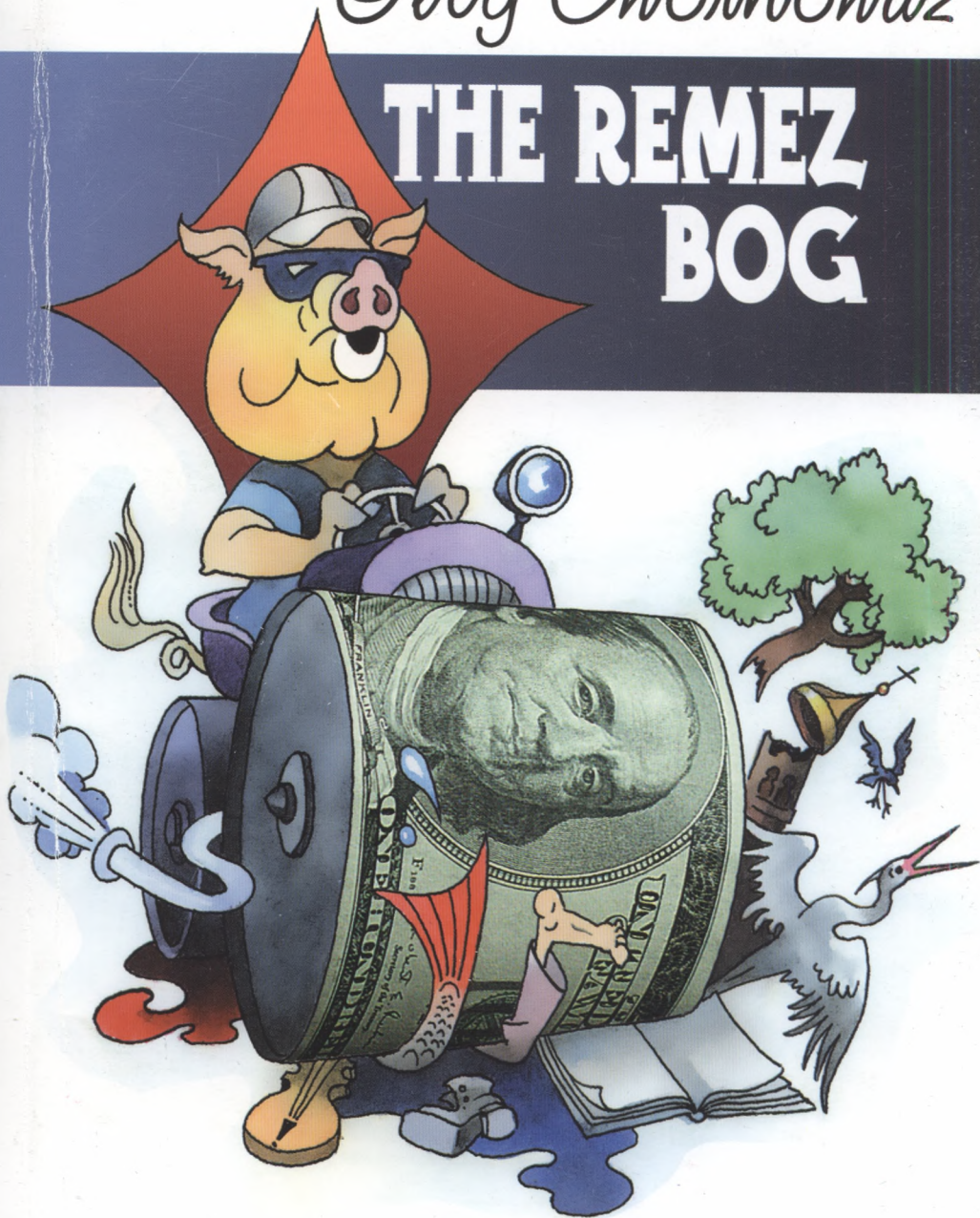


THE REMEZ BOG



Oleg Chornohuz

THE REMEZ BOG

A Short Fantasy Novel

&

Short Stories



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Oleg Chornohuz was born on April 15, 1936 in the village of Ivaniv, Vinnytsia Region. After graduating from the Department of Journalism at the Taras Shevchenko University of Kiev in 1964, he worked for the press until 1987, alternately holding the posts of feuilleton writer, manager of the department of feuilletons, and editor-in-chief of Ukraine's principal satirical biweekly magazine *Perets* (Pepper). He is a member of the Ukrainian Journalists Union (since 1960) and the Ukrainian Writers Union (since 1963).

Apart from numerous articles, essays and stories written in a satirical and humorous vein, he authored 11 satirical novels — *The Aristocrat from Vapniarka* (*Aristokrat iz Vapniarky*, 1979), *Merry Advice* (*Veseli porady*, 1979), *The Claimant to an Astrakhan Cap* (*Pretendent na papakhu*, 1983), *Babylon on the Hudson* (*Vavilon na Hudzoni*, 1985), *I Want to Go to the Sea* (*Ya khochu do moria*, 1989), *The Ukrainian Centaurs* (*Ukrainski kentavry*, 2002), *Gifts of the Pygmies* (*Dary pihmeiv*, 2002) *The Whims of Fate* (*Prymkhy doli*, 2006), *The Golden Scarab* (*Zoloty skarabei*, 2007), *The Remez Bog* (*Remezove boloto*, 2007), and *Risen from the Dead* (*Voskresly z mertvykh*, 2008).

Some of his stories have been adapted for theatrical presentation and for motion pictures.

His books have been translated into 22 languages, Esperanto included.

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THE REMEZ BOG

A short Fantasy Novel

IN THIS WORLD
OF OURS



CHAPTER I

Unbelievable as it might seem, all this happened after the unexpected appearance of a whopping ace of diamonds in our kitchen garden. I rubbed my eyes, not believing what I saw – a monstrous something that looked exactly like an ace of diamonds spreading across two-thirds of our five hectares of land or, rather, five hectares of bog. You see, my father, a merited war and labor veteran, was allotted this so-called farmland by Okrimenko (he'll be described in greater detail later on) after our collective farm became stone-broke and its land was shared among what was left of the farm's members. Instead of proper plowland we were allotted this place, which our villagers called none other than the Remez Bog. In addition to the bog, we got a house, and at no charge for that matter, although, truth to tell, after a series of mysterious deaths of its former occupants. None of our villagers had the guts to settle in this house – but that is of no relevance just now.

Some years after the demise of the Moscow Empire my father suddenly passed away. His golden soul, having detached itself from the blue tear he shed on parting with me, flew into the cloudless sky out of the hinged ventilation pane in the window, leaving behind a barely perceptible white trace resembling the tail of a comet.

* * *

I grew up in a patriarchal Ukrainian family, the Buriachenkos, who felt a permanent nostalgia for the past, priding themselves on their Cossack origins and deeply respecting their parents, forefathers, and the elderly in general.

In our family – and, I’m almost certain, in any other Ukrainian family – all without exception were great dreamers, and throughout their entire conscious lives they wanted to be at the top of the tree. My father, too, was not different from all the other Ukrainians. He dreamed and dreamed until he realized it was too late for dreaming. So he began doing some serious thinking: maybe I, at least, would succeed in holding the trump card in this life. On the whole, he always regarded life rather soberly because he was a convinced teetotaler. As you will see, I, too, developed into a sober and clever character. Even my fellow villagers say so, especially after I enrolled in the Agricultural Academy without any assistance from Makar and his calves.

Makar – that’s the name of my famous uncle. Ukrainians refer to him quite frequently in phrases like, “where Makar doesn’t drive his calves to graze.” It’s an old idiomatic expression that means guiding or directing anyone or anything to a destination that ends NOWHERE. My famous Uncle Makar will figure often enough in this story.

* * *

Shortly before I enrolled in the memorable school of higher learning, my father acquired a piglet. He dreamed that it would grow into a hefty hog one day and would be enough to grease the palms of all the Academy professors who were to decide on the scholarly horizons of his sonny boy. But his dream was not fated to come true. The piglet was of a decorative rosy variety. Nowadays only the jazzy nouveau riches keep them as pets in their villas. No matter how much these "pets" are fed and bathed in pink and blue bathtubs, they never grow any larger than the size they were at birth.

So Uncle Makar promised me: if I failed to clear the competitive hurdles of the entrance exams, he would exchange three calves for a substantial hog and come to terms with the professors so that they would bring their influence to bear to make a full-fledged student out of me. The promise lent me wings, because now I had a contingency plan to fall back on in case I flunked in my entrance exams. Incidentally, when my examiners learned that I was the nephew of the nationally famous Uncle Makar, they began raising my marks just so that I would get them his autographs for free.

In this manner, denying themselves an extra crust of bread, my dad and Uncle Makar sent me to the capital city of Kiev to acquire "higher enlightenment," as they put it. On parting, my dad gave me this piece of advice: "My son, I want you to settle down in the capital for good and die there just like all outstanding people in civilized countries do."

I promised him that I'd become a man of high rank (in terms of physical height, at least). By the age of seventeen

I was seven centimeters short of being two meters tall and had every chance of exceeding the two-meter mark by the age of twenty-one, as the textbooks on medicine inferred. Since our village was in the Chornobyl zone, the atoms for peace and the omnipresent radionuclides could make me the tallest person on the planet and my name might find its way into the Guinness Book of Records.

In my fourth year of studies at the Agricultural Academy, I began to work at the Ministry of Agriculture – as a messenger, no more, no less. I still had to study another two years plus complete a brief stint of internship, and then it would be off to the countryside: according to the terms of the agreement I signed upon enrolment, I had to work in the countryside after graduation to advance the agriculture of our potentially great European country.

Although I studied at the Department of Agronomics, now that I had a job at the Ministry it didn't behoove me to be an intern in some rustic village. I cherished great hopes of staying here, in Kiev, and working as a civil servant who would be teaching the peasants how to cultivate their shareholdings better by deluging them with directives from the capital. I was delivering all sorts of instructions and orders to various government institutions with such a mien as if I had written those documents myself. Once an accepted document was registered in a ledger, I would leave the institution with my head raised high. At such moments any casual passerby – of this I was quite sure – must have been comparing me at least to Alexander the Great, who was just then returning as a victor from the most important battle of his short lifetime.

When my father learned that I was working in the Ministry, he could not praise me enough throughout

the village. He assured everyone he met that I was bound to graduate with distinction and the Ministry would snap me up lest anyone else intercept such a promising specialist. Whenever I visited dad for "humanitarian assistance," I never specified what job I held, although tongues whispered, as they are wont to do in every village, that at the Ministry I was no more than a footboy, senior when it came to scrubbing floors, and junior when running errands. These words, though essentially true, angered me fiercely. So what? Didn't the Prime Minister himself shake my hand when I pressed the button of the elevator for him and let him through the door first? When I told dad about it, he almost gave up the ghost. So, fearing for my father's life, I wrote him that I was no longer seeing the Prime Minister, although in the corridors I was occasionally spotting the Minister of Agriculture on whom I was pinning great hopes for my future.

One of the Minister's deputies caught the bird flue during a suburban junket. To be on the safe side, the Minister dismissed him. He was transferred to a research laboratory studying the B-5 virus, while I was temporarily placed in his chair. Several times I arranged the flowerpots in the Ministry's session hall and delivered to the Minister the texts of his reports that were written by more competent deputies. But one fine day the Minister issued an order on staff reduction, and the arrangement of the flowerpots was entrusted to a more experienced employee who held a scientific decree. The Minister was sorry to part with me. He always emphasized that he had never had such an attentive assistant during his entire career. That was true enough: once I handed him the same page of his report twice; he read it two times to

the session attendees, causing a roar of laughter and stormy applause, which he took for unanimous support and understanding of his vision of advancing agricultural production.

The Minister referred me to a Member of Parliament who chaired the Committee for Agriculture. That same day I phoned my dad to tell him about the news, but unexpectedly for me there was metal in his voice when he said: "God forbid! Working for an MP is the last thing I'd want you to do. I don't want any shadow of disgrace falling on our noble family."

It was difficult for me to understand why there was no love lost between my dad and the MPs, but of one thing I was certain: whenever dad asked me to buy anti-allergy drugs for him, Sosnivka (that's the name of our village) was about to be visited by an MP.

Secretly from dad, though, I agreed to the shameful job of an MP messenger. I just didn't have any other choice: for all my rural origins, I was a total zero as far as agriculture was concerned. But to my great happiness there was Uncle Makar. He was no stranger to learning, having finished not one but two grades of primary school; and, as he himself bragged, he passed through the spacious school corridor that led him into the big wide world along with his calves.

Uncle Makar acquired that education during one of the periods in history when our black-earth country was occupied by foreign marauders, after which he labored like a black slave on this black earth, driving his calves back and forth every day to no avail, as the old idiomatic folk expression implied. The weight that the calves put on at the collective-farm pasture would burn up on their way

back home, but that's exactly why they were always in good form. Uncle Makar gained a name that shouts through the archives of history for his Spartan calves and proved to the world that every occupation was necessary and honorable. He thus secured for himself a permanent place in our storm-tossed history: however much it was rigged by each invader, not a single historian – Turkish, German or Russian – dared to junk Uncle Makar from our annals.

Some said that Uncle Makar was forty years old; others maintained that he was forty thousand. I find it difficult to judge who was right or wrong, because to me Uncle Makar was eternally young. When he was lying on a green pasture or hayfield, he would be framing his thoughts about life no less expertly and intelligibly than the wisest of academics.

Well, as you will see, I was just a couple of steps away from a life of clover in the capital had it not been for that ramshackle Remez house with its mythological filling, as it were.

* * *

After the final sharing of the collective-farm land among the villagers, I received a telegram from dad. A postman delivered it to me right in the Department of Agronomics:

DROP DAMNED STUDIES PRD
RETURN HOME IMMEDIATELY EXCL
HELL LOT WORK AT FIRM PRD
FATHER

I couldn't believe my eyes! Was this really my dad's message? Had he forgotten how he had insisted that I never reside in the village again? My fellow students had by then heard enough of the cock-and-bull stories about the country's nouveau riches and believed that I was filthy with lucre, all the more so as the telegraph operator had banged out firm instead of farm on the ticker-tape. From that time on they kept pestering me all the time about what private jet I had and how many passengers it could take on board.

* * *

My mother died several minutes after I was born. She left me as a memento for my father and Uncle Makar, because by that time grandfather and grandmother had already passed away. Formula baby food, let alone day nurseries and kindergartens, were something our villagers had never seen or heard about. So I was entrusted to the care of a nanny or, to be more precise, to the nanny goat of our neighbor Sydir. The milk she produced was extolled to the skies by Sydir, who called it no less than an elixir of immortality.

Sydir's goat was also famous for being the only domestic animal in Sosnivka that contrived to graze on the Remez Bog, jumping from tussock to tussock like a professional athlete.

Just like the cows in India, Sydir's goat was regarded as sacred. But unlike Indian cows, which nobody dared touch with their hands, our goat was given the works by anyone with a valid reason. And there were reasons galore, because after nibbling the grass off the tussocks, she would jump into somebody's kitchen garden and

gobble up, say, a couple of cabbages or other succulent vegetables for dessert.

Well, that's how I was growing up on nanny's wondrous milk until I could stand solidly on my own two feet. Uncle Makar would frequently take me along on his haymaking trips. He'd put me to bed on what was a fragrant pile of hay under the star-studded vault of heaven and never lulled me to sleep. On that bedding I would yell and collapse in a vale of tears to my heart's content, without Uncle Makar ever comforting me.

"Let him have his fill of yelling in his infancy at least," Uncle Makar would pronounce sagaciously. "When he grows up, he'll be yelled at by everyone until his day of judgment."

* * *

When Okrim Okrimenko attended school with my father, he went by his Ukrainian surname of Okrimenko. After his stint in the Soviet Army, he changed his surname to the Russian version, Okrimenkov, more likely to please Moscow's advocates of "proletarian internationalism" and use it as a stepping-stone for advancing his career as a member of the rural nomenklatura.

Knowing quite well when to hold, when to fold, and when to play cards under any regime, he always held a managerial position, alternately occupying the seat of a collective farm chairman or village council chairman. No sooner did our country gain independence he immediately dropped the Russian ending from his surname and became an ostentatiously patriotic Ukrainian. Now he managed the village council, and it seemed that nothing

and no one could kick him out of the managerial armchair that had grown solidly to his rump. Some said that he was in league with the Old Fiend who had bound him to the armchair, while others believed that money was the reason behind such longevity in office.

Our collective farm had crumbled to pieces, while we, the peasants, were destined to become rich farmers, as Okrimenko predicted. In truth, we regarded ourselves no more than penniless beggars, but he insisted that ours was a transitional and temporary status. It was about the same baloney we had heard in Soviet times about the imminent advent of communism.

"Bless your stars," Okrimenko said when he deeded to my dad the Remez house on the bog. "That cottage is so sturdy it will withstand any bolt from the blue."

He must have certainly misread the message of the stars. Last summer – exactly on my late mother's birthday – a thunderbolt crashed into the house and cracked it in two. Dad and Uncle Makar repaired it here and there, and all of us moved in, while Uncle Makar's proverbial calves were sheltered in a lean-to shed.

A lot of stuff and nonsense made the rounds of the village about the Remez house and the bog stretching behind the kitchen garden. The Remez family were regarded as extreme pagans because they refused to recognize Jesus as the Son of God and insisted that he was an ordinary human, although infinitely wise for his time. In our village it was said that God had punished the family for their impious ways. One of their six sons, Marko, was a freak, the second son was born a cripple, and the rest drowned in the bog or else shuffled off the mortal coil at an early age. Their seventh child was a girl called Lybid,

or swan, as her Ukrainian name implied. As becomes a swan, she winged her way to different climes and, perhaps, better circumstances. The villagers said that she was a beautiful girl, and my dad added that she really had a swanlike neck as graceful as that of Nefertiti, a name he had come across in some fancy book.

But deep in my heart, for all those scary stories, there was something about the Remez family house that I liked very much. As long as I can remember, their vacant house had always attracted me. All my fellow villagers gave it a wide berth. It was only I who felt its persistent pull as if a piece of iron had been glued to my seat, while inside the house there was a powerful magnet as huge as a millstone. Before we settled in it, my dad used to warn me to keep away from it because it was supposed to be haunted by all sorts of spooks. People said that it was Marko's ghost: God was supposed to have denied him access to heaven, so now his apparition was traipsing around the bog. Whenever I walked past the house on winter evenings, I would hear weird and creepy noises, moans and laments coming from the loft. It seemed as if air had entered the chimney by accident and something was choking it in there. It struggled hard to break loose from the devilish grip, and when it managed to escape in the end, it rose over the roof not as a white but as a soot-black stream of air; at other times the chimney did not let the air go – then it would moan and weep for a long time until it died from grief, without rising into the nocturnal sky again.

It also seemed that every time it was in the grip of the chimney, the wind was giving the Remez house a grim warning that a complaint about its untoward delay in the soot-grimed labyrinth would by all means be

forwarded to the Heavenly Chancery. In fact, there wasn't any labyrinth at all in the chimney. There was just a straight pipe, and whenever the wind was foolish enough to sweep inside, it would burst out of it like a jet, its sound making the flesh creep – not only among the neighbors in our village but also in the other village on the opposite bank of the Sosnivka River (named for our village – a rare honor in Ukraine).

* * *

So now, with the downfall of the Soviet Union's atheistic era, we Ukrainians were at long last allotted land not in the Siberian taiga or Kolyma but next to our own homes in our own country. Much as my dad frowned on his new holding, I was pleased as punch that we had settled in the house: in front of my eyes spread the ever-green Remez Bog, beyond it was the Sosnivka River, and lining its banks was the thicketed Black Forest.

From the threshold ran a footpath to the garden where we grew potatoes, and at the very end, almost next to the bog, we grew cucumbers and tomatoes. These "snack vegetables," as Uncle Makar called them, were the size of pumpkins and gourds. I don't know whether such jumbo vegetables grew because of the soil's fertility, but it's God's honest truth that they did. Troops of scientists descended on our bog, took the best samples of these vegetables, analyzed their wondrous properties, and then, thanks to our labor, defended their theses to add yet another rung to the ladders of their academic careers. My dad dreamed that I too would one day earn the title of Academician of Agricultural Sciences.

Right behind the vegetable beds stretched the bog, dotted with tussocks that resembled elongated human heads someone had tried to pull out of the morass but ultimately failed. Our elders referred to these "heads" again and again to scare us kids: once we walked into the bog it would swallow us, and perhaps only our grass-covered heads would be sticking out of the mire like large decorative candles.

Whenever I climbed onto the ridge of the roof of what was now our new house, it seemed to me that the bog below took on the shape of a giant who was stretching out his hands and legs to grab at something so as to gain a firm foothold. The sight made my flesh crawl and I would immediately get down from the roof, the shape of the green giant lingering in my mind for a long time. I had a persistent feeling in my bones that something was going to happen in this house.

For my sake my dad had tried to wheedle from Okrimenko a good plot of plowland for growing wheat, onions, garlic, or any other crops. Dad also dreamed of having grandchildren, after which he would prepare himself for his reunion with my mother in the afterworld.

But my first city sweetheart, Nadia, was not inclined to make her home with me in the village.

One evening, shortly after we had moved into the Re-mez house, I sat down beside my father.

"Pa," I began haltingly. "I feel so bad that I want to do myself in. Nadia wants to trade me for a residence permit in Kiev. Maybe she'll marry a city fop. There are no girls in our village – all the good-looking ones went abroad."

But he did not so much as stir, as if he had not heard me at all.

At length, without turning his head in my direction, he asked:

“Are you out of your mind?”

I did not know how to respond to this question. I, for one, believed that I was sound-minded, but somehow my dad had come up with a different diagnosis. I didn't have the slightest idea how he did it, the more so since he hadn't worked as a psychiatrist for a single day in his life.

“When I cross this side of eternity, sell the dratted house and the bog into the bargain,” he said. “Let Makar have the house, and you – you just scam abroad, if there's no place for the likes of us in our own homes.”

Since that day my father was slowly but surely slipping into the dumps.

Before he departed from this world, he deeded to me and Uncle Makar the Remez house and everything that went with it, along with those five hectares of bog that the trickster Okrimenko had so deftly designated as “plow-land” in the deed.

“That's everything I managed to earn after toiling like a slave for fifty years,” dad said dejectedly.

After his death it did not take long for Uncle Makar and me to realize that we had spent all the meager savings my dad had left behind. Right there and then I decided to hit the trail and go abroad from where I would be sending Uncle Makar some hard currency to keep him afloat. But alas! this was no more than wishful thinking, because I was down at the heels at that time.

When dad was still alive, he once told me that a German or a Jew was making the rounds of the neighboring villages and sniffing out the chances of buying up our shared land. Not a bad idea, I was thinking now, and wanted to go looking for that character, but

Uncle Makar stopped me, saying that after a funeral no deals could be made for six months. This tradition also held for the Remez Bog, useless as it might be.

All this time I was wondering whether my heart's desire, Nadia, had married. From the letters of my Kiev friends I learned that she was making good headway in her studies at the university. After graduation she wanted to work at the Central Botanical Gardens, where she was currently undergoing practical studies.

Over an evening meal six months later, I asked Uncle Makar where I could locate that German who was buying up the land shares.

"In Okrimenko's office. Where else?" Uncle Makar said readily. "Wherever there's the smell of money, Okrimenko is close at hand. For money he'll not only get the German for you but also Old Nick, if the price is right, and sell our bog as the choicest of chernozems."

"And what if the German doesn't fall for it?"

"He will. Okrimenko will blaze it in such eye-catching colors that you'll be thinking not twice but dozens of times about selling it at all. He might say, for instance, that there's oil under them tussocks, or even gold for that matter. Once he launches a lie, he believes it to be true until the very end."

* * *

On the way to the village council the next day I met a very old granny. I greeted her politely and wished her good morning. She wished me good health, and when I had already passed her, I heard suddenly:

"Don't even dare think about it."

My eyes twitching nervously, I looked back, but there was no granny in sight where I had seen her just a couple of

seconds ago. I even remembered her appearance quite well – a beautiful but old face with blue eyes that must have belonged to a rather good-looking girl in her golden season of life.

I felt ice going up and down my back. I looked around again – not a single soul in sight.

“Return to your home,” I heard the voice once more.

It’s nothing more than my inner voice, thought I. But why is it suggesting such a stupid thing? Why should I return to my home when I was set on going abroad? The other day I saw a colorful advertisement recruiting young specialists in God knows what countries.

“Don’t you hurry,” the inner voice persisted.

The words were penetrating my consciousness as if I were seeing a telegraphic tape running right before my eyes.

When I returned to the house, it smelled of wild thyme, like at Whitsuntide, when Ukrainians cover the floors of their homes with lush spring greenery. I was perplexed as to where such a fragrance had come from. It was surely much better than the air in the office of the Minister of Agriculture, where they used ionizers and had all sorts of exotic dwarf plants standing on the windowsills.

* * *

Some days later the German I was looking for showed up unexpectedly. He rolled up in his cool jeep right to the wooden gates that barely hung on their hinges of rotten poles. I came out of the house to meet the guest. He shook my hand without saying a word and, a minute or so later, introduced himself. At first his name slipped my mind because it was more concentrated on how to keep the gates

from tumbling down, since he was leaning heavily on them. So I had to invite him into the house as quickly as possible.

To my surprise the guest had a decent command of colloquial Ukrainian. I took this knowledge with a grain of salt, just like my late father did when he first told me about the snooping German. Judging from his face, he was most likely a Soviet Jew, who had hoofed it seemingly to Israel back in the 1970s. Realizing all too well that Israel was far from a peaceful ancestral home, he got comfortably stuck midway either in Austria or Germany.

He again introduced himself as Abraham, named so in honor of the US President Lincoln. They were supposed to have been born on one and the same day, but in different years and in different centuries (that much I knew for certain). His surname was Werner, named in honor of some German scientist.

"I heard you're selling the bog, aren't you?" he asked.

"By the bucketful, Comrade ... beg your pardon, Herr Werner," I replied.

Apparently, Werner did not expect such a reply. Neither did I - it just escaped my tongue unwittingly.

"What do you mean 'by the bucketful'?" he asked, stupefied.

"As fertilizer. I'm an agronomist, after all."

"And what's done with that fertilizer?"

"People fertilize their gardens with it."

Werner became lost in thought and began rubbing his forehead. We, Ukrainians, usually scratch our pates in such cases. But he must have been cranking up his mind through the forehead.

He racked his brains like that for a long time and finally asked:

"How much do you charge for a bucketful?"

"Well, for a large bucket it's five hryvnias and for a smaller one three hryvnias."

"What about two hryvnias?"

"No deal," I, a rock of resolve, snapped back. "It's got more fertilizer in it than the world's best poultry dung."

"And how many bucketfuls can you get out of that bog?"

"The Remez Bog is inexhaustible," I assured Herr Werner. "The more you empty it, the more it fills up on its own."

"Remind me of your name again."

"It's Svitozar."

"Now stop making a fool out of me, Svitozar. I'm asking you a straight question."

"And I'm giving you a straight answer. Ask Okrimenko. Enlist his authority, if you don't believe me. Autumn is the best time for applying this fertilizer. Did you see our tomatoes? They're the size of my head. And our cucumbers? They're between one and two meters long? And the cabbages? Big as snowmen, but green!"

When I mentioned the green cabbages, they set his mental wheels grinding and he came up with an idea: "Can I have a look at the cabbages?"

"Sure. Just send your men to bring you some," I said, nodding in the direction of Herr Werner's crop-headed guards. "If they manage to blast them out of the ground, you'll have them. I hope they have knives..."

"Oh yes, knives and guns," Werner boasted.

"Well, guns wouldn't be of any use in my garden, but knives, sharp knives are a different matter."

"I see that you've got a glib tongue, Svitozar," Werner said, giving me an inquisitive sidelong look. "I wonder where such smart alecks like you were born?"

"In the Remez house."

No sooner had I said it than it struck me like a lightning revelation. Now where was I born into this world, really? Throughout its entire history Sosnivka had never had a maternity hospital. Children were delivered with the assistance of a midwife. And the only midwife around was the old missus of Remez. I was probably born in this house. Why else did it attract me so strongly, like a nail to a magnet?

In the meantime Werner's guards had brought a cabbage, some tomatoes, and a cucumber the size and shape of a Turkish yataghan.

Werner was looking at those jumbo vegetables with the eyes of a bewildered child and was silent for a time.

"Do you sell them?" he asked, regaining his tongue.

"Father used to. I only eat them."

"I see," Werner pronounced meaningfully. "So such cabbages grow on this bog?"

"That's the early crop. The later one is much bigger. Come in the autumn and you'll see for yourself."

"And what about the neighbors?" he asked, and I realized that Werner's mental wheels were now grinding full blast.

"Those who bought my bog fertilizer had a good crop. The rest had vegetables the size of nuts."

Scratching his forehead one more time, Werner ordered his back-alley characters:

"Let's push off!"

They climbed into the jeep and rolled toward the village council, in all probability to seek Okrimenko's advice. I had a hunch that Werner would gladly buy the bog from me. But should I be selling it now?

"Don't you dare even think about it!"

I caught myself polemizing with that old granny again. I was surely hearing her voice.

The next day, when Werner's jeep drove up to our house, it was Okrimenko who was the first to emerge from it.

"Are you really selling the bog by the bucketful?" he asked angrily without so much as a "hello" or "good morning" for an opening.

"Well, people don't have the money for truckloads, so I sell by the bucket..."

"How much are you asking for the bog?" Werner butted in, kicking the right front wheel of his jeep, as if he were addressing not me but the wheel.

"All the money you have," I replied naively.

"All right, smart aleck. You'll get an advance payment. Let Okrimenko be a witness to the deal."

Werner produced a thick wad of dollar bills. At first they saucered Okrimenko's eyes and then electrified him to such an extent that he went into a spin like a whirligig, drilling a little round depression in the ground under his feet.

"Here's ten thousand," Werner announced to all those present. "Okrimenko, write out the receipt."

To tell you the truth, the sight of those greenbacks also made my eyes pop.

"That's not enough," the granny's voice whispered in my ear.

"That's not enough," I repeated automatically.

"What do you mean – not enough?" Werner asked, his eyes shooting fire at me.

"That's five hectares of plowland," the granny reminded me.

"That's five hectares of plowland," I repeated.

"You must be crazy!" Werner roared. "What plowland are you talking about?"

"Better ask Okrimenko about it. That's what he wrote in the deed that he issued to my father."

Okrimenko's eyes rounded in surprise and he mumbled under his breath what distantly sounded like a foul-mouthed expletive.

"What are you mumbling?" Werner asked. "Did you really write plowland in the deed?"

"Well it costs much more than plowland," Okrimenko found his tongue again. "You'll stand to gain, believe me. I'll launch a noisy promotion campaign and the bog will be auctioned off in a wink. The people from the botanical gardens in Kiev will be coming here in droves for the fertilizer."

"Now mind you, Okrimenko, if you let me down, my boys" – he pointed to his crop-headed hoods – "will dump you in that bog without a second thought."

I doubted whether their noggins had enough gray matter to think at all.

Werner gave me the additional bundle of greenbacks, I signed the receipt and Okrimenko affixed a seal to it. All that done, we parted company, or so it seemed to me at the time.

* * *

The next day I was preparing to hit the road. By evening I was supposed to get the rest of the money and the document confirming the sale of the Remez Bog to Abraham Lincoln – oops! – Abraham Werner. In Kiev I planned to arrange an interview with the overseas company that was recruiting young Ukrainian talent for jobs abroad. The ad in the newspaper read:

*Don't miss your chance!
Our quotas are limited.
It's today or never!*

I looked at my watch and saw that “today” had already passed. Werner did not show up, so I'd have to stay around for another day without knowing for sure whether Okrimenko had deeded him the house along with the bog. Carried away by the prospect of going abroad, I completely forgot about Uncle Makar and his calves. Where would they live?

Just then Uncle Makar burst into the house with some astounding news: he had found a relatively young woman in the village and was prepared to exchange his calves for her heart.

My feelings were hurt to the quick. Even Uncle Makar was blooming with joy, while my affairs of the heart were god-awful. The separation from my sweetheart, Nadia, proved a vain test of her affection: the gist of the proverb “out of sight, out of mind” culminated in its inevitable outcome. She turned her back on me for good when I received the following telegram that very same day:

FAREWELL COM
GETTING MARRIED PRD

"Guess I have nothing else to do but hang myself," I mumbled in a voice that seemed to be coming not from my heart at all but somewhere from the rooftop.

I found a rope, went to the calf shed, put a ladder against the highest wall, tied one end of the rope into a noose, climbed up the ladder, tied the other end of the rope to a beam, and then stepped onto the highest rung of the ladder, intending to kick it out from under my feet to dangle over eternity.

But the minute I stuck my neck into the noose I stopped. An immeasurable regret got the better of me and I took the noose off my neck. Here I was about to leave forever the house where I must have been delivered into this world, and my countrywide famous Uncle Makar, the pride of our family. Small wonder that my dad was so reluctant to move into this house, small wonder the villagers told so many weird stories about it: somehow or other it was hexed, and you were bound to crack up in it. That's just what was happening to me now, I thought, and stuck my neck into the noose again to get it all over with.

And again I stopped, remembering that I had promised Uncle Makar the money Werner had given me for the bog. I wouldn't need it anyway in the afterworld I was so hell-bent to reach, while it would buy a decent home for Uncle Makar.

So I climbed down the ladder and scribbled a farewell note to Uncle Makar. In it I asked him to take a look into the crib to see whether there were enough greens for the calves and wished that he would have the crib full of greens for many green years to come. Uncle Makar was a quick-witted man who knew perfectly well how many

beans make five, and he would easily guess that by the oft-repeated greens I had the greenbacks in mind. But in the heat of the moment, when my determination to hang myself was sharpened by a good deed, I forgot to shove the money under the grass in the crib.

I quickly climbed up the ladder, stuck my neck into the noose again, stepped onto the topmost rung and was about to push off when I heard the familiar voice overhead:

“Don’t you dare do it!”

I looked around. It goes without saying that there was no granny anywhere in sight. Was I in the grip of despair before death, or was I just talking to myself? But no: the admonition sounded a second time, and with a cosmic ring to it. What’s that, I wondered – a white fever or a red fever? Dismissing from my mind what kind of fever it was, white or red, that could be befuddling a suicide before he resigned his breath, I was about to push off the ladder when ... the noose suddenly burst into flame and dropped to the floor.

Somebody had burned it with an invisible beam.

Although I did not feel the effect of any heat, I saw that the rope was smoking under the ladder.

“Who are you?” I was curious to know – in midair now, because the burned noose had upset my balance and I was tumbling headlong into the crib filled with the grass Uncle Makar had cut for his calves.

“You’ll be told eventually,” the voice said from somewhere overhead. “The main thing for you now is not to miss the fortune smiling on you.”

A bright ball of light shot through the roof and soared into the sky, to where my dad had departed not so long

ago. The ball did not so much as leave a tiny smoldering hole in the roof.

The next moment I thumped into the crib. When I came to my senses and opened my eyes, I saw a walleyed calf staring down at me. Instead of eating the green grass, it was contentedly chewing the greenbacks that had spilled out of my pocket.

"Hey, you jackass!" I yelled at the calf and punched its muzzle. "Do you realize what you're chewing?"

"...don't hurt the calves don't you sign any documents with Werner don't be in a hurry to sell the bog soon it'll cost much more than all the plowland Okrimenko privatized for all his relatives put together..." I heard the voice whispering in my ear.

The unidentified flying subject, or UFS, as I referred to him from then on, rattled off these admonitions in the manner of certain avant-garde writers, who dashed off their sentences without any punctuation marks, making literary critics go into dizzy raptures over this breakthrough in modern prose. I had a strong urge to tell the UFS that if he were to carry on like that, he'd not only be granted immediate membership in the Ukrainian Writers Union, but also earn the country's most prestigious literary prize.

* * *

Upon recovering the greenbacks that the calves had not chewed up yet, I climbed the ladder to have a look through the hole the UFS had "scorched" in the roof. The sight I saw was described earlier. Somebody or something had put on the bog a whopping ace of diamonds. In

each of its four corners a fair-sized house could be easily accommodated. As a matter of course, this news spread like wildfire throughout the village and, eventually, far beyond it. Delegations descended on Sosnivka in the hundreds, and almost every day helicopters were disgorging television crews and reporters from the world's leading news agencies.

One day an airplane landed in Sosnivka with a large group of full and corresponding members of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. By then Okrimenko had ordered a large desk and an armchair brought to the ace of diamonds, where he opened shop to deal with the reception arrangements for the unending flood of guests. He behaved like a boorish country squire, although being he was well aware that this was my legitimate private property, not his. Then pot-bellied military cargo helicopters landed right on the ace of diamonds, without so much as making the tussocks stir an inch beneath the rotating blades. A company or so of men in camouflage battledress jumped out of the helicopters. They were immediately approached by the academics. One of them got down on his all fours, licked the ground with his tongue, then brushed the damp surface with his index figure and showed it to the soldiers. What he was explaining to them I could not hear at that distance, but it must have been something incredibly clever because everyone around him became lost in thought and began scratching his pate.

While the scientists were scratching their pates, trying to unravel the baffling puzzle of the ace of diamonds, the men were already pitching camp on it.

"Grant the ace on temporary lease," the UFS whispered in my ear.

"What lease are you talking about? I sold that muck to Werner already."

"Get the money back," the UFS rejoined without a letup.

"Listen, could you be our house brownie?" I ventured to ask.

When I was still a child, father used to tell me that every Ukrainian house had its a brownie. Some of them were good; others were of the nasty variety. Exactly what brownie lived in the Remez house I did not know.

"I'm a good one," the UFS said.

How d'ye like that? That unidentified something could even read my thoughts.

"Aren't you Marko by any chance?" I asked, frightened.

"No, I'm not Marko," the UFS replied. "Marko is traipsing around in hell."

"And you - "

"I'm your one and only counselor and protector."

* * *

I looked out of the window and saw Werner's gang approaching my house. I had no other choice but to let them in. I hadn't yet invented anything I could say to my sour guest when suddenly a tiny blue man appeared in front of us. On his head he had a sort of a nimbus out of which stuck two antennas resembling rabbit ears. The tiny man jumped onto the table and looked insolently at Werner's gang.

"What's that critter supposed to be?" Werner asked.

"An unidentified flying subject," I said, which made one of the guards break into a laugh.

"That much I see myself. Swipe him off the table!" Werner ordered.

The biggest guard stepped up to the UFS, grabbed his wide belt and wanted to send him flying into a corner, but the tiny man did not budge an inch, as if he were glued to the table.

"Hey, what's the idea!" the crop-headed character mumbled. "No matter how much I bend him, he remains dead straight."

"Take that scarecrow away," Werner ordered again and turned to the other guard. "And why are you just standing there doing nothing?"

"I can't," guard No.2 replied in a tiny voice and pointed at his legs, which had gotten stuck knee-deep in mud. Remez Bog had stealthily crept up to the house, stayed in ambush for some time under the floor, and was now ensnaring its victims.

"What's the problem, men? Out with your guns and waste that Japanese doll!"

The hoods had really drawn their guns and aimed them at the UFS. At first I thought that my "one and only counselor and protector" would think of something. But nothing doing: from deeply blue he turned into a heavenly blue, and then grew pale altogether. I realized that something was wrong with the UFS and immediately covered him with my back.

"You'll have him over my dead body!" I screamed boldly.

"Now listen, Svitozar, we don't need those Japanese toys of yours. Go and scare your hicks with them. We won't touch him. Take the rest of the money owed you, and get the hell out of here."

"I'm not selling the house," the words escaped my mouth, like a bird escaping its cage.

"I don't want your house. I'm interested in the bog."

"The bog ... the bog doesn't exist anymore," I said, pointing to the ace of diamonds.

"But I gave you an advance payment!" Werner glared at me.

"I'll return it."

"How?"

"By barter."

"By what?"

"Well, say, in exchange for calves."

"Listen, you Academician of Unfinished Sciences!" Werner fumed. "I'm a specialist in immovable property. Calves are moving all the time. I don't need any movables. I'm interested in im-mov-ables. Do you understand?"

"I drew an ace, an ace of diamonds" – I nodded toward the window – "and I don't intend selling it just like that. I'll build a Las Vegas around this place."

"On this bog?"

"What makes you think a bog is worse than a Las Vegas in the State of Nevada? The Americans built their Las Vegas in a desert, while we, Ukrainians, will build ours on a bog. We'll invite celebrities for the opening, say, the Klichko brothers. Let them hold world boxing championships in this place."

Werner turned to his guard, the one who had already sunk into the mud up to his shoulders.

"Was it you who sold him on this idea?"

"How? When? I didn't stir a step from your side all that time," the hood justified himself.

By then a pool of mud with greasy patches was slowly creeping across the floor. It was real crude oil oozing out of the chinks between the floorboards.

"There, take a look. Do you see the group of scientists?" I said, feeling the moral support of the UFS, and again pointed to the window. "Underneath the bog a huge deposit of oil has been discovered. The Academy has already drawn up a project to develop it. I'll be wading around in money in no time. I've already cemented a plaza in front of the future casino."

"How's that - cemented? By yourself?"

"Why me alone? My relatives gave me a hand, acquaintances, and this young man" - I pointed my thumb behind my back, where the UFS was standing.

"Stop pulling my leg. Just yesterday there wasn't any ace around or this scarecrow of yours. You couldn't have done all that by yourself in one night."

"I didn't say so, did I? I said that I was assisted by people in a free community effort - what we, Ukrainians, call a toloka, which has been practiced for ages."

But Werner did not give up.

"You won't manage to take me for a ride. I just won't go along. Yesterday you were looking for a buyer for your swampland. This world is ruled by a market economy, where the word is much more precious than gold..."

More precious than gold? What if there's gold in this bog as well was a thought that crossed my mind. I once heard from the villagers that the late Remez had buried in the bog a treasure trove of gold coins, precious stones, porcelain, crystal chandeliers and the like.

"You'd better save your sentinel," I said, gesturing at the back-alley character whose cropped head was now sinking into the mud.

Werner looked calmly at the head disappearing right before his eyes and ordered the other guard standing on solid ground to help his buddy to sink faster into eternity as a lesson for being a windbag.

"It wasn't him who told me about the casino. Pull him out, by the hair at least," I begged.

"Where do you see any hair?" Werner giggled.

"On his head, where else?"

"Hey, you're right. The bugger must've been scared out of his wits so much it made his hair grow. All right, pull him out. Seems like he didn't tell this hick anything, because I don't remember ever having mentioned the casino."

Then Werner put a bundle of greenbacks on the table in front of me.

"That's my last offer."

"I'm not selling anything now. For no money whatsoever," I stood my ground.

Werner plumped into the only armchair that old Remez had left behind as a memento from a German who had the same surname as this phony Teuton. When the Germans occupied Ukraine, Kapitan Werner was billeted in the Remez house in the capacity of commandant of Sosnivka, for which he developed a great liking. He ordered the troops under Lieutenant General Andrei Vlasov (Moscow is now chary of remembering this Russian traitor, who had mustered an entire field army in the service of Hitler) to lay a sidewalk of brick between the village and the bog. Seizing every single brick they

could put their hands on in the village, Vlasov's men were building this sidewalk until the spring of 1943. When the Germans retreated westward, our villagers took back their bricks, and once again the Remez family had to wade knee-deep through their bog, especially in rainy seasons. Once our erstwhile guests returned – this time from the northeast – they didn't give a hoot about any paved sidewalks or attributes of rural culture, especially since they simply loved to wallow in mud.

Now I was standing in front of the new Werner, keeping my eyes glued on him and killing time as much as I could. Werner was manifestly unnerved by this development.

"Guys, give him the works," he ordered at last.

The guard, who had regained his hair so miraculously, slowly approached me.

"Aren't you afraid of sinking under the ground a second time?" I asked him.

He jolted to a halt and stared fixedly at me.

"Step back," Werner ordered him. Then he came up close to me, drew his gun, and was already shoving its muzzle into my teeth.

"You shouldn't do that," I remarked. "This place is also dangerous to stand on, as you see."

He looked down at his feet and saw that his classy shoes from a Kiev boutique had sunk into the crude oil.

"Stop playing your tricks on me!" Werner yelled furiously.

"I don't have anything to do with it. You see, this place tolerates only calm and polite conversations. Whenever you raise your voice, the ground begins to soften up all by itself. So you'd better smother your threatening decibels."

Werner stepped back.

"Are you selling the bog or not?"

"I told you already. I just can't put any imaginable price on that ace of diamonds."

I had no doubts whatsoever that all my brilliant ideas were promoted by the UFS, and I repeated his words as if I were hearing them from a prompt box. "Oh yes, there's one more thing I forgot to tell you. We'll also build a Disneyland here, along with modern highways and airports to receive passenger planes and helicopters. You'll see, we'll catch up and overtake the United States," I was convincing Werner so passionately as if I were incarnating Nikita Krushchev when he made his point by pounding the United Nations rostrum with his shoe.

"You already tried to overtake the US once," Werner barely squeezed his rejoinder into the brief interval in my oratorical outburst.

"Yes, we tried to do that together with the fraternal Russian people," I said, my shoulders slumping. "We failed because the fraternal Russian people liked to make frequent halts on the way to the objective. More often than not they indulged in drinking bouts, and the morning after took a hair of the dog that bit them. But now we've become much wiser. We'll be going by ourselves."

"Where to?"

"What do you mean - where to? Only forward and higher. To the heights of civilization."

Werner was pathetically confused, while the hoods around him were swinging their guns, obviously waiting for orders to burst into decisive action, because they abhorred any yackety-yak.

"Who'll come to this god-forsaken place?" Werner countered.

"Millionaires, multimillionaires, billionaires, multibillionaires in their Maibachs, Mercedes, Bentleys, Rolls Royces, Cadillacs," I was rattling off the makes of foreign cars, as if I were a professional car dealer. "We'll accommodate them in de luxe suites in five-star hotels with blue swimming pools, saunas, and long-legged tanned girls."

"Guys, bump him off," Werner said, unable to hold his temper in check any longer. "We'll come to terms with the village mayor ourselves. And for this smarty we'll arrange a funeral that his Las Vegas will never ever see in the future again. And ram this scarecrow into the table so hard that it pops out on the other side of the globe, somewhere in Nevada."

I wanted to cover the UFS with my back again, but...

But there was no longer anyone behind me. Neither was the UFS standing before Werner. I felt as though I were in a state of weightlessness. In brief, I was no longer in the grip of earthly gravity.

One of the crop-headed hoods exclaimed:

"They've gone up in smoke!"

"How?" Werner asked, as if he didn't see it himself.

"Just like that! A moment ago they were here, and then they disappeared," the guard stated the fact of our unpredicted departure. "A whiff of blue smoke – that's the only trace they left behind."

THE WORLD FROM A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW



CHAPTER II

I took a look at the scene as if from offside and noticed a peculiar thing. *I was no longer in the room*, and neither was the Unidentified Flying Subject. The confused Werner and his hoods were pacing up and down the floor, which didn't have a single trace of either mud or crude oil.

The UFS and I had in the meantime escaped to the loft through the ceiling. I saw his antennas sticking out from behind a stack of hay Uncle Makar had laid in store as winter feed for his calves. Out of habit I crossed myself and asked:

"Why did we have to wait so long, if we could have escaped to the loft right away?"

"You see, when that hoodlum grabbed my belt, he upset my flight and gravitation mode. I couldn't best your earthly gravitation."

Well, well, I thought, my extraterrestrial protector surely knew his scientific terminology. His speech was now much closer to ours, which meant that he had quickly adapted himself to our circumstances.

"While you were talking with them," the UFS continued, "I contacted my base for assistance to recharge my batteries. To tell you the truth, we almost cashed in. I very much appreciate your effort of covering me with your body. It wouldn't have made any difference to my body, but from your point of view it was a really heroic deed."

"Does this mean that your body is more valuable than mine?" I asked, offended.

"If you, my dear, found yourself in the world I come from, you'd understand that the body isn't necessary at all. It's no more than an addendum to the soul. If my soul has a positive energy and operates in a normal mode, bullets are powerless against it."

"All right," I said, my depressed mood soothed a little. "What are we going to do now?"

"As you've already realized, I can read your thoughts," the UFS confessed.

"So what's on my mind right now?"

"I see that you're ablaze inside."

"Why should I be ablaze?"

"First, because you'd like to know whether your sweetheart Nadia is really getting married. Your friends wrote to you that she's not dating anyone, didn't they?"

There was no use denying the truth, so I gave an affirmative nod.

"Second, there's another thought of a universal nature that's nagging you. It's your great doubt about the existence of the afterworld where your father's supposed to be now, along with your mother who passed away just a few minutes after your birth."

I was utterly stunned because I hadn't told him anything about my mother.

"Listen, what's...what's your name?"

"I've got a total of seventy-seven of them. You can call me by my abbreviated name of AOL-77."

"Just AOL-77. Sounds a bit tactless to me. You see, after three hundred years under the Russians we adopted their custom of adding a person's patronymic to his first name. What if I called you something like Aol Ivanovich or Aol Petrovich?"

"There's no need for such appendages. Simplicity is truth's most becoming garb. So let it simply be AOL. Enough chattering. Let's fly to our destination. I'll show you the world from a bird's-eye view."

Of course, I put little faith in what I was hearing, but in my heart I wasn't against such an idea.

"Oh yes, what should I do with those scientists who are loafing around my ace of diamonds as if it were their Academy of Sciences?"

"Forget them. They'll be munching their food, communing with the spirits, and advancing all sorts of crazy hypotheses. In the end, they won't come up with anything useful."

"And Werner?"

"Werner is now sitting in the village council. He put a couple of bottles of liquor in front of Okrimenko and is talking him into selling your land."

"But it's my land."

"Of course, it's yours. So go and prove it. Spike his guns."

"But how?"

"One nail drives home another," AOL said with an air of unruffled competence.

"Drives out another," I corrected him.

"Sure, but in our case it should drive home an altogether different nail. Go buy a good supply of horilka, wine, cognac and beer, take along those funny papers you earthlings treasure more than human life, and go to Okrimenko to drive home your legitimate right to the land."

"You mean to say that I should take along money? But I don't have any."

"I'll produce it for you," AOL promised.

"You what?" I exclaimed, flabbergasted. "Are you a counterfeiter?"

"Why a counterfeiter? I'll make real money for you. Solid, real money, much better than the stuff rolling off your printing presses."

I heaved a gasping sigh.

"No, I won't go for that. My dad used to tell me never to steal and never to forge money. Don't undermine the foundations of the country, he said. It's your country and your land."

AOL looked at me in wide-eyed astonishment and gave a slow nod.

"All right, now let's fly to your sweetheart."

Such a development was very much to my liking.

The next moment AOL dissolved in the air, turning into an aura (what that word meant I hadn't the slightest idea, but I loved how it sounded).

A barely visible tiny beam twinkled in the air and I noticed that AOL had linked me to himself with it. I ceased to be a body burdened by clothes and footwear and turned into a soul – invisible, weightless and transparent.

* * *

We flew over the clouds past cities and villages. Looking down at the Earth, I only saw electric lights flickering here and there.

"Where are we?" I asked at last.

"Not far from Kiev. Over a little town in the suburbs of your capital," replied my guide.

Human inquisitiveness is an incomprehensibly weird habit. I was beset by worries up to my gills, but for all that I was curious to see what other people were doing.

AOL must have read my thought, because the next instant the little beam started to screen colored pictures before my eyes.

In the room of a house a man was restlessly pacing from corner to corner, gnawing at a pencil and mumbling something under his breath.

"Who's that?" I asked. "A scientist or an inventor?"

"No," AOL said. "He's your colleague, a nationally celebrated writer. Everyone is praising him to the skies as the pride and genius of his people, while out of envy, behind his back, they muckrake him with relish."

Just then the man raised his hands to the ceiling, either in a curse or prayer.

"What's he up to?" I cried out, as my optical beam went into a spin. "Does he want to shove his neck into a noose?"

"Exactly. Don't forget that you intended to do the same when I came flying to you in the loft."

"Is he as ill-starred as me?" I asked. "Or did his sweetheart leave him?"

"No. He's destroying his works. The next thing he'll do is throw his last manuscript into the fire and then sit down at his desk and write a farewell note. He wants his close friend to say the eulogy at the funeral because he was the only one of his colleagues who was genuinely sincere and treated him without any shamming."

"AOL, stop him!" I cried out. "Stop him like you stopped me. Burn his rope. Look, he's already climbed onto a chair..."

"You're right," AOL agreed calmly. "Now he'll knock the chair out from under his feet and – curtains."

"And you won't do anything so save him?"

"Exactly. We came to your world not to take care of erratic individuals, but to save mankind as a whole."

I gave no ear to what he said, although I must have paid greater heed to the purpose of his mission. At that moment I was more deeply concerned about the fate of the hapless writer.

"Then I'll cut that rope myself with the optical beam."

"You'll fail, because you haven't got the skill for this purpose, earthling," AOL said. "When you tried to commit suicide, you didn't consult your mental menu too much, but this man, even if he fails the first time, will repeat the attempt again and again until he gets his way. He realized that social injustice reigns supreme in your world... Oh well, he's passed away already."

Indeed, the soul of the suicide-writer rose into the sky, flitting past us in a barely visible streak of light.

"He's happy now," AOL uttered reflectively. "Happy as never before. Tomorrow he'll be even happier, while his enviers ... well, they'll come to his home festively dressed as if for their own birthdays. They'll compete in florid speeches over his coffin, surreptitiously rejoicing that he'd kicked the bucket at long last. But here's what they have forgotten: the highest recognition of a writer occurs precisely after his death - this is the way it's always been. Streets, schools, libraries and universities will be named for him. He'll be awarded the highest government prize posthumously. Monuments will be erected in his honor. And eventually - just imagine! - a newly discovered planet will bear his name. And then the enviers will envy him all the more bitterly."

The dimensions of such fame took my breath away. In the meantime, AOL had turned the corner of a high-rise and landed on the helipad of a newly built penthouse.

From there another panorama unfolded before my eyes. In the window of a house I saw a lean little man. There was absolutely nothing remarkable about him except for two outstanding features: a nose the shape of a poker and shiplike slippers. Now and then he put something against his head; to me it looked like a gun.

"Goodness gracious, here's another potential suicide!" I exclaimed in horror.

"Nothing of the sort," AOL calmed me down. "It's not a gun but his huge finger. Whenever he tries to scribble something, he puts his finger against his head, probably believing that through this conduit he'll draw something resembling a thought from his skull."

"To scribble, you said? Is he also a writer?"

"Well ... at one time he published two tiny books of short stories. The majority of them are pathetically primitive, but unexacting readers like them. Some of the stories were even to the taste of the Committee for Awarding the Taras Shevchenko Prize. But sitting on such committees are mostly diehard bureaucrats, not literati."

"What's his name, maybe I've read some of his writings?" I asked.

"Hardly. He's little known, but he's raring to become famous and will go out of his way to that end. He signs the books he writes as Eu-Geneius."

"That's a rather singular pen-name," I praised the writer. "If I were to see such a pen-name on a book cover, I'd probably buy the book."

"His split surname is only half of his problem," AOL remarked. "His soul is also split in two, just like the Remez house. One half of his soul services his inflated ego, while the other services officialdom."

"But I see that he has a worried look," I observed. "Is he working on a new book, or what?"

"No, he's reached the stage of creative impotency. Right now he's working on a new ... well, a new title for his previous book. Recently he found another sponsor, but there is nothing new to be offered. So now he spends sleepless nights, trying to concoct a new title to be blazed on a new cover."

"Is he prone to take his life?" I asked just in case.

"Oh, no. Such characters are not of the suicidal variety. Suicide is a side effect that can be afforded only by a genius."

I don't know how long we would have continued discussing the controversial subject of suicide if we were not interrupted by a ghastly howl.

"That's a huge watchdog howling," AOL commented. "He's been carrying on like that for the past five years. His master buried a horde of dollars in jars under a shed, and a chained dog in this place is the best guard for the cache. In all these years the master hasn't unchained the dog a single time. The poor critter probably would have liked to hang itself, but the chain is too short. Were his master to be chained like that just for one night, I wonder how he'd be howling."

"Look!" I cried out in horror, and some owls that had been sitting alertly on their perches scanning the landscape for prey, took flight, their wings almost touching us in passing.

"No, it's not a hanging, but a suspension called *strappado* in medieval times."

"But he howls no less wildly than the dog."

"You'd be howling like that if you were handcuffed behind your back and then hoisted by a rope tied to your hands."

"I see people in uniform," I said, taking a closer look at the scene. "AOL, this is done by the police."

"Exactly. They're extracting his confession of a crime he did not commit. The public prosecutor's office is in a hurry to find the perpetrator of the crime and close the case as fast as possible."

"But, but... it's vile to accuse an innocent person!" I said angrily. "A criminal charge should be brought against the law enforcers."

"If criminal charges were brought against all serious offenders and they were locked up," the UFS remarked ironically, "you'd have so many prisons there wouldn't be any space left for residential houses."

* * *

"AOL, there's one thing I remembered a while ago. Before I met you, I heard a voice. It wasn't yours."

"Granny's on the way," AOL said with a nod.

"Who is she?"

"She's my deputy, so to speak. At that time I couldn't get to you personally, but I had to receive the information somehow. So I sent her soul to tell you everything, just like through a radio transmitter."

"A soul?" I asked, surprised.

"You didn't understand me, did you? Yes, her soul. Remember how she dissolved in the air?"

I thumbed through my yesterdays and now recalled quite clearly how the strange granny had suddenly disappeared.

"Is she dead by now?"

"Yes, around the time you were hearing her voice."

"Who was she?" I was insistently curious to know.

"A beauty in her younger years. She was envied because of her beauty, just like the suicide writer for his talent. Even when her beauty waned, her old female acquaintances gulped bitter tears out of envy. The women on your planet love, envy and are jealous until the last days of their lives."

"She must have had an eventful life."

"Yes, eventful, but her death was a ghastly one."

"How did she die?"

"She was poisoned by her grandson."

"What for?"

"To inherit her apartment."

Suddenly something sharp stabbed my heart and I felt a heaviness pressing on me: I was regaining my body.

"Wait a second and I'll deal with this earthly gravity," AOL said, concerned. "You take everything too close to heart, so I'll switch off your hypersensitive sensors. Otherwise you'll wreck your ticker that's of low quality material as it is."

In that instant AOL must have really done something to me because I immediately felt a lightness in my limbs and an utter indifference to everything I saw.

"Now you'll perceive reality better," AOL said.

* * *

My switched-off heart produced a fantastic effect: the capacity of my brain reached its maximum level, and I began asking AOL all those questions I should have asked hours ago.

"So who are you? How did you land on our planet? And why did you choose me?"

"Your planet is perplexingly mysterious to us," the UFS replied seriously. "You exchanged your life's substance for colored papers that you yourselves print and then hunt for, mercilessly murdering one another to possess them. For the sake of these papers you are wrecking the Earth – your cradle and, eventually, your ship in the universe. All this you call civilization. You don't seem to realize that soon this civilization of yours will turn into fire and ashes. The finale is much more serious than just your planet being blasted into smithereens. It will upset the equilibrium in the universe. To prevent this from happening, now and then we go on dangerous trips to this place and build our launching pads."

"Just like my ace of diamonds?" I ventured a guess.

"Exactly. Well, we've arrived in Kiev. Do you see anything familiar, Svitozar?"

Below I saw the moonlit roof where Nadia and I used to sit, hugging each other with the indestructible certainty that this sky and the golden stars were the most beautiful in the world. But right now I was just listlessly recording in my mind what had once been a fact.

There was Nadia wringing her hands, most likely in a nervous state. In the room with her was an elderly, burly type of man.

"I thought she had much better taste," I observed primly.

"That's her father."

"Her father?" I asked, my forehead creasing in wonder. "But she doesn't have a father or a mother. She's a complete orphan who grew up in a children's home."

"If she's a complete orphan, you're a complete idiot," AOL remarked caustically, as he landed on the roof.

"She's got a father, and he is an ordinary worker. She was ashamed of telling you the truth, believing you to be a professor's son. You didn't tell her that your dad is a tiller of the soil either, did you?"

That was true.

"Her father," AOL continued, "told her that as long as he was alive he'd never permit his daughter to marry a hick. If he had his way, he'd marry her off to a diplomat."

"But she sent me a telegram that she was going to get married."

"It was her father who sent it."

That moment something warm touched my breast close to my heart.

"AOL, give me my body back. I want to see her."

"Are you out of your mind?" AOL was taken aback. "Do you want to run into her crazy papa? Oh, oh, seems like I'll have to cut off your sensors more thoroughly. Just a moment. That's much better now. For your information he visits her almost every day to kick up a row, yelling at her that he has denied himself sleep and an extra crust of bread to make her settle in Kiev and stay there. I simply don't understand why you people dream of living in places where the air is foul, where cars belch out nauseating exhaust fumes, and where the earth, instead of grass, is covered with black stinking tar."

* * *

I saw a lot of things that day.

I saw deception, murder, contractors of murder, and professional killers.

I saw people dying, I saw them being born.

I saw a lot of young people my age who were ashamed of their parents of humble origin, and if my heart had not been switched off, I would've been deadened to burning shame.

I saw dolled-up girls resembling top models whose fathers – euphemistically called oligarchs, but publicly known as crooks – married them off to similar oligarchs, that is to say crooks, and rejoiced at adding some more filthy lucre to their family business. And it didn't matter whether they married off their daughters in churches three or five times – for neither Almighty God nor a priest was of any relevance – as long as there was money behind the bond of union.

I saw the abysmal despair of senile scientists, who were among the world-renowned inventors of nuclear arms, which could pulverize the entire planet in a matter of seconds.

"If all this is true," I squeezed the observation out of myself, "it should be brought to the knowledge of the entire civilized world."

"We've been trying in vain to establish contact with your savages," AOL said with a sigh. "They hunt us like animals and knock down everything they come across. There's little common sense in your people."

I became thoughtful, so profoundly thoughtful that I had a strong urge to scratch my pate, but I could not, because of the physical absence of the latter. That inborn Ukrainian habit of scratching one's pate resurfaced even in my incorporeal state.

"Now let's rest a while and have a little chat," AOL suggested. "I'd like to tell you something, about the Remez house in particular."

* * *

"You remember, of course, the weird sounds occasionally coming from your loft," AOL launched slowly into the story.

"I certainly do. Whenever I remember those sounds, they make my eyelids twitch nervously."

"You were right in believing that it was the late Marko carrying on in your loft. He was really a savage beast, who finished off two of his brothers. His soul is now stewing and frying in hell, from which he manages to escape now and then. Whenever that happens, he tears around your bog like a loony. Jumping from tussock to tussock, he sets them aglow. He hoots and screeches like an owl, sending a glacial shiver running down people's spines. At other times he prowls along rooftops on moonlit nights or in the dead of night appears in front of a hapless stray and, under the pretext of leading him onto the correct path, takes him to the deepest mire in the Remez Bog, At which point the devils rush out of hell, grab Marko and return him to the bottomless pit. But regardless of how many times he's thrown into the devilishly hot magma, he never burns to death. That's how God punished him with a hellish immortality."

"Does this mean that this freak is only afraid of devils?" I asked. "Is there anyone on Earth he's afraid of?"

"On Earth Marko is afraid only of your Uncle Makar and his calves. The latter sense him from a considerable distance, while Uncle Makar sees him too and chases him into the mire with a sacred willow twig. That twig has the same effect on the devils."

On hearing the devils being mentioned, I recalled how our Sosnivka women frequently complained: "Where the devil are our spouses hanging around? Probably cradling the devil's cup of home brew!"

We, too, are hanging around the devil knows where, I thought with a sigh.

"I ... am ... not ... a ... devil," AOL said with an offended drawl. "By the way, I saved you from the noose."

"That's what your current mission is all about? To save me?"

"That too. Don't be in a hurry to depart for other worlds. You still have to continue our clan."

"Our?" I asked, not understanding what he had in mind.

"I mean your clan ... the old Cossack clan of the Buriachenkos. You're its one and only descendant. Don't forget that, Svitozar. Well, if you want to see the devil so much, I'll show him to you right away."

* * *

This message had not yet sunk in when I saw a beautiful panoramic view of a monastery dominated by the gilded cupolas of churches.

"Do you see that smartly dressed gentleman stepping out the expensive car?" AOL said, pronouncing his words like a TV commentator concentrating on what he believed to be the most essential.

"Sure," I said. "His face looks familiar. I've seen him a lot on television, standing up for the rights of Orthodox believers."

"That's the devil."

"What do you mean – the devil?" I asked from utter surprise. "Does he have no fear of the churches and the crosses on them?"

"He's not only unafraid of all of them, he's on chummy terms with the clerics."

An incredibly corpulent priest, a bishop by the looks of him, emerged from the principal church and walked toward the respectable black-suited gentleman, who began rummaging in his pockets and produced a thick wad of dollar bills. And then I saw something I had never seen in my life before: on the gentleman's back trembled a pair of wings as thin as woman's stockings, yet no less scary for that.

"Tomorrow get together as many of your faithful as you can," he said to the bishop. "Give them something to eat, but don't overfeed them, and then lead them to Khreshchatyk Street in a crusade to save Lenin. The benighted heathens want to pull down the monument to him. Don't spare money for the crusaders."

"I won't let them," the bishop said emphatically. "I won't let them have it..."

It was difficult to understand what he really had in mind – the dollars, or the Lenin monument?

When the gentleman was leaving, I saw his burning eyes for the first time. That instant I remembered where I had seen him before. He was the very same MP my dad had warned me against being his assistant.

* * *

After directing the optical beam at the monastery's refectory, I took a closer look at the assembly of monks sitting around a bounteous table.

"The highest ecclesiastical dignitaries," AOL informed me. "The one with the beard is their Metropolitan."

"Roasted suckling pigs," I commented on the arranged dishes. "Then there's black caviar, red caviar, fried homemade sausages, butter, cheese, stuffed eggs, olives with anchovies... Aren't they supposed to be fasting at this time of year?"

"What fasting are you talking about?" AOL said with a laugh. "Ever since they started celebrating New Year, they don't know how to grind to a halt."

"It's the Year of the Pig," I recalled.

"To be honest, all the years on your planet are Years of the Pig," AOL remarked skeptically.

"How would you call this year then?"

"I would call not the year but your entire century the Century of Jackasses."

At this point I spotted a young girl and interrupted him.

"Look, AOL, she's heading to the refectory."

"In her haste she mistook the Refectory Church for the refectory. Now she's opening the door. She is horrified at the sight of so much meat on the table during a fast. She's trying to run away, but - see? - they're pulling her to the table."

"What are they telling her?"

"They're explaining that they are God's vicars on your Earth and that in the Year of the Pig God granted them a number of suckling pigs so that they can partake of His present with devout gratitude. She is resisting, but see how that hog of a monk is embracing her waist? He's ablaze with desire. He's forcing her to drink a glass of cognac. It's the first time in her life that she tastes liquor and small wonder it's made her staggering drunk."

"What will happen next?"

"The usual things that happen to drunken women trapped in the clutches of hogs yearning for flesh."

"Why doesn't the old Metropolitan stop this looseness?"

"He's just as drunk as everybody else. See what a kick he's getting out of the scene. Its outcome will be boringly banal. That hog will knock her up, and she'll bear a child that'll be bundled off to an orphanage to preserve the faultless dignity of the monkly tribe."

"What about the threesome guzzling vodka in the corner over there?" I asked. "Whom are they reproaching with their bitter condemnations?"

"Since this monastery is under the rule of the Moscow Patriarchate, they're cursing the Kiev Patriarch for falling away from the Kremlin's canons," AOL replied in his know-it-all manner. "Through their mouths the Kremlin is anathematizing him."

* * *

Without so much as by your leave, AOL made a sharp turn in another direction.

"Do you recognize where we are?"

"In downtown Kiev, of course."

"Do you see that bunch of people marching under red banners?"

"Yes. They are Ukrainian communists whom the local press rags for being the Kremlin's lackeys."

"That's true for nearly most of them. But there are also a few others, who could be called 'errant sheep.' They believe in the Lord God, they believe in their priests and

willingly march under the church banners as they're ordered to, bearing above their brainless heads the portraits of sanctified robbers and murderers."

I took a closer look and saw over the marchers' heads the portraits of Lenin and Stalin, and a little way off I recognized to my surprise some icons and a portrait of Czar Nicholas II whom the Russians had called Bloodthirsty Nick no so long ago.

An exalted granny dropped to her knees in front of the portrait of the world's proletarian Fuehrer. Compared to him, the Bloodthirsty Nick was a biblical lamb.

"She's crossing herself," I whispered in bewilderment. "It's simply impossible."

"Nothing's impossible in your country. Mark my words: the Moscow Church will canonize him eventually. But the tragedy behind this granny's attitude is the complete lack of knowledge of her past. Her father was a White Guard officer. Under the onslaught of the Red Army his troops hoped to board ships in the Crimea and escape to France. To give the officers and men the chance to reach the ships, their wives took their children to meet the Red Army halfway, believing that Lenin's Bolsheviks would not shoot at women and children. But their hopes were in vain. Almost all of them were mowed down, and only a few of the children remained alive, among them this girl. She was sent to an orphanage where she was brought up in a communist spirit, which made her hate the White Guards and deify the Bolsheviks for the rest of her life. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, she found an outlet in this kind of religion to save herself from abject despair."

"What blatant nonsense!"

"Well, it's become much of a steady habit on your planet. People pray in churches, beseeching God to grant them more of those colored papers. They step over the corpses of their fellow humans, and then build churches and pray in them again. The entire history of your church is a history of sharp knives and black nights, campaigns with swords and death by swords. Is religion worth anything if it dooms so many innocent people to death? Just think hard about the fact that the victims don't want to pray by the canons devised not by God but by the same mortals as them. Now these crazies here are marching under church banners and saints while abusing their fellow men and calling them far from godly names."

* * *

We alighted in an abandoned stork's nest. AOL explained that its feathery occupants had died in a fight with ravening eagles on the shores of the Mediterranean.

"Won't our beams burn their nest?" I wondered. "What if they're still alive and will return?"

"No need to worry. We're only shining brightly and nothing more than that. It's the best refuge in this place, what with a police academy on one side and a nuthouse on the other."

"A police academy? That should be interesting. Let me have a look inside," I asked AOL.

"All right, take a look while I do the explaining. Right now the cadets are in the initial phase of an assault drill. Out of their foxholes a moment ago, they're going at it tooth and nail against one another."

"But I see real bayonets!" I said in utter surprise.

"Sure, real bayonets fixed to Kalashnikov assault rifles. What else did you expect? Their systems are stuffed to the gills with the adrenaline they dreamed of. Their daddies paid a lot of money to have their sons trained in such a prestigious police academy. Look AT how they're stabbing at whatever's in their way and hitting faces with rifle butts. That means broken bones, concussions"

"I'm sick of this scene," I said. "Let's better have a look at the nuthouse."

"People in a nuthouse are calm and subdued. No fighting there..."

"Then they're not real nuts," I concluded. "The real ones are those with the bayonets."

"Your planet is a mystery indeed," AOL reiterated his previously voiced conclusion. "Everything here is frequently the other way around."

* * *

"He's a dingbat, isn't he?" I said, pointing at an old man who had just then burst into the office of the hospital's chief physician. [] In his hands the old man held a soccer ball skillfully painted like a globe, while under his arms he had a box with a child's railroad and tank cars. After arranging all this on the floor of the office, the patient put about twenty tank cars on the tracks and pushed into the nipple of the ball a small tube that he stuck into the first tank car.

"Pumping natural gas out of the bowls of the earth, aren't you?" the physician said with a smile, warming up the patient.

"Exactly," the old man said. "Let's fill up our tank cars. With the fourth tank car the planet is already cracking – hear that? With the sixth tank car it's all wrinkled. Take a look, please. Africa is linking up with America. See what's happening to the Indian Ocean?"

"Madagascar is floating away from Africa," the physician added.

"You see it all right, but the stupid scientists seem to have gone blind," the half-wit fumed. "That's just what is happening: the Indian Ocean is expanding while the Atlantic is shrinking. Tomorrow I'll show you what our planet will look like when we pump all the oil out of it."

"Good," said the doctor with a readiness to agree. "Now my dear, go back to your ward and I'll send over a nurse with a tranquilizer."

"I don't need your damned tranquilizers!" the old man suddenly burst into a shout. "If you think I have a loose screw, you'd better take a look at yours. I'm telling you what reality holds in store for our earth. If my predictions prove correct, soon all your therapies will not be worth a fig. There won't be anyone for you to treat."

While the orderlies were pushing the old man out of the physician's office, I said to AOL:

"To me he doesn't seem to have a perverse kink in the head at all."

"And not him alone," my guide agreed. "Take a closer look at the next one."

"He's writing something, as far as I can make out. Looks like letters. Love letters? Hardly, he seems to be too old for that."

"Stop talking nonsense. His fate is altogether different. When he was still a boy, he decided to devote his life to

his native land. When he turned fifteen, he took up arms and went into the forests of the Carpathian Mountains to fight for Ukraine to be free. He fought for fifteen years, hiding in thickets and gullies until he was wounded one day and taken prisoner."

"Were criminal charges brought against him?"

"Oh, yes. He was thrown into a prison camp for fifteen years and got an additional fifteen years of exile in the Siberian taiga."

"And then..."

"And then Ukraine, so dear to his heart, appeared on the map of the world. But he returned to it as a broken old man. For the next fifteen years he kept writing letters to Members of Parliament and ministers. He asked to be treated as a freedom fighter who had sacrificed his life for the freedom and independence of Ukraine and that his comrades-in-arms be treated with equal respect. But he did not receive a single response. The young Ukrainian state had no need for these feeble veterans. Instead, orders and substantial pensions were heaped on those who had executed, tortured, and exiled the true patriots to Russia's polar circle. After such a hideous outrage he lost his faculties MIND and was confined to this asylum, where he'll probably meet his death."

"For whom are those letters intended then?" I tried to clarify. "For MPs and ministers?"

"Though an inmate of the asylum he realizes pretty well that MPs and ministers are a bunch of barefaced frauds. So he writes his appeals to Almighty God. But the saddest aspect of his condition is that he still hopes to receive a response..."

Upon hearing this story, a painful sadness came over me. Again AOL had to adjust my emotional sensors.

After keeping silent for some minutes, he turned my attention to yet another patient.

"That patient over there is perhaps the wisest of them all. He's an outstanding scientist. At least that's what he believes."

"So what's his expertise?"

"Judging from his nature, he is a great humanist and romanticist. A God-fearing Ukrainian patriot, his personal philosophy makes him an idealist of the purest water. He considers himself a follower of Plato or Proculus or Hryhoriy Skovoroda - he hasn't yet made up his mind which one. Since, during his studies, he managed to escape the influence of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, he dreams of building a paradise in just one country."

"Reminds me a lot of our third president," I mumbled.

"Now just imagine a country inhabited by sentimental and deeply religious Ukrainians. They don't want to fight or seize anyone or anything. All they want is to build the world's best cars and civil aircraft, develop a medicine based on godly principles, and have transparent borders of bullet-proof plastic sheets."

"Without any weapons whatsoever?"

"No, they do have them. But their weapons don't shed any blood, lulling instead [the] hostile troops to sweet slumber. Then the smiling Ukrainians disarm their sleepy enemies, graciously preserve their lives, and dispatch them in a friendly manner further away from the battlefield - to Ukrainian factories and plants. The latter operate exclusively on solar energy, without contaminating

the environment. This patient is also designing public medical cars for all the poor at no charge..."

"That's a vivid fantasy he has, all right," I agreed. "But did he invent anything practical and useful as a scientist?"

"Each of his inventions is unquestionably unique. The most important one of all is his solar-mirror method of communicating with the Almighty God. All day long he catches sunbeams in his mirror. According to his theory, these reflections are supposed to be God's envoys. He converses with them and informs God of his brilliant ideas. They, i.e., his ideas, are of extraordinary scientific value."

"But most genuine inventions also border on the fantastic," I said reflectively. "And a lot of people think that such inventors are nuts. Who knows where the limit is..."

"Yes, who knows," AOL agreed with me this time as well. "Perhaps future generations will concede that the contemporaries of this genius failed to understand him. Everything is in the hands of the Almighty."

The religiosity that my extraterrestrial acquaintance demonstrated to me so unexpectedly made me recall an absolutely earthly thing: for the second day now I hadn't eaten a crumb and felt quite comfortable without my body.

"I think you'll agree now that having no body isn't that bad," AOL remarked. "First, you save a lot on food and clothing. Second, you can travel wherever you want in an instant. I don't know about you, but I'm sick and tired of this loonybin. How about an evening pleasure tour over Kiev?"

"A wonderful idea," I replied.

* * *

We landed on a satellite dish antenna, of which there was a multitude now above the windows of the city's high-rises. Against the background of the antenna AOL glowed somewhat differently than before. Probably it reminded him of a flying sauce or something else.

"Do you want to see what marital life is all about?" AOL asked me shrewdly. "The observation will stand you in good stead in the future."

In an apartment right under us a husband and wife were embroiled in a screamingly noisy argument: he wanted to watch a regular session of Parliament, while she was gunning a Mexican TV serial.

"Have you never heard pigs squealing around a trough, or what?" the wife yelled. "The next time we visit my grandmother in the country, go into the pigsty and listen to your heart's content!"

"Is our Parliament really a pigsty where pigs squeal around a trough?" I asked AOL, as if he were a professional parliamentary commentator. "Uncle Makar used to say something of the sort, and my dad did not like MPs for some reason."

"Well, theoretically, your Parliament has some reasonable humans. About five percent," AOL said skeptically. "Let's fly over there and you'll form your own conclusions."

* * *

There it was, the Ukrainian Parliament with the national flag fluttering on a tall spire.

"Hey, I don't understand why I hear the repetitive ten-second countdown that sounds only after the MPs press

the buttons on the panels in front of them to vote for a motion or law. They can't be voting every ten seconds all the time."

"There's absolutely no voting in progress. It's the computer."

"A computer can't possibly vote for the MPs?"

"As if you didn't know how your MPs go about their jobs! They serve different factions at one and the same time, and run up and down the aisles pressing the buttons for absent MPs for a set fee. They're doing it in a rush and so carelessly that the computer finally goes on the Fritz. It's a glitch in the system, as IT specialists put it."

It made me so sick to hear the piercing sound several dozen times that I began pleading with AOL to take me elsewhere. Just then I noticed a man coming out of our legislative think tank. His outward appearance did not suggest any semblance of an MP: a faded suit, a shabby briefcase instead of a respectable attachee case, and not the slightest blustering arrogance in his eyes. He had a bouncy pace and was turning his head all the time as if to see whether he was being followed.

"I wonder who that could be," I reflected aloud. "He doesn't look like an MP; first, he is poor, and second, he is scared."

"It's a category of people who are afraid of their own shadows. In their worn-down galoshes they go to work, to their betters, to all sorts of conferences and sessions, and even to a theater. If any of them drives, it's a jalopy manufactured about half a century ago. You see them now and then at flea markets where they buy, say, old chairs. When you visit their homes, the host will offer such a chair and caution you that it dates from his

great-grandfather's days. But the money they've hoarded would make a Rockefeller green with envy. Even we have failed to disclose from on high where they hide the money. All right, enough. You wanted to see what Parliament looks like inside, didn't you?"

I focused my optical beam into the session hall. Oh, wonder of wonders! What I saw was a veritable zoo – growling and snarling tigers, lions, jackals, hyenas, wolves and foxes, screeching owls, hawks, vultures, ravens and magpies, and an overwhelming majority of dirty hogs, although there were no fewer hee-hawing jackasses. Here and there were some black sheep and a negligible few humans. The latter tried to explain something to the hogs and jackals, and saw in response only bared fangs, while the hyenas broke into such a ghastly howl it made my flesh creep.

"Yes, my father was [right one hundred percent," I concluded with a deep sigh and gestured to AOL to get me away from this place.

* * *

Once again bewildered by the inexplicable nature of humans, I directed my optical beam in another direction. Suddenly I saw hundreds if not thousands OF similar beams rising into the sky like fireworks. Some of them were brighter than the others, but never in my lifetime had I witnessed such a fantastic sight.

"Somebody must be celebrating their jubilee birthday or a successful business deal," I observed with a mumble. "But once the rockets burst, why doesn't their light drift to the ground but keeps on flying skyward?"

"Those are the souls that are leaving their dead bodies on Earth," AOL explained.

AOL's explanation seemed to be incongruous, but I had seen so many unusual things by then that I ceased to wonder.

"Now those lights over there are the souls of soldiers," AOL continued. "Thirty young men died in their first year of service."

"What happened to them? The armed forces are not involved in any hostilities in this country," I said, although I wasn't that confident in my observation right now.

"Sometimes you don't need any hostilities to court trouble. These boys were bent on making some extra pocket money. They stole a couple of rockets from a depot and wanted to recover their nonferrous components. Nonferrous scrap metal can fetch good money in your country, but this time it amounted to the price of human life," AOL said, a ring of bitterness in his voice. "One of the rockets blew up and the other detonated, putting an end to the boys' lives."

"But.... but does heaven enclose them all in its embrace?" I asked.

"All of them, except one."

"You mean the one who made a mistake when he was taking apart the rocket?"

"No, the sergeant-major who talked them into this venture. His is the lonely soul wandering in the skies now. Its light is lusterless, like a rotten egg."

I looked more intently and saw the slightly visible jellyfish-like souls against the background of the dark blue sky.

"But he's not the only one like that out there," I remarked.

"Correct. Over there you see the soul of a university instructor who extorted bribes. Because of him and the likes of him, some students picked up the habit of boasting that textbooks are not authoritative sources for them."

I almost gnashed my teeth in anger as I recalled my student days. I knew only too well some of the sonnies of well-fixed daddies: the only effort they were good at was sticking dollars into academic record registers for the examiners to enter a good mark for course credit tests. From my brief life's experience I knew that more often than not money spread the almost incurable virus of megalomania. I recalled one such greenhorn who was proud that the elderly professors he had bribed were dancing attendance on him.

"Well, that's certainly not an attribute of native intelligence," AOL said thoughtfully, once again setting my wits to work in the right direction. "Svitozar, take a look at the highway down there."

The highway slithered like a black snake into the distance.

"That's where the Grim Reaper is making his horrible rounds on your Earth," AOL remarked sadly. "He chooses his victims arbitrarily. Some he rocks to sleep at the driving wheel, others he induces to ride a magic carpet instead of a car that requires attentive piloting, and still others he provokes to violate traffic rules. And then he reaps his terrible harvest of careless drivers, both young and old."

"Especially the drunken ones," I added.

"Take a look at that young fop, how he meanders his Ferrari down the macadam. See that glint of satisfac-

tion and arrogance in his eyes as he overtakes the other cars. Very soon he'll guide his bucket of bolts to extinction."

"What a numbskull...He must be drunk, as far as I can make out by his driving."

"You're absolutely right."

"Who gave him the permission to drive in such a state?"

"A police patrolman, who else? No doubt for a fat bribe."

And again I had to give AOL his due for his unmistakable prediction. A couple of minutes later the smart Ferrari turned into a flaming heap of scrap when the car crashed into a tree.

* * *

Then I concentrated my attention on a truck half-full of coal, into which a box was being lowered and then covered with more coal.

"And what's going on here?" I wondered.

"They're loading high-quality coking coal to be hauled to the seaport of Odessa," AOL replied readily.

"It's coal all right - that much I can see myself. But what's the box in the truck for?"

"A woman is inside the box complete with a life support system. What you see is trafficking in human flesh in action. At Odessa the goods are loaded onto ships and taken abroad. Believe me, the demand for flesh is much higher than for the coal."

"And who are the recipients of the cargo on the other side?"

"Slave traders in Turkey, Israel, Greece, Portugal, Spain, the United Arab Emirates... The list is endless. The women end up in striptease clubs, brothels, and the prettiest of them in harems."

Although I knew about the sex slave trade from hearsay and television reports, this practical phase of the business shocked me.

"AOL, where do they find them?" I asked.

"There are many ways. Some are kidnapped, others are ordered, but in most cases the girls themselves fall for the alluring baits of advertisements for jobs in what are supposed to be cafes, bars and nightclubs, but actually are nothing more than cathouses."

The message of the advertisement I had taken at face value not so long ago – *Don't miss your chance! Our quotas are limited. It's today or never!* – resurfaced in my mind. Although I hardly met the requirements for joining a chicken ranch, I was glad not to have fallen for the bait. Who knows what might have befallen me. It never hurts to keep on the safe side. After all, the slave trade comes in a huge number of varieties.

* * *

"Now the main thing for you is not to lag but keep close to me," AOL said, as we followed the tree-lined course of the highway. "Otherwise you'll fly in an unlooked-for direction, like that trainee who's deaf to what her driving instructor is telling her to do."

Behind the windshield I saw a pretty woman in the driver's seat.

"Right now she's not thinking about traffic rules, but how to lure the instructor to the back seat," AOL

remarked contemptuously. "She's intent on getting her driver's license by hook or by crook and doesn't give two hoots that this very instant, instead of first gear, she has shifted into reverse. After six circles backwards he'll be dizzy and grab her leg, exclaiming, 'I've never met a woman who drives in reverse to such perfection!' To which she will assure him that this is not the only thing she can do to perfection and suggest that they get into the back seat..."

Again I was overwhelmed by the infallibility of AOL's predictions, because that's exactly what happened.

But the driving instructor refused delicately, pleading a terrible headache.

Being an out-and-outer when it came to having her way, she tried to convince him that a headache wouldn't present any obstacle to what she had in mind.

In the end he flew off the handle and yelled at her: she was his sixth trainee that day and what she wanted was too much even for a professional driver.

* * *

Then we heard raucous laughter coming from the side of the fateful highway.

A group of boys were kicking another boy, who was roaring with laughter in response.

"What a blinking idiot to roar with laughter when he's being murdered," I concluded.

"His brains are fried from drugs," AOL explained. "He doesn't feel any pain or the approach of death. Now they'll clean out his pockets, filch his cell phone, watch and wallet, while his body - not yet a corpse, but the boys

are working hard to this end – will be dumped on a garbage heap somewhere out of town. There he'll be set on fire, along with the garbage. Those characters even believe they're useful 'scavengers of society.'"

Still, I wondered why AOL did not do anything to prevent all this.

"We can't interfere in your doings all the time," he said sadly, having intercepted my reproachful observation. "We just can't. It's what you are supposed to do yourselves..."

* * *

"Listen, Svitozar, why should we be circling over Kiev all the time? Why not visit Africa? I'll show you some real children of nature."

I didn't have the slightest idea of how he would whisk me to the opposite side of the world. No sooner had this thought flickered through my mind than I was flying over a different continent. The first thing I saw was a sandy beach lined by palm trees, where a group of Africans was dancing with wild abandon.

"Bunch of savages," I commented.

"Don't jump to conclusions," the pedantic AOL said. "This tribe has the finest minds in the world. By the way, they're also of extra-terrestrial origin and settled on your Earth thousands of years ago."

"Well, well, that's news to me. And what are those white men in commercial vans doing on the beach?"

"They are representatives of the consumer society, who see a lucrative market for dressing the naked."

"That's a really strange idea for such a hot climate."

"And an empty idea besides," AOL agreed. "Those natives have perhaps the most ingenuously natural IDs on your planet."

To tell the truth, I didn't understand what he had in mind by "natural IDs."

"Well, it's when you see right away whether it's a man or a woman," my guide explained. "Here is something for the sake of comparison...."

I hadn't had a chance even to blink when I saw a scene in an uproariously noisy nightclub.

"Take a closer look at those dancers," AOL whispered in my ear. "That woman over there with flowing hair is actually a man once it comes to visiting a rest room. And that boy with a crew cut will prove to be a woman when he's in bed."

(At this point I had an urge to doubt the gender of my guide. But since he had the mystifying ability to read human thoughts, I immediately saw his disapproving eyes fixed on me).

Gyrating on a stage in the nightclub was a stripper who eventually proved to be a man as well.

"You humans are a truly weird lot," AOL said. "You are so insistent on dressing some while undressing others."

* * *

By midday of the third day of my aerial wanderings, just when respectable employees were leaving their offices for lunch break, we were still circling over the Ukrainian capital like some errant birds.

"Why's that dignified lady hovering around the entrance to the Cabinet of Ministers?" I was curious to know. "Look, all the guards pay honor to her."

"But she can't reciprocate, because she lost her honor ten years ago."

"Is she that old?"

"If twenty-five is old for you, what's young then?"

"She's employed by the Cabinet of Ministers at such a young age already?" I exclaimed rapturously and began recalling my adventurous job of a ministry messenger, when AOL interrupted my fond memories:

"Yes, fancy her working at the Cabinet of Ministers and servicing the Prime Minister himself. And what staggering bills she draws up for each of her sessions!"

"What sessions?" I asked.

"Pre-lunch sessions of massage with all services up and down. Never mind the up and down – too early for you to catch on. You'll get the picture once you're married."

Astonished by the virtuousness of the alien, I fell silent and would have stayed that way were it not for an opaque beam whirling crazily around us and then rapidly zooming off into space.

"Goodness gracious, what could that have been?" I asked.

"It's the soul of an amateur hunter," AOL replied, as confidently as before. "Moments ago he was discharged from the hospital, or rather from its surgical unit. He was gravely wounded during a hunt. The men in white expertly completed what his hunting partners failed to achieve. Such crazies depart for the afterworld in the hundreds every day. I really don't understand your brutal pastime. Why do you earthlings hunt so doggedly the living souls of animals?"

I was now intensely annoyed by his constant flow of critical remarks about the customs of my country and planet: whether he liked it or not, they were the only ones I had.

"AOL," I began, trying to thwart his further nitpicking, but he interrupted my train of thought.

"What, what is it you want to tell me? That those brutes can't imagine life without a chunk of raw meat roasted somewhere outdoors? And that for this purpose they use gunshot to blast all the innards out of an animal's body, and ..."

"AOL," I said, standing my ground, "I'm glad that everything's different on your planet, and your people, or whatever you call them, are intelligent, educated, magnanimous and nationally conscious."

"At least as long as I've lived there I have never seen anything of what goes on here," my interdimensional guide said angrily.

Crestfallen, I fell silent.

"But your patriotism is something I like and understand," AOL said the, dulling the edge of the injury to my feelings.

"After all, I too lived on your Earth once."

"You did?" I asked, surprised, curiosity getting the better of my offense.

"Yes, I did. And then I had to leave ..."

"And when did you ..."

"When did I die?" he completed my unfinished question. "It happened twenty-one years, two months, three days and four hours ago."

A whistle escaped my lips, because AOL had just now stated my age with mathematical precision.

"What a strange coincidence...", I began saying when my attention was distracted by the sight of three men who were stuffing what looked like large bundles of waste paper into plastic bags which they put into barrels and closed them with lids.

"Let's fly on," AOL said. "On the way I'll tell you about what you mistakenly took for waste paper."

* * *

"Well, it might be some documents destined for the state archives, but I discerned a quaint irony in your voice, AOL. What is it then?"

"Try and make another guess," AOL suggested with a laugh.

"Hm ... not so long ago elections were held in my country," I said, picking my way toward another conjecture. "Since fair elections are a fairytale, it may be concluded that these ones were also rigged. So now the MPs with the piglike mugs you showed me some moments ago want to cover up their tracks and destroy the real ballot papers that the voters cast in favor of people, not pigs. That's why these barrels are now being tightly lidded to be dumped in the Black Sea or, even better, in the Mediterranean. Is my guess correct?"

"A good shot in the dark, but you missed the mark again," AOL said. "Yet it's not a wacky idea at all, since it was used in your country before and will surely be used in the next elections. It's not ballot papers."

"What, then?"

"Hard currency."

"Hard currency? Whose?"

"Well, your Prime Minister wants it very much to be his."

"The Prime Minister – of all people? Oh yes, the one who so willingly paid for the massage services," I recalled.

"You bet. But now he's no less willing to pay for the services of shippers. The barrels with the hard currency will go on board an air plane."

"Please, be more precise from this point on," I begged, my curiosity heated to the boiling point.

"You see, your Prime Minister is well aware that while he sits in his high armchair he's got a chance to grab a fat chunk of the public pie. That hunk's so huge it wouldn't fit into any specially tailored pocket. So he's got no other choice but to stash the filthy lucre in the barrels. You don't know what a fantastic deal he pulled off."

"What sort of deal?" I jumped with feverish impatience to learn the details.

"Stay put or else you'll go off like a shot to the constellation of Orion. The Prime Minister clinched a deal with several dozen countries, promising them to supply aviation fuel for all of their aircraft."

"But where can he get so much fuel?" I asked, bewildered surprise jolting me out of the jumping mood. "We're not some Russia or the United Arab Emirates!"

"He pumped all the fuel reserves out of your armed forces and even out of your civil aviation. And it's curtains for all your passenger liners. The only fueled aircraft is the Prime Minister's personal plane. Now he'll load all the barrels on board and make himself scarce abroad."

"Just wait a minute," I interrupted, trying to recall my meager university knowledge about macroeconomics. "As far as I remember, all the money under inter-state agreements has to land in the state treasury."

"It surely has to," AOL agreed. "But your Prime Minister made it a *quid pro quo* arrangement, sharing some of the loot with the State Treasurer, Minister of

Finance and, of course, with the Chief Customs Officer. He shelled out greenbacks to them to them, while they opened up the green corridor to Europe for him."

"Which means that he is a state criminal," I pronounced with conviction. "Won't Interpol be looking for him all over the world?"

"What a naive character you are, Svitozarik!" my guide said genially.

The gentle name of Svitozarik moved me deeply. Only my late father called me by that name, and not often for that matter.

"What makes you think I'm naive? He can be sold out by anyone. By these loaders, for instance."

"Don't worry about that. They've been given a good word to the wise. He offered them a simple option between life and death. Seeing that murderous glint in his eyes, which didn't have a shade of love for his fellow men, the loaders chose the right option. Your Prime Minister knows how to arrange his affairs."

"Still, I can't believe that he won't be nabbed and slapped into jail," I said.

"My dear, he'll not only be left at large, but he'll be idolized!" my guide responded. "No more than two days will pass and a group of MPs will be on its way to bow down before him. They would have gladly gone by air, but since all the airplanes are grounded for lack of fuel, they'll travel on their personal buses. On behalf of the Ukrainian people they'll implore the Prime Minister to return to his homeland, because without him the President is not worth a hill of beans, while the Ukrainian Parliament's been left to its own devices, like a gutter urchin."

"Why would they do that?"

"The MPs hope that after they 'whitewash' him, each of them will get a share of the barreled greenbacks to secure their comfortable old age and a spot in a prestigious cemetery. On the way in their buses they'll have only one thing on their minds: what will they receive from the loot?"

"And the Prime Minister will hit it off with them?"

"Of course he will. After a month they'll meet him in Parliament with bouquets of flowers. The most slavish of them will smother him with an energetic smooch like in Leonid Brezhnev's times. The entire Parliament, along with the Communists, will jump to their feet and burst out with a loud 'Hurrah!' The Prime Minister will be moved so profoundly that his left eye, which blinks the most frequently, will shed a hot tear and burn a hole in the Parliament's floor. The country's hero now, he will ascend the rostrum and from its height declare that he will give his entire annual salary and all his bonuses to the Ukrainian people. After that the applause will turn into a thunderous ovation, and the Prime Minister will be carried on the hands of the MPs to their parliamentary restaurant, which they modestly call a canteen. Journalists will also be treated to the canteen's goodies. A year later he'll be awarded the order and title of Hero of Ukraine. Then the press will go into rhapsodies about his incorruptible integrity."

"Is it really necessary to dip so deeply into the public purse just for the sake of instant publicity?" I moaned.

"Not always," AOL said in a jolly way. "Your name will also feature in the press very soon."

"My name? That's impossible," I said. "Even when I was in my former shell, so to speak, the newspapers

never wrote about me. They'll hardly write anything now, what with me being a misty-incorporeal-something."

"Upon my word, your name will be in the press, Svitozar," AOL insisted. "And very soon. Tomorrow, as a matter of fact!"

* * *

As the evening stole on, AOL and I were circling over an elite district of the capital. Below I saw a little park, its alleys lined by wide-spreading lime trees. I still doubted the veracity of AOL's prediction of me catapulting into fame, when he interrupted my thoughts with another idea:

"Now you'll have a chance to show your heroic mettle."

In one of the park alleys three gorilla-like hoodlums were approaching a boy and a girl, no doubt a strolling pair of sweethearts. One of the hoodlums landed a crushing uppercut to the boy's jaw. The boy fended off the next blows to the best of his abilities, but he was a tender sort and was soon knocked down. Then the second hoodlum grabbed the girl by the elbow so brutally it made her scream with pain. She bore such a striking resemblance to my Nadia it made my heart thump.

"How can I help her, if I don't have a body?" I yelled in despair.

"Don't worry about that. I'll lend you the proper form," AOL assured me.

The next instant I was already feeling that I had all of my body in place – hands, head, and a pair of feet standing on solid ground. I was not just standing on any place on the ground but right in front of one of the gorilla-like characters.

"What kind of a soldier of fortune is that?" he asked in utter surprise.

From behind his back another hoodlum chimed in:

"A monstrous ape, if you ask me! Listen, out of what century did you come and in what museum were you brought back to life?"

I must have presented a weird sight indeed: pointy-toed, dark-gray moccasins on my feet, my body clothed in shining armor, and yellow gloves that made my hands look like the paws of a pterodactyl. On my head was a fancy helmet, but my hair underneath it was most likely bristling, since my entire body was bracing for a bitter fight.

"You don't look very much like frequent visitors to museums," I remarked.

"Hey, Tug, here's a buddy of yours," the first hoodlum said to the second one. "He's chattering in Ukrainian."

"A guy of many tongues, eh? Nikolai Azarov is surely no match for him*, the third hood said ironically, letting go of the girl to scratch his nose.

I thought she would take to her heels, but instead she bent over her boyfriend and put an ear close to his heart to hear whether it was beating. I could hear that his heart was not simply beating, but throbbing from fright. I decided to go into action. My decision was well-timed, because the first two hoods were approaching me, swinging their knives in the air. To tell the truth, I was in the clutches of fear for all that I was clad in armor. I'll have to pin my hopes on AOL now, I thought. He will certainly not be twiddling his thumbs if the human comedy suddenly switches genres into a tragedy.

* Reference to a former high-ranking government official and current Member of Parliament notorious for his ludicrously clumsy attempts at speaking Ukrainian during public appearances. – Tr.

"Stand firm!" I heard his familiar voice.

I raised my eyes, and there was AOL in human shape, sitting on a swinging branch.

"And what sort of a weirdo is that?" the hood by the name Tug asked, scratching his pate in perplexity. "An unidentified flying ... object, or what?"

"A subject," I corrected him and hit his forearm vigorously to knock the knife out of his hand.

What happened next numbed me with surprise. Tug's forearm broke like a dry twig, and he gave such an ear-splitting scream it jolted his cronies.

In the meantime, the first hood produced a gun and began aiming it at AOL to pick him off the tree. Without a second thought I punched his mug so hard it sent him flying head over heels onto the lawn.

The third hood was in no mood to witness the finale of the carnage and made himself scarce, followed shortly after by a limping and moaning Tug.

I scanned the battlefield with a pleased look. The boy had come to his senses by now and was staring at me pop-eyed. The girl's eyes were as bewildered as his, and I saw that at close quarters she did not resemble my Nadia at all. But she was good looking and I thought she'd be much wiser to exchange that pipsqueak of hers for a brawny man. Adopting a gutsy posture, I gave her a smart salute. It seemed that she wanted to say something, but could not frame a single word, much as she tried. Without hearing any parting word from her, I took French leave. Truth is, not of my own free will. By that time the omnipresent AOL had again deprived me of my body and transferred me into his interdimensional space.

"Enough of ogling at girls," AOL said severely.

Moralizing, just like the old crones in Sosnivka, I thought bitterly.

"Wait a minute! Where is my knightly outfit?" I asked sweetly, trying to change the subject as quickly as possible. "I thought you'd leave me at least some souvenir from outer space."

"By the way, that outfit would be the envy of the most skilled American hired guns. Even those that are dispatched to warmer climes to set up their brand of democracy there."

That observation stopped my mouth. How come the alien from outer space was so knowledgeable about international politics on our Earth?

"But in my world of purity you won't need that metal scrap. Let's move on!"

Then we easily flew across the Dnieper (if Nikolai Gogol were to be believed, not every bird could wings its way across this broad river in his days).

"But where is my knightly outfit?" I insisted.

"Well, I left it in the park," AOL admitted. "For your scientists it'll be the puzzle of their lifetime. Your UFO specialists will try to prove that this is a spacesuit of an extraterrestrial alien, while the advocates of national antiquity will cling to the belief that Prince Vladimir wore that armor when he was whipping his ignorant pagan subjects toward the Dnieper in order to convert them to Christianity. Others, who are addicted to sensationalism, will persuade any who is prepared to listen that the armor belonged to a Teutonic knight, who was buried here centuries ago. Svitozar, you'll hit the headlines tomorrow. You'll read something that your imagination couldn't be fired up even by amplified extraterrestrial energy!"

* * *

THE next day the newspaper *Mind-Blowing Facts* featured a curious article.

AOL lent himself and me human shapes, and we landed on earth where he wheedled a copy of the newspaper from an old man who was sweetly snoozing in the sun.

"As living eyewitnesses claim...", AOL began reading the article.

"What a strange phrase," I said. "Are dead witnesses able to claim anything?"

"Don't interrupt me! As living eyewitnesses claim, yesterday at eleven o'clock in the evening a black fire-breathing dragon landed in a park on the right bank of the Dnieper. According to eyewitnesses, he tore out of the ground a willow tree on which sat a young boy playing a lyrical tune on his fife. The melody caught the ear of two sweethearts. Enchanted by the ethnic melody, the sweethearts settled under a nearby bush, and that's when this stunning event occurred. Today the boy and girl visited our editorial offices. Although some time has elapsed since the incident, they're still trembling uncontrollably from its effect..."

I was giggling, if the sounds escaping my mouth could be called a giggle.

"What willow tree? There were only lime trees in that park!" I said.

"The site where this event took place," AOL continued reading, cool as a cucumber, "has already been visited by a group of scientists headed by the Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences. They have assured the mass media that this unusual incident will be investigated thoroughly. The investigation being of national import, the Academy of Sciences will conduct it until the first two weeks of September, if there is no rain."

* * *

Our next destination was the Kiev suburb of Koncha Zaspa. At first the grand upscale mansions, villas and cottages worthy of titular dignitaries dazzled me. Since curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back, I thought my curiosity could be gratified without any fatal consequences.

"What about just taking a peek at what these villas look like inside?" I asked

"No problem," AOL replied.

The next moment my curiosity was satisfied when I saw all that luxurious furniture, lamps, porcelain, gold and silver figures of bunnies, mice, foxes, gophers, piglets, gnomes, soldiers, cats in boots, Robinson Crusoes and Fridays, pyramids, pirates, canoes, battleships, and African tribesmen with spears displayed on endless glazed shelves among curiously fashioned bows, swords, yataghans, incrustated Damask daggers, blazing diamonds, tapestries, and Renaissance paintings. Well-tended palms, ficuses, magnolias, and rhododendrons surrounded the villa, along with exotic shrubbery and no less exotic flowers.

"Yet another example of human excess!" AOL's voice brought me back to reality.

"And ... whose villa might that be?" I asked. "What made the owner cram all these things into one place?"

"It belongs to a high-ranking ministry official. You must have seen him when you were delivering the mail around the ministry where you worked. He crammed his home with all that stuff because he had no other choice. On what else could he spend all the money he had stolen?"

When I saw the portrait of the villa owner in the parlor, I recognized him right away. During lunch breaks he liked to drink cognac out of a teacup, stirring it with a spoon. When somebody reminded him that his mug was ruby-red from the "tea," he would complain that his secretary had the habit of serving it too hot. He was also famous for keeping his visitors stewing in the corridor, explaining that before complying with a visitor's request, his expectations of a positive outcome should be fanned into a blaze. It goes without saying that a positive outcome could be achieved only with a kickback.

"He's got an itchy palm and can't help it, because he adores money," AOL continued. "Soon he'll return to his house and you'll see with what glee he'll be shuffling each bundle of banknotes like packs of cards, kissing each pack and then placing it in his attachee case. By the way, it's the last time he'll be doing that this year."

"Why the last time?"

"Because we got sick and tired of him," AOL admitted. "I intend to play a trick on him."

Half an hour later the host came home with a guest. They settled down at a table laden with enough food and drink to line the stomachs of an army platoon.

"You see," the guest said, blushing, "my request is a subtly delicate one..."

"Oh yes, I understand," the Deputy Minister said condescendingly. "That's why I invited you to my home. The purchase of public land is a really perplexing problem. Not for official ears, you know. In my home it's a different matter, and we'll deal with the problem after a good lunch and a pleasant chat."

"Of course, of course," the guest agreed readily, downing a good shot of vodka.

"But, my dear guest...", the government official said, casting a meaningful glance at his guest. "The solution calls for a"

"Oh course, of course," the guest agreed again and reached for his wallet, out of which he produced a thick bundle of greenbacks and extended them to the host.

And then and there I witnessed a mind-boggling wonder.

The Deputy Minister reached for the money - and instantly jerked his hand back.

He rubbed his eyes in disbelief and then reached for the money again, only to jerk his hand back right away.

At first I did not understand what was going on, but a minute later I saw what had happened.

The Deputy Minister had extended his hand, but what he jerked back was the hairy paw of an animal.

"Could that be because of the hot tea?" the Deputy Minister mumbled under his breath.

The terrified briber jumped to his feet and fled from the villa at a dizzy tempo.

"What did you do to that man, AOL?" I asked in a broken whisper, although on the Earth's airwaves my voice wasn't heard anyway.

"Nothing unusual," he replied indifferently.

"But what will he do now?" I kept on whispering, concerned, as if this shakedown artist were my dear uncle.

"Don't you worry about him. You'll see him yet. Let's fly on!"

* * *

There seemed to be no end to the line of villas and cottages I saw below. Here and there new ones were being built, popping out of the ground like mushrooms after a rain.

"Another ministerial official lives over there," AOL commented, pointing at a sumptuous Baroque-style villa. "Every time he takes a boodle, he explains it to himself like this: 'I never would have taken it if it weren't for my children studying in Switzerland. A good education requires a lot of money, as you know.'"

"Has he got a lot of children?"

"None at all. In his younger years he led a loose life and paid dearly for it. The diseases he contracted are something nobody would ever tell their friends about."

"And he's never been caught red-handed?" I wondered.

"Even if he had been, nobody would arrest him. That man has an inborn talent for getting out of any scrape."

"How does he do it?"

"He doesn't have to do anything at all because your laws stand up for what they're supposed to punish," my guide replied derisively. "The only people who are arrested in your world are petty thieves. The big ones, though, are held in the highest esteem. Remember the Prime Minister and his barrels?"

At this point I fell silent, deciding not to pester AOL with my stupid questions: after all, these were the problems of my planet, not his.

But five minutes later I was consumed with nosiness.

The thing is that on the balcony of a handsome villa a man in boxers was counting money with a beatific smile

on his face, exactly like the Deputy Minister half an hour earlier.

"Another government official?" I asked AOL timidly.

"Nothing of the kind. He's not well stocked with intellectual equipment to be a civil servant. The man doesn't work anywhere."

"Does he make all that money for a song?"

"No, with his oily tongue."

"Is he a writer?" I ventured a guess.

"Good heavens! You writers are no more than bedraggled beggars these days. This man, no denying it, has a brilliant talent for swindling money out of people."

"And who are his victims?"

"Anyone foolish enough to fall for his bait. The first thing he does is borrow a small amount of money from an acquaintance, say, a hundred dollars for a couple of days."

"And then doesn't repay the debt?"

"Quite the contrary. When he clears the debt, he adds a box of chocolate candies and a bottle of the finest cognac, as interest, so to speak."

"So what does he gain in the end but extra expenses?"

"Moral dividends, that's what he gains. Just imagine: after such a sweet treat, the borrower is filled with admiration and usually tells a friend of his, 'I'll definitely introduce you to Kolodziansky. He's the most decent guy I ever met!' Well, that's exactly what Kolodziansky wants. He'll borrow another hundred or two hundred greenbacks from this new acquaintance for three days and gives them back on time, along with a bottle of cognac as interest."

"Still, I don't understand the gist of the matter."

"It's simple. He keeps borrowing according to a rising scale. After fostering unfaltering trust, he borrows several

thousand dollars and passes out of the picture to play the same trick on others whom he cultivates in the same manner. While his old acquaintances try in vain to reach him by phone, Kolodziansky's changed his cell phone number and lives in green pastures elsewhere."

* * *

The more I saw what was going on, the more I realized that I was ignorant about what had become commonplace in my land a long time ago. It proved that I was unfamiliar with life in its reality, and I must have twisted my features into a question mark: now which of us was the extraterrestrial visitor to this planet – AOL or I?

Unsettled by this startling revelation, I suddenly espied below what seemed to be a familiar face. I took a closer look and saw it was one of my fellow students, Mykola Zakolotenko. He was dressed up like a jack-a-dandy, with a couple of gold chains dangling around his neck.

"My, oh my! I knew him when he was one of the poorest students in our class," I mumbled. "He used to go around the dormitory complaining that his mother was living on bread and water in the village."

"He left his mother in painful poverty and decided to live in gilded regions," AOL explained. "He keeps company with lonely rich women. The businesswoman he's having an affair with lives in that villa with the red-tiled roof. In a day or two they'll be off to Hawaii."

"Of all the places that sponger is going!" I exclaimed in envy.

"Yes, Mykola loves sunshine, cozy gleaming beaches, and sun-tanned girls. Tomorrow evening that business-woman of his will catch him with a broad in a nightclub and send him packing. But Mykola won't be tortured by unhappiness for long. He shows up unexpectedly in places where rich ladies are holidaying. As a rule, his affairs are short-lived. He explains that he doesn't want to abuse the generosity of his willing clients. Next week he plans on giving the Fiji Islands a whirl, where a well-heeled lady will be waiting for him."

* * *

"AOL, you promised I'd see again the deputy minister whose hand turned into a paw," I said when we were flying over downtown Kiev again.

At first AOL uttered what sounded like a disdainful grunt, and then said, "I don't really understand why he's fired up your imagination so much. Look, there he is, running along the streets like someone demented and trying to hide his paw in vain."

The government official was really swirling through the streets and lanes, running first into one office building, then into another one, then rapidly dashing out of it and scurrying off like a rabbit frightened out of his seven senses.

"He finally realized that neither a bribed public prosecutor, taxman, investigator nor judge will help him one bit," AOL said with a smile. "He's really terrified. When he looks at the sky, he sees it through prison bars. And when he looks at the greenbacks, on each letters he sees one and the same magic word blazed in red letters..."

"A magic word?" I asked. "What word? *You're welcome?*"

"*You're welcome* is more than one word, stupid!" AOL rebuked me. "On those dollars there's an altogether different magic word - *BRIBE*."

"Is that your wizardry?"

"Well, frankly speaking, I don't exactly like the word *wizardry*, but your observation is to the point, Svitozar."

In the meantime, the government official had reached a beach on the Dnieper. The people he came across looked with bewilderment at the man who, instead of a right hand, had an animal paw. Much as he rubbed the paw against his trousers or with sand, it was all in vain; it remained what it had been before - a paw.

"It would be great if all the bribe takers were punished like that," I fantasized. "Ukraine would be much better off then ..."

* * *

The pictures of earthly life unfolded before my eyes without any commentaries. I saw how my fellow earthlings were stuck in the morass of their own vices, a morass that was much worse than in the Remez Bog. They struggled to wrest themselves from its grips and raised their painful voices toward the sky - but in vain. Owing to AOL's skill in switching off my sensors, I practically did not hear anything that was going on below, but was simply absorbing the information and committing the events to my consciousness. It all looked like the scenes of a flick fluttering before my eyes.

"No, that's not a flick," my guide cautioned me. "It's just your planet with all the stitches of human fancy ripped out of it. You spill black oil, as black as your death, into any body of water within your reach. You sell, sell and sell again your planet wholesale and retail. It yells, shrieks, and howls in protest. It's burning down to ashes right before you, but you don't give a damn. Each of you is concerned only about his own wayward life."

Again something stirred within me, making me feel pain and fear.

"I want to go home..."

"But you wanted to see your father," AOL reminded. I felt as helpless as a child.

"All right, let's go to your home right away," AOL said, taking pity on me. "At the same time we'll settle your earthly affairs. After all, that's the main reason I'm here."

"What for, AOL?" I asked, surprised.

"To help set your earthly life straight."

"But why specifically mine?" I still could not reconcile myself to being the chosen one.

"Very soon you'll learn why," AOL replied.

THE TREASURE OF THE REMEZ BOG



CHAPTER III

While we were approaching the Remez – oops! – our house, night was just turning to dawn.

Closer to the bog I recognized my ace of diamonds. Behind the ace... the sight sent shudders up and down my spine: lying in the bog was some twisted, humanlike bugaboo with an open mouth crammed full of mud.

"What's that?" I asked, horrified.

"It's Marko Remez lounging in the mud," AOL stated with a sigh. "You're now living in his house."

"Must be him, if you say so," I said, rubbing my eyes in disbelief. "Looks like he had one drink too many and drowned in the mud."

"Nothing of the kind," AOL disagreed. "Liquor was something he couldn't stomach. Otherwise his liver would have done him in by the age of fifty at the most. Was he ever a brute! He murdered a dozen or so people and met a vicious death in the end."

"How did it happen?" I was interested to know. "Was he on the run all the time until someone outsmarted him and dumped him in the bog?"

"Don't try to guess. I'll tell you everything in detail."

After AOL lent me a human shape again, he and I settled under the old weeping willow next to the Remez house. A soft breeze was rustling through the willow, and I experienced such a sublime and blessed feeling it was as if I had been born into this world anew.

Unhurriedly, AOL launched into the story he had promised.

In the final stages of the Second World War, when the Germans were fleeing our country in a panic-stricken retreat, Marko Remez stole the horse and buggy that Werner used for making his rounds of the village. Marko hid the horse and buggy in a remote and secluded place in the Black Forest beyond the river. He alone knew the way to the hideout where he grazed the horse. Even my Uncle Mark, as AOL confirmed, did not graze his calves there.

After the war there were no vehicles whatsoever in Sosnivka. People who arrived at the local railroad station had no way to reach their distant villages. Marko would drive his buggy to the station to pick up the passengers. But his clients were mostly demobilized officers and sergeant majors. The luggage they carried from vanquished Germany was crammed with looted trophies and money.

Marko would first drive all his passengers to his house always for one and the same reason: he supposedly forgot to take along a hurricane lamp and shotgun. Driving through the forest without this equipment was a dangerous and frightening venture. Those were troubled times. Apart from wolves, which had multiplied plentifully throughout the war, the forest was infested with bandits who robbed people and occasionally killed them. It was precisely this ostentatious concern for safety that won over the unsuspecting passengers, and they agreed to be driven all the way to Marko's house at the other end of the village. That's where he picked up his shotgun and killed the passengers in cold blood, throwing their corpses into the bog.

Once Marko brought yet another of his victims to his house – a high-ranking officer – and shot him in the back

of the head. He was a military security colonel on a mission to investigate the mysterious disappearances in Sosnivka.

"And this professional failed to best an amateur?" I asked in wonder.

"Oh no, Marko was no amateur. He was well aware that an officer who had survived such a horrible war could be knocked off only with much caution. It was the officer who underestimated Marko, taking him for a run of the mill hick. Anyway, the colonel paid with his life for such a dim idea of things. When Marko's brothers learned that the victim was a colonel, they stole his shotgun and demanded a ransom for their silence. Being incorrigible boozehounds, the only thing they craved was to neutralize the hangover the next morning after becoming blurry and foggy with moonshine the day before. It goes without saying that Marko was violently opposed to the idea of paying any hush money. A verbal scrimmage ensued, followed by fisticuffs. Marko launched Ostap and Petro into eternity with a steel pipe, while Stepan whipped the shotgun out from under his coat, where he was hiding it, and shot down Marko. Then the other three brothers dumped the three corpses in the bog.

"And what happened then?" I asked.

After a week two military security officers, who were making inquiries into their colleague's disappearance, paid a visit to the three brothers. The latter feigned ignorance. Without any doubt, the officers did not believe them. Right after the war judges, let alone courthouses, were in extremely short supply, and the prisons were packed to the brim. The officers realized that the case would take a long time to be threshed out, so without

a second thought they pumped the three brothers full of lead. Their corpses, as the circumstances suggested, were thrown into the bog.

"The history of the Remez family is surely a sad one," I said with a sigh. "Now I understand why Marko is having such a bad time even in hell."

"Because he doesn't deserve to be even in that place," AOL replied. "The devils shun such freaks like they shun the man who's lying in the mausoleum on Moscow's Red Square."

"So Lenin is denied a place in hell as well?"

"Sure. He's been petitioning for a legitimate residence permit in hell for a long time, but the Supreme Hell Commission flatly rejects his appeals. Once when he managed to get into hell's reception room, he immediately began hatching a revolution there. Lucifer flew into such a rage at this deadly affront that he chucked the crackpot out of hell. So now the outcast is shuttling back and forth between the stars topping the Kremlin spires in the hope that he'll be admitted to hell for at least one day to fire up his revolutionary zeal there."

"Oh yes, there's one more thing I keep forgetting to ask you. The six Remez brothers had a sister, Lybid. What happened to her?" I asked.

"Yes, they did," AOL said and became lost in thought for a while. "She just vanished into thin air."

"Do you know her whereabouts, AOL?" I asked.

Again there was a pause.

"Not now, Svitozar. Not now. I'll tell you at the right time."

* * *

As I lay under the willow tree, I was gradually regaining my former self. It was an inexplicable feeling to hear the throb of my heart in a youthfully vigorous body.

AOL raised his ultramarine finger in the air.

"My receptors are recording an unusually high level of radiation," he mumbled angrily. "I wonder how you earthlings intend living in the days to come..."

"I, for one, intend to marry my Nadia. That is, if she agrees to marry me," I said, my shoulders drooping in uncertainty.

"What then? What children will you have? What blood will you have?"

"Our blood, of course," I replied. "Nadia's and mine."

"That's not what I mean. I have in mind blood that's tainted with the radionuclides from the Chernobyl fallout. Your beautiful planet could have been God's Eden on Earth. But it fell into the hands of unreconstructed fools."

To me AOL greatly resembled an unexpected guest who had visited my sordid, untidy home. What impressions about our planet would he come away with? What would he tell his extraterrestrial neighbors about our Earth? I cringed in shame, and this feeling made me boil with anger.

"Why are you picking on me all the time? Go and put all these questions to those smart scientists over there. Why should you be quizzing a dropout, who's more worried about how to survive instead of being in a stew about the unforeseeable future of this planet?"

Just then the academicians were crawling out of their tents and being treated to breakfasts that, as I later

learned from my fellow villagers, came from the finest restaurants of Kiev.

"On the other hand, though, please don't go near them," I said, coming to my senses. "They might grab you, stick you in a jar of brine, and exhibit you for money in museums."

While I was lounging on the grass under the weeping willow, AOL was immersed in deep thought. Actually, he was thinking visually. As he told me, once he took an interest in an animate or inanimate object, he instantly saw in his mind's eye the entire true and unmistakable history of this object from its remotest past to the present day.

"Goodness gracious, this is the most messed-up civilization that exists in the infinite universe," he said dejectedly.

"And are there many civilizations in the universe?" I asked, opening one eye lazily.

"Thousands, if not millions," AOL said with confidence. "But none is as troublesome as yours. The devil himself wouldn't make head or tail of it. No wonder he hasn't been visiting you lately."

"I wouldn't say so. I just saw one this very day," I confirmed readily. "Except for you ..."

"I'm not a devil," AOL protested. "I'll prove it to you very soon."

I didn't care a straw about devils because my dear Nadia was preying on my mind all this time

"Now what sort of life can I offer her?" I moaned, utterly exhausted by the numbing thoughts about our future. "I have nothing to call my own, except for this bog and that weird ace of diamonds on it..."

"Stop your whimpering!" AOL cried out, vexed by my complaints about life. "You should be holding onto your mummy's skirt instead of thinking about marriage."

Much as he wanted to shame me, his crabby response produced the opposite effect. When he mentioned mummy's skirt, it moved me all the more deeply.

"How I wish that my mother were alive today," I said with a deep sigh. "I've never seen her, except on a photograph."

"You want to see her that much?" AOL asked, a warm ring to his voice that I had never heard before.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, you'll have the opportunity."

"Really?" I jumped to my feet and rushed to embrace him.

"Yes, you'll see her, Svitozar. I always stand by my word, unlike those fraudulent visionaries who pervert the truth to their liking."

"But when will I see my mother?" I asked impatiently.

"Don't be so excited. Everything will happen in its proper time. To get you out of the dumps, I'll tell you about one such fraudulent visionary."

Since AOL was the master of the situation, I had no choice but to give him a nod and listen to his story:

"Shortly before your Orange Revolution, which enraptured the entire world, a student threw an egg at your Prime Minister, who thought it was a ball bearing from a tractor. Scared out of his wits, he dropped to the ground in a faint. One ivory-towered scholar told the press that Michel de Notredame was supposed to have predicted this event in one of his rhymed quatrains: 'White with yellow will stop him and he will fall to the ground.' This interpretation was the hottest news in all the mass media. The 'visionary' became a hero of the day and expected to earn a government award. Truth is he had to wait a long

time until the egged Prime Minister came to power again. Then the apology of a visionary fed another crazed sensation to the press. Nostradamus was also supposed to have predicted this comeback in another quatrain: 'From the country of black pyramids shall return the baron of miners and all the princes will fall at his feet.' The Prime Minister was on cloud nine from being represented in such full-bearded dignity and ordered his assistants to grant the 'visionary' a liberal life pension and have an ancestral coat-of-arms designed for him."

"A coat-of-arms for someone who's not an aristocrat?" I asked incredulously.

"Are coat-of arms designed only for aristocrats nowadays?" AOL mimicked the tone of my question. "With you earthlings, a fat bribe can make an aristocrat out of anyone."

I clammed up, having no argument to counter the shrewd observation. An orange-red sun was rising over the horizon. In its light the ace of diamonds was scintillating like a rainbow, ruddy purple dominating its color range. Here and there bright pulsating blips seemed to be transmitting messages into the sky.

"Aren't those your heavenly beacons, AOL?" I ventured a guess.

"Exactly, and landing pads for that matter. Lest your planet crumble into pieces, we reinforced it on all four sides with those aces. The ace of diamonds fell to your lot."

"And they're supposed to save the Earth?" I asked quizzically. "What about explaining this idea to the academics?"

"Oh no, leave that Satanic tribe to their own devices," AOL replied impatiently. "Most of your scientific

knowledge is fallacious. No sooner do you see our interplanetary spaceships than you raise a hue and cry: 'Down them! Nab those aliens dead or alive!' and try to pick us off like sparrows. You are convinced that science requires sacrifices. We have excellent knowledge of building interplanetary spaceships with reliable armor."

"Are they that safe?" I asked.

"Safer than your passenger planes. The slightest fault in their systems and they plummet to the ground, like rotten apples from a tree."

"Yours don't fall, do they?"

"What you call waste is something that doesn't exist in our part of the universe. If we had anything like it, you would have been familiar with our spacecraft a long time ago. Do you have any reliable information about a single interplanetary spaceship ever being found on Earth?"

"Not that I know of," I had to acknowledge.

"That's it. We, though, visit you frequently. But, to tell the truth, we avoid landing on 'civilized' continents."

"Why so?"

"Because those you take for savages are offering us a better welcome. We can have a pleasant chat with them and partake of their food. They have the gift of sharing and sharing alike and believe that we are their gods."

I sat there tongue-tied.

"Now imagine Earth as a sort of a laboratory or, even better, a beehive," AOL continued. "We watch closely which of the beehives produces the best yield. And I must tell you that in terms of morality your 'civilized' earthlings are behind by hundreds of points. The Africans and American Indians are morally purer than all their conquerors either from the East or West."

"You are supremely wise, AOL," I admitted. "I wish we had a president like you."

"God forbid such a prospect!" AOL exclaimed sharply. "I'd be ripped to shreds in less than six months. Or else I'd be dragged through the mud to such an extent that I wouldn't dare dream of any references worth their names. Besides, our Heavenly Supreme Council decreed not to send any promoters of new ideas to Ukraine anymore. What you've got here is a veritable hell that's overpopulated with sparkplugs and leaders of all sorts of parties. The level of your political contamination sweeps off the scale like the radiation around the Chornobyl nuclear power station. If your politicians don't abandon their dog-eat-dog attitudes, they may soon convert hell into an interminable political discussion club."

This observation set my brain to working again. There were a lot of things for which to be grateful to AOL. I had learned so much in a short time and become wiser. If my father were alive, he would have been proud of me and said, "Were you really taught these wisdoms at your Agricultural Academy? Your academicians must have been very good. To be sure, you'll also be an academician soon."

I didn't want to be an academician anymore.

Wisdom or no wisdom, nature was gaining the upper hand: the idea about the interaction of the sexes was preying heavily on my mind.

I, for one, was a man – a hundred-percent certainty as far as I was concerned. Nadia was my sweetheart – not doubt about that either. Well, where did AOL fit in then? Or, perhaps, the world he came from did not have men and women at all but some other beings. For ethical rea-

sons I could not possibly take a look under AOL's fuselage to find out the truth.

"Don't poke your nose into something that is beyond your grasp," AOL suddenly said gruffly, having, as always, read my immodest thoughts. "While you're so concerned about the sexual differences of extraterrestrials, you don't know so much about your own self."

"What is it that I don't know?" I asked archly.

"A lot of things," AOL replied calmly. "For instance ... you don't know where you were born."

A whistle escaped my lips from my surprise. What he said was the naked truth. That ultramarine being knew absolutely everything about me.

"Let's go into the house," AOL suggested.

I trudged after him just like a calf would after Uncle Makar. From the entrance hall we went straight to what had been my father's bedroom.

"It happened here on this bed," AOL said.

"What happened?" I asked, not understanding what he had in mind.

"Your appearance in this world," AOL answered.

"In the Remez house?" I asked. "Well, frankly speaking, I suspected it. At that time the old missus of Remez was the only midwife in Sosnivka."

"There's still a lot more that you don't know, son. Well, you'll find out soon enough." AOL stretched out his blue hand and stroked my hair. "You'll see your mother, and your father too."

My spirit was buoyed by the prospect.

"I'll have to buy dad a carton of Prima cigarettes that he liked to smoke. I wonder what kind of present I should get for mother. Maybe a box of chocolates."

"Stop your chattering, Svitozar. Your parents have probably been drinking sunny nectar all this time."

"Still, it's not proper to visit mum and dad without a present."

"Don't be peevish and take my advice," AOL said, frowning. "Take along a bottle of liquor that Uncle Makar stored in the sideboard. It's not intended for your father."

"Of course it's not. Dad never dipped his beak. Who is it intended for then?"

"For Okrimenko. Do you think we came back to your place for no reason? You'll drop in on Okrimenko on the way."

"Why should I ...?"

I had not finished what I wanted to ask when I realized that my feet were carrying me to the village council.

* * *

Okrimenko met me in a manner that was far from chummy – he must have scraped up a very intimate acquaintance with Werner's wallet in the meantime.

"Oh, Buriachenko Jr. has shown up at last!" he exclaimed, without offering me a seat near his desk. "Now tell me, who the hell do you think you are? Or are you so stuck-up just because you've flashed an ace of diamonds in your kitchen garden?"

The next minute he must have espied the bottle sticking out of my pocket, because he rose to his feet and invited me to sit down. His voice took on a mellower ring:

"Young man, isn't there anything else on your mind besides playing with aces? You'd be better off finishing your higher education and grazing calves in your leisure

time. With such a clever herdboy the calves might become clever as well."

I took the bottle of liquor out my pocket with a resolute gesture and put it on the table.

Okrimenko rushed to the door of his office and turned the key in the lock.

"For the sake of Ukraine's glory stop falling for Werner's tricks. Try to do everything you can to make the ace of diamonds my property. Take my word, you won't regret it."

"What the stinking hell do you need that ace of diamonds for?" he shot back. "Generally, diamonds make a shaky set. It would have been better if you had drawn hearts or a suit of clubs."

"Thanks for your advice, but I had no choice. You should be grateful that it wasn't a spade," I remarked judiciously.

"You may be right," he agreed. "A spade is like the crow that tends to prophesy ill."

After filling a glassful of liquor, he knocked it back and directed his melancholy eyes somewhere beyond the horizon, as if he were seeing the apparition of communism there.

"My dear Okrimenko, this is an unprecedented project of interplanetary importance," I tried hard to soften him up, attentively watching how the liquor was blearing his eyes. "It'll have worldwide repercussions! And you, as the executive who promoted the project, will earn respect and praise, to say nothing of the profits, which will be enough for all your grandchildren to come."

I was not sure, though, whether Okrimenko had listened to my tirade to the end because his head dropped like a wounded bird onto his crossed hands on the office desk.

I went out into the corridor silently and just as silently pressed a forefinger to my lips to make my fellow villagers in the reception room understand: The council chairman has asked that he not be disturbed today; he's settling some serious business with his superiors in the district council...

* * *

AOL and I passed the evening in a pleasant chat: several days ago Uncle Makar had hightailed it to his young wife, taking his calves along as a marriage gift.

To my tremendous surprise AOL had a profound knowledge of my homeland.

"I can bet you anything that you know little about the most glorious episodes in the history of Sosnivka," he said reflectively right after our evening meal – that is, after *my* evening meal, because he refused to partake of a kingly helping of fried bacon and eggs, explaining the transgression of a guest's etiquette by his total lack of a digestive system as we earthlings understand it.

"Yes, I don't know much about Sosnivka's background," I mumbled, not in the least offended. "If you know more, please tell me."

"Several centuries ago, the Muscovites' best army under the command of Prince Trubetskoy was causing a lot of trouble in your neighborhood. That much you must have probably heard."

"Oh yes, that much I did," I said with an affirmative nod, happy to realize that I was not a total dunce.

"Angered by the Ukrainians' aspirations for untrammelled freedom, the Muscovite Czar dispatched a large army led by Prince Trubetskoy to the area where you are

living now. In the wake of Trubetskoy's troops, a group of Cossacks disguised as peasants followed at a safe distance."

"What for?"

"You'll see it now for yourself, " AOL said and with a sweep of his hand produced before my eyes a color screen with troops of Cossacks and Muscovites against the background of a landscape that resembled my native district as it must have been several centuries ago. "Watch how the Cossacks blow up the dam and the bridge on the river. The flood will knock Prince Trubetskoy's troops off their feet. That's when the Cossacks, along with their Tatar and Polish allies, will attack from two flanks. Prince Trubetskoy will do the same, but he has nowhere to retreat – behind him is a flooded plain."

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"On July 8, 1659. If the Russian historian Sergei Soloviov is to be believed, 'The flower of the Muscovite cavalry perished in one day and never again would a Muscovite Czar be able to field such a splendid army.'"

"Good Lord, how many Muscovites drowned in that flood?"

"Some 30,000. Two senior Muscovite officers, Pozharsky and Lvov, opted for captivity. Prince Trubetskoy beat a hasty retreat with what remained of his troops. Along the way, he buried a chest with his troops' pay in what is now the Remez Bog."

"You mean the hoard is still there?" I asked, baffled.

"Yes. The paymasters of that time applied a rule of paying the troops only after an engagement. That way they saved on what was allocated for remunerating the initial strength of the troops."

"That Prince Trubetskoy was a clever sort indeed," I concluded.

"Clever enough to avoid drowning in a smothering deluge. It's a wonder that the Kremlin still has not made any territorial claims to Ukrainian territory. The reasoning could be very simple: wherever Prince Trubetskoy's horse hoofed the ground, that's the land of Russia."

"What if a peaceful DNA could be implanted into the genetic code of the Russians," I reflected in errant fantasy. "Would it be possible to neutralize their aggressive manners then? That would be half a victory over the world's evil!"

"A wonderful idea, but difficult to translate into reality," AOL said with a smile.

"Why?"

"Because such serious experiments should be conducted on the sober-minded. When was the last time you saw sober Russians? By evening they are soddenly drunk, and the next morning they suffer from giddy hangovers. Genetic engineering is not applicable to such people. When a drunkard drives a car, he becomes a potential criminal. Now imagine a drunkard at the controls of a nuclear missile installation."

I got gooseflesh from the implication.

"Ukrainians also seem to have picked up this intemperate habit," AOL continued. "Take the chairman of your village council as an example. Local as his responsibilities might be, he still has to shoulder them conscientiously."

I got gooseflesh again - this time from the unpredictable ways of Okrimenko.

"On the whole, Ukrainians are a happy-go-lucky people," the extraterrestrial said dejectedly. "You're so trusting

and hospitable, you tend to play host to everyone and you like everyone but your own selves. And then you're happy when you try to please everyone..."

But these accurate observations were falling on deaf ears because the picture of Prince Trubetskoy's hoard had inflamed my imagination.

"Incidentally, Trubetskoy's hoard is not the only one in the Remez Bog," AOL said with a sly wink.

"Really?"

"Have you read anything about Hetman Polubotok in your school textbooks?"

"Of course I have," I answered, offended.

"The Remez Bog also conceals a chest with his will. Shortly before his death, he deposited a large amount of gold in the Bank of England. In his will he bequeathed the gold to the people once Ukraine gained its independence. The Bank of England does not want to return the hoard because the Ukrainians cannot provide any documentary evidence. All the documents are here in the Remez Bog."

"And not a single Ukrainian historian had the sense to conduct a dig in this place!" I exclaimed.

"Your darned athletes of scholarship write such stuff and nonsense it can make any knowledgeable person sick. Truth is not in high regard nowadays."

"No, it doesn't enjoy respect," I agreed.

At this point I told AOL about the tragic fate of my Kiev acquaintance.

He was a young journalist shortly out of university. Embarking on his career, he pledged his word to be a champion of truth and expose anyone who tainted his integrity and honor. A romantic and a Don Quixote, he made a good start as an investigative reporter. But several

months into his job he was found dead in the waters of the Dnieper.

"I know this sad story," AOL said. "For your powers that be, truth is a crime, and a serious crime as they see it."

I traveled down through the avenues of time and recalled Hrytsko (the journalist's name) telling me about some cases he had investigated on his own initiative. And wonder of wonders – no sooner had I called these events to mind than they appeared in a string of still images on the screen.

One such case concerned the murder of a businessman who traded in timber. It all began with an announcement in the press: oak logs in substantial quantities were needed for the restoration of a historic estate of some eminent Venetian doge – for hard currency, in point of fact. The businessman did not have his own woodlands, but he recalled a rich landed proprietor – a coarse version of a Ukrainian *latifundista* – whose acquaintance he had made during a merry party in a sauna catering to the Kiev "elite."

"That *latifundista* owned some fine oak groves," I recalled out aloud now. "The businessman concluded a deal contract worth millions, transferred the money to the owner's account and they both agreed on a definite felling date. But the *latifundista* was a tight-fisted sort and decided to renege on his commitment. When the businessman arrived with a crew of fellers to transact his part of the deal, the *latifundista* went hunting in that same grove and shot the businessman, seemingly by accident. The huntsmen rushed to the scene to confirm that it had been a dire mishap."

"Sure enough, the huntsmen were bribed lavishly to offer the investigators this kind of evidence," AOL continued. "The woodcutters, too, were bought off, and the prosecutors had no choice but to conclude that a fateful accident had occurred."

"Exactly," I agreed. "In our Sosnivka there was a much more horrible case when a local elbow-bender was done in by his boozing companion. No public prosecutor gave any serious attention to this event at all. The one we had in the nearest district sent his assistant to look into the matter. After some time he arrived in Sosnivka, drew up a report, took along a pitchfork as the tangible evidence of the crime, and passed out of the picture forever. Racked by belated pricks of conscience, the perpetrator of the crime waited from months on end to be charged and brought to trial, but to no avail: the prosecutor had simply forgotten about his existence. The unpredictability of the situation crushed the spirit of the drunkard to such an extent that he hanged himself, leaving behind a note: 'It's more than a poor wretch can bear: they can't even put me in a clink in a human way.'"

"Exactly, neither jailing nor burying anyone decently," AOL agreed. "Just remember how your dad was buried."

"How come you know about everything, AOL?" I wondered, as the recollection flashed on the screen in vivid pictures.

When I attended my dad's funeral, the undertaker did not care so much about my emotions as about my hands, asking me all the time what I had in my pockets. To which I replied, "My hands."

"So take your hands out of your pockets. This is God's acre, after all," he said. "Isn't it your father who's being put in his last resting place?"

"Of course it's my father," I said.

"But your hands don't show it."

At that I pulled my right hand out of the pocket and gave him the money he was wheedling out of me.

"Now I'm aware that you're seeing off your dad," he said. "But I still can't say that you held him that dearly."

Then I pulled my left hand out of my pocket and made another offering. I could not have anyone casting doubts about my reverence for father.

"You should have punched the kisser of that undertaker," AOL hissed.

I was taken aback by such aggressiveness from the extra-terrestrial pacifist.

"AOL, this was a cemetery where peace should reign," I countered. "When I was parting forever with someone I loved, my mind had to be intensely concentrated lest I made a mistake in the wished-for address of my dad's final destination in the afterworld."

"Well, you know next to nothing about the afterworld," AOL. "So far..."

"Yes, so far," I said with a yawn.

Small wonder I yawned, because it was past midnight and I was sleepy.

* * *

In the morning, my guest woke me with these words:

"Get up, Svitozariik. Today you'll experience the most wondrous moment in your lifetime."

The first thing that crossed my mind was that I wouldn't be surprised by anything I had already seen in the past few days. But AOL's promise of meeting my parents

made me jump out of bed in a jiffy. I dressed in whatever was close at hand – something AOL didn't have to bother about – and we went out of the house.

On the ace of diamonds we saw the academicians sweetly snoozing under the morning sun.

"They've been dizzily drunk since yesterday evening," AOL remarked.

"Won't they catch a cold lying on the barren ground?" I asked, worried about the health of the finest representatives of Ukrainian science.

"Don't fret your gizzard about that. The floor of our launching pad is kept warm all the time."

"The floor? You probably had the ceiling in mind, didn't you?" I asked, because just then AOL reached one of the red diamonds and opened it as if it were a hatch.

The next moment he took my hand and pulled me into the hatch. Inside, I found myself in a brightly blue maze of galleries.

"For some it's a floor, for others a ceiling. Everything in this world is relative," AOL said.

AOL sat down on a weirdly shaped blue chair. His body lit up in a blue flame turning into an elongated deeply blue lamp. The sight gave me the creeps.

A few minutes later AOL gave me a nod and in no time I was sitting in the very same chair. The feeling I experienced was fascinatingly blissful. A hot vibrating energy was streaming up and down my spine as my body took on a glowing shape similar to AOL's.

"Have I become a neon light?" I asked in utter surprise.

"So what?" AOL replied with a laugh.

"Why is there only one chair in this place?" I wondered. "You're my guest, while I, the host, can't even offer you a seat."

"What makes you so sure that I'm your guest?"

"Because this bog is privatized and it belongs to me, along with the ace of diamonds."

"Well, if we take into consideration the interior of this ace of diamonds, it's not I but you who's the guest here, Svitozarik," AOL said with a giggle. "So I suggest you humble your possessively proprietary instincts. This is further proof that everything in the world is relative."

I closed my eyes and surrendered to the blue warmth seeping pleasantly through my body. It was a blissful feeling that made me indisposed to any philosophizing.

"It's a pity you're not interested in philosophy," AOL said. "Philosophy is an important pursuit. Take Hegel, for one..."

Gogol - my fellow countryman, after all - was a favorite writer of all the Academy of Agriculture students I knew, but as regards Hegel, our understanding of his teachings was as foggy as the Andromeda Nebula.

"AOL, please spare me," I begged.

"I see no reason why I should, because Hegel expounded quite a few interesting ideas. Just think about this one: it's not so important what you chatter about as how you live. Your philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda was different. What Hegel was just chattering about Skovoroda put into effect by transiting from an earthly individual into the primary source of his self, i.e., from a subjective limitedness to a supra-individual absolute or, to put it differently, into another existence..."

"AOL, please don't!" I begged again.

"All right, all right, I'll take a breather at this point, although it doesn't hurt to pump some rudiments into your head so that you will understand where you are right now."

"Inside the ace of diamonds. Where else?"

"In quasi space that's where you are, stupid."

"In what?" I asked, jumping out of the weird blue chair.

"In quasi space," AOL repeated. "Sit down and relax. You are the one who wanted me to take you to this place. The blue cylinder behind your back is slowly pumping energy into your body and transforming your consciousness."

"And what'll happen to my consciousness now?" I asked, frightened. "Will I forget my Nadia?"

"Nothing of the kind," AOL calmed me down. "You won't forget either Nadia or Uncle Makar's calves or anything else you've been taught in your Academy of Agriculture. On the contrary, you'll understand a lot of things much better. Philosophy, for instance."

"What would I need that for?"

"Your consciousness is now being transformed to a level where you can establish contact with your parents. You'll grasp their energy potential and visualize them."

"Visualize what...?" I failed to frame the question to the end because that very instant I passed out.

* * *

"Svitozarik!"

The gentle call made me come to my senses. It was a woman's voice. At first I believed it was Nadia's voice – hers was the sweetest voice I had ever heard in my life.

But on cocking my ear, I realized that the voice was different, filled with wondrous unearthly modulations reverberating through my entire body.

Slowly I opened my eyes. I shook my head to rouse myself from the reverie, and there in front of me stood my beautiful young mother as I remembered her from the old snapshot.

AOL was nowhere in sight. Well, to tell the truth, he suddenly vanished from my mind, along with all the incredible adventures of the past few days. I don't know how many hours mother and I sat side by side, holding each other's hand in silence. Today I keep wondering whether quasi time can be divided into hours.

At last we broke our silence and spoke for a long, long time. I was prepared to hear her voice for ages. From her I learned that her name was Lybid, the youngest child in the Remez family, which meant that the ruthless murderer Marko Remez was my uncle.

"I was born to my mother's delight after the death of all my brothers," she said. "I was kept in the dark about their doings. As I grew up, I learned the truth and ran away from home for shame. For several weeks I hid in the forest, where your dad found me. Of the entire village he alone did not disown me because of my brothers. He offered me his big heart and calloused hand of a hard workingman. So I was set on repaying him with gratitude and bear you, even at the price of my own life."

Only now it occurred to me that neither my father nor Uncle Makar had ever mentioned her name. Deprived of a mother all those years, I strongly believed that Mother was the best imaginable name for a person who had endowed me with the most precious gift any human being could wish for – life.

I knew that my mother died right after my birth. Shortly after, my grandmother – the midwife who assisted in ushering me into this world – passed away as well. After the death of her husband and six sons, the disappearance of the light of her life proved to be the last straw. My father never got over the loss of his beloved wife. And even in his wildest dreams he would never have wanted to live in the Remez house. But Okrimenko rudely lifted our life out of one groove and set it in another.

“May he be damned a thousand times over,” I heard a familiar hoarse voice and raised my head.

Behind my mother’s back stood dad, dressed in a linen shirt, a patched cap sitting at a rakish angle on his head and the usual cigarette sticking out of his mouth, the exact same dad I had known when he was alive.

Mother looked about twenty years younger. As they embraced each other affectionately, dad seemed to be proud of his eternally young wife, while mother must have been glad not to be much older.

“Hello, son,” dad said and slapped my back lightly. Then he sat down on the blue floor and launched into a story about his life in the afterworld. Since he was in a jolly mood and joked all the time, it was hard to tell what was true or not in the yarns he spun.

“When I arrived at the gates of Eden and applied for entry, Apostle Peter granted it without any fuss,” dad said. “He even issued me an open-ended pass.”

“To Paradise, really?” I asked incredulously.

“Sure, son. I can prove it,” dad said and reached into his pocket from which he produced several crumpled sheets of paper. “By the way, Petrarch passed on a couple of sonnets for your Nadia and wishes you both pure love.

He and Laura are united at long last in Paradise, where they are now living happily."

Although I took the sheets of paper permeated with the smell of rose petals and covered with romantic Italian verse, I still did not believe dad. He used to be a clever and artful man, and I wouldn't be surprised at all if he had copied the sonnets from a book and presented them now as a personal gift from Don Francesco.

"And what's so wonderful in that Paradise?" I was interested to know. "No drinks are served there, movies are out of the question, as are concerts..."

"If it were so bad, would anyone want to stay there?" dad remarked. "Have you ever met anyone who returned from Paradise?"

"No one at all," I agreed.

"There's no greater pleasure than getting acquainted with the universe," my mother added, like an experienced lecturer in philosophy. "And to discover other worlds."

"Exactly, other worlds," dad said, nodding in agreement. "We even went on an excursion to hell."

"Did you really see hell?" I asked to confirm whether my ears weren't playing a trick on me.

"Yes, I did. But what you people call hell we call by the official name of the Great Hellish Kingdom of NOGS."

"What does NOGS stand for?"

"It means No-Goods, that is, all sorts of gangsters, chronic crooks, thugs, con men, parasites and the like."

"Wow! And are there any MPs among the NOGS?"

"Certainly. As a matter of fact, they rule the roost and hold debates around the clock. In the intervals between their windy palaver they are entertained by show business stars."

"Are there any journalists among the NOGS?" I asked.

"Of course there are – the entire kit and caboodle of the 'All-Ukrainian press in the Russian language'! How else can they report on the parliamentary debates for the ordinary residents of hell?"

"The excursions to hell are they organized frequently?" I was curious to find out.

"Not too often," my mother cut in. "They are intended mostly for people from other civilizations, who simply do not believe that such NOGS can exist in our galaxy."

"Are there any eminent residents in hell that I know of?" I asked, barely checking myself from laughing at what I had just heard from my mother.

"Currently, the servants of hell are set on filling two VIP vacancies for the mayors of two of Ukraine's largest cities," my father replied.

"Why would hell need mayors to run the show?" I asked.

"Oh no, their duty will be of a different kind," my father said. "They'll be given hammers and ordered to walk around hell to see if by any chance a Ukrainian name has been given to streets, lanes, stores or cafes. The mayors will have to knock them off with the hammers. But this idea is not meant for public ears, so don't blurt it out when you're back on Earth."

"I'll keep my mouth shut," I promised, although I figured that writing about it wouldn't mean going back on my word.

After his death my father seemed to have acquired the gift of reading people's minds, because he said: "Oh well, smudge paper to your heart's content. Nobody will believe you anyway."

* * *

I was lying on my bed in the Remez house, while AOL was applying a compress to my forehead and treating me to hot herbal tea.

I had a racking headache that was all the more unbearable at the thought of the world's flaws.

No longer did I want to know how AOL appeared at my side again. As far as I knew, his mission here on Earth was much more manifold than he cared to tell me. Weren't there enough problems for an extraterrestrial mind to deal with here on Earth? Settle some fools on a planet and exempt them from any control, they'll make such a mess that it'll snuff out the heavens.

With the earthlings the visitors from outer space have always had difficult problems. For hundreds of thousands of years not a single contact with them had yielded any results. On the one hand, earthlings had beautiful, perfect bodies and inexhaustible brain potential. But on the other hand, they were incurable savages, stirred by bestial instincts, and absolutely unpredictable. Here on Earth each perceived the world through a diseased ego, and nothing whatsoever was of any importance, except for an inflated *I*.

Couldn't that have been the reason why the Almighty took the drastic step of sending to the Earth extraterrestrials under the guise of humans to live among them and thereby understand us "from inside." What painstaking, ungrateful labor it must have been to cleanse the human intellect from moral corrosion. Wouldn't it have been wiser if He had destroyed the results of the unsuccessful experiment and started everything from scratch?

Couldn't He have sown on this planet another variety of intelligent beings – this time *really* intelligent ones?

"Not only is the wisdom of God infinite, His mercy it also infinite," AOL said gently, applying another compress to my forehead.

It was only now that I discerned that the voice belonged to a woman.

It was the voice of my mother.

"Mummy," I whispered.

"Yes, it's me, son. At long last you recognized me."

"What will happen to us now?" I moaned and passed out again.

* * *

When I regained my senses, there wasn't anyone in the room. Right then and there I knew what had to be done.

Behind the window the morning mist was hugging the ground. I waited impatiently for the scientists to wake up after their inebriating studies of the day before. They'd hardly bounce into wakefulness before ten o'clock.

At ten-thirty I came out of the house. Some of the scientists – most probably the ones who could hold their drinks the best – were taking soil samples. I went up to them and inquired how things were going.

"All night long we've been recording signals from outer space," a bearded academician boasted. "We believe that the nocturnal noises over the Remez Bog are identical to the calls of the dolphins in the Indian and Atlantic oceans."

"Are there any historians among you?" I asked, choking back a yawn.

"If you need one, we'll find him."

"Good. Get me two historians and a dozen or so excavators," I ordered.

"What would you need excavators for?"

"Just get them. They're the most important part of my project. Without them you'll achieve nothing."

After I made sure that my order was strictly complied with, I decided to depart for Kiev.

* * *

Kiev was a beehive of activity, as preparations went on apace to observe the country's Independence Day.

A huge crowd had assembled on Independence Square. The combined brass band of the Kiev Military District was blaring sonorous marches. Not far away a number of choirs were performing folk songs. Leaders and their faithful followers of all one hundred and eighty Ukrainian parties were merrily clapping their hands to the music, while the most gifted of them joined in the singing so beautifully that I thought they'd earn their salt much better by being choristers.

The music stopped when the mayor approached the microphone on the central rostrum. He was God's messenger on Earth – that's the only thing I could make out of his garbled speech. The ministers were next in line to let loose their oratorical guns. Behind them stood the judges of the Constitutional Court, who were famous for being immune (well, for the most part) to taking bribes of, say, apartments, land plots or pedigree pups. Well versed in the intricacies of legislation, they were out of their depth in elementary arithmetic. The country was

made aware of this flaw several years ago when the then President applied to the Constitutional Court to clarify his chances of contravening the Constitution and run for a third term in office. The judges were set on conjuring up a historic discovery in arithmetic by concluding that one plus one equals one. The incumbent was overjoyed and said that he would stand not for a third but for a second term, since the first was supposed to have been no more than a "ranging shot." God knows what it could have come to if there hadn't been any people with common sense in the country's legal profession.

Next in line behind the judges of the Constitutional Court were the Members of Parliament. When I spotted them, I immediately felt an allergic reaction. Dad must have passed it on to me.

Hiding behind the back of the MPs was a tiny group of Communists. I knew pretty well that instead of abiding by what Karl Marx had set out in his *Das Kapital*, they were siphoning off the country's wealth and amassing their capital by dubious means.

Goodness gracious, was the sight of these freaks the reason I had come to Kiev? I thought as I pushed my way out of the crowd.

I walked down the central streets past the stately houses that – apart from concierges, watchmen and janitors – were inhabited by crooks rolling in riches. On one corner I came across the deputy minister who sported an animal's paw instead of a hand. This time the paw was locked in handcuffs. He was flanked by two policemen, who seemed to be questioning him, while he was shaking his head in vigorous denial. I came closer to get an idea what the verbal exchange was all about. One policeman was

holding a hundred dollar bill under the nose of the deputy minister and asking him to read the word BRIBE on the bill – first letter by letter, and then the whole word.

The deputy minister employed every trick in the book to avoid pronouncing the word, feigning ignorance of the Cyrillic alphabet.

“All right, mister,” the policemen said impatiently. “We’ll take you to precinct headquarters and explain the difference between Latin and Cyrillic. After that you’ll be offered a comfortable hotel suite in what we call a slammer.”

I didn’t hear how the illiterate miscreant responded to the invitation because I was already on the way to the outskirts of town, where Nadia rented a room.

I pressed the doorbell. Nadia opened the door and stood there petrified.

“Nadia, dear, I have always loved you and will love you forever,” I blurted out.

“I don’t believe – ”

A wonderful reaction, isn’t it? Women all over the world are cast in the same mold: when you tell them the truth, they don’t believe you; when you weave a tissue of lies, they rush into your arms.

“I don’t believe ... my eyes,” Nadia whispered.

“So believe them and tell me at last: will you marry me?”

“Of course I will.”

“But I have a confession to make first. I don’t have a villa or an estate, just half of a ramshackle house, and a bog instead of decent plowland. Putting it otherwise, I’m just a poor country bumpkin.”

“I don’t care,” Nadia said.

"I could get a job here in Kiev and rent a room for both of us ... but I want to live where my forefathers lived and died. Are you willing to join me?"

That moment her gruff father appeared from the next room and gave me a look that didn't bode well for the aspirant to his daughter's hand. He was about to give me a piece of his mind when Nadia stopped him with an abrupt gesture.

"Please, father, don't say anything. And you, Svitozar, keep quiet as well. I made a number of wrong conclusions. Nothing will stop me now and I'll go with you, Svitozar, to the end of the world."

* * *

After a modest celebration of my engagement to Nadia, I returned to Sosnivka to make preparations for our wedding and to see how the scientists were dealing with the matter I had instructed them to take care of.

Long before I reached their camp I heard boisterous merriment coming from that direction. On reaching the camp, I was strangely confused upon seeing a government helicopter parked on the ace of diamonds.

"Something's wrong here," I mumbled under my breath, because the bigwigs were supposed to be holding high festival on Independence Square.

I saw quite a few employees of the Ministry of Emergencies, headed by their Minister Pooprish, dancing to loud music of every imaginable style. Stretching along the entire length of the helicopter's fuselage was a banner with the inscription "Glory to the Most Progressive Science in the World!"

When I came closer to see exactly what emergency had generated such a wild ruckus, I met Werner.

"Svitozar, your bog may be the best deal I ever clinched," Werner said with a broad grin.

"And what does that mean for me?" I asked.

"For you to get the hell out of here," he replied. "You've got my first down payment, and since I'm in a good mood today, I'm willing to pay the rest. Once that's settled, our ways part."

"Herr Werner, it's a pity that you do not take me seriously enough. I told you that the Remez Bog is not for sale. I, too, am in a good mood today and prepared to return your first down payment. Do you really believe that I'll leave my own house and property to live God knows where? What will you be doing around this place anyway?"

"Oh, there'll be a lot of things to do here," Werner said, without so much as paying heed to the fact that I was the real owner of the bog. "I wholeheartedly agree with you about building a five-star hotel on the Remez Bog, along with a casino, a Ukrainian Disneyland nearby, and a superhighway linking Sosnivka with the rest of the world."

He was about to discharge another round of words, when I stopped him with a simple suggestion, "Werner, get lost!"

At first he was thrown off balance, but then he assumed a conciliating mien and said, "My dear Svitozar, why do we have to fight over trifles? If you want to be a co-owner of the casino, I won't mind at all. The two of us can score many points in the joint venture and make our pile out of the bog."

"Oh no, you won't!" exclaimed the Minister of Emergencies, Mr. Pooprich. Never in a hurry to be the first to visit the sites of serious emergencies, he had a keen sense of smell when it came to sniffing money in the air. He overheard our conversation and was quick to observe, "All the wealth of the bog belongs to the state, that is, to us. We are the state."

"Exactly. The state is represented by us," Okrimenko chimed in behind the minister's back.

"Do you agree with me, Mr. Buriachenko?" the minister winked slyly in my direction, most likely expecting that I would be instrumental in him getting a slice of the Remez Bog treasure.

Werner, too, must have entertained the same thought.

"Svitozar Buriachenko is an old buddy of mine," Werner said, slapping my back. "Beg your pardon, Mr. Pooprich, but I..."

I had no other choice but to push the threesome aside and leave. They continued arguing as I resolutely strode toward the ace of diamonds. It was only now that I became aware that behind the helicopter several excavators were digging up the bog. The scientists were wallowing in the mud, now and again pulling something out of it. Every find was attended by an outburst of tumultuous emotions.

The bearded scientists, who seemed to be a demon of energy, ran up to me and said breathlessly, "Mr. Buriachenko, we all want to thank you for your brilliant foresight. Although we suspected that this place would be an Eldorado for science, the riches we have unearthed are mind-boggling – gold czarist coins, gold and silver goblets and trays, diamonds, rings, earrings – all part of

Prince Trubetskoy's treasure. We pulled a stout iron-bound chest out of the mire. So far we don't know what's in it, because my colleagues could not open it. But judging from Hetman Polubotok's crest on the lid, the chest might hold something unique."

* * *

One month later Nadia and I were joined in holy wedlock. By this time she had converted the musty-smelling and uninviting Remez house into a cozy home. Then I was invited to Kiev to be familiarized with the results of the comprehensive historical and archeological study that was launched on my initiative. The outcome was so stupendous in scope and substance that I was issued the certificate of a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences and offered a cushy government job. I turned down the offer right away. The prospect of becoming a public servant was tantamount to being a galley slave. Apart from having to sit the entire day in a stuffy government office, I would have to brace myself against the temptations of being offered bribes that would be forced on me directly or indirectly, of turning gray from the ominous tension of being caught red-handed, and so on and so forth. Yet I was happy to receive a hefty government prize bag for the finds that were unearthed in the Remez Bog. I placed the reward in an account at the State Savings Banks. That was perhaps the best possible thing I could do in good faith.

Okrimenko, as I eventually learned from my fellow villagers, was in a black mood after he failed to get a chunk of the pie from the Remez Bog he had so imprudently

deeded to my father. As a result, he began crooking the elbow more frequently until one day he slipped out of sight, never to set his foot in Sosnivka again.

Abraham Werner, too, realized that our Cossack country wasn't a good enough backyard for his shady deals. Much as he tried to talk me into selling my property, I did not relent – the Remez Bog was not for sale. Nor did his idea of building and running a casino together with me materialize. Thank God it didn't, because the true purpose of a casino is to pluck a player to his pinfeathers.

The Brits refused to return Polubotok's treasure to Ukraine, arguing that it was not yet a truly independent and sovereign country. The Ukrainian nation as such, they insisted, had not yet completely evolved, because its western regions were squabbling with the eastern regions, and the northern with the southern.

"Put your house in order first, and then we'll see," was their emphatic verdict.

My parents, too, had dreamed of seeing our nation ultimately revived. Now and then they visited me, and once I introduced them to Nadia at her request. Truth is, my mother, as should have been expected, appeared in the guise of AOL, while father had a similar eerily blue appearance. But by this time I was well prepared to properly perceive the infinite relativity of nature, just like Nadia, all the more so as she had majored in natural science.

"Children, promise us that we'll be grandparents soon," my mother asked kindly.

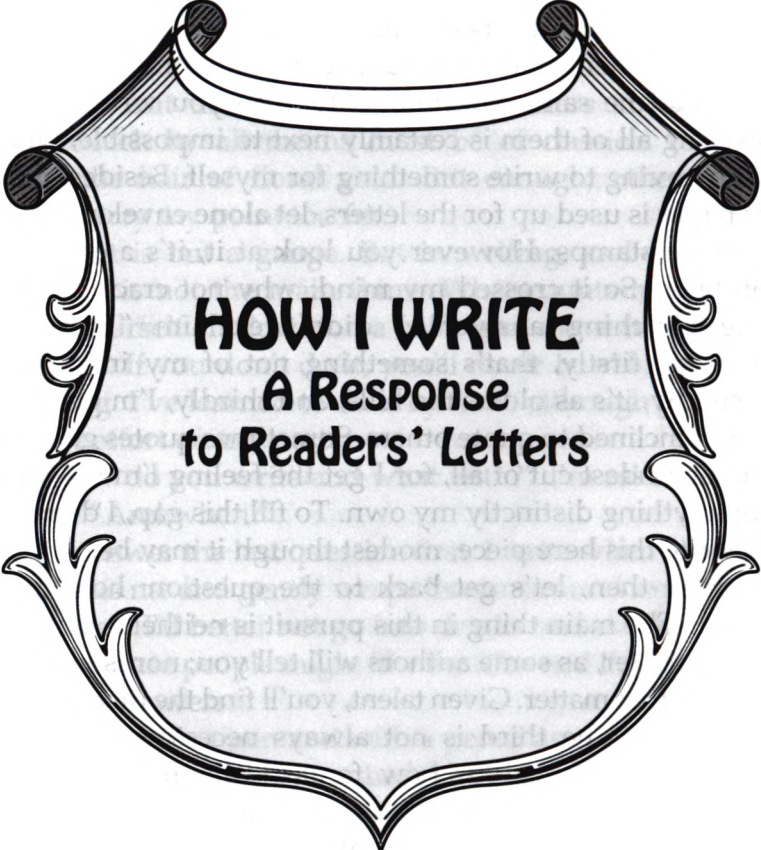
I promised that her wish would come true, although I expressed serious doubts whether our offspring would be as healthy as they could have been before the Chornobyl accident and the onset of global warming.

"Global warming or not, the main thing is to keep our relationship warm," Nadia remarked, snuggling up to me.

"Keep it warm all right, but don't overdo it. Husbands tend to get measly when they're overwarmed," my mother cautioned.

"Revive the nation. On our part, we will occasionally update the gray matter of your fellow citizens," father said.

"Especially the gray matter of scientists," mother added. "Lately they don't care at all what their loony inventions might do to the planet."



HOW I WRITE

A Response to Readers' Letters

Lately I've been literally flooded with letters. Their main message boils down to one and the same question: "How do you write?" Answering all of them is certainly next to impossible, what with having to write something for myself. Besides, a lot of paper is used up for the letters, let alone envelopes and postage stamps. However you look at it, it's a complex problem. So it crossed my mind: why not crack it with one clinching answer? I didn't exclaim "Eureka!" because, firstly, that's something not of my invention, secondly, it's as old as the hills, and thirdly, I'm generally not inclined to quote others. Sometimes quotes give me the unkindest cut of all, for I get the feeling I'm no good for anything distinctly my own. To fill this gap, I decided to write this here piece, modest though it may be.

Well then, let's get back to the question: how do I write? The main thing in this pursuit is neither a pen nor a typewriter, as some authors will tell you; nor is inspiration for that matter. Given talent, you'll find the first, second and third. The third is not always necessary. Petrarch never met Laura, but how fantastically he wrote! By the way, Laura was the wife of a certain Lauro (his family name, though, proved to be untraceable in all the sources I browsed through). Perhaps that's just where the secret of inspiration lies. Give a thought to it. For inspiration you don't necessarily have to meet a definite woman. It's enough to open wide your window (preferably in spring),

lean out of it, prop up your chin with a hand, and keep your eyes riveted on the modern Lauras. Describe their figures (but in a way all your own), their eyes, and, of course, their lips – this the most important instrument of communication between man and woman. Also, say a few words about the dress and what it's made of. Poets almost never write about it, a fact that galls fashion-minded girls.

After that descend to some particulars about their legs, which by all means must be of classical bronze, while the hair of floral gold. But enough, otherwise I might carry my point too far.

Talent is but a gauge. But in writing, as I've stated above, it is not the main thing. What counts most is to make yourself sit down on a chair and move it closer to the table. If you don't do it, you'll never be able to write anything. I've learned to do it by now, although it exacts a lot of effort on my part.

"How do you write and what with?" I'm asked in the letters. "And when?"

I'll answer the last question first. I write when inspiration visits me and gently wraps its arms round my shoulders. Well, I'd better not go into details on how that happens, because people might like the idea and I'd drown in a sea of followers.

I write with a pen and with a pencil as well. The pencil I hang by a string at my bedside where I put my notebook, and then I go to sleep. As soon as inspiration visits me, I wake up in a jiffy and, without waiting for the advent of morning, materialize my inspiration.

Nowadays when technology has made fantastic strides, you can buy yourself a recorder. But it has some serious disadvantages. Using it in daytime when nobody

is around is all right. But at night it's dangerous: you can wake your snoozing spouse. And wives – you know that pretty well if you're married – are an unpredictable lot. So I think it's better not to risk it, much as the laws of art call for certain sacrifices.

Then there's the typewriter. I almost never use it. My thought runs away faster than the carriage of a typewriter. By the time I find the letter I need on the keyboard, I forget the phrase. Much as I try to find it in the deepest recesses of my soul afterward, it's lost. If it ever resurfaces, it doesn't seem to be what I thought it to be initially. It is common knowledge that the best things are the ones we lose, just like the biggest fish is always the one we fail to hook for one reason or another.

Train your brain. Train it just like your muscles. Never think that the brain gets tired. It's your body that gets tired. The more you wear your pencils down, the more your brain struggles along. At such moments it reminds me of a heavily loaded truck some dimwit lets roll down a hill without checking the brakes first.

What to read? Read everything you can lay your hands on. However much you read, you'll know little anyway.

When you get down to writing, you learn that you don't know your geography, in spite of the fact that you had excellent marks in that subject at school; you don't know anything about history, although you majored in it back in college; and, to top it all, you find that you don't know the language, your native tongue in the first place.

You run to the library, turn to experts, and for all their advice and consultations, the critics will invariably waylay you at some corner and flay the skin off you.

In short, read as much as you can. Read in buses, cars, trains, streetcars, subways, public gardens, parks, on the banks of rivers, lakes, ponds, canals, seas and oceans (if you happen to get there).

If a hammer is too destructive a tool to snuff out your television set – this brilliant invention of the 20th century which has transformed many a talented writer into hundred percent word butchers – simply switch it off and let anybody else who wants watch the box.

Read!!! But never read any books, booklets, and essays (even of your own writing) while you're abroad. When you get there, take in the scenery, towns, villages, and old architecture and jot down your impressions. Pick up as much as you can of the customs and traditions of the people you visit. Ply them with questions and write down the answers. Copy slogans, the wording of ads, names of streets, and inscriptions on the tomb-stones of people whose names you've known since your schooldays. Don't be ashamed of accepting booklets, leaflets and guides even when you're given them free of charge. Once you're round the corner, don't throw them away. They might come in handy when you start writing.

Then, what do you have to know to perfection? The classics, of course. Not all of them, but about six or seven. No more than ten is all right. But you must know them like the ten fingers on your hands. It's not necessary to get down to your toes for the total count. Ten fingers (for ten classics) will be quite enough. Believe me.

The reader might wonder whether I have a moral right to offer such advice. I don't know. I'm not sure. Maybe I don't. Maybe I don't a thousand times over. If so, please be so kind then as to refrain from asking your

mind-tearing question: "How do you write?" I write the way I can.

Well, you've got my answer. You can laugh it off. Still, I'd be happy if it sets your mental wheels grinding. To be frank with you to the end, this is my first serious scholarly work. Its size won't win me a master or doctoral degree, of course. But if I add someone's quotation to every phrase and sentence, this modest piece of writing could swell to a whopper of a book.

So I advise the scholars to have a look at my paper, and if it's only a question of adding quotations, believe me, I won't have to be asked twice – I'll comply right away. But I won't settle for less than a doctoral degree. If they offer me full membership in the Academy of Sciences (I'm no canting hypocrite when it comes to airing my ambitions), I'll drop my eyes and agree. What about being a corresponding member? I'll put on a modest air for the sake of appearances to make them understand that I've had my fill of corresponding, as it were.

At this point I would like to tell you about a meeting I had with an Academician not so long ago. I told him a number of stories on one and the same subject. He listened to me so attentively I thought his jaw would drop into his lap. I reeled off a string of information he'd never heard of in his life before. Well stocked with gray matter that he was, he wouldn't admit his ignorance at first. But when I finished, he embraced me, shed a tear, and even wanted to plant a kiss on my cheeks. But I never allow any strange character I meet for the first time to kiss me. So he only licked his lips and gave me a beaming smile.

"My colleague," he said. "You overwhelmed me. What I've heard from you is an amazing revelation.

You're not simply an Academician, but an entire Academy of Sciences."

Well, I don't claim to be an Academy of Sciences. That would be too much for my modesty to bear. Just a full member of the Academy would be quite enough for me, the more so since the athlete of scholarship embraced me gently and called me Academician in the presence of other people who must have surely wondered why I hadn't objected. You see, I really hanker for the title but only on one condition – I'd like to be called Honorary Academy Member of Kiev University. My alma mater is especially dear to me. I hope I'm just as dear to it as well. If my instructors are to be believed (and I have no reason not to believe them), I cost them a bundle of no less than 15,000 rubles to gain an education. If I add to it what I got from my former employers who gave me paid leave for term examinations twice a year for six years in a row (I studied by correspondence), my tuition price tag would amount to a total of 25,000. I might as well add a further 5,000. I'm not stingy. After all, I didn't pay for my education out of my own pocket.

In short, I thereby give written consent to the title of Honorary Academy Member, and so as to compensate for the aforementioned expenditures, I formally promise not to sign my name on any payrolls.

**Most sincerely yours,
Oleg Chornohuz**

P. S. The reader might ask me: what has the Academician title got to do with all that?

My answer: it's just because my thought-provoking way of writing deserves it.



“Oh, what a marvellous, charming imprint of a lady’s delicate hand, sir,” Oleksander Tymofiyovych exclaimed, as I stepped over the threshold of the villa. “I congratulate you. To receive such powerful slaps at your age, my dear friend... Well, that’s really something. Slaps like that make life still worth living at this age. Or are you of a different mind?”

“That can’t be!” I blushed furiously. “Oleksander Tymofiyovych – a handkerchief and a mirror!” I flung these words as if I had really meant to say – a handkerchief and a sword.

Oleksander Tymofiyovych wrapped his arm around my shoulders, passed me a towel, and led me to a wardrobe that had a huge mirror hanging on the inside. I glanced at my reflection and nearly fainted.

“It’s incredible but irrefutable,” I turned to face the gathered company. “Do you have any idea how much time has elapsed since I was slapped...”

My friends roared with laughter.

“He’s going to up and tell us that it’s been no less than a couple of decades.”

“Well, perhaps not a couple of decades, but at least a couple of years...”

“My friends,” I raised my hands theatrically, and with that gesture made them fall silent. “This slap is exactly two hours old.”

"Well, congratulations! But where's the one who saluted you? Who gave it to you?"

"Tell us, to whom does this delightful and charming little hand belong?"

"And, I might add—a mighty little hand," Oleh Danylovych pointed out.

"I'll tell you, just don't be too disillusioned," I said, as I sat down in my customary place. "But before I begin, I'd like a cup of coffee laced with brandy à la Sidalkovsky. Otherwise you won't squeeze anything out of me, just as you can't squeeze anything out of coffee grounds that are emptied out of a percolator."

Oleksander Tymofiyovych poured me some coffee from a thermos and laid out a large assortment of accompanying treats: milk – condensed, powdered, and regular – and several phyllo pastries for which we had a standing order. I took my first sip and then, opening my mouth widely, demonstrated for a good minute that the coffee was excellent and that the expression on my face was the best possible compliment to the one who had prepared this heavenly drink today for our "Masonic Lodge."

"Mmmm-ye-sss!" I dragged out this word – one that is not to be found in any dictionary – and closed my mouth.

"Sir," Poloshchuk, who is quite taken with this English term, addressed me. "Our lodge, and likewise our ears – they all attend you."

"We all attend you, proceed to disillusion us."

"Do tell us, for if this lady's foot is as delicate as her hand, then, by the rights invested in me as an old bachelor, you can inform her that I'll marry her without so much as even glancing at her face," Oleksander

Tymofiyovych, warmed by a generous dose of coffee, exclaimed as he leapt to his feet.

"The lady truly does have a little foot, Oleksander Tymofiyovych, but at the risk of sounding trite I must say that she isn't the one for you – she has expensive tastes and likes to put her best foot forward."

"And that's why she chose you?"

"How can she have chosen him if she's spurned him," Victor Dmytrovych said pointedly.

"I beg your indulgence, for I'm about to begin my story. This mysterious woman, the imprint of whose hand you can still see on my right cheek, is none other than my wife!"

"Aha! Bravo! Bravissimo!" they all applauded warmly, as if confirming that I had arrived at least two cups of coffee too late.

"Just out of curiosity, what prompted your good lady to present you with such a surprise?" Poloshchuk spoke up once again.

"Well, it's actually an old and highly moral narrative, my friends!"

"I'm sure," Borys Ivanovych snickered. "Twenty-five years of married life and suddenly you get a slap of that magnitude. There must be an interesting – and I would venture to say – spicy story behind it all."

"I have to disillusion you once again, because although the story has a moral to it, it isn't at all as spicy as you would like to think," I said. And I began my narrative.

I'm deeply convinced that it's just as harmful to go visiting with one's wife as it is to go to a smoking room just because your friend, who happens to be a smoker, goes there quite frequently...

In short, some time ago my school friend N., whom I hadn't seen for about ten years, invited me over. While inviting me, he bragged that although he had once copied my school assignments, he had long since become a big shot, something that I never would have dreamed of.

But at the same time he hadn't let it go to his head, and he had retained his humility and the memory of our friendship.

I, of course, immediately wanted to know what kind of big shot he had become. He intrigued me, just as I'm intriguing you now.

"When you come to see me," he said, "I'll tell you. Write down the address and come right over."

I promised him: "I'll be there in three or four hours."

"In four hours?" he asked in alarm. "That's utter madness. Why so long?"

"You see, my dear friend, it's this way," I replied, "in the first year of our marriage my wife needed ten minutes to get ready to go out. Now, after twenty years of marriage – four hours. During the first ten years, every year was like two years for her. Like being at war. Now – one year is like four years, like doing hard labour..."

"Okay," he chuckled. "We'll be waiting for you."

I won't describe how he greeted us. Or how he hosted us. I'll only say this: it all went very well indeed. But I want to expand on one detail.

After we arrived, his wife came home from work. You wouldn't say that she was a beauty. At that age, it's only in rare cases that a woman retains traces of her former good looks. As far as I was concerned she was an ordinary – looking woman, but she was very pleasant, hospitable, and open-hearted. That's exactly what appeals most to us men, but it's also what we appreciate the least in our own wives.

Petro Andriyovych – that’s what we’ll call my friend–leapt from his chair as soon as he heard the key in the keyhole. He opened the door. And for some unknown reason he asked her: “Is that you, my love?”

He kissed her tenderly, took her gently by the arm, and after escorting her in an elegant manner to our table, said: “Now you can get to know one another. This is my Yanichka.”

We shook hands.

Yanichka smiled pleasantly, excused herself for a minute, quickly changed her clothing, freshened up a bit, and joined us at the table. About half an hour later, my wife and I felt as if we had known Yanichka at least from grade school if not from senior kindergarten.

Yanichka was a wonderful conversationalist, she liked jokes, and she knew how to tell them; most importantly, however, she didn’t display the slightest bit of arrogance or superiority. She was a simple, modest, and pleasant woman, and, most importantly, she wasn’t a hypocrite.

On this first occasion, we left their home with a feeling of regret that we had spent so little time there, and we kept trying to think of excuses to visit them again. Actually, it was my wife who felt this way, not I. I’ll admit, however, that until certain words had been spoken, words that I’ll quote right away, I too was of a mind that we should visit Petro Andriyovych more frequently.

“We must visit them again,” my wife said. “At the very least, a boor like you might learn how to treat his wife. Just look—she came home from work and before she had even crossed the threshold he was already at her side. He quickly took her shopping bag, kissed her on

the cheek, and asked: 'How are you? Did anyone offend you at work today?' And she's the wife, you know, of someone who is almost a minister."

I swallowed the bitter pill and remained silent.

But she went on and on: "All you can brag about is that he copied school assignments from you. But he's quite the man now. The intelligence of a minister is encoded in his genes. As for you, however, once a peasant always a peasant. Have you greeted me even once with a kiss? Have you ever taken my bag from me when I'm staggering under its weight?

"You're not saying a word! You have nothing at all to say. And just stop and think about her name. He refers to her ever so tenderly – Yanichka. But her real name is simply Nina."

And then my wife once again regaled me with the story that he had already told us. He and his wife had studied together at the same institute, in the same class, in the same group, and they had even shared a desk. Once, during their first year there, he had taken a pocket knife and carved: 'Ya + Nina = Lyubov [I + Nina = Love].' Then someone had scraped away the word 'Lyubov [Love]' and all that was left was 'Ya Nina [I Nina]'. From that time he called her 'my Yanina.' And when he married her he called her his dear little 'Yaninochka,' and then he shortened the name once and for all, and now he never calls her anything but 'Yanichka.'

I reined in my tongue and picked up my cup of coffee, but it turned out to be cold.

"What happened next?" the entire company almost bellowed at me.

"Next?" I repeated the question. "I'll tell you what happened next, but only after Oleksander Tymofiyovych pours me another cup of coffee. And only on the condition that the coffee isn't so hot that it scalds my tongue, or so cold that I'm not able to warm myself in this company."

Oleksander Tymofiyovych attended to my request and I continued.

It's probably about two years now since our first memorable visit. As time went by, I visited my school friend less often, even though my wife kept suggesting time and again that I should see Yanichka more frequently. Actually, I now referred to my friend as 'Yanichka,' while my wife called his wife that. But whenever we talked about the family of Petro Andriyovych, we simply said: "Why don't we go to Yanichka's?"

And off we'd go. Nothing changed at their place. They continued living together on the best of terms. In the morning, when he was seeing Yanichka off to work, he still kissed her and wished her a safe trip as he held the door of his official car open for her. Indeed, he carried on with his wishes to such an extent that one time it seemed to me that the chauffeur couldn't help but snicker quietly, for Petro Andriyovych was bidding his farewells to Yanichka as if he were seeing her off on a trip to another country for at least half a year, even though he knew that within seven working hours Yanichka would be home again.

Sometimes when we were at his place, he'd phone her at work. He'd inquire if she had drunk some kefir, if she had taken a walk in the fresh air during the noon break, and if she wasn't too tired. If she admitted to having any kind of pain, he'd categorically forbid her to continue

working and order her to come home right away, and he'd even threaten that he would go at once and bring her home himself.

To my wife it seemed that after these visits I too became a slightly better person. And indeed, I occasionally carried my wife's heavy bag for her and drove her to work, but I simply could not bring myself to kiss her in the morning as she left for work. It was all a matter of some stupid principle. And, most of all, I didn't want to ape anyone, even though my wife kept hinting that I should, stressing that Institutes of Culture did not breed intelligence. I was, in fact, willing to kiss her, but I was always waiting for the right moment, a holiday or something like that.

And then one time we went on a vacation to a health resort. I don't remember where it was—in Yalta or Koktebel.

Anyway, one day my wife ran up to me and said: "Come on, try and guess: whom did I see near the hotel today? You'll never guess!"

"Who was it?" I asked her.

"Yanichka!" she answered, smiling happily.

"Yanichka?" I asked again, as if I hadn't heard her the first time. "Her or him? Or both of them together?"

"Him," she said. "I saw him going into the hotel."

I put in a call to the hotel and made an inquiry.

"Yes," the desk clerk on duty answered. "He's staying in room 103. The telephone number is such-and-such."

I phoned him.

"Oh-oh-oh!" I heard him shout with happiness. "So you're here, are you? Come on over at once. And hop to it. I'm waiting. I have champagne, cognac, and everything else that's needed."

I didn't pay much attention to the words "and everything else that's needed." I took my wife, and off we went to see Yanichka. We knocked at the door, and he opened it.

He shouted like a student: "Well, look who's here! Come on in, my dear friend!" and he reverted to a Georgian accent. "We'll drink and make merry!"

I walked in and my wife followed me across the threshold.

"Hello, Petro Andriyovych!" she greeted him.

I looked at him and noticed that he'd suddenly turned deathly pale. He stopped dead in his tracks and didn't even respond to the greeting.

Ant then, suddenly, two winsome young beauties dashed towards us from the deluxe room and called out to Yanichka: "Come on, Petro Andriyovych, let's have a look at your old school buddy."

My wife was on the verge of fainting. And, more to the point, so was I.

"Well," I said to him, "you didn't warn us that you weren't alone. We thought you were here with Yanichka. But I see you're here on a business trip. The girls – they must be your stenos, your secretaries, right?"

"A secretary and a courier," Petro Andriyovych said, quickly picking up on my lead. "Our work here is most urgent... It's the plan... We're working at a furious pace... Everything has to be submitted by tomorrow... it has to be written, retyped..."

"If it's done by hand," I said to him, "it's not quite the same. But if there are girls to do it... and especially if they're professionals, then... Well, that's great."

"Everything will be up to standard," he assured me. "They both know how to type. They finished courses..."

"Well, you'll have to excuse us," I said. "We're late for supper. We've been out walking and we've worked up quite an appetite. We just thought we'd drop in for a minute. To see how Yanich... Pardon me, to see how Petro Andriyovych is getting along..."

"Oh, this damned coffee," I suddenly interrupted my story. "It's cold again. Oleksander Tymofiyovych, I'm not as spoiled as Oleh Danylovych to be drinking cold coffee."

"I won't warm it up," Oleksander Tymofiyovych replied, "until you tell us what happened afterwards."

"Afterwards? We don't visit Yanichka anymore. My wife said: 'I don't want to set eyes on him ever again. I hate him. You men are all the same—especially if you make it into the top managerial ranks; you indulge in all sorts of secretaries, state-owned cars, official trips...' I still don't know what point she was trying to make.

"And, as you know, my friends, it just so happened that yesterday I was confirmed as the Director of Municipal Assets... Now I too have an official car and a secretary. It's true that she's homely, but I'm not about to replace her because I don't need to be inundated with anonymous complaints during my first few days in office. I rushed home and shared the good news with my wife..."

"This morning my chauffeur drove her to work. And in the evening she came home, as always, with a heavy bag. Exhausted... She rang the bell. And then she said: 'You could at least have nailed a hook on the door, Comrade Director. There's no place to hang your bag when you're trying to find the keys.'

"My dearest," I responded, and I felt so fortunate. "You'll have a hook, and as for your bag, give me your bag, and let me kiss you..."


"I was so happy, and I approached her with such a sincere heart. She gave me her bag, and then she took a good swing at me and...

"Need I say more?"

My friends lowered their heads...

"I'll just say this. When she struck me, the only thing that stopped me from keeling over was the door frame. And, in addition to the sparks in my eyes, I remember hearing her say: 'I'm not a Yanichka!'"

"What she meant by that, I still don't understand. But, my dear friends, after all is said and done, women – they're really a world unto themselves. It's not easy to figure them out."



ALCONAUTS

(1983)

As you know, I deliberately bought my cottage in this neglected, Godforsaken spot," Serhiy Ivanovych began his story as he poured us coffee around a bonfire. "For two years it was very quiet here. Except for a feral cat and her two kittens, no one came by to see me; and even the cat showed up only when her hunting was unsuccessful."

Serhiy Ivanovych seated himself on a stump. Through the boughs in the orchard we could see the rippling water of the Dnipro-Slavutych as it carried on its mighty back a riverboat with four decks of tourists who were enthusiastically dancing a fox-trot in the late evening twilight while belting out incomprehensible words to the beat of the music.

The steamer glided past us, leaving in our hearts memories of our naïve romanticism in days gone by, and sadness — an unfathomable sadness for the days of our youth that we had frittered away so thoughtlessly. The sounds of the music slowly receded, and when they died out altogether and only a light on a solitary buoy was left to blink forlornly at us in the night, Serhiy Ivanovych continued his story.

"This spring, however, guests started stopping by quite frequently and unexpectedly. They began taking my apricot, peach, and fig saplings. Then they went after my apple, plum, pear, and rosebush seedlings. They dug them up very neatly, and as soon as I brought in new ones, they took them as well.

"As you can see, there is no watchman or any neighbours nearby, and there never have been in these parts. Only an old fisherman used to live on the bank of the Dnipro in this hut that I now occupy."

Serhiy Ivanovych was silent for a moment, as if he was listening to the rustling of the branches in the orchard, and then he unhurriedly continued his story: "I came up with all sorts of ideas. I even taped a message on my tape recorder in which I shouted: 'Oh, you wretched thieves, you've come again, have you? Well, I'll show you!' The tape recorder worked without a hitch. But, for the most part, it frightened only me and my family, for the seedlings continued disappearing from my young orchard.

"Then my uninvited guests decided to take up fishing. They took my fishing rod, an inflatable boat, a fishnet, lures, hooks, and leads. But they left me the last batch of seedlings that I had planted.

"I forgot to tell you that I had stuck needles into the tips of the branches of the last seedlings that I bought. It didn't harm the trees, and it gave me at least a fighting chance of finding them if I ever had to go looking for them. Because when I went to the district warden and told him that I was being robbed, he just smiled.

"My friend, I have to look after eight villages all by myself. I have lost'—that's exactly the way he put it: I have lost—'tape recorders, cars, radios, transistors, money, and you've come here about some kind of seedlings... You have thieves that are honourable. It could be said that they're decent folk. Gardeners.'

"I felt ashamed. Perhaps they truly were gardeners? It wouldn't be right to plant them in jail for wanting to cultivate an orchard. But then these gardeners switched to fishing and started going after my fishing tackle. And later they turned their attention to my agricultural implements: hoes, axes, spades, saws, hammers, and even nails.

"One could either weep or become a Sherlock Holmes. And Oleh Danylovych over here," Serhiy Ivanovych said as he turned to one of our companions, "will back me up

when I tell you what I did. He was the one I called upon, and we spent a couple of nights in the role of village detectives. We took a few bottles, some bread, canned food, and, of course, coffee in a thermos so we wouldn't fall asleep. Plus a few adventure stories and a chess set.

"We spent the first twenty-four hours uneventfully up in the attic. No one bothered us. And we didn't scare anyone off. But the next night our nerves weren't up to it. We couldn't stand it for more than three hours without a light. We turned on our flashlights, drank the rest of the cognac, and began to sing. Does anyone want more coffee?" Serhiy Ivanovych interrupted his story.

We shook our heads.

"Well, since you aren't sleepy yet, I'll tell you everything that happened. The most interesting part is still ahead. I noticed that, as a rule, the thieves came here every Tuesday. I'd come here on Friday evening, right after work, and on Monday morning I'd leave for home, but when I came back on Wednesday morning, I'd find the windows and doors wide open: the guests had already paid me a visit.

"So I decided to stay at the cottage the following Tuesday. That is, I left as usual on Monday, but I spent the night at the home of a good friend in the village. On Tuesday morning I set up my ambush. I took a rifle, my dog Dzhulbars, and pretended that I was hunting partridges, which, I should add, are actually found here, but not in the same numbers as, let's say, centipedes and wood ticks.

"At some point in the afternoon I fell asleep. When I woke up, I saw that my guests were already hard at work in my cottage, carrying out paint, two new axes, a saw, boards... I shut my eyes: was it possible that I was dreaming? Then I pinched my nose and rubbed my eyes. No, it was exactly as I'm telling you.

"I rammed two bullets into my rifle and went to meet my guests."

"Good day to you!" I called out to them from behind a bush. "May God help you in your work."

They were struck dumb with panic. Three middle-aged fellows with badly crumpled, unshaven mugs. While they stood gaping at me without knowing what to say, a little devil seemed to tug at my tongue: "Which one of you is the owner of the cottage?"

"The owner?" they exchanged glances.

"Well, yes," I repeated, "the owner. You're here to fix up the place. Or what?"

One of them, who had less stubble on his face than the others and who was obviously the leader, glanced first at me, then at my rifle, and said hastily: "Of course, we're fixing it up. That's what we're doing. We're just getting ready to paint the windows and doors. You can see for yourself," he says to me, 'how the old paint has peeled. But the owner won't be here until tomorrow. So there's no point waiting for him. We have work to do... After we've finished painting, we plan to saw some wood," and he pointed at the saw and the axe.

"You must be planning to split it as well."

"That goes without saying," another one added his two bits worth. "We'll split it and pile it up neatly. So that the owner will be pleased with us. That's the way we do things!"

"Well, that's fine," I said serenely. "You go ahead and work, and in the meantime I'll just rest for a while, because I spent so much time crawling through the ravines that my legs are falling off."

I saw them look at one another, but they didn't say a word. One of them picked up a can of paint and opened it; another one brought out an assortment of brushes. I

watched to see which one he'd choose. He chose the smallest one—and I felt I could trust them to paint the veranda.

I sat down a little way off and cradled my rifle on my knees. Dzhulbars was sitting next to me with his tongue hanging out; he kept looking wisely first at me and then at them, as if asking: "When will you finally let me put some patches on the pants of these hooligans?"

I kept petting him and saying over and over again: "Not yet, Dzhulbars. Be patient."

"So, you're going to paint the veranda first, are you?" I asked them. "And then you'll go on to do the bathhouse, cellar, outhouse, kitchen, and cottage doors?"

"Exactly!" said the one who was obviously the leader.

"Well, that isn't such a big job for you. You'll probably have it all done before dinner."

"It's no big deal—there's not that much to do," the third one spoke up.

"You know, it slipped my mind," I replied. "Serhiy Ivanovych did tell me about it. You're also supposed to paint the gazebo with the light blue paint, the little bridges over the ditches with green paint, and the flower beds in the old car tires with red and blue paint. And also the roof on the shed. Well, if you finish all this before dinner, then... But after all, that's nothing for three big strapping fellows like you! Moreover," I continued, "I have a proposition for you. You see, I'm a designer. Have you heard of a profession like that?"

I could see that upon hearing this word only two of them exchanged glances, while the third one didn't even raise his head, as if he wanted to indicate to the others: "In that case, my dear brothers, we're done for."

"So," I said, "I have a proposition. In order to ensure that the work progresses smoothly and precisely, I'll

take on the task of overseeing everything. Let's get to work, comrades. Now you," and I pointed to the doomed fellow who upon hearing the word 'designer' had not even lifted his head, "you get up on the gazebo. You," I said to the leader, "off you go to the shed. And as for you," I turned to the third one, "get to work on the veranda. Lay on the lettuce-coloured paint, but do it very carefully. If you do a lousy job, I'll make you redo it. The responsibility for everything rests with me now. Serhiy Ivanovych will arrive tomorrow to have a look, and if he sees that things are botched up... Whom will he hold responsible for that? Me. He'll say: 'You were here. Couldn't you see to it that things were done properly?'"

"You sound like the owner," one of them finally said, as if he were both asking and confirming this fact.

I understood that he was trying to flush me out.

"I'm a friend of the owner — and that's as good as being the owner himself," I replied. "So, off you go to the gazebo and don't stand around gabbing. You've wasted enough time already. You haven't even lifted a finger as yet to do any work. All you've managed to do so far is bring out the paint and the tools."

They remained silent, but they were breathing heavily. Well, to make a long story short, I'll say this: I worked them so hard that by dinnertime they were sweating bullets.

"That's enough, Mr. Owner," the youngest groaned as he struggled to stay on his feet.

"What kind of owner am I," I said, as though offended "Take this can of brown paint and freshen up the garage. And you, what's your name?"

"What's it to you?"

"Well then, Blue Unshaved Chin — up you go on the roof."

"If it isn't too much to ask, give me some water... The sun's scorching hot... I'm almost melting..."

"Don't exaggerate," I shouted. "See, I'm sitting over here and I'm okay. The gazebo isn't a blast furnace. There may be a few awkward spots, so hang on to the ladder. And watch what you're doing—don't smash a hole in the roof."

The whole day went by in this way. I sent one of them to the store for bread. I thought: if he runs away, well, may the devil take him! He's put in a good day's work already. What's left can be finished by the two others. And there's less trouble with two.

But I did warn him before he left: "Be quick about it. Because the other two have to start sawing the wood, and then the third has to split it and pile it in neat little pyramids. So, take care that your friends don't become annoyed with you..."

He was back within half an hour.

Then I made them haul last year's potatoes out of the cellar and dig a hole for the garbage and other refuse.

By then one of them couldn't take it any longer and he said: "We've figured out that you're the owner. If it isn't too much to ask, let us go. Whatever we haven't finished today—we'll do tomorrow, but we haven't the strength left to pretend any longer."

"What do you mean — 'to pretend'?" I inquired uncomprehendingly.

"Well, that we're workers, and that you're not the owner of this cottage... We," said one of them, "understand everything. We recognized your dog..."

"Okay," I said. "I'm the owner. And who are you?"

"Don't poke fun at us," one of them said as he squatted on the ground. "You know who we are."

"No, I don't," I said.

"Well, how can I put it... We're guests... You understand, we're guests," one of them started to say chokingly. "If it

isn't too much to ask, give us something to drink. And if not, take us to the warden. He'll at least give us some water..."

"We won't do it anymore..."

"Well, okay, fellows," I said. "Explain to me what it is that you do. First you carted off my seedlings, then you went after my fishing gear, and now you've shifted your attention to my agricultural implements."

"It doesn't depend on us," the leader finally responded. "It depends on our buyers. They say to us: maybe you fellows could get us some seedlings. So we get some. Then some fishermen put in an order for fishing reels... And now everyone's painting, fixing up their houses and yards. So we came after the paint..."

"But who are you by profession?"

And the one who had gone for bread shouted: "Alconauts, we'realconauts!"

"Alconauts. In your language—alcoholics. Let us go! We won't steal any more, and we won't drink any more. We give you our word."

I let them go. Of course, I didn't really believe that they'd stop drinking and stealing. You can't retrain people like that in one session. But there haven't been any other incidents at my place. At least I haven't had any 'guests' since then.

Is it possible that work can make decent human beings even out of 'alconauts'?

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THE REMEZ BOG

