused from sleep:

"You know, I saw Australia in my dreams today! I had a feeling I was walking around there; it was dazzling yellow all over, and the sun was so hot."

Silka loved geography and spoke about each country as if he had been there. Two of his elder brothers who had gone to the war and hadn't returned left him their textbooks behind as well as an atlas. He and I read it by turns, and must have read it already a dozen times. Obora and Kibkalo, though, only read it once — reading was something they didn't like.

"It was as yellow as the apricots in Shtokalo's orchard. There were bananas and oranges and pine apples growing there..."

None of us had tasted apricots, because nobody grew them in our village, except for Shtokalo. The old man guarded his orchard on the hill over the ravine day and night, and if he wasn't on guard duty, it was his wife, an incredibly loud-mouthed woman who spoke with a twang. When she said "What?" in her farmyard in the evening, the sound of it carried throughout the whole village and made the dogs howl.

After Silka's stories about apricot-yellow Australia, we passed Shtokalo's orchard with such a look every day that it terrified the lean wizened man and he wagged his finger at us in warning. At that we would turn away, pretending we hadn't intended to look at his apricots in the first place.

Down the hill we walked along the cobbled road. The sun was already low and hiding behind the windmill over the ravine. The cobbles were still slightly warm and strewn with dry, twisted leaves from the maple trees lining the road — the leaves tickled our bare feet and broke under their weight. Before reaching Shtokalo's orchard, we sat down to put our brogans on so as to walk through the village in full uniform. As we tied the boot strings, we glanced furtively at the apricots. There were still a lot of them; they made the branches bend and, gleaming in the long rays of the setting sun like a rich yellow fire, assaulted us with fruity fragrance. Buzz-z-z went the wasps and bees under that fire.

Neither Shtokalo nor his missus were in sight in the orchard.

"Let's pinch some just to taste what they're like," Silka whispered. "But don't you look that way. We'll wait until it gets dark and then... At least a handful."

"What if he goes complaining to the school? Then we'll be kicked out," Kibkalo predicted sourly.

"If we only take a handful, would that be stealing?" That-Me-Or-Not said, surprised at Kibkalo's view of things. Silka's plump cheeks, covered with a sparse fluff that glistened in the setting sun, had grown red from excitement. His big forehead was also red, and the forage cap, too small for his noggin, stood on end over his forehead. All our forage caps were too small for Silka. With Kibkalo they were too big, because he had a tapering nut. His mother had taken it in and it stuck out behind in a funny cocklike comb.

"As you like, but I'm going home." Kibkalo raised his wedgelike eyebrows as if he were about to cry, and went away, his lean legs knocking against his officer's bag.

"Let him go if he likes!" Silka cheered up Obora and me. "We can manage without him, can't we, bo's?"

We rounded Shtokalo's orchard, warily looking left and right to see whether anyone was in sight in there: pressing the notebooks to our chests, we crept right to the bottom of the ravine. The swifts came darting out of their nests in the red clay wall and circled over the ravine, raising a din. The ravine was locally called The Wall, because the brooks flowing from Pisarev Forest had made it abruptly steep. Down in the ravine it was colder than on the hilltop. The water flowing from the forest brooks gurgled quietly. We drank of it, lying on our stomachs and dipping our noses into the brook, so cold it set our teeth on edge. For a while we sat quietly.

The swifts calmed down and darted back into their nests like arrows. We wondered how they managed not to miss their targets and hit their wings against the clay wall. They just folded their wings, closed their little forked tails, and — swish! — they disappeared into the holes.

It was still light over the ravine, while at the bottom it was already dusk and the ceaselessly whispering brook was turning black. We kept silent and our eyes surveyed the scene like those of real crooks.

The two hundred and fifty grams of bread in my pocket had stuck to the cloth. How would Auntie Yalosoveta and me have supper without bread? Oh well, that wasn't too great a loss, because soon we'd be getting work-day pay in money and kind at school. If it were millet, it'd be better: there'd be millet gruel to cook the whole winter through. A thick

gruel of that kind could be eaten without bread. On second thought, though — why without bread? I'd keep on bringing it home as before. Now that I was in school we'd manage somehow. We had the clothes we needed, there was my daily ration of seven hundred grams of bread, and not that much firewood went for heating our house. With a bigger house it would have been a problem.

"A hell of a lot of wolves bred during the war," Vasil Silka whispered. "Last night they broke through a shed wall at the Ostapishins in our neighborhood and carried off a kid. The old woman cried bitterly and so did the goat for her kid."

"I'm not afraid of wolves," Vasil Obora said. "Were I to catch one I'd simply strangle him and that'd be that."

You bet he would! Obora was so strong he once picked up two German antitank mines in each hand and pressed them like a barbell.

Night was already falling. The stars glimmered. From here they looked bigger and more brilliant. Small wonder they say that stars are visible from the bottom of a well in daytime.

It was getting rather cold and we were beginning to shiver slightly. Now and then the shivers rippled through either Silka's or my shoulders — just like that against our will. The cold had no effect on Obora, though.

"Getting co-old, huh?" he asked. "It's all the same to me. Once last winter I was sitting in the house barefoot, because Mom had put on the only boots we had and gone somewhere. So I went outdoors barefoot, had my fill of skidding on a frozen pool, and ran back into the house. I didn't feel any chilblains in my toes at all after that. I've got the hide of an ox, you see."

Jangle-jangle-jangle — the sound made us prick up our ears. We listened intently and straightened into sitting positions. Jangle-jangle-jangle — the sound receded into the distance. It grew quiet again. It was the miller jangling his keys on his way home.

"That's wonderful," Vasil Silka said, slapping his knee. "You, stay here, Pavlo, while Obora and I go and see how the land lies."

As the Vasils clambered up the hill, clods of earth rolled from under their feet and plopped into the brook.

No sooner was it quiet again than I heard a drawn-out "Oo-oo-oo!" coming from somewhere behind the mill.

I started, and shivers ran right down to my heels: what was it?

And again "Oo-oo-oo!" — so plaintive and spine-chilling. A wolf? Of course it was palsy wolffy!

He must have been hungry, judging by his grievously piteous howl.

From above came the gasping Vasils and the rolling clods of clay.

"Hear the wolf?" they asked me.

"Sure. What's going on up there?"

"He's bumming round the orchard, his burning cigarette glowing in the dark, and coughing his head off. How do you like that? Doesn't he ever want to sleep, or what? There isn't a single light in the windows of the village now."

We sat there as before, listening to the gurgling brook and the howling wolf behind the mill.

"What makes him prow around the mill? There aren't any sheepfolds or pigsties there."

"He isn't prowling around. He's sitting on his haunches, with his head thrown back, and howling from hunger," Silka said. "He's waiting for dead of night when the people fall asleep."

"Just like we do."

"We'll cop the prize just the same. I doubt if Shtokalo will be able to stay up like that till morning."

The Shtokalos, Prokip and his old missus Hanna (nicknamed Hendzia for her nasal speech), were perhaps the stingiest people in the world. In forty-five, when the men from our village who were still alive or had returned from the war decided to mark the occasion, a party was held at the office building of the collective farm. Some of the food was donated by the farm, and the rest clubbed together for by the villagers. The Shtokalos were asked to bring *kysil*.\* Everyone coming to the party had to come with a quart of *horilka*. The Shtokalos brought both the *kysil* and the *horilka*. The guests started tucking in and then singing songs under three strong lamps that had also been purchased with pooled resources. By and by, it came to singing *Handzia*, a song which was performed best before the war. It was so merry you just wanted to dance to the tune. The guests sang

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\* *Kysil* — one of the simplest Ukrainian desserts — fruit purée made of cooked fresh and dried fruit, sweetened, and thickened with cornstarch — Tr.

the first verse and had started on the second when Hendzia Shtokalo got to her feet and said loudly with a twang: "Lit's git out a' here Prokip, 'cause they're making fun of us!"

The guests tried to explain that this was no more than a song about a young woman, Handzia, and Shtokalo wasn't the only woman in this world who had the name. But all the arguments were in vain! She dragged her old man from the table, and on leaving, turned round to say:

"Give us our *kysil* back!"

Everyone burst into a roar of laughter, and she was given back her *kysil*. Then the chairman of the collective farm uncorked a bottle of *horilka*, poured it into glasses, and without so much as a shade of a smile on his face, said seriously:

"Catch up with them and give them this empty bottle."

His request was complied with, and Hendzia Shtokalo took the bottle, after all.

"It'll be for cooking oil," she said.

Prokip Shtokalo silently dragged himself along after her.

The song was sung to the end nonetheless, but now instead of the proper "Handzia" everyone was singing "Hendzia":

*Hendzia pretty,*  
*Hendzia birdie,*  
*Hendzia winsome and so lordly...*

It was becoming brighter overhead, as the moon climbed higher. Only one wall of the ravine was bathed in the moonlight which probably penetrated the swifts' nests right through. Silka and I were not jerking our shoulders any longer but shivering outright. I was feeling the chilly dampness gathering inexorably on my skin under the service shirt.

"Let's make a fire," Obora said, "because you're a sorry sight to look at."

We broke dried weeds along the brook, gathered whatever sticks we could find, and built a fire. When our chests were warmer, we turned our backs toward the fire and then held our hands over it until they couldn't bear it any longer, after which our hands went under our armpits: once it was warm under the armpits, the warmth trickled throughout the whole body.

"It feels like being on the equator," That-Me-Or-Not rejoiced after getting warm. The golden fluff on his cheeks gleamed in the moonlight. "The equator is a great circle that divides the earth's surface into two hemispheres," he ex-

plained. "Don't mix it up with Ecuador which is the name of a country."

"After I'm through studying to be a mechanic, I'm not going into that trade," Vasil Obora said. "I'm going to be a tractor driver. What's a mechanic? You'd have to tinker with engines and keep hunting for spare parts all the time. Sitting behind a steering wheel by yourself is much better. Once I plowed during the night when I worked as a coupler with a tractor driver. I had a hell of a good time. The headlights snatched the glistening upturned ground ahead out of the darkness, while the tractor driver slept by a haystack and I was left to myself. I'd stop the tractor, get down to clean the plow of weeds, and continue plowing."

"I'll go on studying geography," Silka said.

"But you've got to do a three-year spell of work after trade school."

"So what? I'll work them off and then go on studying geography."

"Listen, are apricots just as yellow inside as they are outside?"

"Who knows. I only saw their stones, which are sharp at one end and blunt at the other."

"I think they're hot. Here we've got a cold night, but they must be hot inside."

"And I think they're covered with fluff, aren't they?"

"Who knows. Soon we'll find out."

The fire started to die; only the cinders smouldered fitfully.

"The wolf's gone quiet for some reason."

"He's probably gone to break into somebody's sheepfold."

"Come on, Pavlo, it's your turn to see what Shtokalo's doing," Silka said. Then he listened into the night. "Hush, there's someone coming," he whispered. "Hear it?"

From above we heard what sounded like footfalls and then the sound disappeared. Moments later clods of clay came rolling from there into our fire, sending up sparks. We bounced to our feet and craned our necks, but after having looked into the fire we couldn't see anything, even one pace ahead of us.

"Don't be afraid, it's only me," somebody said hoarsely from above.

Pellets of clay rolled to our feet, followed by — of all people! — Shtokalo sliding down the hill. Both of his hands pressed a capful of apricots to his chest.

"Here, have some and go home, because I want to sleep." There was a sickly smell of tobacco on his breath. "Sit down. Why are you standing there like fence posts. Now who prepares himself to steal as you do? You holler and gab so loudly the whole village can hear you, not to mention myself. Besides, you've built this here fire! Some crooks. You should have done all that quietly if you were bent on stealing."

"But no, we just wanted to taste them!" That-Me-Or-Not exclaimed. "Do you call that stealing?"

"All right, here you are. Taste them. I'll eat some, too, because you've talked so much about them it's given me an appetite." The old man laughed and was the first to take a handful of apricots out of his cap.

We, too, stretched our hands out timidly toward the cap, took one apricot each, bit a little piece off it, and held it in our mouths to savor the taste just as my Auntie Yaloveta had tasted the bread I brought from trade school.

It was difficult to determine right away what it tasted like! Was it like honey? Hardly — honey couldn't touch it. It really tasted of the sun, although it was cold now. Moments ago we had thought they'd be warm.

"They're like pineapples!" Silka said. "I've read about how they taste."

"What the hell are you calling them pineapples for? They're apricots and nothing else," Shtokalo said in his hoarse voice.

He champed, munched away noisily, smacking his lips, and the juice came squirting out of the fruit as he took handfuls of it out of his cap.

"How do you like that?" he said, surprised. "Every day I trample them underfoot, and they've never tasted as good as now. What the hell! Know what, one of you hop along and pick another capful. But do it quietly and don't pick them off one branch, because my old missus will see it in the morning and give me the works."

Vasil Obora was the first to go. He brought back quite a capful. Silka was the next, and after him it was my turn.

Oh, if you only knew how happy I was picking apricots on a moonlit night! As I bent a branch, the fruit knocked lightly against my head — tap-tap-tap. I felt their velvety touch against my cheeks — so they were covered with fluff, after all. And the one that accidentally fell into my shirt-

front tickled my skin at first and then ceased to betray its presence.

We kept bringing more and more, while Shtokalo ate them wolfishly, shooting the stones out of his mouth like slugs out of a small-bore rifle.

"Whew!" he groaned after gorging himself on the last capful, and reclined on the clay. "Did I shovel it all down in your company. My belly's so heavy now I doubt if I'll be able to get out of that ravine."

The Vasils and I stamped the fire out lest the wind scatter the embers, and then clambered uphill, helping the old man — the boys holding him under his arms, and me pushing his legs from behind.

"Oh-h thanks! Oh-h thanks," Shtokalo huffed and puffed hoarsely. "When you're old it's only easy going downhill."

At the top we were met by the moon, a windless calm and warmth; down in the ravine it had been much colder.

"Now pick some for yourselves to take home," Shtokalo said. "I'll go have a good snooze. Oh my God, my belly's about to burst, darn it. Come again when you feel like it. But wait for me in the ravine; I'll come down to you."

We walked along the cobbles gleaming coldly under the moon standing over the hill, each of us carrying a capful of apricots pressed to our chests like infants. They looked palish yellow and gave off a delicious fragrance that seemed to spread across the entire countryside. We heaped praises on Shtokalo, our breath laden with the fragrance of the apricots.

The Vasils turned to their homes.

I still had to walk about a kilometer to the bridge by my house.

At night the half of what remained of our house looked like a riverside barn, with the only difference that it had a chimney. Hey, what was that? The light in the window was on and someone was standing by the wicket gate. The figure started walking toward me. It was Auntie Yalosoveta.

"That you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my God, I almost had a heart attack," she said, sobbing. "Where have you been? I've been way up the hill looking for you."

"Here you are," I said, holding out my bread ration and the cap full of apricots. "And stop crying: I won't do it again."

Every Sunday we gathered by Vasil Silka's house when blue dusk fell and the cold October moon reigned in the middle of the sky. We sat on a bench in front of an enclosure we had made of German shell crates. Behind the enclosure lay Private Ivan Ivanovich Kudriash in his grave. In 1943 Ivan Ivanovich was billeted at the Silkas along with other artillerymen: he was killed during an artillery attack when he was reining in the horses lest they be frightened by the detonations and gallop off. The horses were spared, but Ivan Ivanovich was hit by a tiny piece of shrapnel that pierced his heart.

Vasil and I took five crates apart, Silka and Ohora sawed the spikes off the boards (the crates were built for shells but had spikes as on a chest), I planed them for the pickets, while Kibkalo nailed them to the rails around the grave. The enclosure came out low but straight as a string on each side.

Before starting to play, the Vasils tuned their balalaikas by the first string, while I dried the skin of my tambourine by burning matches to make it contract and, consequently, sound more resonant.

"What shall we play?" That-Me-Or-Not asked. "How about the *Pidozirka Polka*?"

It was named for our village — Pidozirka. Silka had composed it himself, and was proud of it. The polka had no words. We could only think up one line and the rest was whatever came into our heads on the spur of the moment, or else we simply hummed the tune. The Vasils usually sang, but I kept quiet: once when I joined it, the boys asked me to stop, because I was singing out of key. "You'd better bang away at the tambourine," they said, and this I did from then on so as not to upset their balanced chorus.

At the head of Ivan Ivanovich's grave we had planted a poplar sapling. It had taken root immediately and started to grow very fast, reaching over a meter and a half in three years.

Whenever we had to agree on a meeting place in the evening, we said: "At Ivan Ivanovich's." There had been rumors that the remains of all the soldiers who were buried in the field, by the roadside, and in the orchards would be exhumed and brought together in a communal grave by the collective farm office. We had already made up our minds

not to give up Ivan Ivanovich's grave. We'd stand round it, take each other's hands, and say, "No!" Firstly, the grave was by the road for everybody to see, secondly, there was the poplar, thirdly, we had built the enclosure; besides, our girls had planted calendulas and asters on the grave. We wouldn't give it away.

"Our" girls were meant to be Sonya Prikhodko, Manya Kivshik, and Olya Yekhnich. When us four boys had our summer uniforms on, we and the girls, seven of us in all, had enough room on the bench by Ivan Ivanovich's. But when we put our greatcoats on, it was too much of a squash and the bench had to be extended.

The girls were older than we, but since there weren't any boys the same age, the girls came to us. Though there was an older boy, Semen Petik, in our village, he visited the neighboring hamlet, where he was in great demand as well.

The Vasils started to play the polka. Silka played with a plexiglass pick on each string separately as on a mandolin, Obora strummed all the strings with his fingers (he took the second part of the tune), while I beat the tambourine with a stick, against my elbow or knee to make the disks jingle louder. I joined them softly, inconspicuously. The Vasils told me: "All you have to do is pick up the rhythm." So I picked up just that.

The girls seemed to have been waiting until we started up; we knew they had, because they appeared on the footpath meshed by the shadows of the branches bathed in the moonlight, and Manya laughed gustily to let us know they were coming. I was going on seventeen and Manya told me that I was a very good boy. "You're so good, Pavlo, that... well, I don't know..." She always sat down at my side and either laughed or sighed. For the past six months or so, the Vasils, Silka, and Obora had been telling me: "She's fallen for you, can't you see that, you fool? Put an arm around her and just tell her something, for she'll take you for a milksop and go to Petik." *If that's what she's like, let her go for all I care*, I reasoned.

The girls came up, their arms linked, hair plaited and covered with kerchiefs.

"Hello, boys!"

"Hi!" we replied lazily. Previously when we weren't yet wearing our uniforms we simply exchanged greetings, whereas now we behaved like grownup beaux.

"So what do you suggest — sitting or standing?"

"Take the weight off your feet."

They sat down with loud giggles. Manya chose a place between Kibkalo and me. After settling cozily between our greatcoated figures, she brushed against my shoulder and leaned lightly against it. On purpose. Was I a kid, or what, not to understand that?

"Good evening," she whispered in my ear.

"Good evening, Manya."

Anyway, we went off key and got out of time.

"Hey, stop that!" Silka exclaimed. "Let's start all over again."

I had to have enough elbow room to beat the tambourine, so I said to Manya:

"Move a little, because I can't work with my elbow."

She moved a bit, shoving Vasil Kibkalo to the edge of the bench.

"Some get the loving, others the shoving," Vasil mumbled acidly, hinting at Manya having taken a fancy to me.

"You look like a soldier now," Manya said, craning her neck lest she touch my elbow.

"That's because of the uniform," I said, shaking the tambourine to make the disks jingle, after which I beat it with the stick as before.

"Bo's, let's sing *Oh you, Halya*," Olya Yekhnich asked.

"All right," Silka agreed. He was our musical director, telling us how and when to play.

We started up the song about the girl Halya, who "had a fine figure, but who'd be loving you when I would leave you?"

We made a fine chorus which sounded alternately merry and sad. Manya was soloing, although she did not have a ringing voice and it trembled on the higher notes besides.

"So what are you going to be?" she asked me in the middle of the song. "A truck driver or a tractor driver?"

"A fitter," I said. "That's a man who makes all sorts of things out of metal. Shovels and such like. The foreman said that once we're through school, we'll be able to make earrings."

"Will you make some for me?" Manya bent close, looking into my eyes.

"I don't know. I'd have to have metal for that — gold or silver."

"A ring could just as well be of copper. I saw some made

out of five-kopeck coins on the women at the market, and they looked marvelous."

"Could be. I'm not sure; I'll ask my foreman."

"Listen, Manya, either you sing or you talk," Vasil Kibkalo snapped. He didn't do anything — either singing or playing, so it annoyed him whenever Manya talked to me or simply sat at my side. *So why don't you go ahead and date her*, I thought. I wouldn't mind.

"Those girls from the trade school, are they pretty?" she asked me.

"There are all kinds among them."

"Have you taken a fancy to anyone yet?"

"Oh no," I said. "They're still too small and march in the shrimp lines."

"Mind you, it'd make me cry," Manya whispered so close to my ear her lips almost touched it, which made me hot all over.

"You'd better say a kind word to Kibkalo. Look how sulky he is."

"Let him."

"As you like."

Kibkalo bent over, and pushing his chest against Manya, said to me sourly:

"You keep on beating instead of loafing."

"Mind your own business!" Manya said angrily, pushing Vasil aside. "Boys, play the *Black Sea Cossack*," she asked and started singing quietly:

*Mother, a Black Sea Cossack,  
A Black Sea Cossack,  
Took me barefoot  
Outdoors into the frost...*

She sucked in her breath, making it sound like a sob, and continued:

*He took me barefoot  
And he asked me:  
Is it frosty outside  
Or is it not?*

I didn't beat the tambourine or rattle the disks, but sat there and listened.

What a fantastic moon glowed in the sky that night. For some reason it shone unemotionally on ordinary weekdays

as compared with Sundays when I couldn't take my eyes off it. On such nights I didn't want to hear anybody or strum any music, but keep walking on and on into the steppe.

The flowers on Ivan Ivanovich's grave cast their shadows over the enclosure, the marigolds and asters stood out in their quiet beauty, while the calendulas gave off a sour smell. They bloomed until the first snow and their flower heads with yellow petals stuck out of the snow for a couple of days if it wasn't frosty. My dad must be lying in such a grave somewhere. Or perhaps not in a grave at all, but in some trench just like the soldier whose remains were found by chance in the neighboring village not so long ago. His submachine gun, belt and messtin were the only things the passage of time hadn't destroyed.

*Oh, it isn't frosty,  
There's only the dews,  
And here I, young lassie,  
Stand without any shoes...*

"When we're leaving, you go first and I'll catch up with you a bit later," she whispered to me. "But don't walk too fast."

"Sure," I said. "I'll be waiting for you."

She had the effect of reins on me: whatever direction she pulled in, I turned there. She'd be better off yanking Kibkalo like that. Well, if not Kibkalo... Silka or Obora would do very well for that purpose.

"What about swinging a mean leg, girls?" Vasil That-Me-Or-Not suggested. "It's getting boring. You're all sitting like you've been chained to that bench. And you might as well stay away next time, Manya. Better go to the boys in Zamostya beyond the bridge, because they've got more pep."

The hint was aimed at me.

"And why shouldn't I come here?" Manya wondered playfully.

"Because when you're around Pavlo beats out of time, and Kibkalo here wilts before our very eyes!"

"I'm not going to be told by anyone where I'm supposed to go." Manya countered haughtily. Then she asked kindly, as if she hadn't taken offense only a moment before: "Please play the *Oira* for us."

We played the *Oira*. I was diligently beating the tambourine lest That-Me-Or-Not sent Manya to the boys in

Zamostya where they also gathered outdoors. Just then we could hear them singing the song *Once Two Heroes Asked to be Let in for the Night...*

Sonya got up to dance with Olya, because the Vasils were busy playing; Kibkalo invited Manya. She got to her feet reluctantly, and as she was being led away by the arm, she looked round at me with a guilty smile. *For what reason?* I wondered. If she wanted to hop around that much, let her. I couldn't dance anyway even if I weren't keeping time on the tambourine.

Vasil whirled Manya around, the flaps of his greatcoat swirling and his wedge-like eyebrows sticking upward as if he were either surprised or weeping for joy. He didn't take his eyes off her, while she didn't take hers off me over his shoulder. Her eyes had a stamp of sorrow and pleading in them which made me turn away.

The Vasils quickened their pace and I barely kept up with the tempo for the finale of *Oira*. Then the balalaikas stopped abruptly as the Vasils simultaneously clapped their hands on the strings, while I kept on jingling for some time — a movement also provided for in the finale.

"Oh, I'm so tired I feel dead on my feet!" Olya Yekhnich said shrilly and affectedly to make it sound wenchlike, and waddled off to the bench. She was a rather corpulent sluggish girl, and her shrill voice did not match her looks. If she had been leaner it would have been all right. Sonya got really tired, because she was catching her breath: while dancing, she had been "leading" Olya, or rather hauling her around.

"Don't play so fast any more, boys — my heart will jump out," she implored the Vasils.

The girls sat down on the bench: Olya by Vasil Obora (they were well matched), Sonya — fair-haired, quiet and humble — next to Silka. When he told her something from geography under his breath, she would exclaim softly, surprised: "Oh, and where is it — that Greenland?"

Kibkalo and Manya did not sit down right away, because he kept holding on to her — his long arms were wrapped around her, he was whispering something in her ear, while she tried to get loose, saying out loud:

"Let me go or I won't dance with you any more. You'll dance by yourself!" At that she laughed. It was both an approving and an enticing laugh, as if she weren't that much against Kibkalo hugging her. What a habit!

Then we sat in a stiff row again like at a wedding ceremony. The girls seemed to be expecting something, and we didn't know what to do next — go home or stay a bit longer?

The get-together was going sour. Perhaps it was because we had to get up at five in the morning to be on time for parade and breakfast. With the girls it was an altogether different matter — school for them started at eight, they had mothers and fathers, and all of them lived in houses that had not been ruined by the war.

"Know what, boys, let's teach you how to dance!" Manya suggested. "Without music, though. You can hum the tune out loud or in your head."

"That's a grand idea!" Silka exclaimed. He unbuttoned his greatcoat, put one flap across Sonya's narrow shoulder, and they started gyrating and taking little steps back and forth. Vasil was cooing something in her ear, and Sonya said pleadingly from time to time:

"Don't step on my feet, because the sole of one of my shoes is partially torn."

Vasil Obora and Olya also went off to shake their clumsy legs. Manya took me by the hand, and bending like a weasel (apparently under the effect of the tune she was humming in her head), led me round the circle and then farther and farther away from our group. Her eyes glittered; her little fingers clutching the palm of my hand were hot.

"Do you love me?" she asked quietly and breathlessly.

"I? I don't know."

"What do you mean — you don't know? Not a wee little bit?"

"Who knows..."

"But I... whenever I see you, even from afar, I'm so happy I want to run toward you. But I stay rooted to the ground — numb and looking, just looking at you. The day before yesterday I saw you lugging some firewood, your head drawn into your shoulders it made my heart bleed for pity. I would've run and helped you if there hadn't been any people around. You know they'd think up something right away. Are you glad whenever you see me?"

"Sure. There goes Manya, I think then."

"And that's all?" Manya's eyebrows flew up, her eyelids and lips fluttered, and the fingers clutching my hand grew limp.

"What else am I supposed to think?"

"Now when I touch you it throws me into a fever."

"I felt the same when you whispered you'd cry."

Manya put her forehead on my shoulder.

"Oh, how prickly your coat is," she whispered and raised her head.

"That's because it's new," I said. "Got it only the day before yesterday."

"Let's run away from here," Manya breathed hotly at my chin. "All right?"

"No, let's wait till everybody's leaving, because they'll say that..."

"Let them! What do we care?"

"No, we stick together every day, and it wouldn't be right for me to disappear just like that."

"Then I'll catch up with you," she whispered the same idea she had suggested before.

"What about Vasil?"

"I'll get rid of him, or fool him. Don't you worry on that account."

We danced again, closer to our group — or rather it was she who was directing me back there.

The few lights in the windows that were still on throughout the village started to go out. The shadows the poplar and the flowers cast on the grave of Ivan Ivanovich lengthened and melted gradually as the moon sank and waned, while the stars grew brighter in the north.

"It's time we *komm nach Haus*," Silka declared in twisted German. "So till we meet next Sunday."

He took the balalaikas back into his house (they, too, had once been his brother's), put the greatcoat on Sonya's shoulder causing her to disappear completely in it, and saw her to her home, telling her on the way about the strange countries beyond the mountains and oceans. The next day we would hear what country it had been and how it had amazed Sonya. He loved when others listened to him and showed surprise at his knowledge.

Vasil Ohora put his arm under Olya Yekhnich's and took his leave:

"So long!"

There were three of us left. Vasil Kibkalo had to go uphill where he lived not far away from Shtokalo; Manya and I had to cross the bridge.

"Well, I'll be going," I said. "So long. Are you coming, Manya?"

"Yes. I'm afraid to go home alone."

Kibkalo, though, held her firmly and looked at me with eyes full of caustic hatred.

"I'll see you home," he said to Manya. "So why be afraid?"

"Let me go," she said insinuatingly. "I'm not going your way as it is. Otherwise you'll ask me to see you home, too, since you'll be afraid to go alone."

"Why should I be afraid?" Vasil said, trying to put on a bold front.

I left. But it wasn't that easy to do as before when Kibkalo had held on to Manya to make her stay. Today it pained me to be going home alone. I didn't know what to do. Should I return and simply pull Manya out of his clutches (but she herself had been making eyes at him and rushing over to dance with him) or go on and let her do what she wanted? In the meantime, they were arguing. The next moment she went off into a peel of unrestrained laughter. Let her laugh, what did I care!

After I had walked some distance, I heard her say:

"Let me go, Vasil, or else I'll hit you!"

Looking round, I saw her running in my direction. I stopped and waited.

"Whew, at long last I've got rid of him!" Manya breathed heavily and took me first by the arm, then her hand slipped into the pocket of my greatcoat where I had stuck mine, took it in hers and squeezed it gently. What a pest that Kibkalo was! Such a character could get his way anywhere for all his milksoppy looks.

"And he'll get you, too!"

"Oh no — the hell he will!"

"But you yourself flirt with him and laugh in a funny way."

Manya stopped and so did I, because our hands were stuck into the same pocket.

"But I do that on purpose," she said in an amused whisper. "I like it when I'm being loved! And I'm flirting just for the fun of it. I don't love him this tiny bit" — she showed me half of her fingertip to emphasize her point. "Pon my word. And you thought that..."

"How should I know? One moment you go off in a 'ha-ha-ha' and the next moment you threaten to hit him."

Manya laughed.

"Let's get moving or he might get the idea of catching up

with us," she said and sighed. "Seems I have no luck with either of you."

We went on.

The moon was sinking and the night was growing dark. Beyond the river it was also quiet now, except for short peels of rollicking laughter that came now from one, now from another part of Zamostya where the girls were seeing one another home so they wouldn't feel too scared along the way.

Manya lived five houses from my place. When I returned from school she either appeared in the door or behind a window where she waved me a finger in greeting so that nobody else in the house would see it. I always nodded to acknowledge her greeting.

"Let's go to our part of the riverside and sit on the willow stump."

"All right."

We crossed the bridge and then ran down the steep embankment and along the river to the willow. The tree had been sawn off before the war. The bark had peeled off long ago, there was moss at the base of the stump, the top of which had been polished to a gleam by the old men and women, girls, boys, and children who sat on it every Sunday to listen to the latest news or gossip, play, or crack sunflower seeds.

The trunk was cold. Manya felt it with her hand and said:

"Turn back a flap of your greatcoat so I can sit on it, because my skirt is too thin."

I unfastened the still unyielding hooks on my greatcoat and turned back a flap. Manya sat down on it and put her arm round my waist.

"Oh, how warm you are."

"You bet, being under such cloth," I said. I wanted to stroke her hand and was about to do so, but decided against, since she might have taken it for an advance.

It was quiet and starry over the river. Along the bank, little fish were jumping between the water lilies leaves; their petals had already fallen off and what remained were only the green seed pods. Soon the leaves would also sink to the bottom and lie there till spring. They would be seen through the first ice, but they would not be green any longer, but red with streaks of green.

Manya put her head on my breast and sighed tremulously. I bent over and breathed down her neck so that she would

feel warmer in her light jacket and white cotton blouse. She giggled quietly and embraced me more firmly.

"Do you feel warm?" I asked her.

"Your breath tickles my neck," she whispered.

"It's time we parted, because I've still got my engineering drawing to do."

"With me it's algebra."

"If it hadn't been for the war you would've been in ninth grade by now?"

"And you?"

"Me too. I started going to school when I was six — so much did I want to get there."

"If we had come here last year, you and I would've been in one class throughout the winter at least." Manya's parents came from around Kremenchuk not so long ago. "We'd have sat at one desk, huh?"

"Here, boys don't sit with girls at one desk. If they do, they're done for, because they'll both be the butt of endless jokes."

"What do you have to draw?"

"A hammer, in three projections."

"What for?"

"To make a hammer from the drawing."

"Can't you make it without the drawing?"

"No. You've got to stick exactly to the measurements."

Manya turned her face to me; her dark eyes glittered with an intense and fiery sparkle and frightened me slightly. Her fair hair, lustrous close up in the starlight, had slipped from under her kerchief onto her brow and cheeks.

"Kiss me," she whispered.

I turned my eyes away from hers and, seeing no sense in hiding the truth, said:

"I don't know how."

She rose a little and brought her burning cheek to my lips. I opened my lips and then closed them again.

"See, and you said you didn't know how," Manya whispered languidly and put her head on my breast again.

I finally plucked up enough courage and stroked her hand.

"Aren't you frozen yet?"

"No."

Huddling still closer to me, she asked:

"How long will you be studying at trade school?"

"Two years."

“What then?”

“We’ll be sent to plants in the cities, they told us.”

“After which you’ll be drafted into the Army?”

“Probably.”

“I’ll wait for you just the same whether you’re in a city or in the Army. Even if it takes five years.” She got up abruptly and gazed into my eyes. “Do you believe me? Say you do, because I’ll get angry and burst out crying. I’ve already cried because you’re such a...”

Tears really glistened in her eyes.

“I believe you,” I said hoarsely, because my voice had failed me.

Manya took my cap off and brushed back my flop of hair.

“What a white forehead you’ve got under your flop! You can comb your hair backward now. Just like this,” she said, brushing it back. “But first you’ve got to dampen it with water and then comb it. On top, then, goes the cap.” She kept silent, tousling my hair. “Pavlo... why are you so timid? Are you like this with every girl or only with me?”

That stung me.

“So I’m a sissy, isn’t that what you want to say?”

“No, but...”

“I’d have to be like Vasil, eh? Grab you — and pull, and pull!”

Me timid? Why, I tossed all the grenades, German and ours, I could get my hands on. I’d have done the same with the antitank grenades if they hadn’t been so heavy and gone off so fast — after four seconds. And what about the German whose hand I grabbed and then yelled my head off when he raised an ax at Auntie Yalosoveta when she wouldn’t let him try her felt boots on? He kicked me so savagely I went around doubled up with pain for a week after that. And what about the half of the house I saved from the flames? Well, all that might have been done in the heat of the moment.

As I was turning this over in my mind, I suddenly heard something swishing through the air our way. I instantly guessed what it was — a clod of earth. I fell on Manya with my chest, making her utter a stifled scream. Behind me — bang! — something hit the willow stump. Sure enough: it was a clod of earth thrown from the direction of the dyke.

*Why you bastard!* I raved in my mind. *Found yourself a cowardly sissy around here, haven’t you?* I picked up

a clod as well but failed to throw it — it was crushed in my hand from fury.

Someone stamped down the road away from the dyke — not across the bridge but in the opposite direction. Who it was I couldn't tell for the darkness.

I gave chase until I was out of breath.

It was a vain effort, because the fugitive was long-legged. So I returned to Manya.

"Who was it?" she asked, frightened. She stood by the willow with my greatcoat on her arm.

"Who else could it be." I took the greatcoat from her and put it on. "Vasil Kibkalo, who else. He was snooping on us."

"It's time for us to go."

"You afraid?"

"No. It's late and I'll get a preaching back home."

Still, she was afraid.

We walked through our kitchen garden, holding hands. My heart throbbed and my shoulders jerked. Let that funk be grateful I hadn't caught him!

Behind the house we turned into a footpath running along the road. In our home there were no lights on: Auntie Yalosoveta knew I beat the tambourine on Sundays and came home late, so she didn't stay up.

"Farther on I'll go by myself," Manya said and limply detached her hand from mine. She walked off to her house, while I felt so empty and dreary I didn't want to do anything — go into my dark house or do the engineering drawing; I'd get up at three in the morning and do it. Now I just wanted to walk, although the moon wasn't shining any more. But where? I hadn't ever experienced such a feeling before.

"Manya," I called quietly. "Don't go away."

She stopped and stood still for a moment. Then she returned slowly with bent head. She came close to me, pressed herself to me, took my face in her hands, and then I felt her wet eyelids and hot trembling lips against my cheeks.

"Ma-anya, get yourself home!" It was her mother calling, not too loudly and in a voice that seemed devoid of anger. "Do you hear me, Manya? You'll get it for your trysting."

The rains had set in. In the morning, at midday, in the evening, and at night — the rain drummed away every day. It seemed as if it was atoning for its absence throughout the

whole summer. Our greatcoats didn't have a chance to dry thoroughly; by morning they were merely warm after a night indoors, and while we walked to school, they steamed until we reached the first or second station, by which time the rain had them drenched again.

It got difficult to walk. The graded dirt road had turned miry, and the sides of the road weren't any firmer, since they had no grass cover. We plodded through the slippery mud, fell into it at least three times before reaching the suburbs of the township, where the going was easier, because there was a cobbled road.

At times trucks passed us from Kharkiv, Poltava, or from the Lyuten MTS. We raised our hands to hitchhike a lift. Once one had stopped, we clambered into the back, and when the truck started to skid — more often than not at Aspen, our middle station in the steep hollow — we jumped out and pushed the truck until it made hard ground; if one didn't stop, we clung to the tailgate.

The drivers of the military trucks always gave us a lift: either out of pity or because of our uniforms. Ours were about the same as theirs, the only difference being that we had brogans and bell-bottomed trousers, while they wore breeches and high boots.

Vasil Obora had been first to clamber into the back of a passing truck when the weather was still dry. At the foot of the hill, while the driver was changing gear, he hung on to the tailgate, threw his fat legs in the air, and landed in the back of the truck. As it went over the hill, he waved to us in parting.

We struggled up the cobbled hillside, praising Vasil for being brave enough to put into practice an idea we should have hit on a long time before.

"One lift means nine kilometers off the four and a half thousand. The second lift is another nine kilometers less!" Silka exulted.

When we reached the top of the hill, we saw Obora lying under a maple tree, his head propped in his hand.

"What's the matter?" we wondered. "Did he chase you off, or what?"

"No. What's the fun of it riding al-alone?"

At that we agreed to scramble onto a truck together. Whoever got on first would give me a hand, because I couldn't reach the tailgate. With a Studebaker or Chevrolet truck, which had low tailboards, chains on either side, and large

bumpers, it was much easier. I could first grab hold of the bumper or chain and then the tailboard.

We knew our hill quite well: where the drivers changed from fourth to third gear, and where from third to second and from second to first. That depended, though, on whether the truck was loaded or empty, but we learned to guess that from a distance by the sound of the engine. We jumped off the truck on the approaches to the township where there were a lot of ruts and the drivers always slowed down.

Some of the drivers were nasty. One of them once let us have a fast ride up the hill which certainly made us wildly happy: we were on a truck, after all! Then suddenly he slammed on the brakes. We jumped out of the truck and took to our heels. For about ten minutes he chased us with a crank in his hand. "You broke my tailboard last week!" he yelled. "I'll show you how to jump on my truck!" We yelled back from some distance to tell him that it hadn't been us and he must have taken us for somebody else. The man shook the crank threateningly and swore. No sooner was he in his cab than we were back at the truck. No matter how hard he tried to tear off we clung to the tailboard. In the end, we stole a ride and got to our destination faster than we would have done on foot. We nicknamed the driver Fritz for his German-type peaked cap of yellow leather.

Vasil Kibkalo stretched his hand out to me when, along with Obora and Silka, he climbed onto a truck first, but I wouldn't take his hand after that evening with Manya.

On our way to school the day after the incident, I held him back by the arm until the boys had walked farther.

"Was it you throwing earth clods yesterday evening?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" his wedgelike eyebrows flew up. "Why should I have done that? I went off to sleep."

He was certainly lying, to judge from his voice and eyes. I wouldn't take his outstretched hand after that. If I failed to get on a truck, I walked.

So now he was sucking up to the Vasils by sharing a pie or a slice of sour-dough bread with them: his dad was a mechanic servicing a thresher, and for him grain wasn't that hard to get.

Walking to school in September and early October was better than now. When we left home at five in the morning, it was already growing light, while now it started to dawn only as we approached the township. Before reaching it, we

walked through the darkness in single file one after another, changing places now and then — either the Vasils or me walking up front. We followed gropingly the leader's footsteps.

During theory classes we could have a rest for half a day. But when we had practice training, we'd be on our feet throughout the day, sawing, drilling, giving a hand at the smithy, and if need be, making forged pieces for chisels, hammers, pliers, and shanks for bricklayer's trowels.

I and ten other students had to make hammers. The foreman issued us the best files: we had a lot of filing to do on four surfaces and on the fifth — the poll. My hands had already got used to the work, so they didn't hurt, which was something I couldn't say about my feet.

I had good and excellent marks in theoretical subjects, except for engineering drawing. Early in the morning after my meeting with Manya, I was in a hurry to get the drawing done and mixed up the measurements, because drawing was the last thing on my mind. As a matter of fact, nothing else was on my mind either: Auntie Yalosoveta, the school, and even Father whom I thought about every day, recalling his parting smile and the tears in his eyes; on leaving, he said to Auntie Yalosoveta: "Lesya, dear, look after the boy if I won't come back. For him and me, you're the only relative we still have, Lesya. My kind, dear Lesya, thanks be that we met you." That's exactly what he said: we...

To make the room lighter for me to draw in, Auntie Yalosoveta lit the oil lamps made out of an antitank shell and a smallbore AA gun shell. It didn't help much, though.

"You stayed out a bit too late today. Been making music? I went outdoors, but didn't hear anything. Only heard someone talking by the willow tree, but I couldn't make out who it was."

"It was Manya and me."

"You?"

Why did she have to pretend? By the way she was breathing I guessed what was on her mind right away.

"She's a fine girl," Auntie Yalosoveta said at length. "And she has a kind face. She always greets me and then blushes."

"Go to bed, or else you'll oversleep in the morning. It's not long to come anyway."

We didn't have a clock in our home. The one we had before the other half of our house was blasted to the skies

had an alarm bell that rang feebly. Now it must be ringing somewhere up there in heaven.

Auntie Yalosoveta climbed onto the stove, and drawing a sigh, said again:

“A fine girl.”

To make our morning trek to school less boring and scary — in the darkness there wasn't a single light or sound but the howling of the wolves, which we heard on either side, ahead and behind us — we had decided to build a fire by Pisarev Forest every evening on our way home. We lit a heap of brushwood, the flame sending sparks flying up to the telephone wires, warmed ourselves at the fire, put rotten stumps around it to keep it going in our absence, and then left for our homes. At dawn, when we came up to station T we saw the fire from there. It seemed to be far, far away. But actually it was only a furrow's length away from us. When it rained the fire went out. In frosty weather, however, it glowed every dawn. After passing it, we kept looking back at it for a long time and calling out:

“You can see it, look!”

“It's still there!”

“Hey, it's disappeared now!”

This made us sad, but not for long, because the township soon lifted out of the darkness and we saw lighted windows here and there.

Every morning we followed these bearings: from the village lights down the hill, when we turned round to look at our fire, and to the lights in the township ahead of us.

Often I had a horrible nightmare in which I saw myself waking up in my room flooded with the light of a dazzling morning. My blood ran cold at the thought that I had missed parade and breakfast and our group was already marching through the township, bawling *Far Eastern Army* without me in the “shrimp line.”

Once I woke up and the room really was bright with a soft white glow coming through the window. I pressed my forehead to the windowpane — it was white outdoors, while the sky was black without a single star in it or the faintest glimmering of dawn. The Vasils and I had noticed that whenever dawn was creeping on, the sky first turned gray as if the Milky Way were spilling across it from horizon to horizon; a little later there appeared a dimly visible trace

of silent blue over the steppe, after which every roadside shrub looked like a human figure from a distance.

What I saw through the window this time could be explained very easily; a quiet joy from the days of my childhood tickled my throat: I was seeing the first snow through the window. It had fallen at midnight and I had taken it for dawn. Before the war the first snow was like a holiday for us: we threw snowballs, made our first snowman, and rolled down the hills, losing our caps in the fun, as the snow crunched softly under our chests, shoulders and elbows.

It was terribly inconvenient without a clock in the house: the whole night through I dreamed it was time to get up. A rooster might have saved the situation, but we had neither rooster nor hens. During the war the Germans had carried off our hens, and now we didn't have feed for the fowl. Some of the households had roosters, but just try making out them crowing during a snowstorm, windy weather, or a thaw when everything turns black and dull. Nocturnal sounds are the most muffled during thaws.

Auntie Yalosoveta slept on the stove, and I on the plank bed adjoining it. We had a pillow each. I used a blanket and my greatcoat for covering; she had only a blanket, because it was much warmer on the stove. Previously I slept there as well, but now, even when I was dreadfully chilled after coming home from school, I didn't climb onto the stove but went outdoors to chop wood instead or shovel snow to warm up. After that October night with Manya I seemed to have gained in years — without any hope of ever being my old self again.

"You've changed somehow," Auntie Yalosoveta said now and then. "And your voice's changed, too. It's getting lower."

The thought that occupied me most now was our house. I had made up my mind to rebuild it log by log and cover it with a new straw thatch as soon as it got warmer and the day lengthened. How long could we live in such a hut?

I had to get up earlier than Auntie Yalosoveta to drop in at Silka and Obora's homes to wake them. Kibkalo got up himself, because his parents had an alarm clock. I dropped in to the Silkas first. He was the hardest to rouse, because all the Silkas slept like logs. The way they slept was common knowledge to the whole village. At times you had

to rap on the windows for ten minutes to wake them. In this effort I was assisted by Silka's baby sister Nadya. As soon as I rapped on the window I would hear her cry inside:

"Ma-a, there's someone trying to break in!"

Then she would disappear, and when I rapped on the little window opposite their stove, she would babble in a tiny, sleepy voice:

"Vasya, get up; there's Pavlo come for you. Pa and Ma, you can go on sleeping. It's Vasya he wants."

After that, Vasil opened the door and stepped back into the dark entrance hall in which two hens were perched on a ladder. Dizzy for constant lack of sleep, he said in a breathless voice:

"Is it time already? I seemed to have fallen asleep just a minute ago! I hadn't had any dreams yet and..."

I entered the house. Inside, it was warm and damp from the willow wood drying on the stove, and smelled of old cooking oil. Nadya, her hair hanging loose and eyes puffy with sleep, looked from around a stove corner and said with a lisp:

"Hello, Pavlo! None of them even heard you rapping..."

Sometimes she asked me with a cunning squint in her little eyes:

"Pavlo, will you marry me when I grow up? I'd be patching your shirts and you'd be combing my braid."

Old Silka and his wife would laugh for all that sleep had got the better of them, and he would say hoarsely from under the greatcoat he was covered with:

"What a piece of clay! She can't talk properly yet, and here she knows all about marriage."

I would promise to marry her by all means. Then she'd wave at me with her white little hand, disappear onto the stove, and fall asleep.

While Vasil got dressed, I took off my greatcoat so I wouldn't get too warm inside the house and then shiver when I went outdoors. Vasil's parents gradually emerged from their sleep. Both of them had permanent jobs — the father attending to oxen, and the mother to the cows at the local collective farm — which made them utterly exhausted every day. They slept on a simple canvas spread over a plank bed adjoining the stove. After rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, they heaved deep sighs, and then smoothed down their hair with their palms.

"Pavlo, it seems you came too early today. Maybe it's not time to get up yet?"

I was asked this question every day.

Perhaps it was really too early? But how could I know that?

Vasil and I went out by the wicket gate. The snow had blanketed Ivan Ivanovich's grave so high that only the spikes of the low picket fence stuck out, and the poplar sapling swayed in the wind.

"We must shovel the snow away," I said.

"Let it be; he'll feel much cozier under it," Vasil said judiciously. "Besides, the flowers will grow better that way."

It didn't take long to wake Obora. No sooner had we rapped on the door than he was outside, as if he hadn't slept at all. He seemed to be tough as steel: we never remembered him being cold or afraid of anything, nor did he ever get tired, enduring his lot in silence. The only thing that plagued him from morning to night was hunger. Once he said: "I want to eat even in my sleep." He was a strong muscular fellow to be sure. Silka and I were better off, for we were small.

When we came up to Kibkalo's house it was dark inside. Whenever we whistled to him, the light in his home was already on (we knew then for sure that I had got up on time and it would be five o'clock soon), but today the house was dark. Could he have left already, or were we late? No, he'd be afraid to go to school alone. Or was it really too early?

"Something's wrong," Silka said. "Did you hear any roosters crowing on your way to my place?"

"No. What if I missed the first, and the second hadn't crowed yet?"

We whistled once, then a second time. A match flickered in Kibkalo's house and then went out. The entrance door creaked open and Vasil's father said from the threshold:

"It's too early, boys — half past one."

He kept silent and so did we. Where should we go now? Back? Returning to our homes and rousing our folks was out of the question. Or should we walk slowly to school and there freeze in the cold till the opening time?

Kibkalo's father made up his mind at last:

"All right, come in."

None of us had ever been in Kibkalo's home. They lived like recluses: what they did behind the tall plank fence

nobody knew; when they talked you couldn't hear anything but an indistinct mumbling: the moment their door closed the bolt clanked shut. No rapping on the door could make it open; you only saw the curtains on the windows move slightly, as an eye peeped out to watch the intruder.

Kibkalo did not lead us into the large living room, but into the foreroom. It smelled of milk, rye bread, and a warm stovebed. The strongest smell was that of milk; we had forgotten when we smelled it last. By the stovebed a pile of straw gleamed in the dark. Kibkalo spread the straw out with his foot.

"Lie down here and have a nap. I'll wake you up when it's time to go."

The eyebrows of Kibkalo Sr., just like his son's, always stood on end; he had cheerlessly drooping lips, and, besides, his upper lip slightly overlapped the lower one. In the village he was respected as a skilled and cool-tempered machine operator.

We hit the straw in full dress: caps, greatcoats, tarpaulin belts, and tin buckles. It was the first time in four months of school that we slept serenely.

In the morning we set off with a lively, quick and easy tread: the wind blew from one side and not head-on, the air was refreshingly frosty, and we had had a good nap in the warm house. And the main thing — Kibkalo's mother had treated us to milk and real rye bread. When we went out, she saw us to the wicket gate.

"You are a strong boy, Vasil," she turned to Obora, "so see to it that nobody hurts my sonny." As she said that, she stroked Kibkalo's narrow back.

Obora promised he'd do his best. On the hilltop he gave me a bearhug and said quietly:

"Get up at two o'clock once more!"

After it snowed, we carried on feeding our fire at Station Aspen. But now we did it not so much to enliven the autumnal darkness of the steppe as to warm ourselves on the way. Besides, we had got used to our fire. The rotten aspen stumps smouldered for two days or even three. We took them from Pisarev Forest. A kick was enough to get them loose, after which we carried them on our shoulders to Station Aspen where we had built up a sizable stock for future use.

"We've had such a splendid treat today there's no use hurrying for breakfast!" That-Me-Or-Not exclaimed suddenly. He had a habit of saying things unexpectedly. "Let the

orphanage boys have our rations. But there'll be parade, so..."

We squatted around the fire, puffed into the glowing embers, and brought our hands so close to them our finger bones shone through. Obora fetched an armful of dry twigs from the forest and threw them onto the coals. The fire leapt up in a column, scattering the hissing sparks across the snow. We turned round on our heels as firemen did on their watch towers and warmed our greatcoats on all sides. When the flame subsided and licked only the stumps, we moved on.

Kibkalo felt like a million, smiling intermittently at everyone. He engaged us in conversation, convinced that the bread and milk would make us talkative. Besides, he wouldn't have to eat on the sly now — it can't have been easy for him to gobble up the food with his hungry classmates around. When we were drinking the milk, he shot furtive glances at me, as if he were figuring out how much I was worth. I caught those glances, and without blinking, stared back into his eyes which he always clapped shut.

"All right, in our case the explanation is simple. But what makes you attend school, Vasil?" Silka asked. He was walking up front, his large head drawn into his shoulders, one hand stuck in the pocket and the other into the lapel of his greatcoat. "If I were as well off as your folks, I'd never drop out of school, but keep on studying forever and a day."

"Pop made me," Kibkalo retorted lazily. "He told me that after I'd learnt to be a mechanic he'd take me onto his machine; with a little coaching from him I'd have less trouble getting by."

"Exactly," Obora said. "The machine and steam engine will give you a chance of... well, taking some grain home."

It happened to be a bad night: a snowstorm raged outdoors, the wind howled like a wolf between the bridge piles and moaned in the chimney, blasting all the warmth out of the house. I could just imagine what it was like on the hilltop where the wind would sweep me off my feet. There had already been such a night in December when we barely made it to school.

I got out of bed about four times to have a look through the window. I couldn't make out anything going on outdoors. There was only the snow pelting against the windowpanes which was covered with ice two fingers thick.

"Sleep, sonny, it must be early yet," Auntie Yalosoveta said from the stove. "I've been unable to get any shut-eye since evening."

"I have to leave, but what keeps you awake?"

"I've been thinking. Now when you finish school, they'll send you somewhere, and I'll be left all alone... there won't be your dad or you around. Who needs me anyway?"

"What do you mean you'll be left alone? I'll do my three-year spell of work and come back. Besides, I've still got a long time to study."

Auntie Yalosoveta sighed in the darkness.

I had to get up; the sooner the better, so that the boys wouldn't be left without breakfast because of me. Try and hold out till lunchtime without eating! That day we had practical training, which meant I could pull the coveralls over my uniform, but since it was so dreadfully cold outdoors it was much better to fold the coveralls in three and put them to my chest under the greatcoat to protect myself against the withering wind.

I quickly stuck my feet into the brogans, turned down the flaps of my forage cap which made it look like a bag, pulled it over my head and ears the way the Germans had done during the war, and put a winter cap on over it.

"Watch out you don't freeze your face," Auntie Yalosoveta said. She did up my greatcoat, while I pressed the folded coveralls against my chest. "My God, it'd be better if I went instead of you. At least turn sideways when the wind's too furious."

"By the time I finish school I'll have learnt how to read my lecture notes while breasting the wind," I joked. I pitied her, watching her thin fingers pulling my greatcoat lapels tight to fasten them with the hooks. I pitied everything about her. But I didn't even have time to express my compassion. Besides, words would have been the least comfort on such occasions, so I decided to stay silent.

I went out onto the road, my head bent low: the wind and snow whipped my greatcoat like a scourge. I scanned the village from under my cap and stopped in my tracks: the lights were on in almost all the houses.

Wow, it must have been six o'clock!

I made to run, but failed. The wind was pushing me back. I knew that with a strong head-on wind it was useless to run, because it could sweep me off my feet much more easily; I just had to push on with greater effort.

Still, what time was it?

The lights in Manya's house were also on. Should I rap on the window and ask the time? They, too, had a clock. But no. Me muffled in two caps and late at that would be too much for her.

I walked closer to the houses which offered some protection from the wind, and broke into a run again, plodding through dry whipped up snowdrifts.

I ran into Silka's house without knocking, because the lights in it were on too.

"Vasil left just a short while ago," Silka's mother said. She was kindling the stove with damp wood. "Did you oversleep? Oh, poor children!" she pitied me. "In such nasty weather it's small wonder you overslept."

I didn't drop in to Obora's house: Silka must surely have roused him.

So there was nothing left but to catch up with them.

The Kibkalos' windows were dark: the entire family was obviously sleeping, Kibkalo's parents did not let him go to school in such weather. They could well afford to have their son left without the school bread ration and watery soup.

It took me a lot of effort to get halfway up the hill. The wind was slashing the barren cobble with withering force, so I had to double up to move along. The telephone wires overhead did not hum — they howled in a multitude of voices. I wondered why they didn't snap for the ice that coated them.

"Pav-v-vlo.... a-a-atch u-u-up!" barely audible voices carried from afar.

My spirits buoyed. "I'm coming, I am, bo's," I mumbled into my breast. Shouting into the wind would have been useless. The wind would have taken my breath away the moment I opened my mouth. They wouldn't hear me anyway. I had to struggle along, come what may. Perhaps they'd wait for me by the fire if it hadn't been blown away. Such a wind could make the stumps roll, let alone scatter the embers.

I passed Station T, barely making out whether it was a T or an A for the snowstorm. I peered into the darkness from under my frost-covered eyebrows. What was that? A fire! Our fire! But how did it happen to be in this place? It should be quite some distance ahead. But here it was! It wasn't flickering or throwing up sparks as it usually did.

Was I seeing things? I stopped and looked intently — two specks of light, one close by the other. Was I seeing double out of despair? I pulled my numb hands out of my sleeves, rubbed the frost off my eyelids, and my vision cleared a bit. Yes, there were two specks of light, and something was standing about five paces ahead of me. Or was it two paces?

“Is that you, boys?” I asked and shivers ran down my spine, because I had a premonition that these weren’t the boys.

The specks of light shone without a flicker: they were green, and before I had had a chance to tell myself what was really standing there in front of me, I backed away.

*It’s a wolf. Why, it’s a wolf!* the thought flashed through my mind. I felt my hair stiffen as if there was too much of it under my two caps.

I can’t remember whether I really said or only meant to say “Scram!” but the wolf didn’t budge and remained sitting there as before, his eyes sparkling.

“Come, come,” I said coaxingly, and, numb with fright, extending him my hand as if Grandma Ostapishin’s kid were on my palm. “Come, come!”

We always used to call dogs that way when we were children, pretending to hold something in our hands so that the dogs would come up to us and we could play with them.

The wolf neither retreated nor advanced, but stayed put as if he were making fun of me. I even had a feeling he was sitting there on his haunches and grinning at me in the dark like some old man. I got bolder then, grew angry, and yelled:

“Scram, you mutt! Scram, I tell you! I’ve got to be at parade on time! Do you hear me? Or are you deaf? Why, you wolf I...” I wanted to swear at him with something like “you big bad brute of a wolf,” but I held myself in and said kindly again, shivering all over and my teeth chattering:

“Why you, palsy-welsy. You miserable crook sitting around here like a lord. Let me pass, I tell you!”

A savagely furious glitter flashed in the wolf’s eyes, and then I saw him clearly, tall and lean — two shadows: his and mine. I glanced round: from the direction of the hill two headlights appeared, alternately sweeping their beams upward and jabbing into the snowdrifts and telegraph poles lining the road. It was a truck! I looked again at the place where the wolf had been sitting just a moment ago — there

was nothing there but snow snaking and swirling on either side of a boundary strip post.

The headlights approached, dazzling me, but I didn't turn my eyes away and kept waving my hands, whispering: "Pick me up, driver... Pick me up..." My heart was almost bursting out of my throat, pounding against the coveralls on my chest. "Pick me up..."

Already I could hear the engine. It howled full blast, and the headlights didn't dip as they usually did when a driver was about to stop and reduce speed.

*Maybe he doesn't see me or is dozing behind the steering wheel,* I thought. Wouldn't he stop? Hardly!

When the truck came level with me, I yelled at the top of my voice toward the cabin, faintly illuminated by the dashboard inside:

"Pick me up, driver! There's a wolf here!!!"

But the truck roared past me, sending a cloud of snow dust and the stench of exhaust fumes into my face. Driving into a snowdrift, the truck went into a slight skid, throwing the rear wheels sideways, and the engine roared the more wildly. I rushed forward, and gasping on the smoke belching from the exhaust pipe, grabbed hold of the ice-covered coupling hook. The truck was a one-and-a-half tonner. I had never been able to reach the tailgate of one of those without the Vasils' help, and had it not been for the wolf and his terrible cold eyes that had stared into my soul just a moment before, I wouldn't have reached it. But I did, and I held on. No force could have torn me loose from it. Everything else was simple: I pulled myself up (not for nothing had I lugged and chopped wood every day) and dropped into the back of the truck. I approached the cabin, reeling with the jolting and the effort it had taken me to race after the truck and hold on to the coupling hook. The tarpaulin roof of the cabin flapped in the wind, and when I sat down, there was the smell of warm flour in the back of the truck. I've never known flour to have a cold smell: it always breathed warmth. I ran my fingers over the four or five sacks in the back — yes, they contained either flour or bran. I lay down on them sideways, stretched my hand to the dirty sidewindow of the cab, and yelled:

"Driver, there are two boys walking ahead; pick them up!"

"Got on, after all, you brat! All right, I'll give you the ride of your life!"

The truck tore off with still greater speed and gave a drawn-out ominous-sounding honk. I went down on my knees on the sacks; ahead I saw the Vasils, Silka and Obora, waving their hands in the shaft of the headlights.

"Stop!" I yelled, bending over to the sidewindow. "We're late for breakfast, and there are wolves about!" The moment I saw the driver's peaked cap, I was jolted into a shocking realization: it was Fritz!

"Sure I'll pick them up... You'll have a fine ride yet!" Fritz snapped nastily.

What sort of creature was he? The wolf had been much more reserved, while this character would drive me God knows where and beat me up to boot.

Well, whether he liked it or not he'd have to throttle down at the oil mill, because there were such ruts that he couldn't bounce over so easily. There was also a pothole just before the bridge. I'd jump off somehow.

But the driver did not jam on the brakes either by the oil mill or the bridge, and I would have been thrown out of the truck if I hadn't held onto the sacks. There was not a soul in sight on the road, which was the only broad road running through the township; only the beams of the headlights slashed across the windows and tin roofs of the single-storied houses. The driver lowered the sidewindow slightly again, and asked casually, almost kindly:

"Did you see my number?"

"No, I didn't," I replied, not understanding why he had asked. I really hadn't seen the number plate, because the truck was in snow all over, and besides it was dark.

"You have to get off at the MTS?" he inquired again.

"Yes, we've got practice training today!" I yelled back.

"Good enough. I'll step on the brakes opposite the market, and you jump off. I'm in a hurry."

*Let him,* I thought; I could just as well walk from the market to school.

The truck raced through the township at a lick and approached the market square. I could already see the farthest houses beyond it where the road dropped into a gully.

The driver slammed on the brakes, sending the truck into a skid. Reeling, I made for the tailgate and threw one leg over it, groping with my foot for the coupling hook below. That instant the truck tore off with such a furious jerk that the tailgate slipped out of my numb fingers and I went

hurtling head over heels down on to the cobbles. Already grounded and trying to force one gulp of air into my lungs which had collapsed on the impact, I saw the red tail lights disappear into the gully; and with them, the veils of driven snow in the overcast sky, the lights at the MTS, and the market stalls also faded from my sight.

The first thing I heard when I came to, was a woman's voice. She talked so rapidly it made her gasp for breath:

"I was going to the market draw-well for water, when I saw something black on the road. At first I was scared and backed away into my yard. But then I plucked up my courage, approached, and looked: it was a human being. He was wearing the same uniform as you. I ran off and called my mother, and we carried him into our house; he was as light as a feather, I tell you. And did he moan — it was a fright to hear. So I came running to you as fast as I could. Who mangled him, that poor soul, I wonder. Oh, look, he's opening his eyes."

I saw a red blur, and it was a moment before I realized it was a stove. Our entire group, along with the foreman, had made it out of a steel barrel when the weather was turning cold. We riveted a long tin pipe and stuck it outside through a window so that the heat going through the pipe would spread throughout the whole workshop.

The foreman was squatting at my side and pressing something cold to my forehead. It was snow, I guessed. I felt water drops rolling down my collar, shoulders and chest, and tickling me. Except for something like a thin sound ringing annoyingly in my head, I felt no pain.

No sooner did I try to stir than I cried out from the attempt: a knife seemed to have slashed across my whole left side — leg, half of my chest, and shoulders, and a muffled bell went booming in my head.

"Don't move! Do no-ot moo-ove," the foreman said in a kind voice.

All the boys from my group stood around me. They looked at me silently, some frightened, others gloomy. I instantly recognized both Vasils among them.

"Vasil," I said so quietly I barely heard myself. "It was Fritz. I saw his peaked cap."

"What Fritz?" the foreman asked, bending close to my face.

"The driver. He jolted... on purpose... so I wouldn't see the number plate."

"Do you remember the number?" the foreman bent still closer. "One numeral at least?"

"I know the number!" Silka exclaimed. "I remembered it from last autumn: SHD-41-18. Exactly! I remembered it. He was chasing aftêr us then..."

The foreman got to his feet.

"Monitor!"

"Yes!" Grishukha snapped to attention.

"Take ten boys and go onto the road. But be careful. Care-ful!"

"We'll do it, Comrade foreman," Grishukha said in a tone that sounded almost cheerful. "He won't get away from us."

He started calling out the names of his boys from the orphanage. I knew them, and thought: *Fritz won't get away from them.*

"And send somebody to the hospital right away," the foreman said.

"I've done that already. Fedir Demidovich."

Grishukha squatted at my side and looked straight and boldly at me; his eyes were intensely black and severe. He took a breakfast ration of bread from behind a breast flap of his greatcoat, opened his hand, and put the bread into my palm.

"Take it. Fortify yourself. It's yours. Have a bite. It'll make you feel better."

I looked at my open palm: on it gleamed the grains of salt pressed into the bread.

As I looked at it, I felt something constricting my chest — faintly, gently.

## DEATH OF A HERO

### I

In his sleep Igorko heard the plank bed adjoining the stove creak, then his mother's bare feet shuffled across the floor, and instantly he woke. The room was wrapped in a deep predawn twilight; throughout the night, the frost had settled so thickly on the windowpanes that they were invisible. Only on one pane, on the leeward side of the house, a tiny bluish hole glimmered. Through it a star, split into spangles, blinked.

"See, what bears the frost has etched on the glass," his mother said, and started blowing onto the window. The hole widened and let another star into the room. "Get up, Igorko, gray dawn is breaking already."

Igorko turned over on the stovebed and ran his hands along the outer edge of the hearthstone to see whether it was time to get up or not. The hearthstone was cold, as it usually was by sunrise; from under his blanket came a smell of dry clay dust and old soot. It *was* time to get up.

While his mother lit the oil lamp and rattled the oven door by the hearth, preparing breakfast, Igorko stayed in bed a little longer, his palms pressed between his knees like a child, and blew onto his chest to warm himself for the last time before going out. Then he remembered the latest news from school and that roused him from sleep completely.

"You know, Mom, we've got a new assistant director for political studies," he said boastfully, pulling a crumpled khaki service shirt over his lean shoulders. "He's a Hero of the Soviet Union! Came straight from the front. The director calls him 'our cavalier.'"

"You don't say!" Priska exclaimed, surprised. "So he's a cavalier, and a young one I suppose."

"Oh no, Mom, he's not a lady's man. He's a war hero."

Priska emptied the remainder of yesterday's dumplings onto a platter. Along with the liquid, a blue potato and two fallow gray dumplings rolled out of the bowl.

"Maybe you'll be better fed now, since you've got a hero?"

"The boys said we'd be getting a little more at meals, but there's nothing definite yet."

Igorko sat down at the table. He picked a piece off a potato, ate a dumpling, and scooping several yellow fat specks onto his spoon, washed it all down with a spoonful of the liquid.

"Mom, the rest is yours, because I'll have a full breakfast at school," he said, pushing the platter toward the center of the table. As he spoke, his voice trembled, probably because the dumplings had been cold or the draft from the window had chilled his back.

"Give me my footgear, please."

Out of the hearth niche Priska took a pair of battered boots stuck on pegs to dry, two big burlap foot clouts, and a bunch of string as stiff as wire. Igorko laid them out on a bench in separate piles. First he pulled on a pair of old heelless socks in such a way that the bare parts of his feet would not stick out of the boots, then he wound the clouts over the boots and tied them securely with the string so that they wouldn't come undone on the way. The main thing was to walk at least half the way. By that time the foot clouts would have frozen stiff and would stay on the boots till he reached town. There he would have to take them off, because such footgear was not acceptable with school uniform.

"See, what a timid sort you are," his mother said with a sigh, helping him tie the strings. "And you didn't get any brogans either. You're just like your daddy. He probably died, because he didn't dare insist on having his way either. The shrewder ones came back from the war..."

"The brogans were only given to the kids from the orphanage, Mom," Igorko rejoined.

"And what about the cap?"

Igorko blinked quickly and averted his eyes.

Drafts raced through the house, making the flame of the oil lamp sway, which caused the shadows in the corners to flicker like living things.

Indeed, Igorko had fallen foul of fortune when he was issued the cap: it was too big for him, and, besides, it had RUI, standing for "reused item," stamped right on the forehead. The other boys also had the stamp — not in front, drat it, but somewhere on the side or the lining.

No sooner did Igorko appear at the village club now than his school pal Vasyuta Skorik, who usually had his arms

round girls' waists (two as an invariable rule), started tipping winks to everyone and singing a folk song:

*Oh give me  
What you meant me to give —  
A piece of black sheepskin  
My cap for to patch...*

The girls doubled up with laughter, wriggling in Vasyuta's embrace while he pawed their thighs. (Vasyuta was monitor of his class and wore a new officer's cap without any stamp on it at all!)

"Sock him in the kisser!" the older boys advised Igorko, and laughed, because they knew he wouldn't get the better of Skorik.

Igorko, though, was not spoiling for a fight. He skulked silently in a corner, hiding in the darkness to conceal not so much himself as his stamped cap. Once, however, he had not been able to check himself. He came up to Vasyuta face to face, and said:

"Listen... you! You... stop teasing me... Maybe my Pa got killed in this cap... Get it? You jackass!" After which he retired to his corner again.

From that day on, he had stopped visiting the club and dropping in at Vasyuta's house to walk with him to school in town.

A rooster crowed at the far end of the village. At first he sounded bold and jolly, but then choked on the frosty air and broke into what resembled the clucking of a brooding hen.

Igorko, his cap pulled over his mother's old kerchief and his gray greatcoat girded with a canvas belt, pressed his face against the windowpanes. It was dark outside, but he knew it only seemed so because of the flickering oil lamp; in fact, dawn was breaking. He saw the large morning star already hanging low, shooting its sharp glimmering sparks in every direction. The windowpanes hummed faintly under the pressure of the wind, as if someone were waxing thread outside.

"Well, I'll be going, Mom, or I may be late for breakfast."

"Mind you obey your foreman, Igorko," Priska said, seeing him off to the hallway. "And be attentive to your teachers.

To all of them for that matter. Watch out your face doesn't get frostbitten, because you'll be walking into the wind today."

"I'll be careful," Igorko promised, stepping over a pointed snowdrift by the threshold.

Choking on the sharp frosty air, like the rooster who had crowed shortly before, he coughed and walked in the direction of the village common.

## II

Walking made Igorko's body warm and his feet hot. But the biting frosty air made breathing difficult, pricking him in the lungs and back and irritating his nose. Whenever he turned his back to the wind, a sharp hacking cough shook him. If there had been any dogs in the neighborhood he would certainly have roused them all. But there weren't any. Since the Germans shot all of them during the war, no dogs barked in the yards, which made the village sullenly silent. The wind tugged at the trees, the old sheds and reed fences, making them creak, and whistled in the enclosures and among the ice-coated twigs.

Igorko could see clearly where the snow was old and where it had fallen in the night. The older snow was blacker, glittered here and there with a coating of ice, and droned like an empty grain vat underfoot. The morning moon had sculpted the snowdrifts with ribs and patterned them with green shadows. It kept pushing up and up, the stars parting to make way for it.

In the Skoriks' house the lights were on. Vasyuta must have been up already. Never mind, he'll catch up if need be. He always caught up with Igorko, afraid to walk alone to school. It was only at the clubhouse that he put on a bold front.

Beyond the village the wind blew mercilessly. With no houses around, it lashed in wild abandon. There was nothing along Igorko's way but telegraph poles and the moon hanging over a strawstack far off in the steppe. Igorko doubled up from the cold and pushed his hands deeper into the sleeves of his old greatcoat.

The old snow rang under his steps. Snow came drifting his way like a twisting snake, hissing and draping round his feet.

He wondered what Valeriy Maximovich was doing at this

moment. He was probably already up and washing himself. On a chair lay his officer's jacket with the straight lines of his glittering orders and the Star of Hero of the Soviet Union. Igorko had seen the star, and the orders, too. Valeriy Maximovich had an awful lot of them. They wouldn't have fitted on Igorko's chest: small wonder, because the assistant director's chest was three times broader.

The day before, Valeriy Maximovich had noticed him, too, and even called him by name. They had been sitting with the boys in the social studies room and talking about the war. Igorko's foreman Polulyak was also there. A wartime sailor, he was much bigger than Valeriy Maximovich and wore his decorations aslant. On his forehead he had a dent from a shell splinter and a pallid scar that pulsated visibly.

Igorko didn't hear everything they were saying, because he was standing fairly far from the group. If it hadn't been for that dratted cap, he would have come closer.

"What rank did you start out in the war?" the foreman asked Valeriy Maximovich.

"I was a sergeant," he replied with a smile. "We Ukrainians, they say, are all potential sergeants, because we love both ordering people around and obeying orders as well."

The foreman burst into such a roar of laughter it made his head bob up and down. The boys laughed, too, although they didn't quite understand what he meant by "potential."

Then Valeriy Maximovich started telling them what he got the title of hero for. Who else but a hero could have knocked out six tanks at one time all by himself. Yes, sir.

Igorko kept straining his ears. Then finally he moved closer. Valeriy Maximovich noticed him. He looked him over for a while, and said:

"Why are you looking at me like that, boy?"

Everyone instantly turned round and looked at Igorko as if they were seeing him at the trade school for the first time.

Igorko was dumbfounded.

"You see," he uttered with an effort, "it's interesting what with all those Germans around and you being alone!"

Valeriy Maximovich smiled faintly, and said:

"You must be a fine boy — but your cap surely lets you down."

Igorko didn't take offense at all, nor was he ashamed of his cap. Was he really to blame that there weren't any better ones in the storehouse?

"Never mind, eagles," Valeriy Maximovich addressed them all. "For summer we'll get black uniforms and black caps with crossed hammers insignia for you on order. What's your name, boy?"

"Chovnovy... Igor Chovnovy."

"That's how it'll be, Chovnovy. All right?"

You bet, if there are caps into the bargain.

The old packed snow resounded merrily under his feet. Walking had made his back warm now.

Day was slowly breaking in the east. The snowstorm was spent. The moon had turned from red to white, as if it had recovered from the cold. Through the haze he saw the town in front of him: a medium-sized fire observation tower with a mushroom-shaped snow cap on the broach roof, a number of brick buildings between naked aspen trees dotted with a lot of birds' nests, and further on, row upon row, houses — upright and ramshackle, thatched and tile-roofed, as in any village.

By the little bridge, beyond which the town's cobblestone road started, Vasyuta Skorik caught up with Igorko.

"Didn't drop in, did you?" he said gasping at Igorko's ear. "Well, like hell you'll get a second helping at meal time. I've heard the boys from the hamlet won't be at school today, so I'll give their portions to the orphanage kids and not to you."

There was a smell of canned fish and the skim of baked milk on Vasyuta's breath. It was so strong it conjured up the crisply browned and white-rimmed skim quite graphically in Igorko's mind. It was little wonder Vasyuta could afford such grub for breakfast: his father supervised a dairy farm and his mother worked in a store.

Vasyuta lit up an aromatic cigarette, and stuck one hand in his lapel and the other in his pocket just as the school director did.

"I was at the clubhouse yesterday," he boasted after a while. "Was necking with Nastusya Nalisna. She's a little dish I tell you, but the minx kisses like a leech. My lips still ache." He spat through a chipped tooth, and then piped a line from a pop song:

*Why have you made me drink my fill of poison... Ha-ha!*

The rail on the fire observation tower clanged eight o'clock. The trade school was already close by. The smell of

warm brown bread and the steam of a meatless meal hung in the air.

Igoriko sat down on the snow and started unwinding his stiffly frozen clouts.

### III

A crowd was milling about on the leeward side of the school building. The boys had stuck their hands under their armpits, and were pushing one another with their shoulders, rubbing against each other's backs, stamping their feet and hopping round to keep themselves a little warm. In the public garden, the orphanage boys, hiding from the foremen behind the monument to Stalin, were selling their supper bread rations to the local women to buy tobacco or warm foot clouts. The bread had dried up during the night and didn't weigh its initial two hundred grams. The women weighed it in their palms and hummed and hawed, while the young traders, their lips blue and their eyes watering, kept moving to stay warm.

"How much is it?" a woman inquired.

"Two hundred grams to a title."

"What are you asking for it?"

"Thirty roubles."

"What about ten?"

"You must be kidding!"

The cold nipped them so mercilessly it made their eyelids stick together. For all that, nobody entered the school building: firstly, they hadn't been let in for morning parade yet, and secondly, everyone was waiting for Vasil Tyt, the village idiot. A moment later he appeared, walking toward the crowd. He was tall and lean, dressed in a German great-coat with a worn velvet collar and a cap with a broad red band running diagonally across the front. The boys went to meet him with guffaws. Igoriko stayed by the wall. His pockets bulged with the clouts he had stuffed inside. He was so cold he couldn't open his teeth.

"Hurrah for the partisan!" the boys shouted, halfway to Tyt.

"Hur-rah-ah!" everyone roared.

Tyt stopped in his tracks, snapped to attention, and brought a dirty red palm to his head in salute, his eyes ominously serious and his lips pressed tight.

"Boys, he's barefoot," someone remarked.

“Hur-rah-ah!”

“Tyt, come on and get up on the Tiger!” Vasyuta Skorik suggested.

The idiot raised a crooked finger.

“Ai Moment!” he said and clambered up the ice-coated German tank standing in the middle of the street with a cannon jutting into a snowdrift.

“Parade!” came the call from the school, and the students stamped off to the parade ground, cutting short their foolery.

The groups lined up quickly, because everyone wanted to get into the mess as soon as possible; Igorko, too, forgot his frozen feet and raised himself on tiptoe to see the assistant director over the caps. He was standing there in the middle of the parade ground with the foremen and instructors. They all wore black uniforms, while he was in a brand-new gray greatcoat with a shoulder belt. He was saying something to Polulyak and smiling.

Then the director, Sakhatsky, appeared from behind the stack of boards in the schoolyard. He always turned up unexpectedly, and this time both students and instructors were momentarily dumb struck — but not so Valeriy Maximovich, oh no.

“School, dress right!” military instructor Vitkovsky hollered, vigorously pressing his left, artificial, arm to his thighs.

The parade froze. Heads turned right with a jerk, but many caps remained as they had been, Igorko’s included.

“Ten-shun!” Three hundred and sixty noses again merged into a single line of faces, topped by caps with traces of five-pointed stars.

“How do you do, comrade students!” the director said quietly to make everyone heed him. His neck was thick and short, and his cheeks — chaffed by the fabric — spilled over his collar. He was crosseyed, which made his eyes seem to shift in all directions, so that every student thought he was looking at him alone — a sensation that made everyone feel uneasy.

“How-d’ye-do-comrd-directr!” the parade roared in response with a simultaneous emission of warm air from their mouths.

Morning roll call followed. Shortly after, the whole school marched to the mess hall.

“Strike up a song!” Vitkovsky ordered.

The students broke into a discordant song, stretching out its lyrics right down to the tail of the long column:

*A machine gunner was I born,  
A machine gunner shall I die.*

Then the front lines started on the second, grimmer stanza about the fate of the machine gunner, while the back lines were still finishing the first stanza in a jolly manner:

*...unner shall I die...*

By the mess hall the column broke up: some looked into the windows of the bread-cutting shop to see whether they'd be given short weight on their ration, while others crowded by the kitchen and shouted through the open door:

"Zinka, bring out the meat!"

"Hey, Podolyak, throw me a heel. When I was on duty, I... Remember?"

Igorko stood in line for the mess, because his group always entered after the first two. But today for some reason they weren't allowed in. Through the gauze-curtained windows came the sound of clattering steel bowls, then somebody shouted, and a wild din broke out inside — a bench crashed to the floor, a windowpane rattled round the corner and glass crashed onto the ice-glazed snow.

Those outside quietened down. Then the door to the mess hall flew open and banged against the wall, and red-faced, excited students came bolting out of the dense steam of the mess.

"Don't eat that grub, brothers!" someone cried out.

"How long are they going to cheat us?"

"They're giving us slops to eat."

"Don't go in there, boys!"

Mikola Chmutik from the third group, who was famous for his rollicking whistling that went with the song about the "birdy nightingale" which "trilled mournfully," stuck four fingers as dirty as Tyt's into his mouth and gave a shrill whistle. The crowd burst into a nervous roar of laughter, swayed, and started rolling from side to side. Igorko was painfully pushed to the wall, dragged against the wet door, and in the end, found himself in the mess hall. In the fray he saw only Vasyuta's face and his bared, chipped teeth.

"Go in, boys!" Vasyuta muttered scaredly. "We'll get

thicker food! For us... it'll be better! Go in! Better... I tell you. Oh, you hicks."

"Get out of here!" Igorko moaned hoarsely. He wanted to wrestle his hand free and push Vasyuta away, but he could not: he was squeezed in. "Want to be a favorite, don't you? Get out of here, you fat mug!"

Suddenly Igorko was silent, seeing Valeriy Maximovich standing at the opposite end of the mess hall. His hand was tucked into his shoulder belt, and he smiled at the provision superintendent's back. The latter was running back and forth between the overturned tables and the door with outspread hands, yelling frantically:

"Stop it! What do you think you're doing? Let me get up the tables! My, what's got into all of you? Valeriy Maximovich... Comrade assistant director..."

Igorko was pushed again. Behind his back somebody called out scaredly, "The director!" and the crowd backed away toward the door and stampeded into the hall.

Silence fell.

"What's going on here?" Igorko heard, and only then did he see the director. He stood by his assistant, with sternly bent head and hands clasped behind his back. "I'm asking you, Valeriy Maximovich."

The assistant director took a step toward him and stopped smiling.

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask you!"

Sakhatsky jerked his head backward, revealing the red marks made by the chaffing of his collar on the underside of his chin.

Valeriy Maximovich managed a faint smile.

"Do you realize what this is — a riot, political subversion."

"I don't understand you. I think it's just a protest by people who've been cheated."

"Oh, that's how you see it," Sakhatsky said, breathing out sharply, and suddenly he shouted so furiously that it jolted Igorko: "So you're laying down the law here as well, you bastard!"

Igorko froze: Valeriy Maximovich reeled forward and his hand slid down the leather strap to his right pocket.

"What did you say? Me a bastard? Why, you rat..."

The director pulled in his head and said under his breath:

"Take it easy, Comrade hero. The days of 'Draw your swords!' are over. Call the Party bureau immediately."

Sakhatsky spun round on his heel and made for the door. His squinting eyes were bloodshot and dulled like those of a blind man.

#### IV

The rail on the fire observation tower clanged ten o'clock. The sun had climbed over the town, playing and sparkling in the icicles hanging from the tin roofs. The cold, however, persisted. The windows in the main school building glittered intensely, the trees in the public garden creaked and gray haze rose from the draw well in the schoolyard crammed with students.

No longer did a single group approach the mess hall. The boys sought sunny corners and crouched in them because of the cold. The class monitors weren't around: they had been called to the director's office along with the foremen and instructors. Such lack of authority oppressed the students more than anything.

"Now they'll be trying to find the ringleaders," it was quietly rumored in the crowd.

"Then'll follow expulsions."

"For what?"

"You'll see."

Tyt appeared in the schoolyard; he must have thought breakfast was over already and he could snatch a morsel from the kitchen. He walked from group to group, shot his hand up to his red-banded cap in salute, smiled kindly at the boys, but nobody paid him any attention. Everybody was watching the main entrance.

At length the military instructor Vitkovsky came out the door. Both his arms, the artificial one included, were pressed to his body as if to attention, his lips were solemnly clapped shut, and his chin raised high, as if any moment a combat decoration was to be pinned to his chest in front of an entire army which had failed to check an enemy onslaught and run, while he alone, Private Vitkovsky, had stood his ground and saved the day.

"Off to parade!" his brief command lashed out like the stroke of a whip.

Then the orders came tumbling one after another, almost without interruption:

"'Ress right!"

“Ten-shun!”

“S ye were!”

“Ress right!”

“Ten-shun!”

“S ye were!”

The students turned their heads back and forth, reacting with dumb submission to every snarled command.

The first to come running out of the school building were the class monitors. Like any other petty supervisors they looked angry and at the same time proud of having been called to account. “See,” their faces seemed to say, “while you were having a great whoop-de-doo we took the rap for you.”

The boys started asking them in whispers what would happen next, when the director, surrounded by a retinue of black greatcoats, came out onto the parade ground, and again the command was snarled down the lines:

“Ten-shun!”

The foremen hurried along the first line, and each took up his position by his group. Only the assistant director, Vitkovsky, and the director remained standing before the parade. In the director's hand a piece of paper with a handwritten list on it fluttered and rustled in the wind. The assistant director took one step forward and started speaking in a thick voice that had a hoarse, stifled ring to it:

“Comrade students, what happened today in the mess hall is a grave offense against the people who are providing you with shoes and clothing. Furthermore, it's political subversion that plays into the hands of the enemy. Comrades, we are ashamed of you whose fathers died heroes' deaths only yesterday for the cause of...”

He spoke at length, now and then raising his eyes to the tree tops in the public garden, down which ice-glazed snow fell with a ringing sound, knocking the frost-withered leaves off the oak trees.

“Well, those who disrupted classes today,” he said in conclusion, “must in all strictness be made to answer for their misdemeanor to the school administration as well as to their comrades.”

Valeriy Maximovich lowered his head and stepped aside. Then Sakhatsky called Vitkovsky, and when he came running up at a trot, holding his hand to his cap in salute, the director handed him the paper and fixed his eyes on the lines again. He looked at everyone simultaneously,

which made them scared, because each one thought the director was looking at him alone.

"First group, attention!" Vitkovsky shouted. "Chaban, Tikhonovich, Prikhodko, Reva — two steps forward!"

"Second group..."

The parade came into motion, the back lines started to push into the first line, and the left flank moved ahead, forming a wide-swung curve.

"Third group, attention!"

Foreman Polulyak took several steps toward Sakhatsky, and stiffening in military fashion, said:

"The third group hasn't got any offenders, Comrade director. My boys didn't even get the chance to enter the mess hall."

But nobody listened to him. Vasyuta shot a furtive side-long glance at Igorko and stuck his chest out even further.

"Third group..." Vitkovsky continued. "Chmutik, Syabro, Chovnovy — two steps..."

On hearing his name, Igorko turned round, as if he were seeking help from somebody behind him. But there was nobody there. Those who had been standing behind him had pushed their way up front a long time before. Behind, there was only Tyt by the public garden. He stood there in a snowdrift under a young aspen tree, solemnly holding his dirty hand to his red-banded cap.

"Chovnovy!"

Igorko elbowed his way through the crowd and stood in front of the parade beside the foreman. Polulyak inclined slightly toward him, and whispered: "What's happened, Igorko? What have you done? Oh, what a mess you're in. That's Skorik's doing and nobody else's. We were questioned separately."

That instant the culprits were commanded to turn right and ordered to march off to the storehouse. *We'll be stripped of our uniforms*, Igorko realized, because last year this had happened to two boys; he bit his lip lest he burst out crying. But the tears welled up in his eyes against his will, and he started to see double. When he looked round at Valeriy Maximovich, there were two assistant directors standing there.

By the stack of boards from behind which the director always appeared, Igorko tripped on a board sticking out of the snow, fell headlong into it, and lost his boot.

"Catch up!" Vitkovsky shouted angrily.

Igorko sat down by the stack and started feverishly pulling on the boot, but his hands trembled so violently and his eyes were covered with such a blindingly hot film he couldn't get the lace into the snow-packed tab however hard he tried. Polulyak ran up to him, squatted at his side to help him, and said in his ear with a puff of warm air:

"Take it easy, Igorko, and never mind what's happened." The dented scar on his forehead pulsed throbbingly. "I'll have a talk with Valeriy. He'll settle everything. Never mind. After all, he's a hero. They'll listen to him."

"What?" Igorko cried out, jumping to his feet. "Him a hero?!"

He bolted off to the parade ground, hit his head against an overhanging board, and shouted at the top of his voice:

"You... you... listen.... You?!"

That instant Polulyak's broad palm clapped Igorko's mouth shut. "Hush, you fool, hush! Oh, what a mess. The boy's ill. Now what can you do about that? The boy's been taken ill..."

## THE RED HAZE

We sat at the foot of a steep river bank and chatted, our fishing rods propped on shaky forked twigs. The sun had gone down, and the black water melted the shadows from the fishing rods. Under the willows and in the sedge, the receding day wove a shroud of night — perhaps the only thing in the world that comes into being so furtively.

Presently a breeze swept down from the meadowlands along the Psel River, wafted the rank odor of hay from the stacks, tore through the silence, and made for the underbrush, rousing the birds from their sleep. The lights of the anglers' cigarettes glowed more intensely on the far bank.

The wind swept past and died; the river turned gray as mist befogged the water.

"Yeah, nothing will come of it today," someone said from behind the shrubs.

A fishing line flew through the air — swish, swish!; a rod scraped on the sand, and a little bag of bait plopped into the water. "With a mist like that, don't expect any fish to bite."

"Why?" Ivan Mefodiovich, my neighbor, asked.

"The night air is too close for fish."

The anglers disappeared one after another, twigs crunching under their tread. The mist tore loose from the water; its edge clung to the banks and froze.

The fish didn't bite. But we stayed on till morning, because at midnight we were determined to get some catfish.

Ivan Mefodiovich was fifteen years my senior. He had large, slightly sorrowful eyes. Usually he looked at me in such a way that, were I to have lost my balance and started falling, he'd catch me up with that look of his.

Of course, neither of us were very good anglers, actually more of what my mother used to say: "Our Thomas, too, claims to know a thing or two."

The air over the woods turned gray as it does at sunrise. In the sky, the frayed outlines of red-fringed clouds took

on a chiseled pattern; the mist grew denser and started to turn pink. The moon climbed in the sky.

Ivan Mefodiovich glanced toward it, shuddered, and mumbled something under his breath. In the greenish darkness, I caught sight of his pale face with painful wrinkles around the mouth for a fleeting moment. He burst out laughing. But there was a weird ring to that laughter: it was devoid of all feeling, more like the sound of a child having hiccups than a laugh.

"I can't stand the sight of the rising moon," he said haltingly and reached into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes.

He lit up, cleared his throat, and continued:

"As far as I can tell, a man's a strange creature. He always carries a peck of troubles with him. Those troubles stay calm inside him without showing at all, as painless as the air he breathes. And then they'll suddenly give him such a nasty jolt his knees buckle."

I don't like listening to unpleasant things and wished ardently for any small fry whatsoever to bite, even a goby. But the night air must really have been too close for the fish. Not even the bream would splash on the water.

A red moon, set deep in the sky like a crater in a glowering abyss, rose over the wood. The clouds and dewdrops on the shrubs, the sand on the steep banks and the mist hovering over the river became saturated with a dense red haze.

"The sky was just as red then as it is now," Ivan Mefodiovich said as if to himself. "That was in forty-four, in Byelorussia. I guess you hadn't even been born yet. We had been plodding through the marsh and came across a little island around midnight. There were ten of us. A pair like you and me and another eight, all of them young and fearless as they come. We caught sight of a house — the only one anywhere around — and made for it. Well, it wasn't exactly an island, more of a hummock with mown hay piled up in stacks. All around us was the forest, the marsh and the pitch-black night. Under such circumstances you had to dig in first and then sack up.

"But no: my men insisted on getting some sleep in the house for an hour or so and then digging in before dawn.

√ "The men were determined to have their way. But I knew those nazi bastards inside out: if they hadn't burned the house down, that meant it had been left as a reference point. I wasn't ordering my men any more, but trying to persuade

them outright: 'Don't go in there, boys. What the hell do we need a house for if we've got as much hay here as we want.' 'Maybe there are some girls there,' they replied, grinning. 'You bastards,' I said. 'I'll shoot the first one who budges!' 'Oh no you won't, Ivan, because the Krauts will hear it,' they rejoined laughing and went off, their medals jangling.

"At that very moment the moon came out just as it did now. It rose right over the house as if it had slipped out of the chimney.

"Overhead I heard a flapping — something flew by and alit right on the chimney. It was something round like a bundle of straw. Turning its head right and left, it hooted shrilly. It was a screech owl. You could even see its beak moving.

"I was about to dig a foxhole for myself, but when I heard that hooting, I was struck dumb and the shovel froze in my hand. I'd heard my fill about that accursed harbinger of bad news when I was a child, but I didn't believe it.

"Then, flick — a searchlight flashed on and trained its beam right at the house. I could see the white wall through the window, a nail in the wall, and a cobweb in a sooty corner. I can see that cobweb and nail to this day.

"Once the target was lit up, it was plastered with mortar shells. It seemed the nazis were just round the corner... you could even hear them horselaughing and swearing. What a mess to get into! One after another the shells landed on and around the house. The mortars must have been ranged on the target while it was still daylight. The roof went up in the air along with the wattle fence and the haystacks. In the billowing smoke, the moon seemed to turn round and round. In between the trees, the marsh glistened like a pool of blood. And the smell of burning hay filled the air.

"Men!" I hollered. 'Mates, pull out!' This made the nazis roar louder with laughter. '*Dummkopf!*' they yelled.

"Then, suddenly everything ceased: they stopped firing; they'd probably gone to sleep or left their stations.

"The next morning I shuffled around that island like a ghost. It was quiet all around, but the house was still blazing like a torch.

"That was probably the only time in the whole war I was frightened out of my wits. It wasn't death I feared. Oh no, it was the solitude I was afraid of, brother..."

Somewhere nearby, water splashed against the shore, a willow root snapped loudly, and a hunk of waterworn bank tumbled into the river. A wave rolled across the stream under the mist, struck the far shore, spilled onto the sandbank and petered out.

“Before sunrise I went into the house and what a sight I saw! One of the men was lying in the hallway, another in the middle of the room, and one was hanging over the windowsill — he probably had been killed when he tried to slip out through the window. The mud on his puttees hadn’t dried yet.

“I got a medal for that night: you see, I saved the materiel and held the battle position. On the front line, I wore that decoration only for my superiors, but as soon as I got back home, I told my wife to hide it in a trunk so that neither I nor anyone else would see it.

“From that time on — after all, twenty years have passed since then — I haven’t been able to stand the sight of a rising moon. It makes me shiver so hard that three days later, my whole body still aches as it does after a hard day’s work...”

Ivan Mefodiovich fell silent, lay down on the dewy hay and covered his face with an old army cap. But in my mind’s eye, there still lingered the red mire of night, and in it the nine laughing men, their medals jangling. All around them shells were whistling. I’ve never heard them whistle, thank God. I wonder if it’s like it is in the movies?

Everything started to turn gray. The moon had paled and seemed utterly ineffective now. Dewdrops glistened on the fishing rods; a narrow strip of silt gleamed along the shore — the water level must have dropped during the night.

Soon afterward, a breeze swept down, the mist began to tremble, tore loose, and drifted downstream.

## HOW THEY MARRIED OFF KATERINA

In late autumn when all the trees in the orchard, except for the lilacs and the tips of the poplars, had shed their leaves, and, far out over the barren fields, bluish clouds shrouded the sky as if portending snow, the hamlet grocer Stepan Bezverkhy was visited by Katerina, the youngest of his three daughters, who had arrived from the Donbas and declared that she was getting married. Katerina had been away in the Donbas for about six months and worked there in a miners' canteen either as a barmaid or a waitress, so nobody in the hamlet, where everything about everybody was common knowledge, had expected that she would find herself a husband so soon.

The parents weren't too happy about their daughter's announcement, but it didn't make them particularly sad either: eligible suitors among the hamlet boys were few and far between, and Katerina was already on the wrong side of her twenties — so however regrettable, she had to be married off sooner or later. They asked her only when the wedding would be, what occupation their future son-in-law was engaged in, and what he was like. Katerina answered listlessly: the wedding should preferably be held in the hamlet, because here it would be merrier for her — she'd be among her kin, after all; her elect worked as an engineer-economist at a mine; and as to what he was like, she concluded: "When he comes — the mine's giving him a Volga sedan for two days — you'll see him yourself. As far as you're concerned — well, it won't be you but me living with him."

She said it softly, but with such unmaidenly sorrow in her eyes that the parents realized: whatever the future bridegroom was like, they ought not dissuade their daughter or put off the wedding.

It was proposed that Katerina sleep in the front room on her maiden bed with a mountain of cushions that reached to the painted rug on the wall. On that rug made out of an old baize blanket, a traveling painter had dashed off a round blue pond, two long-necked swans kissing each other with

their beaks, and edged the whole scene with red and yellow flowers, also round.

The room was clean and cozy, as is the case only in a family with daughters, not sons. On the walls, in frames surrounded by embroidered *rushnik* towels, hung the portraits of Stepan's three daughters — thin-faced, curly-haired, with slightly frightened eyes: they had obviously had their pictures taken for the first time in their lives. They bore the striking likeness of twins, probably because the photographer in Poltava retouched all their eyebrows in the same way, evenly.

Katerina's eyes strayed from portrait to portrait with a dreamy smile, then she turned to her parents who were sitting side by side on a bench opposite her bed, looking sadly at their daughter.

"He's all right," Katerina said. "Strict, though, and close-mouthed. When he comes, don't talk too much, or you might say something out of place. That's my request."

Stepan kept his peace, fumbling more fussily than usual for a cigarette in his pockets, while his wife said quietly:

"Are we enemies to our child, or what? We'll please him somehow."

When the daughter fell asleep, the parents quietly went out into the other room and sat down side by side on the warm stovebed just as they had done in the daughter's room. Neither said a word for a long time. She sighed, and he smoked. Then Stepan broke the silence:

"Must be *some* character!"

"Well, it's just what she chanced to come across," his wife said sadly.

They didn't turn the light on. She made the bed gropingly — for herself on a steel cot that had got into a fire during the war but still served its purpose well, and for her husband on the stovebed. In the meantime, Stepan had gone to the cowshed; he threw an armful of hay into the manger for the cow, mumbling something angrily; then for no apparent reason he thwacked the cow with a pitchfork across her flank and said all aboil:

"Turn round, you stinking bitch!"

And instantly he felt relief, taking pity on the cow, on his wife who could tolerate everything and never quarrelled but only took it all with a sigh, and on his daughter — his last delight in life. He had hoped that she'd bring a young husband to his home and they'd live on everything her

parents had acquired, while he and his old missus would have someone to lean on in their old age, because the elder daughters, after having waited in vain for the matchmakers to show up, had left their parents' nest in search of happiness — one to Siberia, the other to the Virgin Lands. They had not intended to be away for long, but stayed there for good. The girls married, fate blessed them with children, and now they only sent occasional letters with a closing line such as: "Goodbye. Kissing you, Papa and Mamma, the Andreyevs." That's how the elder daughter put it. The middle one, who was of a kinder disposition, wrote: "Kissing you, dearest daddy and mommy, the Yevtushenkos." Once they had visited their parents' home with their husbands and children. The husbands were all right — energetic, talkative, and good-looking young men. They brought along half a yardful of mercurial chattering grandchildren.

"Grandpa, what's the name of this?"

"It's a flail."

"And what do you do with it?"

"Beat grain."

"How?"

"Like this."

"Grandma, what's that big pot full of potatoes for?"

"It's for Oinky."

"Oinky? What's that — a piglet?"

The discovery made them clap their hands and jump for joy:

"Oinky, Oinky, Oinky, Oinky!"

Stepan suggested that his sons-in-law stay. The whole hamlet would join hands and build them houses within one summer, the collective farm would apportion them personal plots big enough to have abundant orchards after two or three years, and Stepan was prepared to add a heifer and piglet for breeding to their households. But they argued over and over again: "You see, we've got our kin back there, our homes, and good pay. What else can we wish for?"

They were right, to be sure. Where content is, there is a feast.

Now Katerina was about to leave her parents' nest as well. So farewell grocery store, with all its goods, and live as you wish, mommy and daddy. "When you get old, all of us will help you, and if you want, we'll take you into our home." Thanks, children. Who'll hand us a mug of water, once we're ill, who'll call grandpa a Grandpa, who'll ask him to

be taken on his shoulders for a ride on "horseback," who'll chop wood for the old missus or ask to be told a fairytale at bedtime, who'll look after the orchard lest it wither instead of blooming abundantly every spring, who'll sing Father and Mother a song on a winter night?

"We'll take you in." Kilina Volokhivska was also taken in by her children. For two summers her house stood empty, shining with its ribby sides, the windowpanes glittered with the colors of the rainbow as if somebody had smeared them with wagon grease, the orchard had overgrown with weeds reaching up to the twigs. In the farmyard that looked more like an abandoned graveyard, only hedgehogs grunted in the weeds and stray cats with glimmering eyes lurked. All of that could have been sold, but who would have bought it, since everybody went awandering. This summer Kilina came back home. "I was born here, and here I will die," she had told her daughter and son-in-law. "If you want your mother to live longer, don't move her from this place." Her farmyard grained new life, the orchard became cleaner, the cottage shone with the bluish panes of its windows, and the hedgehogs and cats disappeared.

"We'll take you in." Sure enough you will. Save perhaps when we're dead, and then it'll make no difference to us.

The cow rustled in the straw, munched on the dry stalks, and kept hitting Stepan with the switch of her tail. His heart having softened by now, he wasn't angry with the cow any more. He stood for a while yet in the farmyard, listening to the swelling wind. The barren leaves in the orchard didn't swish their twigs, but blazed their trumpets of autumn.

Stepan and his wife couldn't sleep for a long time. He discussed with her what had to be done the next day: the butcher had to be invited to deal with the hog, so that the sausages would be stuffed by evening — there were only three days left till Saturday, whereas the minced meat jelly could be cooked just as well on Thursday; they were against pressing any cooking oil, but would rather barter it for sunflower seeds at the oil mill; as for flour, they had enough of their own. His wife was figuring out in her mind who to invite to help her with the cooking, while Stepan was reasoning out loud how much moonshine would be needed if all the relatives and villagers were to be invited to the wedding party.

"Andrushko's distilled two carboys of moonshine today.

He gave me some to taste; it was so good it burned in the spoon and kept on burning when it spilled onto the floor. I'll tell him to hold it back. Tomorrow Motrya Reshitkivska'll set on distilling as well, so I don't think she'll grudge it for the occasion, and my brother Fedir's got moonshine, too. Besides, I'll take a crate of vodka at the store, for the son-in-law's folks might come along."

Given all these worries, their sadness was dispelled.

"In a word, we'll manage it somehow," Stepan said, yawning, and fell asleep, but his wife turned from side to side for a long time still, sighing and sobbing bleakly; she fell asleep only shortly before the first cock crow.

"How do you intend celebrating the wedding — the old or the new way?" Stepan asked his daughter in the morning, when he was dressing the butchered hog that had been brought into the house.

With one hand Katerina was helping her mother at the stove, while her other hand pressed a big flower patterned kerchief to her breasts. The kerchief had been Grandmother's and was kept at the bottom of the family trunk as the most valued treasure, interlayered every autumn with walnut leaves against moth and for fragrance. The kerchief made Katerina look like a beautiful sulky girl with big eyes full of womanly sadness.

"The new way, Father. The people will enjoy the food and drink, have a good time, and go home."

"What if you take your bridesmaids around the homes and invite people to the wedding party, the closest relatives at least?" Mother asked timidly.

"Now what bridesmaids are you talking about, Mama?" Katerina replied with a smile. "There's practically no one of my age left in the village."

"Will you wear the bridal veil at least?"

"I will, if you want."

"And thank God for that favor," Mother rejoined.

"It's become the fashion now to do things differently than we did," the butcher Kuzma Bilokobilsky added, screwing up his only eye. He was cutting the fatback into broad strips which he sliced into four equal parts, then sprinkled them densely with salt, and stacked the pieces in a big crate that once held German mines. "Nowadays its slap! bang! — and you're spliced. Or else they celebrate a wedding today, and

the next day — ha! ha! — the bride's off to a maternity home!"

Katerina's face flooded with color. She dropped her head, and went into her room. Stepan's wife reacted angrily at Kuzma's chatter:

"May God forgive or punish you for what you gabble in the presence of the child."

"Isn't it true what I said?" Kuzma retorted, offended. He was a kind man who didn't like egging people, but always spoke his mind, which was why he didn't understand the angry reaction of the old missus.

"Enough," Stepan interfered. "Old lady, serve us the fresh roast and let's have some breakfast."

After a good drink, Kuzma was deeply moved, about three times he wished Katerina and her husband only sunshine and flowers in their life, a lot of children, and that she should not forget Father and Mother in the "foreign, faroff land": in Kuzma's mind, the Donbas was beyond seven seas and high hills.

While Katerina was lying curled up on the cushions, crying her heart out, Stepan, beet-red in the face from the drink and his eyelids fluttering, quickly tied a hunk of brisket and two pieces of fatback in a bundle as a present for the butcher and, thanking him for his service, saw him beyond the gate.

"Now stop whimpering!" he raised his voice at his wife when he crossed the threshold and saw tears glistening on her cheeks, glowing red from the flames in the stove. "What's this supposed to be, after all — a wedding or a funeral?"

She wiped the tears swiftly and said as if she hadn't wept at all only a moment ago:

"Sure it's a wedding. You've been keeping your nose in the cup since morning, and so it's all the same to you, but a mother wants perhaps to shed a tear for her daughter."

Stepan kept silent, because he was really dizzy from drink. He went into Katerina's room, stroked her head as he used to do when she was a child, and said:

"Hush, Kate, hush. You see, as it is, you can't live with Pa and Ma forever. Better get out my clothes and I'll go to the grocery, because it's pretty late already."

Stepan arrived at the grocery shicked up and shining like a new penny: he wore broad breeches of sturdy blue cloth, creased box-calf boots, and a jacket of the same cloth as

the breeches. He also gave off a faint odor of his daughter's perfumes which she had sprayed on the lambskin jacket collar and shirtfront.

The people crowding around the store met him with polite greetings, without any of the abuse they usually heaped on him when he was late: everybody was aware that the man still had a lot of work on his hands.

"Take enough bread to last you till Monday, because I'll be too busy getting in a regular supply," Stepan announced. "Also, my daughter asked, and so do my wife and I, that you come to the wedding party on Sunday."

The people thanked him courteously and asked where the party would be held and what the bridegroom was.

"If the weather is fine, we'll hold it outdoors, so there'll be enough room for everyone. The bridegroom's a chief engineer at a mine," Stepan stretched the truth, reasoning that the Volga sedan his son-in-law was expected to arrive in would sustain the fib: who else but a chief engineer would be given a state-owned sedan for a 400-kilometer jaunt.

The people nodded to acknowledge their respect, those who lived closer to his house promised to lend tables, chairs and crockery, and everybody bought a lot of bread.

The women made their purchases quickly and left right away, but the men hung around the counter, and when the last woman left with a wicker basketful of bread and lemonade bottles, they turned their grinning faces on Stepan:

"Stepan, what if we chip in today, on this occasion." Some dug into their pockets, producing crumpled one-rouble bills, while others fumbled behind their shirtfronts just for the sake of appearances: why haste and make waste, when they could have a drink off Stepan free.

In fact, Stepan swept the little pile of money aside, saying, "Take it back; this one's on me," latched the door, and took two bottles of *Stolichnaya* vodka from under the counter.

After two glassfuls of vodka, they had a third, chasing it down with tinned food, bread and ginger cookies, and praising Stepan's daughters for getting "fixed up" so deftly, until Petro Malinyukivsky, the great local singer, got the urge to sing. At that Stepan brought his palm down on the counter and said:

"Men, enough is enough. I've still got work up to my ears."

The men, some reeling, others stepping with a firmer tread, went their way. Stepan closed the store and made for the village to invite his brother, who was a musician and chaired the local collective farm. (As Stepan reasoned, Fedir wouldn't present the newlyweds a TV set, because they weren't members of the farm, but he was unlikely to refuse an occasional batch of straw litter for the cow or a pile of firewood.)

Stepan returned from the village heartily drunk; he felt so sorry for Katerina, himself and his wife that he burst out crying. But on recalling that he was marrying off his daughter not to any sort of suitor but to a chief engineer (after having reuttered the meager lie several times, Stepan had ended up in believing it himself), he quieted down, wiped the drunken tears from his eyes, and fell asleep in what he was dressed in — high boots, holiday breeches, and silken shirt.

Early morning on Sunday Stepan's farmyard was filled with idly wandering people — relatives, neighbors, cooks. Tables were being placed in rows from the gate right up to the orchard, benches were knocked together of yellow well planed boards, inside the house and in the hallway even the floors were crammed with bowls with jellied minced meat, stewed fruit and *kysil*. On the table in the front room lay a *korovai* wedding bread adorned with guelder rose berries surrounded by pure white wax candles, and Katerina's bed was displaying a snow-white wedding dress, bridal veil, transparently mat like hoar frost on a birch spray, a wreath, and a pair of brand-new white pumps. All this she had brought along with her.

The candles on the table burned evenly, flickering whenever anybody opened the door, and guttered with hot wax, giving off the odor of a church interior. Katerina sat in the corner of honor, her head covered with Grandma's kerchief in a married woman's fashion, and gazed at the candles without blinking. The cooks busying themselves in the smaller room grasped the chance to exchange whispers whenever Stepan's wife went out to bring in something from the outdoor cellar or pantry.

"Seems it won't be a sweet married life, because Katerina's bleached out."

"The bridegroom's not here yet, and he should have been here yesterday evening."

Outdoors, all the preparations were supervised by Fedir, Stepan's younger brother. Fedir was a fine figure of a man who, just like Stepan, had hard ruddy cheeks and sharp hazel eyes, though more furtive than his elder brother's — probably because Fedir frequently squinted them up as if he were aiming at somebody.

"Cover the big table in the middle there with the best tablecloth, because the newlyweds and guests will be sitting at it," Fedir ordered the women. "Now those two standing on the side can have a simpler cloth; that's where the parents and relatives will be. For everybody else it might as well be oil cloth: they're not such big lords."

His voice was loud and merry like a young man's. The women eagerly submitted to his orders, giggled, twirled round him, and tried to get closer to Fedir, who didn't miss the slightest chance to pinch one, put his arm around the shoulder of another, run his hand across a breast under a tautly stretched blouse, or slap a rump. Fedir's wife, a keen neat woman who did her work eagerly, saw all this, but wasn't angry with her husband, joining in the general laughter and twittering:

"You could've hugged me once at least like you did Halka here who still can't get her breath back!"

"I'll have my fill of it back home!"

"Eh, at home it's not so much fun, while in a dark nook it's like being with another man!"

The weather was like an Indian summer. The sun shone yellow from behind the orchards through the leafless branches, the dew-spangled leaves on the ground didn't smell of rot yet; cold from the morning frost, they lay in puffy heaps around every tree, and the wind wafted an odor of tilled earth and autumn stubble from the fields.

Stepan was running his feet off in the yard, now showing what to take, now sending boys beyond the hamlet in turns to see whether the car was coming, or else walking around the tables, waving his finger and moving his lips, as he counted over and over again to see how many guests could be seated at the tables.

Toward lunchtime the hamlet dwellers started arriving, each with a bottle or two or even a carboy of moonshine under the flap of his jacket. The musicians from the village came, too: Ivanushka, the fiddler, whose upper jaw protruded over his slightly recessive lower jaw and whose gray eyes

looked upon the world with trusting kindness; Shurko, the accordion player and clubhouse manager, a blond bashful boy who used to sit in the empty clubhouse in winter when nobody was around and composed his own music — it rang of the sandy desert, blistering heat, and his quiet longing for home, because Shurko had recently done his stint in an Army unit stationed in Central Asia; Vasil Krivobik, the flute player and stableman from the hospital, who had brought from the war his one and only trophy — a factory-made recorder of the finest workmanship; and Mishko Mushnik, the tambourine player and collective farm truck driver, who could drum on his tambourine with a peg, elbows, knees, chin, head, and called out to the strains of a Hopak dance, his face turning red and his eyes bulging: "Oh, come on, come on, come on! Oopla! Oopla! Oop-la-la!" The musicians talked quietly with one another, tried their instruments, and Ivanushka and Shurko tuned up the violin: Shurko carried a long drawn-out note, while Ivanushka plucked the strings, alternately raising or lowering their pitch by turning the pegs. Then they played a figure from a Byelorussian polka as a try-out, put their instruments down on a long bench by the house, and lit up: Stepan had ordered not to play before the arrival of the bridegroom.

By midday the yard was full of people. Seeing that the beginning of the wedding party was being delayed, the men settled at the tables by the edge of the orchard and started playing cards. All of them, as one, wore jackets, yellow and black leather caps, breeches, and box-calf high boots. The flower patterned kerchiefs on the women made them look like a flowerbed of flaming poppies; the yard swarmed with children playing pat-a-cake, scampering among the grownups like sparrows among pigeons, and romping around the house, barn and outdoor cellar.

Presently a breathless boy, one of Stepan's scouts, came running from the edge of the hamlet, and shouted:

"They're coming! They're coming!"

The men quickly gathered the cards and hid them away, got to their feet, and made for the gate after the children and womenfolk. At the gate stood four unmarried young men exchanging banter and winks, as they waited for the bridegroom: they had to demand the bridegroom's treat and ransom and felt a bit embarrassed. Stepan went from one to another, and whispered:

"Boys, mind you do your job properly and peacefully —

God forbid you pick a fight. If you don't get your way, I'll give you a bucketful of my own moonshine."

"Getting it from you wouldn't be that dandy!"

"Stepan, don't meddle in their affairs. What kind of a wedding would that be without a treat and ransom for the bride?"

A whirl of slumbering autumn dust rose from behind the last houses in the hamlet; the chickens bolted off to the wattle fences with flapping wings, as a Volga sedan shot up to the yard at full speed. The crowd quieted down and surged ahead so abruptly it made the gate creak. Three people stepped out of the car: two young men of which it was difficult to determine who was the bridegroom, because both were dressed equally finely in white nylon shirts with ties, austere solemn dark-colored suits, and brand-new Bolognā trench coats, and a woman, obviously the mother of the bridegroom — an exaggeratedly powdered lady with too much lipstick on.

"See what a lordly mother Bezverkhy's son-in-law's got. Now which of the men is the bridegroom?" the people whispered in the crowd, pushing each other and rising on tiptoe. "They haven't got a single flower about them, nothing at all..."

The young men from the hamlet who stood at the gate and were to demand the ransom were at a loss as well: who should they demand it from?

"We ask the dear guests to enter," Fedir bowed and pushed at the wicket gate with both hands.

"The bride!" somebody let drop in the silence and everyone turned to the house. On the porch stood Katerina in a white ample wedding dress hiding the outlines of her figure, a wreath of guelder rose berries and silver foil over a crown of finely dressed hair, and a long bridal veil the train of which was carried behind her like a wave of mist by girls and young women in traditional embroidered shirts and flower patterned kerchiefs with long tassels. Her ruddy cheeked, smiling, excitedly interested retinue was impatient to see the bridegroom: who were they taking such a flower to? Katerina stood there with hanging hands, which made her narrow shoulders the narrower, and her thin neck no sunray seemed ever to have touched had grown the longer; her head slightly bent, she looked from under her eyebrows

over the crowd onto the street. Her eyes sparkled with a calm bashful smile, while her lips trembled with excitement (she had never been eyed by such a crowd in her life); she covered her eyes with her fingers and walked majestically to the gate.

"What a beauty Stepan has reared," the women whispered.

"An Immaculate Mary — and that's that."

"Who did our boys ever look at?"

"And what would she have been doing here — tending pigs?"

"Look, there's the bridegroom: he's the first to walk up to the wicket gate!"

The bridegroom was a young man of about twenty-eight, with scraggly hair parted on one side by a comb that apparently had wide-set teeth; he was shorter than Katerina, but with broad shoulders and a stern-looking face which was slightly effeminate and pallid. He smiled faintly at Katerina and was about to open the wicket gate, when one of the boys blocked his way and muttered with a sullen scowl:

"Out with the ransom!"

"What?" the bridegroom asked uncomprehendingly.

"I said: out with the ransom. You're taking our girl, so you must ransom her."

"I beg your pardon, but with us it's a custom to pay a ransom for a girl," Fedir explained, squinting his smiling eyes at the bridegroom.

"Hm," the bridegroom hemmed and arched one of his eyebrows. "Well then, as you please." He took a wallet out of his pocket, slowly ran his fingers over the bills, and handed the boy a brand-new fifty-rouble bill.

"That's it!" the crowd exhaled enthusiastically; the boy hid the crisp bill away and said in a kinder key:

"Come in now."

The bridegroom took Katerina by the arm and led her toward the house through the corridor of people who were visibly reluctant to step back: everybody wanted to see the visitors at close range. On the other side of the gate spread a rug with black and red strips, and at the end of it stood Stepan, a bowl of grain and silver coins in his hands, and his wife: she was a bit stooped, while he had stiffened to attention like a soldier; on the side of his jacket were pinned two orders and a row of broadly spaced medals. Katerina bowed low to her parents three times, while the bridegroom only bent his head. Stepan scattered the grain

and coins over the heads and shoulders of bride and groom, and said as solemnly as he could:

“Live in peace and concord, my children.”

Stepan's wife also whispered something with trembling lips, kissed Katerina and the son-in-law who remained standing with bent head, and covered her eyes with a handkerchief.

The musicians went off in a lusty *Oira*, and the newlyweds entered the house.

“What's that comedy for?” the groom whispered Katerina in the ear, irritated. “Why couldn't just the relatives have gathered, modestly and quietly.”

“Let them do it how they want it,” Katerina retorted meekly.

While the relatives crowded into the front room, making the acquaintance of the in-laws (the groom's mother did not wish to exchange kisses with anyone, but only extended her hand, introducing herself as Klavdia Kuprianivna), the cooks quickly laid the tables with meat dumplings and sour cream, pickles, stewed cabbage, rings of sausages, and the girls and young women who had carried the train of Katerina's bridal veil brought out the wedding loaf. The breeze instantly snuffed out the candles, but the guelder rose berries glowed red in the sunlight like a wedding banner. Fedir put on the table three-liter bottles of moonshine of varying degrees of clarity — gray, bluish, crystal clear — and shortly after a mist seemed to hang over the tables for the multitude of bottles. Over that mist, opposite the wedding loaf where the newlyweds were to sit down, stood out three bottles of champagne, like diminutive churches with silver cupolas.

When the newlyweds appeared on the threshold, the musicians burst into a triumphant flourish, not knowing anything more suitable for the occasion, for a flourish was something familiar they had heard being played at gala meetings when the collective farmers were awarded bonuses and citations.

As a representative of the local authority, the collective farm chairman was the first to speak.

“Dear comrades,” said the chairman, a lean meek man with a long nose and caved-in cheeks. “Our marrying off Katerina Bezverkha today is good on the one hand, but it's bad on the other. It's good she has found her happiness which we cannot but rejoice in, and it's bad, because Kateri-

na didn't bring a man into our community but is being taken away from it herself instead. That's a minus. So I say: girls and young women who are not yet married, take in regular husbands for regular tenants in your homes!" At that the chairman joined in the general laughter, and even the groom twitched his lips in what might have passed as a smile. "Lure the men to our collective farm. We, for our part, will build you houses and give you the finest personal plots. Take the old collective farm orchard, for one. Isn't that fine land? Now in that place, as our fellow countryman Gogol \* once wrote, a wagon shaft simply stuck into the ground will grow into a *tarantass!* \*\* So everyone is welcome. And that's what we'll drink to!"

"Right you are," the men droned, pouring themselves moonshine straight out of the bottles into their glasses. "You said it as if you were reading it from paper!"

"Right!" shouted the bolder women, stretching their glasses across the table to clink with those of the newlyweds and the chairman; they did it carefully so as not to spill the drink on the appetizers; and the musicians went off into a flourish again.

Then the party drank to the parents of bride and groom, during which procedure a half-tipsy guest, who must have taken a nip before the party, cried out pertly:

"And where's the groom's father, I wonder? Or should we choose a godfather for him, eh?"

"The son-in-law's father," Stepan said, rising to his feet with glass in hand, "was called to a conference in Voroshilovgrad at short notice! So he's away on state business, and I drink to him in his absence!"

Stepan said this so solemnly and Klavdia Kuprianivna pursed her british red lips so haughtily it made some of the guests drop their heads to hide their grins.

The groom winced and whispered something to Katerina who looked imploringly at her father as if to say she had warned him not to talk too much.

Taking advantage of the silence that had fallen for a moment, Omelkovich, a loader at the village grocery store and the first speaker at every collective farm meeting, got up at the last table by the orchard. His brother was a lawyer

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\* Gogol, Nikolai (1809-1852) — Russian novelist, best known for his *Dead Souls*

\*\* *Tarantass* (Rus.) — a springless carriage

working in Astrakhan who visited the village from time to time to consult the wronged. Omelkovich had adopted his habit of speaking in a highfalutin, formal manner. His speeches always drew roars of laughter, yet he was eagerly listened to for the unusual words his tirades were interspersed with.

"Comrds!" Omelkovich uttered loudly and confidently. "Akchly, legly and practicly we've got here not newlyweds, but husband and wife!" Katerina's face flooded with blood and she averted her eyes, the groom raised his eyebrows high and looked at the speaker with undisguised contempt, while Fedir's glib-tongued wife reeled off rapidly:

"What are you gabbing? Whenever you open your mouth you sound like an empty bucket dipped into an empty well!"

The guests rocked with laughter. Omelkovich blinked doltishly, and continued:

"Legly they're registered already, which means that's the end, and there's no return to their unmarried lives but through a divorce. That's what I wanted to say!" His speech finished, he sat down with a triumphant mien.

The musicians, though they had had one over the eight, realized that Omelkovich's speech had to be neutralized somehow. They exchanged winks and struck up a polka, but that instant Lavrin, an old connoisseur and supervisor of wedding rites, got to his feet, waved them to silence, and said after the silence was total:

"Huh, and why don't you, Katerina, tie a kerchief on the bridegroom's arm? Don't you really want to tie him to your heart?"

"Exactly!" the womenfolk cackled. "That's just to the point!"

From the farthest tables where the men were seated (at a woman's side a good drink was practically impossible) came muttered comments:

"If he wants to give her the bob, no rope's going to hold him back. Ha-ha-ha!"

"He seems too stuck-up. Such smirky types are good only for reading newspapers and watching TV..."

Katerina slowly got up, pulled a kerchief — brand-new, silken, and ironed into equal little squares — out of her sleeve with her thin fingers, and smiled tenderly at her elect. He rose, too, extending his arm reluctantly as if for an injection. When the kerchief flashed in a silken triangle on his arm, the party shouted as if in collusion:

“Bit-ter! Bit-ter! Bit-ter!”

Katerina inclined all of her body to the groom and seemed to be prepared to wind round him like a vine, close her eyes, and drop into the abyss the kiss could have opened under her feet. But he, tensing his neck so much the collar bit into it, barely brought his pressed lips up to Katerina’s flame-colored cheek and pecked it.

“Not like th-a-at!” the womenfolk raised a clamor.

“Come on, do it like you did it the first time in your life!”

“Like you do it in private!”

“Bitter!”

“Show us how the engineers kiss!”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

“He-he-he-he!”

“What heathens,” he said quietly to Katerina when they sat down after going through the whole ritual of kissing on the party’s insistent demand; he took a sip of champagne from the glass trembling in his hand, but Katerina emptied hers completely and said amicably:

“They’re people like anywhere else. You’d better empty your glass like everybody else.”

The groom gave her a stern sidelong glance, yet didn’t say anything and pressed his lips harder together.

The women struck up a song. It wasn’t a wedding air but an ordinary song, because they had realized that since the song *With our Princess* didn’t suit the bride, the *And With our Prince* was altogether inappropriate with regard to the bridegroom. Such a stuck-up character — and a Prince? Oh no!

Grown bolder after two glassfuls of champagne, Katerina also joined in the song — at first quietly as if she were singing to herself, and when the men’s powerful basses drowned the supporting voices, she suddenly took on the first part in a voice as ringing and clear as an eddy at the bottom of a well:

*Oh, brother dear, my falcon,  
Oh, brother dear, my falcon,  
Do take me in for the winter...*

Brimming with sorrow, the ancient song, with which many a generation of the villagers had been brought up and many had departed this world, made the tears tremble on the

eyelids of the women, and the men turned gloomy, looked sadder and sobered up as if they hadn't drunk at all, while Hritsko Bairachansky was soaring high with his tremulous tenor, infinitely high under the clouds like a lonely bird. It seemed that the song was chanted not by dozens of people, but by one polyphonic soul. Only the day before, Olexiy Tsurka had been hanging around the village clubhouse thoroughly drunk, seeking himself a "rival" to vent his spleen on, and once he had found him (his former team leader), he begged the first fellow he came across: "Vanko, go and pick on the team leader. Let him hit you, so I can sock his mug."

It was only recently that Paraska Zhmurkova was spitting froth as she squabbled with her neighbor Yalosoвета Kravchenko over a boundary strip both were laying claim to when they were plowing it up for winter. But today they were sitting shoulder to shoulder at the table, chanting the song they had known since childhood and looking like two obedient and polite children of the same parents. There just was nothing of their old enmity now.

"Wow, the hicks are surely putting on a show!" one of the bridegroom's friends said. He probably had hoped that no one would hear him above the song. But Fedir Bezverkhy, who sat nearby at the table with the relatives, heard him, screwed up his eyes, and asked:

"Excuse me, but where do you yourself come from?"

"Oh, I come from a long way from here, pop," the young man said importantly. "I'm from Vinnitsya. Or rather it's my parents who're from there. I'm a native of the Donbas."

"I see. That's a really long way from here!" Fedir gave a gay laugh. "Isn't it in your Vinnitsya they say 'spockled' instead of 'speckled'?"

"But no, I told you I'm a native of the Donbas. It's my parents who..."

"All right then, let's drink to the parts you come from," Fedir said with a grin. "But fill it up to the brim so nobody back home misses you, as it were."

Fedir downed the drink, wiped his lips with a handkerchief, and called to the singers:

"Why did we have to strike up such a sad song? Isn't there a merrier one for the occasion?"

"What about *Farm Cheese Dumplings*?"

But old Lavrin got to his feet again, and said:

"Hm-m, as far as I can remember, nobody ever sang this one in our parts. And don't seing it now, because if the Cossacks had only fought for girls and dumplings, we'd all be Turks today. Let the musicians play — what else were they invited for?"

"Make it my tune, boys," Luka Ilkovich Vlasenko said, getting up from the table. A former trooper and company cook, he was now a night watchman at the village grocery. All his life, before and after the war, he danced only the *Barin's Wife*, which earned him the nickname Barinya. Whatever he told of his past, he started like this: "Now when I served in the cavalry, I had a long sabre with a castor on the tip of the sheath..."

"Warm the tambourine, Mishko," Ivanushka the fiddler ordered.

Mishko lit a piece of newspaper, held his home-made instrument of dog skin over the flame for a while — and the tambourine boomed like a bell. Ivanushka pressed the fiddle to his shoulder and raised the bow, Vasil licked the mouthpiece of his recorder, Shurko ran his fingers down the buttons of his accordion, and Luka Ilkovich took up his favorite stance: his right hand on the back of his head, his left arm-akimbo, and his shorter wounded leg thrust forward. Then he spat through his teeth and said:

"Well?"

Ivanushka waved his bow abruptly — and the accordion player started the introduction, slowly, accentuating every bar on the bass keys. The fiddle imperceptibly came to the support of the bass notes and, crying out sweetly like a cunning young woman, jointly carried the tune; then the recorder flowed into the melody like a brook; and only the tambourine kept silent, waiting for its opening chance.

Luka Ilkovich moved stealthily round the circle, favoring his wounded left leg, and throwing his right leg straight out like a stork — his eyes were screwed up, his short gray mustache was bristling, because his lower lip was propping up the upper lip as he imitated the capricious barin's wife. Mishko had twisted his big mouth sideways and uttered in time with the music:

*Barinya's quite a sweetie,  
Shaped for love, she is pretty,  
Barinya, tootsy-wootsy,  
Barinya, playful kitty...*

Oh-oh, oh-ho-ho — the copper jingles of the tambourine rippled with laughter, and then they stopped abruptly.

*Every day she has a new man...*

the tambourine roared with laughter:

*Every day she has another...*

And instantly the melody swirled like a whirlpool:

*Barinya, tootsy-wootsy,  
Barinya, playful kitty...*

“Oh, come on, come on, come on! Oopla! Oopla! Oop-la-la!” Mishko cried at the top of his voice, his face going red and eyes bulging.

Luka Ilkovich was crying out something, too, beat the dust with his feet, waved his arms like the vanes of a windmill in a good breeze, contorting his body this way and that way, it seemed he wasn't dancing but trying to go head over heels. Suddenly he stopped, and everyone who had seen the old man reveling in dance many a time thought he was worn out and would stop. But Luka Ilkovich, biding his time for the bar he needed, burst forth in dance again, slapping his palms against his elbows, thighs, chest, neck and the soles of his feet with such zeal the slaps drowned the music. (“After every *Barinya*,” Luka Ilkovich would boast to his cronies, “my whole body's beaten blue, and my palms and fingers are so sore I can't hold a drink in my hands. Ugh!”)

“Wow, what a show!” the “native of the Donbas” kept crying out enthusiastically through bursts of laughter, nudging the bridegroom. The groom laughed as well — not constrainedly and haughtily as before, but in an unaffectedly sincere way: his laughter proved to be quiet and soft like an enthusiastic boy's, and his teeth were even and white. He wound his arm round Katerina's waist, feeling her hard, slightly protruding belly, and the pride of a future father swelled up in him.

“What about a drink, Katerina? Only you and me,” he said quietly.

She had guessed who he wanted to drink to, dropped her eyes, then raised them again — beautiful, love-deep eyes — and said with a nod:

"I can't drink more than a wee little bit, but you have a glassful."

At that moment she wanted to embrace at the same time both old man Luka, the musicians, and all the guests, for her loved one had become as gentle and kind as he had been during the first days of their acquaintance.

"Fantastic performance!" the guests shouted after the musicians had stopped playing and Luka Ilkovich, reeling with fatigue, walked to the table.

"Rock the dancer!"

"Go ahead," Luka Ilkovich agreed, "but watch out you don't drop me, because I might break my other leg and quit dancing for good."

The sturdy tractor drivers threw him up into the air a couple of times, carried him to the table, accompanied by the laughter of the villagers, and poured him a full glass of moonshine as a prize. The musicians also sat down round their two stools laden with jellied meat and moonshine. From the last table where the men were sitting, came the voice of Samiylo Shkurpelo, the famous village fibber:

"See, here I come running into Berlin, damn it, and ask: 'Where's that Hitler of yours around this place?' I look and there among the Germans there's a type with a military mustache, his hair combed sideways, a white flag in his hands. He was in civies, though. I look and see him slipping behind the back of the others. '*Hände hoch!*' I says. 'Caught at last, aren't you, you bastard?' And I stick my submachine gun into his chest. '*Komm, follow me,*' I says..."

"You're a lop-eared, blue-nosed liar, Samiylo. Hitler imolated himself!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Samiylo rejoined, offended. "First hear me out and then start your namecalling... Well, I take him to headquarters and there I see about three hundred similar characters. They were all Hitler's doubles, see!"

"Did you come running into Berlin all by yourself or with the troops?"

"With the troops, right in the vanguard."

"Now when I served in the cavalry," Luka Ilkovich said with a faltering tongue after the "prize drink," "I had a long sabre with a castor on the tip of the sheath..."

"Yeah," said Samiylo's youngest brother Simon, "when I served in Karelia, our regimental CO summoned me one day and said: 'Sergeant Shkurpelo, take seventy tractors, get

to the head of the column, and drive into the tundra for wood, because there's none left to heat the soldiers' bath-house with..."

"...why do you think that Kolchak man from Opishnya bagged so many hares last year, and all of them with the left barrel? Because the first shot he ever fired out of it had a golden crosslet packed with the charge. Before every hunt he rubs wolf's bile into his eyes — then he can see a hell of a distance away..."

"...It's good that young people are specially taught now to behave, because akchly they've forgotten what's what. Back in forty-six Zakharko used to call me out to the Village Soviet and say: 'Get the registrants subject to military service together, make them form up, and take them to Zinkiv Hill at a forced march.' So I drew them up and hollered: 'At the do-ouble! Quick march!' and the only thing I heard from them was gasping breath and not a single squeak of complaint. I had to run, too, but I felt responsibility behind my back..."

"Listen, that bridegroom isn't an engineer at all, but a metalworker," Danilo Shkabura opened his mouth for the first time throughout the whole wedding party. He never believed anyone in anything, and always said:

"That's all a lie."

"What do you mean he isn't an engineer?" he was asked.

"Just what you heard. Engineers aren't like him."

"So what are they like then?"

"They're different..."

Some of the guests were already tipsy. The first to be led off into the house and put to bed was the collective farm chairman. Throughout the party Stepan had been pouring him the strongest moonshine until it made the man fall off his chair. Before he was knocked out, someone advised him: "Ivan Lukovich, what if you go into the house and take a rest?" To which he rejoined, offended: "Who? Me? Oh no... I've never abandoned my squad in battle — and I won't abandon you!"

Olexiy Tsurka was roving from table to table, looking fixedly at almost everyone with his bloodshot eyes, and asking: "Where's the team leader? Find me the team leader and I'll twist his head round — from north to south!" He even pestered the master of the house: "Oh, Stepan Kindratovich... Come here, closer... You don't want to, afraid, huh? I know your dealings. Remember how you sold millet?"

Three kilos of millet — and a half a kilo of melted candy, or else the customer wouldn't get the millet. And did you yourself take those tarry candies? I know..."

A huge cloud spanning half the sky seemed to rise right behind the orchard opposite the midday sun, a cold wind started to blow, and presently a dense slanting snow fell — virgin snow, downy and wet.

The newlyweds went into the house, because they were dressed lightly and were cold. Besides, they had to pack their things for departure.

One after another the guests, mostly women and children, took leave of the hosts, thanking them for the food and drink. The men, though, carried a number of tables toward the outdoor cellar away from the wind, chatted, sang with hoarse voices, and those who were soddenly drunk and susceptible to tearfulness wept recalling their grievances or gave in to pity for God knows who.

Dusk was already setting when the newlyweds, dressed for the journey, the bridegroom's mother and his friends came out of the house and walked to the gate where the purring Volga sedan was waiting for them. Katerina and her mother were weeping, hugging each other time and again, the bridegroom winced as if in pain, while Stepan, happily drunk by now, kept impressing on his son-in-law:

"Mind you, son, treat Katerina kindly. She lived with us like a swallow in a snug nest, knowing no grief or want, so mind you. She'll make a splendid wife — believe me, her father."

"I believe you, pop, I do," the husband, his hands stuck in the pockets of his trench coat, reassured Stepan. "Don't worry, everything will be all right."

"And you, Klavdia Kuprianivna, take good care of her," Stepan cooed, kissing her dry powdered cheeks. "If she does something wrong, tell her how to do it right, teach her, and, well, don't hurt her. She's our..." He waved off the definition. "And I for my part... Just write what you need, I'll get you everything: potatoes, eggs, fresh meat. I won't begrudge my in-laws anything... I'll give all I have just so that they live happily."

The newlyweds and guests climbed into the car, the doors banged shut, the driver revved up the engine, and the car,

tearing up the snow under its wheels, rushed down the lane, leaving two black tracks in its wake.

"Oh, my dear child, when will I see you ever again," Stepan's wife cried out, and burst into convulsive sobs.

Fedir and his wife took her by the shoulders and led her into the house, while Stepan trudged off to the outdoor cellar where the men were humming.

The car surged out of the hamlet, the beams of the headlights illuminating the insulators on the telegraph poles, and rushed onto the highway. Katerina kept looking out of the back window through which she barely saw the houses; here and there lights flickered on the lamp posts and in the windows, and when the hamlet disappeared altogether, she put her head on her husband's chest, and her shoulders trembled violently.

### THREE LAMENTS FOR STEPAN

Stepan Derevyanko died when he was not yet thirty-five years old. He was brought down by some illness, and quickly at that.

On Friday evening he came home from Kremenchuk, supped on milk, because he could not eat anything else, lay down to rest after his journey, and was taken so ill (probably because of the milk) that he said to his wife:

"Manya, looks like I won't drive the truck into the yard today. Let it stay by the gate for the night. If you're not too tired, go and sweep the cabin inside and lock the doors." And he gave his wife the keys to the truck.

Manya had stopped loving her husband a long time ago, probably as any wife would have done, because when a husband grows weaker from year to year and day to day, love wanes too. There was no room left for love in her heart because of pity — for him and for herself. Tired as she was after her shift in the calf shed where work was anything but easy, she would look at herself in the mirror at times: her eyebrows were still young, black, with a glittering streak of blue (still blue, for all that); she had a slender figure, and the slenderness showed even under her husband's old jacket; she had high breasts of a young girl. They had not lost their firmness after childbirth (she had borne but one child during her twelve years of marriage); she was meant for life and love.

But instead there were only sighs.

Another woman would certainly have taken up with someone else long ago (weren't there enough shady places in the garden, even on a moonlit night?) and prolonged her prime stealthily with an illicit lover. That might have been true of another woman, but not Manya. Her heart did not listen to reason, although at times reason prevailed: no one caught her heart's fancy.

"You're a strange sort," Serhiy Batyuk, the youngest team leader recently back from the army, once blurted out right to her face and her downcast eyes. "Do you think I don't see how it is with you?" he added, his fingers twirling a button he was trying to undo on her jacket.

It was in the evening in the calf shed, behind a stack of straw litter. She had bent down to the crib to tie the last calf to it when he appeared out of nowhere and clasped his arms round her waist, while his trembling fingers made their way to her breasts.

Then he unbuttoned the jacket. It took him some time, because she had only sewn the button on the day before. When he finally managed to do it, she said, "Let me go," and left.

On reaching the gate, she turned round and said:

"Finish tying up the calf, 'cause it might fall into the crib and you'll have to pay for the damage."

That evening Stepan came home from work tired out and asked to have a bath. That's what Saturday was for. He washed in a tub. As Manya rubbed his back with a soapy washrag she had to bite her lip lest she burst out weeping: her hands kept bumping against Stepan's bones, while his sharp knees stuck out of the tub like bayonets leveled for attack. She checked her tears, though. After all, he would have guessed what had caused them.

She took the keys, broom and duster and went to the truck. Stepan was a driver as tidy with his truck as he was with his household. His hands, just like spring, brought everything he touched to life: after he had swept the yard, it wasn't a yard any more but a clean parlor; when he built a barn, it turned into something palatial; when he planted an apple tree, it would bear aplenty. That's the kind of man he was. And what about the truck? When you came to think of it, what was to be gained by making it look spick and span? It was just a heap of iron, and nothing more. But no: he'd blow off every single speck of dust before getting in behind the steering wheel. And he washed it every day; if he couldn't do it, then he'd call for Manya to help. Or was it only because he wanted them to do it together, to have her at his side? But this happened only occasionally. Mostly he managed on his own. "You're tired as it is," he'd say, carressing her with his eyes all the time. When she turned around, she would still feel his eyes carressing her back.

She swept the floor of the cabin, wiped the seat, the dashboard, and the windows, locked the doors as he had taught her, and went into the house.

The next moment she bolted out onto the porch, with its little railings which the evening moon had tinged with green, and collapsed.

"Oh, help me neighbors!... Help me!..." she groaned.

The neighbors heard her and came running from the nearby houses—that were close to one another. Some people crowded into the living room, others gathered by the window and looked silently on the couch: covered with a fresh linen sheet was Stepan lying supine in the white-buttoned gray shirt he had worn as long as anyone could remember. He had his arms folded over his breast as he liked to do when he had a rest, and his eyes stared fixedly at the ceiling.

One of the older and more sensible women closed his eyes. The men rushed to the unconscious Manya, picked her up from the porch and carried her inside, after which her daughter, also Manya, was called from the other end of the lane where she was playing with the other children.

The funeral arrangements were made forthwith.

Someone hurried off to the home of the chairman of the collective farm to tell him what had happened and ask for a coffin and a brass band; someone else was sent for Stepan's mother who lived across the river, with the injunction: "Now, don't you go blurting out the news straight off — do it in a roundabout way." Those who had nothing to do remained standing at the other side of the gate for a long time, sighing and bemoaning Manya's woe — such a young woman and already a widow — and recalled everything about Stepan. He was already consigned to their memory.

"Only yesterday I went up to him when he was sprinkling the cherry trees in his orchard with a besom. 'Lend me some shingle nails,' says I. 'All right, neighbor,' says he. 'How many do you need?' Then he picked the bad ones out of the bunch — those that were bent or had their heads knocked off — and gave me the rest. A fine man, he was. Another man wouldn't even have admitted he had them at all..."

"Once I seen him lugging a sapling pear tree in a sack, with the top sticking out. And he himself was reeling in the wind. Now, who would you be planting that tree for, man, I thought, if you won't ever taste its fruit?"

"Oh no, that's where you're wrong, Halya." They were considerate now to one another, using the respectful form Halya instead of the more familiar Halka. "We don't do things just for ourselves, do we?"

Sighing intermittently, they set out for their homes along the moonlit lane. Only Stepan's truck remained standing by the gate, the engine still giving off warmth.

On the third day the grave diggers started work on

Stepan's last resting place. They would dig down to the depth of a spade head and then take a rest: the earth was compact, solid loam, the side walls hard as cement. They would sit down, light cigarettes and lapse into silence. In this way, they worked till breakfast. After breakfast, followed with a good drink, the digging progressed in a livelier fashion and the cigarette breaks became more frequent, because it was a long way till midday.

The loam around the grave gleamed yellow; the sun shone from behind the coniferous wood gently whispering near the graveyard, and the fragrance of acacia wafted through the air. And bees, thousands of bees, thronged to the acacia flowers — every cluster trembled like a living coat of gilt.

"Stepan sure picked a bad time to check out," one of the diggers said, simply to make conversation. "He could've pulled through till autumn at least."

"As if he had a choice."

"Yeah, that's how it goes," another one said with a sigh. "Some are lucky enough to live a full life and get a pension into the bargain, while others don't even get their fill of work."

"Well, that depends what yardstick your life's been measured by: for some it's long, for others short, and for another hardly any time at all."

"Listen, boys, how about sending someone off to the greasy spoon (that's what they called the roadside café opposite the graveyard), 'cause I feel rotten."

"Suits me."

"I won't say no either."

"We'll drink to Stepan's last home."

"Sure, and not just to likker up."

"All right, Ivanko, off you go, you're the youngest."

For a while change jingled as they pooled their resources: no one wanted to produce his rouble or three-rouble bill.

By midday the grave had been dug and scraped and, throwing their spades over their shoulders, the diggers, their vision blurred (after Ivanko's mission to the greasy spoon) and talking away quietly, set off to Stepan's house to bid farewell to the deceased.

From far off, it looked as if there was a wedding party at Stepan's house. In and around the yard were a great many people all dressed in white (it was hot); flowers, red and yellow, blue and white, gazed up at the sun from the

wreaths of pine branches, and Stepan's truck — its tailgate and sideboards down — was draped in red. Stepan was to be mated with the earth.

On reaching the gate, the grave diggers took off their caps, stood their spades against the wattle fence, and the crowd let them through to the house. The men did not hide their eyes: they all were red now, and no one in the crowd would ask them why.

After taking their leave of Stepan, they went out the gate and took up their spades again.

"Now they'll bring him out," the whisper went through the crowd. "See, the brass band is getting ready."

The brass band was not local. It had been brought from the district motor pool. One instrument was yellow, another white, one was old, another new, while the drum, as is customary, was adorned crosswise with embroidered cherry-red velvet straps that made it look like a circus drum. The musicians, like their instruments, were also a sundry bunch: one was old and bald, he sweated all the time and kept wiping himself with his sleeve; another was a handsome, ruddy-cheeked boy alertly watching the door through which the deceased was to be carried; the third was a stout young man, his face shaved to a tint of blue, although the bristle on his neck had not been touched (he was too lazy to shave there), and his eyes, blurred with lust, roved over the younger women. He kept turning his head from one side to the other, the bristle on his neck scratching against the collar. His trumpet was white and tarnished all over, the biggest of all the brass instruments.

Presently the chairman, a young man with a low, round peasant-style haircut, came out onto the porch, and said in a weary voice:

"All right, you truck drivers, go inside and carry him out."

The crowd stirred. The bald musician turned to his mates, put his trumpet to his lips, and the whole band followed suit.

In the meantime, boots started to thump inside the house; farewell laments spilled into the yard out of the open windows from which came a smell of burning candles; the bald band leader stamped his foot, bending his knees so that he was almost squatting, and a funeral melody flowed over the village into the fields, onto the young rye and wheat, and into the pine forest, languid in the sun. The womenfolk

covered their faces with white kerchiefs, the men hung their heads, and the wreaths gave off a fragrance of fresh resin as soon as they were moved. There was a dry rustle of paper flowers, people wept loudly, while the chairman took up his position outside the gate and gave orders in a quiet businesslike patter:

"Now come out in pairs with the wreaths, slowly, one pair after the other, and try to walk in step, then the whole picture will be quite different."

The band, albeit rather discordantly, blew for all they were worth on their brass instruments and muffled the sounds of lament, and the coffin with Stepan in it floated silently above the people's heads as if by itself.

"Oh, my dear master!" Manya screamed in a voice no music in the world could have muffled as she, her head covered with a black silken kerchief that reached her eyebrows, writhed in the arms of the womenfolk. "Why must you cross this dear threshold with your blessed feet for the last time — the threshold you planed and built yourself? Don't leave us all alone in this world!"

"Oh, daddy!" little Manya whimpered. Pale and hoarse, she, too, was wearing an unhemmed kerchief (probably torn off her mother's), and a clean, if unironed red polka-dot dress. A number of people swept her up in their arms and started to console her.

"Never and to no one have you ever spoken a lie, nor a word of cunning, nor a word of slyness!" Stepan's wife choked herself with wailing. "And no one can remember even a tiny bad thing you did to anyone, my kind heart, my master and protector!"

The people nodded and thought sadly to themselves: *What she beld in respect, she does bewail. Not a husband, mind you, but a master of her household.* But there was no censure in this judgment.

Stepan, curly-haired and solemnly indifferent, floated overhead. He was dressed in his best suit, one he had never worn because of his daily bustle and his mute anticipation of death, and a shirt embroidered in blue to match his eyes. The black brows on his small withered face were proudly curved and glittered like silk in the sun.

When the coffin was level with the gate, Manya uttered an imploring, frantic scream:

"No, don't carry him out, don't carry him out, for it will be forever!..." Then she lapsed into silence and went

limp, like a broken bough, in the arms of those who supported her.

“Oh, my son, my son,” Stepan’s mother lamented quietly and hoarsely, but without tears, as she covered her eyes with the palm of a hand that looked black against the gray of her head. “Forgive me, my child, that I brought you into this world for so short a life... But had I known, had I suspected you would be ill, I would’ve prayed to God day and night to send this illness down on me... May no one know how hard it is for a mother to bury her child and live... Oh, my son, dear son... When you came to see me, you’d try to help me even before you crossed the threshold: ‘Can I chop some wood for you, Mom? Can I draw some fresh water for you, or buy some dry peat?..’ Lordy, you were so thin the sun shined through you like a cobweb... No wonder I saw you in my dreams, my son, from when you were a child and up to your last breath... But what I saw was only your little head, only your little head: now in a meadow amid young hemp, now in a field playing amid yellow dandelions, now in the orchard amid the twigs of cherry trees blossoming white, now bent over your carpenter’s plane, or over my granddaughter in her cradle, or over my world-weary gray head... So there was a reason for my dreaming all these dreams, oh Lord...”

She fell silent like a spent spring, and thenceforth did not utter a sound.

Then Manya’s father — a stooped little man in an old-fashioned shirt with a dicky and large boots — raised his voice.

“Why did you let me down the way you did, eh, my son, Stepan?” he queried with kindly reproach in his feeble, feminine voice. “When you asked for Manya’s hand, you said, ‘I’ll spare her and love her, Father, and won’t let her work too much,’ and now you’ve left her just like that... Why did you have to come and fill me with such blighted hope, old man that I am, eh?...”

Up at the front behind the wreaths, they carried the portrait of Stepan still young and alive — a smiling curly-haired soldier; his eyes sparkled with kindness and mirth, but deep down in them was a hint of distant sorrow.

Stepan’s friends mourned him as they walked on either side of the truck, holding on to its sides or simply shuffling along with heads bent low. They mourned in silence, a bitter

lump in their throats: this was the first time they had had to part with a comrade of their own age. They had grown up with him as a brother, experiencing want and the joys of working, yelling their heads off laboring in the fields, stealing straw in the dead of night in the fiercest snowstorms, in the evening singing songs to the girls about a mother who would count all the spoons before sitting down to eat... One spoon was extra... It belonged to her child who had drifted away from her fold and disappeared like a stone in the water so cold... With his friends Stepan had been reticent and closemouthed, more like a shadow. Yet without him no company was worth the name: there was no going to it, no singing, no high glee. Everything he did was always without words, unexpected: if a friend of his was trying to tug a sledge of firewood through the snowdrifts, Stepan would leave his sledge, turn back and silently join hands, pulling with all his might, after which everyone would come running to help; if there was no one to launch a high-pitched song, Stepan would take the first part himself, although he was a baritone, and after starting it on its way, he would lead it to the end; if someone fell up to his neck into an ice-hole skating and was on the point of drowning, Stepan would be the first to crawl out to him with a belt in his teeth. Later on they all would hee-haw and brag that it was they who had pulled the poor bugger out, and Stepan would join in the laughter — but without a word.

With heads bent low, they walked along, keeping close to the truck and regretting they would not bear their mate on their shoulders but had to put him on the truck, for this had been the decision: his workmates would carry him out of the house, while Stepan's truck would take its master on his last journey. Lyonka, Stepan's trainee, was to sit behind the wheel. Lyonka did a good job driving the truck, smoothly without any jerks, without stepping on the gas unnecessarily.

At the graveside, the brass band fell silent. Dozens of hands took the coffin down from the truck, as the drivers were now assisted by Stepan's friends. There followed a moment of silence interrupted only by sighs, the moans of an already enfeebled Manya, and the buzzing of bees over the grave. One bee even alit on the muslin covering Stepan, made its way to his hands crossed over his chest, touched them with its lip and flew away. In the meantime, the

chairman took a little sheet of paper folded in four out of his pocket, coughed into the silence, and said:

"Comrades, today we are parting with the best driver on our collective farm, Stepan Timofiovich Derevyanko. He was a first-class driver and garage manager. A considerate comrade and adviser at work, Stepan Timofiovich was repeatedly given bonuses by the management, awarded a radio-gramophone set and five citations, and every year his portrait appeared on the Board of Honor both in our village and in the district center. Stepan Timofiovich was also a wonderful instructor and educator of our younger drivers..." At this point the chairman raised his eyes to search out Stepan's trainees, and said: "Lyonka over there was his trainee, and Mikola Ratushny, and Olexa Huzyi couldn't manage without his advice whenever there was a fault, wasn't that so? Well, the boys can tell about that themselves." Then again he started reading about how "the collective farm management entrusted the most responsible and distant runs to Stepan Timofiovich Derevyanko and was sure he would never let us down," that "his truck was in go and run condition in any weather, at any time of day or night like a clock" and so forth. "It is sad, very sad," said the chairman folding up the paper, as his steel-covered teeth flashed cheerfully against the sun like a smile, "but there's nothing we can do about it: death doesn't ask our permission. So rest in peace, Stepan Timofiovich, our comrade and friend! You shall live on forever in our memories..."

"But where shall he live, where shall he live if he's no more, no more!" Stepan's wife cried out as if she had been jolted out of a dream.

"I said he'll live on in our memories," said the chairman, embarrassed; after which he coughed again, straightened up, and said loudly:

"The next speaker is Mikola Ratushny!"

Ratushny pushed out of the crowd sideways, stood at Stepan's head, and started to speak haltingly, shifting his cap from hand to hand:

"I've known Comrade Derevyanko since we were kids, and when I came back from the army we worked together. Once I met him — I had come to see a movie at the club, still wearing my soldier's uniform, as I remember — and he asked, 'Where are you going to work, Mikola?' I told him I didn't know yet. 'If you want to, you can be a driver,' he

said. 'I'll teach you myself, and then you can put in for a test to get your driving licence. Or if you like, you can take driving lessons.' Well, you might say that I learned at his side, for after all it was right here at home. I only went to Poltava to take the test to get the driving licence, 'cause you don't get it otherwise. See. Once I remember taking apart a carburetor but I couldn't put it back together as it's a messy job. Then and there Stepan Timofiovich appeared. 'All right, let me have a try,' he said. I didn't even have time to light up before — slap! — he had it all in one piece again. We put it in, and the engine started. See. He didn't get his way by swearing at you, but always managed somehow to get along with a kind word. That's why everyone listened to him..." Ratushny fell silent and nervously crumpled the cap in his hands. Then his eyes roved over the crowd as if he wanted its advice: should he go on or had he said enough? In the end, he plucked up enough courage and added: "To tell you from the bottom of my heart, I'll say that there are a lot of different people in this world — I've seen them in the army, in these parts, and elsewhere — but men like Stepan are few and far between. I don't know how to put it, but... I think it'd be better to say, 'How do you do?' than 'Live on in our memory forever.'" Holding his cap with both hands, Mikola made his way sideways toward the crowd in the same way that he had come out of it.

In the brief silence that followed, someone whispered between repressed sighs:

"'Stepan,' says I, 'could you lend me, say, a dozen nails?' 'All right, neighbor,' says he..."

"'Maybe someone else wants to have a word, comrades?'" the chairman asked. "'What about you, Lyonka?'"

Lyonka dropped his head and color suffused his face.

"I can't speak in public," he said softly.

"Well, then," said the chairman with a sigh, shooting a sidelong glance at the coffin, "let the family take their leave."

The music and lamenting broke out simultaneously; the jackdaws took off from the trees near the school, climbed into the sky and started to wheel; and the bees drew nectar from the acacia flowers in the bustling, businesslike way they had done before, making each cluster tremble like a living coat of gilt.

"Oh, Stepan, my dear!... Oh, my master and supporter!"

"Don't, don't cover up my daddy!"

"Oh, my son, my dear eaglet!"

And then the hammers started banging away on the nails, lumps of earth fell into the grave as the coffin, swaying slightly, was lowered into it on towel strips.

Stepan's wife writhed in the grip of the compassionate neighbors supporting her, fell on her knees onto the loamy earth, frenziedly tore the kerchief off her head, and implored and moaned:

"Take the child away, take Manya away, don't let her see all that, don't let her hear..."

Torpid and obsessed with grief, the pallor of her face set off by black brows and tearless glittering brown eyes lined with large blue shadows, she felt the eyes of Serhiy Batyuk staring at her all the time and chased them away with a thought that throbbed feverishly in her mind: "Aren't you ashamed? Oh my, of all the things to happen to me! And what about Stepan, what about him?!"

Serhiy really was standing on the other side of the grave and looking through the crowd only at her; although there was grief in his eyes, Manya could not drive his excited breathing and his lustful, strong young hands from her mind.

"Oh, they're damned, damned!" She sank into a torrid haze, whispering, "Oh Lord, is this really possible?"

Someone put some earth into her hand and made her strew it over the coffin, someone else led her away from the grave, consoling and comforting her in an exaggeratedly sweet voice:

"Come, come that'll do, my child. Spare yourself, 'cause there's no help for it, and nothing will bring him back to life."

Yet Manya trembled all over, and Serhiy's eyes seared her like fire through the black kerchief on her back, and flooded her heart with scorn and a warmth she had forgotten long, long ago.

The earth kept on falling into the grave — by handfuls and spadefuls, and with it fell the whispered words:

"God rest his soul in His Kingdom..."

"Rest in peace..."

"God rest his soul..."

“Rest in peace...”

Then a yellow mound grew over the grave enveloped in the resinous fragrance of the wreaths, and the people slowly started to disperse in all directions from the graveyard.

Stepan remained in his last resting place under the wreaths of pine twigs set with paper flowers, and with him remained his quiet, genial love, of which he had so often spoken.

“I love to see a sun shower pouring down on apple trees heavy with ripe fruit... Then they seem to weep and laugh at the same time... I love it terribly!”

## TALES OF THE STEPPE

### THE ABANDONED SHANTY

Nobody remembers how long the shanty had been standing on the steppe. As a matter of fact, it didn't look like a shanty, because it had no walls, windows or chimney; neither was it a haystack, for it had a door. Behind the door there was a cold murk that smelled of toadstools and rains of long ago. The shanty also had two huge holes in its sides. One of them faced the north from which cold winds blew in winter, while the other opened on to the south whence warm winds were wafted.

Other winds and breezes swirled around the shanty, seeking any furtive hole they could whistle into: black midnight winds, azure dawn winds, limpid midday winds, and green evening winds. Each hummed a song all its own in the door and holes: the black midnight wind moaned like an owl; the azure wind of dawn sighed half-wakened from its sleep; the limpid midday wind trilled merrily; while the green evening wind cooed quietly, because it wanted to sleep.

The shanty fell into decay with time. Yellow and green moss had covered it all over, and around it was a riot of weeds: wormwood, wild oats, feathergrass, spurge, vetch, and yarrow. Right on top of it grew a poplar sapling which had appeared here when it was still a seed. Whither it had been wandering and whence it had come nobody knew. It was just a stray sapling.

In winter and spring the shanty was open from morning till evening and the whole night through. So come in the door or crawl through the gaping holes, if the door wasn't good enough for the purpose. But in summer and autumn it was cooped up, because the door and the holes and the weeds around it were all entangled in cobwebs running up and down, lengthwise and crosswise in round and slanting nets — in all sorts of nets for that matter, for every spider had his own frame of mind: either circular, straight, or oblique. Hence the shapes of the nets.

It was uncomfortable inside the shanty. The moss gave off a dank smell, and something droned inside all the time:

either the draft from the steppe or perhaps a bumblebee that had flown in and couldn't get out however much it tried.

It was an abandoned shanty.

Nobody remembers when it was new and served as a shelter against rainstorms and heat, cold and weariness for every dweller on the steppe, be he a plowman, sower, reaper or thresher, when the fields smelled of grain and melons, and hawks wheeled high in the sky. In the evenings, a campfire crackled in front of the shanty; around it weary people gathered and sang their weary songs. Once the people and their songs went to rest, the flames of the campfire would spurt its red tongues, bend in the breeze, or go out completely. Then the untiring embers would glow and flicker right until daybreak and the sparks fly in droves around the shanty, stealthily dying out one after another.

Now the shanty was all alone in the steppe. It had even forgotten how to speak, although it had once known how. True, it didn't learn to speak by itself, but had been taught by its maker — Demid, a carpenter and thatcher.

It all happened this way. After Demid had cut the beams for the future shanty, he straightened his back before sitting down for a rest, put his hands on his hips, and said:

“Whew, how my bones ache. Looks like it'll rain.”

After he had made the frame for the shanty to stand firmly on the ground, cased it with laths to which straw bundles were tied, and then covered it with a thatch roof, the first thing he did before sitting down in the grass for a smoke — or, perhaps, for joy at having finished the shanty — was to exclaim merrily:

“Whew, am I tired, blast it.”

He surely did not intend to “blast” the shanty — the word simply escaped Demid's lips just like that. What it meant nobody knew, not even Demid.

Then, after having had a rest and a smoke, Demid walked around the shanty, smoothed down the thatch with a rake, shook the frame to see how firm it was, and said to himself:

“Wha-a-at? It'll stand for ages! Once Demid's made something, it'll last forever. Yes, sir!”

The next day people came to take the shanty into the steppe.

When they were lifting it on to a wagon, it suddenly said just like Demid had:

“Whew!”

When they were taking it through the steppe and the wind played with its straw top and rubbed against its straw sides, it said over and over again in surprise:

“Wha-a-at? Wha-a-at?”

And when it was brought to its place and taken off the wagon, it exhaled for joy:

“Whew!”

Later on, it said those things many a time, because people frequently took it from field to field, from melon garden to melon garden.

Now the abandoned shanty kept silent day after day and year after year, because nobody took it anywhere any more. Nor did anyone remember it as they once used to do:

“Look what a cloud’s creeping up! Come on, let’s go to the shanty!”

Or:

“I wonder where that campfire’s gleaming so brightly in the steppe?”

“It’s at the shanty where the watchmen are cooking their evening meal.”

There was nothing of that sort now, save perhaps for a passerby who would ask occasionally:

“What’s that black thing showing through the mist in the field?”

“That was a shanty once,” he would be told. “Nobody’s living there now.”

And that would be all.

That’s what people thought and said, because they hadn’t any idea or inkling that the shanty, old that it was, did not actually live alone. In real fact, there were creatures who lived and worked diligently in it, or rested, ate, and even played in it if they had time. Its inhabitants spoke a language people had never heard of or knew about, and so they believed that such a language didn’t exist. Let them believe it if they want. But we’d better take a closer look at the shanty and listen to what’s going on in there.

## WHEN THE MARMOT WHISTLES

In early spring, when the drowsy mists languidly clung to the steppe gullies and hollows at sunrise, and the grass was just pushing up in green patches on the hillocks, a dry weed stalk suddenly stirred right by the shanty, swayed

from side to side for some time, and then dropped to the ground. In the place where it had stood, a burrow appeared. Something puffed and muttered angrily out of it. Shortly after a sharp snout poked into the mist from under the ground, followed by angrily bristling whiskers, after which came the entire head of some underground creature covered with dust, without eyes, and with two little holes in its furry head instead of ears.

"Fie!" said the underground creature, throwing out a cloudlet of dust. Then it sniffed the mist and listened intently.

It was silent around the shanty, amongst the weeds, and farther away on the steppe, and the mist was warm. Only then did the creature slowly raise the two horny lids near his ears, and from under the lids two little prickly eyes peeped out onto the world.

"Fie! How red it is."

The creature had weak sight, and so it didn't like the sun.

*Well, where have I come up?* the underground creature thought angrily, because he was very hungry, and crawled out of the burrow completely.

He was weak after his winter sleep and barely moved his stumps. His forefeet with their sharp horny claws were fairly strong, but he dragged his hind feet and utterly limp tail heavily.

When he stumbled against the shanty, he crouched in fright, but since the shanty was silent and still, he got bolder, tasted the mist-dampened moss with his tongue, and then started to lick it quickly. Oh, how cool he felt inside, what a lot of strength he gained at once! He cheered up.

"Too-too-too, too-too-too," he hummed through his snout and moved on to have a closer look at the shanty and sniff at it from all sides.

The shanty smelled of earth and moss, and to the underground creature it seemed like a hill disappearing somewhere high up in the mist. The weeds around it resembled a forest and the smell was bitter and cool.

*It'd be a good thing to dig a well here,* he thought. The water running down the hill would fill the well to the top. A well dug on level ground gathered water only on the bottom. He'd have to crawl down it, lick up a drop, and then scramble up again — and backward for that matter, which was no mean task!

Presently he found himself opposite the door of the shanty. Out of it rolled gray clouds of mist exhaling dampness. The underground creature bristled up and called very fiercely:

“Too-too!”

Nothing stirred in the shanty, however. Only the echo was hurled back from the dark corners.

*Well, that means that I'm the first to wake up, he thought. And what if the marmot hasn't whistled yet, what if it isn't spring at all but only a thaw?*

Having got bolder by now (since he was the first, who should he be afraid of?!), he shuffled off to the shanty. No sooner had he taken a mere two steps than a threatening cry came from under his feet:

“Hey, keep off!”

The echo from inside the shanty hurled back just as threateningly:

“Hey, keep off...”

The undergrounder crouched and sucked in his breath. That instant, something started tickling his feet, sides, and belly, and even tickled the tip of his snout. The undergrounder looked himself over and saw some long-nosed runners clambering up his legs like firemen up a ladder. They helped one another up with their noses and little legs and all as one moved their antennae aggressively.

“Who are you?” he heard a voice ask and saw on the tip of his snout a runner that looked just like all the others, except that he was a bit thicker. He also moved his antennae and looked into the eyes of the undergrounder with stern severity.

“And who are you?” the undergrounder shot back harshly. “Why are you tickling me as well as everything else?”

“We're ants,” the one sitting on his nose replied gravely. “I'm the leader and I want to know why you stepped on the entrance to our anthill? Who are you and what do you want of us? Now answer quickly because we have no time.”

“I'm Mole,” the undergrounder replied softly, for the tickling had a pleasant and rather odd effect on him. “I'm looking for someone to ask whether Marmot has whistled yet or not. I stepped on the entrance to your anthill, as you said, not on purpose, but simply because I have a weak sight. If you're the leader, tell your troop to stop tickling me. Also, I ask you to tell me how many of you there are, because, to tell you the truth, I've never seen such a big

crowd before. If I may, I'd also like to know why you're in such a hurry?"

After hearing him out, the leader shouted something to the ants, gave them a signal with his antennae, and they quickly ran down Mole to the ground. Then he said:

"Marmot's whistled a long time ago: yesterday at midday. The reason we're always in such a hurry is that we've got a lot of work to do both under and on the ground — building nests, rolling the earth to the top, lugging wheat all the way from the shanty to this place. There are nine thousand, two hundred of us. But while I've been telling you this, our number's grown to nine thousand, three hundred, and as I tell you about that, we've already increased to nine thousand, four hundred, because we've just awakened from our winter sleep."

"I see. I've just got up myself," Mole said with a sigh, because he felt hungry again; for all that, he didn't dare get angry: there was a big troop of ants at his feet, and, besides, their leader was so polite. "I'd want to see whether it would be possible to dig a burrow around here, for I can't stand the sunlight, you know. Wherever I get to the surface on the steppe, there's sunlight all around. Also, the earth looks damp and soft here, which means that there are probably a lot of worms in it: to tell you the truth, I love worms for breakfast very much." At this point Mole smiled bashfully, and added: "And for lunch, too." Then he smiled and added again: "And for supper, too."

"Well, please yourself!" the ants' leader agreed. "You're welcome to be our neighbor. The truth is, someone's started digging a burrow in one corner already. The other three corners are unoccupied, though. Choose the one you like best. But now step back a little, please, and take away your foot, because — excuse me for reminding you again — you've blocked the entrance to our dwelling with it. Move aside somehow."

Presently the ants' leader took hold of a grass blade with his thin legs and scampered to the ground down it, while Mole backed away and took his leg from the barely perceptible hole in the ground.

In the meantime, the leader was addressing his troop:

"Brothers, the one we wanted to punish for the damage is called Mole. He's shortsighted and did us harm unintentionally. So that it won't happen in future, let's build an earth

mound around our underground dwelling! Then our new neighbor will see it from afar and pass it by. And now everyone get back to work at once!"

He was the first to disappear into the hole and his whole troop followed suit in a long black file.

Mole carefully stepped over the file and entered the shanty. Opposite the holes gaping in the mist, a draft blew into his face, making him shiver. Yet farther on, in the corner, it was so quiet, warm and dusky that Mole cooed for joy. He was about to dig a burrow when one of his whiskers caught against some unseen string that gave off a loud twang.

"Mind what you're doing!" Mole heard a threatening voice overhead. He stiffened and crouched tensely.

The string quivered rapidly (it looked as if someone was running down it), and presently Mole saw by his whiskers a gray shaggy creature with long crooked legs, a big round belly, and a little head. The shaggy character also had eight eyes, all of which looked in different directions.

"Who are you?" the shaggy creature asked, rocking on the string and twanging it with a foot.

"I'm Mole," Mole uttered angrily, because hunger had got the better of him again. "And who are you, rocking like that around here?"

"I'm Spider," the shaggy type replied gravely. "I'm not rocking, but waiting for a fly to come by. What made *you* come here?"

"I want to dig myself a burrow," Mole said and sneezed, because the mist had crept into his nostrils. "I got permission from the ants' leader. You'd better tell me what you need so many eyes for?"

"Pah!" Spider grinned. "That's so I can look in every direction at the same time. See that tackle there?" he pointed upward with one of his legs.

Mole raised his head and saw a huge net rocking slightly in the draft (this spider's frame of mind was round and so was the shape of his net).

"That's where I sit in wait for flies," Spider explained. "Once a fly hits the net, it gets entangled. Then I both feel the web trembling and see where it's happening."

"Tell me where you're looking right now, because I can't figure it out," Mole said.

"At you," Spider replied with a smile. "As well as to

the right, to the left, and backward. And where are you looking?"

"Only at you and seeing you badly for that matter," Mole said and smiled confusedly. "I walked into an anthill right now..."

"What if I teach you to see on all sides?" Spider suggested. "What about it?"

"Well, if you can..." Mole agreed without enthusiasm, for hunger was plaguing him as before.

Happy at the chance to have some fun, Spider nimbly circled the orb and ran up the net. As soon as he was at the top, he called down to Mole:

"Can you see me?"

"I seem to see something dimly that looks like you and doesn't at the same time," Mole responded.

"Watch carefully now!" Spider called excitedly and went in circles round his tackle.

Mole rose on his hind legs, supporting himself slightly with his tail, and quickly started turning with Spider. He turned like that three times round his tail, and sat down.

"Look, look!" Spider called, out of breath. "What? You already tired?" — pant, pant — "That's it. Now if you'd been running round in circles" — pant, pant — "and I'd been sitting in one place, I wouldn't have been turning round all the time: for that purpose" — pant, pant, "I got eight eyes. Right now I've got my back to you, but" — pant, pant — "I see what you're doing."

"And what *am* I doing?" Mole said and moved his tail imperceptibly.

"You moved your tail!"

"And what am I doing right now?" Mole asked and quickly brushed his leg against a whisker.

"You touched your whisker!"

Spider was a cackling braggart, and so he said:

"To have two eyes and shortsighted at that — well, that's about the same as having nothing at all. Anyone who wants can grab you! Any kind of grabber!"

"That may only seem so," Mole said, offended. "If you want to know, I, too, can see in all directions."

"How?" Spider asked, mildly sarcastic.

"Just like that. Now circle round your net and stop wherever you like. I'll keep my back to you and tell you exactly where you stopped."

"All right!" Spider agreed merrily. "But now I'll keep silent, because you might guess my whereabouts from my voice."

Spider started to circle his web. Opposite the hole through which the sun peeped in, he stopped and even held his breath. *Let him try and guess where I am*, he thought humorously.

"Right now you're sitting... opposite the sunny hole," Mole said.

Spider was surprised without saying so, and then ran round his net more quickly and froze right over Mole.

"You're over my head now," Mole said.

"But how do you know?" Spider asked, and there wasn't a bragging ring to his voice any more. "You said you saw badly."

"Saying and doing are two different things," Mole remarked with a laugh. "With me it's the ears that see instead of the eyes. When you're running round your net it goes tinkle-tinkle-tinkle. As soon as you stop, it grows silent. So the place where it grows silent is the place where you are."

"Oh-h," Spider said sourly, because now he had nothing to brag about, and keeping up the game just as it was didn't appeal to him. "All right, dig your burrow then, while I go and have some rest, because I feel half-dead." He crawled up his net with wobbly legs.

"Say, if I tear your string with a whisker," Mole called to Spider's back, "what will happen then?"

"Go ahead," Spider said without turning round. "I'll stretch a new one. I've got enough string to make a hundred nets."

Spider rocked on his round net, drew in his bow legs, and, wearied, dropped into slumber, while Mole disappeared underground at the spot where he had stood, throwing up little clods of earth with his legs.

## A DANGEROUS FRIEND

The steppe languished in the crimson rays of the setting sun, as did the sky-bound haze, which was also crimson. The mist had already gone, scattered by the blue winds and breezes. After standing the whole day in the sun, the shanty gave off steam. The poplar sapling on the roof top sent the

fragrance of its buds downwind onto the steppe. Soon the buds would turn into silky leaves. But so far, only the sun had festooned the little poplar with drops of crimson — the dew had fallen and evening was stealing in.

Mole wasn't to be seen anywhere. Ever since he had burrowed into the ground in the morning, he had not shown up. What was he doing down there in the darkness? Could he have dug a burrow that opened in an altogether different field?

Nothing of the sort. Someone was snuffling in a corner. The snuffling continued for some time, and then came a sneeze. It was Mole. Presently a sharp snout pushed warily out of the burrow, then the whiskers appeared, and the head. He sniffed the air, lifted the lids over his eyes a tiny fraction, and disappeared right away — head, snout and whiskers — leaving behind only the round hole gaping blackly into the shanty. In the other corner, where somebody else had started digging and hadn't finished, a pair of eyes flashed merrily, followed by soft, goodnatured laughter: "Ha-ha-ha..."

After that, a voice said:

"Crawl out of there, Mole, and don't be afraid."

"I won't," Mole replied in a muffled voice that probably came from deep down his burrow. "I won't crawl out, because I know you: you're Hedgehog!"

Indeed, Hedgehog came out of the corner where his eyes had flashed only a moment ago. He shook the straw off his prickles and sat down in the middle of the shanty.

"Come on, crawl out. I'm not hungry right now," he said.

"Oh no, I don't believe a single word you say," Mole grunted from below. "You chased me last year to gobble me up. I know your kind."

"Probably it wasn't me, ha-ha-ha," Hedgehog laughed. "Since last year I haven't browsed on the steppe, but only in the village. Hey, Spider!" he called. "Tell Mole I'm not hungry!"

Spider quickly ran down the net (he had rested by now after the morning scramble) and shouted into Mole's burrow: "Crawl out! Hedgehog isn't hungry!"

"How do you know?" Mole asked.

"I know, I do," Spider rattled away. "I see with all of my eight eyes how he's stuffed himself; it makes him sing merrily."

After a long silence, Mole grunted back:

"Let him swear he won't touch me, once I'm up."

"All right, I swear on my honor that I won't touch you!" Hedgehog said and added, offended: "Why should we be at odds living under one roof as we do. We'll be staying here together the whole summer through, after all!"

Only then did Mole, albeit reluctantly and shooting side-long glances at Hedgehog, crawl out of the burrow and sit down very close to it — just in case.

"What about going onto the steppe for a stroll and a chat?" Hedgehog proposed.

"What would we be chatting about when I'm angry and you're not?" Mole muttered.

"So that's just the way we'll be chatting — you angrily and me not," Hedgehog said. "If our natures are different, does that mean we have to quarrel come what may? Nature, you know, is something you can say 'Hush!' to and it'll be silent. You just have to mean it, that's all. So let's go, huh?"

"All right," Mole agreed without enthusiasm. "But as soon as you start feeling hungry tell me."

"Good," Hedgehog agreed. "When I get hungry, I'll start grumbling like this: boo-boo-boo. Then you'd better make yourself scarce."

He was the first to leave the shanty and Mole waddled after him.

A bluish tint covered the evening steppe. At first it had seeped into the shallow gullies like water, stopped there in and around the wormwood bushes, while farther on it had turned completely blue. Far away on the horizon the sky glowed red with the setting sun, and a faint breeze fluttered on the steppe.

"I had been waiting for you since midday," Hedgehog said kindly, because he saw that Mole was really rather afraid of him. "It's so boring to be alone, you know. Those ants don't see the light of day for all their running around like at a fire. Besides, they're too small for me. You talk to one of them, but you don't see him. Now what kind of a chat is that? As for Spider, the only thing he does is watch out for flies. So there's no one I can turn to. To tell you the truth, when I'm not hungry, I love to talk about things with someone, play, or sing a song. And here you were gone all day. What were you doing under the ground there?"

"Digging," Mole replied. "I'm building a home for myself. I've already done three floors and I've got one more left to

do. The ground under the shanty is fine, with lots of worms..."

"What — three floors?" Hedgehog said, surprised. "Isn't just a simple burrow not enough for you?"

"No," Mole said. "You see, although I've got fairly strong legs that's only true of my front legs, but they're not fast enough. I see badly, nor do I have any prickles like you. So I've got to dig not one but many burrows, with several floors. Say it rains, then the lowest floor will surely be flooded. With heavier rain the water will reach the second floor. Where am I supposed to go then? I flee to the third or right up to the fourth floor. Then, Adder might crawl in. Ugh!" Mole shivered at the thought. After he had recovered, he said: "His eyes glisten, his tongue's like a needle... Well, I'm not such a blundering fool to be grabbed so easily. I keep him pretty busy chasing me from floor to floor. It makes my head spin, but he gets his share of twisting, too!"

"If he chases you to the last floor, what happens then?" Hedgehog stopped in his tracks for curiosity.

"Nothing," Mole said with a grin. "The last floor's got an exit."

"Ho-ho. I'd like to see that vermin get in my way!" Hedgehog said with a hearty laugh. "Adder or viper — I'd show it to him!"

"Sure, what with your prickles," Mole said. "You grab them by the tail and hold on while they sting themselves to death."

"Zowie," Hedgehog said, offended. "I see that you, too, take me for a coward. Somebody made up a story that I grab snakes by the tail and everyone else picks up the nonsense. For your information, I never do it that way. I get at them head on and grab them not by the tail but by the neck."

"But their sting is poisonous!" Mole exclaimed.

"So what? It itches me a bit after that, but their poison doesn't do me any harm."

"But it does me," Mole said, downcast.

As they walked through the weeds, they stopped frequently and listened intently into the steppe, because here they could run across both friend and foe any minute. At times Mole lagged behind, after which he would catch up with Hedgehog, lick his lips, and say, ashamed:

"Just came across a snail and..."

To which Hedgehog would bob his kind sharp snout with understanding, and say:

"A snail isn't much in the way of fare, but still it's food. When you're hungry, anything's good. Previously when I wasn't familiar with the village, I also used to snatch up any sort of grub to tide me over. But not now. When I get to the village, I always find a tidbit there: milk or an egg or an apple."

"Milk?" Mole asked, surprised.

"Sure. Say, the mistress of a house happens to put out a bowl of milk for her servants, that is, cats, dogs and the like, and they turn up their noses. Not me. I don't miss my chance. Then lo! I find an egg — it's mine. If I come across an apple under an apple tree — the take's mine, too. Have you ever tasted apples?"

"And what do the people say to that?" Mole asked.

"Nothing," Hedgehog replied with a grin. "Or they just say, 'Let 'im.' They've got a phrase LET 'IM, which means that I may eat everything I want. It's a wonderful phrase. They also love to say, 'SOMETHING!' Now if I slurp the milk out of the bowl or suck an egg — during the night, of course — and then get under some dry bushes in daytime for a nap or simply to rest, I hear: 'Oh something's drunk the milk, drat it!' At times, to tell you the truth, they guess that it was me. But more often than not they say, 'SOMETHING,' ha-ha... Well, I don't let them down either: I catch mice and rats for them. In a word, life is bearable."

"It is," Mole agreed wisely.

Further on they walked in silence, because ahead of them appeared a road and telegraph poles with wires humming overhead. This was no place for chatting, but rather for looking and listening alertly on all sides: at times a wagon or bicycle rolled down the road, followed by a trotting dog with a lolling tongue. He'd pick up their scent one way or another — and then there'd be no end of trouble. No, it was better to keep silent.

The steppe was carpeted with the first spring grass, a breeze, tired after the day, sighed drowsily, and a round red moon had climbed from behind the poles along the road.

"Maybe we should turn back?" Mole said quietly. "Look how far off our shanty is."

No sooner had he said this than two huge eyes flared up on the road, their light dazzling the two friends so blindingly it made them shut their eyes tight.

"Roll up!" Hedgehog shouted to Mole and turned into a prickly ball.

"Dig in!" Mole shouted to Hedgehog and disappeared under the ground where he had been standing just a moment ago, only little clods of earth were flying in the air behind him. Then a terrifying, drumming rumble crashed past them and rolled farther and farther on into the steppe, the light of its eyes roving over the poles, the white insulator caps, the humming wires, and the star-studded sky.

When it was completely quiet, Mole, who had been crouching in his shallow hole, heard overhead:

"Crawl out and stop being scared. That was a truck that passed by just now."

"Haven't you grown hungry yet?" Mole asked cautiously.

"How do you like that!" Hedgehog said, definitely offended. "Why do you get the jitters when you have to crawl out of a hole?"

"Who knows," Mole said as he wriggled out of the hole and shook the dust off his pelt.

They returned to the shanty when the moon was already beaming over the poles along the road. Its light peeped through one of the holes in the shanty, while the night and the stars pushed their way into the other. The wind slumbered as did Spider on his round net.

Near the entrance towered the peaked mound of earth the leader of the ants had promised Mole he'd build, and around it dozed about four dozen ants.

"Why aren't they in the anthill?" Mole asked Hedgehog in a whisper, lest he wake anyone.

"Those are soldier ants," Hedgehog whispered back. "That's their arrangement: some sleep, others guard the anthill."

Indeed, one of the soldier ants suddenly wiggled his antennae and called drowsily to his neighbor in a tiny voice:

"Watch out!"

The neighbor passed on the warning and it went round the anthill, drowsily and wearily:

"Watch out!"

"Watch out!"

"Watch out!"

"Well, good night then," Hedgehog said to Mole.

"Good night," Mole replied quietly. And suddenly he giggled, saying under his breath: "Oh my! He-he-he... oh my."

"What's the matter?" Hedgehog wondered, startled.

"It's just that... he-he!... I remembered how the ants tickled me in the morning," Mole said, flustered, and was about to dive into his burrow when Hedgehog said:

"Listen, Mole, how come you didn't get angry a single time throughout our ramble?"

"I simply followed your advice," Mole said coolly. "I told my anger 'Hush!' and it kept silent."

"See!" Hedgehog was delighted. "Where there's a will there's a way."

At that they crept into their burrows. With them, the old shanty, happy not to be alone in this world and not standing here for nothing, dozed off in the glinting moonlight.

A quiet and warm night draped the steppe. Every weed, every little clod of earth cast a shadow in the streaming moonlight. The shadow from the shanty fell on almost half the steppe and was lengthened by the thin twigs of the poplar sapling.

In the blue flood of the moonlight little pillars appeared here and there on the steppe. At one moment they rose and remained standing, and the next moment they disappeared.

Then they reappeared.

"Twit, twit," they exchanged whistling calls, first close to the shanty, then farther and farther away.

The soldier ants guarding their home dozed wakefully.

Presently one of them woke up, wiggled his antennae, and asked his neighbor:

"Who's whistling there?"

The neighbor, roused from his watchful slumber, asked the next snoozer:

"Who's whistling?"

Thus they asked each other down the line.

Those were gophers scurrying about the steppe. They rose on their hind legs and stood there like pillars to have a look on what was going on on the moonlit steppe; then they would hide in the weeds and furrows.

The moon smiled on it all from on high.

"Twit, twit, twit," the calls carried through the steppe.

A blue glow flushed everything around.

The old shanty breathed almost inaudibly in its sleep, and the poplar sapling, also lulled to sleep by fatigue, gave off a faint fragrance.

In the distance on the edge of the steppe beyond the village, a narrow strip showed white between the cottages

and orchards: it was the new morning returning from its wanderings about the world.

Sweet is the slumber of the shanty brotherhood, both in the burrows and under the thatch at such an hour.

### TROUBLE, PASS BY

None of the shanty dwellers, the shanty included, had an inkling what trouble was in store for them in the morning.

And this is what happened.

As soon as the sun rose from behind the fallow fields and the steppe smiled back at it with rosy spangled dew, the shanty dwellers heard a distant terrifying rumble drawing inexorably nearer and nearer. It made the ground tremble, jarring the underground homes of Hedgehog, Mole and the ants, and sending minute ripples across Spider's net.

Hedgehog woke up, his eyes gleaming out of his hole with fright; the ants scurried frantically around their anthill; and Spider rushed about his net in despair. Only Mole was nowhere to be seen: he kept tearing around his burrow from floor to floor, unable to understand what was going on. No, yesterday's rumble had been different. It resembled only one thunder, but this approaching rumble was like a hundred thunders put together!

Then these hundred thunders rolled up right to the shanty and died as if they had not existed. Only smoke enveloped the shanty in a dense cloud so sickly to the smell it was difficult to breathe.

"Well, boys," somebody said in a terribly loud voice, "shall we plow old Demid's creation under or spare it?"

On hearing these words, Hedgehog, who had at first rolled into a ball, swiftly straightened himself out and started running around the shanty, whispering to everyone:

"Say quickly: 'Trouble, pass by! Trouble, pass by!' Then it'll disappear. Come on, say it!"

The brotherhood droned as one:

"Trouble, pass by!" said nine thousand, four hundred ants.

"Trouble, pass by!" said Spider, gasping for breath as he ran in circles round his net.

"Trouble, pass by!" Mole muttered from his burrow.

"Why should we plow it under?" another, kinder and quieter, voice said. "Look what a lot of different steppe

critters have settled in here. Over there's a rolled up hedgehog, higher up is a spider running about like mad, and here's a freshly dug mole burrow and a whole swarm of ants. Let them live as they did! We'll carry the shanty beyond the hillock by the salt spring. Maybe it'll be of some use to someone there."

At that moment the shanty suddenly spoke for the first time in so many, many years:

"Whew!"

Presently it rose into the air and slowly drifted away.

Hedgehog and the ants and the Mole's burrow remained under the open sky, hearing the receding sighs of the shanty — Whew... Whew...— until they disappeared altogether.

Presently a gopher popped up, seemingly right out of the ground, rose on his hind legs and whistled, and called to the shanty brotherhood from afar:

"Come here, come here! Your shanty's over here!"

And the poplar sapling waved its thin twigs as if calling as well: "Come here, come here!"

"Let's go!" Hedgehog cried out, and was the first to walk toward the shanty through the weeds.

Mole followed him, squinting in the sunlight, and behind Mole stretched an endlessly long black line of ants with their leader in front of them.

Only Spider wasn't around. You see, he had been carried off along with his web and the shanty.

## THE FOREST GUARD'S SHACK

No sooner had winter rung out its snowstorms, and the glazed frost, thin and glittering like crystal, stopped tinkling in the bushes and trees, and the sun warmed up the earth and waters, than Danilo Koriak would get ready to leave for his shack in the forest. There he had to ward off any trouble that might befall a whole nursery of trees: oaklings which only recently had been slumbering and were now rapidly pushing out of the ground in two or tree leaves, saplings of birch, elm, maple, aspen, and short pines that looked like hedgehogs.

Danilo's preparations took up a long time, because he had to take quite a few things with him. When everything was ready, he hit the road, calling his small but nonetheless

raring dog Chafer, whose ruddy pelt and bow legs really made him look like a beetle.

Danilo went off, with Chafer trotting close behind.

On his back was a sack stuffed with all sorts of things and a shotgun, on his feet he had big rubber boots with large patches glued onto them (lest the boots leak), and on a leather strap over his old jacket hung leather pouches with cartridges.

Danilo's sack also held a lot of other things: a knife, a spoon, a piece of wire, a kettle; millet, fatback, onions, flour, potatoes, salt, bread, rusks; also, pruning shears, a saw, an ax, a file; also, hooks, sinkers and floats for his fishing rods; also, ten matchboxes wrapped in a piece of canvas so that they wouldn't get damp in rainy weather. However hard it was for Danilo to carry this load which bowed him down, he pushed on, because he knew that without these goods on his back it would be impossible to live in the forest far from the village. If he wanted to eat, for instance, all he had to do was make a tripod out of sticks, fix to it a water-filled kettle on the wire, and cook himself *kulish* gruel, dough dumplings or porridge; if he had to lay in dry wood for a rainy day, he took the saw and ax, sawed, chopped, stacked the wood in a corner, and then sat in his forest abode, listening to the rain pattering in the trees; if there was a tree that needed to be pruned to make it grow straight, he had the shears for this purpose; should the saw or ax grow blunt, the file came in handy; if he wanted to cook fish soup, he took his fishing tackle, went to the river, and angled for whatever swallowed the bait.

That's the way he lived the whole summer through, without having to leg it back and forth to the village for one thing or another — everything he needed he had about him.

Danilo walked quickly, because he was tall and long-legged like a stork. For every step or two he took, Chafer had to make ten, which forced him to break into a trot with fitful gasps and lolling tongue. Chafer's ears stuck out on his head in different directions just like the flaps on Danilo's winter cap, one of which was turned upward, while the other drooped. This was also true of Chafer's ears: one was cocked, the other hung down and dangled like a rag.

The forest road ran through low land, inundated here and there with spring waters; they were not deep, though: Danilo could wade through, but Chafer had to skirt them when the old man didn't pick him up and carry him across.

Yet Chafer loved to make these detours, because they gave him a chance to bark at the storks measuring the puddles with their yardstick legs in search of food. They weren't afraid of Chafer, since they knew his playful way of running up close and barking. The storks came here every spring, and Chafer visited the forest every spring as well, so they had got used to him. When Chafer came bounding their way, barking lustily, they took two or three wide steps aside for appearance's sake, then pushed off from the ground and took off. They'd fly a little distance, and touch down again.

Danilo would be cross with Chafer for such jokes, stop in his tracks, and chide Chafer sternly:

"Why do you keep pestering them? They're not picking on you, are they? So hold off. Let them feed in peace."

At that Chafer would drop his ears and sit down on his haunches, turning a pair of guilty eyes on Danilo. But the moment Danilo turned his back on him and walked on, Chafer again tore off and looked round to see what he could bark at least a little bit or growl at, for that matter.

Then they entered the forest. It met Danilo like a father: the twigs bent aside so as not to scratch him, the stumps seemed to back away from the path lest he trip over them. The sun trickled on to the footpath through the young leaves and crab-apple blossoms, dazzling Chafer pleasantly. He could have scampered away and run between the bushes, chasing out a hare or bumping into a hedgehog, rolling him around the grass and growling at him in play. But the bushes were drenched with dew, Chafer was loath to get wet, and so he trotted peacefully behind Danilo, recalling the shack: the smoke from the campfire which made him sneeze, the tasty fish heads Danilo treated him to every evening, the warm place in the hay under the porch where he slept at night, and in the daytime when he wished to. These recollections cheered Chafer up, he wanted to get there as soon as possible, and so he dashed on ahead of Danilo, wagging his tail violently, and looked at his master with an impassioned pleading that seemed to say: "Come on, let's run!"

"Make haste slowly," Danilo would say judiciously, yet he quickened his pace, for he, too, had missed his forest abode and was impatient to see it.

When they came out into a big clearing covered with straight rows of seedlings — the older trees growing the

highest, the younger ones lower, and the smallest almost hugging the ground — Chafer, seeing the shack, dashed off toward it, without looking back at Danilo, and barked in a thin voice that sounded like a yap.

Throughout the winter, the shack — a thatched affair with one window — had aged, and sagged to the ground. It stood right by a hill like a beehive amid a riot of blooming apple and bird cherry trees. Chafer ran round it, scratched his paws against the low window that seemed to have faded throughout the winter, and then dived under the porch into his den. It was damp there, the hay smelled of mould, and the boards of fungi and rot — an uncomfortable place so far. Chafer backed out from under the porch and ran to the old campfire site, where last year the flames had bloomed so merrily and where it had smelled of fish soup and fresh fish, whereas now there was only sodden charcoal, dampness and a host of toadstools around it. Chafer could not stand the smell and snorted angrily.

Meanwhile, Danilo had come up to the shack; he took the sack off his back, stood his shotgun against the wall, and unlocked the door, saying to Chafer:

“Well, we’re back home, Chafer. Now we’ll keep house together.”

While Danilo busied himself with the door, Chafer bounced around him impatiently, then he rose on his hind legs and leaned his front legs against the door, as if he wanted to help the old man open it: the hinges had rusted, become swollen with humidity, and did not yield. Danilo bore down on the door with his shoulder, Chafer with his legs, and it opened with a loud creak.

Inside, the shack was plunged in gloom and there was a congested cold that had lurked there since autumn. Chafer quickly sniffed around the dark corners and bumped into his old acquaintances: steel rakes, a shovel, a hoe, a box with nails smelling of rust, an old hammer with a flattened face, and a little trough with seeds giving off the odor of birch, oak and pine.

By then, Danilo had carried out an old blanket into the sun to let the breeze huff the cold out of it, gathered up the damp straw on the bed in his arms and took it outdoors as well to let it dry. Mice dropped out of the straw bundle and bounced across the floor like little gray balls.

“How do you like that!” Danilo said in surprise, raising his eyebrows. “They come popping out like peas.”

Chafer gave chase to a mouse, but failed to catch it. He ran around everywhere — but the mouse was gone, so he stopped in the middle of the shack, spreading his paws broadly, and blinked at Danilo in bewilderment: now where could that mouse have disappeared to?

“Know your own business,” Danilo told him. “You’re not a cat, are you? That’s it. We’d better go and make scarecrows.”

He pulled a bundle of rags from under the bed, picked up the hammer and the box with the rusty nails, and went outdoors. Chafer followed him at a run, joyfully wagging his tail, because he knew that now, just like last year and the year before last, the merriest job of all would begin.

Danilo sat down on the porch, undid the bundle, and stretched out in his hands tattered shirts, pants, jackets and blouses one after another.

“This will do for my shoulders and arms, Chafer, because it’s my clothing,” Danilo said. “Out of this we’ll make Oxion’s old missus, because she gave me the blouse and apron, and this will go to make old man Mikolaichik, since it’s his jacket.”

Chafer yowled enraptured, for he recognized Danilo’s old shirt the back of which was riddled to pieces with sweat, the blouse of Oxion’s clamorous old missus whose farmyard he frequented in winter for delicious bits from a hunk of bread, and the jacket belonging to Mikolaichik who always shooed Chafer out whenever he saw him: “Scat! Was it you who strangled my chicken? Ugh! I’ll show you one of these days!”

Chafer hadn’t touched Mikolaichik’s chicken; it had been a magpie who did it. So every time Chafer met the old man he went after him, barking furiously to let him know what happens if you pick on others without reason.

After collecting some odd sticks by the shack, Danilo sat down on the porch again and started banging the hammer and hacking with the saw: he would hit a nail, hew once or twice, fuss with the rags till he had pulled them onto the stakes — whew! — and then stick “himself” in the tattered shirt and cap he had worn half his lifetime into the ground by the threshold. After he had fussed for a while more, Oxion’s “old missus” appeared, and shortly after, “Mikolaichik.”

Chafer didn’t touch either “Danilo” or the “old missus,” but only ran around them and yelped. But no sooner had Danilo stuck “Mikolaichik” into the ground than Chafer

snatched the tail of his jacket and kept pulling it this way and that until the whole structure toppled to the ground. Danilo looked on laughing, and said:

"Enough, Chafer, enough, or you'll ruin my work."

After that Danilo shouldered all the scarecrows, carried them to the tree nursery — the crows and wild boars especially enjoyed the seedlings for their daintiness — and put up "himself" at one end, "Mikolaichik" at the other, and the "old missus" in the middle.

"Let the old woman stand here," he explained to Chafer. "She's so loud-mouthed her voice will be heard in every corner the moment she shouts."

The idea made him laugh with amusement, for how could she shout if there was nothing of her on the scarecrow but her clothes.

Then Danilo went round the nursery: he stopped frequently or squatted, shook his head and clucked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Just look what those dratted marauders have done," he said to Chafer. "Oh my... that tree's ruined for good."

Chafer sniffed the freshly grubbed earth by which lay an oakling with chewed off roots, tucked his tail between his hind legs and whimpered: he was scared, because the earth reeked of a wild boar's muzzle.

After his rounds, Danilo returned to the shack, made a tripod, and built a fire. Its smoke rose into the branches of the trees, which made not only the wild pear tree by the shack but every tree around seem to be in bloom.

Having had his fill of running and excitement throughout the day, Chafer stretched out by the fire, put his head on his front paws, and looked unblinkingly into the flames. The sun was sinking slowly behind the hill, the birds gradually fell silent — evening was stealing on.

That was the beginning of Danilo and Chafer's life in the forest.

## SINGLEWING

For three days Danilo had nothing to do at the nursery, because at first the rooks were frightened by the scarecrows. They'd come flying in a big clamorous flock out of the forest, and no sooner were they about to alight than "Danilo" suddenly waved his empty sleeves, "Mikolaichik" slapped the tails of his jacket, and the "old missus" flapped her

apron so viciously it was dreadful to be near her. The black-winged marauders flew away, exchanging resentful comments in hoarse, angry voices:

“Caw-w, caw-w...”

Their feast spoiled, they were angry.

Yet after a day or two, the rooks got used to the scarecrows, strutted arrogantly between them, and foraged as much as they pleased: on seeing a seedling that had just pushed out of the ground, they snatched it with their plier-like beaks, pulled it out — and brought destruction. That’s when Chafer was up to his eyes with work. Hiding behind the seedlings, he quietly, sometimes at a crawl, stole up on the biggest flock and pounced on the first bird in his way with a fierce growl. The frightened rooks flapped their wings, took off, and railed:

“Caw-w, ca-aw-w...”

This happened every year.

But this spring Chafer encountered something quite unexpected. Once he stole up on a flock of birds strutting around near the “old missus,” looking for the youngest seedlings, bore down on them like a whirlwind, and chased them away. But there was one rook that didn’t take off: it skipped a little bit to one side, dragging its wing across the ground, and stopped, fixing its wild glittering eyes on Chafer.

Chafer bared his fangs and reached the rook in two bounds. It gave a caw, straightened up on its legs, and pecked Chafer so hard on the forehead he staggered and broke into a pitiful whimper. The rook dragged his dislocated wing farther on, all the while looking round and cawing threateningly. Chafer didn’t go after him a second time, because he was dizzy and his sight was blurred. He lay on the ground for a while, scratched the place where he had been pecked with a paw, whimpering weakly from pain, and trudged off to the shack, his drooping ear dangling in offense.

He was met with an “Oh?” by Danilo who was cooking porridge under the pear tree. “Did you run smack into a twig, or what?” he asked, and fingered Chafer’s forehead.

Chafer gave a plaintive squeak and pressed against Danilo’s legs.

“Well then, go lie down and it’ll get better, it will,” the old man advised kindly.

Chafer crawled under the porch where some fresh hay had been spread for him, and soon fell asleep. In his dream

he saw a huge black bird stealing up on him and aiming its iron beak right at his eyes. Chafer shuddered and growled in his sleep.

He woke up when the sun had already hidden behind the mountain. The sky was red and so was the water in the puddles between the young grass and in the blooms on the pear trees. Chafer drew in the air with his muzzle, and that instant he forgot about both the live rook and the one he had seen in his dreams: the air carried a tasty smell of smoke and porridge. Chafer licked his lips, shook the hay out of his pelt, and went to the campfire. It had already died out, and occasional embers glimmered brightly here and there in the ashes. But no sooner had he taken two steps than he stopped in astonishment. By the pot with the porridge cooling off under a bush, stood the rook with the damaged wing, pecking the tasty meal out of it. The porridge must still have been hot, because on pecking out a morsel, the rook immediately threw it onto the ground and waited until it had cooled, after which he gulped it down greedily.

"Gr-r-r," Chafer growled, but dared not come closer.

"Caw-w," the rook responded angrily, and stuck his beak into the pot again.

"Now what kind of a guest or a pest have we got here?" Danilo asked, as he came out of the thicket with an armful of wood.

The rook turned his gray beak on Danilo, crouched in fright, then got to its feet with a jerk and hopped off into a bush, while Chafer went spinning round like a top and yelped for joy.

"Oh, but he's wounded; see, a singlewing," Danilo said and went into the bushes. Presently he returned, carrying the rook. The bird cawed angrily, beat its wing against Danilo's chest, and tried to peck his hand. Danilo caught the bird's gaping beak, clapped it shut in his fist, and said with a quiet, kindly laugh:

"Take it easy and quit thrashing around, you silly." Then he went down on his knees by the pot and started feeding the feathered vagrant right out of a spoon.

"That's it, that's it!" Danilo kept saying cheerfully, and Chafer minced around quickly with his front paws and whined — also cheerfully, because whenever he ate, his master also kept saying those words.

"Mind you, Chafer, don't touch him," Danilo said, putting the bird on the ground. "See, he's no good at getting food

for himself or flying up to a nest. Singlewing! Oh, that's just what we'll call him."

Then Danilo and Chafer had their evening meal — Danilo right out of the pot, and Chafer out of his ladle. Singlewing had hopped under a bush again and was crouching there without stirring.

After the meal, Danilo went with Chafer to the tree nursery to see whether any damage had been done to it in the meantime, while Singlewing came out from under the bush, sat down by the campfire, and gazed at the embers: like any rook he loved things that glittered.

It was already well into the night when Danilo and Chafer returned to the shack. The old man had a smoke on the porch, coughed a bit, mumbled something to himself, and went to bed. Chafer sniffed at every bush around in search of Singlewing, and failing to find him, trudged off to his den. No sooner had he stuck his head under the porch than a "Caw-w!" issued from it.

Chafer bristled his pelt and was silent, afraid to move an inch. And that's just how he fell asleep: his head under the porch, and his back sticking out. But during the second half of the night, Singlewing let Chafer come completely under the porch, because it was much warmer to sleep together. That's how they started to live in peace and concord. In the daytime, Singlewing went to forage in the young grass, and in the evening, he returned, always carrying something glittering in his beak: a button or a piece of glass or any such thing. He would put it down by the porch and look at it. Chafer looked at it, too, touched the find with a paw, sniffed it, and blinked, as if to say: "Now what's so interesting about it? It'll only pinch in the side." As it was, Singlewing carried all these glittering objects into the den. In the daytime, when the sun shone through a chink in the porch, everything glittered like in a fairytale chest full of jewelry. When Singlewing was not foraging, he kept shifting his treasures from place to place and couldn't get his fill of admiring them.

## THE NOCTURNAL MARAUDER

For Chafer the first nights in the forest were long and frightening. While he was curling up to make himself a bed in the den, he heard nothing but the sound of rustling

straw: everything seemed to be quiet and peaceful in the forest, and all he had to do was sidle closer to Singlewing and sleep. But no sooner had he lain down comfortably and the hay stopped rustling than he was visited by all sorts of fears — big, little, and still littler ones. At such moments the forest seemed to turn into a huge black monster that stole up on the shack, peeping through the window, snooped under the thatch, sniffed around the porch, and groped with its shaggy paw under the porch to find out what was there.

Being with Singlewing was certainly less lonely than it had been last year, but the place was still scary for all that. What did Singlewing care? He ate his fill, played around with his glittering trinkets, and fell asleep, behaving just like a temporary lodger. Chafer, though, had tree nursery to guard, which meant being constantly alert and having his ears cocked.

Tap, tap, tap — there was something tapping against a tree trunk, branches and leaves. Crack — and there was something prowling and lurking right by the porch.

Chafer bristled up (Singlewing, though, was fast asleep!) and froze, holding his breath: what was out there?

The alarm proved groundless. A little branch had broken off a tree and, falling, caught against the living branches. Once it was on the ground, it was silent. That's all there was to it, and Chafer could go on snoozing.

But — what was that again? Last year's grass rustled. At first far away, and then closer and closer. Presently it seemed to be rustling almost right by the den.

Chafer jumped onto his trembling legs (Singlewing, though, was fast asleep!), arched his back and gave a growl. Not too loud, but not too quiet either, so that the grassy monster, if it was already nearby, would hear the growl and run away; if it were far off, it had better not hear it and go its way.

It wasn't a monster at all, but a mouse stealing through the grass toward a cooked wheat grain that had dropped out of Danilo's sack when he was walking to the river to fish in the morning. The mouse found the grain, gobbled it up, and scurried on down the footpath: what if the old man had lost another grain?

It was silent again in the forest. There was only the sound of the brook gurgling by the hill near the shack, as it hurried to the river. Why was it always in a hurry? After all, the river wasn't running away from it, because it was

hemmed in with steep banks, and every year it flowed in the same place.

Chafer was already drifting off into slumber, when something cried out suddenly, rustled loudly in the leaves, and — was silent. Chafer pressed himself into a corner of the den (Singlewing, though, was fast asleep!) and barked in fright: now who was crying out there in the forest at midnight?

It was a bird — a stork. It had dozed off on a tree in a dreamless slumber; its claws clutching a branch had become unhooked in its sleep, and it had started to fall. Falling it had cried out in fear. Then it remembered it had wings, flapped them several times, and was back on the branch. So why did it have to kick up such a rumpus? Chafer wondered.

Oh, what a restless night it chanced to be.

Only toward daybreak Chafer got some shut-eye. But not for long, because in his sleep he heard something breathing heavily and going: “Grunt, gr-runt!”

Chafer backed out from under the porch (Singlewing, though, was fast asleep!), looked around, and froze in fright: on the edge of the nursery, a huge wild boar was grubbing the ground, throwing the earth high with his long snout.

Crunch! — the roots broke off, as he tore out a seedling and munched it greedily, his tusks going clap! clap! as if someone was grinding stone against stone. Chafer was about to dive back under the porch — now who could get the better of such a whopper of an animal?! — but failed to do it soundlessly: either because of the morning chill or fear he sneezed explosively. The wild boar stopped champing, clumsily turned his heavy bulk, and snorted threateningly at Chafer. This made Chafer furious: here was a nasty marauder, and hurling threats at him to boot!

Chafer gave a ringing bark and pounced on the marauder from one side. While the wild boar was sluggishly turning round to face him, Chafer had managed to bite him in the hind leg and jump aside. The boar kept turning; grunted furiously, and tried to hook Chafer with his tusks. Chafer, though, spun round him like a top, grabbing the marauder now by a hoof, then by the tail, which made him squeal with pain. Roused by the noise, Singlewing got out from under the porch. Hopping, and flapping his uninjured wing, he came up to the wild boar and cawed at him angrily.

The boar didn't so much as glance at Singlewing, and at

the first chance threw Chafer so high with his snout that he bounced away like a ball.

This proved to be too much for Singlewing to stand — he hopped onto the boar's neck and pecked him between the ears with all his might.

Who knows how all this would have ended had Danilo not rushed out of the shack. Still drowsy from sleep and wearing only his underwear, he held a shotgun in his hands. Seeing the fight, he shouted:

"So it's you, you noisy marauder!" He drew the hammers fully back with a click, raised the shotgun, and — bang! bang! — fired from both barrels so that the flames leapt up to the top of the pear tree and the smoke enveloped the shack on all sides, as if it had been set on fire.

The boar took to his heels. Singlewing got a short lift on his neck, then he hopped to the ground, and together with Chafer went back to the shack.

"You did a fine job, boys!" Danilo praised them. "See, though you're weaker, you're bold, and two's already a mob for that dirty snouty beast," he concluded, stroking both of them.

In the forest, the brushwood crackled under the hooves of the fugitive; the sound of splashing mud in the marsh receded farther and farther, and soon it was completely silent.

Singlewing strutted into the den and fell asleep right away. Chafer, however, kept sneezing for a long time because of the powder smoke. The gun shot still rang in his ears, and he trembled all over because of his recent fright and of his fatigue. Then he rolled up comfortably in the hay and well asleep, snoring peacefully.

### HOW THE BULLY WAS CAUGHT

One morning Danilo returned from the river without any fish, and said to Chafer:

"Tomorrow get up really early, Chafer, because we're going to catch the big bully of a catfish. See how he's ripped my lines like cobwebs." Danilo showed him the torn lines.

This is how it had happened. Danilo hooked a medium-sized bream. He started pulling it in and saw it glittering in the dawn-lit water, when suddenly the fishing rod bent in an arch, the line stretched tightly like a string, and — twing! — snapped. Danilo almost fell into the water.

"What's the matter?" he wondered and cast another line, putting the snapped one aside. A fish swallowed the hook again, and again he saw it flash in the water. This time, however, Danilo pulled it up almost to the bank, but the next moment — the water churned wildly, and — twing! — there was no fish, no line, but only the fishing rod in Danilo's hands. At the last minute Danilo saw the broad back — as black as the bottom of a tarred boat — of an enormously big catfish.

"Oh my," he said to himself. "But that's not a fish but a behemoth!"

Danilo had heard from fishermen that a giant of a catfish had appeared in these parts since last year and was gobbling up not only fish but also geese and ducklings whenever they swam past his underwater lair.

"You watch out now!" Danilo wagged a finger at him, picked up his useless tackle, and went off to his shack.

He weeded the nursery till twilight, then he built the campfire, and started hammering a big hook. He stuck a stiff thick piece of wire into the embers, heated it until it turned white, and then hammered it on the butt end of the ax. The sparks came shooting from under the hammer like tiny drones. Singlewing was all agog watching their flight and longed to catch just one for his collection. By the time the soup was cooked, the hook was finished. Danilo heated it once more, quickly pulled it out of the embers with pincers, and dipped it into a mug of water.

"Psh-sh-sh," the water hissed, spewing steam.

Danilo fixed the hook to a long, sturdy string, fastened a lead sinker not far from the hook, ate his evening meal with Chafer and Singlewing, and went to bed.

The next morning he got up early, called Chafer, and they hurried off to the river, skirting the dew-drenched bushes.

"That's where he lives," Danilo said to Chafer, pointing at the black water at the foot of a bluff. "So hush up and don't you yelp, for otherwise you'll scare him off. I'll go and catch a live bait for him."

Soon Danilo was back, holding in his hand a fish as broad as his palm.

"We'll nab him right now!" he boasted, stuck the fish on the big hook, and threw it into the river, winding the other end of the line on his hand.

He hadn't even taken a full step back, when a vicious pull at the line almost toppled him into the water. He barely

had time to catch hold of a thin aspen sapling with his free hand.

"Help me, Chafer, or he'll tear me apart!" Danilo cried out, reeling along with the aspen which had bent almost to the ground. "Hey, look, look what he's doing! Oh my, oh my!"

Chafer ran like mad around Danilo and the aspen sapling and barked lustily, which scared the catfish all the more and made it pull at the line with increasing force.

"Help!" Danilo yelled.

Presently some fishermen came running, grabbed the line firmly, pulled the catfish out of the water roaring with laughter and lusty "heave a-hoys!", and fell on it all together lest it slip back into the water.

When the catfish had stopped thrashing its tail and bucking, the fishermen helped Danilo shoulder it, and laughed:

"It's much bigger, than you are, Danilo!"

Running back to the shack was capital fun for Chafer, because the catfish's tail trailed along the ground and Chafer played with it.

"Don't step on it back there; it's heavy enough as it is without you!" Danilo said breathlessly.

At midday a wagon rolled up to the shack, the catfish was loaded onto it and taken to a children's camp in the village, where the kids were treated to catfish steaks.

From that day on, the domestic waterfowl no longer feared swimming in the water, because nothing was attacking them any more.

## BACK HOME, BACK HOME

Summer was over mysteriously soon. The sun traveled over the earth lower and lower, and although it shone brightly and cheerfully, it didn't warm things any longer as it used to. On the pear tree, which seemed to be still in bloom, round fragrant fruit appeared, the seedlings in the nursery were taller and topped with dense foliage — they no longer feared either rooks or wild boars, because the rooks were too weak to pull them out, while the boars didn't like seedlings with thicker roots.

So one day Danilo made his rounds of the nursery for the last time, winding hay bands round the youngest trees lest

they freeze in the bitter frosts which the older trees could now bear quite well. Then he said to Chafer:

"Time we packed up and went back home, Chafer."

Just as in spring, Danilo packed the sack with his goods, locked up the shack, took his shotgun, and now it was off home. The forest rustled to him in farewell and dropped its yellow leaves under his feet. Danilo's mind was on the coming winter, when he would pull a sheepskin coat over his shoulders and take his shotgun to watch the cattle at the collective farm every night. Chafer, though, was glad to go back home, because he had missed Oxion's clamorous old missus as well as the hunks of bread dipped in milk, and his friend Rover from the neighboring yard.

They came out of the forest onto the meadows. The grass here had been mown a long time ago and piled up in stacks, the storks were no more in sight, for they had flown away to torrid lands. Occasionally they came across lizards scampering along the roadside and little gray crested skylarks fluttering ahead of them.

The village was close already when Danilo and Chafer heard behind their backs:

"Ca-aw, ca-aw..."

They turned round and saw Singlewing. He hopped along, flapping one wing and dragging the other behind him.

"Oh!" Danilo was glad to see him. "Chafer and me thought you'd stayed behind in your forest. You did right not to leave our company. Being alone is good, but with company it's better!"

Farther on they walked as a threesome: Danilo up front, followed by Chafer and Singlewing.

## THE WHITE SPOOK

As long as anyone remembered, there was nothing, save perhaps a shower of stones gushing from the heavens, which could force old man Arsen, nicknamed *Bushlia*,\* to stay at home every summer morning. No sooner did the large morning star glow on the horizon than Arsen was on his feet. He threw an old leather bag with boiled wheat (as fish bait) over his shoulder, shoved a round tin can full of big

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\* *Bushlia* (Ukr.) — she-stork — Tr.

and little hooks into his pocket, picked up the fishing rods — and it was off to the river. He walked slowly, because, as he himself put it, his legs hadn't the Cossack mettle in them any longer — they ached with age.

Outdoors, dawn was rapidly ripening into day. In the meadows, the morning mist clung to the grass, storks strutted across the bog like sailors in black pants and dazzling white blouses. Up and down they strutted on their long thin legs, then — flap! — one would take wing, carrying a froglet in its red beak, to serve as breakfast for the nestlings.

"Hey!" Arsen would say, throwing back his head. "So you snatched it, did you? All right, all right, take it to your featherless brood."

Then he walked on. The fishing rods behind his back went swing-swing, the hooks in the box cling-cling. There was the river in sight. The wind wafted dampness from the forest and the smell of wet clay from the bluffs.

The river was also shrouded in so dense a mist it hid the water lispig in the willow scrub — the current was strong here.

"Hoop-hoop-hoop!" Arsen coughed, because it was hard for him to breathe in the mist.

To which some early fisherman would respond with a jocular, "Old man, quit coughing or you'll chase all the fish away!"

Arsen would stop at the bluff to chat with the fishermen and then move on, coughing. No sooner did a "Hoop!" escape his lips than a drowsy hare jumped up and bolted off ahead of him, or a turtledove tore out of its nest, or a wild boar grunted frightenedly and fled, breaking the brushwood under its hooves. The forest dwellers were afraid of the old man's coughing.

Arsen didn't go far: his favorite haunt was a willow tree that had toppled into the water when he was still young. It had been lying there ever since, because its roots kept a tight grip on the bluff.

What fish did not hover near that willow! In daytime whiskered catfish slept under the gnarled branches, by night clumsy breams and hefty carps lurked between the branches, eating with relish the boiled wheat Arsen threw to the bottom as a lure. Swift red-finned ides visited the willow as well, so Arsen had a catch every day.

There was only one day when Bushlia did not show up at the river, which fact astonished the fishermen. They put

forward all sorts of probable conjectures: the old man must have fallen ill, or he must have overslept, because at his age the deepest sleep was at dawn, whereas at night, the weirdest thoughts and visions haunted his mind due to the insomnia of old age. In fact, Arsen had neither fallen ill nor overslept.

This is what had actually happened.

Getting up early as usual, Arsen took his fishing tackle and went outdoors. A white crescent still hung in the sky between the clouds, and dawn was breaking in a pale narrow strip in the east. Arsen stopped by the wicket gate, making up his mind whether or not to go to the river at such an early hour — he wouldn't be able to see the floats on the water anyway and, besides, there was the gully he had to pass before getting to the river. Throughout his life he had heard such a lot of horrors about the gully that even now, in his old age, he was scared of walking in the night past the black cleft that dropped just by the footpath leading to the river. Some had seen a wolf there, carrying a lamb from the collective farm sheepfold on his back, others had heard a horn owl weeping or laughing on a lonely withered maple every night, still others... Arsen realized that all this could actually have happened, and he also realized that real fear wasn't as overwhelming as imaginary fear. So following this reasoning, he decided to go, come what might.

The gully started just beyond the village. As he approached it, inwardly calling himself a "chicken-livered kid," he slackened his pace and trod the ground almost inaudibly. The moon was waning and no longer peeped into the gully, which made it a dark place where a hostile silence lurked. Suddenly Arsen heard something fussing and rustling ahead of him. The old man stopped dead in his tracks and breathlessly fixed his eyes on the place the sound had come from. Shortly afterward, something white like a length of cloth crept out onto the footpath. It froze for a moment, then wheeled in one place, and advanced straight at Arsen. Feeling shivers running down his spine, Arsen quickly took the fishing rods off his shoulder and leveled them at the white thing.

"Look here, you!" he said in a failing whisper, because fear had paralyzed his tongue. "Go your way, you nasty s-spook!"

The "spook" stopped, stood there for a while, and then pushed toward Arsen again.

“Holy God,” the old man whispered out of long habit, and backed away — faster and faster. Then he swung round on one leg, which almost made him fall — his legs hadn’t the Cossack mettle in them, as it were — and ran away toward the village, now and again looking back at the white spook until it disappeared from his sight completely.

He stopped by the first house and spent a long time getting his breath back. The day had dawned completely by then, here and there between the orchards columns of reddish sun-tinted smoke rose into the sky — the villagers were kindling the fires in their stoves.

“What kind of a spook was it?” Arsen said out loud, and after some wavering went down the footpath to the river: maybe he had just been seeing things? Maybe there wasn’t anything there at all? But no sooner had he taken a mere ten steps than he stopped dead in his tracks again: the “spook” was slowly creeping his way. It was coming closer and closer. Whoa! — it stopped and grunted quietly. Arsen took about two steps toward it, holding his fishing rods at the ready, looked at it intently, and suddenly burst into senile laughter. What he saw was a newspaper pierced in several places by gray needles from under which protruded the sharp snout of a hedgehog.

“So it’s you, little fellow, scaring the old man, huh?” Arsen said, choking with laughter. “Are you lugging that along for your den, or what?”

The hedgehog grunted angrily, went round the old man, and dragged the newspaper to the village. Putting the fishing rods on his shoulder, Arsen followed him. Fishing was out of the question today, what with the sun over the pond and the long, long path to the river he would have to take!

“Why did you come home so early?” his wife wondered when, after putting the fishing rods on the pegs under the thatch, he threw the boiled grain to the chicken.

“You see...” Arsen began, hiding his eyes under his shaggy brows. “The river’s swelled. Now what kind of fishing can there be? None.”

With these words he went off to the hay loft in the cowshed to catch up on his night’s sleep.

## THE SHE-STORK

Once when Arsen was fishing by his willow tree, it started raining. The water in the river turned gray and gloomy. The feathered tribe in the forest stopped trilling and warbling, each its own way, and only a woodpecker hammered away at the bark of a withered tree nearby. The fish didn't bite, because when it rained they sank to the bottom and fell asleep. Arsen covered his head and shoulders with a sack he always had with him for a rain, and gazed at the water. The raindrops danced densely across the water and produced transparent bubbles. Arsen kept gazing at the dance of the raindrops until, unwittingly, he dozed off.

Presently a she-stork flew along. She liked to hide in the reeds and sweet flag, waiting until a fish swam by: her finny prey would always be snatched up in her relentless beak. The she-stork wheeled over Arsen, but he didn't stir, because he was fast asleep, so the bird thought he was a stump and alighted on his head. It settled down, stuck its claws into the sack, and dozed off as well.

Both of them sat like that for a long time: Arsen in his boat and the stork on top of his head.

The sun was already peeping through the clouds, the rain had stopped, and the birds burst into song again, but lulled by the rain, the two snoozers kept on sleeping.

The first to wake was the she-stork. She blinked, straightened up on her legs and roused Arsen. The old man wanted to lift his head, but something heavy was pressing down on it. No sooner had he moved a hand to feel what was sitting up there than the she-stork shrieked like a human being.

She slapped across the old-man's ears with her wings — once, and then again — but could not take off, because her claws were stuck in the sack. Paralyzed with fear, Arsen shrieked too:

“H-e-l-p, f-o-r g-o-o-d-n-ess s-a-a-ke!”

So both of them shrieked. Except for the echo that hurled back their shrieks, there wasn't a single living soul about either in the forest or on the river bank.

At long last, the stork managed to break loose, but not without scratching the old man's hands with her claws. Seeing the bird tearing away from him over the water, Arsen came to his senses, fingered the scratches on his head,

and said, "Am I a stump for you, or what?" after which he gathered up his tackle and went home.

Back home, he couldn't contain himself and told his wife about the incident. They both had a good laugh, and forgot about it. The incident would have probably been consigned to oblivion if the old missus hadn't told it to her neighbor who, in turn, told it to the next neighbor who carried the news to another neighbor until the whole village knew about it.

Whenever Arsen went fishing now, the fishermen called to him from the bottom of the bluffs:

"Step on it, old man, 'cause the she-stork's already wheeling over your willow. She's expecting you!"

"Come on, Arsen, tell us how you shrieked your head off with the stork."

Arsen didn't take offense at the jokers. He only smiled and said:

"Well, she shrieked in her own way, and I in mine."

From then on Arsen went by the nickname of Bushlia in the village.

### LASSOCHKA THE TIDBITTER

No sooner had the sun tinted the sky red in the east than Arsen was sitting in the boat by his willow, vigilantly watching the fishing lines. A sun-gilded mist roamed in the forest, turtledoves cooed plaintively, woodpeckers tapped away, and sometimes the brushwood crackled loudly and a grunt-grunt-grunt reached his ears.

Arsen knew that that was the sound of wild boars with their litters returning to their hideouts from their nocturnal grazing grounds.

Once when Arsen, warmed by the sun, was dozing fitfully in his boat, he heard a feeble whimpering behind his back. He woke and turned round.

High on a bluff, he saw a fox cub, its head cocked sideways. It looked at him in slight surprise with eyes that were far from cunning. Then it shifted its eyes to the stern and licked its lips: on the bottom lay fish covered with grass.

"Shool!" Arsen said and slapped his knee.

The fox cub backed away, a little, but did not run.

"A cocky sort!" Arsen remarked. "So you're craving some fish, huh?"

The fox cub gave a tiny squeak.

"All right, then," Arsen said, and added after a while, "Lassochka."

The fish went flying high over the fox cub, but it jumped up nimbly and snatched it with its front paws.

"Excellent!" Arsen praised it and started changing the bait on a hook.

When he turned round, the fox cub was gone.

Next morning, however, it reappeared. And again Arsen threw it a fish — only one, because it didn't ask for more.

In this way they became friends. Soon the fox cub knew it was called Lassochka, and that's when Arsen said "Up!" or "Down!" it had to get onto its feet or lie down. It also came to realize that fish sometimes didn't bite. Arsen kept sitting there, but the floats on the lines didn't so much as stir. In such cases, Lassochka wouldn't whimper or flay the ground with her tail as she usually did when she saw the fish in the boat, but lay down on the grass and waited. Arsen would get bored gazing at the motionless floats and, more often than not, doze off.

He just sat there and slept.

But once he heard Lassochka whining in his sleep. He opened his eyes and saw that the float on one of the lines had disappeared under the water. On the bluff the fox cub wiggled its ears and shifted restlessly from one paw to the other with burning impatience. Arsen picked up the fishing rod and — jerk! — pulled out a perch.

"Here, Lassochka, take it; it's your catch!" Arsen said merrily and threw the perch onto the bluff. From that day on he wasn't afraid of dozing off any more, because as soon as a float stirred Lassochka woke him.

That's how they fished together.

Then an unbearably long winter set in. The forest was covered with hoar frost and glazed ice. No birds sang in it any more, but only the winds wailed in the branches at night.

Old Arsen didn't visit the river, but occasionally he recalled Lassochka, wondering where she was huddling in such cold.

In spring, when the ice had broken up and the sun was warmer, Arsen had his boat brought to the river, got his fishing tackle ready and, just like the year before, went to bring in a catch for the fish soup his old missus and their grandchildren loved so much. As he sat on the bank, he kept

turning round to see whether Lassoehka had shown up. He turned round once, another time, then a third — Lassoehka wasn't there.

But when he looked round the fourth time, he saw on the bluff a big sleek fox with clever but far from cunning eyes, and a fox cub by her side.

“Lassoehka?” Arsen said.

The fox restlessly shifted from paw to paw, whisked her brush across the ground, and lay down. The fox cub, however, licked its lips and gave a tiny squeak on seeing the fish in the boat.

“Tu-tu-tut...” Arsen said, amused. “What does that mean: am I supposed to feed your whole brood?”

He threw a fish onto the bluff.

The fox cub caught it with its front paws and started to eat it. Lassoehka, though, sat motionless, intently watching the floats.

From that time on they fished as a threesome.

## THE HORIZON

### THE TROD

From an obscure landing stage I walked up a rise toward the seemingly close horizon, hemmed in by the Dnieper bluffs as if by a huge gateway, gloriously festive at the advent of night. Over the horizon shimmered a delicate pink crescent paired with a solitary pink evening star.

Twilight was falling.

In the valley horses grazed in a field already gray with dew. There were two horses — one white, the other bay. They belonged to a forest ranger. Further on, I saw his cottage on the edge of a steep, wooded slope, and a large yard with a hay-filled wagon by a wicket gate. In the middle of the yard, there was a fire and over it hung a pot in which the evening meal was cooking.

I heard the horses slowly munching the new grass, enjoying it with what seemed like gratitude.

“Hello, horses!” I called out to them quietly.

They raised their heads and looked at me for a long time, their eyes moony and kind as with all draught animals.

I had a long way to go. But that didn't worry me much. After all, I'd see and hear a lot on the way.

I'd see the spring footpaths and trails fanning out from the road in all directions like branches from a tree trunk — to the villages and hamlets, and the Dnieper and the shallow gullies alongside it, where anglers cut hazel twigs for their fishing rods, children picked sorrel for borshch, and young people looked for lily-of-the-valley or lilac blooming in luxuriant profusion by the old crumbled hearths on the bluffs, or in the hollows between them.

I'd hear songs on the way, because it was Sunday and someone was bound to strike up a song. And walking through Shepelivka, a small roadside village, I'd hear a boy and girl whispering behind a wattle fence — youngsters, almost children, but whispering just the same. They wouldn't talk loudly, oh no! They'd whisper to feel grown up, because whispering in the evening conjures up a feeling of incipient majority; it holds a mystery, the suppressed joy of young love.

Then there would be little lakes and ponds overgrown with sweet flag. I'd come on them in the milky blue mist and go round them. They would betray their presence long before I saw them: wings would rustle in the sweet flag, a frightened duck would quack and whirl straight up, towards the moon.

Further on I'd lose my way, straying either left or right. And if this turn of fortune did not exactly make me happy, neither did it make me sad. I didn't much mind where I went from there on. Everything around was falling asleep or slumbering, so I would have to find my bearings as best I could — I would lie on the ground still hot after the day, and look into the distance. When my eyesight had grown sharper and become accustomed to the night mist clinging about the gullies, I would see the horizon between the bluffs again and continue my journey.

Groping my way thus through the dark, I'd come to the fence and the adobe hut of the old watchman, Yihor. Warmth and the smell of milk would be wafted towards me. The cows lying along the fence would sigh in their sleep, while Yihor sat in his hut, weaving baskets from stripped osiers or painting the ones he had finished green and red: the borders green and the wales red or the other way round to make the baskets look brighter. Basket weaving was Yihor's favorite pastime, and also a means of earning an extra rouble or two.

"It's like with an accordion player at a wedding: he plays to his heart's content and is treated to a hearty meal into the bargain," he used to say. "Being a watchman is my official job, so to speak, just as it might be with anyone else."

I had taken a liking to old Yihor, although I didn't know him. I didn't even know his name for that matter. Calling him "Yihor" was my own idea, because all the Yihors in the world seemed to me to be clever and kindhearted people. Of course, I could have asked him to tell me his life story, but I didn't want to pester the tight-lipped, industrious old man. I would have been ashamed to ask, just as I'd be ashamed to drink water out of another man's well without his permission, or to stop to eavesdrop on the young boys and girls whispering in the orchards.

What made me like Yihor in particular was a word he gave me as a spontaneous gift, without realizing how happy I was to have learned it. The word, and especially the way

he had said it, showed that he was a good man. Wasn't that alone reason enough to respect him?

That day the mist had been so heavy that it completely covered the ground and the Dnieper. I had walked down a road I did not know, striking out at random into the distance. Presently a man with a collection of wicker baskets over his shoulder appeared out of the mist; he had gray eyebrows, sticking out from under an old linen cap, huge hands that looked like sledgehammers, and light blue boyish eyes.

"Is there a footpath running from here straight to the road?" I asked, after greeting him.

The man threw the bundle of red and green painted baskets from his shoulder, took off his cap and, wiping the sweat from his forehead and his sparse gray hair with the palm of his hand, put the cap back on his head. Only then did he say:

"You in a hurry?"

"Yes, I am," I replied.

"There's no footpath, but only a trod. If you look closely at the ground you'll find it."

"The baskets — did you buy them at the market?"

"What would I need so many baskets for? I've woven and painted them myself — so if you want to buy, they're for sale! I'm taking them home, because there's no room to stack any more of them in my hut. My hut's over there by the fence."

"Thank you," I said.

"Instead of thanking me why don't you help me lift the baskets onto my shoulder?" he rejoined, and when they were back in place, he beamed at me. "Once they used to say: God help you. Now they say the same thing and help themselves. All right, then, good luck to you."

After walking away a few paces, the baskets creaking on his back as he went, he turned round, a sly but kindly look in his eyes.

"Now, don't forget to follow that trod."

No, old man, I won't forget. And to this day I haven't forgotten.

## THE PEARS FROM THE SPRING WELL

By her house Granny Martha has two things the same age, a pear tree and a well. Her first husband, Ulas, who died long ago during the First World War, dug the well and planted the pear tree.

"That's from him, my young lord and master, I got those gifts to last me a lifetime," she used to say. "The pear tree still bears fruit, the well hasn't gone dry, and the water in it is close by I can reach it with a catch."

When I first entered Granny Martha's farmyard to have a drink of water, I had pulled the pail out of the well with the "catch," a handle of plaited acacia twigs fitted with a hook so that the pail would not slip into the water.

It was August then and so swelteringly hot it made me feel languid.

"May I have a drink of water?" I asked the old lady. She was sitting under the pear tree embroidering a shirt.

"If you couldn't what would I be living here for?"

She rose nimbly to her feet, put her needlework on the grass, and rolled like a clew towards her cottage to fetch a mug. She was terribly stooped, as if she had once bent down to pull leek out of her kitchen garden and never straightened up again.

As I was drawing the water, the pail struck dully against a pear floating in the well before filling up, and while I drank out of a wooden mug, the old lady said kindly, in a sincere and unaffected manner.

"Drink to your heart's content. You must be tired, walking in the blistering sun at this time of day." She looked at me and smiled wisely as only old people and children smile.

Along with the water I had drawn two pears out of the well.

"Do they drop into the water on their own, or what?" I asked.

"Some of them do, others I throw in to let them cool. At midday the children will be coming home from school, and the little tidbiters will fish out every single pear. Treat yourself to some for the road, and to the cool ones, because when the pears are warm they're not that tasty."

She settled under the pear tree to her embroidery again, without glasses. I asked her whether her sight was good.

"Just as good as it was when I was young," she answered, without raising her head. "Now, when I was about seventy or seventy-five I suppose, I started seeing poorly, so poorly that my late neighbor, Tereshko, God rest his soul, bought me some glasses when he was in Kiev. But now I see as clearly as a young girl." Granny Martha chuckled peacefully, nodding her head over the red cross stitches on the shirt-front.

"How old might you be then, granny?"

"By my reckoning, one year short of hundred. Now if somebody more educated counted them up, there'd probably be a little over a hundred years. I've been around a long time, can't remember since when. I've outlived three beloved husbands. Very soon I'll be going their way, too. I'll go there, have a look around, and visit all three of them."

"Which of them would you, well... like to see most?"

"All of them, son. I'll stay with the last one. If I went to the first he mightn't recognize me — he was so young, after all! 'What do I need such an old woman for,' he'd say. 'Off with you!'" Granny Martha shook with laughter, so that her head bent right down onto her needlework. "To the second one I'd bow really low. He's buried not far away from here in Hrebeni. They found the poor soul riddled with bullets on a river bank. That was during the second war. I buried him myself. The third one was a good match, though he, too, was younger than me. He was a blacksmith. Whenever I came out of the house I heard him tapping with his little hammer. By that time he wasn't much of a worker any more, but he kept hammering away. One day he was suddenly taken ill, terribly ill. The neighbors told me and I ran to the smithy and there I saw him being carried away on a wagon. I'll lie down by his last resting place. He'll recognize me and move over."

"Do you embroider for yourself or for others?"

"I've already embroidered everything I need for myself, my child. This is for others. Let others wear it and remember granny."

Some yellow pears plopped softly onto the grass around her. She put her needlework aside, picked up the pears, and threw them into the well, while the red cross stitches on the shirt smiled brightly under the sun.

When I left the farmyard, Granny Martha saw me to the gate and quickly pushed a few warm yellow pears into my pockets ("They'll come in handy"); behind us strutted

a ginger-colored rooster in red pants, squawking and acting as if he were the master of the household.

Granny Martha's pear tree blooms under the stars, green moss stains the thatched roof on her low cottage, but the windows are black as night. I stand opposite the ramshackle gate and look into the farmyard, and listen so intently that the beating of my heart is all I hear. Could Granny Martha really have gone to her last home?

And suddenly the squawking voice of the rooster carries from the little barn behind the pear tree.

### FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS

I won't see any roadside villages here any more. There'll only be the Dnieper bluffs and the lapping waves whispering quietly to the banks that lie along them. Occasionally a fox will whine outside its den somewhere in a ravine, and the smell of silt will be carried by the underground waters that steal out of the recesses of the earth and flow into the Dnieper, toward the sun, and further on into the sea.

"All rivers flow to the sea, yet it doesn't overflow."

That's what old Tereshko, an amazingly taciturn loner, liked to say to himself, the very same Tereshko, who, after visiting Kiev for the only time in his life, bought a pair of cheaters for Granny Martha. He was her famous neighbor, famous for his unusual well and his skill at a trade that was as old as the hills.

Tereshko had a wonderful knowledge of wood. He knew its every fibre and grain by weight and smell, from root to tree top, as if he had grown from a sapling himself and become intimately related to every tree that had once grown or was still growing in these parts. Tereshko was a wood carver. He didn't carve knickknacks, but things people needed for everyday use — spoons and maple mugs he called "quarts."

Nobody had ever seen the old man selling his handiwork at a country market. He would make some "quarts" from the thinnest staves, each with two plaited hoops and fantastic handles like little grass snakes looking into the mugs as if asking for a drink of water. Then he would carve a couple of dozen spoons (little ones for children, bigger ones for

their parents, and ladles for housewives). And then Tereshko would lay out all these things on a bench by the well and get back to work in his shed, or else go down to the Dnieper and gather logs that had been washed ashore.

If someone walking from one village to another, or to town, happened to pass he would stop at the well for a drink of water, rest a while on the bench, select a mug he liked best or a couple of dozen spoons he needed, and leaving a little pile of silver or copper coins or a combination of both, behind, would continue on his way.

When Tereshko saw that his treasures of yellow wood had disappeared, he would bring more; he would sweep the money into his palm, without counting it or looking greedily at every coin as market traders usually do.

"It's all for the benefit of others, and a little extra for myself," Tereshko had once told Granny Martha. He said it when his hair was already white as snow. He said it only once. So that must have been his testament. And a testament is only spoken once.

At night old Tereshko used to go to the sheer bluff on the Dnieper to watch the moon laying its long red bridge across the water; it was such a deep red, and so firm on the nights when the river was still, that it seemed as if you could step onto it and walk, and go on walking across it to the end, to the end of your life.

It is a long time now since Tereshko crossed that bridge. The well is covered over with young silky grass that breathes rhythmically with the alternating rise and fall of the water as it whispers almost inaudibly to the star-studded sky, and the fragrance of the young sedge and the faint smell of yarrow that winter failed to banish.

Tereshko went a long time ago. Now he stands as a dry elm on the bluff where the moon and its accompanying evening star rise over the horizon. He looks gray and faded now, for the bark has peeled from the tree, making it seem colorless under the night sky, and in his hands he holds the white "quart" of his memories.

## THE SWING

The mist smelled of lilac in bloom. When it started to clear, through the thin bluish haze you could see rows of lilac bushes on the hill, old apple trees the boisterous

Dnieper winds had bowed when they were still saplings, and thickets of young cherry trees; and at the edge of the bluff grew blossoming blackthorn on red clay.

Between the rounded, clustering lilac bushes, the statue of a soldier in a mist-drenched cape, a submachine gun in his lowered hand, stood looking at the Dnieper. By its banks he had performed his last arduous labor.

A footpath crisscrossed with the last shreds of mist ran from the soldier's feet down the bluff to the water's edge. A fisherman was walking slowly up the footpath, leaning on a hazel fishing rod with one hand, while with the other he supported on his shoulder a board on which lay a wet sack of fish.

Once on the bluff, he greeted me stiffly with a "How do you do?" as is the custom with old people in these parts, although he looked not much over thirty. Then he scraped clay every color of the rainbow off his boots with a stick, and sat down for a rest, facing the Dnieper.

"Catch anything?" I asked.

"A few," the fisherman retorted. "Two bream and this here board."

A smile flickered across his face and he went on gazing at the Dnieper.

"Do you have to walk far to your village with this load?"

"No. Maybe a kilometer, maybe even less."

"Why is the soldier standing here and not in the village?"

The fisherman gave a sigh.

"This here is a village, too. Without houses, though. Ever since they were knocked off the bluffs during the war, nobody's settled on the old site. It can be seen from all sides, so the villagers moved farther away, deeper into the gully. To tell you the truth, I don't remember much about it, but my mother told me how they got together here one day." He shot a glance at the statue of the soldier. "All day long they came here in wagons, and toward evening there was a funeral repast. It was the first one since the war. They sat in rows, one opposite the other, right here where you and I are now. The collective farm chairman made a speech (at that time there was a wooden monument, not this one), everyone was given a meat pie, a bowl of borshch and some gruel. The people ate and wept over their food. We kids all kept quiet, slurping the borshch out of the spoons and wondering why the people were crying. Yeah, that's how it was..."

The sun had already risen; its rays first fell on the water by the shore and eventually on the one downstream, giving the Dnieper a rosy flush along its entire course.

"You should see what the spate has washed up over there!" the fisherman exclaimed with boyish enthusiasm. "There are heaps of things. One snag looks like a fox, there's a little oak tree like a heron standing on one leg, and a rooted stump like a devil with a hundred heads, and each with horns, eyes, and shaggy hair — it's scary to look at!"

He burst out laughing. Then he looked at the yellow board and stroked it with the palm of his hand.

"See how the waves and the sand on the spits have polished it — I won't have to plane it. There's too much water in it, though, so it's heavy. Guess I'll have to dry it first."

"What do you need it for, lugging it all the way up this bluff?"

"It's for a swing for my kids. I've got four of them and they love swinging. I fixed a small swing to an apple tree, but they're always squabbling over whose turn it is. You should try holding them in check when they want to swing. So I'll make a really big swing that'll take all four of them at once!"

He got to his feet, easily shouldered the board with the sack on top of it, picked up the fishing rod that served him as a cane, and saying "It's time I got back to work," walked with the "swing" on his shoulder down a narrow lane bordered with boxthorn.

The soldier still stood there in the rosy-tinged dew, looking down on the Dnieper and the lowlands with their spits and pine groves, while above him, gentle and serene, gleamed his part of the horizon.

But I had still to get to my own horizon, which was not far away, hemmed in between the gate-like bluffs over which hung the low moon and evening star.



**Тютюнник Г. М.**

**Т98** Холодна м'ята: Оповідання та повісті / Перекл.  
з укр. А. М. Біленка.— К.: Дніпро, 1986. 318 с.

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