IN STALIN'S SHADOW

A·N·A·T·O·L·Y D·I·M·A·R·O·V

In Stalin's Shadow

Also by Anatoly Dimarov

ACROSS THE BRIDGE

Anatoly Dimarov
IN STALIN'S SHADOW

Translated
from the Ukrainian
by
Yuri Tkach

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About the Author

Anatoly Dimarov is a contemporary Ukrainian writer living and working in Kiev. He was born in Myrhorod, Ukraine in 1922 into the family of a teacher. His surname was inherited from a Bulgarian grandfather. On completion of his secondary education in 1940 he was conscripted into the army and fought during World War 2. Wounded on the German front and demobilized in 1943. Began working as a journalist for the central newspaper "Radianska Ukrayina", followed by stints in a number of other newspapers. From 1950 began editorial work. Became editor-in-chief of the Lviv Provincial Publishing House and later prose editor at Radiansky Pysmennyk Publishers in Kiev. Presently on the editorial boards of several Ukrainian literary journals and series. His stories appear regularly in "Prapor".

Dimarov first appeared in print in 1944. He now has some 15 books to his credit. A member of the Ukrainian Writers Union since 1949. In 1981 he won the prestigious Shevchenko State Prize in literature. Many of his critical works written in the 1960s are now finally being published. He is currently rewriting his previously heavily censored trilogy *And There Will Be People* on life in the Ukrainian village during the Civil War and World War Two. Several Soviet Ukrainian magazines have recently published his novellas dealing with Stalin's excesses, including the famine of 1933. The latter has also been published in Russian in Moscow.

Dimarov has been instrumental in getting many young Ukrainian writers, for example Hryhoriy Tiutiunnyk, into print.

Because he has not lauded the Soviet system and written merely about the lives and tribulations of ordinary people, Dimarov has been "forgotten" by Soviet literary critics, achieving none of the fame of his fellow writers. Drawing on a rich personal experience in tackling intricate conflicts, Dimarov's uncomplicated, though often highly psychological prose has won a wide following in Ukraine and beyond. Its appeal transcends national borders.

He is an ardent gemstone collector and has travelled the length

and breadth of the USSR in search of adventure and semi-precious stones. An exhibition of his "Pictures in Stone" – framed polished slices of stone, which highlight Nature's creative talents – was recently held in Kiev.

Yuri Tkach

Translator's Preface

I would like to thank all those people who made this book possible – beginning with the author himself, who made the selections of the stories which appear in this English edition; the people at the Kiev branch of the All-Union Agency for Author's Copyright. Also my thanks to Wayne Clarke and Olia Kohut, and especially Graham Hirst for editing the manuscript.

REVENGE

This story took place some thirty years ago in what was then the outskirts of Kiev, but is now merely a suburb. However the witnesses to it are still alive and if you question them, they will each tell their own story. Therefore, I do not know just how accurate this account will be, even though I tried to steer as close to the truth as possible.

I

Each new day was packed like dynamite with events. In the morning, diving into an ocean of surprises, a person knew not where he would spend the coming night: at home, on the road, in hospital, or perhaps even in prison.

So how could Olexandr Mykhailovych Kostiuk have foreseen that this bright and frosty February morning – more precisely this meeting with the teenager – would change his whole life so unexpectedly and abruptly?

"I didn't light it! I didn't!"

The teenager was shaking all over. His black eyes boiled over with outrage, his lips twitched.

"All right, I believe you: you didn't light it..."

"Then why did he rip off my hat...! And hit me...!"

The teenager's whole body breathed with indignation. The skates, no longer needed, dangled from his left hand, plaintively tapping against each other.

"All right, we'll sort this out. Just don't run so fast. Can't you see how hard it is for me to keep up?"

He really was beginning to lose his breath. His lungs wheezed, whistled and groaned. He was short of breath. He could feel his heart pounding in his temples.

"Stop... Let me catch my breath..."

Leaning against his walking stick, he breathed like a broken horse. He smiled sadly at the youth, who was looking fearfully at him by now. "It's all right... It'll pass in a moment..."

He was almost the same height as the youth. And of the same build, anorexic, except that unlike the youth's face, his wasn't red, but more a shade of grey – of that he was sure. No frost could have reddened his grey face.

"Well now... Let's go."

He wanted to rearrange his scarf to cover his thin bare neck, but it was no longer there. He had given it to the youth to wrap around his head in place of the hat.

It had been a battle to placate him.

Running bareheaded, with his hair sticking up like a rooster's comb, the lad had collided with Olexandr Mykhailovych. He had not wanted to return for his hat. Outrage boiled over inside him, hot angry tears trembled in his eyes.

"All right, then I'll see you home."

"No."

"What about the scarf...? You don't think I'm going to let you have it?"

And the youth had unwillingly acquiesced.

"What's your name?"

"Maxym... There's our house over there... Here, take your scarf."

"No, I'll come in with you. You'll need someone to stand up for you. Eh?"

The house was small – it was more like a shack. They were put up in yards while apartments were being erected. Just temporary structures. Somewhere for people to shelter. It had sunk into the snow, way back off the street, and shyly batted its small windows. The tall chimney emitted a thin wisp of smoke.

"Someone at home?"

"Mother."

"What about dad?"

"He's dead."

A small dark entrance hall, a low door.

The room was overflowing with steam. A woman froze over the washtub, looking straight at them. Then she pulled out her bared arms from the grey froth and clapped her hands in despair:

"In trouble again?"

Maxym struggled to answer, but the woman was already advancing on him:

"Own up...! Own up, or I don't know what I'll do to you!" She seemed not to notice the stranger, seeing only her son. The teenager's face

suddenly clammed up and a condemned, stubborn expression transfixed his face.

"But I didn't light it!"

"God, he's burn't something down!"

"Listen, let the boy explain," Olexandr Mykhailovych tried to intervene, but the woman no longer heard him or her son. She shouted angrily, and from her shouts one could learn that her life was damned, that her husband, the besotted drunkard, had drunk himself to death, and now her son had become a pyromaniac and a bandit. She continued to rave, and the shouts contained so much pain and bitter sorrow that Olexandr Mykhailovych was suddenly short of breath and his heart was pierced by a sharp pain.

"Will you be quiet!" he finally burst out and angrily grabbed the woman by the arm. "Be quiet!"

The woman became silent straight away. Her tense, angry figure relaxed and the fire in her eyes died. She sank onto a stool and burst into tears. And this unexpected transition from shouting to silent weeping made a stronger impact on Olexandr Mykhailovych than any foul language.

The youth came up to his mother and gingerly touched her arm:

"Mum... Come on, mum... I didn't light the fire..."

"That he didn't," Olexandr Mykhailovych affirmed, even though he wasn't quite sure what had happened there. "Instead of cursing him, let's hear him out... Tell us like it was."

Haltingly the teenager began his story.

Everything had happened because of the skating rink – an enormous frozen puddle outside the pensioner's yard. Not out front, but at the back. The boys had cleared it of snow, had marked the goals with bricks, and begun chasing the puck. Of course they could not make do without the usual screams and shouts. So the owner had bounded out with an axe and neatly furrowed the ice field with small ditches. The boys refused to be left indebted to him. They heaped some brushwood up against his back fence and set fire to it.

"You helped gather the brushwood too?"

"No, I didn't even know about it." The talking had calmed Maxym a little, his lips no longer quivered. "I came up later..."

"Maxym's telling the truth," Olexandr Mykhailovych summed up. "We must go and get his hat back."

"I'm not going!" The boy immediately bristled.

"You're not needed there. I'll go with your mother."

The woman got up and began to dress in silence. She fetched a man's short sheepskin coat and a large well-worn kerchief. Meanwhile Olexandr Mykhailovych's head was splitting; not so much from the shouting, as from the fuggy air, saturated with the vapours of wet dirty clothing. His lungs felt compressed, a tickle appeared in his throat. So as not to break into a long coughing fit, which would tear at his chest, he stepped outside.

He stood greedily breathing in the fragrant frosty air. The frozen sky sparkled with an icy sun. Millions of frightened flashes skipped across the snow, their micaceous glitter blinding his eyes, forcing them shut. The snow was as loose as sand, the trees stood wrapped in hoarfrost, stretching out their frozen limbs.

Bobbing down, Maxym's mother emerged from the doorway. She turned towards Olexandr Mykhailovych and her thin face with its prematurely wilted mouth suddenly came alive with the unexpected blueness of her eyes.

'She must have been very pretty once,' Olexandr Mykhailovych thought. 'But now she's a sight for sore eyes... And what about me?...' He smiled bitterly.

II

The yard was enclosed with a two-metre high fence of thick pine planks. They were nailed so closely together that there wasn't the tiniest crack between them. And above the planks, on metal rods, were three strands of barbed wire.

This was a real fortress, calculated not to let anyone in or out. Olexandr Mykhailovych was reminded of another fence many thousands of kilometres away.

"Do you know his name?"

"No, I don't. I only know that he was asked to leave."

"Work, you mean?"

"Aha. Many like him were given the boot then."

"Oh well, we'll try and talk to him."

Olexandr Mykhailovych came up to the locked gate and struck it with his walking stick.

A dog immediately responded from the other side and barked incessantly while they spoke with the owner, who did not invite them inside, choosing instead to step out into the street.

"Who d'you want?"

Bow-wow-wow!

There he stood before them – enormous, broad-shouldered, a padded coat thrown over his shoulders, with a high hat of grey lambskin.

"Did you tear the boy's hat off?"

"And who are you?"

"This is his mother," Kostiuk avoided a direct answer. He studied the yard's owner ever more closely. There was something familiar about this fellow, his unfriendly face. Where had he met this man?

The woman stepped forward and the owner transferred his cold gaze to her:

"Your boy?"

"Of course!" she answered defiantly.

"Well then: I won't give the hat back...! You won't get it back till you've replaced the burnt planks!"

"But he didn't take part in the burning..." Olexandr Mykhailovych began, but was unable to continue. The woman exploded with her screaming again. She had borne her outrage from home, it seemed, and was only waiting for this refusal. She advanced on the owner, her face twisted with rage, not allowing him to utter a word.

"A-ah, you damned kulaks...! There's no perdition for you lot!"

The owner's face immediately became bloated, his large heavy fists stirred threateningly, whitening at the knuckles, so tightly had he clenched them.

"May you burn with your planks...! May the earth engulf you...!"

The woman screamed and screamed, and it seemed there would be no end to that screaming.

Curious faces began to peer from neighbouring yards. Then, spitting furiously at the woman's feet, the owner dashed back into the yard and thudded the bolt shut.

"Give back the hat, give it back!" the frenzied woman thrashed at the planks.

"That's enough... Come on, that's enough," Olexandr Mykhailovych tried to drag the woman away from the gate. "People are watching!" The barking again intensified. The gate opened unexpectedly. The hat flew out like a black bullet and struck the woman on the face.

"Take your hat and clear out!"

The woman bent over to pick up the hat, but Olexandr Mykhailovych kept staring at the closed gate and strained, strained intensely to recall where he had met this man, where he had heard that voice.

III

Suddenly he sat up in bed and grabbed at his chest, speared by the memory, breathless from the pain. The pain was concentrated just below his sternum, exactly where the interrogator's fist had struck him back then...

He had been brought into the office at dawn, straight from his cell. A grey sky seeped into the room through the unbarred window, but everything inside still breathed of night – the light globe high up on the ceiling, the table, the broad-shouldered man bent forward, writing furiously. Kostiuk saw only the black shock of hair, a swain's black shock of hair which almost reached down to the table, covering his entire face.

The interrogator swung his head, tossing his hair back, and rubbed his red, inflamed eyes. His face might have been described as coarse, had it not been so handsome. Those coarse features breathed with masculine beauty, and probably many a woman had turned to look at him as he walked down the street.

Silently, without taking his gaze off the arrested man, the interrogator rose and moved around the desk. He stopped before the prisoner, a short weedy little intellectual, and stood tall, strong, well-built, exuding strength, muscles bulging under the tunic covering his chest. Slipping his hands into his pockets and rocking on his toes, he stared at Kostiuk derisively. And when Kostiuk, unnerved by the lingering silence, moved a little, the interrogator slipped his hand out of his pocket and punched Kostiuk with all his might.

This was a skilful blow even a professional boxer would have been proud of, right under the breastbone into the solar plexus. A blow which carried the full weight of that powerful muscular body, as well as all the interrogator's loathing towards this counter-revolutionary scum which had forced him to lose sleep, to suffer these interminably long hours.

Struggling to catch his breath, mouth wide open, Kostiuk writhed in delirious pain. After exploding under that fist, it had hurled him to the ground. The pain spread throughout his body, tearing at his lungs, contorting his arms and legs, stopping him from breathing.

Standing over him a short while, the interrogator returned to his desk. He telephoned, ordering two guards to take away the prisoner. He was not led off to his cell, but rather dragged away. Olexandr Myk-

hailovych found the night light and pressed the button. A dull red light filled the room, wrenching the furniture from the darkness. Groaning as he breathed in and not noticing the groans (he had become so accustomed to them), Olexandr Mykhailovych's gaze wandered, seeking something to latch onto, so that he could escape the clutches of the pain, which continued to burn just below his sternum. However, everything around him was familiar down to the smallest detail; the writing desk, the armchair and its plaid upholstery, two chairs, shelves of books, a radio, a small Hutsul carpet – and that was all. After returning from exile he was not interested in lavish furniture for his single room. He had preferred to spend his money on the cinema, books, the theatre – everything we have grown accustomed to calling a cultural life. Knowing that his days were numbered, he feverishly attempted to catch up with mankind's achievements during those fifteen years he had languished in the camps and in exile.

Coughing, he slid off the bed. And shuffled over to the desk. The floor was cold, almost icy. Or perhaps it was only the soles of his feet which were so hot?

Measuring out some drops of a mixture as bitter as wormwood into a glass, he swallowed it, chasing it down with cold tea. Again he got into bed, settling his weak, mutilated body onto the high pillows to make it easier to breathe. Turning off the night light, he stretched out his arms on top of the blanket and lay still.

That felt a little better – the burning in his chest wasn't so bad. The tamed coughing did not try to break out through his throat, nestling somewhere at the bottom of his ragged lungs, gathering its strength...

What the hell was his name?

He strained his memory, but failed to remember. He saw only the face – young, handsome, with eyes red from lack of sleep. And the fists. Enormous, heavy cast-iron fists with glistening, almost polished skin on the knuckles and dense bushes of tarry hair. Every time he stepped into that office, he first looked at those fists...

But what was his name?

That fellow had christened him simply and succinctly: 'Nit.' That had been during the final 'even' meeting.

"Such a nit, and the trouble we've had with you!"

Odd-even... The interrogator had immediately taught him to distinguish between these 'odd' and 'even' meetings.

During that second 'even' meeting he had been courtesy personified. Had invited him to sit down, offered him cigarettes.

"Thank you, I don't smoke."

"Lucky you. As much as I've tried giving it away, you understand, I can't kick the habit."

He spoke to him like a friend, a good old friend. And had it not been for the pain in his chest, had each breath not caused him so much torment, it would have been easy to think that the meeting of the day before had merely been a figment of his imagination. Or had been dreamed in some nightmare.

Puffing on his cigarette and delicately blowing the smoke to one side so as not to upset the prisoner, the interrogator began a gentle conversation about the fact that they already knew everything about him. It only remained for Kostiuk to confess honestly. To certify, so to speak, his sincere repentance. Besides, his transgression wasn't all that grave. At the very most he would get ten years, and not in prison, but in the camps. Forest, work in the fresh air, a great chance to harden one's constitution. He himself would gladly change places with the prisoner, were it not for this damned job. To escape from this office, these interrogations.. interrogations.. interrogations, which sapped all his strength.

"I don't even have proper use of my hand!" He held up his right hand.

To be rid of sleepless nights. To have just one good night's sleep.

"Believe me, I've even forgotten what the sun looks like! I sleep during the day, and at night – you can see for yourself... And out there – there's fresh air, trees, chirping birds... No need for a holiday resort!"

He looked at Kostiuk so benevolently, as if he was his brother.

"But I haven't done anything!"

"Yes you have," the interrogator contradicted him meekly. "You've simply forgotten. Search around there in your memory, remember what you did and tell it all like it was. I'll even prompt you, if you find it so hard to remember... We'll write it all down, you'll sign, and then you can fly off a free bird!" he even burst out laughing at his last phrase.

He tried to persuade him as one did an unreasonable child who did not know where its happiness lay. At last he said:

"All right. Go and think about it, and tomorrow we'll meet again. Agreed?" And gently he shook his hand.

As if that next meeting depended on Kostiuk.

And again that pain below his chest. Olexandr Mykhailovych groaned, stirred, the roused coughing immediately sank its claws into his lungs. Sitting up, he coughed for a long time into the congealed

darkness permeated with unhappy memories.

How had that interrogator managed to hit him during that third meeting? For as soon as he was led in and left standing in the middle of the office facing the table, Kostiuk had immediately realized what was awaiting him. And when the interrogator tore himself away from his writing and rubbed his face with his hands, when he slowly moved away from behind his desk and stood before the prisoner – short, weak, with thin nervous skin – Kostiuk immediately realized that he was about to be punched. And he covered his chest with his arms: let him punch anywhere else, only not the chest!

However the interrogator must have dealt with such subjects every day. He did not tear his arms away from his chest, but clamped his left hand around Kostiuk's throat, pressing as hard as he could.

And when Kostiuk, suffocating, grabbed his left arm with both his hands, he again punched him with his right hand below the chest.

This time the guards had to wait much longer for the prisoner to recover a little. Accustomed to such scenes, they calmly sucked on the cigarettes offered to them by the interrogator and did not look at the man writhing at their feet, wriggling like a squashed worm.

As he was dragged off to the cell, his head dangled as if it were tied on, and his eyes were glassy and unmoving.

During the fourth meeting the trees grew again, fresh fragrant air flowed, birds chirped and flowers rocked their gentle heads. And there was already a prepared confession, requiring only his signature.

But he had not signed.

Why had he been so adamant about not signing?

IV

"Khymochka!"

He exclaimed this out loud, remembering at last the interrogator's name.

Svyryd Yosypovych Khymochka.

He had washed and, forgetting even to dry himself, he paced about the room, agitated, aroused, seeing Khymochka standing before him. Not the present-day fellow, but the interrogator, fifteen years his junior, Svyryd Yosypovych Khymochka.

How could he have forgotten him? For back then after he had been sentenced, after he had received ten years imprisonment and five years deprivation of rights, he had sworn to himself that if he came

out of it alive, he would find Khymochka.

Flowers, birdies, clean air... He had eaten his fill of that clean air! Twelve to fifteen hours a day out in the clean air, with frosts of forty below, in thin prisoner's garb, subsisting on stingy prison soup. Clean, clean, virginally clean, thrice damned clean air, in which people died like flies...

How he had sometimes dreamed of meeting Khymochka as he breathed in that clean air...!

Suddenly he stopped, as if hitting a wall. What if he was mistaken? If that dismal fellow wasn't Khymochka at all, just someone who looked very much like him.

He grabbed his coat. He had to make sure at once that he was not mistaken. Snatching his walking stick, he went outside.

It wasn't as cold today as yesterday. The frost had eased, the sky was woven over with clouds. The wind whistled thinly along the street, promising a snowstorm. Individual snowflakes flew past like white moths, the snow no longer sparkling, but damp and grey.

It was hard going, slippery underfoot. There was pain with each breath. As if that celestial wool, that cloudy cotton-wool, had filled his lungs and would not let the air through.

Standing for a long time, he studied the fenced-off yard. When had Khymochka settled here? Probably before being fired from his job for excessive cruelty.

Again he was struck by the fence's similarity to prison walls. Even the metal posts holding up the barbed wire were bent as in prison – into the yard.

A two-storeyed house peered over the fence. One could see only the second storey and the high roof, also the tops of fruit trees growing in the back, behind the house. In the front yard stood a large walnut of uncanny shape. All its branches grew into the yard and not a single one hung out over the street.

A fellow emerged from an adjoining yard. In padded pants and padded jacket, carrying a wooden spade. He had lost his left eye, however his right blinked sharply. He stood there a while, then impatience got the better of him and he came up:

"What d'you want?"

"I want to know who lives here."

"Svyryd Yosypovych Khymochka... And who are you?"

"Ah... No one... Just an acquaintance."

"No relative, then."

"We were close once," Olexandr Mykhailovych replied. And since the man continued standing there, he asked him:

"Lives regally, eh?"

"Eh, he's a real good householder!" the fellow said with a smack of his lips. He began to tell him that Khymochka had a car, and a garage, and a brick cellar... In short – a true "householder"!

"What kind of a strange walnut tree is that?"

"That...? Well, the kids used to pick up the nuts that fell onto the street, so he chopped off all the branches... What else do you do...? Give 'em a free hand, and they'll strip all the orchards bare!"

At last the fellow returned to his yard and Kostiuk knocked on the gate.

Again the dog answered. Heavy steps approached. Olexandr Mykhailovych cowered, the walking stick danced about in his hands. He wasn't invited into the yard, even though Olexandr Mykhailovych had said that he had a matter to discuss with him. Stepping out into the street, the fellow closed the gate behind him. He stood before Olexandr Mykhailovych – tall, burly, in a padded jacket and hat, in white felt boots faced with yellow leather. He looked down at him.

"What d'you want?"

Leaning on his stick, Olexandr Mykhailovych fixed his gaze on Khymochka.

Yes, this was Khymochka. Khymochka aged, faded and chewed over by the passing years. The same nose, the same firmly clasped lips, the same heavy chin, and eyes in which suspicion lay forever entrenched. Suspicion towards everything which lived and dared to move around him.

Only his face was repulsive now, filled out, almost bloated, no longer handsome.

His fists alone remained unchanged. The same heavy fists, as if cast in iron, and the hair on the backs of the fingers was even more bushy.

"So what d'you want?" Khymochka asked again, growing angry.

Olexandr Mykhailovych mustered all his strength to hold onto his stick. Burning into Khymochka with his gaze, he asked:

"Don't you recognize me?"

Khymochka studied him. It was obvious that he didn't recognize him. Finally a conjecture flashed in his eyes, his face became even more unfriendly:

"Was it you who came yesterday?"

"Yes," Olexandr Mykhailovych nodded. "But we've met earlier...

Much earlier..."

"When exactly?"

"Almost eighteen years ago... My surname is Kostiuk... Olexandr Mykhailovych Kostiuk... You interrogated me... In thirty-nine... Remember?"

He burrowed his eyes into Khymochka. He wanted to see the fear spread across this heavy face, bleaching the cheeks, breaking the hard line of the lips.

However, Khymochka's face remained unmoved. Except for a momentary stir in his eyes. Something akin to disappointment, perhaps irritation. It stirred and immediately died. He looked indifferently at Olexandr Mykhailovych and growled:

"Don't remember."

And having already stretched out his hand towards the gate, he added with sudden malice:

"So many of you "counters" passed through then! Can't remember everyone!"

And he disappeared into the yard.

Olexandr Mykhailovych gasped for air. He felt as if someone had punched him in the face. Such coolness, indifference, such confidence in his own impunity... He even looked about, seeking a brick to hurl at this house, at these scoffing glistening windows.

But there were no bricks around. It wasn't possible for a brick to be lying about outside the yard of such a conscientious "householder"!

V

"I've met your wife. I told her about your behaviour. She was very displeased with you. Very!"

Zoya...! His wife...!

So as not to give himself away, Kostiuk clasped his eyes firmly shut.

Khymochka was again gentle and courteous (an 'even' meeting!). Exhorting him again and again. It was so simple – just sign and all your suffering will be behind you!

'And tomorrow's meeting will not take place!' Kostiuk thought. He was overcome with horror at that impending fifth meeting. He clasped his eyes shut even more firmly, so as not to see that sheet of paper which required 'only a signature, just one signature'. He forced himself to think about his wife.

Slowly the interrogator's voice drifted away, no longer boring into his brain.

He thought about Zoya. He didn't want her to become the wife of an enemy of the people! So that everyone would turn away from her, not give her work anywhere.

He didn't want that!

He didn't want that terrible shadow to fall on his future child. So that his as yet unborn child, having grown up, would not have to write in forms that its father was an enemy of the people.

"I can see we haven't come to any agreement today either," he heard Khymochka's reproachful voice. "Oh well, till tomorrow then." And to the guards: "Take him where he belongs. The conditions are far better there to think things over."

A cold stone "sack" permeated with a grave-like dampness. A cement floor, an ironclad door, a low ceiling, just as in a tomb. A large electric light flooded the cubby with light and the walls were covered with flashes of icy stars. Kostiuk touched them with his finger – hoarfrost! On the walls, the door, the ceiling.

In an hour or so he no longer knew what to do. The icy dampness had permeated him to the bone. His teeth were chattering uncontrollably.

A signature! Just a signature!

And tomorrow's 'odd' meeting would not take place. That horrifying blow to his chest, which he would probably not survive...

Kostiuk no longer paced, he ran, to help circulate his congealing blood. He ran on the spot, because there wasn't enough room to turn around in this stone sack.

The spyhole in the door clicked open, a derisive voice commanded:

"One-two! One-two! Left! Right!"

The guard. Entertaining himself.

Just a signature!

And then there would be fresh warmed air, and birds, and trees, and flowers.

And a pregnant wife who would not know where to hide from the shame. And the future child who would have to write that father was an enemy of the people...

Olexandr Mykhailovych again found the night light, he couldn't go on any more! He could clearly see himself in that stone sack, overcome with despair, spiritually broken, useless.

But no, he would not turn the light on! He would watch everything

till the very end. He had to! He must!

That baited little fellow, he had thought of something then. Tearing off his jacket and shirt, he bared his thin body with its blue goose-pimpled skin and bloody bruise in the lower part of the chest. The typical skin of a petty intellectual, who spent all his life coddled and muffled. He had even been afraid to get his arms wet, lest he caught a cold. So that this little fellow did not find it so easy to press his back against the icy wall sown with starry flashes of hoarfrost, sharp as glass.

He leaned against the wall. Froze...

How long he spent in hospital he could not remember. He had a high temperature, hallucinations – all the symptoms of a bad case of pneumonia.

And here he was again, sitting in Khymochka's office – a pitiful likeness of a person, a being of skin and bone sucked dry by illness. Everything floated before his eyes and, swaying, Khymochka's heavy figure kept drawing nearer, then floating away.

"My, what a nimble fellow. Decided to run away from me!" Khymochka's voice contained real surprise, almost a respect towards this stubborn goldfinch. "Only you won't get anywhere. We'll find you in the grave, if need be!"

No longer was he tempted with fresh air or the singing of birds. In a business-like tone the interrogator promised to break every bone, to crush every joint, unless he signed.

Kostiuk had no doubts that it would be so. And broken, indifferent to everything, he picked up the pen...

When had he learned about Zoya?

Olexandr Mykhailovych again stretched out his hand towards the night light: this was far too harrowing a memory for him. He had avoided it all these years, driving it away, fearing to touch it, as if it was a fresh wound. And again he commanded himself: 'Don't you dare!' And he moved his hand away...

He saw himself, aged, prematurely greyed, in a comfortable lounge room, facing an older woman – Zoya's mother. He had recently returned and had barely managed to find her. It would have been better had he not found her!

He never thought that words could be so heavy. They fell upon him like slabs, threatening to bury him under them. His mother-in-law spoke calmly, almost indifferently – he wanted to yell and scream because of that calmness!

After he had been sentenced, the captain who had conducted the

house search advised Zoya to check into hospital. And to abort the foetus of that enemy of the people. And she went to hospital, for already good people were beginning to shun her. One had to obey, if one wanted to live... She checked in and never got up again: she was into her fifth month... And so the two of them were buried...

'How many children have you got, Khymochka? Two, three, four...? What would you have done to me, had I killed your son or daughter? Together with your wife...'

VI

Khymochka was absorbed in his beer, sucking on it sullenly. As if afraid someone might look into his mug. His appearance alone suggested that anyone bold enough to do so would not be given the time of day.

And although the tea room was crowded, no one sat beside him for some reason. Spying a free chair, Olexandr Mykhailovych sat opposite him, two tables away.

He was thoroughly agitated. There was a burning in his chest and his throat was dry. After getting off the train he felt that he wouldn't make it home without a glass of water.

Drinking the cold fizzy water with small cautious sips, he kept his hot gaze peeled to Khymochka. He watched his heavy bloated face, his large hands with their strong tenacious fingers which, like claws, tore away amber morsels from a piece of fish, unhurriedly bringing them to his mouth – and hatred burned in his heart.

It was as sharp as a knife, that hatred of his. And at present it wounded him, not Khymochka. For wherever he went he came up against it.

Khymochka finished his beer and put the mug down. He sat there another minute, probably deciding whether to have another, and wiped his mouth with his hand. He wrapped up the remaining fish and slid it into his pocket. Rising, he began squeezing his way between the tables, not looking at anyone, exchanging greetings with no one, although it was impossible that he knew none of these people. As he made his way past Olexandr Mykhailovych, Olexandr's hands began to shudder. He badly wanted to grab his stick and whack him one across the face. He clasped his glass so hard, that his fingers cramped.

'Calm down...! As the procurator said: if you hit him, you'll be taken to court!'

He would be taken to court if he dared raise a hand against Khymochka.

He forced himself to finish the water, which suddenly had lost its taste, becoming almost disgusting. He waited for Khymochka to get quite some distance ahead before he left the tea room.

There was a frost outside again. The spaces which had been squeezed in by the clouds only yesterday had spread out, burgeoning to the sides and up. A jet plane buzzed high in the sky and behind its invisible form flowed a silvery river. With laughter and shouts, pupils were returning from school. Passers-by, even the old ones, walked faster, more briskly, driven by the frost. And cold blushes played on everyone's cheeks.

Only Olexandr Mykhailovych neither saw nor heard any of this. Engrossed in his altercation with the procurator, from whom he was now returning, he was reliving the meeting again and again.

'Litigation...? You demand that court action be taken...?' Of course he could understand him. 'But your declaration alone is not enough to institute proceedings against citizen...' at this point the procurator threw a glance at Olexandr Mykhailovych's declaration. 'Citizen Khymochka Svyryd Yosypovych.'

'Not enough?!' Olexandr Mykhailovych continued to fume, furiously picking at the compressed snow with his walking stick. 'A crippled life is not enough...? A lost wife is not enough...?'

'It's not enough to speak about this – this must also be proven,' the procurator's soothing voice resounded. 'Now if you could bring witnesses, submit documented evidence...'

Witnesses...! That procurator acted as if he didn't know that Olexandr Mykhailovych could only find those witnesses in graves. Digging up hardened earth, questioning speechless skeletons: 'Excuse me, were you interrogated by Khymochka? Could you perhaps appear in court to testify against him?'

Documents! Where would he get them? Even the record of his own interrogation, for instance, written in Khymochka's hand... Where was it...?

The procurator could offer him no advice.

'You and I are powerless here,' he spread out his arms helplessly.

'All right... If you're all so powerless, I'll deal with him myself! When I come across him in the street I'll thrash him with my walking stick.'

'Then I will be forced to bring criminal charges against you,' the procurator had said. 'However, I trust you won't cause me such un-

pleasantness.'

'Eh, what a delicate fellow...! And what would you say, comrade procurator, were we to exchange places?'

'All right. Well, to hell with this procurator! We'll seek justice higher up.'

VII

He had again met Khymochka yesterday. He was having luck with these meetings.

He had recognized him from afar. He could have picked him out in the thickest crowd, from among hundreds of people. He would have realized it was Khymochka from the sudden stab in his chest, from the flash of fierce hatred. From the blade being driven into his heart. Cold as ice and sharp as a razor.

He stood suffocating, while the walking stick danced in his hand as if alive.

Khymochka pushed past him, oblivious to everything! He could not have failed to notice him, his coat flap almost brushing past Kostiuk, and still not a single muscle stirred on his stony face. He passed him, as if he had been a post or a brick.

In his net bag he was carrying bread – half a loaf of Ukrainian, half an *arnautka* and two French sticks.

All these fifteen years he had carried the bread like this, day in, day out. He took "all he wanted", carried "as much as he could" – as much as he, his wife, his children and his dog needed. Even during the war he didn't skimp on that bread too much. In any case, he didn't have to tremble over prison rations. Weighed out to the gram, a ration of bread cut to the exact crumb, as set down for a *zek*, a "counter", a camp slave.

All day long, until the return to camp, that piece of carefully weighed bread shone before everyone. Those who had instituted this arrangement – issuing the daily ration of bread after work in the evening – must have been very well versed in the psychology of the prisoner. They knew that if anything could sustain him throughout the endless day, then it was only the dream of that daily ration of bread.

However, that day something had broken down in the well-oiled camp machine. Some cog had fallen out and in the morning, before being driven out to work, they had received their daily portion of bread together with their thin soup.

Kostiuk cut his ration in half. Half he ate with the soup, the other half he left for evening. Pushing it deep down the front of his shirt, he left the camp.

The *zeks* of this camp were unguarded. They went to work themselves, returned themselves. What were those guards for anyway? Forests, frosts and snows guarded them better than any armed guard. And from spring onwards there were the impenetrable marshes.

If someone needed to be punished, he was simply not allowed into camp. 'Go for a wander, dance about, howl with the wolves!'

Kostiuk tramped down a narrow path carved through the deep snows, he tramped along and saw nothing. That piece of bread under his pea-jacket on his chest personified the whole world for him right now. Everything present and past was focused on that stale hunk, which he wouldn't have exchanged for all the gold in the world.

From time to time he touched it with his hand, checking to see if he hadn't lost it. And fooling himself, convincing himself that he didn't even notice, he picked off crumb after crumb, placing them in his eternally empty mouth...

He came to his senses. Whacked his hand with all his might as it was about to disappear again under the pea-jacket. He could eat it all now, but what then? That evening, and tomorrow morning? How would he survive tomorrow?

He caught his hand again carrying a crumb of bread to his mouth. Stopping, he looked about helplessly. He sensed that he would not get the bread even to the sawmill. Spying a stump sticking out of the snow, he made his way towards it. Retrieving the demolished hunk from his bosom, fighting an inhuman urge to bite into it at least once, he hurriedly hid it under the stump. Camouflaging it, so that no one would find it: the *zeks* were a seasoned lot, they would certainly check why someone had strayed off the path, squandering their carefully meted out strength...

The further he moved away, the slower his step became. The hunk of bread under the stump attracted him like a magnet, grabbing at the torn flaps of his pea-jacket, at his feet wrapped in rags. He took another few steps, sensing that if he stopped he would be unable to do anything else but turn back.

And he did stop after all. And raced back...

He ate it together with the snow. Ravenously, stuffing himself, choking. He didn't even notice the tears which froze on his sunken unshaven cheeks...

'Khymochka, Khymochka, how will you pay for my prison rations? What will the price be...?'

VIII

"I told you, didn't I! And yet you keep at it."

"I didn't ask them to send my declaration to you."

"Well, what do you want me to do now? What do I tell them?"

"Tell them that I am satisfied with your explanation. And I won't write anywhere any more."

IX

Another meeting with Khymochka. On a snow-bound street, near his house.

This time Khymochka did not walk past Olexandr Mykhailovych. He stopped in his path and placed his hands behind his back. His dark eyes settled sullenly and malevolently on Olexandr Mykhailovych's small face.

"Writing, eh? Seeking a trial...? Ooh, you nit!"

He quickly looked about and before Olexandr Mykhailovych had time to raise his walking stick, a heavy fist again delivered a blow to just below his chest.

He hadn't forgotten how to punch, this Khymochka. He hit him in exactly the same spot as he had eighteen years earlier. And just as before, thrown to the ground by the blow, falling into the snow, Olexandr Mykhailovych writhed from the excruciating pain, grabbing air with his mouth wide open.

This time again there were no witnesses. And the woman who appeared from a side street and came across Olexandr Mykhailovych, never did comprehend anything.

"What's wrong?"

She fussed around him, frightened, alarmed.

"It's all right... It'll pass..."

Lying on his side, Olexandr Mykhailovych scraped snow into his hand. He swallowed it, stemming the flow of blood from his throat. The snow all around him was spattered with blood, as if someone had been knifed.

"I'll call the ambulance."

"There's no need... Help me up, instead..."

He would never have gotten up without her. His legs shook, buckling at the knees, his head spun. The snow alternated between white, red and black. He wanted to lie down again... To lie down and forget...

The flow of blood seemed to have stopped. Although its salty aftertaste still filled his mouth.

"Where's my... walking stick?"

And when the woman let go of him to fetch the walking stick, Olexandr Mykhailovych almost fell over. Then she helped him over to the fence:

"Wait here while I get it... Why did you throw it way over there?"

She saw him home, wouldn't even hear of him walking home alone. She helped him remove his coat and left only after being assured that he was feeling better.

Moaning, he got into bed. In his suit and shoes. He was afraid that if he knelt over to untie his laces, he might fall over.

Oh, how hard it was to breathe! How it burned in his chest!

What had he called him? Nit? That he was! To be killed and squashed, as long as there were no witnesses...

A car roared outside his window. It grew silent and in its place footsteps resounded in the hallway, there was a thumping on the door.

"May I come in?"

A doctor! With a white coat under his winter coat, carrying a large bag. The woman had summoned the ambulance after all!

"So what happened to you?"

The doctor had already drawn up a chair and sat down. He caught his hand to check the pulse.

"Nothing unusual... I was walking along, fell over and hurt myself..."

"Where?"

"Here, I think."

The doctor was most anxious to see. He forced him to undress, helping him off with his jacket and shirt.

"Oho! This bruise is big enough to have been caused by a dump truck! How did you manage?"

"I managed, that's all."

The doctor finally realized that the patient was not interested in talking. After examining him with a stethoscope and feeling the bruise, he suggested that Olexandr come along to the hospital.

Olexandr Mykhailovych refused. He was afraid that once admitted, he would not leave there. They would carry him out. And he had to

get back on his feet at any price...

The doctor gave in: "Then I'll prescribe you some medication. Take the powders three times a day and apply the ointment... And stay in bed! Have you got someone to look after you?"

"Yes," Olexandr Mykhailovych immediately remembered Khymochka.

"I'll tell your local doctor to come and check up on you. Get well."

"Thank you... Goodbye!" And he almost added: 'May no one beat you up!', but he was afraid the doctor might misunderstand him.

That same day the local militiaman dropped by. Had the doctor informed him about the suspicious bruise? He smelled of freezing cold, trenchcoat wool and leather strapping.

"Sergeant Malynchuk! Come to make out a report!"

The young red-cheeked face emanated official zeal, an unswerving decisiveness to discover the truth.

"So who attacked you?"

"No one!" Olexandr Mykhailovych replied irritably. From now on Khymochka belonged only to him! "I hurt myself! I fell onto a brick."

Flabbergasted, the sergeant slipped his notepad into his bag.

"Be seeing you then!"

He saluted and left.

And Olexandr Mykhailovych was already thinking about Khymochka. He saw his face, twisted with rage, his bloodshot eyes. And the hatred which until now had simmered inside him, suddenly hardened, becoming as tough as steel. He already knew how to deal with Khymochka.

X

The sales assistant at the commission store praised the cartridges, as if they were his favourite children.

"They were made by the best of hunters... look how neatly they've been turned in! No factory will ever do a job like that!"

"All right, I'll take them."

"How many are we after: ten... more?"

He wanted to say two cartridges, but stopped himself in time.

"Ten."

"Shall I wrap them?"

"No need."

"Then may the hunt be successful! Neither fur, nor feather!"

He did not send him "to the three devils", according to hunting tradition. He lowered the heavy cartridges into his pocket and played with them the whole way home.

Reaching home, he lined them up neatly on the table. He began to study them. From their painstakingly rolled cardboard ends peered blunt-nosed lead dumdums, as if from small deadly nests. A fearsome force lurked inside them. They could shatter the strongest bone, fell the most powerful animal. And they could easily kill a person.

Gingerly he bent over (the pain in his chest was still there), and retrieved the double-barrelled sawn-off rifle from under his bed. Only a week before this had been a hunting rifle. Sixteen calibre, a prewar make.

He had brought it back with him. After his release from camp he had bought it from a free worker, as much for hunting, as for that feeling of being a person again. And after he had been rehabilitated, when he prepared to return home, he had brought the rifle along with him too.

It had lain for several years under his bed, liberally greased, wrapped in clean rags. He had retrieved it a week ago, wiped it down, and had then gone off to a hardware store and bought a hacksaw.

In the time he had spent in bed, he had thought it all out. Down to the smallest detail. Even the fact that a rifle might arouse suspicion. Who was this man thinking of hunting down in broad daylight in a city street?

It was torturous work gnawing through the thick steel barrels with the saw. He lashed the rifle down to the end of his bed and spent several days patiently twittering across the steel.

However this now lay behind him too. Here it was, his weapon, with its cut-back barrels and stock, making it easy to conceal under the flap of a coat.

He broke open the short barrels and dropped two cartridges into the chamber.

That was it!

What would Khymochka's face look like now, when they came face to face on a narrow path?

XI

That night he almost didn't sleep. For a long time, interminably long, the darkness flowed past the windows, and he began to think that there

would be no end to that nocturnal flood.

At last the room filled with a predawn greyness. He couldn't stay in bed any longer. He got up, washed with cold water and made some coffee. 'I'll have lunch in prison...'

After breakfast he shaved assiduously, put on clean underwear and a new suit. He cut off the right pocket of his coat and took the weapon which had been made ready the night before. Before leaving the room forever, he turned around and surveyed it with a sorrowful gaze.

A neatly made bed, a table and chairs, shelves with books. He had lived here almost three years, all these things had become dear to him, habitually fusing with his everyday existence. And the thought of someone else, a stranger, moving into this room and using these things, the very thought of this choked up his throat.

He turned around sharply and went outside.

It was a bright frosty morning – exactly like the one at the beginning of our story. The sun shone just as pure and red in the east, those same high smoke plumes stretched from the chimneys into the high sky, the same hoarfrost was fluffing on the trees, rescuing them from the cold. And the snow creaked underfoot the same way, fusing with millions of fires. Everything was exactly the same as on that first day, only he, Olexandr Mykhailovych Kostiuk, was now different. And thus he perceived everything happening around him differently.

He took his time. He knew Khymochka would not disappear anywhere. In this time he had learned all his movements so perfectly, that for any given moment he could tell exactly where his quarry was and what he was doing.

Today was Sunday, so Khymochka was already at the market. Moving from stall to stall, selecting, asking the prices, haggling long and obstinately. And calling all the village women hucksters, speculators, elements alien and hostile to Soviet power.

"There's no Comrade Stalin to sort your lot out!"

As if he, Khymochka, personified Soviet power, and not giving in to him for a few copecks was tantamount to firing on the Soviet regime.

After stuffing full two large baskets, he would come up to the wine stall. Even though the prices here were firm (it was run by Bessarabian collective farmers), and it wasn't his first drink here, he would still ask the price, as if expecting that the wine had become cheaper. He would suck on the glass of wine for a long time, squeezing out all of its gustatory qualities, while his face bore an expression of "Move on, what are you staring at?!"

And only then would he leave the market.

The closer Olexandr Mykhailovych came to the market square, the thicker the crowds became, and the more he became agitated. He was afraid that all these people would hinder him, would jump him and wrench the weapon from his hands. And so he decided not to go to the market itself. Khymochka would be returning only down this street, he would see him from afar and have time to get ready.

He came up to a telegraph pole and pretended to be reading the thickly pasted-on announcements. They were ripped down almost daily, and just as stubbornly others appeared. He thrust the walking stick into the snow before him, as at a duel. Firmly, until his hand ached, he squeezed the sawn-off rifle...

It was him!

A grey lambskin hat appeared at the end of the street, floating above people's heads. His heart thumped hollowly and apprehensively. And then began hammering away in a frenzy. Immediately he found it hard to breathe, a hot wave struck his eyes.

The hat drew closer and closer. A tall broad-shouldered figure, two large baskets, white felt boots faced with yellow leather...

His heart was no longer hammering. Its thump was even and strong, and his eyes became dry and shiny. Olexandr Mykhailovych narrowed his eyes, leaving only narrow slits, like the blades of razors.

He could clearly see Khymochka now. Saw his eternally knitted brows, his drooping nose, his heavy chin. He saw his sinewy hands (Khymochka never wore gloves), overgrown with thick wolf's fur. And his heavy baskets filled to the brim.

He noted someone's lost potato lying ten steps away. And when Khymochka reached that potato and stepped on it, Olexandr Mykhailovych pulled the sawn-off rifle out from under his coat and cocked it...

That dry metallic sound caught Khymochka's attention. He saw Kostiuk and understood what he was about to do...

Khymochka spun around so abruptly that his baskets flew up. Pulling his head into his shoulders, he raced off briskly in the direction of the market, and the baskets flew after him. The long flaps of his trench coat scudded over the snow, ragged pieces of snow flew out from under his felt boots. Yelling "Stop!" for some reason, Olexandr Mykhailovych emptied both barrels.

Khymochka took a long time to fall. Time seemed to have stopped, frozen, while a woman's piercing scream, which exploded together

with the shots, kept shrieking and shrieking. It shrieked so insufferably, that Olexandr Mykhailovych turned around and saw a militiaman.

Drawing a pistol from his holster, the militiaman was running straight at him. Olexandr Mykhailovych took a step towards him, offering the no longer needed weapon. And the militiaman, thinking the fellow was taking aim at him, shot once... twice... and a third time...

The last thing Olexandr Mykhailovych saw was the high icy sky and the fading sun frozen against it.

*

BLACK MARIA

I

This city, which lay in the steppes of Ukraine, had changed hands so often, so many bombs, shells and mines had fallen on it, that there was nothing left to take, apart from broken bricks and charred wood; however, the Soviets and the Germans clung to the ruins with stubborn tenacity, as if the outcome of the war depended on the possession of them. And Junior Lieutenant Kalynka's platoon, half destroyed in this devastated city, had now for the third (or was it the fifth?) time won back the same building or, more specifically, what remained of it: a large basement and a single standing wall, shredded by shrapnel and bullets. Each time a shell or bomb exploded nearby, the wall swayed as if it was ready to fall, while at the very top, on the fourth storey, in a corner miraculously remaining, a small cot kept moving back and forth, each time almost falling into the abyss. The soldiers held their breath, their eyes glued to the cot, while their platoon commander blanched completely and tugged at the restrictive collar of his tunic. How surprised the soldiers would have been to learn that their junior lieutenant had first left for the front from this totally devastated city, that in fact he had lived in this very building, and that that corner of the room up there was all that remained of his apartment. And his son had slept in that very cot. They would have been astonished and would have then understood why their commander fought so hard each time to retake this useless building or at least what remained of it.

Kalynka was depressed not so much by the memory of his wife and son, who had both disappeared, or the sight of the defenceless cot which could have fallen at any moment (he still imagined that his son lay in it), as by the disaster which had befallen him here during the battle before last, when the Germans drove them out of this building. His best machine-gunner, Asanov, had disappeared, together with his machine-gun, and a dark rumour spread among the soldiers that Asanov had gone over to the enemy. After all, the Germans did not pick up the bodies of Soviet soldiers and after the building had been won back, no matter how hard they searched, they did not find him. The machine-gun had vanished completely too.

Already someone claimed to have seen Asanov running towards the Germans, shouting for them not to shoot, because he was surrendering.

Kalynka was called into battalion headquarters and warned that that evening, after it had become completely dark, he should expect a representative from the personnel section.

"Make sure your Daniyalov doesn't dash off to join the Germans too! In the footsteps of his compatriot."

Sergeant Daniyalov, commander of the first squad, was in fact Asanov's countryman. They always hung around together, even sleeping under the one waterproof poncho, and after Asanov's disappearance Daniyalov had turned black looking for his comrade. He flashed his burning eyes and asked angrily:

"Comrade commander, which scum told you that Asanov ran off to join the fascists? Asanov, a fascist? Me, a fascist? Which scum told you?!"

But "comrade commander" knew nothing. "Comrade commander" thought only that the unknown personnel officer would get stuck into Daniyalov and would not let him out of his clutches that easily. Small wonder he had been warned to keep an eye on the sergeant.

Kalynka came up to Daniyalov on several occasions to warn him about the approaching unpleasant meeting. But he never plucked up the courage to mention it: headquarters had ordered him not to breathe a word to anyone about the representative from the personnel section. Sighing painfully, Kalynka would ask him something totally different, which made him feel terrible, as if he was personally handing Daniyalov over to the personnel officer, Daniyalov, who had often gone into battle with him, who would have covered him against any bullet or piece of shrapnel without hesitation.

Thin, short, bandy-legged, with small surprisingly beautiful hands, Daniyalov answered Kalynka with a dissatisfied expression on his face, as if weary to the point of death of the "comrade commander", the war and all the troubles associated with it. Chatting like this, Kalynka moved away guiltily, again returning to the sergeant some time later.

Therefore, when the company sent an order that a reconnaissance team was to be dispatched to the railway station ('We're going to take back the railway station'), Kalynka immediately thought of Daniyalov. Not only because he was their best scout, but because by

sending off Daniyalov, he would at least this time save him from a meeting with the dreaded personnel officer, perhaps even a worse fate. During his time in the army Kalynka had heard all kinds of stories about this arm of the NKVD, so he was not expecting anything good from the impending visit. No longer hesitating, he again went over to the sergeant and ordered him to prepare for a reconnaissance mission.

"You'll take two soldiers. Is that enough?"

Hearing that he was being sent off on reconnaissance, Daniyalov came alive. His scowling face brightened. He became visibly happier and Kalynka could not understand why he was in such good spirits. But he didn't bother asking and added instead:

"You'll set off at dusk."

The personnel officer would be coming in the dark of night.

"Why wait around till then?" Daniyalov replied cheerily. "After all, what's the man'ole for?"

"Man'ole...? What do you mean?"

"Man'ole. Over there," Daniyalov pointed to a barely visible sewerage manhole. "We'll dive underground and pass under the Germans."

Thinking it over, Kalynka agreed: it really would be safer this way.

"Be careful, who knows what the Germans have tossed down there."

"We'll make it!" Daniyalov said cheerfully. And as Kalynka moved away, he called after him: "Comrade commander!" He came up beside him and looked feverishly into his eyes: "You believe me, yes?"

"If I didn't believe you, I wouldn't have sent you on this mission."

"Thank you, commander!"

In half an hour the men were ready and disappeared underground. And another half an hour later all the officers were summoned to the battalion's command post and the battalion commander, an aged senior lieutenant with a grey tired face, briefly informed them that the order to withdraw had been received. The units were to leave the city at midnight, so that by morning they could occupy a new line of defence and be ready to face the enemy.

"What about my reconnaissance team?" Kalynka blurted out.

"You've already sent them?" exploded the battalion commander. "You were told to let them go after dark! Who twisted your arm?"

Kalynka remained guiltily silent.

"Try and do battle with such commanders! What do you say we do

now?" The battalion commander took out his satchel, as if it contained the answer to this last question. Unable to find any answer, he tossed the satchel to one side, annoyed. "When are they due back?

"All right. We'll think of something. Some of our people will still be here then... Comrade commanders, we fall back at zero hundred hours exactly. Check your watches."

As the commanders were leaving, he stopped Kalynka:

"Wait, Kalynka... I thought of leaving someone else behind, but it'll have to be you now. They're your men, you'll meet them here... Station your men along the entire line of the battalion's defence. You'll keep guard until dawn and harass the Germans a little. Make them think we're all still here. We'll give you some rocket launchers, ammunition and some spare machine-gun rounds... Just don't hang around until the Krauts start to attack. Withdraw as soon as your team's back. So that you're over the bridge by dawn. Understood?"

"Understood," Kalynka replied. He was already thinking how best to position his men along the line of defence.

"Yeah, another thing..." he said as Kalynka prepared to leave. "The personnel section rang again... You've cooked up a fine mess...! Your sergeant hasn't run off anywhere yet, has he?"

"No... I've sent him off on reconnaissance."

The battalion commander's eyes popped out as if he was being choked.

"Are you in your right mind?! There's probably already a warrant for his arrest, and you sent him off on a visit to the Germans...!"

"Not on a visit, on reconnaissance," Kalynka repeated stubbornly.

"Silence...! Do you at least realise what you've done? Know what all this looks like...? You let Asanov slip away, and now Daniyalov takes off after him..."

"Comrade senior lieutenant..."

"Silence...! Where the hell did you appear from? A little Jesus Christ! Well, remember this, Kalynka: you told me nothing, I heard nothing. I know nothing and I don't want to know anything! You do the stirring – you answer for it!"

"Can I go now?" Kalynka asked timidly.

"Off you go...! And no more tricks! Strategists, your mother!"

Saluting, Kalynka left. And later, on the way to the front lines and even after he had called together the squad commanders and meticulously explained to them where to station their men, he con-

tinually kept thinking about the unknown personnel officer, about the coming meeting with him, and the thoughts kept pressing in on him more and more. He wanted the Germans, who seemed to have fallen asleep today, to launch another attack and to stop the approaching meeting: after all, with shrapnel and bullets flying, the personnel officer would hardly come!

However the Germans sat like mice and the officer arrived just after dusk: he probably didn't want to fall behind the Soviet units which had already begun pulling out of the city. Which was why he was very hasty and, coming into a corner of the cellar partitioned off with a poncho, he announced straight away:

"Bring in the accused!"

Even by the dull light of the lamp Kalynka managed to look the personnel officer over. This was a young lieutenant with such a pink face, that it seemed as if he had been fed steamed milk all his life. The new uniform suited him perfectly, looking as if it had come straight from stores, and the yellow belt still retained its original smell. 'Straight out of school,' Kalynka thought sadly. 'Well this one will be a real pain!' He was very wary of these "cherubs", as the seasoned soldiers called the freshly-baked officers who arrived at the front straight out of school.

"So where is the accused?"

Without waiting to be asked, the lieutenant sat down on a captured mortar box which served as a chair, and opened his brand-new satchel.

"Who do you mean?" Kalynka asked as politely as he could: the more he hated a person, the more civil he was with them. The company commander, known for his mother oaths, had even asked him if he'd ever sworn in his life.

The personnel officer raised his eyebrows in surprise:

"What, weren't you warned?"

"I was."

"So where's your *chuchmek*?"

Kalynka could feel his lips growing numb. They always went numb when he became angry. 'Calm down, calm down!' Kalynka said to himself and replied even more civilly:

"Sorry, comrade lieutenant, but there aren't any *chuchmeks* in my platoon. I've got people."

The officer's pink face filled with colour, his ears began to burn. He grimly raised his young eyebrows and nervously opened his

satchel. Pulling out a sheet of paper, he centred his attention on it. And said in an official tone:

"Please bring in Sergeant Daniyalov!"

'Now we're angry!' Kalynka thought. He found this funny.

"I'm sorry, but I can't bring you the sergeant."

"What do you mean?" the personnel officer asked in astonishment.

"Sergeant Daniyalov has gone off on reconnaissance."

"Reconnaissance?" The lieutenant still seemed unable to comprehend what Kalynka had told him. Finally he understood, and sprang to his feet: "You sent the accused off to the Germans? And you knew I'd be coming for him?"

"Yes, I knew. And I sent him. Not to the Germans, by the way, but on reconnaissance. There was no one left to send, apart from Daniyalov."

"You had no right to send him!"

"As long as I'm commander here, I make the decisions whom to send where," Kalynka replied as calmly as he could.

The lieutenant stood in silence a while. His face looked as if it had been dipped in boiling water. He adjusted his belt several times, then opened his satchel and took out a fresh sheet of paper.

"May I?" he pointed to the small table, or rather stool, which the soldiers had brought Kalynka from who knows where.

"Please," Kalynka cleared away the mug and spoon, moving the lamp closer.

Before putting the sheet of paper down, the personnel officer rolled his lips into a tube and blew onto the stool, as if it was red-hot and he wanted to cool it. He sat down and again dipped into his satchel. Now there appeared a German pen, probably the lieutenant's only trophy to date, which he guarded religiously: even though the pen was in a case, he had also wrapped it up in paper. He took it out carefully, removed the top and blew on the nib. Then he leaned over the paper and wrinkled up his smooth forehead. And Kalynka, who had been a teacher before the war, saw so much of the pupil sitting down to write dictation in this young officer, that he couldn't hold back a smile.

He still felt no fear. And why should he be frightened after what he had lived through these past few days? 'They can't send me further than the front, can't think up anything worse than death,' – death stalked him every moment as it was, keeping vigil over him day and night. Kalynka didn't know that the terrifying inhuman machine,

which the young lieutenant represented, could send him much further than the front and dream up things far worse than death.

Meanwhile the officer had finished, his handwriting as painstaking as a pupil's. He rose to his feet and handed Kalynka the pen, his face serious and grim:

"Please sign the statement!"

Kalynka skimmed through the writing. This was a statement that he, Kalynka, had known that Sergeant Daniyalov was to be summoned for interrogation and, knowing full well that he had to ensure that the interrogation took place, he had sent the sergeant off on reconnaissance, thus allowing him to avoid arrest.

"You intended to arrest him?"

Instead of answering, the personnel officer again dipped into his satchel and pulled out a narrow piece of tissue-paper – a warrant for the sergeant's arrest.

Only now did something verging on fear stir in Kalynka's breast.

"Where do I sign?" he asked stiffly.

"Here," the officer pointed with his pink finger.

He blew several times onto the paper to make sure the ink was dry and then slipped the sheet into his satchel. Then he saluted carelessly.

"Maksymov, see the lieutenant out!" Kalynka called to one of the soldiers.

"What a load of bull!" Kalynka said to himself, now that he was on his own. He forced himself not to think about the personnel officer, nor even Daniyalov's arrest warrant, written out even before his interrogation, but how best to station his men along the line of defence. He picked up his German automatic and left the cellar.

A soupy twilight had already fallen outside. The outlines of nearby objects had lost their sharpness, the location of mountains of smashed brick, twisted metal and charred wood could be guessed sooner than seen, there was a heavy stench of burnt and crushed material, while the wall rose black against a still-light sky and now seemed much higher than it really was. 'It's standing!' Kalynka thought with a sudden tenderness, as if the wall contained a piece of him too, and he stood there with it, trembling and shaking from the explosions, becoming painfully scarred, but refusing to fall, holding up his son's bed on his severed hand. He recalled the personnel officer again and was genuinely astonished that people could busy themselves with such worthless, totally unneeded business, con-

sidering it important at a time when everything was balancing between life and death.

By the time he had set out his men along the battalion's line of defence, it had grown completely dark. Unseen clouds began to shower them with cold rain; it immediately became damp and melancholy, and he suddenly felt very alone, as if his men were all that remained to fight off the entire German army. On his way back to the cellar, to which Daniyalov and his party would be returning, Kalynka moved from soldier to soldier, whispering words of reassurance to each and telling them that after he fired two rockets in succession – a red and a white one – they were to assemble in the cellar.

"The Germans are quiet," said one of the soldiers. There was undisguised alarm in his voice.

"Knock on wood," Kalynka joked.

"I've already done that," the soldier replied, knocking on the butt of his rifle. And just then on his right two blinding rockets wrenched apart the darkness. They heard a scream, a Soviet "lemon" grenade exploded with its characteristic crackle, German machine-guns answered, choking on their chatter. The arms fire merged into a hot ball, moving furiously towards the Soviet positions... 'Daniyalov!' a thought flashed through Kalynka's head. Tripping over rocks, falling and getting up again, he dashed towards the building.

By the time he had reached it the shooting had stopped. Only short nervous bursts of automatic fire rattled here and there, as if someone was finishing swearing.

The reconnaissance team had already returned. The men stood in the middle of the basement, bathed in the ghostly light of the lamp. Daniyalov lay motionless on a poncho spread on the floor. He could have been asleep, rolled up into a ball with his hand under his cheek, if it wasn't for the small steaming hole in his temple from which flowed a thin trickle of thick black blood. Kalynka immediately realized that Daniyalov had been shot: only a dead man's blood dribbled like that, instead of pulsing with forceful hot spurts. He stared at Daniyalov, recalling the personnel officer, and outrage burned inside his chest.

"Comrade commander!" one of the reconnaissance team was holding a trench spade. "Shall I dig a grave?"

Kalynka was thinking about the personnel officer again and the arrest warrant.

"There's no need. We'll take him with us." He ran his hand over his face, wiping away the fatigue which had overcome him, and said to the two soldiers: "Lie down and get some rest. We'll be pulling out shortly," even though he already knew that the soldiers probably wouldn't be able to sleep after their recent ordeal. "Try to get some sleep. I'll wake you."

He took off his poncho and carefully covered Daniyalov. This was all he could do for him...

An hour before dawn, just as Kalynka was about to rouse the soldiers, the Germans launched an attack. Whether one of the officers had drunkenly confused the time or whether there was another strange reason, no one knew, only some cog became stuck in the finely-tuned German machine and instead of waiting for morning and launching an attack after a hearty breakfast, the enemy soldiers began their attack in the dark.

Flashes, glimmers and pulsations appeared near and far; there were whistles, whines and rustling, a babble of explosions mixing earth and sky, the nauseous stench of gunpowder; a whiz and a groan of shrapnel, which seemed to leave nothing alive, and then the firing moved into the rear of the Soviet lines. As soon as the mortars and shells began to explode behind him, Kalynka dashed off to the machine-gunner who had positioned himself under the wall, for the Germans were about to appear.

They in fact appeared straight away, although Kalynka could not see them in the murky darkness: he saw only the pulsating flashes of their rifles, the dozens of lights speeding towards him and heard the bullets warbling thickly past his temples.

Reaching the wall, he dived into the trench. The machine- gunner lay motionless beside his machine-gun. Kalynka moved aside the dead man's heavy body and lay in his place. The pulsating lights were very close now, converging on him from all sides. Kalynka hastily pressed against the cold wet butt and pulled the trigger. The machine-gun sprang to life, shuddering; fiery threads of tracer bullets cut through the darkness, fanning forward, sweeping away the indistinct shadows. Kalynka fired short fierce rounds, extinguishing one flame, then another, firing away until a shell fell noiselessly beside him and in the explosion, in the flash, in the smoke he was lifted into the air together with the machine-gun. And just before he lost consciousness, some fraction of a second before it became extinguished, Kalynka felt as if his body had become thin as a leaf and

just as weightless. He floated through the air for a long time, still not falling to the ground...

Next there might have followed an account of the German prisoner-of-war camp near Volodymyr-Volynsky; of the barbed wire and inhuman conditions designed to drive as many prisoners as possible from this world, while killing in those who survived against all the odds, everything with a semblance of humanity; of the dull despair and discouragement, and how Kalynka finally managed to escape from the camp; an account of how he travelled east under the cover of darkness, his strength ebbing, how he hid in gullies and woods, how he froze to the bone and suffered from continuous hunger, how he crossed a river covered with the first thin ice of winter and how the ice gave way under him, and how he then lay encrusted with ice on the riverbank, wanting nothing else in the world, except to die; how he finally reached his native village, where he had been born and had grown up, how he had entered his mother's home and lay there for almost six months on the brink of life and death, his strong constitution finally gaining the upper hand, and how he rose to his feet and finally became so healthy that when the Soviets returned and he was called up for service, the medical commission pronounced him "fit" (almost everyone was pronounced fit then, unless they had lost an arm or a leg); how he had gone off to fight again and had returned in 1944, badly wounded; how he had worked as a teacher, first in his native village and then in that same city from which he had left to fight the war and in which he had been captured, and he even began teaching in the pedagogical institute; how his wife had returned from the Urals, having buried with their son the young glint of her eyes and the sumptuous shine of her thick black plait; about their first night together, pressing close together, and her salty tears wich kept dripping onto Kalynka's broad chest; how, together with the rest of the country they gradually returned to a normal, peaceful life with its relative order and surfeit – a large novel could have been written about all this.

But other events beckon to us, so that we might perhaps just mention that during the German occupation Kalynka saved himself from working for the German police by finding work as a grade three teacher until the return of the Soviets. This episode needs to be mentioned only because it was to play a major role in Kalynka's future, but more about that later. Meanwhile, let's return to the large city to find Kalynka sitting in a tram travelling towards the railway sta-

tion. On his way back from a work trip, Kalynka sat in that tram, holding two packages in his lap. One contained a hat for his wife, the other a present for their baby, which was about to be born.

Outside it was early spring, the first rains had generously washed the city, and the buildings, trees and streets were so cheerful and clean, that one wanted to smile, which was probably why people were so unusually courteous and joyous, and it was impossible to believe that dark suspicion or hatred could be lurking somewhere. Kalynka was thinking how he would arrive home, how he would please his wife with these presents, not knowing that he was being watched vigilantly and was spending his last minutes as a free man.

That small piece of paper which Junior Lieutenant Kalynka had signed during the war had not been lost, it had not disappeared, but had pursued him all these years like an invisible shadow, until the hand which decided whether to punish or to forgive, and which was accustomed in the main to punish, wrote a few words on it and without knowing it Kalynka had become transformed in an instant into a person dangerous to his country, a state criminal, an enemy of the people, of which he also was an indissoluble part. Which was why he had to be detained immediately and thrown into a dismal stone "sack", where there were only windowless bare walls, a narrow metal bed made as if for a corpse, an ironclad door with a small peephole and the yellow light of a barred-up electric globe instead of the joyous bright kind sunshine.

In this large city there is a building painted a light grey colour, which until recently people passed with their heads drawn into their shoulders. The building is guarded by ironclad gates capable of letting through entire nations. The windows of the lower storeys are painted over, the massive heavy doors look more like gravestones, from behind which one never hears laughter or merry voices, doors which do not open freely and easily, but barely budge, like the lid of an ominous trap. The building rises in a heavy stone agglomeration for four storeys, but anyone who has not been inside does not know that it also descends another three storeys, jealously hiding its subterranean parts from stray eyes. If a cross-section was taken of the building, the underground part would resemble a frightening honeycomb of stone filled not with honey or larvae (the embryos of future bees), but with human beings. A deathly silence filled these honeycombs; only occasionally did a spyhole click, the ever-watchful eye of the guard glinted and one heard the rhythmic clapping of

hands: a prisoner was being led off to be interrogated or was returning.

Kalynka found himself in just such a stone cell. Nothing was explained to him: he wasn't even shown the arrest warrant, but simply told to get into a car, and was driven away, brought here, dispossessed of all his things, made to undress and then given back his crumpled, fingered clothing and shoes, now minus all buttons, hooks and laces, and ordered to dress. Overwhelmed, Kalynka put on his shoes, dressed, and only then could he think more or less normally. No matter how strange it now seemed, he wasn't troubled so much at being arrested, as at the thought of his wife's hat and child's present getting mislaid.

"Come on, nothing gets lost here!" The guard pushed him in the back.

"Please don't push..."

"Off you go!" the guard yelled, baring his yellow tobacco-stained teeth.

Shrugging (why argue with a fool?), Kalynka turned around and walked off.

They moved along a narrow corridor with steel doors on either side. From time to time the guard behind him clapped and each time Kalynka's broad back shuddered.

They stopped at the end of the corridor. A shadow stirred, another guard appeared. With a clank of keys he moved towards them.

"A new one?" he inquired disinterestedly, not even glancing at Kalynka. He picked out a key, unlocked a door.

"When do you finish?" Kalynka's escort asked.

"In the morning."

"Pity."

"Why?"

"We could have gone fishing."

The guard opened the door and without looking at Kalynka, said: "Inside!" As if some inanimate object, rather than a human being was standing before him.

"Bloody service!" he complained, heartily spitting onto the floor. "I've applied for holidays twice and each time I get the same answer: later..."

Kalynka continued standing in the doorway of the cell, not daring to step inside. He suddenly felt that the moment he entered, the door would close behind him forever.

"What are you waiting for?"

And before Kalynka could open his mouth, the guard deftly pushed him into the cell.

The door slammed shut, the lock clicked. Boiling over with anger, Kalynka rushed at the door, but immediately regained his composure.

'Calm down, calm down,' he told himself, clenching his teeth. 'There must be some mistake. I've been mistaken for someone else. Everything will soon be cleared up and I will be let out after an apology...'

He stood in the middle of the cell for a long time, listening. He waited for the door to open at any moment so that he could be let out. But the door seemed to be soldered into the wall and the silence was sepulchral.

How long he stood like this Kalynka couldn't say for sure. It seemed an eternity. Finally he felt pain in his feet and looked around for somewhere to sit.

There was only a narrow metal bed in the cell. Kalynka came up to it, but he did not dare sit down straight away: both the flattened pillow and the blanket were filthy. Finally he covered the pillow with the grey blanket, which seemed a little cleaner, spread out his light coat over it and lay down on his back. But as soon as he lay down, the spyhole clicked open and a colourless voice, seeming not to belong to a human being, commanded:

"No lying down. No sleeping."

Kalynka sat up and ran to the door:

"Listen, when will they let me out?"

Not a sound came from the other side.

Kalynka stood a while, then again lay on the bed. The spyhole clicked open at once and the same colourless voice repeated with an oppressive monotony:

"No lying down. No sleeping."

"Listen..."

But everything seemed to have died on the other side. Unable to stop himself, Kalynka knocked on the door.

The spyhole clicked open, the upper part of a face appeared. Dissatisfied eyes below bushy eyebrows.

"What d'you want?"

"When will I be let out?"

"Let out?"

Something akin to a smile passed across the guard's eyes. The steel trapdoor clicked and the spyhole became blind once more.

Kalynka looked around helplessly. Everything which had happened to him now resembled a horrifying nightmare. He moved away from the door and sat down on the bed. Sitting was allowed, because the spyhole remained silent. Sitting down, Kalynka began to observe what he hoped were his temporary surroundings.

The cell consisted of the stark straight lines of the walls, floor and ceiling. There was not a single projection anywhere, nothing to break these heartless straight lines, nothing to rest one's eyes on, to soothe the soul. The walls, ceiling and cement floor had an identical dirty-grey colour, as if a thin film of mould had covered everything. It had even enveloped the light globe twinkling up above the door. The cell contained only a bed fixed to the wall, and in one corner a bowl and a wooden spoon stood on the floor. The bowl was glazed and intact, but the spoon was completely gnawed, as if someone had chewed on it day and night in despair.

Hour after hour passed, the loneliness became ever more oppressive. Eventually whispers sounded on the other side of the door, and a small window opened. A soft woman's voice said:

"Hand me your bowl."

Kalynka took the bowl and poked it through the small window. The woman's face disappeared and in its place appeared a ladle. A turbid liquid was poured into the bowl.

"The bread is distributed in the morning," the woman said just as softly. "For the whole day."

The window immediately closed. Kalynka remained standing with the full bowl. He returned to his bed, rested the bowl on his knees, leaned over and smelt it: the turbid liquid stunk of boiled potato peelings. His mother made such swill for the pigs.

'Do people really eat this here?' And this thought was immediately followed by another: 'What about in the camp? Didn't they eat this...?' But he couldn't force himself to even taste it and placed the bowl in the corner.

After a while the lock clicked, the door opened (Kalynka rose to his feet and took a step forward). The guard in the doorway was not the same one who had brought Kalynka here, but a small weedy fellow.

"Step out!" His voice had the deep bass tone of the Russian singer Shaliapin.

Kalynka stepped into the corridor and set off along an already familiar path.

And again behind his back came the rhythmic clapping of hands, again they passed ironclad doors with peepholes. Kalynka began to imagine he was walking along an underground cemetery, an eerie burial place for people. But at last the corridor finished and they climbed two storeys, where another guard met Kalynka and escorted him further.

They came to a brightly-lit office with a large window which was partly opened. The fresh air poured in in a brisk stream. Kalynka breathed it in so greedily that his chest ached, but this was a pleasant pain, which expunged the grey mustiness of the underground from his lungs.

"Sit down here," said the guard, pointing to a stool in the middle of the office.

Kalynka sat down, the guard disappeared into an adjoining room, leaving him alone. 'So they'll let me out,' Kalynka thought. 'Otherwise they wouldn't have left me alone.'

With interest he began to survey the office, for who knew if he would ever find himself here again.

Before him stood a desk with a large table lamp, beside the lamp lay a long object. Kalynka looked more closely and noticed a faceted whip made from steel cable. He flinched involuntarily, remembering a similar one back in the concentration camp, which the SS guard never let out of his hands: he simply used it to break the backs of the prisoners. Kalynka thought that this was probably a piece of material evidence, that some fascist had been interrogated here before him.

He transferred his gaze to the walls, for there was nothing else on the table. The walls were bare except for a large portrait of Stalin hanging over the desk opposite Kalynka.

This was a portrait Kalynka was familiar with. One time, while still a pupil, he had carried one like this in a demonstration – the dear face of the Leader, whose name had long since become for him a symbol of the best things in the world. Stalin was dressed in a soldier's tunic here, rather than the uniform of a generalissimo, and had an army cap – this was obviously a prewar portrait. He was looking straight at Kalynka, staring only as people from portraits or saints from icons could stare: intent and unblinking. And the longer Kalynka looked at the portrait, the more it seemed to him that Stalin was quite different here, unlike the one he was accustomed to seeing

almost every day on countless portraits and pedestals. The artist had discovered some new, as yet unknown feature in the leader's expression, but one which Kalynka could not grasp for a long time. At last it dawned on him: it was the eyes! This portrait had quite different eyes. Not those slightly squinted benevolently smiling eyes of the national father, but cold and merciless ones filled with deep suspicion. No matter where Kalynka looked, he felt that ponderous gaze upon him. 'If only they would get on with it!' Kalynka thought drearily. He was amazed that so much time had elapsed and still no one had entered the office. Through the closed door he could hear distant voices disrupted by something akin to laughter or crying.

Kalynka did not know that this waiting on the stool, like the several days spent alone in the cell, was all part of a meticulously calculated programme of psychological preparation of the prisoner; that unseen eyes were watching him closely and when he began to fidget, losing his patience, one of the officers in the adjoining room extinguished his unfinished cigarette and entered the office with an exaggerratedly firm step.

"Good day!" Kalynka rose to greet him.

However the officer did not even look in his direction. He sat down at the desk, pulled out a drawer, closed it, then pulled out another, took out several sheets of clean paper and placed them in front of himself. Then he picked up a pen and began to examine it as if he was looking at it for the first time.

Kalynka, who stood there in awkward silence, again sat down on the stool: the officer didn't even glance at him. His entire attention was riveted on the pen.

"Are you going to keep me here for long?" Kalynka finally blurted out.

Only now did the officer tear his eyes away from the pen. He looked at Kalynka and something akin to a smile appeared on the interrogator's face. He turned on the table lamp and positioned it so that the light fell straight onto Kalynka's face, while leaving him in the shadows.

"Surname?"

"Surname!" the officer repeated impatiently.

Screwing up his eyes in the bright light, Kalynka said his surname.

"Name...? Patronymic...? Date and place of birth...?"

Having recorded the answers, the officer stopped scraping away with his pen. Kalynka waited tensely for the next question, but the

officer seemed to have fallen asleep.

"Can you tell me why I've been detained?" Kalynka lost his patience a second time.

The interrogator remained silent a while longer. Then his derisive voice boomed from the shadows:

"You don't know, you poor soul?"

"What am I supposed to know?"

"I ask the questions here," the officer replied in a metallic voice. "And the more forthright your reply, the better it will be for you. So, are you going to confess straight away or are we going to play cat and mouse awhile?"

"What do I have to confess to?"

"You've forgotten...? Need some help...? All right, I'll jog your memory, my pride won't suffer... In November 1941 you rescued the traitor Daniyalov by helping him go over to the German side..."

"Daniyalov wasn't a traitor!" Kalynka interrupted indignantly. "And he didn't go over to the Germans, he went off on reconnaissance."

"Went, and stayed behind," the interrogator added derisively. "Where's your Daniyalov now? In Canada? In America? Or back here, doing the work of foreign intelligence organizations?"

"He's here."

"Here?" the interrogator stood up involuntarily.

"Here," Kalynka repeated bitterly. "In the earth... Buried after being brought back by the reconnaissance team. Already dead."

"Ye-es... Decided to tell us stories? To spin some cobwebs around your prick? Perhaps you didn't cross over to the Germans that night either?"

"I was badly wounded that night..."

"You've learned to lie well, Kalynka! But it won't do here! It won't do, Kalynka! I'm asking you nicely for the last time: are you going to tell me the truth or will you continue with your lies?"

"I don't know how to lie!" Kalynka felt his lips begin to go numb. The light was striking his face, piercing his brain. Two hundred watts, no less.

"Well then Kalynka, if you're not going to play ball..."

The interrogator turned off the lamp and the room filled with flickering circles. Kalynka screwed up his eyes tightly, squeezing the darkness from them, and when he opened his eyes the circles had disappeared and he could again see the interrogator. He was stand-

ing now. For some reason he stood a chair up against the wall, climbed onto it and, turning his face up to the portrait, asked loudly:

"Comrade Stalin, what should I do with this *contra*?*"

And Kalynka imagined that Stalin, his angry glare fixed upon him, began to move his lips.

"Ha...? What...?" the interrogator placed a hand to his ear. "Understood, Comrade Stalin!"

He jumped down from the chair and picked up the whip. Coming out from behind the desk, he came up to Kalynka.

"Sta-and up!" And without waiting for Kalynka to get up, he whipped him over the head with all his might.

Kalynka felt as if his head had split in half. It exploded with unbearable pain; everything went dark before his eyes. He grabbed his head and immediately his palm became sticky and hot. The interrogator whipped him again, this time over the hand.

With a short muffled wheeze Kalynka pounced on the interrogator. He threw him to the ground, restrained him and began punching his screaming, contorted face.

How many of them raced in to help their comrade Kalynka did not count. They struck him over the head with something heavy, pulled him off the interrogator, pumped his face, chest and stomach with boots. One of them climbed up onto the desk and, jumping up, landed on top of Kalynka with all his might.

There was a crack and a thud as his heart was squashed. Kalynka choked on the pain and lost consciousness...

He came to on the cold floor of the cell. He was soaking wet. They had probably revived him with a bucket of water. He lay crucified with pain, taking in air in small breaths: his lungs felt as if they contained countless sharp razors. His entire body was trembling, his bloated lips burned with fire, thirst tormented him.

He remembered the swill in the bowl. Groaning, he tried to get up. The cell floated before his eyes. A nauseating ball came up to his throat. His insides emptied and he lay there for a long time, face pressed against the slippery floor.

Finally he made another attempt. This time, no matter how much the floor rocked, he managed to get to his knees. Grabbing at the wall, he crawled into the corner.

Greedily he swallowed the brown liquid until his lips touched the solids. His teeth chattering, he crawled over to his bed. Lying down,

he pulled the coat over himself.

He stretched out his crushed body and froze.

This time the peephole in the door did not click, the command to get up did not sound. Even the guards must have realized that Kalynka was unable to stand or sit.

For six days no one summoned Kalynka for interrogation. They seemed to have forgotten about him, crossed him off the list of the living, burying him alive in this stone coffin. However three times a day the small trapdoor continued to open and a woman's voice, sounding like the sad call of a marsh bird, repeated the same two words:

"Your bowl."

Kalynka no longer put aside the repugnant turbid liquid, greedily eating everything, together with his daily bread ration. He began to be tormented by hunger and, just as during the famine of 1933 or later in the German concentration camp, he caught himself thinking long and hard about food.

But more than the hunger, more than the wounds and bloody bruises covering his body, he was tormented by the trauma inflicted upon his soul on that memorable night.

Each night he dreamt the same dream. He was lying on the cement floor of his cell, unable to move, lying and fixing his intense gaze on the door, which opened slowly and ominously. With all his willpower Kalynka strained to close the door with his eyes, because he knew he was opening it, but he could do nothing about it. The door opened and dozens of boots rushed into the cell. They jumped onto him, crushed him, kicked in his head, ribs and heart. Choking on his own screams Kalynka tried to protect himself with his arms, but the number of boots grew, they filled the entire cell, crowding out the air and light. Suffocating, sensing that he was about to die, Kalynka woke up...

Recovering a little he lay down again, but could not fall asleep until dawn. Until the peephole clicked and an indifferent voice commanded:

"Rise!"

He thought a lot during these predawn hours – about his house, his family, the institute, his colleagues and students – about anything at all, just to forget that horrifying night. Had this happened to him in a fascist camp he felt it wouldn't have been as painful. It was unbearably painful here. For he was being beaten not by the fascist

enemy, but by his own compatriots. And not simply beaten, but being killed with such ferocity, as if their future depended on whether they squashed Kalynka or not.

Kalynka could not understand this at all. Finally he began to convince himself that a ridiculous, savage incident had taken place, that both the interrogator and all the others who had mistreated him would be punished, that they would be tried in court. It couldn't be any other way.

Meanwhile another interrogator prepared to question Kalynka. This one was much older than the stripling who had whipped him. He had the rank of captain and ample experience acquired through long years spent in the service of the security organs.

Without even opening his files, without even seeing the prisoner, without exchanging a single word with him, he could think of Kalynka only as a traitor, an enemy of the people, someone dangerous to the Soviet regime. Therefore, as he leafed through his dossier, he primarily sought things which could be used against Kalynka.

Refused to hand over the traitor Daniyalov? Helped him to cross over to the enemy, pretending to have sent him on reconnaissance? Volunteered to stay behind with the covering detachment so that he could cross over to the Germans? Well, everything was clear.

This time Kalynka didn't have to wait for the interrogator: he was already sitting behind the desk. He nodded to Kalynka and said civilly:

"Please sit down."

And Kalynka, who came to the interrogation with the single thought on his mind: 'I won't let them beat me any more... Better to let them shoot me than to hit me...' Kalynka, who entered the office as if it was a trap, immediately relaxed and a sigh sobbed from his breast.

"Thank you," he said gratefully, sitting down on the stool.

The interrogation began. The captain questioned him in a soothing voice, impeccably courteous. However, the longer the interrogation lasted, the more wary Kalynka became.He felt as if the interrogator was shepherding him in the necessary directions.

"You sent Sergeant Daniyalov on reconnaissance?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you already know that the sergeant was to be interrogated?"

"I did."

"Why did you send Daiyalov off to the Germans then?"

"Not to the Germans, but on reconnaissance."

"Well, on reconnaissance, let's say."

"Because he was my best commander... Besides he asked to go on reconnaissance himself."

The captain looked up, his eyes flashed. Something wary and ingratiating sounded in his next question, as if the interrogator was creeping up on tip-toe:

"You weren't surprised that Daniyalov volunteered to go on reconnaissance?"

"No."

"Why?" His whole body pressed forward.

"Because I knew the sergeant well. Daniyalov always went where the going was toughest."

"Interesting, interesting... It never occurred to you that Daniyalov might have asked to go on reconnaissance so that he could cross over to the Germans?"

"No."

"Pity."

"Daniyalov died at that time. The reconnaissance team brought him back dead."

"Well, that still has to be proved. Can you show us Daniyalov's grave?"

"No... I was badly wounded myself then."

"There, you see. And you want us to take your word for it."

The captain shook his head reproachfully.

"I had a better opinion of you. An intelligent fellow, an institute lecturer, but you act like a..." He sighed sadly. "So you don't want to tell us the truth...? All right, then let's move on to something else." He lay aside the full sheet of paper and took a clean sheet. "Tell me, Kalynka, what impelled you to betray your fatherland and cross over to the enemy?"

"I didn't betray my country!" Kalynka exploded. "That's a lie!"

"A lie?" the interrogator smiled sceptically. For a while he played with his pen, then again looked up. And this time his eyes were unapproachably cold. "One thing, Kalynka, don't forget where you are. We know everything about you and it only remains for you to confess frankly to everything..."

"What do you know?"

"Learn to be quiet and not to interrupt the interrogator, Kalynka,"

the captain lectured him. "Take heed of this advice, it will come in handy yet... Well then, are we going to confess?"

"I didn't betray anyone," Kalynka said hollowly. "And I've nothing to confess."

"Pity. A great pity... I had hoped that you had enough commonsense to admit to everything. This way you would have made things easy on yourself, Kalynka."

The captain rose and gathered his papers. He placed them in a drawer and locked it with a key.

"All right then, sit on it a while, think about it, we've nowhere to hurry off to. I'll just go and have some dinner... Perhaps you'd like me to bring you back something?"

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry."

Shrugging his shoulders, the captain left the room. While Kalynka remained, alone with the terrible accusation which had been levelled against him. And there was also that portrait on the wall which kept its suspicious eyes peeled on him.

The interrogator returned. Picking his teeth with a matchstick, he sat down at the desk, pulled his papers out of the drawer and only then looked at Kalynka:

"Well then, have we decided?"

"I haven't decided anything," Kalynka replied bitterly. "How can I be guilty of something I never did?"

"Pity... Well then..." The interrogator gathered up the papers and tossed them into the drawer with obvious chagrin. "We'll have to help you remember certain things... I didn't want to, but what else can I do..."

He pressed a button on the desk and told the soldier who entered silently in response:

"Take the prisoner to the lock-up. Until tomorrow night."

And again Kalynka descended into the underground, floor by floor. Occasionally a prisoner was being escorted towards him – then Kalynka was ordered to stand with his face against the wall. They stopped before a narrow door. When it was unlocked he saw something resembling a niche carved into a cliff. The guard clicked on a switch and the merciless light of a strong lamp whitened the walls, blinded his eyes.

"Inside!"

He sat Kalynka down on a cement ledge, facing the lamp, with his back to the wall:

"Sit like this! Don't move! Don't turn away!"

The door slammed shut, the lock turned. The light seemed to become even brighter, the lamp seemed to grow in size and move right up against his face.

First there was a cutting sensation in his eyes. As if someone had poured in some hot sand. From under his swollen eyelids poured burning tears which brought no relief. The tears came faster and faster, until he began to feel as if it was his eyes melting and flowing out. Eventually the burning pain penetrated his brain with sharp ceaseless waves. It penetrated deeper and deeper, scattering in millions of red-hot needles. Kalynka grabbed his head in his hands and squeezed it with all his might, then he pressed his burning cheek to the cold wall. He felt a little better. But the peephole clicked open straight away, the guard's voice struck his ears painfully:

"Don't turn away...! Who am I talking to!"

With a groan Kalynka tore himself away from the wall. The light poured forth, the light was insane, the light boiled all about Kalynka and he cooked in it.

Eventually he thought he was going mad. His entire body became bloated from the heat, his eyes did not fit into their sockets. At any moment he expected them to pop out and roll onto the floor, hissing for a long time as they cooled. His dried burnt skin stretched painfully across his face – another minute, another moment and it would give way and burst, falling to the ground like a bloody rag.

Stunned, his head deep in torment which never left him for an instant, Kalynka thought he had sat there an eternity, instead of an hour or two.

The lock clicked like a rifle firing and the door opened:

"Out!"

Kalynka tried hard, but could not get up.

"Who am I talking to!?"

Groaning, Kalynka finally got up and blindly stepped forward, grabbing onto the wall for support. Bloody circles pulsated before his eyes, his brain exploded in solar flares.

"Forward!"

"I can't see a thing," Kalynka unglued his cracked lips.

"It'll pass by the time we marry you off!" With a push to his back, the unseen guard indicated the direction to walk in.

With his arms stretched out before him, Kalynka moved off into the darkness.

Finally he was stopped. A door was opened and he was pushed in the back:

"Come in!"

Kalynka recognized his interrogator's voice. Without waiting for a backhander, he stepped blindly forward. Stretching out his hands, he found the wall and pressed his forehead, cheeks and lips against it for a long time in an effort to cool his face a little.

In the evening he was again brought in for interrogation.

"Well then, Kalynka, are we going to tell the truth?"

But Kalynka was not looking at the interrogator; his eyes were fixed on a carafe of water. By some miracle it had appeared on the desk. He froze to it with a feverish gaze, unable to tear his eyes away.

The interrogator smiled knowingly, poured a full glass and wordlessly gave it to Kalynka. With a moan Kalynka drank it, holding tightly onto the vessel, as if expecting it to fill again.

"Another?"

He nodded.

He seemed to feel better. The thirst had abated, his throat wasn't burning so badly.

"So, are we going to talk?"

"Talk about what?" Kalynka asked, grimacing. "You won't believe me anyway."

"So that's all you have to say?"

"Yes..."

Irritably the captain lay down his pen.

"Pity... A civilized fellow, an intellectual, and behaving like this... What are you hoping for? Perhaps you think we'll believe you and let you out? Get this into your head, Kalynka, no one's ever left here a free man!"

"Not even the innocent?"

"There are no innocent people here!"

Kalynka looked painfully at the captain:

"Do you really believe that everyone who has passed before you was an enemy of the people?"

For an instant the captain looked away in bewilderment. Kalynka's feverish eyes were filled with such torment that the captain had suddenly felt compassion for this man. Something akin to doubt had stirred within him, but he immediately extinguished the spiritual stirring and frowned sternly:

"I ask the questions here!"

Kalynka sighed and covered his eyes with his heavy eyelids.

That night and the next he was taken away for interrogation. Each time the interrogator entered full of vigour and energy, while Kalynka could barely stand up. The interrogation lasted until dawn. Sometimes the interrogator stepped out and then Kalynka immediately dozed off, always being on the verge of sleep, and woke as he was falling off the stool. When he returned to his cell, he immediately collapsed onto the bed, but no sooner had he closed his eyes, than the guard's voice thundered into his ear:

"Up...! Up...!"

This meant that it was morning. People were waking somewhere – refreshed, cheerful, invigorated – while Kalynka staggered over to the door, passed his bowl through the trapdoor and ate, not knowing exactly what he was eating. One single thought, one invincible desire had taken control of his entire being: to lie down and sleep, just for a short while, even only a minute. 'Sleep... sleep... sleep...' The words ticked away in his befuddled consciousness, but the merciless peephole clicked and a heartless voice ordered:

"Don't lie down! Don't sleep!"

An amazing apathy took control of Kalynka. He was no longer offended by the guards' foul curses, nor their pushing and shoving: obediently, like an animal, he went wherever he was told to go. His movements became unsure and sluggish, his eyes were half-closed. Eventually he began to feel that this wasn't him, but that some alien being was dragging his exhausted body along the long corridors, sitting it down on the stool and dozing with open eyes, replying to the interrogator with a broken voice. This being was indifferent to everything in the world, it wanted only to sleep, and to this end it was ready to do anything, even to bear witness against itself, to sign the interrogator's report where it stated that Kalynka had voluntarily gone over to the fascists, become an enemy of the fatherland, his people, his mother and wife, and even his future child...

But the hallucinations passed and Kalynka again became himself and steadfastly maintained his stand: he was not guilty of anything. And he felt that no power on earth could force him to slander himself.

At such moments the guard, who had long grown accustomed to everything, noticed that the prisoner scurried about the cell, opening his mouth into an almost insane grin. Tears poured from his red eyes, disappearing in his dirty beard, but the grin remained.

The guard shrugged his shoulders and moved away from the peephole. He had witnessed many things during the long years of his service, had long since become innured to people's suffering, the more so since these weren't people, but rather enemies who had to be destroyed. If it wasn't for this conviction, this belief that he was carrying out sacred, very useful work, he would never have managed to reach old age without having grey hair on his temples, without having bitter wrinkles around his mouth. Perhaps they would still appear, perhaps the guard would one day remember Kalynka and thousands of other Kalynkas, perhaps they would all pursue him relentlessly and ask briefly and frighteningly: 'What for?', perhaps a time would come when his frozen heart would thaw and his conscience awaken, having been lulled to sleep by beautiful hollow phrases – but neither we nor the guard himself know anything about this yet, not even Kalynka, who was scurrying about the cell almost blinded, his lips stretched into an insane grin.

Because he had realized that he could not be broken, he no longer feared any future interrogations nor that brightly-lit coffin into which they could throw him. Something had become consolidated within him, something which would not allow him to break, which would always support him no matter what they did to him. And even when he sank into indifference once more, even then this "something" did not die within him: it smouldered away stubbornly, in spite of all the threats and torments. And the captain, who during his long years of work for the organs had "cracked" many hundred prisoners, was forced to back away this time. He went to his chief and reported that the prisoner had refused to admit to anything.

"Have you tried all the forms of influence on him?" his superior inquired.

The captain replied that he had.

"Well then," the chief said, querulously chewing on his lips. "We can't hold him here forever. Prepare the paperwork and send him off with the next transport to the province from which he hails. All the more since he remained there during the occupation...

"Yeah, hold on." He stopped the captain. "His wife keeps writing here inquiring about her husband... Write to her... Well, you know what to write!" he added with disappointment.

The captain only smiled. There was no need to tell him what to reply to prisoners' wives. He returned to his office, sat down and began writing the usual phrases...

Meanwhile Kalynka was sitting in his cell, not knowing that he would soon be summoned, ordered to take his belongings and be led off into the yard where a Black Maria would already be waiting, its engine running impatiently. 'Kalynaka? Get in!' And Kalynka would crawl into the van, and the barred door would close behind him, and the vehicle would drive along the city streets, zealously hiding its prey from curious gazes. It would travel along the deserted night streets of the sleeping city and solitary passers-by would watch it go with frightened looks, thinking of those inside. Then the vehicle would stop, the door would open with a bang, an impatient voice would order: 'Get out!' And Kalynka would then find himself in a transit prison – so that later he could go to the railway station: not to the passenger area filled with cheerful shouts and laughter, but to the freight station, and not during the day, but at night, as if Kalynka was being transported by thieves who were accustomed to keeping out of the public's eye with their booty. Extricating him from the Black Maria, they would put him in the prisoners' car and transport him together with the other prisoners, spies, saboteurs and traitors to the country in which he was born and where he lived for many years. For a night and a day the kilometres would tick away sadly, for a night and a day Kalynka would lie on a ledge facing a barred window, with strict orders not to talk to any of his fellow travellers – until the rail car stopped, the guards ran down the narrow corridor, cursing, and the short cruel "Get out!" brought Kalynka to his feet. And Kalynka would get up and, joining his hands behind his back and hanging his head, step out into the night to join people similarly silent, like shadows; and there would be more of those insatiable Black Marias waiting for them, together with stern people with rifles and automatic weapons, totally unlike their compatriots. And all this nocturnal prey, including Kalynka, would be thoroughly counted, checked, divided among the black vehicles and taken away to prison – this time their local, native, provincial prison.

Thus Kalynka would return to the city he had defended in 1941 with his blood and his life. And travelling along in the Black Maria, Kalynka would guess along which street he was being driven, and he would continually imagine that they were just passing that wall which had survived the entire war and now remained standing in peacetime, passing the unmarked grave of Sergeant Daniyalov, the trench where as a junior lieutenant he had lain with his machine-gun until an explosion had lifted him off the ground and thrown him into

a German prisoner-of-war camp.

I can already see Kalynka emerging from the Black Maria in the large prison square brightly lit with spotlights, being led off with all the new arrivals for sanitization, where they doused the prisoners with icy water and then returned their damp cold clothing from the "delouser", as if even able to reduce the temperature of steam to zero here. The medical assistant, a prisoner himself, stuck a thermometer into the prisoners' armpits. 'Healthy...! Healthy...!' he called out, hurriedly yanking out the thermometers, trying to process the mob of prisoners in time. But suddenly he looked at the thermometer handed to him by Kalynka and a flash of joy passed across his face:

"Thirty-nine point six!"

"What are you yelling for, fool?" A red-cheeked doctor with the stripes of a captain in the medical service came up to Kalynka. He ordered him to strip to the waist.

"Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere," Kalynka replied.

The doctor hastily examined Kalynka and turned to the prison chief:

"This one can't go into the general cells. He could be infected."

"What the devil do I do with you?" the prison chief fretted, tugging at the peak of his cap, which made it seem as if he wanted to salute Kalynka, but kept changing his mind. "Where can I stuff you in, you parasite...? Into the outhouse perhaps...? Yarovy!" he called into the darkness. "Is there still room in the outhouse?"

"We'll find room!" a cheerful voice replied from the darkness. "In thirteen."

"Then put this scum in thirteen." And then to Kalynka, who still stood bared to the waist: "Why are you standing there like a blushing bride? Want to catch a fever?"

Kalynka dressed and waited for Yarovy. The fellow soon appeared from the murk, just as red-cheeked and merry as the doctor, and asked loudly:

"Are you the one spreading disease here...? Well, come along then, you bug, follow me!"

"The devil...! Giving him a piece of his mind!" the guards guffawed all around, while Yarovy lightly tapped Kalynka between the shoulders and, smiling with self-satisfaction, said:

"Get a move on, you won't get any further than the jail!"

"A *contra*?" Yarovy asked after a while. He asked merely for something to say.

"Yes," Kalynka obediently agreed, ever careful not to trip and fall, because he felt that he would never have picked himself up again.

"Nearly all ours here are *contras*," Yarovy half informed him, half boasted. "*Contra* sitting on *contra* and driving them with *contras*... What the hell do you scum want?"

Kalynka did not answer. He kept staggering more and more, his legs were buckling under him, his head rang and he felt a little nauseous. Probably intoxicated from all this fresh air.

The low outhouse appeared before him. This was an old stone building which had seen much in its time. After the war it had housed the prison offices and later, when the overflowing prison could no longer hold its inmates, the cellars were turned into temporary cells.

Yarovy unlocked a door nailed together from heavy boards, and warmly ushered Kalynka inside:

"I beg you to accept our hospitality!"

Stepping across the threshold of his new home, Kalynka stopped and looked around. Lit by a barely glowing lamp, the cell was narrow and low, the walls and floor black with dampness. Between the boards of the floor gleamed stinking water. In the depths of the cell, against a brick wall, stood a wide plank bed with a pile of rags. Near the door stood the wooden sanitary pan – the eternal prison idol.

Kalynka squeamishly went around the repugnant vessel and came up to the plank bed. The rags on the bed stirred and two smoothly-shaven heads with large waxen ears emerged from them. The heads blinked, fixed their curious gazes upon Kalynka, while he felt he was beginning to hallucinate. He ran his hand over his hot forehead, closed his eyes, took a deep breath of the fetid foul air, then opened his eyes again, but the heads had not disappeared. They seemed to have been sown into these earthen rags and had just sprouted above the surface. They were just as pale as shoots deprived of sunlight.

"How did you get in here?" Kalynka asked, sitting on the edge of the plank bed.

"We were arrested, uncle," one of the heads replied.

"What were you put in for?"

"Politics."

"Well then, politicians, let's get to know each other," Kalynka stretched out both his hands. "My name is Mykola Antonovych, the surname is Kalynka... And what are your names?"

"I'm Mykola too!" the fellow with whom Kalynka had been talking answered joyously. "And this is Fedko... But he's always quiet, he's always been like that. Their whole family doesn't talk much."

"Why don't you speak, Fedia?" Kalynka asked kindly.

"Well..." Fedia replied in a whisper, turning away and blushing. Then his friend guffawed, and it was strange to hear this childish laugh in the gloomy cellar. Kalynka felt a painful pity towards these children. He looked at their emaciated, almost transparent faces, at their long thin necks, and asked himself bitterly: 'What about these...? What are they guilty of...?'

All the same he was thankful to have been placed in a cell even with these children, rather than being on his own.

Mykola talked with Kalynka, while Fedko remained silent. But when Kalynka addressed him, he blushed, turned away and squeezed out in a voice hoarse with anxiety:

"Well..."

Mykola stubbornly kept calling Kalynka "uncle", even though he had been asked to address him by name and patronymic.

"So why were you boys imprisoned?" Kalynka inquired. The boys immediately wilted, exchanged frightened glances and replied each in his own way:

"Well..."

"For politics..."

Only later, after they knew him better, did they tell their story. Mykola in fact did the speaking, Fedko only listened in silence, his face so attentive and strained, as if the story concerned someone else and not him and his good friend.

These were typical country lads from poor collective-farm families. Their fathers went off to war together and died on the same day in the summer of 1941. Their common misfortune brought the two boys together and they became mates. They went to school together, dashed about the meadows looking for horse-sorrel, muddied the water in the small drying lakes, catching carp and eels for their mothers to make lenten borsch.

During the occupation they had found a packet of German leaflets which an enemy plane must have dropped at a time when their village had been far from the front. The leaflets bore the photograph of a young man in a Soviet army commander's uniform, and under the photograph it said that this was Stalin's son Yakiv, who had become a fascist prisoner-of-war. There followed a short address by

Yakiv himself, in which he didn't spare his father and called on all his compatriots to come over to the German side.

"My God, those scum can lie!" Mykola said, spitting contemptuously through his teeth. "Which son would heap such things on his father? Especially if he was Stalin!"

Fedko agreed with his friend.

Then they began to think what to do with the leaflets.

"Let's burn them," the cautious Fedko suggested. But the thrifty Mykola didn't agree with his friend. No matter what nasty things were printed here, it was still good paper and clean on the back. Mykola took the whole package home and hid it in the chest: it would come in handy some day.

And there it lay until the end of the war. Digging about in the chest one day, Mykola found the packet and made a good exercise book from some of the paper, taking the rest to school to show his classmates.

The leaflets were passed from hand to hand and finally found their way into the staff room. Frightened to death, the teachers began to search through the desks, sifting through the pupils' bags and books and, to cover himself, the principal rang the district military authorities.

The boys were picked up the next day, on Sunday, straight from the meadow where they were tending the cows. They saw the passenger car from afar, speeding away from the village, and dashed off to intercept it.

Reaching them, the car stopped. A gleaming door opened, a military stranger got out followed by their teacher, whose pince-nez kept fogging up, so that he had to continually remove it and wipe it with his handkerchief.

Taking off their caps, the boys said hello. Mouths wide open, they stared at the strange car.

"These the ones?" the uniformed man asked.

"Yes, actually, they are..." the teacher babbled.

"Fine lads!" the military man said cheerfully. And asked: "Want to come for a spin?"

Mykola and Fedir quickly exchanged glances and, still not believing their luck, answered in unison:

"Yes."

"Then get in," the military man invited them nicely. And when the boys crawled inside, still holding their whips, he addressed the

teacher: "I'll ask you to come along too."

"Well, actually, I..." the teacher babbled again, but the military man grabbed him firmly by the elbow:

"Get in, get in!"

The military man had not lied: he took them for a longer ride than they had dreamed. He had brought them – frightened, barefoot, in patched shirts and pants sewn from a German trenchcoat – to this prison. The boys stepped out of the car holding their whips and when a stern mustached uncle ordered them to leave their whips behind, Fedko pressed his fingers around the whip-handle:

"How will I tend the cows then?" Which made those present erupt into tearful laughter.

The whip was taken away and Fedko still fretted that it might have been lost somewhere.

"What about your teacher?" Kalynka inquired.

"Panas Yukhymovych? He was thrown into prison too! Right, Fedia?"

The fellow nodded in agreement.

Finding themselves in the cell the boys cried a lot at first, but then got used to it. Except that they were forever cold and hungry. Lately Fedko had begun to cough, especially at dawn, and wouldn't let Mykola sleep his fill.

"Does it hurt in your chest?" Kalynka asked.

"Well... When I cough..."

"Have you asked to see the doctor?"

"What for?" Mykola answered for his friend. "He's completely healthy. The cough's because of the dampness, uncle. When they let us out, his cold will disappear straight away... Right, Fedia?"

Fedko nodded his head affirmatively. He very much believed that as soon as he was released and raced across the meadow and cracked his whip several times – this tiresome cough would disappear in a flash.

"If only they haven't lost that whip. After all, I made it myself, uncle, and I cut the handle from a special cherry tree – I carved it a whole week! The whip's something else, uncle, you can crack it at one end of the village and heads duck at the other end...!"

"All the same, you should see a doctor."

"Well..." Fedko drawled and his yellow cheeks became covered with a pale autumn flush.

"We've already been interrogated, uncle!" Mykola boasted,

without taking his clear eyes off Kalynka. He snorted with his upturned nose, liberally sown with freckles, pulled his legs back into the rags. "And each time we went separately. A total of four times... The fellow there is such a pain..."

"Why?"

"He keeps grabbing my ear... Twisting it and hissing: 'Tell me, you runt, who taught you to collect the pamphlets? Your teacher?' He twisted them so much that they became like buns. Right, Fedia?"

And again an affirmative nod of the head.

"But I wasn't very afraid of him; he chose the wrong fellow to pick on," Mykola continued. "He twisted my ears, I squealed... He twisted them, but I only squealed... I'm a patient fellow, uncle. Once when I jumped onto a scythe and sliced open my foot, I didn't shed a tear. Just ask Fedko... Will the October Revolution celebrations be soon?" he suddenly asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"They say we'll get white bread then."

"If only they gave us enough black bread," Fedko said sadly.

"Oh, yeah, look what he wants!" Mykola disagreed. "Didn't they tell you there's a famine out there now?"

"Sure they did," Fedko agreed and grew silent, never saying another word. He sat hunched up, folding his hands on his knees, looking far older than his years, with a sorrowful gaunt face, while his large grief-stricken eyes quietly grew blind, as if no longer seeing Mykola, nor this bearded uncle, nor the damp sullen cell.

They went to bed, spreading out the rags and covering themselves with Kalynka's coat. Kalynka lay against the wall, Fedko in the middle, Mykola on the edge. Fedko had a fit of coughing which he held back for all he was worth, his dry hot body shuddering, afraid to wake his neighbours. Mykola couldn't fall asleep for a long time either, continually sighing quietly and stirring. Finally he raised his head, supported it on his elbow and turned to Kalynka:

"Uncle, are you asleep?"

"No."

"Have you seen whether they're digging potatoes yet?"

"They must be."

"We could roast some potatoes!" Mykola said dreamily and looked at Kalynka as if he alone could make his wish come true. "Fedko and I always dug potatoes. We'd fill our shirts full of them and then light a fire and bury them in the coals... Have you tried potatoes out of a

fire, uncle?"

"Yes," Kalynka said softly and in his mind's eye the merry fire blazed away, the sparky coals blushed red and out of them you raked charcoal-encrusted potatoes with such tasty fragrant centres! It didn't matter that coals and ashes crunched under young teeth, that lips and noses were covered in soot, for what could be tastier than a potato cooked in a fire! "Yes, I've tried them," Kalynka repeated and turned to Mykola: "Go to sleep, lad, go to sleep..."

Mykola closed his eyes, while Kalynka stared at the ceiling hung with dirty cobwebs and nursed his melancholy uncomforting thoughts. They brought him no peace – persistent, depressing, resembling one another like twin sisters.

He thought about the boys. They were no older than fifteen, both still children. So by what right had they been thrown into prison, into this cold damp basement, where one could not live and where one of them had already begun to rot? Who had been given the right to violate the Constitution, the good humane Soviet laws, to make a mockery of them? And who were they, all these defenders of law and order, who kept children behind bars and calmly looked into their own children's eyes? Fanatics blinded by suspicion towards everything living or enemies of Soviet power who consciously trampled the law to sow dissatisfaction among the people? Could it be that those above knew nothing? Did they not hear, not see, not even suspect what was happening behind the thick walls of these sullen buildings with barred windows? Could it be that Stalin knew nothing...?

Kalynka did not want to think any further. He began to feel scared. Afraid he might lose faith in a person who had long since become a demi-god for him, the embodiment of the greatest wisdom and justice.

Hadn't he sung songs glorifying Stalin?

At every holiday, amidst the circle of his friends and family he had raised his glass and, with his elated face glowing, sang with the others that song which echoed across the country:

Let's drink to the Homeland,
Let's drink to Stalin,
Let's drink and fill up again!

Hadn't he uttered this name at the front, inciting people to attack?

'For the Fatherland, for Stalin!' Kalynka yelled at the top of his voice, rising to face enemy bullets, and if a bullet or piece of shrap-

nel had killed him, 'Stalin' would have been his last word. Not the name of his mother or father, not his faithful wife, but Stalin.

So where are you now, Comrade Stalin? Where are your all-seeing eyes, where is your paternal heart, which will not dismiss even one of your aggrieved children; where are your ears which should be listening not only to songs of adoration, but also to the cries and groans of the wronged? Why don't you come to this prison, Comrade Stalin, into this damp basement to liberate these children, to restore justice, to severely punish those who flouted the laws which you recorded in golden words on the tablets of history...?

Do you hear, all-national father...?

The guard came in the morning and brought them food: the daily rations of bread and a bowl of swill each.

"There's four hundred grammes here?" Kalynka asked, weighing the glutinous bread in his hand.

"Take what you're given!" the guard bawled. "Can't you see the *dovisok*?"

The *dovisok* was a tiny piece of bread which lay pinned with a sliver of wood to each bread ration. Later Kalynka often came across the magical power of the *dovisok*. As soon as prisoners complained to the prison governor that they were being robbed, the governor always asked:

"Was there a *dovisok*?"

"Well, yeah..."

"What else do you parasites need?" the chief tugged at his cap. "What else do you *contras* want?"

And the "parasites" and *contras* grew silent.

They began to eat. Kalynka neatly broke his ration into three equal portions, but the boys did not eat their bread. They slurped the broth, their hungry eyes fixed to the black hunks of bread.

"How come you're eating without bread, boys?"

"We have it later as a snack, uncle," Mykola explained. "First we'll sip the broth and then we'll eat the bread. It lasts longer that way."

Kalynka wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. 'Poor little things! A snack...' He took two of his portions, which he had set aside for lunch and dinner, and placed them before the boys.

"What about you, uncle?"

"Eat up, boys, and get fat," Kalynka replied. "I don't need much and, anyway, black bread gives me indigestion."

After breakfast the guard came in again and ordered the boys out

for a stroll.

"Can I come along too?" Kalynka asked.

"No, you're sick."

"But it's colder in here than outside!"

"You were told you can't come, that means you can't come!" the guard became angry. And letting the boys out, he mumbled: "What ignorant people they are: you tell them one thing, and they counter with another!"

"We won't be long, uncle," Mykola comforted Kalynka. Both were already standing in the passage, barefoot, in dirty shirts and short pants, their emaciated faces green in the sullen prison light. Fedko was coughing again, his consumptive eyes shining.

"You could at least transfer the boys into a drier cell," Kalynka told the guard after he had returned from seeing the boys off.

"Not allowed."

"Why not? Can't you see one of them is seriously ill? They'll rot in here."

"Not allowed!"

The guard slammed the door angrily, but he must have felt a pang somewhere too, for he eventually appeared in the doorway again.

"Not allowed," he repeated, but now the phrase sounded quite different: this was rather an attempt at justifying himself before the prisoner, to explain something to him, as if he had lifted his cold and impregnable work mask and from under it peered the face of an already older man, criss-crossed with wrinkles, with a smoke-stained red mustache which drooped piteously.

"They're not allowed in the general cell."

"Why not?"

Disappointment and amazement appeared simultaneously on the guard's face. He wriggled his fingers, even grunted, as if unable to believe that a grown man could be standing before him and not understand such simple things.

"There are thieves there."

"So what if they're thieves? Aren't they people too?"

"People!" A contemptuous smile touched the guard's mustache, he seemed to find Kalynka's naive assertion funny. "They call themselves people. But for them we are only *frayers*. You, me, everyone who doesn't thieve..."

"So what, will they make thieves of the boys?"

The guard eyed Kalynka with even greater amazement, then spat vexedly:

"Are you really stupid or just acting...? They'll make them into their girlfriends, that's what they'll do with the boys!"

Kalynka shuddered with disgust. The guard seemed to have woken up. He entered the cell and whispered feverishly, animatedly, hastily:

"Think this is all milk and honey for me at this thrice damned job? Milk and honey?" he inquired, looking daggers at Kalynka. "Who am I to you? An animal, a butcher... But you don't give a damn that this butcher also has a living heart! It might bathe in blood a hundred times a day, but I have to remain silent. Silent and not breathe a word. Listen to the bosses and work. Do everything in silence... So how long do I remain silent? Until they imprison everyone and rot them in the prisons...? Now they've begun on the children. What is this, have children become enemies of the people now? Soon we'll be grabbing them while they're in diapers. Straight off mother's tit and into here, into this basement, into the dampness, behind bars...! You think I don't see? I see everything! I see and remain silent... There..."

Kalynka said nothing, suddenly overwhelmed by this explosion of sincerity. Closing his mouth, the guard looked suspiciously at Kalynka.

"Why are you silent? Going to snitch on me? Remember one thing – no one will believe you! Better than you have tried to dob me in! Uncle Petro knows his work, so don't you go putting your finger in his mouth...! There... Well, what are you staring at, you stinking bastard!"

He left the cell and slammed the door shut for all he was worth.

'What a strange one!' Kalynka shrugged his shoulders. He was already regretting that the confession had broken off so abruptly, but was glad at the same time, for who knew if these words had been sincere, from the heart, or merely bait, calculated to "hook" the prisoner, to open up his soul. All the same Kalynka wanted to believe that the guard was sincere.

Kalynka spent two weeks with the boys. Then the prison medical assistant appeared, took his temperature, and Kalynka was ordered off to the general cell.

Grabbing his coat, Kalynka stopped and looked back at the boys. They were sitting on their rags, pressing close to each other like two orphans, keeping their wretched eyes peeled to the kind uncle. Fedko finally broke down and cringed, turning away towards the wall, while Mykola's voice rang out:

"Why would you want to cry! We'll still see each other..."

He was barely able to hold back his tears too, this courageous Mykola, this patient young lad who didn't cry even when the interrogator twisted his ears.

"See you then," Kalynka called to the boys, believing and disbelieving his own words. "When you boys are released, don't forget to write."

Although he had little faith that the letter would reach him.

The cold autumn rain slashed Kalynka's face, but that was still better than being in the basement cell. Kalynka could barely move his weakened feet, feeling as he might after a severe illness, and was unable to avoid the puddles, splashing straight through them.

"Hurry up, you scum!" the guard hurried him up, for he was getting wet too. When Kalynka stopped and raised his face to the refreshing ribbons of rain, the guard swore angrily and pushed him in the back. Kalynka continued on obediently, the water dripping down his forehead, cheeks and beard, washing away the mustiness which had impregnated his body.

He was brought into the cell – a large government building with sullen grey walls and a single barred window. Those who had built the prison had probably been terrified lest sunlight should enter the building: they had not only cemented in enormously thick bars and painted over the window panes with grey paint, but they had also fixed some wooden shutters on the outside so that the sickly light barely filtered inside and immediately died, suffocating in the stench. Which was why an electric light burned inside day and night – the prison sun, which had greeted Kalynka with its rays on several occasions now.

The cell was filled with people. Although to say "filled" doesn't mean much. The cell was packed tight, filled to the brim with people who stirred on the concrete floor like maggots, talking, laughing, swearing, crying, moaning, living. There were no plank beds here: people sat and lay straight on the floor, spreading under themselves whatever they managed to bring along from the outside.

In the corner by the door, as set down in the regulations, stood the monumental *parasha*, the sanitary pan. The local idol here was even more repugnant than the one he had left behind in the basement cell. A foul-smelling puddle had grown around the overflowing vessel and yet people kept coming up to it, for what else could they do!

Only later did Kalynka learn that the authorities allowed the

parasha to be emptied only once a day, in the morning after breakfast. This was another method of psychological influence on the prisoners who did not want to co-operate. 'They become meeker after smelling it,' the prison authorities thought cynically, thus drawing on the prison *parasha* as one of their faithful allies.

As soon as Kalynka stepped inside, the noisy smelly cell grew silent. Dozens of pairs of eyes – sad, cheerful, sullen, derisive, curious, indifferent – shone at him.

"A new one!"

"Like hell he's a new one! Can't you see his beard's down to his belly-button."

"Hefty fellow."

"A *frayer*?"

"Which article, brother?"

"Let the man come to his senses!"

Kalynka continued standing by the door, anxiously pressing his coat to himself, when an unimaginably filthy creature, a fellow who couldn't have washed since birth, came up to him. He had such lacklustre eyes that at first Kalynka thought he was blind. But no, the creature was not blind: looking straight into Kalynka's eyes, the fellow began to rifle through his pockets.

At first Kalynka did not defend himself. He thought this creature was an official person whose duty was to search every new arrival.

"Where's the tobacco?" the creature asked, sticking its hand into Kalynka's other pocket.

"I don't smoke."

"A poor sweetheart!" The creature was already stretching a grubby hand towards his coat.

"I've only got bread there."

At the mention of bread the creature's eyes flashed greedily. Plucking out the well-wrapped daily ration with a deft movement, it unwrapped the handkerchief and sunk its teeth into the bread.

Only now did Kalynka realize that he was simply being robbed.

"I'm sorry, but this is my bread!"

The creature seemed not to hear. It munched away, wheezing, and a dreamy expression appeared on its dirty muzzle.

Then Kalynka twisted the creature's arm and retrieved the rest of his ration.

He heard a thick baritone behind his back: "Why are you attacking the youngster?"

Kalynka swung around. Behind him stood an enormous oaf, screwing up his evil eyes.

"The youngster might be hungry, he doesn't have a daddy or mummy, and you go and attack him. Give him back the bread!"

"But it's my bread!"

"Look at him, a sweetheart, and peevish too!" someone's obsequious voice reached him. "Count his teeth, Gypsy!"

The oaf lumbered closer towards Kalynka and his eyes suddenly opened wide.

"Give the bread back, you arsehole!" he hissed, baring his teeth. "Hurry up!"

Kalynka looked around helplessly. Eyes watched him from everywhere. Fear, trepidation, curiosity, even sympathy emanated from them, but nowhere did Kalynka see a decisiveness to come to his aid. Again he turned towards the oaf and, feeling his lips begin to go numb, said:

"Never!"

The oaf moved forward and struck Kalynka on the lips with a head as hard as a rock. He was aiming between Kalynka's eyes and would have floored him had Kalynka not swung his head back at the last moment. A salty taste filled his mouth, something hot dripped down his chin. Kalynka brought his palm to his broken lips, while the giant again drew closer, taking aim with his head:

"Give the bread back, you bitch!"

"Paint his eyes black, Gypsy!"

Saving himself from the inevitable blow, Kalynka pushed Gypsy away. The fellow reeled and fell, but immediately got up again. Crouching, he moved on Kalynka, his muscles flexing. 'He'll hit me in a moment,' Kalynka thought. 'He'll push me to the floor and begin kicking me.' He immediately pictured the boots which had pummeled him at his first interrogation. Clenching his teeth, Kalynka bounded forward. He did not see where his punch landed, but all his fury, all his unspent hatred was directed into that blow. Gypsy flew through the air and fell in a heap onto the floor.

Breathing heavily, Kalynka pressed his back against the door. He expected the rabble to jump to its feet and attack him.

But the prisoners weren't even contemplating attacking Kalynka. They sat stunned, no less flabbergasted than Gypsy, who continued to lie on the ground, senselessly rolling his eyes. Meanwhile the creature which had been frisking Kalynka and because of whom the

whole fracass had in fact taken place, kept backing away, its frightened eyes fixed on Kalynka.

Finally Gypsy got up. Kalynka pressed against the door even more, preparing for the next assault, but the fellow didn't even glance in his direction. Staggering, he dragged himself off into a corner and everyone shifted away in fear, making way for him.

Just then a small tattered fellow with a bluish bird-like face jumped out in front of him. Waving his thin arms about, jumping and dancing about, the little fellow shouted vindictively and resoundingly:

"Aha...! Aha...! Copped it!"

Gypsy stopped, staring at the figure jumping before him, waved an arm and the fellow tumbled to the floor to guffaws from everyone. But no sooner had Gypsy taken another step, than the fellow again began to dance about like an invincible bob-up doll and shouted straight into his face:

"Copped it...! Copped it...!"

Guffaws again filled the cell.

And so began Kalynka's association with prison life.

The cell to which Kalynka was brought contained no less than sixty prisoners, even though it was built to house only fifteen. The cell had its own laws, its own caste system, and no matter how much the prison authorities mixed up the prisoners, no matter which ingenious methods they resorted to, even an untrained eye could easily tell that an invisible, but still fairly tangible border separated one group from another. Along the wall opposite the door was the territory of the highest caste, the prison aristocracy: all the pickpockets, burglars, safe-breakers, thieves and bandits who viewed prison as their family home and who returned here after being caught red-handed on the outside. They spoke of "living" in prison and "revelling" on the outside and, as a rule, they "lived" longer than they "revelled". They called themselves "people", while the rest who fed and clothed them they derisively dubbed "sweethearts", and when a sweetheart came into prison he not only could be, but had to be picked clean and punched in the muzzle, the snout, the shnoz at every opportunity. The prison authorities knew all about this, but turned a blind eye to the "people's" cruelty towards the "sweethearts", especially if the "sweetheart" was a political detainee or a *contra*, thus making the underworld, like the *parasha*, its potential ally in the psychological battle with the recalcitrant.

As befitted the aristocracy, the thieves occupied not only the best,

but also the largest territory. They had, if one could use the term, the greatest number of square centimetres "per person", they obtained their food first and the cell leader was appointed from among them.

That invisible border dividing the world of the thieves from that of the non-thieves gave the thieves far more than half of the cell and consequently, for each political, *contra* and "sweetheart" there were so few centimetres of living space that it seemed a miracle that people managed not only to sit, but even to lie down when the order to sleep was given.

All the same, there were groups within the ranks of the non-thieves too. The politicals and *contras* composed the greatest number, of course. Then came the speculators, the embezzlers of state funds, the workers and collective farmers caught carrying out a handful of nails from their plant or a few beets from the field. There were also several policemen and village chairmen here too, but it was far easier for them than for such people as Kalynka. At least they knew they had done wrong; they were not tormented and choked by insult, the most hellish of all human torments.

From the first day Kalynka noticed an old man who sat wordlessly, oblivious to everything around him. Even during Kalynka's altercation with Gypsy he hadn't looked in their direction, sitting with his gaze fixed to the floor.

"They gave him the full bobbin!" Kalynka was told after he had settled in a little and had inquired about the fellow. "He'll stay in here till he rots away."

"What for?"

"Says he himself doesn't know. Apparently they accused him of sabotaging a military plant."

Kalynka recalled his own torture: "Did he confess to it?"

"Isn't it all the same to them!"

"But perhaps he really is not guilty!"

"My God, you're green, brother! Guilty – not guilty... If you're in here, it means you're guilty. If you hadn't been guilty, they wouldn't have arrested you. Heard that before?"

Yes, Kalynka had. He had heard it from his interrogator's lips, in answer to his fervent attempts at convincing the interrogator that he was innocent... But – the full bobbin! The entire life of that person who was sitting, oblivious to everything...!

And the next day the whole cell was in an uproar: the fellow had

committed suicide. When or how he had managed to obtain a large rusty nail no one knew: perhaps he had picked it up on his way back from the courtroom, or had found it earlier. Sometime during the night, waiting until everyone had fallen asleep, he took out the nail and began gouging at his left arm to get to the artery... Kalynka shuddered, imagining how the fellow had gouged at his arm.

All around prisoners huddled in groups, sighed and spoke in hushed voices:

"He twisted it open with the nail..."

"Not at all! He only levered it up with the nail... And then bit through it!"

"And then put his hand onto his cap so the blood wouldn't go everywhere..."

'Shut up! Shut up!' Kalynka moaned, closing his eyes.

"Look, he even tore up his shirt."

"Here, let's have a look... Brethren, there's something written here!"

"Stop crumpling it, you devil!"

Hearing about the shirt and the message on it, Kalynka again came up to the group. One of the prisoners was holding a dirty piece of fabric. And from it screamed thick reddish letters: 'May you be damned...!'

"Written in blood..."

"With his finger... Look, his finger's covered in blood..."

That day all the prisoners were sullen, nervous, angry. Even the thieves didn't play cards. They skulked about the cell, argued often, and Gypsy picked on everyone, tugged at the shirt on his chest and yelled frighteningly:

"Scum! Snakes! I'll cut 'em all up!"

He swore at the guard and was taken off to the lock-up. Kalynka heaved a sigh of relief, for he was expecting Gypsy to begin picking on him.

He sat in the middle of the cell next to the fellow with the blue bird-like face. Even yesterday, straight after the fight with Gypsy, the small fellow had raced up to him, grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him off.

"Come and join me, you'll like it next to me," he said, prancing beside Kalynka. "Come on, make room, can't you see who I've brought here. Didn't you see how we beat Gypsy up?"

Something pitiful, but at the same time comical was contained in

this small man's frail figure, in his nervous jerky movements, even his naive boasts about Gypsy. He talked ceaselessly, twirling his birdlike head in every direction as if he was extremely afraid of something, something unknown which pursued him endlessly, ready to pounce the moment he stopped talking.

"Oh! It will be fine here for you! It will be fine!" the fellow said, pointing to a free spot where even one person would have found it a tight squeeze. "It'll be fine here. These kind people will move a little and we'll all be fine."

He raised his sad eyes up to Kalynka, eager to be of service to his new acquaintance who had beaten up "that Gypsy", and tugged at his sleeve:

"Go on, sit down! Don't worry, no one will touch you here. There are only our people here."

The prisoners squashed up and there really was room for two.

"Did you hear when the amnesty is going to be?" the small fellow asked, looking hopefully into Kalynka's eyes.

By the way everyone around him froze, Kalynka realized this was no empty question, not just something to make conversation. And sincerely regretting that he hadn't been interested in this when he was on the outside, Kalynka replied guiltily:

"No... Unfortunately not."

"They say Stalin himself ordered that everyone's case be investigated."

"And that everyone would be sentenced only nominally... You didn't hear anything?"

"No," Kalynka replied and felt that by denying any knowledge he was doing something evil.

"When Stalin embarks on something, he'll bring it to a conclusion."

"Stalin is like a father: at times he gets angry, at times he takes pity... If he orders Kalinin to issue a decree, Kalinin will do it..."

"That's right, wait for the decree, you headless sheep!" a tall young fellow with bright angry eyes called out derisively. "But you don't want to go off to Siberia!"

Everyone jumped on him. They swore at him with such ferocity, as if it depended on him whether an amnesty was declared or not. The young man, however, was indifferent to the insults heaped upon him and sat down beside Kalynka. He pulled out a tiny piece of newsprint and proceeded to roll a cigarette.

"Tell me...! Tell me...! How do you know there won't be an amnes-

ty?" the small fellow who had brought Kalynka here wrangled with the smoker.

The fellow did not answer for a long time. He licked the cigarette, lit it, inhaled the smoke and closed his eyes with obvious delight. Carefully, as if regretting it, he exhaled the smoke from his beautifully outlined mouth and said, looking up at the ceiling:

"I found out from Comrade Stalin." And suddenly he struck the small fellow's head with his finger. "Calm down, Yasha, you'll know everything soon enough, you'll be dead soon."

Yasha seemed only to be waiting for the fillip. Placated, he sat down beside Kalynka and said out loud: "Oh!" All this looked so funny that everyone around them burst into guffaws.

"Ah, they're always like that," Yasha complained, although he took no offence. 'Laughing? Then laugh to your heart's desire!' his expression seemed to say. 'No one's yet died from laughter.' "And what article are you in for?" he asked Kalynka.

"Fifty-four."

"Oh-oh-oh!" Yasha rocked back and forth. "Oh-oh-oh, how bad!"

"Enough of your cawing!" the young fellow broke him off sharply.

"It's all right for you to talk like that, Actor, you're used to it, but he's just come from the outside," Yasha disagreed piteously.

"And what are you in for?" Kalynka inquired in turn.

"Me...? Ha, what for...? For a letter!"

"A letter?"

"Let it be as you said, in your opinion, but in my opinion it is for a letter."

"How can you be put away for a letter?"

"Everything's possible in our country... Because I didn't enunciate one little letter, they put me away... Why are you looking at me like that...? What, don't you know there's a city called Staling'ad...?" Yasha burred his r's badly. "That's exactly what I said at one of our political information classes. And someone with long ears went and wrote that I had called Stalin a *gad*, a snake. What's it to them, you think they begrudge the paper? They write something, and the interrogator writes something, and meanwhile Yasha's doing time... Because of one tiny letter..."

"What do you think, how much will I get?" Yasha asked after a while, looking anxiously into Kalynka's eyes. "People say I won't get less than ten years."

"How about swapping?" the young fellow suggested. He had

finished smoking his cigarette and now sat with his long arms folded across his sharp knees. "I'll give you twenty-five and you give me your ten."

"Phooey, Actor, quit joking!" Yasha exclaimed and gestured with his hands as if he was pushing aside the proffered years. "What do I need a twenty-fiver for? Keep it to yourself, thank you very much!"

And again those around them burst out laughing. As if they weren't in jail. Kalynka was terrified. Terrified that he too would become so used to incarceration. 'Twenty-five years!' Kalynka thought about the young fellow. 'And he can still joke about it...!'

At night, after everyone had gone to sleep, Kalynka asked the young fellow in a whisper:

"Is Actor your surname?"

The fellow turned his oblong face covered in short stubble and also answered in a whisper:

"No, that's my nickname. My real name is Taras Valko."

"So why do they call you Actor?"

"Because I am an actor. Or rather, was one."

They lay on Valko's coat, covered with Kalynka's trenchcoat, both feeling as if they had known each other for a long time.

"Have you heard of the play *Stolen Happiness*?" Valko asked. "It's by Ivan Franko."

"Yes," Kalynka couldn't help smiling at such a naive question. But Valko seemed not to notice the smile. His face was sad. Two bitter wrinkles cut across his forehead.

"Well, everything began with that play... Why did I have to turn up to the discussion of the premiere?! After all, a girl was expecting me that evening. And what a girl! But some devil seemed to push me to attend: you must go, they can't do without you! And so I went, much to my misfortune..."

"You worked in the theatre then?"

"Where else... Only bit parts, it was my first year. I returned from the war and went into theatre. I longed for the actor's life. The pay was low, the prices high: the damned grannies sat at the market and skinned you alive just for bagels. Still, life wasn't too bad: hungry, but merry. I slept in the wings, because there was nowhere to stay at first..."

Valko closed his eyes, and his face became dreamy and kind.

"Know what I miss most?" he again opened his eyes and they emanated such longing that Kalynka's heart melted. "When I think

of my twenty-five year sentence, I don't feel so sorry about my life so much as I do about the fact that I'll never be able to go out on stage again..."

"Why not, you're still young," Kalynka tried to reassure him, but Valko only pulled a wry face.

"In twenty-five years time...? That's just it... Well, enough of this... So I came along to the discussion, sat down in the front row and listened. And not like the older ones: some dozed, others pretended to be dozing – after all, they were the Olympian gods! No, my ears were burning, I wanted to question every word, to add something intelligent of my own. In the end I couldn't stop myself and asked to take the floor. And immediately began about my own part. 'By what right,' I asked, 'are we falsifying the great classic of Ukrainian literature, Ivan Franko? Who gave us the right to alter his immortal play, which has been staged thousands of times before us and will continue to be staged thousands of times after us?' 'Allow me,' the producer interjected. 'We received an appropriate direction regarding this. From the powers that be.' I should have shut up at this point. Bitten my tongue. But no, I went and blurted out: 'Even if the direction had come from Comrade Stalin himself, we still don't have the right to do this!'

"When I made that reference to Stalin, everyone froze. They sat there, afraid to look at one another, holding their breath. You could even hear a fly buzzing inside an upturned tumbler. And everyone's gaze seemed to be fixed on it.

"I was taken away that night. Pulled out of the wings. Taken away in a buggy, like some count... The rest is common knowledge: interrogation after interrogation, until my feet gave out... Did they illuminate you with the quartz lamp too...?"

"Yes," Kalynka affirmed and felt a stab of pain in his eyes.

"A devilish trick. I nearly went blind. When I announced in court how I had been "cured", the judge refused to believe me: 'Stop slandering our organs!' As they say here, I got the full bobbin. And they sent me off to Siberia...!"

"So how come you're here again?"

"I escaped. Past Kharkiv the thieves sawed through the train car floor and began to jump out, so I tried my luck too..."

"You weren't scared?"

"If it hadn't been for the twenty-five years, I wouldn't have jumped. The sleepers flashed past, the wheels clattered away and

my legs were like poles, I had to be careful they didn't bounce onto the tracks... But thanks to some thief – he pushed me and I flew out..."

"Where did they catch you?"

"At home. Soon as I showed up, they hauled me in. They were waiting for me, knowing that wherever I wandered, I wouldn't avoid my own home... And now they're going to try me again..."

"Again?"

"Well, you don't expect them to pardon me...! However no court frightens me now. What can they do, give me another three years for escape? So what? I'm like a mother with lots of children – one or two children more, it's all the same to me... And what did they rake you in for?" Valko turned to face Kalynka.

Kalynka began to tell his story. He spoke softly, so as not to trouble the sleeping prisoners, and he felt relieved, as if Valko had taken onto his shoulders part of the burden which was suffocating him.

They remained silent, lying there and staring at the prison light which glowed up near the ceiling like the eye of some ever-vigilant beast.

"Yeah," Valko was the first to break the silence and rubbed his forehead. "What do you think, does Stalin know about all this nastiness?"

Kalynka only shrugged.

"That's what I reckon... When I think how much evil they've perpetrated, I'm horrified. Did our parents start the revolution for this? And shed their blood during the civil war?"

Kalynka again said nothing. It was hard, extremely hard for him to find an answer. What did he know? Except perhaps that he too, like Taras and all these other people, was rotting away in prison for no reason at all, sentenced to years of incarceration. He did know, however, that it was better to be put in for a criminal offence than for politics. Even though the politics most often manifested itself as an indiscreet word, some mindless phrase like that uttered by Taras Valko... 'An enemy of the people,' Kalynka thought bitterly, 'If the enemy does not yield, then he must be destroyed.' He recalled Gorky's famous phrase, which never left the pages of the press and was borne on the airwaves each day. 'A higher embodiment of proletariat humanism. Unless I confess to something I never did, I must be destroyed too? Where's the justice in this world?'

Kalynka looked around helplessly. But Taras was already asleep.

So was Yasha, his sharp-nosed face buried in his shoulder, his head covered with his arm, as if he was afraid someone might try to hit him while he was asleep. The whole cell was asleep; all these people, some innocent, some guilty, deprived of freedom and daylight, and the most priceless thing in the world: human trust.

Kalynka fell asleep, not having finished thinking through any of his thoughts.

And the morning woke him with agitated voices: that fellow had suicided by biting through his artery. He was soon carried out, then Gypsy was taken away to the lock-up, and the monotonous prison day began, grey and faded, pressed in by bars and the heavy ironclad door. The prisoners, having woken and had breakfast, felt even more hungry after that pitiful meal. For weeks on end they went about unwashed, unshaven, unkempt, huddling in separate groups, talking, talking, talking – about anything in the world just to forget, if only for a minute, where they were, what had happened to them and what the future held in store.

They liked to talk about dreams most of all. Dreams, it seemed, visited prison most willingly; never had Kalynka heard about so many dreams and nowhere had he come across such an almost pious attitude toward dreams. The men recalled the smallest details and often, as they interpreted a dream, they would argue heatedly, exchanging insults, sometimes even blows.

"I dreamt of the moon, good people," said an old man from a collective farm, who had been imprisoned because at the start of the war, seeing a column of German tanks for the first time, he had crossed himself and told his neighbour: 'Look how many of them are coming! Our lot will never manage to overcome them!' These words might have been forgotten had the old man, who had become a brigade-leader after the war, not caught his neighbour stealing a sack of collective-farm grain. 'Just wait, you old carrion, you'll remember me yet!' the neighbour threatened as he left the collective-farm offices, where he had been fined twenty days' pay. He never spoke truer words! "And the moon was so nice and full, so clear..."

"This means you'll get ten years, old man," he was told. "The moon means ten, the sun – twenty-five."

"Have mercy, ten years for what? For what, good people?" the old man kept asking and his large sinewy hands, which had worked hard during his long life, trembled helplessly.

"For wagging your tongue like that radio, old man," they lectured him. "If you've got a long tongue in these times, father, then swallow it until it reaches down into your arsehole. You hopped onto the fence and crowed like a rooster. So now you've got your tenner."

"But I said only one word!" the old man almost wept. "May disastrous misfortune strike him!"

"Yeah, everyone's become literate now," someone commented. "There are authors now who'll write things about you which you never even dreamt or imagined. Give them a free hand and they'll pack everyone off to prison!"

"So, brethren, are there still many people on the outside?" asked a man who was as thin as death, with only a jersey covering his naked skin: he had lost the rest of his clothing playing cards with the thieves.

"Why, d'you want to count them?"

"Well, no," he smiled an exhausted faded smile. "It's just that at times it seems there are no more people left there on the outside. Last night, for instance, I dreamt that across our whole country there were no apartment blocks, only prisons. I walked along the streets, but they were deserted. Except for the guards strolling about."

"Phew! Trust the parasite to dream of something like that!" people about him spat in fear and anger. "You should sleep longer, scum! Till the end of your life!"

"What for, brethren?" the wretch asked in surprise, but this only further upset the nervous, exhausted men.

"Get the hell out of here, before someone thumps you one!"

"Cawing away..."

"See what the scum's dreaming about!"

"Why victimize the fellow?" Valko asked derisively. "Don't worry, they won't throw everyone behind bars. They have a brain too: they know there won't be any work for them then."

But the prisoners did not calm down for a long time.

Then Yasha interjected. He simply couldn't stand people arguing.

"Listen...! Go on, listen to my dream!" he addressed one, then another prisoner, grabbing them by the sleeve or the flap of their jacket. "No, just listen to me...! I dreamt that the prison governor came along and told us all: 'Know what, you're all free now. So why, I ask you, are you sitting about here and bickering, if you're free? Don't you want to leave here? So grab your rags and out into the street, before I change my mind.' And so we snatched up our rags and left..."

Yasha was not allowed to finish – guffaws erupted all around.

"Oh, Yasha...! Oh, what a trickster...!"

"You're lying, Yasha, aren't you? Come on, admit it!"

A sly sweet smile broke through on Yasha's sharp-nosed face. He surveyed everyone with a kind look and laughed softly:

"Well and what if I lied, so what? It's not a sin to tell a lie to nice people like you."

"Brethren, let's dunk Yasha in the *parasha*!" someone called out. With guffaws the whole cell grabbed Yasha by the arms and legs, and carried him off to the *parasha*. Yasha fought them off, squealing, but his weak voice became lost in the general hubbub.

"Are they really going to stick him into the *parasha*?" Kalynka asked in horror.

"Come on!" Valko reassured him. "They'll only let him have a good whiff... If it wasn't for Yasha, there'd be no entertainment!"

He laughed too, watching the merry interlude, and only now could one see how young he still was.

"I had a dream too," he said and his bright eyes became dreamily glazed. "I was standing on the corner waiting for that girl... Eh...!"

Taras became silent, his face contorted by a painful grimace.

"I'm going to escape," he continued in another tone, now hollow and unkind. "If only they took me out of this hole – that'd be the last they'd see of me!"

"They could kill you!"

"What's it to me?" Taras replied and his eyes brightened insolently. "Me – afraid of death? Life is a penny, all the same, and fate is thieving! I just want to take one breath of freedom..."

Kalynka looked compassionately at Taras. He didn't tell anyone his own dreams – not because he had none. Each night he was visited, tortured, tormented by one and the same dream: he dreamt about food. The most diverse food in the world. And each time Kalynka missed out on eating his fill, even merely tasting the food. He always took so long to wash his hands, splash his face, clean his teeth, putting off that blissful moment when he could pick up a fork or spoon, that each time he was woken before he had managed to have a bite to eat. In despair Kalynka would close his eyes, but he saw nothing apart from the empty hungry darkness. He was extremely hungry. Forever hungry, hungry even after he had put aside his licked-dry bowl of potato broth, after he had sucked on the last crumb of the miserable prison ration of daily bread, weighed short, pilfered, but

with the obligatory *dovisok* attached – this shadowy symbol of honesty.

"Was there a *dovisok*?"

"Well yeah..."

"What else do you scum want...? What else do you parasites need...? Gorge yourselves, you deadshits, on what you're given and say thank you! Your rations have long been waiting for you in the next world, but you're still rotting here!"

And the "scum", the "parasites" and the "deadshits" subserviently took their underweighed ration with the *dovisok* after their unsuccessful attempt at protesting and gorged, gobbled, gulped and guzzled with sixty eternally hungry mouths.

Kalynka examined his arms, until recently so muscular and strong, but now looking more like bones stretched with something which was a cross between old crumpled paper and goose skin. He felt his sharp bony jaws, ran his paper-dry palm across his thin neck, sadly shaking his head. He wondered how long they would keep him here? Why weren't they summoning him for interrogation – if only they would hurry up and finish! Perhaps they had simply forgotten about him? Shoved his file into some drawer to lie there gathering dust until his death.

"You should confess, brother," they advised him in the cell. "Own up, brother, or else you'll rot to death in here. If they send you to a camp, at least there'll be a fresh breeze there."

"But I'm innocent!"

"Eh, innocent! They spit on your innocence from the highest tower! At least that way you'll save your health a little... Or do you think you won't need it there in the camps? Better than bending to the ground there, brother..."

This was how those who had tasted prison life on many an occasion were persuading Kalynka. But some insuperable obstinacy dwelt inside him, so firmly entrenched that it could not be poisoned by hunger, nor torment, nor this prison life. An ancient, incorrigible stubbornness inherited from some distant ancestor. A stubbornness which gave his ancestors the power and strength to burn in fires, to hang on hooks, to be tortured for twenty-five years in the tsarist army – and yet still not to lose their insolence. '...And with the hetman's permission they sentenced him to be burned alive in the public view... They bound him with iron chains to a tree trunk, nailed down his hands and, raising him even higher, so that the Cossack could be

seen from everywhere, began to light a fire under the tree. But Taras did not look at the fire, he wasn't thinking about the flames which were about to consume him...'

Kalynka languished for over two months in the cell. No one summoned him, as if they had indeed forgotten about him. Fresh prisoners were brought in, those he knew were taken away, almost the entire population of the cell had changed, but Kalynka still remained and some began to eye him askance, and the ominous word "hen" was mentioned, the name given to informers planted by the prison authorities. The only thing which saved Kalynka was that he wasn't summoned anywhere.

In this time the collective-farm grandpa, Taras Valko and Yasha had left the cell.

Yasha got ten years. In parting he looked at Kalynka with his big eyes, filled with surprise and sorrow:

"You know, they gave me those ten years after all." As if Kalynka had expected something else. He even attempted a smile, but his lips only twitched and broke up painfully.

Yasha left and immediately the cell became more dismal.

The old man received eight years.

"Your moon had a chink in it, grandpa," he was told. "You didn't look closely enough."

The old man looked about, devastated, blinking his faded lashes in bewilderment.

"Why eight years, good people?"

Everyone felt uneasy.

"Yeah, they really pasted it on the old man's beard."

"He'll never live it down."

However the cell was truly astonished when Valko returned from his trial. From the way he entered the cell, the way he threw his coat onto the floor, the prisoners realized something unusual had happened. Valko's cheeks were red with anger, his eyes were so furious that everyone moved away from him.

"You didn't get the full five, did you?" they asked fearfully.

Valko turned around, as if on hinges and laughed dryly and viciously:

"Five...? Don't want ten, do you?"

Someone whistled in astonishment, someone swore, while Taras loudly heaped mother oaths on the judges and Stalin, until someone hissed fearfully at him:

"Shush, or the guards will hear you."

"What have I got to lose?" Valko became even more furious. "What more can they give me...? Another ten...? Let them go ahead, fuck 'em, and give me two hundred, even a thousand years: I'll do time until the bars rust away, until all the jails rot...! Go on, heap it on, Valko's got broad shoulders, he'll carry it through, he'll survive, he'll still live to see your feathers flying...!"

Once Valko had settled down a little, Kalynka asked compassionately:

"Why did they give you ten years?"

"For sabotage."

"?"

"You don't believe me...? I couldn't have imagined it either until I heard the sentence. I asked the judge for what sabotage they were sentencing me, when I should be tried for attempted escape? And the bloody sonofabitch explains to me: 'You've been sentenced for sabotaging the government's efforts at your re-education...'

"And now leave me in peace, for God's sake, let me be on my own!" Taras pleaded. He lay motionless on his crumpled coat on the ground, his head between his hands. And everyone became silent in the cell, trying not to upset Valko, who now provoked a kind of fearful respect, as if he were already dead.

After Valko had left Kalynka felt orphaned. He couldn't make friends with any of the new arrivals, especially since most of them avoided him, suspecting him of being a stoolie. A strange apathy overcame Kalynka, killing his thoughts. He lay silently or sat with his arms around his knees, resting his chin on his hands. When someone addressed him, Kalynka unwillingly lifted his glazed eyes and replied in a featureless voice: a word or two and he became silent again, hanging his head again. Time was like a sticky dark mass which oozed past him and Kalynka didn't have the strength to even get out onto its muddy surface. He fell like an autumn leaf, silently and noiselessly, into the stagnant turbid water, where even the sun was afraid to look, and knowing that on the silty bottom the inevitable end awaited him, he thought indifferently: 'Let it be so.'

Only twice did he spring to life a little.

The first time was when a guard gave them some newspaper for a smoke. Even though the newspaper was Soviet it was not handed to the prisoners officially, but reached them tenth-hand, with such stealth and caution, as if this sullen prison was a sovereign state with

quite different non-Soviet laws, one in which the suspicious rulers feared the Soviet press like fire. Therefore the guard gave them the newspaper neatly torn up into tiny papers, so that the prisoners could not read anything.

It was here that the intricate tedious work began, similar to the solution of a complicated jigsaw puzzle, a job which could only be completed inside a prison: for here time was a worthless commodity.

A place was vacated in the middle of the cell and each prisoner received one or two pieces of paper.

They began with the first page. First they put together the headline, then set about the text, piecing it scrap by scrap, until a miracle occurred: the whole page, torn up, quartered, but alive, lay on the floor.

They read that page all day long, from line to line, from word to word, without missing a single letter, and even the most ardent smokers would not have dared ask for even a single paper for a smoke.

The following day the page was just as patiently (scrap by scrap) turned over and read on the other side.

The third and fourth pages were read the same way.

And only after they had learned everything almost by heart, did they begin to smoke.

They smoked and argued over one and the same thing: when the amnesty would be announced.

"I'll tell you what, brethren, they'll soon be letting out all the innocent ones," one of the optimists spouted. He was listened to with special attention and he was believed like no one else on earth. "After all, what did Molotov say at the General Assembly? That our system is the most humane in the world... Whether you like it or not now, you have to free the birds...!"

The second time Kalynka again became interested in life was when a search, or a "shmon" in prison slang, was conducted in the cell.

One day the thieves found a small piece of thin galvanized iron while they were emptying the *parasha*. In the cell the piece was straightened out and rubbed against the cement for a long time until it became as sharp as a razor, and they set about shaving. The skin crackled, blood poured from the scratches, but the prisoners took no notice: the small piece of metal reminded them of freedom and they were glad, even if only for a minute, to become engrossed in the illusion of being free.

Having shaved as best they could, the prisoners seemed to have been reborn. Laughter erupted everywhere, warm heartfelt words sounded where, until recently, there had been mother oaths and insults. Illuminated by the shaven faces, gaunt and exhausted though they were, the cell seemed to grow wider, become higher, brighter, more spacious. 'How little is needed to make a person happy!' Kalynka thought, studying his incarcerated comrades. He too had shaved and, rubbing his smooth chin with his hand, felt a strange lightness, as if together with his bushy beard he had shed a good half of that despair which kept swaddling him more and more.

When the guard opened the door at lunchtime and the whole cell greeted him with glowing freshly-shaven faces, he was awestruck. And the cell burst into such irrepressible guffaws, that even the electric lamp shone more brightly. The guard bolted outside and galloped down the passage.

It was then that Kalynka first heard that unfamiliar word "shmon".

The "shmon" began this way: the door opened with a clatter and the governor of the prison burst into the cell at the head of a group of enormous jailers, wielding thick pieces of cable. In contrast to his subordinates he was extremely merry; the cheerfulness splashed out of him, breezing from his well-fed figure, streaming from his restless changing eyes.

"Ah, you lovable scum," he sang out softly, looking around the cell with cheerful eyes. "Opened up a barber's shop, have we?"

The "lovable scum" swallowed hard in silence: the governor stank of undiluted alcohol, fried egg and sausage.

"Silent, are we?" the governor asked in surprise. "Why are you silent? Maybe your governor wants to have a shave as well... Let me have the razor, boys, I'll scrape myself a bit too."

The prisoners stared at the governor's outstretched hand and remained silent, as if bewitched.

"Have you forgotten where you put it?" the governor continued questioning them. "Perhaps you poor fellows scraped away not only your beards, but also the last crumbs of brain matter from inside your skulls? So perhaps you need a little help...? Come on boys, bring these barbers out into the passage for a minute!" And the giant oafs began to grab prisoners and toss them into the passage, and if anyone tried to resist the cable would immediately whistle through the air.

Swearing, wails, groans, screams – everything became mixed into one.

Finally the cell emptied. And then the "shmon" began. The guards crawled about the floor, sniffing in every single corner, peering into every crack, and then, letting the prisoners back in one by one, expertly fingered every fold of their clothing, but they still failed to find the razor.

"So you won't return the razor? Begrudging your governor a razor? Want him to go about unshaven?"

The prisoners kept quiet, as if damned into silence. And for the first time the borders between the "people" and the *frayers* disappeared. A common bond, something insolently obstinate united them. And the governor, who had run prisons for many a year, immediately realized that he would get nothing out of anyone.

"All right then, sit a while and think about it. And so that you find it easier to think, I won't give you any lunch... Nor dinner... Nor breakfast tomorrow... Think about it, lovable scum..."

And the "lovable scum" did just that. They tried not to look at their empty bowls, avoided looking at the *parasha*, to the bottom of which the razor was so deftly fixed.

They said nothing in the evening and remained silent in the morning, even though the empty bowls seemed to scream to be filled with broth, with that bitter, rusty coloured "swill", steeped on potato peelings, that "prison delight", from which even a good master's dog would have turned away in disgust, but which now seemed to all these "lovable scum" to be the best food in the world, the most delicious, most desired dish, the quintessence of all culinary delights, containing those necessary calories which supported the burning of that fickle flame called life.

And there was the bread too. Not some sumptuous roll or round loaf, not that black fragrant bread, not some browned pretzel, not any of those mythical creations out of wheat or rye flour meant only for the gods, but glutinous bread which stuck to the teeth, heavy as pig-iron, black as a jailer's conscience, a prison ration of bread with the obligatory *dovisok* attached with a sliver of wood. Of what value were the sumptuous roll or browned loaf, which spent their entire pampered life on the outside... What were they worth alongside prison bread, moulded, it seemed, from the earth itself, leavened with despair, kneaded with the suffering of the imprisoned! Did they know, those white ladies pampered in light high ovens, how hands can tremble as they picked up a piece of glutinous, clay-like bread? Were they ever eaten with such care, so that the smallest crumb did

not fall to the ground? Or in such small pieces, to make it last as long as possible, to be sucked and relished like sugar? Had anyone dared lie beside a dead comrade for one night, and a second, and a third for those white breads, replying at roll-call that their comrade was ill, that he couldn't get up to collect his ration – here, allow me take it to him? Had anyone dared to conceal the death of a person for the sake of a round bread, no matter how tall and sumptuous it was? But this was done for the sake of prison rations...

How did that silent battle between the prison governor and the prisoners finish? Did the prisoners give in and return the razor to him? Did the governor give in and withdraw his order? Did both sides dig their heels in to the death, the bowls becoming deeply covered in dust? Kalynka never did find out. For the next day he was led off to be interrogated.

"Kalynka, step outside!" the guard called out angrily a second time, amazed that no one had answered.

Only then did Kalynka get to his feet.

"Take your things too," the guard said sullenly. "Come on, make it more lively!"

And he led him out into the yard, where a Black Maria was already waiting for Kalynka, its motor running.

And once more Kalynka sat on a stool before a bare desk. It seemed to him that this very room had been transferred from the capital to the province, but this time there was a hunched-up lieutenant with a morose, unfriendly face behind the desk, instead of a captain.

"Surname...? Name...? Patronymic...?"

All this was entered into the report, neatly and meticulously, for it was enough to make even one mistake for the whole thing to be rewritten.

"Did you spend time on occupied territory...?" the interrogator looked up and asked angrily: "How do you write "occupied", with two c's or two p's?"

"With two c's and one p."

The interrogator assiduously penned in the word, then asked again:

"And how do you write "territory"?"

"With two r's."

"Ah-hum..."

He bent over and diligently creaked away with his pen, looking very

much like a pupil taking dictation.

"And now talk," the interrogator suggested, finally tearing himself away from the paper.

"What is there to talk about?"

"How you engaged in anti-Soviet agitation on occupied ter...ritory."

This was something new for Kalynka. He wanted to ask how things were with the previous accusation, but learning from bitter experience, he stopped himself.

"Why are you silent?"

"What can I tell you," Kalynka replied. "I spent time in occupied territory, but I did not engage in anti-Soviet agitation."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all."

"What do you take us for here?" the lieutenant asked angrily. "Do you think that just because you finished all kinds of institutes, we'll believe you just like that? You think we don't know that you conducted anti-Soviet agitation?"

"I did not engage in anti-Soviet agitation."

"Did you teach in school?"

"I did."

"And was there a portrait of Hitler hanging in the classroom?"

"No."

"Aha, no portrait... But there was a fascist swastika on the school stamp?"

"No."

"That's according to you. But according to us there was. Want me to show you?"

"Please do," Kalynka said, even though he was beginning to have doubts: perhaps that damned stamp really did have a swastika?

But for some reason the interrogator did not show him the stamp. Instead he got to his feet and said:

"Well, you sit here and think about it... Recall how you engaged in agitation against the Soviet regime."

And he left the room.

This wasn't the first time Kalynka was left on his own. He looked through the open door and wondered whether he would be sent back to prison after the interrogation or tortured again with the light. For some reason he dreaded that light more than anything else. Perhaps because he sensed that a few more "seances" like that and he would become completely blind. So as not to be tormented by this, he

forced himself to think about his wife. His wife and his child. A child born without him, because of whom he stubbornly kept his lips sealed when the interrogators pressured him into signing those false testimonies.

"It'll be better for you," they cajoled him. "If you sign, you'll get ten years, go off to the camps, and there you'll come under the amnesty before long. But if you resist, we'll make sure that you rot in the prisons!"

The lieutenant would repeat these same words: Kalynka knew this for certain, just as he knew that he would die before he signed the false testimony.

"Made up your mind?" the interrogator asked, having returned to the office.

Kalynka shook his head.

Towards morning he was led away to one of the cells in the bowels of the building. And the next day the interrogator went off to the village where Kalynka had taught during the occupation.

At first it seemed to the lieutenant that he was dogged by failure. The old teacher who had worked with Kalynka said that Hitler's portrait had not hung in the school. Then he found an old document with a stamp from that time and it had no swastika. The teacher also added that Kalynka often spoke against the fascists, that after having taught there for two months he left the village to make his way to the front.

"Are you defending him?" the interrogator screwed up his unkind eyes. "Defending an enemy of the people?"

"Young man!" the teacher took offence."I've lived for seventy-five years in this world and have never had cause to lie yet. And all the more so now, with one foot already in the grave. I'll tell you one more time – someone like Kalynka was a true Soviet man."

Leaving in peace the old fool, who seemed to have no idea what fire he was playing with, the interrogator set about Kalynka's former pupils.

"How did your teacher greet you when he entered the class? Heil Hitler?"

"He never said that."

"What did he say then? Perhaps, long live Stalin?"

"He said good-day."

"Aha, good-day. So then you yelled "heil Hitler" at him?"

"No, we didn't."

"What did you do then?"

"We learnt."

"Learnt? Learnt how to serve the fascists?"

"That we didn't learn."

"What then?"

"He taught us literature."

"Literature...? Well, and what literature did you learn there? Which fascist writers?"

"We studied Taras Shevchenko."

"Well, and which of his works did you study?"

"*Kateryna*."

"Kateryna? What Kateryna was that then?"

"*Kateryna*, the epic poem!"

"Epic poem? And what exactly did you study in that poem? Come on, who can remember? You? Go on!"

"Oh black-browed maidens, fall in love,
But not with Muscovites,
For Muscovites are foreign folk,
They'll mistreat you badly..."

The interrogator was overcome with the joy of a hunter who had finally picked up the scent. Now he had only to surround the prey with flags and to cock his guns.

"Sign. Right here. Everyone sign please!"

So, Kalynka had forced the children to learn *Kateryna*. Why had he chosen this particular poem? He had done this to denigrate the great Russian people, referring to them as Muscovites, agitating against the friendship of peoples. And what was this, if not bourgeois nationalism, subservience to the fascists! Even a blind man could see whom Kalynka incited them to love during the occupation...!

Now, when he had such a testimony, it would be easy to bring the case to a close. And the day came when a guard appeared in the cell door and commanded loudly:

"Kalynka, off to court!"

As a former soldier, Kalynka was tried by a tribunal. The prisoners to be tried awaited their turn in an enormous room with two long benches, so well-worn that they shone. There was no window, only the immutable yellow light up against the ceiling. There wasn't enough room for everyone on the benches, so many of the prisoners sat on the floor, filled with nervous anticipation of the door opening at any moment and a voice calling out:

"Matiokha!"
"Zasiadko!"
"Kalynka!"

And Matiokha-Zasiadko-Kalynka would jump to his feet, reply with a muffled: "Here!" and pass through the door, to return some ten to fifteen minutes later. And in answer to the question: "How much?" he would reply in a devastated voice: "Ten... Fifteen... Twenty..." Sometimes even "the full twenty-five". For in sentencing people to captivity, the members of the tribunal handed out the years so generously, that if it depended on them, humanity would have become immortal.

Kalynka waited his turn until evening. At first he stood, then he sat on the floor, and later he found a spot on a bench. And the longer he sat, the greater was the hopelessness inside him.

Finally an indifferent voice called out his surname. Kalynka rose and entered the room where the judges were already expecting him.

One of them was already getting on in years; the other two were quite young. The older fellow had the shoulder-straps of a major, the younger ones, of lieutenants. The old fellow's bald patch gleamed, while the young ones had mops of shiny hair. And yet the three somehow very much resembled one another, as if they had sprouted from the one body which was concealed by the red material covering the table. There was something very familiar in their faces, and only after a while did Kalynka grasp what made them look so similar. Indifference. Indifference towards the accused and the work they were performing. They were completely indifferent, these judges, who worked twelve to fourteen hours every day, operating the insatiable judicial machinery, which ground the prisoners between its merciless millstones. Each day dozens, hundreds of faceless people flashed past them, and hundreds of hopes, entreaties, insults and despairs disappeared without trace. The judges only looked drearily at the mountain of files which slowly melted away, only springing to life when one or two files remained, when that blissful moment arrived when they could leave this odious place, step outside where night had already fallen, reach home and collapse into bed.

In a colourless voice the major asked Kalynka his surname, name and patronymic, the year and month of his birth. Then he informed him according to which article he was being tried and asked him what he had to say in his defence. And while Kalynka spoke, the

judge nodded his head. It seemed to Kalynka that the major was listening to him intently and even agreeing with him. But the major was simply dozing. He had learned to sleep with open eyes, nodding his head, something which his junior colleagues had not yet mastered and therefore looked far more exhausted than the major.

"That all?" the major woke up after Kalynka's voice had stopped booming.

"I've said everything."

The major told Kalynka to sit down. Then he asked his junior colleagues if they had any questions for the accused, which they did not.

"The court is adjourning to deliberate," the major announced, getting up.

The judges disappeared behind a narrow door which led into another quite tiny room. Kalynka sat down, smoothing the crumpled pants on his knees with his sweaty palms. The room was filled with silence. Even the court secretary froze, throwing himself back in his chair and closing his eyes. Meanwhile Kalynka's gaze was fixed on the door behind which the judges had disappeared.

His fate was being decided there now. Looking through his case once more, the judges were probably weighing all the pros and cons. Perhaps they were even arguing, and Kalynka sincerely believed that the judges were not arguing about how many years he should get, but whether he should be tried at all. For they had heard him out so attentively, especially the major, who continually nodded his head.

However the judges forgot all about him as soon as they entered the tiny room, as they had forgotten about hundreds of other prisoners. Everything had already been decided and a sentence had already been penned into the file held by the major. They came in here only to preserve the motions of justice and to take a small break.

The major stood by the window and looked out into the street at a boy and girl who were playing by sending paper boats down a small stream. He was thinking about his youngest son, his little pet. He dreamt how he would soon go home, throw off his tight smoke-steeped jacket, wash and sit down at the table, and how his son would climb up onto his knees, panting. His face immediately softened, lit up with a smile.

As soon as they entered the room, both of the lieutenants lit up and one of them asked the other if he would be free by eight that day.

"Don't even dream of getting out before ten," the other told him.

"In a hurry to go somewhere?"

"It's my wife's name day today," the first one said and he looked so unhappy, that the other fellow consoled him:

"Yeah, I can't say I envy you."

Meanwhile the major tore himself away from the window and took out his pocket watch.

"It's time," he said and his face took on its habitual solemn and stern expression. Tugging their jerseys smooth, the lieutenants followed the major out.

"Rise!" the secretary ordered, and Kalynka jumped to his feet and heard out the sentence standing up: ten years of imprisonment.

Kalynka was taken to his cell straight from the courtroom.

Everything was silent, as if in a grave. Drops of water were falling somewhere, as if counting the time Kalynka would have to do; the dampness of the underground cell slowly entered his body and never before had Kalynka felt so alone, so removed from life.

And in the morning he would again be shoved into a Black Maria and returned first to the prison, and then sent off to the camp.

Kalynka had been lucky, all the same: had he received more than ten years he would have gone off to the Far North, but as it was he found himself in the local camp, whose inmates were rebuilding an enormous dairy plant, built by the Belgians back in the early thirties.

Passengers passing over this spot in aeroplanes in 1947 noticed a long rectangle surrounded by barbed wire, with the ruins of an enormous building in its left corner. These were the remains of the dairy plant. And in the diagonally opposite corner, like a case within a case, there was a quadrangle surrounded by even more wire, with towers and spotlights, with long huts and an open area on which tiny match-people moved about, looking like ants.

Perhaps this was how they appeared to the man by whose will they were thrown behind barbed wire. Their weak insect squeaks did not reach his governmental ears, for he had long since stopped considering himself to be of normal height, but like the Ancient Egyptian pharaohs, hewed out gigantic figures in his monstrous imagination, rising majestically above the millions of tiny insects which crawled about somewhere below in the dust at his feet... Was it really only in his imagination? Didn't we raise heavy monuments of marble, didn't we pour gigantic figures in bronze, so that he could look down upon us, three, four, ten times lifesize – the living embodiment of an idol who could only be worshipped, making human sacrifices? Didn't he

stand in squares, in parks, quadrangles, multiplied hundreds of thousands of times, and we kept erecting more and more new temples, we who haughtily rejected all the gods in the world and declared our only god to be the free unfettered bright mind of man? Well, we made him into a god and gods have no heart.

And so millions of wingless insects crawled about on quadrangles surrounded by barbed wire, moving and dying, having been unable to convey to the Kremlin god any of their hopes, or their despairs, not even their damnations.

Thus the passengers passing over this camp in 1947 rarely thought about those comical matchsticks who raised their overgrown dirty faces to the sky and looked longingly at the thin-winged free bird in the sky. These passengers could never have imagined that each of these small men would have gladly given up ten years of their life in exchange for a minute not so much as even in the plane, but simply beyond the barbed wire, as far away as possible from that anthill. And the aeroplane sped off, piercing the clouds, bathing in the spaciousness, leaving the small men behind.

That first morning Kalynka was woken by a metallic shriek. Beyond the thin wooden wall someone was striking a metal rail for all he was worth, and it rang out, groaned, screeched, driving sleep away with its painful screams. People stirred on the two-tiered plank beds. The woken men began to cough and spit, as the orderlies ran between the plank beds, yelling at the tops of their voices: "Ri-ise!" And bombarding everyone with such colourful mother oaths, that the thieves answered with guffaws of delight. Someone received a backhander, someone shrieked loudly, someone was dragged out of bed by the feet, someone continued to lie in bed until he was thrown straight onto the floor and given a kick to the ribs. Meanwhile the rail continued to shriek until all the prisoners had left the hut and lined up in the quadrangle under the merciless light of the spotlights, which made the darkness all around seem even thicker.

Kalynka stood in the front row in the right wing. The high starry sky breathed of cold. To keep warm the prisoners moved from foot to foot, huddled together and even pranced about. Suddenly the orderlies who were lining up the prisoners stopped dead in their tracks. A short thin captain came up to the column. He had a small childish face and sparse lashes around eyes blue as a summer sky.

"Good day, rabbits!" he greeted them, rising on the toes of his lacquered boots.

The prisoners replied in a babble of voices.

"Aha, You don't want to greet me properly! Come on, let's try once more... Good day, rabbits!"

And again the indistinct din of voices rolled across the quadrangle.

The captain's face reddened, he was obviously upset. He rose on his toes again and commanded sharply:

"Right turn! Round the hut at a run!" And hundreds of prisoners stamped around the hut.

"Stop!" the captain commanded when the breathless prisoners had returned. "Line up...! To the left...! Good day, rabbits!"

"Good day, citizen chief!" the column replied with hundreds of mouths.

The petite features of the captain's face blossomed.

"Now you're fine lads!" he praised them, rocking on his toes. "And I'd advise you not to quarrel with Uncle Vasia. Then Uncle Vasia will like you and will be good to you... Understood, rabbits?"

"Understood, citizen chief!"

"And now let's have some breakfast and get off to work. And watch you work properly, so that Uncle Vasia doesn't have to blush because of you...! New arrivals – step out of the column!"

There was movement in the rows; dozens of men came forward. Kalynka took two steps forward too. The captain walked along their row, assigning each person somewhere to work.

"Bending pipes... Shifting rocks... Digging foundations... Demolishing the wall..."

Kalynka was assigned to demolishing the wall. After having the standard potato swill for breakfast and setting off for work, Kalynka asked a sullen bearded prisoner:

"Who's this captain?"

"The commandant's assistant," the fellow replied reluctantly.

"Bad-tempered, eh?"

The prisoner looked Kalynka up and down derisively; the shadow of a smile passed across his face:

"Kind as kind can be!"

And again there was silence, except for the tramp of hundreds of feet all around them.

"The work very hard?" Kalynka could not resist asking.

The bearded fellow looked at Kalynka as if he had a few screws loose:

"It's hard to find anything easier. All you do is swing a little ham-

mer about until evening."

And Kalynka did just that with a twenty pound sledgehammer. From morning until night. He pounded with all his might into a strong unyielding wall and was short of breath, dark spots appeared before his eyes and he felt nauseous. He stopped, wiped away the sweat mixed with cement dust, which hung all about in a thick cloud, and in that dust, as if bound with chains, exhausted people stirred with morbid glistening eyes. From time to time they raised their heavy sledgehammers, striking the wall, and each felt as if with this blow his life would flit away too, dripping its last drop.

In two weeks Kalynka was reduced to skin and bone. He couldn't lie for long in the one position. Tossing and turning all night on the plank bed, he groaned in his sleep, and his groans united with the groans of the others. Only now did Kalynka realize what it meant to sway in the wind.

Later, when he could no longer lift the sledgehammer, he was assigned to bending bars. The thick iron bar was placed in a vice and against the free end he had to press his chest and apply the weight of his whole body, gripping the unyielding iron with his hands, digging his feet into the ground. He had to bend, bend, bend, from morning until night. Only those who had done time with Kalynka could imagine how a chest crushed against iron could ache. For the rest of his life Kalynka retained the habit of rubbing his chest with the palm of his hand.

He worked almost against the barbed wire and was thus the first to notice the solitary women's figures, which approached the camp fearfully. Almost all of them were dressed in drab grey coats and heavy reddish boots, and there was something so familiar about these figures that each time he saw them Kalynka thought about his mother.

"Where are you off to there, old woman?" the guard shouted, noticing yet another. "Tired of life, are we?!"

The woman would stop, offering her small bundle up to the soldier, as if it were a pass to get into the camp:

"Dear soldier, my dear dove, I've come to see my son!"

"Hurry back there or I'll shoot!" the soldier yelled even louder, raising his rifle.

The woman turned around obediently and went off, looking back. The prisoners gazed after her, each imagining that she was his mother.

Moving back a safe distance, the women would usually stop stock-still and turn to face the camp, remaining as solidified shimmering figures until nightfall. And back in the huts, lying on stone-hard beds, the prisoners exchanged words for a long time, those sad figures still standing before their eyes.

The niggardly light dripped from the dust-covered lamps, oozing sparingly between the plank beds on which the prisoners lay like logs, exhausted by the day's work. Excited voices carried from the other end of the hut: the thieves were "combing the king's beard" – playing cards. They did not have to work, so they were not tormented by sleep.

The next day brought Kalynka an unexpected meeting.

He came across Mykola. Waving the long sleeves of his tattered jacket, the boy was running somewhere and bumped straight into Kalynka.

"Mykolka, greetings!" Kalynka embraced his shoulders.

The boy raised his freckled face and his blue eyes radiated such joy that Kalynka's eyes began to sting.

"Uncle, is it really you?"

"Who else...! Hold on, how did you get in here?"

"I was sentenced!" Mykola replied even more merrily and wiped his nose on his sleeve, without taking his eyes off the kind fellow.

"They sentenced you?"

"Aha... Six years."

Kalynka stood there, lost. He squeezed the boy's shoulders, as if trying to convince himself that the lad was indeed before him, and not a figment of his ailing imagination.

"Wait, how can it be," he mumbled. "After all, you're not even fifteen..."

"I will be soon, uncle..."

"Where's Fedko?" Kalynka recalled Mykola's friend.

"Fedko died... Of consumption..." Mykola's eyes glazed over, his face became aged, like that of a person whose soul had wilted prematurely. And Kalynka no longer asked anything. He simply pressed the lad to himself, looking straight ahead with his dry eyes, over the shorn head nuzzling up to him so trustfully.

"Where are you living, Kolia?" he asked softly.

"In hut four," Mykola replied in a whisper. "Together with Gypsy."

"With Gypsy!"

Kalynka suddenly recalled the guard's words when they had talked

about transferring the boys to the general cell. And the unequivocal gesture, and the grimace of revulsion.

"Listen, Kolia, you'll move to my hut today," he said emotionally. But Mykola was silent and fear played on his face.

"Do you hear, Kolia?"

"I can't," Mykola whispered, looking away.

"Why not? Why?" Kalynka almost screamed, shaking the lad by the shoulders.

"Because Gypsy will knife me."

Mykola whimpered and burst into tears. He turned away from Kalynka, ashamed of his tears, wiping his eyes with his dirty sleeve.

"He keeps pestering me... Says these... shameful things..."

"Come along!" Kalynka said, squeezing Mykola's hand. He had to rescue the lad, no matter what the consequences.

The fourth hut was empty except for a group of thieves on the end plank beds near the small window. Kalynka immediately spotted Gypsy who was sitting stripped to the waist, tattooed all over. There wasn't a clean patch of skin on him. A large red heart pierced with an arrow covered his chest. Blood dripped from it, sprinkling onto the inscription: 'I'll never forget my dear mother.'

Gypsy was sitting and crying. He was sobbing uncontrollably, listening to a sad underworld song about a thief who was thrown into the "slammer" and how he said his farewell to freedom:

Farewell, farewell, my free world –
From here there's really nowhere to go...
My woman will find another man,
And never will I have a son.

The song indeed had a melancholy, surprisingly good melody and was sung by a short thief with such a moving tenor, that even Kalynka's eyes became damp. But, remembering why he had come, Kalynka approached the group.

As if on orders, all the thieves turned to face him and the song broke off.

"Gypsy, can I see you for a moment?"

"Who is it?" Gypsy asked querulously, wiping his tearful eyes.

"Some *frayer*."

"Take a ride, scumbag!"

"Gypsy, I need to talk with you!" Kalynka said firmly, feeling his lips begin to go numb.

Gypsy slid off the plank bed, came up to Kalynka and immediate-

ly recognized him. He knitted his brows, his eyes flashed fiercely, and Kalynka clenched his fists, preparing for an attack.

"What do you want, scum!" Gypsy yelled, rolling his eyes insanely.

"Drop it, Gypsy," Kalynka said in disgust: during his imprisonment he had grown to know the thieves and their ways. "I haven't come here to watch a show."

"What's the matter, bitch, you come here looking for your death?"

"I've come to tell you to lay off the lad," Kalynka continued as calmly as he could, although this composure was hard-won. "Keep away from Mykola."

"What's the matter, bitch, you come to threaten me...? Know what I'll do to you now!"

Gypsy came right up to Kalynka, breathing foully into his face. He could have simply knocked Kalynka off his feet and trampled him into the ground, but the memory of their previous encounter still remained firmly embedded in his head and so he only "put on a show".

"You worm, pitiful *frayer*, what d'you want from me?!"

"Leave Mykola alone."

"Why, will you go and snitch on me otherwise, bitch?"

"I'll kill you," Kalynka promised. "I'll get a sledgehammer and smash your head in."

And Gypsy believed him. He continued to rant and rave, spraying spittle everywhere, but he did not dare touch Kalynka.

"Look here, Gypsy," Kalynka said wearily. "Let's not argue about it."

He turned his back on him and went outside, where Mykola was waiting for him, frightened to death.

"Now he'll leave you in peace," Kalynka promised, hugging the boy. He knew that the encounter with Gypsy would not end at this, but didn't want to think about it now. He saw only the youth's raised trustful eyes, the gaunt face glowing with timid joy. And it made him feel warm and good inside. "Everything will be all right," he added.

That evening Gypsy visited Kalynka's hut. Seeking out his foe with his eyes, he smiled ominously and wordlessly made his way to the group of thieves playing cards. He was greeted with shouts, room was respectfully made for him. Gypsy sat down without uttering a word and stretched out his blue tattooed arm towards the dealer:

"Deal!"

And he sat there playing until morning.

At first Gypsy had no luck. He lost his jacket, his chrome-leather boots. Red splotches covered his olive face, his thin whiskers twitched.

"Maybe we should stop, Gypsy?" one of the new gang members suggested obsequiously. He was still just a *siavka*, a *mazuryk*, not having yet become a true thief. Gypsy looked at him so fiercely, that the cards fell out of the fellow's hand.

Gypsy continued to lose. He kept being dealt damned useless hands, he couldn't break the dealer at all and his face was turning grey.

"Deal!"

Finally, towards morning, his luck changed. Gypsy as the dealer, began to beat everyone time after time, gradually undressing the gang playing with him. The last to hold out was that *siavka*, who had been so lucky at the start. Finally he too lost everything to a thread, including ten days' rations. And then Gypsy said what he had in fact come here for. Carelessly shuffling the cards, he suggested:

"Let's play for a *frayer*."

The *siavka* turned white. To play for a *frayer* meant to choose one of the non-thieves and to play for his life. If you won, it was your good fortune. If you lost – you had to kill the *frayer*. If you became scared and didn't kill him, you would be driven out of the gang, becoming a *frayer* yourself, and sooner or later someone would play for you.

"Well?"

Gypsy's eyes were derisively screwed up, a contemptuous small smile twisted his lips.

"No guts?"

The *mazuryk* looked around at his friends, but found no sympathy. There was only an intense wolfish curiosity in their eyes.

"Serve!" the young thief said hoarsely and stretched out his sweaty palm.

But Gypsy was in no hurry.

"Who for?" he asked.

The thief carelessly pointed to the nearest *frayer*, who was sleeping soundly, suspecting nothing.

"No," Gypsy said, "I don't like this *frayer*. Let's play for that one there," and his dirty fingernail pointed at Kalynka. "If you win, I'll give you back everything..."

Within a minute Kalynka had been lost. Triumphant, Gypsy threw down the cards, got up and stretched, and, with the toe of his boot,

pushed aside the rags he had won:

"Take it all – Gypsy doesn't offend his friends!"

And the following night, after everyone was sound asleep, a shadow bent double appeared over Kalynka who was sleeping face down. It paused to listen and then struck with its "pen" – a razor-sharp knife. A deep groaning burst forth from the sleeping figure; he let out a rattle, his flattened body shuddered, while the shadow dashed off among the plank beds, becoming lost in the darkness...

And so Kalynka found himself in the infirmary – the infirmary rather than a mass grave: his fate had managed to draw a lucky card in the game of life and death with the thieves. The sharp "pen" passed only a few millimetres away from his heart and this saved his life.

The infirmary bore the bold title of "hospital", although this was a similar type of hut with the same earthen floor, with tiny windows to hold back the sunlight, making it appear as if this too was meted out in miserly prison rations. The only difference was that the plank beds were single-tiered here and people in filthy coats wandered among the beds: doctors who were prisoners themselves – for the camp could boast any profession: the organs did not take pity on the "cadres" when they populated their camps. Therefore, even the orderlies usually had a higher medical education, something which no hospital on the outside could boast.

For Kalynka it was a long and difficult recovery. His exhausted body struggled weakly with death. Kalynka lay burning with fever for quite some time, and only after a month was he able to sit up, pressing his thin arms against the planks. He sat or lay there, feebly listening to the endless conversations going on about him, and at first he wanted only one thing – for people to leave him in peace, not to disturb him with their tireless questioning.

Finally, together with his recovery, curiosity began to stir within him. Kalynka no longer turned away in despair whenever he sensed someone's stare, no longer covered his ears, but began to listen, at times even contributing a word or two of his own to conversations, most often about one and the same thing: would the amnesty be soon, what was the news from the outside, who was in for what and when they expected to be released.

The first to talk to him was the fellow lying on his left, although to say "lying" would not be quite accurate, for ever since Kalynka had come to, he had never seen the fellow actually lying down. From early in the morning he sat motionless on his plank bed, his long thin legs

hanging over the side. Only occasionally did he reluctantly slip down onto the floor and slowly shuffle over to the toilet door. He would return and sit down again – immobile for several hours at a time.

He had a habit of staring at one and the same object for ages – be it a person or a piece of clothing. He stared intently, rarely blinking his bluish eyelids, until the prisoner who was the subject of his ponderous stare began to swear:

"You going to shine your devilish peepers at me for long? Want a punch in the moosh?"

He would flinch, as if woken up, looked away, and a minute later fixed his gaze on someone else.

Catching his steady stare on himself, Kalynka once asked him:

"Have you been convalescing here for long?"

The fellow shifted anxiously, and Kalynka, who had watched him before, again thought that his face was like that of a mummy. It was dried, devoid of muscles, the immobile face of a corpse brought into the light of day out of a thousand-year-old grave.

Only the eyes were alive. Deeply sunken, hidden under high brows, they continually burned with a sullen flame, as if this person's soul was smouldering away inside them.

Kalynka had already thought that his neighbour had not heard him, when the fellow stirred once more and opened his grey lips:

"Why convalesce?"

His voice was hollow, cracked, as if he had just been throttled.

"Why?" Kalynka was astonished. "To get better."

"Why get better?"

Kalynka did not know what to say. Then the fellow boomed hollowly:

"There... people recuperate, they want to live. But they'll all die sooner or later. You'll die, and I'll die, and that fellow, and that one: no one will leave here. D'you hear: they call us rabbits? That we are. Living as long as they allow us to... But when the time comes, they'll bludgeon us between the ears and that'll be the end..."

He became silent and didn't utter another word for the rest of the day. And in the morning Kalynka again felt the weight of his ponderous gaze. As soon as he turned over and their eyes met, the fellow began talking, as if a day hadn't gone by:

"Recuperate! What for? Look here," he pointed to a bald fellow, "he keeps writing declarations. What for? He's hoping his declarations will reach Stalin? But even he doesn't really believe that."

"That's not true, that's not true!" the man disagreed, moving his head about in agitation. "I do so believe!"

"You do...? You're fooling yourself! You keep writing and the guards only wipe their arses with your letters."

"You're lying, you're lying!" the man protested even more vehemently. "They wouldn't dare do that!"

"They wouldn't?" the fellow inquired sullenly and something akin to a smile twisted his bloodless lips. "They'll dare to do anything, there are no laws for them. They'll grab you by the ear and whack you with a hammer on the back of the head..."

"You're lying, you're lying!" the man exclaimed, with tears in his eyes this time. "He's always like that," he turned to Kalynka for support. "He doesn't believe in anything. But I still have faith! You'll see, my letters will reach Stalin – everything will change then!"

"Yeah, a fool's prayers..." the fellow said contemptuously and, turning away, again rested his morose gaze on Kalynka. "They live and don't know why. Nibbling away on grass..."

"All the same, you're alive too!" Kalynka could not help himself.

"I'll die soon," the fellow replied convincingly. "And you'll die too. Everyone will die!" he added with sullen delight.

Kalynka discontinued the conversation. There was something so depressing about this fellow, that merely looking at him stopped one from wanting to live.

"And that one there will die too," the fellow grunted, as if waking up. "Eh, sweeping! He'll sweep his way to the grave like that."

Kalynka looked to where the fellow was pointing. A hunched creature in torn rags, resembling the dirty feathers of a rumpled bird, was swinging a broom about. As the figure approached them, Kalynka made out a high forehead under a shock of grey tangled hair.

"Who's that?" Kalynka asked.

"An academic," his neighbour replied indifferently. Noticing Kalynka's eyebrows shoot up in surprise, he snorted. "You didn't think that they broke their wings as well? You'll see in a moment..."

Waiting until the old fellow drew opposite them, the neighbour stretched out his hand and asked in a hollow voice:

"Who are you?"

The old fellow flinched and pressed the broom to himself. He raised his wary eyes at Kalynka's neighbour, his shoulders twitching.

"Who are you?" the neighbour renewed his demand.

"I'm an academic," the old fellow replied softly, pressing the

broom to himself.

Everyone about them became silent, absorbed. Obviously it was not the first time that this spectacle was taking place.

"What kind of an academic are you, if you're wielding a broom? You're a shit!"

"I'm an academic!" the old man repeated stubbornly.

"There, you see," the neighbour turned to Kalynka. "He says he's an academic. All the same, he'll die..."

"I'm an academic!"

"All right, we believe you – you're an academic," someone said in a conciliatory tone. However the old man was agitated now. He tossed the broom away and clenched his small fists, threatening an unseen foe.

"I'm an academic! An academic!"

"Why taunt him like that?" Kalynka asked his neighbour. He scowled even more, grunting his standard: 'We'll all die', and turned away from Kalynka. The old man ran out of the hut.

"He won't sweep for over a week now," one of the patients noted.

"An ambitious old man!"

"Why hurt him like that?" Kalynka asked again, astonished at this absurd confrontation.

"Eh, dear fellow, do you think we're hurting anyone! Our damned existence is hurting us!"

The patients resumed their conversations, only the pile of unswept rubbish and the broom remained as a memory of the academic, but Kalynka continued to think about him. About him and about the morose neighbour, about all these people, exhausted not so much by disease, as by captivity, for whom this depressing hut would still be home for a long time to come, together with the plank beds, the narrow passages between them and the bare quadrangle, trampled by thousands of feet, with guard towers on tripods all around. And this made Kalynka feel so melancholy, so uneasy, that he was ready to agree with his neighbour that 'we'll all die, we'll all find our graves here...'

* * *

The time has finally come to say goodbye to Kalynka. Although before we shake his large kind hand, I must tell you about another event without which this story would not be complete.

This incident occurred after Kalynka had returned to his native town upon being rehabilitated, and was again working at the institute. Returning home one day, he spotted a notice on his desk: a summons to appear at the army registration and enlistment office.

He was genuinely surprised by the summons, for he had already been struck off the military register because of his poor health. But his old mother, who had moved from the village to live with them, was very frightened. Ever since that day when her son had failed to return from his trip, she kept expecting fresh misfortune, her exhausted heart unable to perceive those changes which were purging the country's air of suspicion and fear.

Kalynka reassured his mother as best he could, but she refused to listen to him all the same: she donned her warm coat, put on her felt boots and surreptitiously followed her son, and stood waiting in the entrance across the road from the army registration and enlistment office until her son had emerged alive and well.

Kalynka had been invited to the fourth section and there a major presented him with a medal and a certificate. Kalynka stretched out his hand to accept it, but suddenly recoiled: Stalin's profile stood out clearly on the top side of the medal.

Then Kalynka returned home, holding the round piece of metal with a bas-relief of the man he had once trusted so firmly as no one else, and who had so perfidiously betrayed his sacred trust. In the first square he came to he sat down on a bench and opened his hand. Unprotected by his body heat, the bas-relief of the mustached man with a narrow wicked forehead slowly began to cool, becoming covered with a bluish, dead hoar-frost.

1960-1988

THE HUNGRY THIRTIES
(A Parable About Bread)

Having visited almost all the villages and talked with all the people, Hryhoriy Ginzburg returned to Khorolivka, so tired that he didn't even enter the district committee offices. After a hurried supper, he lay down and immediately fell asleep.

Waking at around midnight, he was unable to fall asleep again. His head ached, he was desperately uneasy. He again thought about Stalin's article "The Year of the Great Break", recalling his own conversations with the villagers who were in no hurry to join the collective farms. He also remembered how they had called from the provincial centre and asked sternly: 'How's your middle peasant, Comrade Ginzburg...? Not joining...? Hesitating...? Bad, bad... Read Comrade Stalin's article. Read it and take good note, so that it won't be too late afterwards!' It was this veiled threat which angered Hryhoriy the most. They, you see, had already taken note, with their ears forever pricked towards those above, already drawing the appropriate conclusions from Comrade Stalin's article. Sooner or later those lower down would take good note. And when these began to take note, they would take such notes that no one would be able to decipher them all, even if they had a hundred years to do so!

And what will you do, Comrade Ginzburg? You, the secretary of the district committee, the communist, the devout Leninist, that you've considered yourself to be until now? Will you also prick up your ears and take good note? Will you say to hell with the peasants which you met these past few days, who came to you with their problems and thoughts?

Arriving at work Ginzburg first of all looked through the newspapers waiting for him.

Almost every newspaper column screamed about the new assault on the kulak, about the beginning of an unforseen mass movement of the peasantry to join the collectives. With each subsequent issue the tone of the newspapers became ever more impatient towards those who hesitated, towards those who doubted that there could be a sudden change in the psychology of the middle peasant.

All that day Hryhoriy thought about the newspapers. And he finally decided that he couldn't remain silent any longer: it was either now or never.

He wrote the letter to Stalin, a person whom he had grown accustomed to believe without reservations, whom he viewed as Lenin's heir.

'I work as the secretary of the Khorolivka district committee in Poltava Province, so I can only speak for my district,' Ginzburg wrote. 'Having read your article, I decided to check my impressions once more and visited nearly every village in the district. I met the party activists, the peasantry, held lengthy conversations. And everything I heard and experienced has forced me to write to you.

'Dear Joseph Vissarionovich!' Hryhoriy continued. 'Above all I am a communist and therefore I would despise myself if I were to keep quiet about all my doubts associated with the social collectivization of the country as announced in your article. I do believe that in many districts there has been a change in the psychology of the middle peasants and they have joined the collective farms en masse. We should be overjoyed, we should welcome this and carry on this trend. But what do we do where such a change has not occurred, for example in a district such as Khorolivka? Should we too announce a struggle for total collectivization over one or two years as some radicals are already doing? But wouldn't this amount to a gross infringement of the principle of voluntary membership which Lenin supported to the end, and which you too defend so rigorously in your works? Should we resort to leftist methods, follow Trotsky, who called on the party not to pussyfoot with the hard-working peasantry, build socialism at the cost of their merciless exploitation? Instead of persuasion and painstaking educative work, should we adopt the strategy of force, violence and repression?

'Will such a course not strike against the union of the toiling peasantry with the proletariat?

'Will this not compromise the building of socialism in the eyes of many honest people who trust the Soviet regime without reservation, and on whom we rely in our everyday work?

'I would be very grateful to you, dear Joseph Vissarionovich, if you could answer my letter. I am convinced that the questions raised by me are worrying not only myself.

Hryhoriy Ginzburg
Member of the Soviet Communist Party (Bolshevik)

from 1913.'

Would Ginzburg have written this letter, had he known how dearly he would have to pay for it, had he been able to see two months into the future?

For Hryhoriy waited exactly two months for his reply.

With its withered yellow leaves, November rustled away. December galloped along after it with icy hooves. January 1930 arrived with snows, frosts and storms.

The villages lurked within mounds of snow, deep in snowdrifts. Half-buried beneath the snow, the houses seemed lower than they actually were, as if they had squatted, hidden, pushing white caps over their foreheads and eyes – in the fearful hope that the New Year would not notice them and would pass by.

'Move on, off you go,' they might cry. 'Why have you stopped over us? We never called you, we still haven't lived our fill with the old year. Pass us by, perhaps someone is waiting for you, but leave us in peace.

'Us and our livestock ruminating in warm stables, cowsheds and sheep-pens, livestock which is accustomed to the same pair of hands and won't even take a blade of hay or a pinch of grain from a stranger.

'And our fields, this land where every clod has been broken up by our hands, watered with our sweat, so generously watered that it needs no rains. And you want me to disown my field, to hand it over to a stranger, tearing it away from my heart.

'Leave my fate alone, let me be my own master.

'Go away, go, disappear into the blue yonder!

'Go on, off you go!'

But January did not hear, it paused in every village, beside each house. It knocked loudly at each door, banged insolently at the gate, grabbed the stupefied farmer by the flap of his sheepskin coat and, no matter how the much the fellow dug his heels in, no matter how firmly he grabbed hold of the door or the last post in his fence, nothing helped. He would set out like this, back-to-front, to enter the new year, 1930, and would come to his senses only in the collective farm.

The New Year arrived with winds. They were especially wild in the steppe, sweeping along the dry snow, tugging insanely at the telephone wires which stretched like bared nerves between Khorolivka and Poltava. And contact was broken many a time, and words seeped lifelessly from the wires which became entwined around the poles like torn arteries...

"Khorolivka...! Khorolivka...! Give us Ginzburg...! The district committee secretary...! Ginzburg?! Comrade Ginzburg, you're speaking to the provincial committee here...! Leave immediately for the provincial committee...! With the members of your office...! Immediately...! These are orders from the first secretary...!"

"What did you write there?"

Ginzburg's good friend greeted him with this question when Hryhoriy dropped by to see him before fronting up before the first secretary. He was sitting at his desk, shuffling through papers, and when Hryhoriy came in he didn't get up to greet him, did not spread out his arms joyously, but only asked with ill-disguised censure:

"What did you write there?"

"Perhaps" Hryhoriy said softly, "you could at least say hello?" He stopped in the doorway, his dishevelled mop of hair trembling with tiny dewdrops of melted snow.

"Forgive me." The provincial committee instructor frowned, for he was also a friend, a very good friend in fact. "But you know, I'm rather busy now... Do you know why you've been summoned...? Your letter arrived here from Moscow. From Stalin's office." The following words were said in a whisper: "With a resolution that it be looked into at the local level..."

"My letter?" Hryhoriy asked in astonishment. "But what has the provincial committee got to do with it? I wrote to Stalin... And sent it off to him personally!"

"Well, I don't know about that," the inspector shrugged his shoulders. "That doesn't concern me... I only want to warn you: be prepared for the worst. Your letter is being assessed here as a slanderous attack of a right-wing opportunist, a degenerate..."

"Who's interpreting it like that?" Hryhoriy interrupted him indignantly. But just then the door opened and a young girl's face appeared:

"Vasyl Trokhymovych, don't forget about your meeting!"

"I'm coming!" The instructor jumped to his feet, obviously relieved at the opportunity to end this uncomfortable conversation. He grabbed his papers, looked at Ginzburg, who, stunned by the words, continued standing by the door: "Forgive me, I must run... The chief wants to see me...!"

The waiting room of the first secretary was packed with people. Some were sitting, talking quietly; others feverishly leafed through

papers, hastily jotting things down; still others paced about nervously, appearing to see nothing apart from the high, massive, black-leather upholstered door to the first secretary's office. Hryhoriy chose an empty chair and sat down, firmly intertwining his fingers. He suddenly began to shake, as if he had caught a chill and was just beginning to warm up. He lowered his head so that people wouldn't notice his right cheek, which was jerking spasmodically, and froze.

Although Hryhoriy did not feel guilty of anything, he still couldn't help feeling alarmed. Both the instructor's warning to be prepared for the worst and this sudden summons to appear with all the members of the district committee, coupled with the infamy of the provincial committee's first secretary, who had appeared in Poltava only a month earlier, but had already managed to manifest his cruelty – none of this could hardly be expected to allay his fears.

Hryhoriy sat and painfully recalled the contents of his letter to Comrade Stalin, unable to fathom what it could have contained to allow him to be accused of "right-wing opportunism".

What had he said that went against Lenin's policies?

After all, he had cited Lenin in that letter. That very well-known quote of his, which he could repeat, word for word, even now.

Ginzburg could clearly picture the appropriate page and the part circled in red pencil (he had circled it himself), and the individual words he had underlined:

'The matter of the transformation of the small landholder, the transformation of his entire psychology and attitudes, is something requiring generations. To resolve this question of the small landholder, to rejuvenate his psychology, so to speak, is only possible through a material base, technology, the utilization of tractors and machines in agriculture on a mass scale, electrification on a mass scale.'

There it was – whole generations. Not a mere one or two years, but several generations. And even then, on a foundation of mechanization and the electrification of the village on a mass scale.

And another of Lenin's instructions with an immediate bearing on the events of today:

'In no event should the evolution of the masses be overtaken; we need to wait until a movement forward grows from their own experiences, their own struggles.'

In any case, Stalin also quoted this directive of Lenin's, cautioning against imposition, the issuance of decrees, the forced inclusion of

the peasant into collective farms...

"Don't you hide behind Lenin! We can quote from Lenin without your help."

"Tell us instead the percentage of collectivization achieved in your district."

"Why have you taken the kulaks and White Guard remnants under your wing?"

"How much did the kulaks pay you to write this letter?"

And Hryhoriy Ginzburg, who stood his ground to the end, finally exploded:

"I'm not answering any more provocative questions!"

"Oho!"

Hryhoriy could almost physically sense the growing hostility of these people, who had gathered in the first secretary's office to examine his case. He could sense the stultifying, poisonous air beginning to coagulate. And the longer he stood at the end of the vast table, the harder it became for him to speak, to gather his thoughts, especially since he was continually being cut off, attacked with questions, derided.

He was very thirsty! But the carafe and glass stood at the other end of the table and no one was thoughtful enough to pass him down some water.

"I've said everything I intend to," Hryhoriy finally said.

And then the first secretary's voice sounded.

Until now he had sat without uttering a single word. It was hard even at this stage to deduce whether he was condemning Ginzburg or not. On his full, assiduously shaven face there wasn't the slightest movement, his grey eyes were filled almost with indifference, as if he could see neither Ginzburg nor his companions right now and even if he could, then he wasn't very interested in them. Only after Hryhoriy announced that he had finished, did the first secretary raise his closely-shaven head and stop Hryhoriy, who was about to sit down:

"Just a moment, Ginzburg, I have a question for you."

He said this so softly, that the words were barely audible in the large office. He was obviously confident that no matter how quietly he spoke, everyone would hear him all the same.

Everyone froze. Hryhoriy stiffened too, turning to face the first secretary, who continued in a half-whisper:

"Why has the middle peasant joined the collective farm en masse

in districts adjacent to yours?"

"I don't know..."

"Because the kulak agents have been smashed there," the secretary explained patiently. "The communists there have managed to convince the middle peasant of the advantages of the collective system."

"And we couldn't!" Hryhoriy replied with bitter sarcasm.

"Couldn't or wouldn't?"

"Couldn't!"

"Perhaps you didn't want to?"

And without waiting for the anticipated answer, the first secretary posed another question:

"Are the other members of the district committee of the same opinion as you?"

"I don't speak for them," Hryhoriy replied ineffectually.

"Who's from Khorolivka here?"

Liander and Putko jumped to their feet. Someone else belatedly rose to his feet with a deafening clatter of his chair – Ginzburg didn't even bother looking in that direction.

"Are you also in agreement with your secretary?"

"I was always against him!"

This was Putko.

"I've had several altercations with Ginzburg about the most important questions concerning our policies!"

And this was Liander.

"I categorically condemn Ginzburg's political line!"

This was the head of the district military organization.

"Be seated, comrades... Who would like to take the floor?"

Immediately several hands shot up. Ginzburg sat down, becoming motionless, hanging his head. And after everyone who wanted to speak had had their say, even after the first secretary began his summation, even then Hryhoriy did not lift his head.

The first secretary began with a general characterization of the state of affairs in the Khorolivka district.

The district, it seemed, was littered with White Guard elements, kulaks and their underlings, who had carried with them the entire district party organization. Yes, the entire organization. And here was the result: a vicious neglect of the most burning questions, sabotage of the party's policies, frustration of the plan of total collectivization, a lack of faith in the Central Committee's line of unfolding the collective-farm movement.

"It's not a pretty picture, comrades."

"It's disgusting!" one of the party bureau blurted out.

The first secretary frowned, intolerant of interruptions.

"Now let's look at Ginzburg himself..."

Even here Hryhoriy did not stir.

Meanwhile the secretary was talking about mud:

"You and the head have become bogged down in right opportunist mud..."

And about hostile activities:

"We can't view your letter in any other light, other than as an attempt to sully the Leninist leadership of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, to compromise the party's Leninist policies towards total collectivization of the toiling peasantry..."

About the hostile cell:

"It should be said that the members of the Khorolivka district committee showed political blindness and failed to spot your White Guard kulak cell in time..."

About Ginzburg's behaviour here, in the provincial committee office:

"You have understood nothing and learnt nothing. Even now you continue to push right-opportunistic drivel about the middle peasant not yet being mature enough to be able to join a collective farm, that in Poltava Province there is no mass movement among the peasantry for total collectivization in the shortest possible time frame. Thus you appear as a political plebeian who has lost faith in the policies of our party..."

"An enemy rather than a plebeian!" one of the bureau again blurted out.

"It's one and the same thing... And please stop interrupting me... Therefore, we can come to no other conclusion, other than that you've become totally degraded, politically corrupted, losing your communist face, becoming an active appliance of the White Guard kulak element, their agent in the ranks of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks."

Having finished, he remained silent a short while and then addressed the members of his bureau:

"What are your propositions, comrades?"

"Relieve him of his position!"

"Throw him out of the party!"

"Send him off to court!"

"Replace the Khorolivka district committee!"

At the last proposition the chairs of the district committee members creaked.

"Dissolve the Khorolivka district party organization as one which has become corrupted!"

The first secretary approved all the propositions. Apart from the last one.

"I think, comrades, that it's not worth dissolving the entire party organization. On the whole, the party organization is healthy and Khorolivka's communists will honourably manage to achieve the historically important task of total collectivization... Well, Khorolivka comrades?"

"We'll manage...! We'll manage!"

"Fine... Then I put to the vote the measures suggested here for the revitilization of the Khorolivka district party organization."

Unanimously the bureau members raised their hands, although they each raised them differently, depending on their position. Those sitting immediately beside the first secretary raised their right hand perfunctorily, with their elbow resting on the table. They must have waved those arms enough all day long, and had no more strength left to raise them high. But those who were furthest away raised their hands like schoolboys, lifting them up high, until their joints cracked. Look at me! At me! Look how devotedly I'm voting!

But perhaps none of this had taken place? Perhaps Hryhoriy had only dreamt it all? And in the end, how would all this reflect on him!

"Ginzburg, lay down your party ticket!"

Here it was – that most frightening thing! Here it was – the end!

Hryhoriy rose to his feet, his stony features motionless.

Wordlessly he made his way to the enormous table covered in red cloth. He was walking towards his own death, although neither the first secretary, nor those sitting beside him suspected anything yet. Only Hryhoriy knew about this.

He stopped two paces short of the table, bringing his hand to the side-pocket of his tunic. Not the one with his party ticket, but the one with his Browning, which he had brought back from the civil war.

The button sewn on by his father would not unbutton. It resisted, shaking its metal head in despair, refusing to pass through the buttonhole. Then Hryhoriy tore the flap open and the button fell straight onto the table, ripped out with the meat.

He pulled out his Browning and yelled into the first secretary's face:

"I won't give you my party ticket while I'm alive! You can take it off my dead body!"

He raised the pistol to his temple...

The provincial committee bureau's meeting finished at this point. Still pale, those present left the large office. Hryhoriy was carried out, the Browning and his party ticket lay on the table. The air was filled with the smell of gunpowder and a large dark stain remained on the carpet where Hryhoriy had fallen. The carpet would be changed, of course, and the office aired out, the party ticket and the pistol would be removed – nothing would be left to remind anyone of the district committee secretary who, having lost his class feelings, sank into the mud of right opportunism, becoming a degenerate and a kulak sympathiser.

Which is why he would not be placed into a coffin lined with red muslin, would not be sent off to Khorolivka, so that the people could pay him their last respects: with music, a wake meeting, a triple salute – no, he had not deserved this! – and instead he would be taken to the morgue, where indifferent doctors would open up his skull and enter into the report that the bullet had entered his right temple, damaged such and such tissue, which was the cause of death (as if this was at all important), and the report would be studied some day... He would be dispatched to the morgue, and there, after the post mortem, they would place what remained of Ginzburg into a roughly-made coffin, to then rattle him off to the cemetery and bury him hurriedly: why waste time on someone like him! There would be no monument on his flattened grave, no five-pointed star, even though it had shone for Hryhoriy throughout his life. They would erect nothing...

And in vain would the old Isaak, insane with sorrow, seek the grave of his only son in the provincial capital, in vain would he thrust all his savings into the hands of the groundsmen, if only they would show him where his Hrysha was lying... In vain...

Because those groundsmen didn't know where he was buried either.

Taking pity on the old fellow, one of them would finally grab him and take him up to someone's fresh grave, telling him that this was his son's.

But he would take no money, even though Isaak pressed handfuls

of notes into his hand.

"Come on, old man! Do you think we're completely without any scruples!"

And the groundsman would go on his way, angrily shrugging his shoulders.

And when he turned around, he would see Isaak's bent figure over the snow-covered mound. Isaak would be standing so still, that it seemed he was no longer a living person, but some sorrowful gravestone monument, alien to everything living, and the groundsman would involuntarily think that perhaps the old man really had no more need of that money...

No one saw Isaak in Khorolivka again. Where he had gone, whether he had returned from Poltava or simply stayed behind there, no one ever discovered. Perhaps he had dropped by his home, picked up his remaining belongings and again returned to be with his son. Or perhaps he never left that stranger's graveside: stiffening over it, turning to stone, his shoulders and lowered head becoming covered with a thick layer of snow. And the occasional visitor who chanced to find his way into this secluded corner would stop, amazed at the unbelievable monument of sorrow and despair, the creation of some genius sculptor...

That could have happened too.

However we shall not enter the cemetery grounds lest we too be accused of being sympathetic right deviationists, lest we too are called degenerates and appliances of the class enemy, or even camouflaged White Guards, even though we might not even have been born when those White Guards did battle. So we won't try to find Hryhoriy Ginzburg's lost grave – we can no longer help him anyway! – but instead we'll head back to Khorolivka, where the new first secretary was a comrade who had been sent to strengthen the party organization of the Khorolivka district.

This new secretary, Ivan Ivanovych Suslov, viewed all peasants as a reactionary petty bourgeois element, who, given the slightest opportunity, would consume and dissolve within its ranks all the achievements of the proletarian revolution, sucking it into its quagmire. Therefore, even though he did not speak openly against the policies of the New Economic Policy (as a Bolshevik he considered it his first duty to uphold an iron discipline), his heart never did accept this new policy, considering it to be one of the most tragic mistakes, setting the Soviet Union back a good ten years or so.

At last the party's Central Committee regained their senses and corrected the mistake.

Having read Stalin's article "The Year of the Great Break", Ivan Ivanovych could not help slapping the newspaper in approval with his palm, excitedly pacing about the room, whistling his favourite song about a steam engine, the commune and a rifle.

Ivan Ivanovych arrived in Khorolivka with ready, well-formed views on the peasant, with rock-hard credos, so to speak.

Credo one:

Every peasant was a potential bourgeois. There was no essential difference between the richest and the poorest, there were only those who had made it into the ranks of the kulaks and those who aspired to get there.

It was obvious what should be done with the exploiters and kulak underlings: destroy them all down to the last barbarous class fingernail! And as for the rest, that ground which continued to give birth to petty bourgeois tendencies had to be removed from under their feet. And the sooner the petty bourgeois base was destroyed, the sooner the muzhik could be reforged into a builder of socialism, a faithful companion in arms of the proletariat.

Credo two:

The peasant doesn't know what he wants. Because of his age-old backwardness he has always resisted everything new, everything progressive, even though it might bring him happiness in the near future.

Therefore, we cannot wait decades until the village rises to the occasion and turns to face socialism. We need to grab its head with a firm proletarian hand and turn it around the full one hundred and eighty degrees, whether it wants to or not, to face socialism.

Credo three:

The social restructuring of the village, like the revolution, cannot be done with kid gloves. Only the soft-bodied degenerate intellectuals can lisp about not applying pressure to the middle peasant during the time of total collectivization.

The party has placed a historically important task before us: to finish collectivizing by the spring of 1932. We replied to this call in true Bolshevik fashion: we shall meet this spring with totally collectivized farms! In this way we shall apply a decisive blow not only to the kulak elements who are sabotaging the grain delivery, but also to the right opportunists, the friends of the kulaks, who, during the

elections to the village soviets, tried to destroy the pact on total collectivization, adding to it the words "as far as possible" and "on voluntary terms"; there were those who openly called out: 'We don't want it, abolish it...!'

"Comrades! We've heard first secretary Comrade Suslov. Who else wants to speak?"

Putko gazed sternly around the hall in which the district's communists were seated. He leered at them through his large glasses with their massive tortoiseshell frames, bought on a whim in Poltava, and arched his eyebrows: the glasses dug into his nose, but that was all right – even cows grow accustomed to saddles.

"Come on, comrades!"

"May I?"

A hand went up somewhere at the back. Movement erupted there, chairs rattled, communists rose letting a tall man with a heavy handsome face and a black moustache pass. Watching with interest as the man lumbered towards the stage, the new secretary asked:

"Who's this?"

"Hanzha from Tarasivka. One of Ginzburg's mob."

Ivan Ivanovych's eyes immediately narrowed.

Hanzha ascended the stage, stood behind the podium. Only now, with the light falling on him, could one notice how haggard he had become. He looked intently about the hall and pressed forward:

"Comrade communists! A comrade has gone from us... a Bolshevik... a revolutionary... a Leninist..."

"Who's he on about?" Suslov asked Putko, but before the fellow could answer, Hanzha had pressed even further forward and his voice rang with strain:

"Please rise and show respect for the memory of our dear Comrade Ginzburg with a minute's silence!"

There was dead silence.

"Get off the podium! Now!" Putko yelled at Hanzha.

"Why, let him continue," Ivan Ivanovych disagreed. "We must know what our enemies think."

Again turning to Hanzha, Putko ordered him sternly:

"Speak to the point! Without any provocation."

"I can do that," Hanzha agreed. Turning heavily towards the presidium, he addressed Suslov directly:

"It seems to turn out quite strange, comrade first secretary..."

"Ivan Ivanovych Suslov!" Putko helped him out loudly. "It's about

time you remembered it."

"Thank you for reminding me... I forgot. That's old age for you... Well, it seems to turn out quite strange, Comrade Suslov. You still haven't managed to go anywhere, haven't met anyone yet, haven't talked with the people, but you immediately called together all the communists and offered them a ready cure for all our ills..."

"Listen, Hanzha: you can speak, but don't go off at a tangent!"

This was Putko again. Oh, he wasn't a simpleton, this Mytrofan Onysymovych!

"Why, let him speak!"

Not a single muscle moved on Ivan Ivanovych's face. Only his eyes became lighter, mercilessly brighter.

"You've called on us here to pressure the middle peasant, to show him no pity, driving him into the collective farm. But have you considered the results? Villagers aren't like cattle, over which you throw a lasso and yoke..."

"So you're equating the collective farm to a yoke?" Liander piped up. "We won't forget this expression of yours, Comrade Hanzha! We won't forget!"

"Don't you go frightening me, I've already been frightened. Perhaps I didn't express myself concisely enough, but I still firmly believe that it's too early yet to speak of total collectivization. Too early!"

"Comrade Hanzha, how then should we assess the January resolution of the party's Central Committee?"

This was Ivan Ivanovych now. He spoke calmly, almost benevolently.

Hanzha did not understand: "What resolution?"

"About the rate of collectivization. Where it says plainly that Ukraine must complete its collectivization by the spring of 1932. How do you assess this resolution?"

Hanzha went pale, but his voice nevertheless rang out steadfastly:

"I assess it as a fallacious decree."

This time Mytrofan Onysymovych fought for a long time to restore order.

"What is he doing? What is he doing?" Olga groaned, tearing at the red kerchief in her hands. And Volodka kept looking about, bewildered, as if asking: 'What did he say, Uncle Vasyl...? Did I really here that or was I imagining things...? Is he in his right mind to say such things?!'

"Well, everything is clear then," Ivan Ivanovych rose. "You can sit down, we'll take care of you later..."

Hanzha was taken care of that same day by the district committee bureau. Before the meeting Olga followed her husband, without leaving his side. She begged him:

"Admit that you were wrong...! Go on...!"

Her pleas embodied pain, despair, the despair of a woman who still loved her man and was trying to rescue him, to keep him at her side.

And the pain of a communist losing her comrade.

'I know we quarrelled. We quarrelled a lot lately. But I promise to be more submissive in future, more compliant, not to irritate you in any way. But come to your senses, change your mind, admit your mistakes! Tell them that you misunderstood the resolution, don't be so stubborn!

'You hear me, tell them!

'I've never wept. Never. Even when I buried both my husbands – the comrades never saw my tears. They were proud of me, of my stoicism, they called me an iron woman. And now look at my eyes: they're full of tears. I'm ashamed of them, but I can't stop them...'

"Tell them...! D'you hear, tell them!"

Hanzha carefully extricated his hand from Olga's and raised his pain-filled eyes:

"Do you know what's most sacred to me?"

"What?"

"Truth... I'll be damned, if I will renounce it!"

And he didn't renounce it. He stood before the bureau members without any thought of recanting. He had dug his own hole and would fall into it.

"Do you still consider the Central Committee's line on total collectivization to be wrong?"

"Yes, I do."

"What is your attitude towards Comrade Stalin's well-known position on the development of the collective-farm movement, presented by him in his world-famous articles "The Year of the Great Break" and "Towards the Question of Agrarian Policies in the USSR"?"

"I consider them to be anti-Leninist."

Such unprecedented insolence sent shivers down the spines of those present.

They voted unanimously, maliciously, for Hanzha's expulsion from

the party. No less unanimously, they voted to place him on trial as a right opportunist, a kulak degenerate and a White Guard agent, a malicious slanderer of the line of the Central Committee and General Secretary Comrade Stalin.

And the trial took place, and the procurator's angry, class-oriented speech thundered away, and the judges looked sternly, mercilessly at Hanzha, who during the most difficult time of class struggle had shown himself to be a deserter, a political mercenary, a traitor to the world proletariat. Everything was clear to these righteous judges; not a single doubt touched their class-pure hearts. They had convicted him even before the trial had begun.

So rise now everyone; the court has returned from a five-minute deliberation to deliver justice!

Rise, Comrade Olga, you've no need to hide your eyes from the judges! You found the strength in you to overcome your love for this man and told the court the whole truth, even if each of your words was a nail driven into the coffin of his sentence.

You're a brave woman, a true soldier, Comrade Olga!

Volodymyr Tverdokhlib, you can rise too. A young communist, a passionate soldier of the revolution! You too found it hard to speak out against your Uncle Vasyl, against your godfather, who – remember, Volodia? – used to place his wise hand on your impatient shoulder and say patiently: 'Eh, Volodia, Volodia, everything's not so simple, Volodia...!' And though your deep voice trembled and broke, you too condemned the former communist Hanzha as a hostile element.

Rise, the court is in session!

And why aren't you hurrying to rise, you there, who have turned grey overnight? Why are you hanging your head, why are your strong shoulders stooped? What burden has fallen upon you, pressing down on you so much, that it seems you'll no longer straighten till the day you die?

Clenching his teeth, tightly folding his fingerless palms, Hanzha rose.

Three years in prison and another three years deprivation of rights.

They would have handed down a harsher sentence, but they took his poor origins into consideration.

Not a single muscle twitched on Hanzha's face. As he left under escort he didn't even glance at Volodka or Olga. He had wrenched them both from his heart.

Enemies are nowhere near as frightening as treacherous friends.

The sword aimed at your breast is nowhere near as frightening as the knife which stabs you treacherously in the back.

No matter with what lofty ideals it was sharpened...

So there had been the trial, and the cell, and the first night in that cell – the most difficult night for a prisoner. And there were the thoughts which assail a man nowhere more than when he is behind bars. When he is left on his own: not for an hour or two, but for long years.

So we won't bother Hanzha on his first night – it's bad enough for him as it is. Let's move away from the bars, because the guard has already turned in our direction, straining his eyes and ears – God forbid, lest he sees us! He might take aim, according to the statutes and fire – and our souls will escape from our bodies!

So let's hurry back to our houses and thank the Lord that the windows still have no bars and the doors are without prison locks, that our house is far enough away for none of this to concern us.

I don't know, don't see, don't hear.

And that fellow who has just been imprisoned, I don't know him either, I've just heard about him from you now and I haven't even seen him anywhere.

I didn't go about the village with him, didn't have any long heart-to-heart conversations, didn't ask him for advice on how to live, whom to trust, on whom to rely. And if I ever did come across him by chance, then even then I sensed from the first glance that he wasn't quite right... You know, different in spirit... There was something about him which immediately put me on guard...

An enemy, you say? With the kulaks, you say? Up to his ears in mud...? My-my-my! Who would have thought...!

Although, if you think about it, it was heading that way. That Ginzburg... And then Marta... Prykhodko too... Not Ivan, but Mykola...

So you say he got all of three years...? Must have deserved it, no one metes out sentences for nothing... So that's how it is: you meet someone, chat with them, even invite them home, and there you go...! The people in this world! Couldn't warn you, could he: well, it's like this, don't come near me, because I'm sinking in mire. Watch out, or I might drag you down with me...

Hanzha, eh...

Try to stay friends with people after this! Try to see through them!

Olga and Comrade Tverdokhlib paid for not "seeing through". Straight from the trial they went to a meeting of the district committee bureau: they were examining the state of collectivization in the district, especially in Tarasivka. It was examined harshly, with down-to-earth forthrightness. And it was quite a shameful picture too: the percentage of collectivized farms was inadmissibly low, the village soviets were choked with class-hostile elements, the kulak was savagely obstructing the party's policies in the village.

Someone tried to speak up, asking where those kulaks were, for they had all been exiled the previous year. But Ivan Ivanovych, who was chairing the bureau meeting, decisively condemned this attempt at masking the class struggle in the village:

"We have kulaks in our midst. Kulaks!"

And with a firm open hand he pressed down on the sheet of paper before him.

"Comrade Tverdokhlib, how many kulaks were dispossessed in your village?"

"Two!" Volodka jumped to his feet like a schoolboy.

"And how many households are there in Tarasivka?"

"Over three hundred."

"So you see, comrades, they could only find two kulaks in over three hundred households. You think I can believe this fairy tale? Where was the Tarasivka communists' vigilance?"

Silence. Heads were lowered under the merciless glaring gaze of the first secretary.

Only Comrade Putko did not hang his head. He was sitting at the edge of the table, beside Comrade Suslov, so as not to be associated with the "rabble". And when Ivan Ivanovych asked angrily: 'Where?', when he pressed down on that sheet of paper, Mytrofan Onysymovych also pressed his hand down on the table and ran his censurious gaze over those present, as if posing the same question.

'Where was your class vigilance, that you missed so many kulaks? And if you had none, why didn't you come to borrow some from me? You crowded around Ginzburg, peered into his mouth? So eat what you've earned now, just don't include me in your ranks!'

"Comrade Suslov, I think the communists of Tarasivka need to be made an example of. So that others take notice."

The first secretary raised his hand and didn't even blink when Olga called out indignantly:

"And where were you?"

'Heh, where was I! Don't look now where I was then! I'm at the table now, in the presidium, you could say! And in that case I'll ask you the questions, not you me! In that case, receive a stern reprimand for allowing your class vigilance to be blunted and bear it cheerfully!'

What a woman, eh: 'Where were you?'

Tverdokhlib received only a rebuke. They took his youth into consideration, his short time in the party, his realization of his mistakes and his proper behaviour in court.

The procurator had even praised the bureau: we need more communists like him!

And it turned out that Volodia had not been punished so much, as encouraged at the bureau meeting. And when after the meeting Ivan Ivanovych asked him and Comrade Olga to remain behind for a talk, he shook their hands in parting and said:

"See that you don't let us down, comrades!"

And he told Volodia:

"We'll be recommending you for the head of the collective farm, Comrade Tverdokhlib. Can you manage?"

And Volodia almost choked with happiness.

'I'll manage, comrade, I'll manage! Even in the face of death and torture I won't stray from the party line!'

And it didn't matter that the collective farm wasn't even in the cradle yet, that nearly all the farmers of Tarasivka still dreamt of their own field, their own cattle, their own household – their own, not collectivized. That didn't matter. Volodka didn't doubt for a moment that he could force them to dream other dreams, sweeping from their stubborn heads those pernicious dreams.

There'll be a collective farm, Comrade Suslov! And the plan will be executed the full one hundred percent!

Excited, Volodka left the district committee offices. His ears were like lamps, his cheeks burned, his lips were one big smile. And everything would have been perfect, if it hadn't been for the memory of Uncle Vasyl, and if it wasn't for Comrade Olga: sullen, exhausted, with a grey face.

He came up to the sleigh, invited Comrade Olga to join him, and made an effort to console her:

"Perhaps they'll still let him out..."

Olga turned away and said nothing.

They rode out into the fields along the well-travelled winter road.

All around them there was snow: it had covered the boundaries and merged the plots, so one couldn't tell what was whose. The winter had united and collectivized the land, without asking for the farmers' consent, passing from one end to the other with a white plough, sowing everything with snow. But Volodka no longer saw the snow; instead he imagined lush wheat, and the circling rooks were replaced by happy people coming out in a group onto the collective-farm fields, to the accompaniment of the sweetest music to his party heart: the roar of tractors, the chugging of traction engines, the singing of threshers – and choice grain kept pouring into the collective-farm bins.

And then a train of carts set out to deliver the grain to the state. The first in the entire region, and he was up front there on the lead cart...

Aw, to hell with it!

Meanwhile Tarasivka was buzzing with alarm: save yourselves, if you can – misfortune is coming!

Who had begun this rumour? You never could find out who was the first to utter it, even if you went through the entire village with a fine-toothed comb.

Like the echoes of an alarm bell, like some fossilized hunk of froth left behind by the wave of people's hearsay, the figure of an old woman bent double stood black outside the village soviet. Until now she had lain peacefully on her oven, forgotten by all and sundry, but now she had been swept out all the way to the village soviet: weeping bitterly and inconsolably, she bathed in cold, senile tears.

"Why are you crying, granny?"

"How can I not cry, my son, when they're saying that everyone will be butchered...! It would be all right if they only butchered the officials, but they'll be butchering everyone without distinction..."

"Go on home, old woman, enough of your tears. Don't worry, no one will touch someone as old as you."

"You think they'll be checking who's old and who's young? They'll be butchering everyone."

"And who might be doing the butchering, granny?"

"How am I to know that, my son... If only they would leave the children alone...!"

"See that?" Volodka turned to Comrade Olga. "We haven't even arrived properly yet and the kulaks are already operating! Obviously they haven't dispossessed them enough!"

Grandpa Khlypavka stepped out of the village soviet in a sheepskin coat, felt boots and a hat inherited from the deceased husband of Grandma Natalka. Unharnessing the stallion, he informed them:

"There's so much talk here!"

"What kind of talk?" Volodka brought his eyebrows together in a stern line.

"All kinds." The old man avoided a direct reply, but immediately couldn't resist adding: "Volodia, is it true they'll be shaping a commune from our village? Everyone thrown in together, both men and women, and the children then being handed out like chicks among the households."

"Who told you that?"

"Well... the people are saying that," the old man brushed his beard. "Evidently some fellow passed through our village and said to prepare for the Last Judgement. Eat your fill, while there's still time, out of your own bowls, because you'll soon be sipping swill from a common cauldron."

"Instead of spreading hostile kulak gossip, you'd do better to hurry up and unharness the stallion, grandpa!" Volodia interrupted him angrily. "And tell the executives to call a meeting of the party committee!"

"Where's Vasyl then?" the old man asked. "Gone home? Or perhaps detained in town?"

"Detained!" Volodka burst out angrily this time. "Only not in town – in prison!"

"What do you mean – in prison?" the old man's jaw dropped.

"Just that: he received three years jail for counter-revolution! Is that clear...? And I've got no time to stand here idly chatting with you: unharness the horse and summon the executives!"

Volodka went into the village soviet, while the old man continued standing in the middle of the yard, completely bewildered.

'Oh, Vasyl, Vasyl! Why didn't you look after yourself, Vasyl?'

"Grandpa, you going to be hanging about here much longer?"

Volodka! Showing his true colours at last!

With trembling hands he unharnessed the stallion, led it off to the stable. And after he had brought the horse into its stall, he asked it with bitter reproach:

"So you lost your master?"

The horse sighed, guiltily exhaling into his face.

And then the old man could not hold back any longer and burst

into tears. He wiped his eyes with his soiled sleeve, but the tears kept coming and coming: disconsolate, salty, bitter.

'So that's how it turned out, Vasylko... Who would have thought... And he has the temerity to shout at me...'

He threw the horse some hay and left the stable. He made his way home, instead of following the executives. Undressing, he skulked about the house like a restless soul and then took a bottle of moonshine from the sideboard.

"To you, Vasylko!"

The moonshine burned the roof of his mouth, spreading inside like firewater. And meanwhile the old man was pouring another mug:

"May the Lord look over you!"

Grandpa Khlypavka had more to drink than he'd had in a long time. The alcohol hit him, driving the thick stagnant blood around his dilated old arteries, filling his flabby body with militant vigour. He grabbed his heavy pear-tree axe and set off to liberate Vasyl.

"I'll get you... you sons of bitches... may you burn in hell...!"

He made it to the village soviet and bumped into the post with the cast-iron rail and heavy hammer to raise the alarm in case of fire. He grabbed the hammer and began to pound the rail for all he was worth.

"Pe-eople, save Hanzha...!"

Volodka himself wrested the hammer from the old man's hands: he had raced out together with the party active at the painful shriek of metal.

"Lock him up in the cells. Let him sleep it off till morning."

The old man immediately calmed down, obediently letting himself be taken away to the slammer. He lay down on the straw, made his cheek comfortable in it and fell asleep.

Komsomol members, teachers and Committee of the Poor Peasant members – all part of the party active – returned to the village soviet alarmed and unhappy. The men did not look each other in the eye, doggedly smoking their home-grown tobacco, hiding behind the smoke. The female teachers quietly exchanged whispers, while Comrade Olga looked as if she had been taken down off the cross.

Yeah, it wasn't easy to forget a person...

The head of the village soviet. A communist who installed soviet power before everyone's eyes, one could say. Who fought for it, without regard for his health or his life.

"I don't understand: he was trusted by the chiefs in town, respected

by the people, and then suddenly he becomes an enemy...? How can it be?"

Petro Nesheret. Raising his thin eyebrows in bewilderment, he looked about him with pure, childlike eyes.

The men sucked on their cigarettes even more doggedly, becoming even more solidly swathed in smoke. Even Voldka felt confused, but he immediately took control of himself and said as sternly as he could:

"It's not for us to judge that, Petro! It's easier for them up there to see who is friend and who is foe. And if they've sentenced him, then there must have been a reason, and there's no point in engaging in demagogy!"

See how slickly he could turn his tongue! Trust the devil to pronounce words like that! The villagers lowered their heads in fright.

"That may be so," Nesheret agreed. "It's obviously easier for those up above to see these things..."

"And you didn't know that yet, poor soul?" Ivan Prykhodko asked derisively. "The chiefs don't have eyes like you and me: they can see clear through everything. For example, you've pottered about this earth forty odd years and you still don't know who you are. But the chiefs need only glance at you – and they can immediately determine your place: whether it's in jail or the work brigade..."

"Enough of that!" interrupted Tverdokhlib. See what they've brought it down to: placing the work brigade and prison on the same level! Better close that stupid trap of yours, Uncle Ivan, and thank your lucky stars that I've no time for you now (after having been in town, Volodka suddenly felt that he wielded frightening power: he could run whoever he liked out of the village). I've got to worry about the work brigade which we're setting up now, Uncle Ivan. "Well then... There's an idea that our TOZ* be made into an artel. And that those Komsomol members who aren't in the TOZ yet, should lodge applications today requesting to join the collective farm. Together with their parents. The poor peasants as well..."

"Can we think about it?"

Volodka looked sharply at the fellow who had asked the question:

"We'll think about it later! But now it's like this: either lodge your application or say goodbye to the TOZ! And the village too."

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* TOZ – Association for the Common Cultivation of Land.

"Why the village?" someone piped up near the door.

"We'll dispossess you...! Enough tiptoeing about!"

They left way after midnight: the village was already asleep, covered in a white winter blanket, and dreams passed from house to house as blue shadows. A light frost crackled and creaked: winter was not very fierce this year, thank God; it was a farmer's winter, one might say. Everything had been covered in snow, so the crops wouldn't freeze off, and the frosts were not too savage – so that all the dried manure and straw prepared back in the autumn for fuel would not be used up. If only winter could be like this every year!

"You just can't tell from year to year," chattered the peasants. "Remember the last one? Froze the ears right off you!"

"Yeah, but summer was like a proper summer. But with a winter like this one, a cold summer will follow. There'll be no time for an old man to warm his bones."

"Well, that remains to be seen. It's all in God's hands."

"Yeah, God... These days even God has fled so far in fright, that He can't see what's happening here. Whether you shout or whisper – it's all the same: He won't hear you."

"Ye-eah..."

But what that "yeah" was meant to mean no one would say out loud, although everyone understood what it was all about.

Which was why they spoke about anything at all as they parted: about the weather, the next harvest. Anything but that most burning, most alarming thing, the thing which made a man restless on any kind of bed, making the fluffiest pillows seem rock-hard.

It was a thorn in their sides until the very morning.

Because it's all right for you to yell about the collective farm, Volodka; you receive money for that from town now. A wage. Every month you have a fresh penny to tide you over. No matter what happens, you'll be able to pull through.

Tractors... Combines... They reap and thresh... But will they also thresh me in the one sweep, crunching my bones to pieces?

And why make haste? I haven't even grown accustomed to being in the TOZ, and you're already dragging me off to the collective farm.

You say we'll be well off? Rivers of milk and honey? Electricity? I just press a button and the ploughs do the work themselves, press another button – and loaves of bread tumble onto my table... You're a good speaker, Volodia, a good speaker... I could listen to you

forever about the rivers of milk and the paradise of the future. But let's strike the deal this way: you first get those buttons and then encourage me to join the work brigade.

That's what each of them would have told Volodia, if he hadn't been afraid. As it was, they only pulled their hats over their eyes and muttered:

"Ye-eah..."

Volodka was so fierce, he was sputtering: only twelve people out of the thirty-seven activists had agreed to join the work brigade. They should all be thrown out, so there would be neither sight nor sound of them! Kulak underlings...!

It was easier with the Komsomol members who were holding back. Tomorrow morning there would be a Komsomol meeting and the question would be posed directly: either join the collective farm or say goodbye to your Komsomol ticket! But what should he do with people who dug their heels in, like Protasiy? 'If you keep pestering me, I'll leave the TOZ too.' Volodka could take no more and slammed his fist on the table: 'Stop this counter-revolutionary talk!' But the fellow reacted as if someone had poured hot coals down his back, roaring back at Volodka: 'Have we got freedom here or not? Go and slam your fist down at your wife, if you feel like it!'

So there was the total work brigade for you! There was your one hundred percent collectivization!

At the thought of Comrade Suslov, at the thought of his impending meeting with the district committee secretary, he began to burn all over.

What would he tell him? How could he face him?

And Volodka could not sleep all night long. And morning would inevitably come – as grey as boredom, blinking at him like the devil from under bushy eyebrows, not promising anything good. Except perhaps a meeting with Grandpa Khlypavka.

"Slept well?"

Silence. Wouldn't even look at him. Bloated from the moonshine. Enough straw in his ample beard to stoke a furnace.

"Aren't you ashamed, getting drunk like that!" Volodka said a little more gently this time. "Do you at least remember what you were up to here yesterday?"

The old man's lips moved, his beard jerked.

"Got the whole village out of bed, punched me in the face..."

Only now did he look at Volodka. And in his red swollen eyes there

was the fierce obstinacy of old age:

"You son of a bitch, you deserved worse than that...! Pht!"

He spat at his feet and turned and left the village soviet. But as he walked along the street, he couldn't calm down. His heart ached again as he recalled Hanzha. He entered his house and sat on the bench near the entrance, as if this wasn't his own home at all, and hung his head low.

Grandma Natalka rushed up to him: "What's the matter with you, old man?"

The old man raised his eyes. They were dull, covered with a grey veil of sadness:

"Bake some pies, Natalka dearest... With potato and beans."

'Oh, God!' Grandma Natalka became petrified. 'You aren't preparing to die, are you?'

For as long as they had lived together he had never called her "Natalka dearest". A damned devil – yes. An Egyptian Satan. Even a witch. And suddenly here was this "Natalka dearest"!

"What's wrong with you, old man?"

"Bake the pies, Natalka dearest, boil up some eggs, kill a chicken as well, I'll get the bacon... I'm going to take Vasyl a food parcel."

And the oven glowed with coals, and the pies baked away. Eggs were boiled hard and the speckled chicken floated in boiling water. And people came to their home bringing whatever each had.

"How will you get it all to him?" Grandma Natalka fretted, packing the large basket.

"I'll manage. Good people will give me a hand."

And they did help him. Gave him a lift right up to the prison.

"God bless you, good people! May the Lord bring you health!" the old man thanked then and rapped his walking stick against the large, ironclad gate.

A small window opened and a stern face appeared:

"What do you want? Don't you know the rules?"

But the old man wasn't one to be frightened off. He took a step closer, courteously took off his hat and said:

"Good health to you! Can you get Vasyl for me, good man!"

"Which Vasyl is that?"

"Hanzha, of course. My compatriot from Tarasivka. The former head of our village soviet. I've got a food parcel for him here."

"Use the door on the right for parcels," the head in the window explained and disappeared, slamming the window shut.

He found the door on the right. And there were people beyond that door. They spent a long time explaining to the bewildered old man that the prisoner Hanzha had been transferred to the prison in Poltava.

"We don't keep convicted men here."

The old man stood around outside the prison a while and then headed off to see his son, who worked for the railways.

"Well, son, I don't care how you do it, but you have to get this food parcel to Poltava. To the prison, for Vasyl."

And his son was obliged to deliver it. Not straight away, of course, but when it was convenient. However it was winter outside, luckily, and nothing spoiled.

And the day would dawn when the guard would unlock the cell door in the Poltava prison and hand the heavy basket to Vasyl Hanzha. And Hanzha would empty the mountain of goodies onto a blanket:

"Crowd round, boys, help yourselves..."

And he would add a little more softly:

"See, they didn't forget about me."

He would stand and watch the boys help themselves, relishing the simple peasant food.

And someone would ask in surprise, with a full mouth:

"Why aren't you having any?"

"Later maybe," Hanzha would reply. He would eventually take a pie, chewing it for a long time, fixing his gaze on the barred window, and his gaunt, dirty, unshaven face would glow with an incurable longing...

And meanwhile a mighty storm was raging in his village of Tarasivka.

Putko, or Mytrofan Onysymovych, as he was known, had arrived early that morning. He immediately ordered that the party active be assembled. And after the frightened members had gathered in the village soviet, Putko rose to his feet and ran his displeased gaze around the room:

"So what's this happening here, my dearest ones? The class enemy is rabidly agitating against the collective farm, and you've hung out your ears? How am I to interpret this?"

He refused to remove his sheepskin coat and hat, even though the room was well heated. Sweat was already dripping from under his hat, but he would hold out; he wouldn't take anything off for the mo-

ment, so that the Tarasivka active would understand how displeased he was with them.

"How many have enrolled to date, Comrade Tverdokhlib?"

"Twenty-nine households," Volodka replied guiltily. In these past few days he had grown thin, swarthy, and but for his belt he would have lost his pants on the road.

"Twenty-nine?" Mytrofan Onysymovych snorted. "That's peanuts...! Other villages have already been one hundred percent collectivized! What will the party say to us when it hears this shameful figure? Do you think I'll be taking this figure to the district committee with me? Or perhaps the provincial committee? You can go and report it yourselves, my friends, you yourselves can blush before the proletariat!"

There was a baited look, a deathly nostalgia in Volodka's eyes, and the activists had hung their heads too, afraid to take a breath. Only the militiamen who had accompanied Putko here felt at ease: they exchanged whispers and chuckled. They could obviously afford to laugh: they accompanied the dispossessed to the district centre.

Mytrofan Onysymovych's last words brought red blotches to Comrade Olga's face.

"May I say something?"

"Wait, I haven't finished yet," he barked, even though he himself was about to ask if anyone had anything to say. But that request would have been at his bidding and this woman had raised her hand herself. Besides, she had been Hanzha's mistress. We won't let you forget that until the day you die, dearie! You'll remain forever 'under suspicion'. "Yes, well then, where was I interrupted?"

"The figure," Volodka said timidly.

"It's a shameful figure, comrades! I will add bluntly: the revolution was not enacted to bring such figures to the district centre! So... And now, does anyone have anything to say?" He seemed to forget that Comrade Olga had asked to speak. Ah no, he hadn't forgotten: he lay a stern eye upon her: "You wanted to say something?"

"Yes!"

Olga rose sharply to her feet, straightened her jacket, as if she were still wearing a tunic instead of these very ordinary civilian clothes.

"I would like to say, comrade, that you are behaving very wrongly here. Who gave you the right to insult us all? To berate us like children!"

Tania cowered beside her: Putko seemed so frightening to her. He

stood up, rolled his eyes and slammed his fist down on the table.

"Let's finish with the demagogy here!"

The militiamen immediately grew quiet, looking expectantly at the head of the district executive committee: should we grab her or not?

"Come on, let's have questions which are to the point, my dear," Putko said more softly this time.

Aha, so she was to be left alone for the moment. That's all right, we can sit around until the command sounds: our work won't run away from us.

Olga turned white with rage:

"I'll be notifying the district committee about your behaviour here! And please don't 'my dear' me!"

"Go ahead and notify them," Putko finally sat down, realizing that he had probably overdone things. He finally removed his hat and wiped his hair with his hand. "Obviously, I didn't mean to say here that you're all in league with the kulaks or the opportunists..."

Immediately the room seemed to brighten, as if two suns had peered into the window instead of one. Even the militiamen's eyes softened: what have you got to fear, comrades? We didn't come for you and we won't be taking you away!

"Therefore," Putko continued very amiably now, "from today consider yourselves mobilized for total collectivization. We'll get on with it in earnest... You've cajoled the people, toyed with them, played at demagogy – enough of that...! Have you broken the village up into work brigades?"

"Yes."

"Does everyone know whose section is where?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll begin today. At seven this evening we call a general meeting of the village. On the agenda will be total collectivization and no more questions asked! And make sure every last person is present. Die if you like, but you must ensure everyone is there...! Understood?"

"Understood," the rank and file answered sullenly.

"Then we've finished with this for the moment... Now we come to the second question: the liquidation of the kulaks and their underlings..."

"But we've already liquidated them!"

"That wasn't liquidation, that was only a game of hide and seek with them!" Mytrofan Onysymovych replied abrasively. "You only

grabbed what was growing on the top, but you left behind all the roots. So you want those roots, come spring, to choke our collective-farm harvest? We won't let that happen!"

"Who else do we dispossess?"

"That's what we'll decide here and now... That's why we're assembled here... Comrade Tverdokhlib, grab a sheet of paper there and a pen, and start writing down the names!"

Volodka tore a sheet of paper out of an exercise book, dipped his pen into the inkwell and paused in anticipation. Everyone fell silent: they looked as if bewitched at that sharp pen hovering over the blank paper and were afraid to breathe.

"Well, why are you silent?" Putko voiced his displeasure. "Name the families. Do I need to ask each of you in turn, or what?"

The men became even more still. Each was praying feverishly lest he be the first! Because what can I say, who can I name? My neighbour? A godparent or an in-law? I won't be able to look people in the face after that!

"Perhaps you could tell us, comrade? It's easier for you to see from your high position where we've still got kulaks."

"You want to hide behind my back?" Putko became angry once more. "Then I'll tell you very responsibly: it won't work... Comrade Tverdokhlib, come on, you can begin. Who in your village has grown a kulak skin?"

The pen in Volodka's hand hovered over the paper, as if taking aim at whom to shoot.

"Prychodko, Mykola Oleksiyovych..."

"Then write him down."

"But he's been in the Red Army!" Ivan shrieked, realizing the consequences for his brother. He jumped to his feet and hugged his hat imploringly: "Good people, speak up, don't let an innocent man suffer!"

"Come on, let's have no yelling here...! Comrade Tverdokhlib, how many horses does the aforementioned have?"

"A pair."

"Oxen?"

"A pair as well."

"And cows?"

"Two cows, a heifer and a steer."

"What else does he have?"

"Twenty sheep... Two pigs... Seventeen beehives... Well, as for his

fowl, I haven't counted them... He's got a full yard there."

"A uniformed kulak, then," Putko summed up. "And don't you weep crocodile tears before us here, comrade, and (this was addressed to Ivan), don't stop our eyes up with talk of the Red Army. If he's turned into a kulak after being in the Red Army, then all the more shame! Sit down, comrade, and don't force me to think that the class enemy has bribed you."

"This is his brother," Volodka said quietly.

"Family ties have no place here!" Mytrofan Onysymovych scowled. "We make decisions on a class basis, and there can be no partiality towards godparents or brothers! And it wouldn't be a sin to take a closer look at you too, comrade..."

"He's our activist," Volodka took pity on Ivan. "He was the first to sign up for the TOZ, he's poor, has lots of children..."

"What about the collective farm?"

"He's applied to join there too."

"All right then, sit down! Just get it into your thick skull: if you keep defending the kulaks, you'll follow them out of here... Written the name down?" This was addressed to Volodka. "Now, who else do you have that's a camouflaged kulak?"

A few more souls were named, those who until this day had been considered solid middle peasants, civilized farmers, who only a year earlier had received congratulatory diplomas, who had been praised in the newspapers, cited as examples for others to emulate. Just as well we took no heed of those impassioned calls. Didn't bust our guts, didn't work like black oxen, didn't tear the last crumb from our mouths as we strove to become civilized farmers. Otherwise we too would have ended up on that list, on that frightening sheet of paper, from which no name could be expunged out with even the sharpest axe.

Surname, name, patronymic.

A mere three words, and beyond them lay the long road to Siberia.

That sheet of paper was frightening – worse than the grave!

But Putko was still not happy. He still wanted more. Only six dispossessed out of three hundred households? It seemed frivolous. Incredulous. More militiamen than that had come with him. Besides, the kulaks were there. They were there, they only had to be extricated properly!

And another small thought, of a tactical bent, so to speak: the farmer couldn't be won over with bare hands, he couldn't be bought

with rosy words. From time immemorial the peasant had grown accustomed to treat all words with suspicion, especially when those words came from those in power. Because you wag your tongue about and leave, and I end up screaming and beating my foolish head for listening to you.

It wasn't enough to simply cajole the peasant; he still had to be frightened, to be shown a strong stick like a stubborn child so that he would feel the justice of our words not only with his brain, but his back as well.

These profound tactical thoughts in fact forced Mytrofan Onysymovych to fight for the lengthening of the list of candidates for dispossession.

"So then, you have no more kulaks...? Hiding them?"

An oppressive silence. The room seemed to grow darker. Had the sun sunk below the horizon or hidden behind a cloud, that it had suddenly became so gloomy?

"All right... We'll approach it from another angle then: who was most vocal against the collective farm...? Come on, Tverdokhlib, let's have the names!"

And again Volodka's throat went dry. And his tongue became rough. And with that mischevious tongue of his he named several peasants.

And among them – Hanna Martynenko. Nightingale.

He had named her, had not maligned the truth. For it was she who had raised hell among the village women who had brought their washing to the ice-hole. She shouted so loudly that her voice echoed:

"I'll strangle my husband with these here hands – but I won't let him join the commune! So that he can sleep with other women under the one blanket? To hell with their commune!"

"Is that exactly what she shouted?" Putko asked.

"Very close to it."

"Then write down: Hanna Martynenko, kulak underling, conducted hostile agitation against Soviet power..."

"But she was only on about the commune."

"That's the same thing... Who is conducting total collectivization? The Soviet authorities. So if you're against the collective farm, therefore you're an enemy of the Soviet government. Clear?"

"Clear..."

Although it wasn't clear to everyone. Tania, for instance.

She couldn't understand at all, couldn't accept having to dispos-

sess Mykola Oleksiyovych and Palazhka Danylivna. She just couldn't clamber onto the only true class platform, that on which you tossed aside pity and personal sympathies, and chopped the enemies' heads off!

What kind of enemies were they anyway? Danylivna – an enemy? Danylivna, always with that gentle smile on her kind face? Oleksiyovych, with his calloused hands, proud of the fact that all his wealth was due to his own hard work?

So why dispossess them?

Or the Martynenkos, for example. Those Nightingales, who had never had a spare piece of bread from time immemorial.

What kind of kulaks were they?

What was happening here?

With forlorn eyes filled with trepidation, Tetiana looked at Tverdokhlib, Comrade Olga, at the people sitting beside her: why are you all silent? Get up and say something...! Say that all this is lies! That this is wrong!

They were silent. They didn't get up. Didn't utter a single word. Even Ivan Prychodko, whose older brother's name had been entered on that horrifying list, even he, after Putko had explained to him the "class essence" in simple terms, sat there without a murmur.

They were silent. Was it because all of them were already on that platform, so deftly erected by Mytrofan Onysymovych?

Only Tania still tried to thrash about, but even she finally closed her lips. So firmly, that they turned grey.

For who was she – a priest's daughter, a kulak's wife, the sister of a man purged from the party and herself recently thrown out of a Soviet establishment – who was she to contradict them?

So keep quiet, suspect woman, you uncertain element, keep quiet and don't breathe, if you want to live longer in this world! Lie low with your small truth, which is nothing compared to the great class truth now embodied by Mytrofan Onysymovych.

So just sit there, Tania, and keep your mouth shut! Sit there in silence! Thank your lucky stars that you weren't assigned to the brigade which is to dispossess the Prykhodkos. Or the Martynenkos. To destroy the nest of those nightingales, who for long generations had enchanted the village with their singing.

And anyway, they won't be slitting their throats, won't be slicing off their heads, but only deporting them to Siberia. People somehow managed to survive there too, and they would be glad to listen to

these southern nightingales.

They would enter a hurriedly erected dugout, sit down on a bench made of freshly-planed cedar planks and ask in their Russian tongue:

"Come on, *khokhols**, sing us that song... The one you always sing... About the wind which flies along, but never reaches your Ukraine."

And the *khokhols* would sing for them. Why shouldn't they sing for these kind people who gave them shelter, helped them build a dugout?

They would sing for them.

About the wind. About distant Ukraine...

They did the dispossessing that very day, without delay. Placed them on the carts, just in what they were standing, and took them off to Khorolivka, straight to the railway station, where the goods wagons were already waiting for them.

And Hanna screamed frighteningly, damning everyone:

"You'll shed our tears yet...! May you all be damned! May the earth not bear you upon its surface!"

Oleksiyovych remained silent. He sat on the sledge, hanging his legs over the side. They looked like broken roots pulled out of the ground. And after the horses had set off, his feet scraped over the snow like a dead man's.

Danylivna continually kept reminding Tania:

"Watch after the heifer... And when spring comes plant the cabbage on the land facing the meadow..."

Tetiana nodded and no longer saw Oleksiyovych, or Danylivna, or Vasyl for all the tears.

And so it was that they disappeared into the mist.

Only their house leered with the blackness of its open door, calling after its owners. And that inhuman scream was frightening and eerie...

And the people would assemble that evening in the village soviet for a general meeting. They would all come, for Mytrofan Onysymovych's tactical move had had its effect.

And after Mytrofan Onysymovych's speech and those of Tverdokhlib and Comrade Olga, and Ivan Prychodko from the non-party masses, Putko would rise to his feet and rest his heavy hands on the table:

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* *khokhol* – derogatory Russian term for Ukrainians.

"That clear to everyone?"

"Well yes... Why not..."

"If that's the case then there's no need for any discussions... I put to the vote the voluntary entry of the entire village into the artel. Come on, those against Soviet power, raise your hands!"

Yeah, someone should be so foolish! Some had already raised their hands and had left for Siberia with them still raised.

"No one... Then it's clear – everyone is for. I welcome and congratulate you. We still have to elect a board, the candidates for which Comrade Olga will read out."

And after Comrade Olga had read out several surnames:

"No objections...? Then we'll put it to the vote. Those against Soviet power, raise your hands...! No one... Unanimous... Comrade Tverdokhlib, you can have the floor now."

And Volodka would rise and run his happy gaze about the room and say in a voice hoarse with joy:

"The collective farm has to have a name... Mytrofan Onysymovych has suggested we name our artel in honour of our dear leader and teacher, Comrade Stalin."

And the meeting would finish, and the people would leave in deep, silent thought. And then they would assemble with their livestock and their equipment and seed; and then they would take it all back again, after the appearance of Comrade Stalin's article "Giddiness From Successes", where it would be written in black on white that the collective farm was a voluntary thing, and in vain would the grief-stricken Volodka try to convince his fellow villagers, grabbing them by the hands and the flaps of their coats, to change their minds and not destroy his beloved collective farm: only a mere fifty households would remain.

Serves you right! Don't usurp power, don't force people, don't distort the party's policies.

And Volodka would be severely punished for that distortion: he would receive a rebuke at the district committee bureau meeting. And looking at Tverdokhlib with eyes as clear as the first secretary's, Comrade Putko would be sternly asking at that meeting how he, Communist Tverdokhlib, could have fallen so low as to use non-party methods of collectivization, violating the instructions of our dear leader and teacher Comrade Stalin.

And Mytrofan Onysymovych would not be spared a severe rebuke either. This would come a little later when he and the first secretary

would be summoned to the provincial capital and their superiors would look at them with piously clear eyes and ask how they could have stooped to such mistakes. The same superiors, who only a week earlier had telephoned unendingly, pressing, for a round figure, the full one hundred percent. Only a round figure! So round, that it could roll all the way to Moscow.

However wise Mytrofan Onysymovych wouldn't breathe a word about this. He wouldn't breathe a word, wouldn't become indignant, but would thank them for the harsh lesson, for prompting him and giving him orders. And he would dash back to Khorolivka to "correct the situation".

And spring would come, and the snows would melt, and the ploughed fields would appear black, begging grain from the warm hands of the farmer.

All this would come to pass; it was inevitable. But meanwhile Tetiana, having seen off her dispossessed landlords on their long road, returned to the house.

It was empty, bare. Except for a bench, a bed and a table: the rest had been taken away by the dispossession commission. Even the sashes had been ripped off the walls, for they were Prykhodko's, not the teacher's.

She sat and recalled Oleh for some reason.

Where was he now, how was he?

"If there was only my wife, I wouldn't hesitate twice about moving in with you. But there are the children, Tania, the children!"

"How could you have married her without being in love?"

"Ah, Tania! Life is so entangled... Everything is so complicated..."

She looked into his weak-willed, unhappy face and felt sorry for him... and disappointed.

Perhaps because he was so pitiful, she never told him anything. That she had become pregnant, that she was expecting his child.

She only said:

"Well then, you've got a family and you must return to them."

She only smiled bitterly when he exclaimed:

"You're throwing me out?!"

She ran her hand over his soft, submissive hair and comforted him like a sick child:

"It'll pass... Off you go then."

She pushed him away, afraid she wouldn't be able to control herself and might scream.

"Go then!"

And so he had left, not understanding anything. He had left offended and after that had never returned to Tarasivka.

Well, perhaps it was better that way. To make a clean break: straight away, without leaving the smallest thread of attachment.

Tania continued to stand in the middle of the room and her little Andriy came up to her timidly. And after she ran her hand over his head, he became more daring:

"Mum, draw a man for me!"

And he dragged her over to the window.

Tania did not ask him what kind of a man he wanted to see: she had drawn them for him before. Breathing onto the glass, she traced a circle. The contours of a face, eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth.

However Andriyko was not pleased with something. He scowled, looking daggers at the fellow.

"I don't like him! Rub him out!"

"Why?"

"He's bad. He's not smiling. He's crying."

Tania took a closer look and indeed he looked as if he was crying. A grimace had contorted his face, like a clown who was forced to entertain people, hiding his own crushed heart under the make-up.

"Just a minute, we'll draw a happier fellow."

She rubbed him out, drew another circle. But this one too looked more like he was crying than smiling. And the more Tania rubbed out, breathed on the glass and drew, the sadder the faces became.

* * *

You couldn't say that there had been a poor harvest this year.

The year was normal, with May rains and June thunderstorms. The sun-baked blue of the sky was pregnant with turbid clouds, and grey kerchiefs of rain rocked over the villages, the woods, the valleys, the boundless spaces of the steppes.

People hid under thatched roofs, under carts, throwing light summer clothing over their head and shoulders, while the horses and oxen set their steaming sides under the clear watery whips and shuddered only when the evil lightning exploded with a frightening crackle right above them, rending the ragged clouds.

"Lord preserve us...!" white-faced women crossed themselves and drove the children away from the windows, so they wouldn't attract

the heavenly fire. Because the year before last someone had been peering out like that in a neighbouring village and when the lightning hit, it went clear through the house. Didn't burn the house down, but mowed down the whole family. They lay down in a neat little row: the father, the mother and three children. All of them black, like tadpoles. And the lightning was found behind the house: a stone arrow a good sagene long and still so hot that you couldn't touch it.

"Lord preserve and protect us!"

A hasty cross made at the windows and the door, the oven closed off. Those who figured this wasn't enough placed icons in the windows as well: Saint Illia wouldn't raise his hand at Christ or the Mother of God!

The worst passed over, thundering and flashing away, and the children rushed out into the steady joyous rain, jumping about the wet grass, the small boiling puddles, screaming ecstatically:

Come down, rain, come down,
Upon grandma's cabbages...!

Come down, rain, come down. Don't miss a single field, a single plot of ploughed, tilled, sown land. Let it grow, let it flower, let our hard work, our joyous blood and sweat, bear fruit. The whole world is standing at our backs, waiting for us to feed it.

Shower down, rain, shower down, and you, earth, bear for us. Bear oats and barley, rye-wheat and every other grain, so there will be enough for everyone: those who yell, and those who are silent, and may there still be some left for us.

The wheat and rye grew, the grain ripened, ripened and bent submissively before the sickles, scythes and harvesters. Into large, tightly bound sheaves, into ricks and shocks, and then -- onto carts and drays.

And the oak wheels creaked and sang; mountains of grain sailed over to the collective-farm threshing yard. And the thresher hummed day and night, and the golden grain poured in a constant stream, to be winnowed and poured into sacks and bags, then onto drays: the first dispatch of grain to the state.

The first in the district.

The plan finished in seven days! This wasn't like in the past: three hundred households, three hundred farmers, and each taking care not to deliver it before his neighbour. They carted it into their yard, the storehouse, and thudded away with their flails until the new year: there'll be time, it's not urgent.

Two hundred and thirty farmers had already united into an artel. Seventy remained. The most stubborn. The most obstinate. Those who weren't frightened off by the large taxes – no matter how they were throttled, they stood their ground, didn't come crawling to join the collective farm:

"Sign me in as well, because I haven't any strength left! Whichever way you look at it – it's ruin all the same!"

"That's just it, uncle! What did you expect? That we would make allowances for you Indians? Understand all the advantages of collectivization now?"

"Sure. How couldn't I, when the produce tax ground into the dust even those who worked for themselves!"

Although these held off for all they were worth. Grabbing hold of their own property, they wanted nothing to do with common property, because common property was the devil's property, because only loafers had it good there – those ragamuffins who from time immemorial had gone about with large spoons and small shovels.

Having had enough trouble with them during the grain delivery in previous years, they wisened up this year, setting up two public threshing areas for the Indians, right there in the fields. They were sternly ordered not to cart the sheaves home, but to thresh them there on these common threshing areas.

"Why should I take it all the way there, when my house is just here!" objected the Indians. "I'll bring it in, thresh it, work out how much to keep for seed, how much for the family, the animals, so that we can survive till the next harvest, and I'll deliver the rest. Holy cross, I will!"

They didn't believe him. Neither his word, nor his holy cross.

"You can tell that fairy tale to some other fool, uncle, because we heard it all last year."

They turned into the threshing areas, drew up to the threshing machine:

"Off you go and don't look back! First you can deliver what's prescribed, and then you can judge how much you need for seed and what you need to stuff yourself with."

So whether you liked it or not, you had to turn off. This must be the end of the world approaching, if you couldn't be your own master! You stopped your cart in that threshing area, threw your sheaves onto the ground, looked daggers at the threshing machine which whined insatiably, spitting out chewed-up straw, and sullenly

awaited your turn to pour the still warm grain into sacks and load them back onto the cart. Then off to the grain delivery centre in the district town, and not on your own, but in an organized fashion, in a train, so that even a blind man could see how friendly and unanimous we were in our desire to fulfil the first commandment.

Let it be, it is delivered. To the last grain. In the private sector the plan was fulfilled and overfulfilled a full one hundred and ninety per-cent. They even wrote about it in the papers, a dozen of which Tverdokhlib brought back from town and handed out to the agitators. He ordered them to each assemble a dozen households and to read the article out loud: let the people hear and rejoice; how they had been praised!

They listened.

About the accelerated tempo in grain delivery.

'When many of our districts give far less grain than they did in the previous year, and then complain that they cannot fulfil the plan, that tells us that hostile, kulak elements have become entrenched there, former Petliurites...'

"Well, it's obvious! They probably haven't even dispossessed anyone there."

"And what will happen to those hardheads for not fulfilling their quota?"

"They've written that here too. Listen."

They listened to the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR and the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Communist Party of Ukraine about the blacklisting of such villages and districts:

'As for blacklisted villages and districts, the following measures are to be taken:

1. Cease the delivery of all goods, completely end all state and co-operative trade, ship out all existing goods.

2. Cease the granting of credit, carry out the pre-term recovery of credits.

3. Inspect the collective farms in these areas and eradicate them of counter-revolutionary elements.'

"That's about the collective farmers... What about the private farmers!"

"There's something here about them too."

'In the village of Yurchykhy a band of kulak underlings sabotaged the plan of grain delivery. A field court sentenced the whole band

to imprisonment with terms ranging from two to five years, with confiscation of all property. After the arrest of this band the rate of grain delivery immediately began to increase and at January 1, 1933, that is, on the day of the trial, the private farmers had fulfilled ninety percent of their grain deliveries.'

"Aha, so they fulfilled them after all."

"So would you!"

"Well that's obvious..."

Having heard their fill, they dispersed. One couldn't say that they went away overjoyed, but each bore a reassuring thought with him: 'Thank God, I've already delivered my quota. I'll manage till the new year somehow, and who knows, maybe our government will soften a bit by then...'

However before the stinging pains inflicted by this grain delivery had passed, uninvited guests again appeared in the farmer's yard:

"Deliver the grain, uncle!"

"What grain?"

"The grain you're supposed to deliver to the state."

"Lord Almighty, I've already delivered my share! Here are the receipts!"

And he dashed off to the icons and took out the pieces of paper not yet even covered in dust. He unfolded them with trembling fingers, almost crying:

"Everything is written down here. I delivered everything to the last grain."

But they didn't even want to look:

"You can wipe your arse with these receipts! So what if you've delivered that grain. You still have to give us what is demanded by the forthcoming plan!"

And the farmer could stand it no longer: he would dash outside to the storehouse, and crucify himself across the door:

"I won't let you in! Cut me up, bury me alive, I won't give you any more!"

At first he would be gently cajoled. They would patiently explain to him that the bread was for industrialization, the Five Year Plan, to build a happy future sooner. 'For your own children, uncle!'

But he wouldn't have a bar of it. He would shake his head about stubbornly. 'I don't need that happiness of yours, you can keep every last skerrick of it for yourselves; just leave me my grain! Because what will I feed my children, if you scrape it all out?'

Having achieved nothing during the individual discussion, they would try to influence him collectively: to work him over at a meeting. A representative from the district centre would speak to them, paint a picture of the situation, both internal and external, making everything as clear as day.

"Do you understand now, comrade farmers, why we need to fulfil and overfulfil the forthcoming plan of grain delivery to the state? This plan is completely and totally achievable."

And then a sullenly sarcastic remark would sound from the ranks:

"The plan is obviously achievable, only there's no grain."

And at this point the cajolers would lose their tempers.

"No grain, you say? Not a single grain? All right then, we'll do a check of your storehouses and bins!"

But the farmers weren't born yesterday either. They had learnt a thing or two during the times of militant communism, the produce allotments and produce detachments. They had learnt and had not forgotten. While the arguments and persuasion went on, they quietly dug secret pits, out of sight of their neighbours, lined them with straw and filled them with grain. The bare minimum was set aside till the new harvest. This time they didn't greet the brigades with arms crucified across doors, but with storehouse doors wide open:

"Here, take a look! I don't even know how we'll get through this year."

However the brigade members weren't born yesterday either:

"Tell us, uncle, where you've buried it! Because we'll find it anyway and it'll be worse for you then! We'll skin you alive!"

"Skin me," the farmer would say, waving his hand in despair. "Skin me to make your boots and breeches, and take my children together with my skin. Take them away so that I won't see them die a hungry death."

He would stand there and watch them looking for the grain, rummaging about in the house and behind it, gouging the clay floor, attacking the frozen earth with their probes. And if they found that assiduously camouflaged pit:

"So you've no more grain, you say?"

And the farmer wouldn't utter another word. His wife would be wailing, his children screaming, and he would stand speechless like a corpse.

And only after they had harnessed his mare into his cart with the last sacks of grain, only after they had set off out of the yard, would

he dash forward and grab the brigade leader by the sleeve:

"What will I sow next season now?"

And such despair would flow from his deadened eyes, such inhuman sorrow, that even the brigade leader's heart would contract. And softly, so that no one else could hear, he would try to console the farmer:

"Don't fret, Yukhym: come spring, we'll give you some seed grain."

"Then why are you taking it away?"

"So that your children won't eat it."

Hear that Yukhym, so that your children won't eat it! So that you won't take even a single grain when your children are bawling with mouths torn open with hunger:

"Daddy, I want to eat...! Daddy, I want some bread...!"

When you yourself, bloated and blue, as if you had indeed been skinned alive, when you, unable to stand that hopeless mewing, tear open the soiled shirt on your chest, roll your eyes horrifically and scream:

"Here, eat me, just be quiet!"

They cleaned out the Indians and then set about the collective farmers. Because the plan is the plan, because you have to fulfil it even if it means you have to die! Because Comrade Stalin himself would say directly and unambiguously in his speech "Summary of the First Five Year Plan":

'Instead of the 500-600 million poods of commodity grain laid in store during the period of reconstruction of the private peasant household, the party has achieved the possibility now of laying in store 1200-1400 million poods of commodity grain annually.'

Is that clear, Comrade Tverdokhlib?

Is that clear, comrade village communists and Komsomol members?

Is that clear, comrade brigade members and grain delivery managers?

Not five to six hundred million, but one thousand four hundred million poods of grain.

And what does this mean?

In hard figures it means that Tarasivka has to deliver twice as much grain as it delivered in the bumper year of 1928. To fulfil and overfulfil! Because Comrade Stalin couldn't have made a mistake in naming that figure. Comrade Stalin knew better than you or me how much Yukhym, Petro or Mykyta had harvested. And there's no point

expounding your rotten liberalism, expressing all kinds of hostile thoughts that the plan was not realistic, that there would be no grain left for seed, that if we were to fulfil and overfulfil this forthcoming plan to the end, we would all die of hunger! That's all right! Because Comrade Stalin has stated clearly that '...we have undoubtedly achieved the position, where the material standing of the workers and peasants has steadily improved in our country. This can only be doubted by the rabid enemies of Soviet power.' Is it clear to you now, Comrade Tverdokhlib, exactly who can doubt the fact that, after handing over all his harvest down to the last grain, the peasant will continue to live in even greater prosperity?

And what have you done? Who gave you permission to distribute twenty percent of the harvest to the collective farmers for their workdays...? You're silent...? Just as well! So listen to us: immediately retrieve all the illegally distributed grain, including the grain the collective farmers might have grown on their private plots! And close all the mills until the completion of the grain procurement...

Go and fulfil it. And read Comrade Stalin more often!

And once more the village began to shake with procurement fever. Now they no longer differentiated between collective farmers and Indians – it was all swept up systematically. They plunged probes into the earth, crawled about attics, knocked down ovens and chimneys. And during the night, pricking up their ears, they listened for the thud of a pestle, for the creak of secretly made handmills.

To the sounds of lamenting, groans and wailing the Tarasivka peasants fulfilled this plan as well, fulfilling it with honour, as the newspapers wrote. Not leaving a single grain for themselves. They fulfilled it and launched into merry songs to celebrate their happy life.

About the people's father, dear Stalin:

Stalin sits in the meadow
Gnawing on a horse's leg:
"Oh my, what terrible filth
Is this Soviet horse veal!"

About the good life:

Hammer and sickle in the storehouse,
Death and hunger in the peasant's home,
And atop the house one bale of hay,
Nevertheless he is a kulak!

About the well-paid collective farm labour:

Grandpa sits on a blanket
Earning workdays:
"Workday, workday,
Give me bread for a day, gran!"

Give him something, granny, give him something! Help the emaciated old man, don't let him die, at least until the spring, so that he can still sow the fields with the grain being stored in the collective-farm granary. Because what will you be eating, old woman, if your old man has no strength to go out into the fields after the snows have melted and the ploughed fields have warmed? What will you reap, old woman, if your old man doesn't wave his hand about, so that the grain passes evenly through his fingers and sprouts in the ground to bring people life?

Feed your old man, old woman! Even with pigweed, even oak bark, if you have nothing more edible, and come out together with him to welcome Spring.

Here She comes, warmed and caressed by the sun, adorned with flowers, surrounded by birdsongs.

Only why is She so unlike her predecessors? Where has Her joyous smile disappeared, the bright shine of Her eyes, Her hot flush, Her young supple waist, Her light springy step?

She is moving along the fences like a century-old crone, barely able to move the logs of Her swollen legs, stretching out Her withered arms, opening Her frightening black mouth and instead of a melodious voice there comes only a death rattle:

"Food... food..."

Even the birds avoid Her and the flowers drop from Her blackened, dishevelled plaits.

Spring wanders from village to village in the vain hope of finding at least a crumb of something edible. She crawls up to the home of Tverdokhlib, resting against the walls, the windowsill, rising on Her toes and pressing Her deadened face to the black windowpane. She no longer begs, but only waits, torpidly and submissively: perhaps they'll hand her a crumb of bread here.

"Volodia...! Volodia...!"

"Hah...? What...?"

Volodka tore his heavy head away from the pillow, sleepily blinking into the darkness.

"There's someone at the window..."

He turned to face the windows and listened hard: there seemed to

be no one there. The night before two had crawled into the yard and when he came out in the morning they were already dead.

"There's no one outside. You're imagining things. Go back to sleep."

However no sooner had he placed his head on the pillow, no sooner had he begun to doze off, when right in his ear he heard Marusia's frightened whispering:

"Volodia, there really is someone outside!"

Hell!

Unwillingly Volodka slid out of bed, pulled on his pants.

"At least grab your gun."

"All right."

He put his hand under the pillow and took out the heavy pistol. Barefoot, he went into the hallway and stood there, listening. It seemed as if there was no one there. Quietly he slid the bolt aside and opened the door slightly, poking out his pistol and then his head.

The moon had already set; it would soon start to grow light. In previous years roosters would have begun to crow at this time, but now there was only the silence of the graveyard: they had slaughtered the roosters and eaten the chickens. The village lay there as if dead and the stars shimmered eerily in the sky, straining off the remnants of their miserable light onto the earth. And in that dusky light, in that uncertain shimmer, hungry shadows crawled about. They rustled along the fences, outside the houses, stretching their swollen arms towards the doors.

"Who's there?"

Silence.

"Who's there?!"

Stock still – and wouldn't let out a breath.

Clutching the pistol, Volodka stepped outside. He paced about the yard and stood awhile: there was no one about.

Returning into the house, he berated his wife:

"You keep hearing things and then don't let me sleep. You should strain your ears less."

He found the mug of water in the dark and took a drink. Sliding the gun under his pillow, he took off his pants and lay down.

But he was unable to fall asleep. He could sense with every nerve that Marusia was not sleeping. He turned towards her and pretended to touch her face inadvertantly. Just as he thought – she was crying.

"Crying again?"

She remained silent, swallowing her tears. That soundless crying was like a sharp knife in Volodka's heart! He would have felt better had she sobbed aloud.

"Well, what was I supposed to do? Tell me, go on?"

Not a word in reply.

"I couldn't do anything else...! I couldn't...! Do you understand that?"

His voice woke his mother. She began to rustle on the oven, sighing: "Oh-oh-oh!" She was probably crossing herself. Praying to God to send peace and harmony into their home and turn away the hungry death wandering from house to house, snuffing people out.

But there was no peace. And there was no harmony in this house.

Their son began to cry. Marusia hurried up to the cradle, picked up the baby. It immediately became quiet – snorting away and champing, and eventually the cradle began to creak and Marusia's voice sailed through the darkness:

"Ah-ah-ah... Ah-ah-ah..."

And those "ahs" contained more pain than consolation, more tears than smiles.

But what could he have done?

How could he convince his wife that he could have done nothing else? He couldn't, even though his own heart was being torn apart.

When Marusia's father had come into the village soviet – bloated, filled with dead water, when he stopped in the middle of the room and rested on Tverdokhlib his bleached eyes, sucked dry by hunger, white as those of a corpse, Volodka's throat contracted. He was sitting beside Nesheret, the current head of the village soviet, and his gaunt face showed naked pity towards his father-in-law.

"Boys, give me back my beans!"

Nesheret began to fidget about, as if someone had stabbed him in the back. He raised his eyebrows at a pitiful angle and looked at Tverdokhlib:

"P'raps we could give it back to him...? How much is there – just a sack; and yet it'll help him to make it until the new harvest."

"Volodia, my son, let me have it back...! The wife can't even lift up her head any more..."

A little longer and Volodka would have given in. Would have ordered the Komsomol boys to hand back the beans taken away as seed. But he immediately thought that should he give in this one time,

young and old would immediately know throughout the village: 'Ah, see, he gave his father-in-law back his beans, and meantime he's skinning us alive! See what Soviet power is like...!' And Volodymyr Tverdokhlib's face became stony cold and, swallowing convulsively, he replied as loudly as he could, so that not only his father-in-law and Nesheret could hear, but also those others waiting in the adjoining room:

"Your beans were taken from you legally... We won't be returning them..."

His father-in-law didn't ask for them any more. It appeared as if he only wanted to perform an unpleasant duty, that he was not at all interested in the consequences of his visit to the village soviet. He turned around wordlessly and went off, slapping his soles against the floor. And Volodka was no longer watching his father-in-law walking off, but stared at the spot where he had been standing. There he could clearly see the black marks left by his bare feet...

Neither his father-in-law nor his mother-in-law would ever be visiting them again: they had died. On one and the same day, on Easter itself. They had kissed thrice with the mouthless woman who avoided neither young nor old.

Volodka did everything to give them a decent burial. Strangers were simply picked up on the road, carted off to the cemetery and tossed into a common pit. They were thrown in and sprinkled with lime, because until the pit was filled to the top they wouldn't cover it with earth. Volodka laid his in-laws into two coffins and saw them off on their final journey.

Marusia said nothing to him when she learned about the beans. Not a word. She only wept in silence and became like a shadow.

Life, to hell with you!

Had he wanted people to die like this? Had he thought about this as he swept the grain out of the village? Sweeping it out to the last granule, just to fulfil that forthcoming plan, to show up the neighbouring village which was shamefully lagging behind in grain delivery, the village where the women finally resorted to counter-revolutionary actions, where they intercepted the train of grain carts and fell under the horses' hooves, under the wheels, and took all the grain back to their homes. And what had they achieved by that? Judges arrived, masses of militia, and they began to sentence people: some went off to prison, others to Siberia. They took the grain away just the same, and their vegetables as well, and now it was worse in

that village than in Tarasivka.

Volodia had wanted what was best for the village. He felt no pity for the Indians (they could die for all he cared), but he had convinced the collective farmers that rations would be handed out. Mytrofan Onysymovych himself had assured him of this.

And then that same Mytrofan Onysymovych had categorically demanded that they collect seed grain, so that they could sow everything, without leaving a patch of land free. Mytrofan Onysymovych had banged his fist on the table and ordered sternly:

"Remember this: if you sabotage the sowing you can say goodbye to your party ticket! Go, you panic merchants, and fulfil the plan!"

And Volodka fulfilled it. Hardening his heart, gritting his teeth, he fulfilled it. He knew well enough that if they didn't sow this year the whole country would be lost! The bourgeoisie was only waiting for the Soviet Union to collapse. We must survive! At all costs! With whatever sacrifices were necessary.

Because class struggles never occur without victims, Volodia, they are the most merciless battles. And there is no room for tears or pity. Read about that in Comrade Stalin. Read it and assimilate it.

He read this. He was assimilating it. But he couldn't convince Marusia, his politically backward wife.

No, he would not be able to fall asleep after all! And morning was already pressing its pale face against the windows. So, it was time to get up.

Breakfasting on thin *zatirka* soup, Volodka stepped outside. He was dressed in a black jacket, breeches, boots. His "parabelum" was at his side. In case of class altercations.

The breeches were stitched over with yellow leather, so that they wouldn't wear out when he got into the saddle.

"Wore his own backside away during all those meetings, so he's had to sew on a cow's," the farmers joked quietly. Quietly, so that he wouldn't hear them. Because long gone were those times when Tverdokhlib was simply called Volodka. Now he was only referred to as Danylovych. And seeing him approaching, they hastened to take off their hats.

Even Grandpa Khlypavka had stopped being familiar in his relations with the head of the artel.

Even now, spying his boss, he moved away from the storehouse containing the seed grain, the flour for the tractor drivers and the hot meals for those working in the fields. He took off his hat and it

immediately became obvious that the old man did not take advantage of his position: his hair had completely fallen out, his eyes shone like those of a sick man.

"Good health to you!"

Instead of replying to the greeting Volodka asked morosely:

"Everything under control?"

"Seems to be," the old man put his hat back on. "There's only one worrying thing: they keep crawling here and crawling. Should build a moat around it or something."

"Just keep driving them off! That's why we put you here, so they wouldn't come crawling here."

"Well I yell at them and I wave my walking stick about, but they don't understand a thing! They just keep coming, like mice, the Lord forgive me. It's not so bad during the day, but at night it sends shivers down my spine: rustling here, crawling from there. One of these days they'll do me in. Like that watchman at the cemetery..."

"We'll have to get you a rifle," Tverdokhlib decided.

"Yeah, I would feel happier with a weapon, of course," the old man agreed. "But there's no need to even shoot them: they'll give up the ghost by morning anyway. Another six were picked up this morning..."

"Ours?"

"Strangers... Why would ours come crawling here? Ours know that nothing will come of it anyway..."

"Enough there," Volodka interrupted the old man. "Keep an eye on things here then."

But no sooner had he moved away, than Grandpa Khlypavka called after him:

"I wanted to ask you something else!"

"What?"

"The kiddies gather around the storehouse during the day – there's no keeping them away. They try to get some flour through the cracks... So should I fire on them too, or what?"

"Come on, quit that, old man!" Tverdokhlib exploded. "Do what you're ordered to do, and if you start playing the fool, we'll toss you out of the collective farm right away!"

"I only asked, just for interest. Sorry, if it wasn't the right thing to say."

And he returned to the storehouse, further away from misfortune. Because Volodka really could go and throw him out. Didn't take

much for that to happen. It was within the scope of his authority and power.

However the old man's heart wasn't made of stone either.

'It's all right for you to lie beside your wife and to give orders, but you should try standing here for a night... They just keep crawling up, as if lured here by bait... You can shout and curse, it has no effect. If I didn't drive them away and push them off, they'd have gnawed through the walls by now...'

And almost crying, the old man yelled into the hollow darkness, filled with rustling and movement:

"Well, what do you want from me...? My own stomach's bloated...!"

He wouldn't doze off until morning.

And when the sky festered in the east, Grandpa Khlypavka – pale, miserable and exhausted – did the rounds of the freshly departed. 'What were your names, you poor souls? How will you be remembered before the Lord?'

And later he screamed, trembling with powerless anger, when the carters began to toss them like logs onto the cart:

"What are you doing, you sons of bitches?! Have you no heart, or did a she-wolf bear you, that you treat people like that?!"

'The world is perishing, it is perishing fast! Animals are breeding in it, with no pity or conscience... Who needs this – to torture people with hunger? Who?'

Grandpa Khlypavka stood there, resting his withered hands on his walking stick, watching the cart with the bodies move away. He blinked his red, tormented eyes, filled with bitter incomprehension.

Only when the sun began to warm up, when people began to appear in the street, did the old man feel a little better: there were people to exchange words with then. You could greet them with a "good morning", inquire where they were off to.

Here, for example, was the teacher Svitlychna. She came out of the yard of Mykola Prykhodko, who had returned from Siberia, but was probably wishing he hadn't now. A dark kerchief, an old skirt and barefoot. You could tell straight away she wasn't off to school, but going into the fields to tend beets. There was her hoe over her shoulders. She would weed until around one and then they would pour her a bowl of *zatirka* soup, and she would then somehow survive until the next bowl.

'Only for some reason that *zatirka* is doing you no good, poor soul. See how thin you've become. Only your eyes are gleaming. Hey, hey,

even your legs have become swollen, my dove! That's why you're walking so laboriously.'

He took off his hat and greeted her affectionately:

"Good health to you, Oleksiyivna! Going off into the fields?"

"Yes," Tania smiled palely and awkwardly: she was ashamed of her bare feet. But what could she do, if they had become so swollen that she could barely squeeze them into her shoes? So as soon as she left school, she took off her shoes.

"Children fast asleep?"

"Yes."

"Then let them sleep and grow healthy. And may you have good fortune too."

Tania thanked him and continued on her way. She hurried along, so that she could finish her quota. For well before lunch the children would begin to trickle in from the village to the beet plantation, all of them carrying bowls and spoons, with stomachs bloated from pigweed, chaff and potato peelings, with abnormally large eyes in their sharpened faces, with hungry mouths surrounded by wrinkles. They would assemble at the field camp where the *zatirka* would be boiling away and, standing to one side, would wait patiently until their mothers had finished working and came for lunch. They would wait in silence, even pretending that the large cauldron with the bubbling, steaming *zatirka* barely concerned them.

And when the mothers shared their pitiful rations with them, they would greedily sip the hot food and afterwards there would be no need to wash or dry the bowls or spoons; they would lick them dry, to a hot shine.

Tania's sons did not venture into the fields: they had been strictly warned not to leave the yard. She was frightened by rumours that children were already being caught and slaughtered for meat. So they met her each time at the gate.

She carried the *zatirka* in a glazed mug, running home from the fields. And not at all because she was afraid of being late for school: the whole way she fought the temptation to taste, to sip the seductively fragrant dish. For she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to stop herself then until the bottom was visible.

She saw her sons Andriyko and Yurasyk from afar. They stood by the gate, each holding a spoon. That spoon of Yurasyk's seemed especially big: he guarded it above all playthings, wouldn't part with it all day long and even placed it beside him at night.

When their mother drew up to them, Yurasyk immediately grabbed hold of the kerchief tied around the mug and accompanied her into the house.

The still steaming *zatirka* was poured into three bowls: Yurasyk got the most, Andriyko less, and mother even less. Her older son was already attending school: he would receive a bowl of millet gruel there – a hot breakfast. The smaller one would get nothing else, apart from dry and bitter pancakes made of acacia blossom, which fell apart even in the frying pan, and a broth of potato peelings, for Tetiana had sneaked a whole sack of the peelings from the pig farm.

Today Tetiana had brought dumplings instead of *zatirka*. Dividing them among her sons and having some herself, she then took each of them by the hand and went off to school: Andriyko attended the second shift too, and she refused to leave Yurasyk alone at home. So she sat him right at the back and he sat quietly, like a mouse. All the children had in fact long since become quiet and inert: they sat apathetically at their desks and didn't play during the breaks. Hunger alone shone out of their eyes.

And the janitor, Granny Natalka, no longer had to stop them during the breaks and yell her "Careful there, or I'll tell the teacher!", for Granny Natalka could barely move herself, being so sucked dry by hunger, that she was only skin and bone. Her face had shrivelled into a fist, her mouth had become sunken and all her teeth appeared to have fallen out. She would rest a cheek on her hand and grieve tearlessly:

"What is happening, Oleksiyivna? At least they could take pity on the children! If the children die off, who'll be left to walk this earth?"

What could Tania say? That she, a simple village teacher, knew about the thoughts and intentions of those wise leaders, who badly needed to organize a famine? She only saw how the people suffered and died and, devastated, bewildered, could not fathom what all this was for.

However she was frightened and remained silent. She didn't share her thoughts with anyone, afraid that any word, the slightest indiscreet expression, and she would be pronounced a kulak, a Petliurite or some other kind of agent and be dismissed from work.

And then there would be death. Inevitable, cruel, hungry. For her and for her children.

So she remained silent. She would remain silent all her life, until the grave, afraid and trembling all her life. Remaining silent even

when everyone else was speaking out, unable to believe that this was serious, that this was for a long time. And when she would be chided for her fearful silence, she would reply:

"I am already so scared, that I'll be trembling even in my grave."

So Tania said nothing in answer to the old woman's crying, her tearless grieving, but walked past her silently.

And Granny Natalka could do nothing more than return home from school and pour out her despair in front of the old man:

"What's happening in this world of ours today, father?"

However Grandpa Khlypavka also had other things on his mind other than idle conversation with the old woman.

One time he stopped Nesheret and began to quiz him about who was the top man in Russia these days.

"Who's our tsar these days, Petro?"

"Well Stalin, of course. Why?"

"No, it's all right. I just asked for interest's sake."

So it was Stalin, Stalin whose portrait hung in the village soviet.

The leader, teacher and father.

You've gone quite a distance there from your children, daddy dear, quite a distance. You sit there unable to see how your listless and cunning servants destroy and strangle your children, father. Through the collective farm and into the other world.

Is this order, father?

Grandpa Khlypavka was deeply convinced that Stalin wasn't aware of anything. That it would be enough to get to him, to open his eyes, and he would immediately rise to the defence of his people. He would order them to be fed and clothed.

He would reach him somehow. Reach him and fall down at his feet:

"Save my Ukraine, father, otherwise there will be only crosses and graves left!"

So Grandpa Khlypavka was preparing for the long trip to Moscow.

He said nothing about this to Tverdokhlib, or Nesheret – in case they didn't let him go. He only asked that someone else be assigned to guard the granary. He placed two rounds of oil-cake into a bag, three handfuls of rusks: they had been saving them for a black day, when things got really bad. He told Grandma Natalka:

"You'll manage here somehow, Natalia. I'm not going for myself, but for the whole nation."

"And when will you return?" Grandma Natalka began to weep. "The rooks will pick you clean in that foreign land!"

"Such old, unpalatable people like me aren't touched even by rooks," joked the old man sadly.

And Grandma Natalka stood by the gate watching the old man as he walked off and wondered wistfully whether they would see each other again in this world.

No, they wouldn't.

Because one night Grandma Natalka would wake up, as if someone was calling her, so softly, so gently, as her departed mother used to call to her in childhood. And Grandma Natalka would realize that it was Death calling her. Having slipped into the house unseen Death would be standing over her head, bending over her in a black shadow.

"Lord, don't take away my soul!" Grandma Natalka would begin to pray. "Let me live at least until morning. My floor's unswept, and my house hasn't been whitewashed yet. I'll be ashamed to lie in a coffin in such a house!"

And the Lord would show her mercy and tell Death to move away from the old woman. And as soon as dawn rose on its spindly legs and staggered across the earth, carrying before it its bloated stomach, Granny Natalka would rise, mix up the clay and chalk, and set about working on the house. She would assiduously whitewash the walls, paint the foundations with red ochre and spread clay over the floor. And then she would stoke the oven, warm some water, bathe herself and, dressing in her new shirt, would lie in bed, lie down and cross her hands over her withered breasts:

"Now you can come for me, Death!"

And Death would come up to her again. Leaning over the old woman and rocking her transparent face back and forward, she would ask hollowly:

"What would you like, granny, in your last moment?"

The old woman would champ with her toothless mouth and ask timidly:

"I'd like to taste some white bread, dear Death."

But Death would shake her head: she had no bread.

"Then at least some millet gruel."

Once more Death would shake her head: hunger had devoured the gruel too.

Well, if there was nothing, who cared: the old woman could die without it.

"Ask for something else!" Death would insist in despair.

The old woman would move her bloodless lips about and look with her kind eyes at Death:

"Don't fret, my dove, have no regrets: I don't want anything else."

Carefully Death would remove the old woman's soul from her emaciated body, extinguish it, draw the eyelids over the eyes in the waxen face and walk out on tip-toe.

And Granny Natalka would lie in eternal peace, silenced forever in the festively adorned house, which would shine under the gentle sunshine like an Easter egg, looking as if a good artist had painted it in pure, joyous colours and rolled it into the green grass, among orchards flooded with white blossom...

Meanwhile Grandpa Khlypavka was travelling by rail to the distant northern capital.

His son helped him reach Kharkiv by coaxing a conductor friend from a passenger train into taking his father, and the old man travelled in grand style in the service compartment. In Kharkiv the conductor said:

"You'll have to make it on your own from here on, grandpa. Go down to the freight yards and try to catch a freight train heading for Moscow."

Thanking him, the old man took his bag and set off for the station.

For three days and three nights the old man tried to get onto a train going in the direction of Moscow. For three days and three nights he clambered over the tracks, hiding from the militia which had exhausted its voices, whistled hoarse its whistles in attempting to drive away the hungry people.

"Scram! Get the hell out of here, or we'll throw you into prison!"

What was prison to them? What was prison to all these people who would crawl through fire or dive to the bottom of the ocean, if only to get a crust of bread, who made their way to the railway stations from villages exterminated by famine and, tearing open their empty mouths, called day and night, unable to attract the attention of the one and only God:

"Bre-e-ead...! Bre-e-ead...!"

And meanwhile a rumour had spread. An insistent rumour that in Moscow bread was being sold without ration cards: you could take as much as you wanted, as long as you had the money. And those who got there with no money wouldn't die either: if there was bread, then there would be alms.

And the people crawled onto the tracks, stormed the freight

wagons, and often it happened that a good dozen men would pack themselves onto some wagon and freeze, so that no one would notice them and throw them off, waiting until the train set off and then whisper joyously: "We're off." They would be as happy as little children, without knowing that they weren't headed for the Red capital, but in the opposite direction, into those very same parts from which they had escaped, as if from hell.

Grandpa Khlypavka was lucky; he didn't climb onto one of these trains. Some railway worker, taking pity on the old man, whispered into his ear to go off to the marshalling yards where trains were being prepared for Moscow. And after many hardships the old man finally managed to clamber onto the roof of one such freight wagon, where others like himself were already lying.

They set off that evening, having spent all day lying in the hot sun, as if in a frying pan. Two didn't make it and died. They thought of sliding them off here and now, but came to their senses in time: if someone saw the dead, they would also find the living. They would throw them off outside the town.

Emerging from the city, the train sped off into the serene twilight of the steppe and the travellers rallied. They stirred, began to talk, especially when it became dark, to stop themselves from falling asleep and rolling off the roof. They couldn't see one another and only heard the voices. Occasionally someone would light up: a fiery speck would glow in the blackness, brightening and fading with the breaths of wind. Glowing like the hope which kept these people alive.

"If only we could make it there!"

"We'll get there. The worst is behind us."

"Uncle...! Hey, uncle...! Is it true that the shops there are bursting with bread?"

"That they are, but not for us."

"Know what we're travelling on, good people?"

"A train."

"To hell with your stupid train! We're sitting on grain, that's what!"

"Grain?" everyone stirred.

"Lies...?"

"I swear by the holy cross! That railwayman who helped us get on told me. All these wagons are stuffed full with our wheat, the whole train..."

They grew silent and believed him. They sniffed hungrily, greedily.

Eventually they began to talk again. The fellow on his right asked:

"Going off after some daily bread, grandpa?"

And when Grandpa Khlypavka said that he wasn't, they didn't believe him.

"What else can you be going for?"

"To save the entire nation."

They heard the old man out in silence, intently, without interrupting him.

"Well, grandpa, may luck be with you!"

"Come over here to the middle! Otherwise, God forbid, you might fall off..."

During the night two more died. One of them took a very long time to die. He kept hallucinating about someone called Oksana and begged her for some bread.

Then he grew silent.

He had eaten his fill...

They crossed him and pushed him off the sloping roof into the black stormy chasm which howled fiercely, and pressed even closer together: 'Whose turn is it next?' Each of them silently appealed: 'Not me, dear Lord! Not me! My children are waiting for me!'

In the morning they stopped for a long time at some station. They listened in silence as people moved about down below, tapping hammers under the wagons, shouting to each other, swearing. Finally the wagon under the men jerked forward, slowly at first, then faster and faster the station buildings sailed past, surrounded by poplars. Mykhailivsky Khutir was left behind.

"Well, now we're in Russia, boys."

Some fellows even got up on their knees to see what this Russia looked like. But eventually they lay down, disappointed. The same fields, except perhaps that forests and woods were more common here; the people were like anywhere else, only the villages appeared dismal and sad: the black houses were not surrounded by cherry blossom; they did not peer out with whitewashed walls.

"Uncle...! Hey, uncle...! Why are their houses so black?"

"Because they eat black bread."

"We-e-ell..."

And a little later in a rueful voice:

"I'd be glad of even a little black bread..."

"Suffer a little longer, wait till we get to Moscow..."

Moscow, Moscow, Moscow... And Moscow greeted them all with

NKVD patrols on the sidetracks, pulling the hungry off the wagons and platforms, cramming them into empty freight wagons and sending them back: Moscow didn't want such guests!

Grandpa Khlypavka managed to clamber off the wagon in time and scurried off into the bushes.

He stayed there until evening. Once it was dark, he decided to continue on foot. He made his way up onto the track and stumbled on towards the light glowing in the north.

And so Grandpa Khlypavka would have reached Moscow, appeared before Comrade Stalin and fallen down at his feet, but for the river, the bridge across it, and the implacable fellow standing on guard there. He clicked his rifle bolt and ordered the old man to turn back:

"Just turn around and keep walking, old man! This is forbidden territory!"

And Grandpa Khlypavka set off back for Ukraine.

He walked for a long time through fields and forests, along roads both wide and narrow, through villages, towns and cities and did not look about him, did not try to remember what he saw to tell everyone back home: the curiosity had long since faded from his washed-out eyes.

And the old man's conscience gave him no peace: he hadn't managed to save his nation after all.

His conscience tormented him, ate at his heart, further undermining his already failing health.

One morning, barely managing to reach some district town, the old man lay down in the square under a pole with a black loudspeaker, in order to die.

He placed his bag under his head, folded his hands on his chest, turning his thoughts to the Lord, praying for forgiveness for all his sins. But no sooner had the old man finished his prayer, no sooner had he closed his eyes so as not to see Death removing his soul, when right above his head there began a crackling and wheezing, and then a cheerful metallic voice greeted the old man with a good morning.

"A good morning to you, comrades!"

To hell with you! Won't you even let a person die in peace!

Whether he liked it or nor, Grandpa Khlypavka had to listen to the bravura music and the news as well. And then the voice in the loudspeaker changed and this time some woman chirruped joyously:

"And now let's hear an essay about the happy rich life of the Ukrainian collective farmer."

The loudspeaker seemed to clear its throat, then another voice, this time a male one, began:

"The collective-farm villages are growing strong and large. Honourable work has given us lush crops, beautiful tall grain, which can hide the collective farmer within its fruitful mass. Rocking with their full, still-green heads in time to the joyous, lively, happy face of the collective farmer, the ears of grain assure us:

"It will be a good harvest!

"And this, as our leader and teacher Comrade Stalin has said, will elevate our collective farmers even further, from being middle peasants they will become even wealthier..."

The old man couldn't stand this shameless affront to truth any longer: he groaned, raised his head and, seeing a militiaman approaching him, said:

"My son, be kind enough to shut up that barking bastard so that I can at least die in peace!"

And so, instead of coming before the heavenly judge, the old man appeared before another, a mortal judge. And behind him stood not a guardian angel, but that militiaman who had dragged him here from under the post, supporting him along the way so he wouldn't fall.

"Did you utter counter-revolutionary words, old man?"

"How could I remain silent, my good man, when the thing was lying so shamelessly."

"So you did then... Write down: the accused admitted to conducting counter-revolutionary agitation against the collective system."

And the old man was put behind bars.

In a few weeks Grandpa Khlypavka recovered, regained his strength in "the state house on state rations". The food wasn't too bad and the work was all right: he was appointed to clean up the cell. He could have lived without a care in the world, but thoughts of his home village tormented him, as did the memories of his compatriots who were becoming bloated with hunger. And after long deliberation, after he had asked if they fed people like this in all the prisons, the old man managed to rustle up a scrap of paper and talked one of the prisoners into writing a letter to Tarasivka for him.

"What do I write, old man?"

"Write this for me, my son... Greetings to all of you who are still

alive. Grandpa Varyvon bows before you... Well, I never made it to Comrade Stalin's, they wouldn't let me in; I'll tell you about it when we meet, but meanwhile I'm here in prison. But don't worry about that, the life's not bad here, the officials are courteous, they don't beat you up, everyone receives his ration of bread and gruel three times a day... So listen then, good people, to my advice to you: while you're still alive, drop everything and set off to Khorolivka or Poltava. And lie down under one of those poles on which they hang radios, and curse that radio for all you are worth. The militia will come running and drag you off to court. And from there it's a direct road to prison. But don't you worry about that, my dear countrymen, because these days you can only save yourself in prison – everywhere else it's famine and devastation... Got that down...? And now pass on a low bow from me to the old cheese – Grandma Natalka – and seal it up..."

And the letter was sealed and sent off to Poltava Province, village of Tarasivka. And for a long time afterwards Grandpa Khlypavka kept asking when new prisoners arrived:

"No one from Tarasivka among you?"

"Good people, you haven't come across anyone from Tarasivka, have you?"

And he fretted that his countrymen probably had not heeded his advice.

The old man did not know that Grandma Natalka was no longer alive. Nor did he know that he was destined never to see his native village or his countrymen: Death, which had retreated from him in the square, frightened off by the militiaman, had sought him out here in the prison.

The guard must have dozed off, for he didn't notice the tall thin woman with a scythe over her shoulder sweep past him. She made her way into the slumbering prison and went from cell to cell, looking for the old man.

She finally found him and, wasting no time, swung her scythe over his sleeping body. She reaped the over-ripe kernel of life and snatched it up so that it wouldn't fall onto the cement floor, so that not a single grain of an unlived day should be lost.

And so Grandpa Khlypavka died an easy death and we will see him off on his last journey to the remotest corner of the town cemetery, where as far back as anyone could remember they buried the beggars, vagabonds and prisoners. Grandpa Khlypavka was laid in a

hastily dug grave.

We'll toss a clod of earth into the grave: 'May the earth be like feathers to you, old man!'; we will stand for a minute with heads bowed over the silent mound and then slowly walk away, thinking no longer about Grandpa Khlypavka, but about the person to whom the old man had been taking his pure heart, his great hope, his fervent prayer for his entire people. And this person had rejected him so pitilessly. We will be thinking about the horrifying crimes committed by this man, about the rivers of blood, the oceans of suffering with which he would inundate his kingdom, and the fact that, thank God, this person was not eternal, but eternal were the people to whom this man had attached himself. The time would come that Death would reap this repugnant kernel bloated with black blood and kick it away in disgust...

And we shall pause here and ask the spinner who spins the threads of human destinies:

"And will this person avoid punishment? Will he hide in the grave from his terrible crimes?"

And we will immediately think about God.

And if He doesn't exist, then He must be dreamed up so that this person does not escape judgement.

Let the Lord ascend his heavenly throne and hear out Grandpa Khlypavka.

"How can I try him, if he hasn't died yet?"

"I can wait, Lord."

"Well, wait then. You can live in Paradise in the meantime."

The old man lived in Paradise, bored because there was nothing to do. So he went to the Lord again.

"Give me something to do, Lord, because I'm bored out of my mind."

"What can I give you to do?"

"Give me a plough and a harrow, a horse or a pair of oxen, a scythe, a rake and a thresher. And let me have a piece of land."

And the Lord gave Grandpa Khlypavka everything he asked for. And Grandpa Khlypavka sowed and reaped until Stalin's death. And when Stalin died, the Almighty called both of them before Him: Grandpa Khlypavka stood on His right side, Stalin on His left.

And Stalin would stand black from all his crimes, and the blood of innocent victims would lap at his feet.

Grandpa Khlypavka would be serene and gentle even in his anger.

He would make no demands, merely request:

"Judge us, Lord. Let Your judgement be final."

And the Lord would ask him:

"Of what do you accuse this man?"

"He wanted to destroy my entire nation."

And Stalin would stamp his feet in fury, splashing blood in all directions:

"Liar! I spent day and night endeavouring to do the best by my people! Blame Beria! Beria!"

However Grandpa Khlypavka wouldn't even glance at him.

"How can you substantiate your terrifying accusation?" the Lord would ask then.

"Summon the witnesses, Lord."

Then the Almighty would call the angels and order that the old man's witnesses be brought.

Men and women who had died in their prime during the famine would come in, horrifying to behold.

And their number would be a thousand thousands.

Mothers would enter bearing toddlers on swollen arms, and the babies would strain with their dead mouths towards barren withered breasts – it would be frightful to watch these mothers and their children.

And their number would be a thousand thousands.

And old people would come before the Lord, tangled together, arms and legs entwined, still covered in lime – it would be frightening to look at these old people.

And their number would be a thousand thousands.

And people tortured and killed in the prisons and camps would come before the Lord too.

And seeing them all the Lord Himself would be horrified and would cover His eyes:

"Take them away, I can't look at them!"

And then Grandpa Khlypavka would come up to Him:

"Don't close Your eyes, Lord. After all, You are God, not a mere mortal! You teach us in the Holy Scriptures that all who pass by a crime become criminals themselves, that all who help bandits become bandits themselves. So who can judge us, if You turn from us?"

Then God would tear His hands away from His eyes and, in agony, ask the witnesses:

"Who killed you, good people? Who killed you?"

And every single one of them would turn to face Stalin.

"What do you say now?" God would ask Stalin.

And Stalin would remain silent.

Then the Almighty would turn to Grandpa Khlypavka:

"I will allow you to specify a punishment for this inhuman creature, old man."

And Grandpa Khlypavka would reply:

"I did not bear him, so it is not for me to judge him. Punish him Yourself, Lord."

And God would become lost in thought. And say after much reflection:

"Forgive me, people, but I cannot be your judge: there is no punishment in the world which could equal the horrific crimes of this man!"

* * *

The grain was ripening.

The fragrance of a bountiful crop carried across the earth, filling its concave chalice, running over its edges. It fell with a satiated gilt on the sharpened scythes, the reapers, the carts and drays, the horses and people, the shaggy sheaves of wheat being assembled into stooks, rising like mountains in steep-topped stacks. It also gilded the trembling hands which devoutly picked up the first sheaf and fed it into the thresher.

Villages rose out of famine-stricken ruin, became reborn, like sphinxes rising from the ashes. And windmills which seemed to have died forever, came alive, flapping their wings about like gracious birds which had grabbed hold of the earth and were trying to lift it into the heavens. The freed millwheels turned around and the flour poured forth, flowing to the houses in spring streams. Tubs were already standing prepared, sleeves were rolled up, ovens were stoked. And although the kneading tubs had cracked, it didn't matter, as long as there was something to put in them! And although arms had grown unaccustomed to such work, it didn't matter, as long as there was something to knead! Pieces of resilient dough were taken out, slapped into white balls and then placed on a spade and fed into the oven.

And now it was time to be quiet: to walk about quietly with a light step while the bread was rising. And to stop breathing! Everyone was quiet, motionless in joyous expectation, for a miracle of miracles was taking place!

And then the first round loaves would be removed from the ovens and it would be hard to say where the glow filling the room came from: the warm golden bread or the eyes of the women and mothers.

The famine passed, perishing like a horrible nightmare, and gradually people began to forget the look of children with splinter-thin arms and legs, how frightening adults could look when they were bloated with malnutrition. The carts piled high with corpses were gradually forgotten, as were the wide mass graves dusted with lime, and these groans that rose into the heavens day after day, month after month, from the suffering Ukrainian earth. The memories grew so dim that millions of sincere people would eventually call the perpetrator of this famine a father – this man eternally dressed in a military uniform, as if he was forever preparing to wage war, to shoot and to slaughter.

They would parade about with his portrait, glorifying him in songs, naming their sons after him, and thousands of Yosypkos would grow and age, to eventually become adult Yosyps.

And after he died, they would come running from everywhere, rending their bosoms with sobs, crushing one another just to obtain a petal, a leaf from the wreaths which had towered over his catafalque.

Wreaths instead of rocks...

The troubled past seemed like a frightening dream to Tania. Why recall it? It was better to erase it from the mind, to breathe this satiated air, to rejoice at the joyous appearance of people and to walk along a straight steppe road with a small bundle in your hand. To walk without hurrying, because you had left early in the morning and the whole day lay before you.

She was returning from her mother's.

Her mother had become very small: the skin on her face was completely wrinkled and covered with a grey moss, and her mouth was sunken, continually moving about, as if she was chewing on the leftovers of her life.

Tania spent the whole day at her mother's. She put everything in order, and read the short letter from Fedir who had been too lazy to write his sister a separate letter: 'We're alive and well and wish you the same. Congratulations, mother, on another grandson. A real Cossack of a fellow, when he grows up he'll be a fine plaything for the girls (he should be ashamed, writing such things to mother), but meanwhile he's sucking on his milk and pissing into his cradle: he'll

probably become a fireman...'

So, things were all right with Fedia too. You could live and praise the Lord, as people said. So Tania had no reason for being sad, she would rather be joyous, only she felt a little uncomfortable because Hanzha was walking alongside her.

He had caught up to her on the road. Recognizing her, he greeted her warmly, asked about the village: who had survived, who had gone off where.

Only two people did he not ask about: Olga and Volodka.

He told her a little about himself.

He had spent time in jail, had been released early, and had just returned from the Kryvy Rih area, where he had sought out his comrades from before the revolution. They were taking on people there to work in a plant. He had already agreed and only needed to drop by Tarasivka now to grab a few things after which he had to return that day.

Tania listened in silence. She didn't didn't try to dissuade him, to persuade him otherwise: she could sense the incurable injustice which was tormenting this man. She stole glances at him.

He had turned completely grey, while his eyes seemed even darker.

Tania and Hanzha came out onto a high gently-sloping rise and stopped: Tarasivka lay there down below, submerged in orchards, contained by the river, luring them with its white houses.

"Well, there's our village," Tania said wistfully.

Hanzha said nothing. He merely tugged at his grey moustache, as if wanting to tear it off. He looked down at the houses, the orchards, the gardens and streets – intently, hungrily, and his whole life spent on this land floated before him.

And he was no longer certain that he could break with it so easily.

Kiev, 1966

GODS FOR SALE

Even though I had worked with this fellow for several years, I never could fully understand him.

I couldn't grasp the one fundamental thing: why had he been the way he had been? Surely he couldn't have been born that way!

I speak of him in the past tense, for he is no longer among us: he passed away.

I remember well the day of his funeral.

It was the middle of summer, the heat was stifling, the musicians were bathed in sweat and their instruments seemed to be on the verge of melting. So the funereal melody did not flow like a river in flood, instead it bubbled like a small brook about to dry up. We sweated away in our dark clothing not knowing where to hide from the sun, for there wasn't a cloud in the sky, nor a memory left of the wind – we sailed along in such a hot mirage, that a haze appeared before our eyes. Even the flowers had wilted and the writing on the black ribbons had shrivelled and wrinkled. "Unforgetable", "honest", "beloved", although it could just as easily have been "insincere", "insidious", "evil", and the latter words would have been closer to the truth. We hated him with a vengeance, although his sudden death seemed to stem our hatred, leaving a melancholic emptiness in each of our souls and something akin to pity towards the deceased.

He lay in the coffin looking as if he was about to open his eyes and break into his Mephistophelian smile: "Pretending to be sorry for me? Well, well. Stop this comedy and get on with it!" Even death was unable to wipe that sceptical expression from his immobile face, while his old beret, planted firmly on his head, emphasized that expression even more. He never took off that beret, even in the office, and we had long grown accustomed to it. Even in the coffin he wore his beret, such had been his last wish, as his wife had explained – there she was with her two daughters, dressed in black from head to foot. "My three prostitutes" was the only way the deceased had called them, and I wondered now if they ever knew how their father and husband had referred to them.

They probably knew, for they didn't shed a tear, moving along with frozen faces, terribly alike in their unnatural frigidity.

Perhaps they too had detested him during his lifetime?

Who knows. Other people's lives are a closed book, as they say...

We carried the coffin right across the cemetery and the musicians groaned into the burning trumpets with their last strength.

Then came the funeral orations at the graveside, over the open coffin. The deceased listened in disbelief and we felt uncomfortable for those delivering the speeches.

When we finally lowered him into the hole and covered him with earth, piling wreaths on top, everyone felt a strange relief, as if they had carried out an unpleasant duty and were now free of their obligation.

His widow moved about the crowd, inviting each of us along to the wake. Something deceptively like a smile played on her face, while her two daughters looked on anxiously. Some people obediently boarded the bus, others tried to disappear unseen – and there were far more of those who slipped past the bus, than those who boarded it.

Splitting into groups, we left the cemetery – this final resting-place of humankind – and each person involutarily thought that he too would one day be farewelled like this with a brass band, with sorrowful speeches, both sincere and insincere, and be hidden away forever from the living world. All these thoughts swathed the soul in a quiet melancholy. Disturbing thoughts, everything we had strived for and lived for until now suddenly seemed so inconsequential, so petty alongside this eternal mystery, which even the greatest minds were unable to explain. What do we live for? What is the meaning of life? Why have we been summoned into this world? Is it merely a blind whim of nature or the fruit of a universal consciousness which creates us. Sown across the planet, to be later harvested, just as an assiduous farmer collects his crop. Reared as materialists, each of us strives for eternity in the depths of his soul, for he is unable to be reconciled to the idea that he will die and nothing will be left of him, absolutely nothing. Each of us thought about this, but ashamed to voice our thoughts, we began to talk about the deceased.

"He was a complex fellow, may the earth be like feathers for him!"

"A product of our times."

The home-grown philosophers among us had to air their views.

"Did you notice that the widow didn't shed a single tear?"

"As if she needed to cry! They lived like cat and dog. Didn't you hear him say that neither of his daughters were by him?"

"Well, the elder one looks very much like him – a chip off the old block. Except she doesn't wear a beret."

At this point we all smiled involuntarily.

"It wasn't an easy life for the poor things."

"Who knows what it was like for him in that family, perhaps he was like that because of them."

"Yes, he was a complex fellow..."

"To have lived, and then to have no one shed a tear for you!"

"What about Kost Kostiovych? I saw him crying."

"Well, perhaps Kost Kostiovych..."

Kost Kostiovych, the only friend of the deceased, had followed immediately behind the coffin. He held a wide-brimmed hat with both hands... A real straw hat, brought from his native village in Poltava Province. When he walked down Kiev's main street in that straw hat everyone turned to watch him pass. In his straw hat, with a wheaten mustache, with patient grey eyes, he seemed like a real village uncle, transplanted straight into the heart of the city. He had chosen the most peaceable profession, working as a book-keeper for as long as we had known him. So Kost Kostiovych was the only person present who had really been grieving, and when the deceased was being lowered into the grave he couldn't stop himself from crying. He would wipe one eye, then the other with a bent finger and his mustache twitched as if it was hurting.

He was the first to go into the bus, as if afraid there would be no room for him, and when the bus passed us, we saw him sitting up front: full of reproach, as the straw hat sailed past us.

"Who will he play chess with now?"

"He's lost his partner."

Every Sunday after lunch they would go out into the courtyard with a chess board, and sitting down at a table they would set out the pieces, often playing late into the evening. Kost Kostiovych always played intently and in silence; only his mustache betrayed him, beginning to tremble before the most crucial moves. You could also tell from his straw hat whether he was winning or losing. If he was losing, the hat was way down over his eyes, but if he was winning, it would sit on the back of his head. The curses and bad language that were heaped on Kost Kostiovych! Especially when he was winning.

Setting out the chess pieces, his opponent would threaten each time:

"Well, today we'll settle the score! I'll have you squealing like a pig!"

But Kost Kostiovych only snorted into his mustache.

The game began, and with it the choicest, most biting curses aimed at Kost Kostiovych. The names he was called! 'Swine' was the most innocent of them: he called everyone a swine behind their backs. Kost Kostiovych only replied with a gentle smile, which barely touched the tips of his mustache. And he never took offence.

What could they have had in common, apart from that weekly game of chess? What had brought them together?

Kost Kostiovych belonged to that breed of people who wouldn't hurt a fly. I can't remember an incident where he so much as raised his voice, let alone told anyone off. If anyone had enemies, it certainly wasn't Kost Kostiovych.

The deceased had been quite another kettle of fish. He trusted nothing in the world, and people least of all. Humans were created for evil, the only difference being that some acted overtly, while others knew how to put on a pretence.

"They're only good when they're asleep, and even then not always. People are monkeys all over, old man Darwin knew what he was on about."

"What about man's intellect," people would throw back at him.

"Here's where your intellect is!" he patted his stomach. "Take away your hunk of bread and your intellect will disappear in a flash! You'll climb back into the trees. I know."

He made use of that "I know" all the time, stamping his every expression with it, so that each assertion was unchallengeable.

At one time he had read somewhere that if Neanderthal man was to be dressed in a suit today and let out into the streets, no one would take any notice of him: so small was the difference between him and modern man. It would have been difficult to have dreamed up anything more reassuring for him. He went from office to office, reading the article out loud.

He stood out with his particularly cutting remarks. He would highlight the most unnoticeable shortcoming in each of us, the tiniest negative character trait – and even if you were an angel three times over, he would still find some dark blemish and would turn it inside out in such a way that the blemish became dominant. One person was a thief, except that he'd never been caught. Another person was a careerist and yet another a stupid fool. This woman was a slut and that one unfaithful to her husband. For some reason he liked to talk about debauchery most of all. Listening to him you'd think that

everyone only thought about illicit affairs. I've already mentioned that he didn't spare his wife and daughters either. 'My prostitutes have decided to go to the theatre today.' 'You should try to live with my prostitutes!'

He would often insult people, especially visitors, who would storm out of our offices, choking with indignation. They wrote and complained – but it was like water off a duck's back. He would be called out, chastised, made to promise not to act that way again, and he would stay quiet for a while, but inevitably returned to his old ways. Even the bosses seemed to be afraid of him.

Though they might have feared him, they also valued him: there was no better auditor in the whole administration. He should be given his due here. There would be panic wherever he was sent to audit the books, for he always uncovered things which others before him hadn't even dreamt about.

"Oh those pigs squealed when I pressed them into a corner!" he laughed when he returned.

There were the naive ones who tried to buy him off. He took the bribe without batting an eyelid. And dug even deeper.

"How else could I have lulled their vigilance?" he asked in astonishment when he was reproached. "It's a sin not to take a bribe when it's being offered."

Just like that. He wasn't even ashamed to admit that he took bribes. He must have subscribed to more newspapers than anyone else. But he read them differently than other people. He was interested only in the critical letters to the editor. He would cut them out and place them into folders. He must have had mountains of those folders, which he often brought to work too, where he would take out a cutting and wave it about like some flag:

"Have you read this...? And we want to build communism!"

We all tried to keep our distance, falling silent whenever he drew near and, if we did talk, we chose our words carefully. He must have sensed this – it would have been hard not to – but he didn't let on. 'I don't give a damn what people think about me!' his whole expression seemed to say.

He was a dreadful man!

And yet Kost Kostiovych had befriended this man.

One day, quite a while after the funeral, I asked Kost Kostiovych:

"How could you two have been friends?"

We were on our way home from work, walking along a quiet street,

and nothing interfered with our conversation.

Kost Kostiovych looked at me with a kind of reproach, moving his wheaten mustache about. He asked quietly:

"Did you know him?"

"Of course! We went through hell and high water with him at work."

"Hell and high water!" snorted Kost Kostiovych. "And now you're besmirching him." He touched my sleeve and said with a special kind of trust: "Did you know that he was the most wretched person in the world?"

"Him? The most wretched? Tell that to someone else!"

"But I'm telling you," Kost Kostiovych continued in an equally low voice. There was something in that voice – pain? reproach? – that left me at a loss for words. "Do you want to hear the truth about him?"

And I heard a story which I probably would never have believed had someone other than Kost Kostiovych told it to me.

So, here are just a few fragments from the life of Vasyl Andriyovych Duboshey, in the same order as told to me by Kost Kostiovych. I haven't added anything of my own, haven't changed anything: fantasy cannot compete with what life dishes out. I will relate all this in the hope that you too will understand why Duboshey was the way he was.

Vasyl Andriyovych Duboshey was born into an intellectual family in 1920. Both of Duboshey's parents worked as teachers, so that his early childhood was associated with the school. There had been no hint of kindergartens back then and, not knowing what to do with their child, the parents often took him with them into class. They told him to sit quietly and not to play, and this three-year-old youngster would sit through three to four lessons in the back row. The pupils gladly played with him during the breaks, especially the girls. In the end he began to consider the school his second home and once, when he was asked whose he was, he replied in all seriousness that he was the school's. And since he was a curious, inquisitive lad, he had taught himself to read and write, to add and subtract by the age of five.

A memory of childhood: his parents never gave him toys as presents. When he saw a large doll for the first time, he couldn't believe that it wasn't alive. He had been given books. Only books.

Generously embellished with pictures, with colourful covers, mostly containing poetry, which he learnt by heart. By the time he was six he knew countless poems and was put on stage for every celebration. This small six-year-old person wearing a blue *chumarka* coat, a high lambskin hat and red boots with heels (his parents loved Ukrainian artifacts) would come out sedately onto the stage and recite "My Testament" or "Father's Hat" in a ringing voice.

He liked the latter poem most of all. It was the story of a hat which a father had brought back from the war. Reciting that poem he would always take off his own hat and show it to the audience.

Eventually he was nick-named Father's Hat, and after that no power on earth would have forced him to recite the poem again.

It should also be mentioned that little Vasyl had a sister Vira, five years his senior. This needs to be mentioned if only because his sister was responsible for his never having taken off his beret.

Vasylko studied well, he was a quiet and meek child, and even during the holidays he would rather be at home reading books instead of being out on the common with children his own age. It was in grade four that a certain incident happened to him affected him so deeply, that throughout his life he would think back to it many a time: it seemed to him that had this incident not occurred, his life would have taken quite a different turn.

In those years every newspaper wrote about the exploits of Pavlik Morozov, a Pioneer (a member of a schoolchildren's communist organization) from a remote Siberian village. There wasn't a school which didn't have a Pioneer detachment named in his honour. There wasn't a classroom where this celebrated Pioneer's portrait didn't hang. Pioneers lined up facing him, they reported to him about their successes, made solemn pledges and oaths before him. And there were Pavlik Morozov classes too.

A class such as this was conducted at the start of the school year in Vasylko's fourth grade.

Their young teacher, Olena Kyrylivna, read a newspaper article about a lad from a neighbouring village to the children who listened in rapt silence. They were enthralled and horrified, especially when the teacher explained how the Pioneer was not afraid of letting the authorities know that his father was hiding grain in a pit. 'After all, he could have been killed, just like Pavlik Morozov...'

The teacher's ringing voice cracked with emotion, she herself sincerely believed in what she was saying, but the children cowered

more and more, hugging their desktops.

The teacher ran her glowing gaze about the room of petrified children and asked:

"Children, would you like to be like Pavlik Morozov? And like the Pioneer from our neighbouring village?"

"Yes!" the class replied in unison.

"Then raise your hands, those who would have done what he did?"

It was at this point that confusion set in. Those children who were already about to raise their hands, immediately lowered them, looking fearfully at their teacher, while others simply stared at their desk.

A lank girl with thin plaits said softly:

"Daddy said that that fellow from the village wasn't a kulak at all... Not like Pavlik Morozov's father..."

Olena Kyrylivna frowned angrily.

"You don't understand anything, Olia!" Then she looked about the class.

"Well, come on then, I'm waiting!"

Vasylko felt as if the teacher was looking directly at him. He wanted so much to be liked by Olena Kyrylivna, that he went and raised his hand.

"Good lad, Duboshey! One can see straight away that you're a true Pioneer. And who else, children?"

A few more children wanted to become "true Pioneers".

During the break Vasko proudly walked about the school passage. He felt that all eyes were upon him.

But after lessons, on the way home, his sister beat him up.

Even as a small child Vira had been quick with retribution. No matter how much a hiding she received from mother, no matter how much father chastised her – it had no effect. If things didn't go her way, she would let her fists fly. And many a time Vasylko came running to mother crying: 'Vira beat me up!' Mother, who was just as hotheaded as Vasko's sister, grabbed whatever was at hand, be it a broom or a rag, and began to pound his sister: 'Take that...! Take that...! Take that...!' And what was strange, Vira never cried. She remained silent. She only squeezed her lips tightly together until they disappeared.

And so this time when Vasko bragged how he had been the first to raise his hand, Vira suddenly punched him with a pear-hard fist.

"What's that for?!" Vasko bawled.

"You're going to denounce father then, eh?"

And she hit him a second time on the back of the head. He heard his neck crack, and his cap went flying to the ground.

Any other time Vasko wouldn't have taken this and would have hit Vira back. But this time that phrase of Vira's had struck him so strongly, that he didn't even burst into tears.

He? Denounce his dad?

Vasko loved no one else as much as he loved his father. Mother was for day-to-day matters, she never had any time, always at the stove, or doing the washing, or cleaning the room, or sewing and patching. Mother often scolded them, because nothing was done right, nothing was done her way, and at times she reached for the broom, so that Vasko both loved mother and feared her; but father was for the holidays, the festive days, when you could stay by his side, when father belonged completely to you, down to the last fingernail: Vasko found it more interesting to be with his father than with anyone else.

"I'm going to tell father on you!" Vira threatened.

Vasko was already completely devastated. After all, he hadn't been thinking of his father when he had raised his hand! He wanted to burst into tears now – not so much from the pain in his neck, as from the injustice which had suddenly overcome him.

How he suffered the next few days! How he fretted that his sister might have told father after all, and that he knew everything! Even though dad had said nothing to him, it seemed to Vasko that his father now looked at him differently. How he sometimes wanted to run up to him, to cling to father's warm hand, to tell him that he hadn't done it on purpose, that he had raised his hand only because the entire class had done so (Vasko had convinced himself that everyone down to the last pupil had raised their hands), that he wouldn't go and tell on his father for anything in the world!

"You haven't grown sick, have you?" his father once asked in a worried voice and hugged him close.

And Vasylko couldn't help himself and burst into bitter tears. He couldn't understand why he was crying, but the tears seemed to wash away everything which had been hanging over him all those days, and he felt a strange relief.

At the same time he caught himself spying on his father. Listening to what his father was saying, watching to see where his father went, whom he met. All this seemed to take place independently, as if some other fellow had settled inside him, someone who was very

knowledgeable on what a class enemy was and what one should do with him.

With time that incident was forgotten. Especially since Vira never did tell father anything. So for the moment we too shall forget about her, for quite different events were awaiting Vasko after he had come of age.

Vasyl Duboshey (now it would even be awkward to call him Vasko), having matriculated with excellent grades from the secondary school of which his father was principal, was now a third-year student in one of Kiev's tertiary institutes. He was studying economics: his father had wanted him to steer clear of politics, for in those times you paid with your freedom for political involvement. So many trials were taking place in those days, that it seemed the "enemies of the people" in the tertiary institutes were breeding faster than they could be caught and jailed or executed. And the remaining students now recited during lessons of class vigilance:

Villainous, loathsome, evil scum,
Who did you dare threaten with death?
You shall receive no more mercy,
To be shot like dogs is your fate!

With their innocent hearts, their trusting souls in which anything could be sown, the students recited these words, condemning innocent people.

Several "enemies of the people" had wormed their way into the faculty where Duboshey was studying: the dean, both department heads, several lecturers and some post-graduate students. They were angrily branded at meetings, and Vasyl would sometimes take the floor too and ask with pained reproach, where was our class vigilance, that we failed to spot the insidious enemy in time, allowing him to operate unnoticed? Vasyl sincerely believed in his words, everyone who had been arrested seemed to be an enemy which only a blind person could not have spotted: they had overlooked, missed and ignored them, and this was difficult to forgive. Vasyl went about the hero, he was elected secretary of their faculty's Komsomol bureau, he was already thinking about joining the party to replenish the thinned ranks, when one late night (this always happened late at night) the doorbell to their apartment rang briefly and uneasily.

The three of them lived together then. Vira, having married long ago, already had two children. Vasyl was sleeping soundly, but his

parents, who had learnt to sleep with one eye open, got up immediately and for some reason his mother dashed into his room instead of answering the door.

"Son, there's someone at the door!"

Vasyl had never seen her so frightened. Her fear was passed on to him, although he didn't feel guilty of anything. Jumping out of bed in his underpants, he stood beside his mother. He listened intently and it seemed to him as if all the objects around him had frozen in fear too.

"Where's dad?" he asked in a whisper.

"Getting dressed," his mother replied in a whisper too.

The doorbell rang again, this time angrily and exactingly.

Letting out a moan, his mother ran out of Vasyl's room.

He heard father's footsteps. The light switch clicked on, light rushed in from the adjoining room. Only now did Vasyl notice that he was wearing only his underpants and, hastily grabbing his pants, he danced about the room trying to get his foot into the trouserleg. He was already shaking nervously and his teeth were chattering.

He heard his father come up to the door.

"Who's there?" Father's voice sounded almost like a stranger's, cracked with fear.

A muffled answer came from the other side, father opened the door. There was a clatter of feet down the passage and into the adjoining room. Vasyl was putting on his shirt, but the buttons kept refusing to go into the buttonholes. He finally did it up, smoothed his hair with trembling hands, but did not know what to do next. Standing in the reassuring darkness, he listened to the voices questioning his father. He didn't dare leave his bedroom: it seemed as if they had made a mistake, that everything would be cleared up shortly and they would leave. And so he didn't want to show himself.

"And who's in there?" Vasyl heard.

"Our son."

"Wake him up!"

Vasyl did not wait for them to come in and stepped out himself. Four strangers stood in the brightly-lit room, all looking frightfully alike. There was something implacably faceless about their identical, ill-fitting light overcoats, their deeply-set khaki caps and chrome-leather boots. One of them, who had probably been asking the questions, again turned to father:

"Is this your son?"

"Yes." Father was already dressed in his work suit. He appeared calm, only his face was unusually pale.

"Are you studying, young man?" Shining eyes containing nothing but emptiness checked out Vasyl.

Vasyl made no answer, but his father hurried to his aid, as if wanting to protect him:

"He's studying in a tertiary institute. And, by the way, he's the secretary of the faculty's Komsomol bureau."

"Yes." And it was impossible to tell what that 'yes' meant: censure or approval. The man turned around to the three others behind him and ordered in a low voice: "You can begin."

The search lasted for several hours. Throughout the entire apartment, room by room. Furniture was shifted around, drawers and boxes emptied, every book was leafed through. Paintings were removed from the walls, the frames were tapped, as well as the walls themselves. It seemed that had even the smallest dust particle been concealed from them somewhere, they would have found it all the same.

"Tell me what you're looking for?" father could not hold back. "Perhaps I can help you?"

They did not reply. As if father had ceased to exist for them.

They were in no hurry, going about their work calmly and methodically. Their movements were so trained, that it looked as if robots were rummaging about the apartment. Vasyl even recalled the science-fiction novel *The Robots Are Coming*, which he had recently read. There was something metallic and heartless about these men.

After his unsuccessful attempt at trying to talk to them, father grew silent. Throughout these long hours he remained standing in the middle of the room and mother, who was sitting feebly in an armchair, begged him several times:

"Andriusha, sit down! Andriusha, sit down!" as if their whole future depended on whether father remained standing or seated.

Even though it was warm in the apartment, mother must have been cold, because she continually rearranged her black woollen scarf, which made her look small and defenceless.

Vasyl remained standing too – drawing on his dwindling strength to stay on his feet. His knees ached, his head was as empty as ever, he couldn't believe what was happening around him, he kept thinking that something would click above them and these people would disappear, and the fear which had gripped his heart with an icy clutch

would blow away.

But nothing clicked and the terribly identical men continued to do their work.

One of them emerged from father's study, carrying a pile of identically bound books:

"Chief, look at this!" The voice of a hunter who has stumbled onto his prey.

The chief took one of the books and opened it.

"Hrushevsky!"

"I lecture in history," father explained hastily.

"Using Hrushevsky?" the chief asked derisively: his bright eyes were already squinting mercilessly.

'Why didn't we burn them? Why?!' a shriek emanated from Vasyl's soul: while he was still in grade five, father and mother had 'purged' father's library behind drawn curtains. They picked out the dangerous books, tore them up and burnt them in the pot-bellied stove. These included books by Pokrovsky, Hrinchenko, Vynnychenko, Ellan-Blakytny and another dozen or so authors. 'Well, we got a bit of warmth out of them,' father had said sadly, raking the ashes into a bucket, so that there would be no trace left. Mother had wanted to burn Hrushevsky then too, but father would not let her. The seven-volume set had stood all these years, hidden behind other books, and Vasyl had long since forgotten about them.

But he should have remembered. Should have! And tossed them out, even behind father's back.

The faceless men took away Hrushevsky, ordering father to come along as well.

"Masha, don't cry." Father was strangely calm, only very pale, almost green. "This is a misunderstanding. I'll be back soon... The comrades will clear everything up and I'll be back home by tonight." Father seemed to be addressing them, wanting them to confirm this, but all four remained indifferently silent. Then father turned towards Vasyl: "Look after mother, do you hear?" He hugged him and pushed him away, as if afraid of bursting into tears, and such a hot wave suddenly splashed into Vasyl's heart, such utter despair, that he barely managed to stop himself from yelling like a small child: 'Daddy, where are you going?!' and choking on inconsolable sobs. There was a painful swelling in his eyes, they misted over, he saw father's washed-out figure disappearing, shielded by other figures, and he wordlessly kept swallowing his tears.

He sat by his mother's side until morning. Mother did not fret or cry: she sat dumbly, petrified, staring into nothingness, which opened before her in all its horrifying hopelessness. He saw his mother like this for the first time and it seemed to him that she was going insane.

In the morning, when mother came to her senses a little, they began to clean up in the apartment. Picking up the scattered underwear, putting aside those things which had been soiled, placing the books back on the shelves. Sliding drawers back in, closing cupboards and the sideboard, setting the armchairs and chairs back in their usual positions. The rooms again assumed their normal appearance, but they still lacked one thing – father.

They had a late breakfast: yesterday's leftovers. Then mother began to get ready to go and find out what had happened to father, and when Vasyl said that he would go along with her, she objected anxiously:

"There's no need. I don't want them to see you there." Mother didn't want the slightest shadow of suspicion to fall on her son.

"But you're not afraid of going!"

"I've already lived my piece, son. While you've got your life ahead of you."

Vasyl argued a bit more with his mother, becoming angry that she refused to take him along, worrying what father would think about him not being there. 'In my position father would have done the same,' mother replied and remained implacable. Vasyl did not attend the institute that day: he couldn't even imagine how he could show his face there. He lay down on the sofa and held his head in his hands.

He was thinking about Nelia. What would she say when she found out? Would she come running to console him?

He was engaged to Nelia (her old-fashioned parents had insisted on that), they were to be married this autumn. Nelia would be moving into his place, they had already made plans how they would furnish Vasyl's room, Nelia's large portrait already hung above the desk at which Vasyl prepared for his lessons. Suddenly he jumped to his feet, thinking they had taken her portrait away too; no, it was in its place, Nelia was smiling at him with her joyous smile and that carefree smile echoed inside him with such insufferable pain that Vasyl let out a groan.

Only now did he realize that his father might not return. Almost

no one returned out of all those who were taken away. They were ruled out of life once and for all, and their children were thrown out of the Komsomol, expelled from the institutes if they were students. He suddenly imagined how he would be expelled, how others would take the floor and ask mercilessly and furiously where his class consciousness had been, just as he had done many a time himself, branding a son or daughter of an enemy of the people...

'But my father isn't an enemy of the people!' he shouted in his mind at this upcoming meeting. 'This is a misunderstanding, a mistake.'

Those others who had been expelled had said the same things. And Vasyl had said with a stern frown:

"Lay down your Komsomol membership card!"

And that was that. And the person disappeared. Not a trace was left of them. They dropped out of Komsomol and institute life as the son or daughter of an enemy of the people. Branded until their dying days.

Where they all disappeared to had not interested Vasyl. Uncertain rumours circulated that one had found work as a stoker, another as a loader – they were taken on to do only the most difficult, dirtiest work. Vasyl's closest friend had become a loader too; a fellow with whom he had gone to school, then the institute, with whom he had entered the Komsomol. 'How could you have deceived me all these years?' Vasyl asked him angrily and was the first to raise his hand in favour of the fellow's expulsion from the Komsomol.

All enemies had to be weeded out, decisively and mercilessly, every last one of them.

Now his turn had come. And Vasyl knew in advance that they would not stand on ceremony with him, just as he hadn't stood on ceremony with those others...

Would Nelia turn away from him too...?

Mother returned. She tugged at her scarf as if she had pulled all her hair out with it. Her eyes were extinguished, her face grey.

"They told me to come back in a week. To bring a coat and a hat."

"A coat and a hat? In the middle of summer? What have they got there, a freezer?"

"I don't know," mother said wearily. "They told me to bring them."

"Then I'll go there myself!"

"Don't you dare! You hear, don't you dare!" Mother grabbed hold of him as if he was about to leave.

And Vasyl did not go. Instead he went off to the institute the next day.

The closer he came to the institute, the more unsure and alarmed he felt: he imagined that they already knew everything. He greeted his fellow students prudently, afraid they might not offer him their hands, just as he had not offered his upon learning that his best friend's father had been arrested. His friend had just stood there, his hand outstretched...

They shook Vasyl's hand. Greeted him. Talked as if nothing had happened. 'They don't know!' Vasyl sighed with relief. Not yet, at least. He sat through the lectures after that, unable to comprehend a thing: continually expecting the door to burst open and someone to summon him before the Komsomol committee or the dean's office.

He also feared meeting Nelia. What would he tell her? And yet at the same time he wanted this meeting to take place. Especially now that he badly needed that smile brimming with tenderness, her loving gaze. Nelia was in second year and he always saw her home.

What would he say when they met this time? That his father had been arrested? That he was the son of an enemy of the people?

So he didn't see her home this time. Without waiting for her, he rushed home, suddenly imagining that his father had been released. That they had sorted out the misunderstanding, apologized, and father had long since been home.

But only mother was at home. She sat stock-still in an armchair. Everything went dark in Vasyl's eyes.

Hearing her son, the mother stirred, as if waking up.

"I took the things over today." She raised her sorrow-filled eyes at Vasyl.

"What's happening with father? Did you see him?"

Mother shook her head:

"I didn't see him... They wouldn't let me... There are so many women there... And all with food parcels, all with food parcels..." She let out a sob, covered her eyes with her hands. Her shoulders shuddered.

"Come on, mum, don't cry!" Vasyl tried to console her. Even though his own voice was beginning to crack and there was a tickle in his nose. "You'll see, father will come back! What sort of an enemy of the people is he?"

"I'm not crying, son." Mother wiped her eyes, even attempted a smile. But it would have been better had she not done this! "You must be hungry! Let's go and eat, I've made some soup."

Over lunch she asked tactfully:

"How are things at the institute?"

"The same," he replied as calmly as he could.

"They didn't summon you anywhere?"

"Where are they supposed to summon me? Don't even think about that, mother. Everything will be all right." He put on a cheerful face in front of his mother, although he didn't believe his own words.

He was summoned before the Komsomol committee on the fourth day after his father's arrest. The door opened when everyone was at their desks and the lecture was about to begin. A girl poked her head in:

"Who's Duboshey in here?" Vasyl got up in fright. "Come to the Komsomol committee after the lecture."

'This is it!' Vasyl went cold inside.

During the lesson he couldn't make out what the lecturer was saying: in his thoughts he was already before the committee.

He had been acquainted with the committee secretary Oleh Bezpaly ever since he himself had been elected secretary of the faculty's Komsomol bureau. Although Oleh was a student too, he seemed far older than his twenty-two years. A kind of reserved dryness came through all his actions; he kept not only the rank and file Komsomol members at a distance, but also the members of the committee. When addressing people he would refer to them only by surname. Deep inside Vasyl was entranced by him and often caught himself imitating Bezpaly. He also tried to speak in a low voice, and be just as unflustered and reserved.

Bezpaly was there alone. He was sitting at an enormous desk (just then large desks were coming into vogue: those sitting at such desks were no longer human, but almost demi-gods)... Bezpaly sat at the enormous desk leafing through some papers. A straight part shone in his neatly-combed hair. Without raising his head he pointed a sharp pencil in the direction of a chair: sit down!

Vasyl sank into the armchair so that only his head appeared over the desktop. He immediately felt very uncomfortable: these armchairs were calculated to create just such a feeling.

The silence lasted for several minutes: Bezpaly seemed to have forgotten about Vasyl's presence.

"Did you call me?" Vasyl finally asked.

With obvious reluctance Bezpaly tore himself away from the

papers and looked coldly at him:

"I've been forced to summon **you** here." His soft voice bore no promise of anything good. He looked down, tapping his pen against the gleaming desktop. "You can't guess why, can you?"

"No, I can," Vasyl replied, cowering.

"When was your father arrested?" Bezpaly was acting very formally towards Vasyl, emphasizing that chasm which had appeared between them.

"Four days ago."

"Four days! And all this time you've been keeping from us the fact that your father is an enemy of the people?"

"He's not an enemy."

"Who then?" Bezpaly allowed himself a smile. "You won't begin to try and convince me that our state arrests innocent people!"

Vasyl remained deadly silent. These words were all the more painful, since he himself had uttered them aloud not so long ago. With a similarly merciless certainty.

"So what do we do with you now, Duboshey?"

The question hung heavily in the air. Vasyl felt very hot. His shirt collar was digging into his neck, choking him like a noose.

"Do you have your Komsomol membership book with you?"

"Yes," Vasyl answered hoarsely.

"Let me have it."

Vasyl took out his small grey book, only now realizing how precious it was to him. This wasn't simply a booklet – this was his future.

Bezpaly took his Komsomol membership and tossed it indifferently into a drawer.

"So what are we going to do?"

Vasyl only moved his lips: he still couldn't wrench his eyes from the spot where his membership had lain.

"I feel sorry for you, Duboshey. Even though I'm not supposed to pity you. But you were an active member, we were even thinking of recommending you to join the committee..."

"I didn't know anything!" Vasyl burst out. 'Didn't know? Didn't know what? That your father was an enemy of the people?'

"I believe you, but that has to be proven."

"How?"

"I shouldn't be telling you this. But I feel truly sorry for you. Did you read the last issue of our newspaper?"

"No." These past four days Vasyl hadn't been in the mood for newspapers.

"I knew it," Bezpaly shook his head reproachfully. "You should, you know. Here, have a read. On the last page. If you decide to follow the same path – drop by. We'll talk about it. Only the sooner you do it, the better. We can't wait too long."

Coming out into the passage Vasyl greedily attacked the back page. His salvation was there – he could feel this with all his being.

The sports column. That wasn't it! Articles about cultural activities. Not that either! He feverishly ran his eyes across the whole page but found nothing of relevance. He began to reread the page and – here it was! – at the end, before the editor's name, he spotted a small note.

'I renounce my parents!'

His heart thumped mightily, blood rushed to his head. There was a ringing in his ears.

I renounce my parents...

'I, a second year (read **fourth year**) student, Dmytro Kovalenko (read **Vasyl Duboshey**) renounce my parents (read **my father**) as class enemies of the Soviet state. I am breaking all ties with them (**him**) forever and swear to be true to the cause of building socialism in our country!'

No, he could never do that. Never!

He crushed the newspaper, wanting to throw it away, but his hand acted independently and placed it in his pocket. And then every second, every moment he felt the presence of the newspaper.

He wanted to see Nelia. So badly, as never before. He recalled that it had been four days since he had seen her home and rushed off to her lecture hall.

He bumped into Nelia's girlfriends. He knew them all and they knew him. They nodded affably at him, smiling. 'They don't know yet!'

"Where's Nelia?"

"Nelia's sick. She's got the flu."

"When did this happen?"

"The day before yesterday. Didn't you know? What a fiance!"

Perplexed, he left the institute. So this was why Nelia hadn't dropped by his lecture hall at all. Any other time he would have dashed off to visit her, but now he hesitated. Finally he decided to go over and visit her.

Nelia's father answered the door. He was a lecturer from their institute. With an old-world pince-nez and a full beard.

"Hello! How's Nelia?"

"Vasyl, come inside."

The eyes behind the lenses appeared lost. He took him into the lounge room, offered him a chair, even though Vasyl resisted: he had only dropped by for a minute to find out how Nelia was.

"How's Nelia, Volodymyr Oleksiyovych?"

"Nelia's in bed." And seeing that Vasyl wanted to get up, he raised his hands: "She's asleep just now, it's better not to alarm her." He tugged at his beard (the lenses shuddered anxiously). "Vasyl, I wanted to ask you..." He burst out coughing, cleared his throat. "How are things with your father?"

'This is what it's all about!' Vasyl thought with a sinking feeling. Looking away, he said:

"They've arrested him." And immediately added passionately: "But he'll be released! They'll sort everything out and release him... It's a mistake, Volodymyr Oleksiyovych!"

"Let's hope so... Let's hope so..."

A heavy silence ensued.

"Then I'll be going," Vasyl rose to his feet.

"Yes, yes, go."

"Tell Nelia that I came by."

"Yes, yes, I'll let her know." And in the doorway, hiding his eyes behind the lenses, he added: "I'll tell you what, Vasyl... For the moment you'd better not come round any more. Nelia shouldn't be alarmed... Until she gets better..."

He left feeling as if he had been given a backhander. 'I won't ever set foot in your house again!' There were tears in his eyes as he walked away. 'The son of an enemy of the people! The son of an enemy of the people!' the words echoed in time to his footsteps.

Coming home, he handed his mother the crumpled newspaper:

"Here, read the last page."

"What's there?" his mother reeled with fright.

"Read it. Right at the bottom."

Mother picked up the newspaper and it immediately began to shake.

"Who's this Kovalenko?" she said, unable to understand a thing. "A friend of yours?"

"What's Kovalenko got to do with it?" he yelled with disappointment. "It's been suggested to me that I make a similar statement! Me, do you understand...? That I renounce my own father! They've given me a model here on how to word it," he pointed at the paper.

"And if I don't renounce him – I'll be turfed out of the Komsomol. And the institute... Who needs the son of an enemy of the people...? Even Nelia's already deserted me!" He firmly believed that this was so. "They threw me out of their home and told me to forget about coming again." He waved his hand about, so as not to burst out crying and ran off to his room. Collapsing onto his bed, he buried his face in the pillow, and felt so much pain, so much pain, that he wanted to scream!

His mother came in. She shuffled along as if she was ailing and, placing the newspaper on his desk, she sat down beside him, sighing deeply.

Vasyl was already lying on his back, his glazed eyes fixed on the ceiling. His mother's hand stretched out to his head, touched his hair. She stroked it comfortingly .

"Listen what I've decided, son."

Vasyl remained silent: he didn't want to speak or listen.

"You won't be able to help your father in any way now, son... I saw and heard enough there." Mother took food parcels there every day.

"What are you saying, mum!"

"I'm just telling you how things stand...You can't get father back... And you have to live." His mother's hand kept stroking his hair. "You've still got your life ahead of you, son..."

"So what do I do, mum?" He again felt the obedient child.

"Write what they're asking you to write, son. Intelligent people won't condemn you."

"What about dad?"

"Dad would have told you to do the same. If he returns, he'll understand everything. And if he doesn't..." At this point mother's voice broke off and her face began to tremble. She fought off the tears which were choking her and again ran her hand over his head: "Go there tomorrow and do it..."

He disagreed, but allowed himself to be convinced for a long time, although inside he already knew that there was no other way out. However the more clearly he realized this, the more vocal his objections became.

Finally he gave in:

"All right... I'll do it if you insist. "

He was irritable the rest of the evening. Angry with himself, his mother, the whole world. And his mother didn't know how to approach him.

But there was an unpleasant conversation with his sister still awaiting him. Vira lived in a regional town near Kiev – she rushed home as soon as she received a letter from mother. Mother must have told her everything, otherwise where would Vira have found out that Vasyl had renounced his father. Vira opened the door when he had returned from the institute (mother had just gone off to deliver another food parcel).

"The writer's arrived!"

She stood in the doorway looking viciously at her brother.

"Let me in!" Vasyl felt as if people were already gathering behind him.

"You've buried father alive!" Vira followed her brother like a shadow, burning him with her gaze. "How will you be able to look him in the eye when he comes back?"

"He won't be coming back." God Almighty, it was bad enough without Vira! What did she want from him? What?! "It's all right for you there, hiding behind your husband's back. I was threatened with expulsion from the institute. Would you want that? Well...? You can't help father anyway..."

"What a bloody villain you are, Vasyl!"

"Then don't chat with bloody villains! Go back to where you came from!"

"I sure will! But I'm taking mother with me. You can stay on your own, father-seller!"

However mother refused to join Vira. To leave Vasylko on his own now...? And who would take father the food parcels...? Mother wouldn't have a bar of it, no matter how much Vira tried to convince her, even shouting at her, but it would probably have been better had mother agreed to go. Late one night (father had been in prison for almost a month) the doorbell rang sharply in their apartment.

They jumped to their feet together.

'They've come for me,' Vasyl went cold inside.

Dressed in her nightshirt, his mother dashed into his room:

"Escape, son...!"

She grabbed him by the hand and dragged him over to the window. She probably failed to comprehend that they lived on the third floor and that down below there were cobblestones.

Breaking free of mother's clutches, Vasyl began to dress. He was shuddering once more, just as he had that time they had come for father. There was a ringing in his ears.

Meanwhile the doorbell was going mad in the passage. And they were banging on the door.

"Just a minute!" Vasyl called out and didn't recognize his own voice.

"I'll go...! I'll open it...!" Mother wanted to protect him at least this way.

This time there were only two of them. In the same coats and caps, the same chrome-leather boots. And equally faceless. They conducted no search and didn't take Vasyl – taking his mother instead.

Mother left almost cheerful.

"Everything will be all right...! Don't worry..." she said, smiling at her son, until they led her, already dressed, out of the apartment.

And so Vasyl was left on his own. He was again summoned before the Komsomol committee and another renunciation appeared in the institute newspaper. How that newspaper found its way into his sister's hands he never did find out, but Vira again burst into the apartment and during the wild argument that ensued hit him over the head with something heavy. He hadn't even seen what she was holding in her hands, noticing only the flash of metal. There was a sharp pain and he lost consciousness...

Vasyl spent almost a month in hospital, while his sister was thrown into prison. When Vasyl was discharged he had a scar across his whole head and not a hair on his head – it had all dropped out. After that he began wearing a beret all the time.

A few words remain to be said about Nelia.

Nelia married someone else, but before they had been together even a year, her father was arrested. And her husband immediately divorced her. Vasyl eventually did marry Nelia, but until his dying day he could never forgive her her betrayal.

"He told you all this?" I asked Kost Kostiovych. I found it hard to believe that someone like Duboshey was capable of an honest confession.

"What can I say..." Kost Kostiovych took off his straw hat and smoothed down his grey hair. "What if I were to tell you that I met his mother *there*? Would you believe me?"

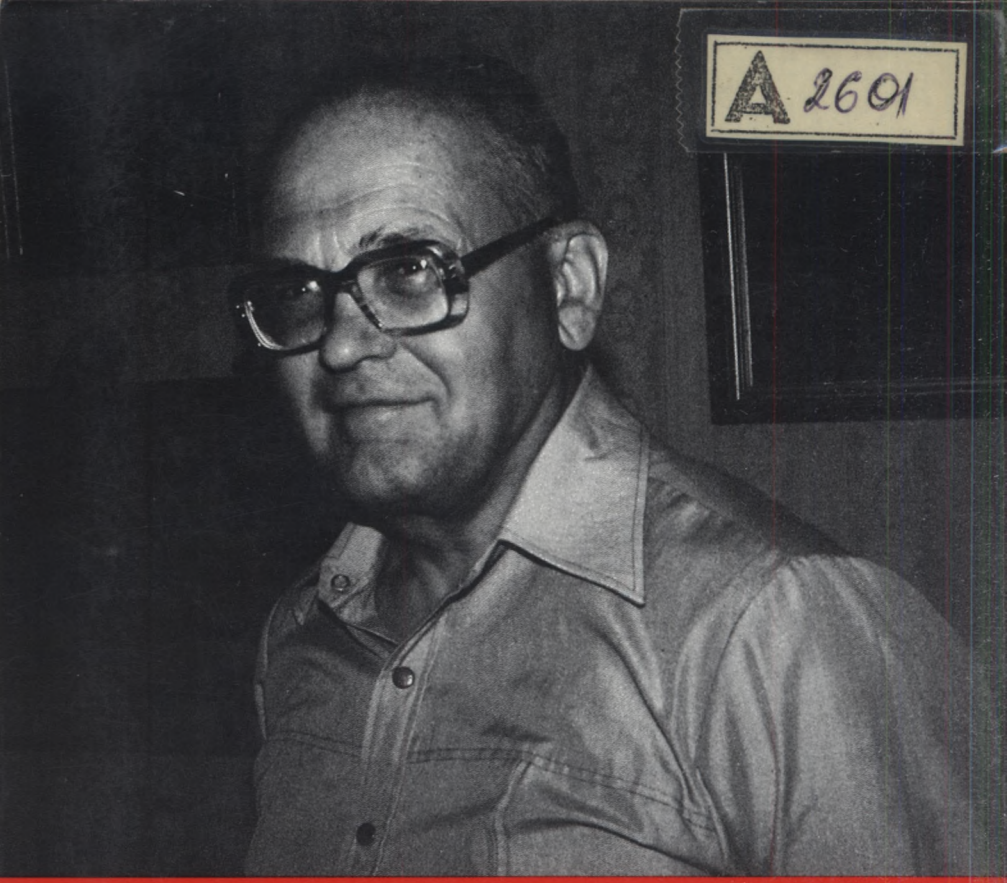
"You...? Met his mother...?"

"That's right," Kost Kostiovych smiled. "She was over fifty then. I was thirty-two, sent straight from the German prisoner-of-war camp into one of ours, without a stop anywhere. Trials and retribution were

swift then: if you became a prisoner-of-war and didn't shoot yourself, it meant you were an enemy of the people. That's how I became a traitor and received my ten years. Plus five years disfranchisement. I met Vasyl's mother in exile. Someone told me one day: 'There's a woman compatriot of yours dying over there. Perhaps you could visit her, it'll make it easier for her.' I went to see her – she was skin and bone. Couldn't lift her head any more. But when she heard that I was from Kiev too, she was overjoyed, as if her own child had appeared: 'You'll be able to see my Vasylko there!' She grabbed my hand and began to kiss it – I barely wrenched it free... So I kept visiting her until she died. She took a long time to die and kept talking about her son the whole time. How unfortunate he was. Before she died she made me promise that when I returned, I would find him... That was no problem, for he still lived in the same apartment, except that he was married and had two daughters. And so we got to know one another. You know, he trusted only me... Not his wife, nor his daughters – only me..."

Kost Kostiovych's eyes were beginning to glisten suspiciously. He broke off his account and continued walking alongside me with lowered head. Meanwhile I was thinking about Duboshey. A man had lived alongside us and we had known nothing at all about him...

Kiev, 1987



Anatoly Dimarov

Stalin was responsible for the deaths of millions through famine, execution and Siberian exile. Many millions more were scarred for life by his reign of terror.

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Anatoly Dimarov is a Ukrainian writer living and working in Kiev.