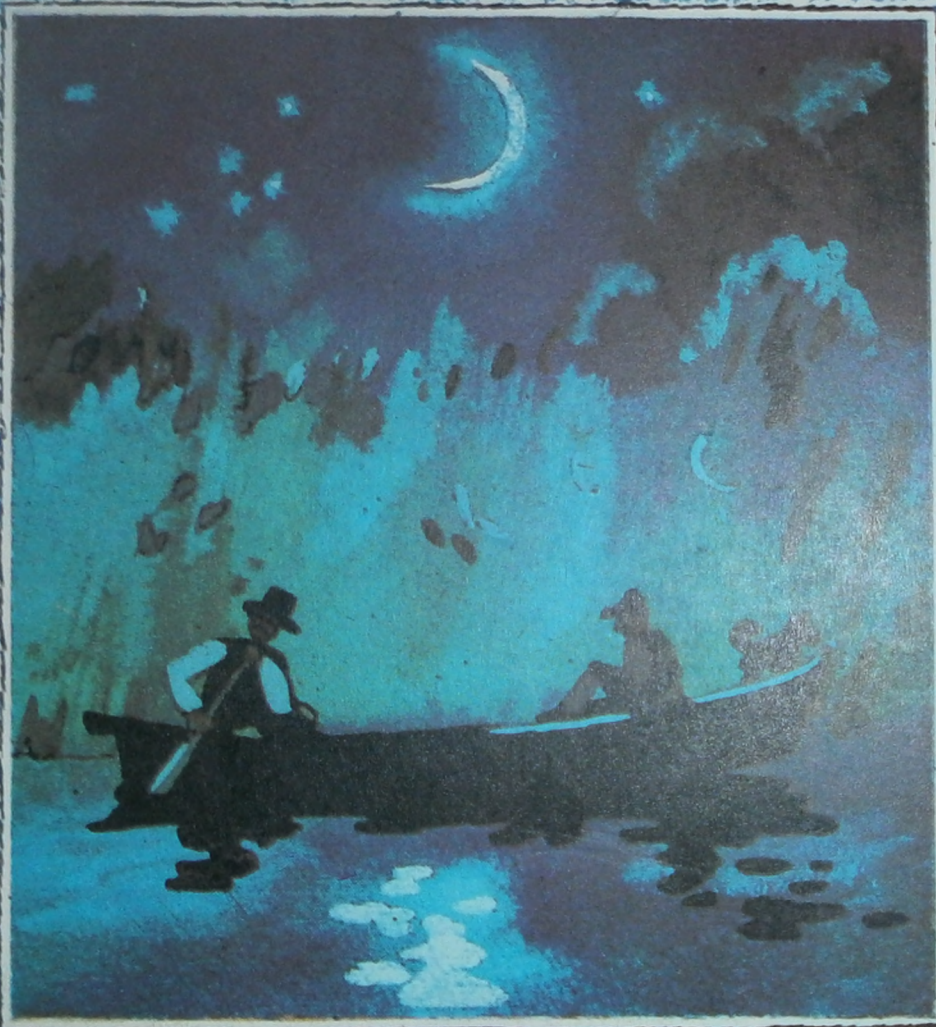


MIKOLA VINHRANOVSKY



*Summer Evening*



2846

MIKOLA  
VINHRANOVSKY

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*Summer  
Evening*

SHORT STORIES



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## WHAT MAKES THE EARTH SPIN

A gray hail cloud, its white chilly rifts pierced by the yellow rays of the evening sun, was retreating to the town of Uman. White hailstones with sharp blue edges were still sizzling on the tilled field after their mighty impact, and two sparrows in a shelterbelt of acacias

nearby chirped in low voices that were dry with fear, asking each other whether they were dead or alive after the wild tumult of the hailstorm.

The dark-brown-rimmed eyes of puddles on the hushed country road along the shelterbelt gazed into the sky, and the water from the melting hailstones inside the empty mag-

pie nests fell right into the eyes of the puddles, drop after drop.

My dapple-white nanny goat with bulging eyes looked delightedly at the bluish bump where a hailstone had hit me on the forehead when we were trying to get away from the storm. I had pitched my tent on the bank of the Kodima River and was angling for ruffs, when suddenly a torrential downpour broke out, followed by a hailstorm. Usually quiet and knee-deep even to a frog, the steppe river instantly swelled, seething with bubbles like boiling milk, flattened the reeds, washed out the dry packed ducks' nests, whirled their blackened addled eggs and feathers, tore into my tent, inundating my transistor radio on which our famous Nina Matviyenko was singing beautiful folk songs just then, snatched up the inflatable raft with the white plastic bucket containing my day's catch, and dashed further on to the sound of pelting hail and clapping thunderbolts. I was rushing out to save the bucket and raft when the wind swept into the tent, filling it with air like a balloon. It swayed from side to side and started to lift slowly into the sky. I threw myself down on the tent, grabbed the pegs loosened by the floodwater, and started to squeeze the air out of the tent with my body. The hailstones thrashed my back so violently I felt they were scraping off my skin like scales from a fish. But I was determined to drop dead rather than give away my tent to the elements. Flashes of lightning fell on my four-legged companion who circled round me and bleated dementedly, her face gray with fear, as she vainly tried to escape the stinging hailstones. The Kodima, however, was not satisfied yet. The water reached my hands, legs and back. I raised my head and, gasping for air, jumped to my feet, pulled the tent off the ground and out of the water, shouldered the wet bundle

with everything in it, and dashed to a Scythian barrow nearby. The goat followed me at a run.

"Pitch the tent or I'll throw you back into the river I saved you from!" I shouted at her. She only bleated piteously in response. So I covered her with the sodden bundle and slid down the slippery feathergrass of the barrow to retrieve anything that could still be saved.

The raft, bucket, fishing rods, boots and raincoat had disappeared, which I hardly regretted, but what made me really bitter was the loss of the can with home-made cooking oil. Up to my neck in water, I plodded round the willow tree, groping with my feet for the can I had tied to a root, but instead I came across somebody's creel with crayfish that had been washed downstream. Well, that was something at least. Halya would be glad to have them.

I threw the creel onto the bank, climbed the barrow, chased the goat away, pitched the tent as best I could, found my thermos inside, and went to milk the goat. She blissfully screwed up her bulging eyes as I squirted the milk into the thermos. Moving her hail-battered horns left and right, she looked with misty eyes at the gray-blue evening landscape that smelled of dampness; then she scanned the barrows, of which there were several and, reassured that the one we were on was the highest of them, dribbled more milk into the thermos.

At the sound of mooing in the village of Zabary, hidden behind the reeds on the far bank, my nanny increased her yield, because down at the dairy farm it was milking time as well. A silver moon rose from behind the tilled field.

The crickets, dry by now after the rain, came to and started to chirp, reminding the road and the steppe of their eternal purpose — to run and stretch to the horizon respectively. Water



flowed with an unintelligible gurgle into the dark ditches along the shelterbelt. Yet another raindrop, silvery, the last one, continued to build up on an acacia thorn, uncertain whether to break loose or not, and in the end, dropped slowly into the black eye of a puddle, now rimmed with silver instead of dark brown.

"Who, who?" came the cry of a kite in the sky over the steppe.

"Who? Nobody!" the echo from the reeds on the far bank hurled back gruffly. "Who, who... I'll show you who... You'll regret your whooping yet..."

I lay on top of the barrow between the tent and the dozing nanny, trying to guess where the kite could be at that moment.

A satellite flew over the kite I could not see. It carried a yellow candle in front of it to light the way for itself and for God.

"Stop it! Stop gnawing at my head. Stop it!"

Presently I noticed gophers scampering one after another out of their holes in the barrow; they spit tiny bits of gold into the feathergrass, dived back into their holes and jumped out again with gold in their teeth which were also gold.

"I'm a king! I'm a Scythian king! Don't you gnaw at my head — it's gold. Don't dig your holes around this place!" the king shouted at them from his tomb.

"But we haven't got any other place to live in but your tomb, what with our children to care for and winter approaching. You could at least take pity on us, King," the gophers whimpered back, and went on spitting out the gold and digging their winter quarters.

The crayfish rustled in the creel lying on the river bank.

Something slapped on the water close to the bank and then splashed noisily in the middle of the river, sending silvery ripples toward the reeds; the ripples scattered in silvery

bubbles and then subsided; water beetles now paddled out from under the leaves of the water lilies to look at themselves, at the frogs, and at their nearest neighbors — also frogs.

Bluish clouds of smoke, or mist perhaps, rose over the mute wall of old reeds which seemed waxen in the moonlight, somebody was drumming away on a tambourine in Zabary, and, judging by the muffled barking of the dogs and the blinking evening lights going on in the village, Halya would be coming any minute now. That I could see from the behavior of the nanny goat: she stared fixedly across the Kodima at a point known to her alone, and then she must have picked up the sound of Halya coming, because she gave a plaintive bleat into the early autumn night.

The black bow of a paddle boat pushed out of the brass yellow reeds into the silvery surface of the Kodima, and Halya waved a paddle to me in greeting.

The boat was warm to my touch as I pulled it ashore. Halya stepped down onto the grass. We embraced. Her hands were cold with the chill of the night, the water, and the dusky village she had come from.

"Why are you dressed in a white smock?"

"Ask me something easier. I got into the boat and started to paddle when I saw on the water something white with a paddle in hand — it was simply my own reflection. I'd come home running from the dairy farm when it was already dark, grabbed a bundle of cornmeal for your polenta to go with the cooking oil, and hurried to you in just what I had on at that moment — the smock I had been milking the cows in. And where's your canvas?"

"On top of the barrow the Kodima chased me up."

"You know what my great-grandmother told me today? 'I had a dream you were





dating him on a barrow of all places. So watch out,' she said. 'There must have been a reason for such a dream.' But then Grandma interfered. 'Mama, you never experienced love in your life, so why lecture others how to go about it? She's been his sweetheart for a long time. Halya, you keep dating that boy and don't be afraid of anything, because this life is like a poppy — in the morning it blooms and in the evening the petals fall off.' This made Great-grandmother really mad. 'When you were her age you fooled around just like her,' she lashed out at Grandma. 'Do you think I don't know? I know everything and I see everything!' My mother, though, just listened to their argument without saying a word. Oh, I brought you some salt here." Halya raised her suntanned arms and took a matchbox with salt in it out of her plaited hair. "I put it in there in case the boat overturned. The river isn't deep, but my boat is leaking. The day seemed as long as eternity. I thought I'd die until I met you. Why are you looking at me like that? Why, tell me? Is it because I'm barefoot and dressed like that? But I told you I was in a hurry to see you."

The oncoming chill of autumn crept into the riverside villages on the hushed steppe, and either because the king had turned over in his sleep or because he had disturbed the gophers in the process, the lovers felt that the barrow had started to spin like a toy round the star-studded sky.

## SHAGGY

We had never had a dog like Shaggy before. There had been all sorts of dogs in our home, but never one like Shaggy. We had Spots, or Spotty as we called him sometimes. He loved to bite his tail and paw and laugh. Whenever I said, "Catch up with me!" to Spotty, he chased me.

Once Dad and I went fishing. It was at night. Dad covered the bottom of the boat with a couple of sheepskin coats and sat at the oars.

"How about taking Spotty along?" I asked.

"All right," he said.

Shortly afterward Spotty and I were lying on a sheepskin, having covered ourselves with the second sheepskin. Dad was rowing, the night drifted past us as did the reeds, while Spotty breathed untroubled at my side. We fell asleep like that.

We woke at sunrise. The sheepskin was wet with dew, a mist hovered over the river. From the village, geese came running down the river. They almost flew as they ran and plopped into the water. Behind them a little dog came rolling down, barking in a thin voice.

It was Shaggy.

Dad took him into the boat. Shaggy and Spotty sniffed each other and crawled under the sheepskin.





## THE CHEST

There was a witch living in our village. I knew her quite well, and knew who visited her and when. The witch's house stood amid pear trees and flowers on the edge of a gully. There was one remarkable thing she possessed — a chest. I'll tell you about it later on; now my story is about the witch herself.

She could turn herself into anything — a cow, a goat, a wheel, a gray stone — anything she wished. I liked those changes of hers, and since I was reluctant to go to school, I turned into her home, settled on the bench by the window, and whiled away my time like that.

"Granny, change into a flower today," I said. "Outdoors there's winter and snow, but I want it to be spring."



"I won't become a flower today, because I'm busy," the old woman said. "I'm expecting guests tonight. The ice will start breaking up on the river tonight, and my guests are coming over from the other bank."

"So what?" I asked.

"Nothing," the old woman said.

"What if I don't go to bed tonight and come to the river to have a look at your guests?"

"I don't mind," she said. "But don't you breathe a single word about it. If you tell anybody, I might get chased out of the village, or perhaps worse than that."

"I won't tell anybody, because I feel fine in your home, and I don't have to go to school besides."

"Come at midnight then, hide in the reeds by the Lukashenkos' house, and sit there facing

the river under a pear tree. After the ice starts drifting and my guests cross it, sit still until I give you a sign."

"What will it be?"

"Do you see that pear tree over there in the snow by the window?"

"Yes."

"Well then: as soon as you see it bloom, and that's something you will see — that'll be my sign."

"And what if I fall asleep?"

"If you want to sleep that much turn your nose to the wind and you'll stay awake."

"What if I fall asleep anyway?"

"You won't. White Sleep will come flying and he won't let you doze off."

"What is he like, White Sleep?"

"He's cold."

"And what if he doesn't come flying along and I doze off, and your guests cross the ice and go into your house without me seeing them? So what's that white cold sleep like?"

"You just hide in the reeds at the Lukashenkos' and you'll find out what he's like and what guests visit me at midnight."

"Well, I'll be going."

"All right, but don't you breathe a word and be careful not to freeze."

I was dressed warmly, and walked to the reeds at the Lukashenkos' across the thawing snow between the cherry trees with blobs of sticky resin on them.

The water was warming its cheeks under the snow, and in the air there hung a smell of either a dog or birds that had not yet returned from their passage — in short, it smelled of something of the kind.

The river broadened before my eyes, and seemed as if it had a stomach ache: something was gurgling in it, crackling and swelling.

There was nobody coming from the steep snow-covered bank on the other side of the river.

A stone was sleeping in the snow. An apricot tree was dozing over the bindweed hanging down a bluff. I didn't hear a sound, except for a dog barking in his sleep somewhere and the water warming its cheeks under the snow.

I settled under the pear tree, facing the ice-bound river and sat like that for some time. When I was on the point of falling asleep, I suddenly glimpsed something coming up from behind my back. I turned round and saw White Sleep plodding quietly downhill through the snow. White and round like a sack with flour, he walked on little black paws. He had a pair of black peepers the size of poppy seeds, and a snout like a hedgehog's.

"Phew!" he said.

White Sleep was not alone; he had his wife and two children with him.

I remembered seeing them somewhere, but they must have grown either older or grayer.

"Where are you going?" I asked White Sleep.

"We've come to sleep in the pear tree."

"Go ahead, I don't mind."

"But we can't, because you're sitting in the way."

"I can get up. But the old woman told me that it would be you who'd stop me from falling asleep."

"She's a fool, and your dad's no wiser! I myself want to sleep, and so do my wife and children."

"But how will you sleep in a pear tree?"

"Phew!" White Sleep said and turned on his little black paws to his wife. "Tell him something on that point, because I haven't got anything else to say."

"What did you eat yesterday?" his diminutive round-shaped white wife asked me.

"Bread."

"What else?"

"Pickled tomatoes from a barrel."

"Well, it's time we went to sleep. The snowy winter is passing, and we haven't got anything to eat."

"And what do you eat?"

"We eat clean snow and wash it down with frosty air."

"So sleep to your hearts' content. But why do you have to do it in a pear tree?"

"Phew!" White Sleep said. "That pear was our grandfather's and our great-grandfather's. Did you hear that?" He turned to his children. "And in this pear tree they slept all their lives and willed that we and our grandchildren sleep it out there as well."

"We hear you all right," White Sleep's children replied. "We'll sleep it out. We just love sleeping."

"Fine lads!" old White Sleep said. "See that hollow in the tree? Crawl inside and sleep. Follow them, wife, while I stay with this human for a chat."

His wife and children crawled into the hollow. White Sleep rolled up to me, settled at my side, licked some snow, and said:

"Phew! And what makes you sit in the snow under this here pear tree, freezing and on the lookout for something?"

"It's not much fun, I agree, but the old woman said she's expecting guests from the far bank tonight. I've never seen devils, so that's what makes me sit here."

"Go on sitting if you like until you turn into a devil yourself."

"And what if it really happens?"

"Do you think it's that easy for a devil to be what he is? Do you think it's easy for them to turn, say, into a human being?"

"Have you ever seen devils yourself?"

"Sure, just like I'm seeing you now. But to tell you the truth, we've never become friends, either because they're no match for me or the other way round. They're restless characters, while I'm a quiet type."

"What's their occupation? I mean, what do they do?"

"Nothing. They fool people, and get a kick out of it. They also love to watch films and soccer games, angle for fish or just loaf around. If it hadn't been for me and my family having to wake up for something to eat, I would've kept on sleeping and sleeping, even in my sleep!"

"All right — you sleep. That much I understand, because you're White Sleep after all. But what do you do in your sleep? I mean what do you see in your dreams?"

"Devils. They've poisoned my soul, and I've hated them from my Great-grandfather Sleep's time on. I see them in my dreams day and night, and they always rouse me. Such a sleep as I am you won't find anywhere in the world. No country, no people has such a sleep. I'm not simply Sleep; I'm White Immemorial Sleep. I can sleep not years, but centuries. But those devils keep pestering me."

"Why do they pester you? What do they want from you?"

"They want me to stay awake. Look, here they come — eyes glittering, tails hanging down to the snow. I suppose I'd better get into the pear tree!"

I looked round across the ice-bound river and — one, two, three, four, five, six, seven! — I saw their black seven. They came down the steep bank, supporting one another with their paws so as not to slip in the snow. Truth is, I couldn't make out their horns and tails, because they were far away. But judging from their wary tread and the furtive glances they

kept shooting to all sides, I understood that this was they!

The sky got darker, the water edge turned yellower, in the middle of the river it was black, and something seemed to have squeezed the river in. A faint moan escaped from it, then something burst into a horrible howl from its depths, the devils on the far bank started drifting slowly downstream into the snowy distance, a warm rain trickled from above, and the ice started to move.

For a moment I even forgot about the devils, because I felt so relieved and cheerful on account of the ice having started to break up.

I saw the young watery body of the river pushing the ice floes onto the bank; they came shoving onto hard ground, crushed the reeds, some of them even reached the pear tree, giving off an underwater warmth.

The rain had burst from all the clouds, both ours and those that must have crept up from abroad, because the river seemed to have come to the boil! It flung the ice floes into the sky, sending them flying in white saucers over the pear tree right past the old woman's house.

I ducked lest the ice hit me.

That instant I saw the eyes of the river. It looked at me with its young gray eyes from between the farthest white ice floes and then disappeared beneath the floes, making them quiver like jelly.

What the gray-eyed river wanted to tell me then I don't know, but it must have had something to tell me, because suddenly everything was still and the rain stopped.

Gray raindrops fell from the pear tree, and I heard the soft peaceful snoring of White Sleep and his family, coming from either the sky or underground.

Presently I heard the river's body quietly

and quickly refilling with strength, as it moved its shoulders, and again the ice floes brushed against the shores with a whispering sound.

Meanwhile, the devils had got together in a huddle and struck matches, obviously lighting their cigarettes.

Whether they smoked for long or not it was hard to tell — it must have been a short smoke, because the tallest of them walked up to the river, stepped onto an ice floe, and started jumping up and down on it.

After that he jumped onto another ice floe. There he went through the same procedure as before, and thus jumping from floe to floe easily and adroitly, he made his way to the middle of the river, where he looked round at his crew, waved a paw at them, and as one the devils started jumping across the broken ice in my direction.

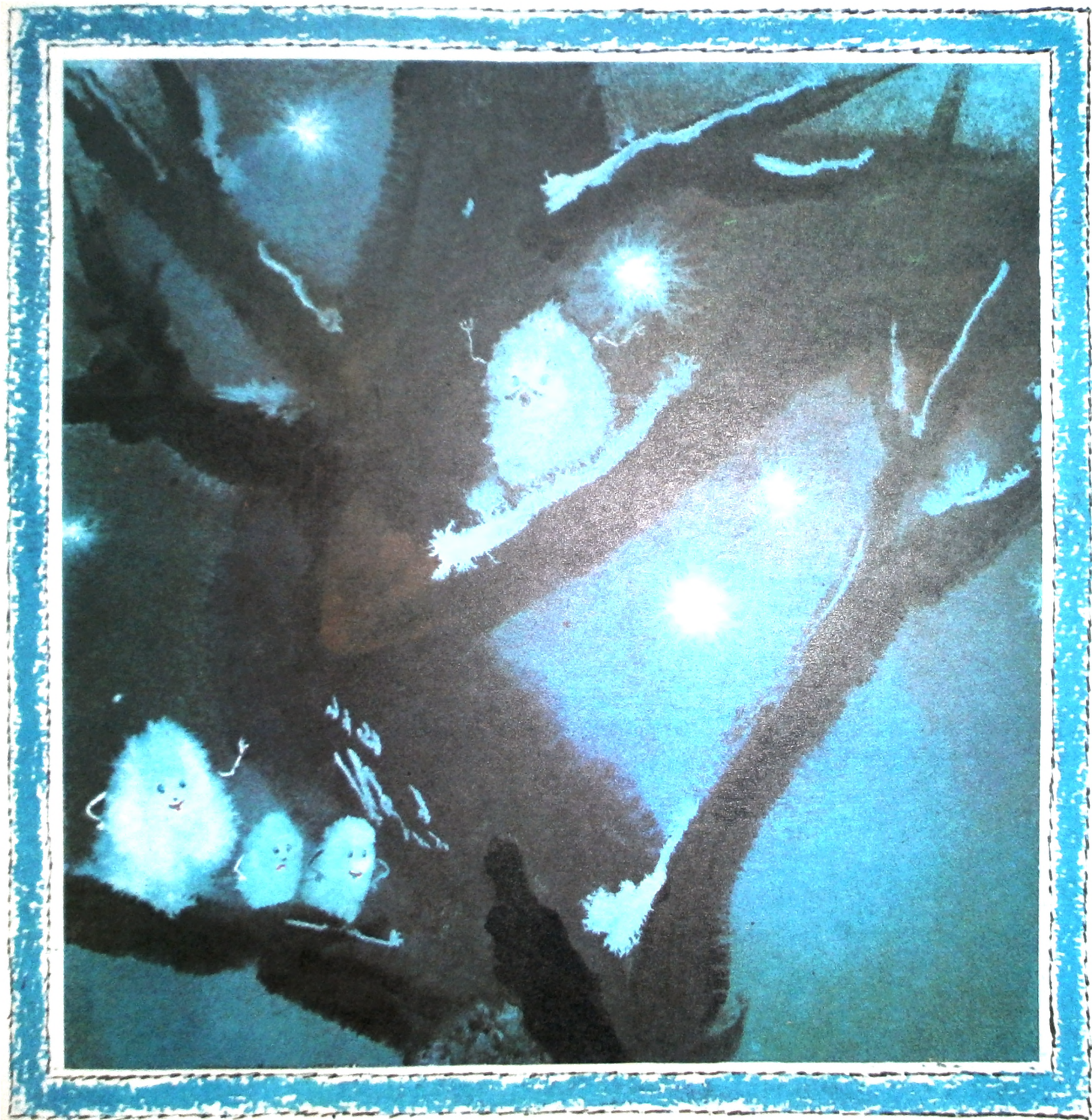
I was about to flee to my home when one of the devils suddenly slipped and went flying into the water. But no sooner had he had a proper dousing than he zoomed onto my bank like a jet! That same instant his mates picked him up under his paws and carried him straight toward me at a trot.

I slipped behind the pear tree, then behind a lilac bush — and hid there.

I peeped from around the bush and saw the devils taking the boots off their hapless mate's feet, spreading a padded jacket on the snow, and wringing out his foot clouts.

At this point I got the fright of my life: the tallest of the devils who had jumped across the ice first was none other than my father. The one who had fallen into the water was our neighbor Pavlo Vitrishchak, a horse doctor and Hero of the Soviet Union. I noticed right away, though, that something was amiss with this crew, because black tail tips showed from their right pockets — they had hidden their tails so they would not get wet!





I saw that my father wasn't a father at all but a devil-father, and Hero of the Soviet Union Pavlo Vitrishchak wasn't actually what he claimed to be but a devil as well!

Besides, their caps sat on their heads not in a human but in a devilish way — they stuck out a bit, because they were pulled over horns.

"Why did it have to happen to me?" Pavlo Vitrishchak said.

"It didn't have to, but it did," my father replied.

The other devils were getting their breath back, and by and by I started recognizing them.

The third was my history teacher, an unmarried man who wore blue breeches. Back at school, I had noticed that he was sort of beelzebubic, since he knew far too much about oceans, military campaigns and pirates. Also, he had no wife, no children, and was a lodger just for appearances sake! There he was — my teacher, with a tail tip sticking out of his pocket, as he caught his breath after jumping across the ice with his crew at midnight! The crew addressed him politely, adding his patronymic, as it was proper to address a leader.

"Still, Panas Andriyovich, you haven't finished what you were saying," Pavlo Vitrishchak said, pulling on his second boot.

"Well, as I said, everything in the world is arranged in pairs," my teacher-devil rejoined. "Do you think that if our planet Earth didn't have a twin somewhere, it would exist, eh?"

"It wouldn't," my father said proudly. "For everything in the world is paired, like doves!"

"Oh sure, but there's one thing I want to get straight!" the smallest of the devils Ivan Kozoriz said (he was a war invalid and father of seven children, all of them girls). "What did we hold that meeting for today? What's

the sense of it. None, I tell you. We talked, smoked, had a drink and that's all there was to it. I said it before and I'll say it now: we shouldn't have stopped. Didn't we reach Berlin? We did. Didn't we take it? We did. So we had to push further on. We'd have pushed on to the Atlantic, and today's meeting would have been different just as our palaver at it would have been, and everything else in the world."

"Ivan Mikitovich, why does Berlin still bother you?" my father asked sadly.

"Because we're not as powerful as we used to be, however high we soar."

"Oh yes, yes," the other three devils, probably strangers newly arrived in these parts, concurred with him.

"It might be so, but it isn't," Pavlo Vitrishchak said, and the entire crew fell silent. He didn't say anything more. For a Hero that seemed to be quite enough to say. He looked for some time at the small Ivan Kozoriz with a stern expression, then he came up to him, took him by his paws, set him on his feet, and kissed him on the lips.

All the devils started to kiss each other, including my father. For me that proved again that he wasn't a father but a devil-father, because my real father had never kissed anyone, even on holidays.

After the kissing, the crew formed a circle, put their arms round each other's shoulders, and started to sing. The song exposed them completely: their devilish tune hadn't a single human word in it, although their inarticulate mumbling was in itself to my liking — it had a martial ring to it.

A warm rain started pattering on their caps again, and without so much as the sound of voices or footsteps they made their way uphill to the old woman's house.

There's something fishy, I thought. They



hadn't said or shown anything to indicate that they had come from far away, or from the nether world either for that matter. If they had, why didn't they smell of pitch but only of wet padded jackets?

I crept out of my hideout and sniffed the snow where Pavlo Vitrishchak had been lying. The snow smelled of tobacco.

Then I sniffed every one of their tracks — they smelled of tobacco as well. Even the pear tree, which had never had anything to do with tobacco, smelled of tobacco, too, and so did the raindrops — there was no trace of a devil's scent in the air.

They had covered up their tracks!!! it suddenly dawned on me.

That instant everything burst into white bloom, whiter than the snow and White Sleep, much whiter than cobwebs and milk: the old woman's sign glared white!

I had already forgotten about that sign by then, but it appeared so blazingly white that silvery nightingales broke into song in the gray eyes of the river.

It was my pear tree glowing in its final winter garb. The hoar frost on it melted into tears under the warm rain, and I ran to the door of the old woman's house.

All seven of them sat at the table around their drinks, while the deft and chipper old woman busied herself at the gas range.

"Everything in the world is paired. Now let's take history, for example," my teacher Panas Andriyovich said.

"Oh no, don't tell us that!" Ivan Kozoriz said with a lilt.

"It might be so, but it isn't!" Pavlo Vitrishchak said with determination. "But Panas Andriyovich, teacher of our pranksters that you are, tell us what you've got to say!"

Panas Andriyovich got to his feet, raised his drink, and said in his bachelor's voice:

"Everything wears away: winter and spring, our clothes and what not, and even our padded jackets, but everything in this world is paired. Let's take love, for instance. What does it seek in the world? It seeks a counterpart! Love seeks love. And what about goodness? Goodness seeks goodness. What about a bird, for instance, or a bear? Or even a devil just like each of us at this time of the year? Everything in the world seeks goodness and love."

My ears and nose turned cold with fright, because uncertain as I still was deep in my heart, I thought that as they had come from a late meeting my doubts would be utterly crushed now.

"Sure!" Pavlo Vitrishchak said.

None of that made me feel easier, because for the past week I had been playing truant, making my father believe I was going to school, while in actual fact I was dropping in at the old woman's house and whiling away the time there to her merry and frightening yarns. In the late afternoon I'd look through the window, and seeing the kids returning home from school, I'd run outdoors as virtuously innocent as an angel.

That evening the old woman's sweet chatter unwittingly lulled me to sleep on the chest in the corner under the icons.

I went on sleeping like that without any idea what would happen at home next morning, how my father and my schoolteacher would react, and how in general everything else would work out.

So that's why the chest is the last thing on my mind now, and I'll tell you about it when everything has cooled down. I'll tell you about it another time.





## THE GOSLING

He opened one eye, then the other, gave a tiny squeak — and was born into this world. His mother looked at him, covered him with her wing, and her eyes dimmed with tears: the flock had to fly away that night. Her mate and older children had joined the flock in the

morning to forage in a winter-wheat field and practice flying over it and the floodlands before departing for the warm countries, while she had remained to brood her late autumn egg. She had still hoped that nothing would hatch from it — but no, here he was: a hunched, damp, sad-looking gosling with a chip of eggshell sticking to his tiny beak. He was

drying under his mother's wing, unaware that his brothers and four sisters had been born in May, in spring, when they should have been, whereas he had popped out in autumn, today, when the hoar frost sprayed the green leaves of the water lilies and the geese's nearest neighbors, the landrails, had left long ago.

She was trying to make up her mind what to do. Flying with six children across three seas was a laborious effort, so where could she take her seventh child? She could not possibly put him under her wing or on her back — he'd fall. And here winter was approaching, the floodlands would freeze — what then? Spend the winter with a nestling? And what about the wind, and the snow, and frost and ice, and foxes, polecats, martens, buzzards, falcons, stray cats, dogs, and hunters? What would she and her nestling eat? It would be the death of them.

For the first time in her life the old goose did not want to go on living. She considered herself a long liver, since she had survived three summers and three winters. The first autumn she had made the passage across three seas to the warm countries, her flock had met with such murderous gunfire from the reeds that she was the only lucky one of her generation to have survived. She might have asked her elders what to do with the nestling, but there was not a single grandparent in the flock. Geese did not live long enough to become grandparents. Besides, her mate was young, one passage her junior.

She lifted her wing and looked at her little mite of a child: the gosling blinked at her drowsily and sank into slumber.

What a worry you are to me, she thought.

From the floodlands downstream, the wind rolled ruffled waves, ringed the reeds by the water's edge with white frothy collars, and

bowed them with a dry rustle over the goose, covering her completely; while they were bent, she took a nibble from their long hardy leaves and wanted to nibble them again, but they straightened up. She tensed, waiting for the wind to bend the reeds again so that she could snatch one leaf at least, but the wind suddenly changed direction and bent the reeds over the empty nests.

Through the reeds she saw the gander and her children flying out of the glow of the dipping sun. On landing, the children started to preen themselves. The crops under their young yellow beaks were so full it seemed they could not think of going anywhere that night.

The gosling peeped from under his mother's leg and saw his father. And the gander saw him, too.

He adjusted his wings and said to her:

"Fly off and eat something. But be sure you don't collide with an airplane over the winter-wheat field."

"All right," she said. "I'm off."

"Fly through the gray. Don't fly through the blue. And be quiet. Once you're above the reeds, climb higher to the right: there are three humans in ambush already behind the reeds. The one by the field has a tripple-barreled gun."

The goose flew off. A number of shots were fired at her, or perhaps at the flock. When the flock settled on their nests, the gander saw that the old geese were missing. Old geese fly low over the ground, so they must have paid with their lives.

The gander stretched one wing, then the other, looked them over again and folded them.

His wings were in order. The older children had huddled up to one another for warmth, stuck their beaks into their wings, and were now chattering.





"Somehow we'll cross this sea, and the second and the third, if we aren't shot down," the gander told them, and looked at his late autumn child.

Raindrops started to fall out of the nut-brown sky. A drop hung on the gosling's beak and in it he saw his father: he had wary eyes, a gaunt reedlike neck which kept moving back and forth over the gosling and turning at the faintest rustle. Father also had a high, soft gray breast: the gosling pushed himself into its feathers and it was so warm there he dozed off again.

A shot cracked from the direction of the winter-wheat field, followed by three successive reports from the reeds; the children drew their beaks quickly out from under their wings and looked at their father.

"Do we take off or stay?"

"Stay," the gander said, though his heart was thumping so wildly it roused the gosling from sleep; he crawled out from under his father's breast, looked into his yellow eyes, and asked:

"Why are you hitting me with your breast?"

She'll die, the gander thought. That instant a flutter of wings beat the air and the breathless goose dropped to earth heavily, knocking the ears from the reeds.

"Are you all right?"

"I seem to be. Phew. What shall we do now?"

"Take the children and fly off. I'll stay behind with the little one and drift downstream somehow until he's grown up and using his wings."

"I won't fly." Black rims appeared around her eyes, as yellow as her mate's. "I'll stay with you and the little one. The children will leave with the flock."

"With what flock and where to? Take a good look — there are only the young ones left. You're the oldest of them all, so you'll fly

and lead them. You won't survive with the nestling here. Do you hear?"

"Yes," the goose said. "Well, shall I get ready?"

"Yes. Night is creeping up and so is the mist. Take off into the mist. Nobody will see you or get you in it."

"What about airplanes?"

"They don't fly here in the mist. By morning you'll have reached the reserve. Touch down there without any hesitation and don't be afraid of anyone. Fortify yourselves there. From the reserve you'll head over the sea. Fly low over it. Nobody will touch you over the sea. Farther on decide what's best for the flock. Choose only dark rainy nights for your passage."

"And what if you don't make it with the little one?"

"Don't worry. Take care of the flock and the children — that's the main thing now. Be cunning and cautious. I'll try to join you with the little one in the spring. Just look what a fine baby we've got — he's no sooner born than he's speaking. There's a cocky gander for you!"

The goose went up to the gosling, picked the chip of eggshell off his little beak, and said:

"It would be better if you hadn't been born or spoken at all..."

In the dead of night the geese took off and flew away. The goose led them through the mist up into the sky; unable to hold her emotions in check, she honked to her mate in farewell. No sooner had she honked than gunshots broke from the winter-wheat field and the reeds.

The gander stretched his neck. Only the whisper of the reeds reached his ears. Then came a scream. He listened more intently. No, it wasn't the scream of a goose but of a



human being. They must have hit one of their own, he thought, for in the dark it was difficult to make out sky or ground. The gander bent his neck and listened for the gosling's breathing.

With the departure of the flock he suddenly felt the night growing heavier, bearing down on his nest with its damp darkness; it crept up his back and into his wings as if it wanted to hide in his plumage and dry out there. Once cheerful and dear to the geese, the reeds above the gander were silent now in a way that was furtive and hostile, and the dark water was talking to someone in a threatening voice. Suddenly an otter, a fish between his teeth, surfaced before the nest and looked greedily at the gander and his young one. The gander hissed at him menacingly, as if to say: "There aren't enough fish for you, are there, so you want my child as well? Just you try and get closer — I'll snuff the life out of you!" The gosling fled for cover under his father's belly and legs, and gave a tiny squeak. The rain started to pour out of the night sky with increasing force, loosening the nest and making it lighter. Any minute the water would take it.

The gander wrapped his wings round the nest with the gosling in it, and kicking his legs against the hostile water, guided the nest to midstream. By the reeds the water was cross and peevish, either because of some root or a hole that had got in the way — here it eddied and boiled with anger, always finding something disagreeable; but in the current, it was lithe and free, not asking who was floating on it or where, as it rushed on easily under the autumn sky and made the bottom of the riverbed ring. What did it care that a gander was riding it, steering his nest with a fledgling aboard.

In the middle of the stream, the gander

breathed with relief; he guided the nest without paddling. While the nest was being carried into the rapidly advancing darkness, the gosling could not have his fill of watching his adroit father. Happy at the sight, he tickled his palate with his tongue, stretched out his wings for his father to see, crawled up to the edge of the nest and said, "Daddy, I want to have a swim! I'll have a dip!" — and jumped into the water.

The gander froze. Barely holding the nest steady with one wing, he scooped the gosling out of the water with the other and put him back into the nest.

"I'll give you a dip all right, you little fool! I'll give you one! What about catfish, and pike, and perch!" That moment he felt teeth cutting into his leg under the water. He jumped swiftly onto the nest, which went into a spin in the racing current. The nest will fall apart and we'll perish, the gander thought. It was a new nest he and his wife had built from reeds of two years' standing — people used such reeds to shelter greenhouses from the winds in winter.

From downstream, lights and music appeared out of the depth of the night, and the water rushed nest, gander and gosling faster and faster toward the musical lights. As they drew closer, neither the rain nor the darkness could dim their colors. The gander looked round at the shore — it had disappeared from sight. He started to paddle with his left wing to get farther away from the lights and pass them by. The water under his wing resisted with a giggle, while the perch beneath the nest gnashed their teeth. He pushed off with his right wing. It was stronger than the left one, because for some reason every passage he had led the winds had always buffeted his right wing. Being in the sky was one thing, though, but water was something else. It twisted,

jerked and pulled at his wing: the nest would not obey him, rushing toward the lights, and presently the black gleaming bulk of something huge rose out of the dark night just in front of his beak.

"Jump!" the gander barked, and the gosling fell into the water. His small yellow body was swallowed up by the night; the gander barely managed to take flight before the black oncoming hill.

"A bird!" shouts came from the barge.

He had already winged over the barge when his pinions caught on the antenna and he tumbled onto a heap of coal. A searchlight was turned on him from the wheelhouse; a man came running his way and the gander threw himself right and left on the coal, blackening his feathers as he thrashed about, while the man shouted in the direction of the wheelhouse: "Keep the light steady; I can't see anything!" The man crawled on all fours, his hands and eyes roving over the coal. His hand and onion-laden breath passed the gander — the man had crawled toward the bow of the barge. The little one's perished, and so will I, the gander thought. I should've kept close to the shore instead of swimming in the middle of the river.

The barge chugged slowly against the current, carrying the gander away from the flock and the gosling.

"I didn't find him!" the man shouted from the bow. "He's not around. Dim the light, 'cause you're blinding me and I might fall into the water!" He crawled again on all fours back to the wheelhouse. The gander raised his head just then — of all the foolish things to do! He wanted to see if his pursuer had passed or not, but with the splashing of the water and the chugging of the engine he didn't hear the man coming right up to him to grab him by the neck with both hands.

"I've got him! I have! Here he is!" the man rose to his feet in the beam of the searchlight, holding the gander by the neck. The gander gasped for breath. And then he hit the man's face with his wings, both the sound and the injured one; the man fell on his back onto the coal, while the gander, his neck twisted to one side, threw out his wings, hardly daring to hope they would bear him, but they did, lifting him into the air. Black as the night, he was airborne again, plowing through the dark with a wobbly head. Now, where is the gosling, he thought, where did I jump into the water, where is the water, and what am I flying over now — water, field, or reeds? The gander let out a scream, but because of his constricted throat it was only he who heard the scream. He dropped lower and wheeled for a long time, screaming again and again. Presently he saw it — the water, the sweet water that had been so kind to his little feathered tribe, the water with its warm, shallow inlets and, in summer, mosquito-infested reeds, where he and his gosling were born. It picked him up in a whirl which neither his legs nor wings could withstand, and now this unkind black water took him on a wilful ride the whole night long until dawn when he collided with the metal girder of the dam of a hydro-power station.

The gander knew the station and the tall plants rising on either side of the steppe river. He and his mate had once had so much of the smoke that they never flew over the plants again.

The gander turned his neck — something crackled in it lightly, and he dived into the water. Once he was under the surface, he saw a blay and pecked first at one, then another: the fare made him feel good. He surfaced and leaned his injured wing on the water — the wing caused him searing pain

as if he had leaned not on water but on fire. The wing's ruined, he thought, and looked sadly upstream to where his fledgling was supposed to be. Where am I to look for it, on what shore?

He kicked his strangely numb legs against the water and swam upstream. The bow of yet another coal barge slowly pushed out of the sluice, the gander dived and thrashed his legs vigorously, heading for the shore for as long as his lungs held air. When he was out of breath, he resurfaced, and that instant someone shouted from the barge: "A bird!" the gander slapped both wings against the water, and not believing his good luck, took wing, heavily, hunched, his beak plowing through the water.

Three anglers in tarpaulin garb were walking inland away from the deserted summer houses. Seeing the gander, they raised their spinning rods, whistled, and broke into a noisy halloo; the gander was lost, his neck started to jerk frantically, and he dropped onto the water. His wings would not support him any more. With one eye he cast sidelong glances at the barge in the middle of the river, and with the other he held the anglers.

The anglers had no boats and the water was too cold for them to wade into, but they had spinning rods instead. Moments later spoon baits started to explode around him in golden flashes,—the anglers were set on catching the gander with spoons at any price. He dived, resurfaced, dodged the spoons in every way possible. One of the anglers was no mean sniper: his spoon landed right on the gander's beak—that could have been curtains. But he had been born under a lucky star, because the spoon and the hooks slid down his beak and plopped into the water. Then, summoning into one thrust all the strength he had left in his wings, and oblivious

to any wheres and whys except for the imperative to escape destruction, he rose heavily into the air. Behind his back the barge gave a whistle and the sniper with the spinning rod spat into the air in despair.

The gander plowed through the air with effort, his eyes searching frantically for somewhere to hide. Fortunately for him, an islet of willow scrub showed gray from above. He had almost reached it when he saw a blue motor launch pushing off. He had to turn back! But where could he find the strength for that? Fly higher? What with? So he dived into the water and hid under the waves.

From under the waves he saw two people in the boat—a man in a green tracksuit and a woman in a red raincoat with a yellow scarf. Both of them were standing. The man was holding the end of the long scarf and pulling at it as if he wanted to tear it off and her head with it. The woman kept covering her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook. Then the man tore the scarf from her neck, threw it to the bottom of the boat, jumped into the water, and swam to the shore. The gander resurfaced from behind a wave and saw the boat with the woman in it drifting downstream and the man walking along the shore upstream in the same direction as the gander had to go.

On the islet the gander nibbled greedily at the rust-colored willow leaves and bark, then settled on the sand and started silently grooming his injured wing.

And what about the gosling? He was simply bathing in bliss! No sooner had his father shouted, "Jump!" than he had plopped out of the nest into the scintillating blackness; the black moving mass brushed against his side, a wave picked him up and pulled him into the night. The drifting black silk of the water enveloped his tiny yellow body, cov-

ered him with a wave, then uncovered him again, immersed him and pushed him to the surface, and then dragged him onward. What was everything like around him when everything was just black? He could not see either himself or his father; there was only a drizzle beating against his little head, the smell of food hung in the air, but he could not make out where it was coming from. The night was full of noises; it could have been the rustling of the reeds — so paddle on that way, little gosling, and don't be too afraid; if anything happens, just breathe in as much air as possible and — dive. He seemed to hear voices on the shore. The gosling listened intently — it was just the wind playing on the water and an iron chain fastened to a boat. I won't scam anywhere, because I'm not afraid, he reasoned. Since I can't see anybody, nobody can be able to see me. He swam up to the boat, went round it, chose a quiet nook on the leeward side, and dozed off. In his dream he was grown up already, living among geese who screamed at him, and then the bowers of bliss disappeared.

"Hi, silly."

"I'm not silly. I'm wild."

"Well, since you're wild, come to me; don't be afraid. I'm a steel smelter, and this here is my wife and our three sons who're steel smelters as well. I'll put you in a barrel by the shed for the night, so that nobody hurts you, at least my, that is, our geese."

"They won't hurt me."

"And what if they do?"

"Oh no, they won't."

"Anyway, the less you're stared at the better."

"Now look what a beautiful neck I've got — just like an old gander's. Warm me!"

"Well then, I'll bosom you."

"But I'm dirty."

"Look, Valentina, how he's sitting in my bosom. He's dozed off. I'll take him to the blast furnace and show him to the boys. He's jerking his feet — must be dreaming he's swimming. Give him some water, and switch off that TV set, or else he won't fall asleep."

"Hey look how he's clung to you."

"Pa, give me the gosling. What do you need it for, if you got your own geese."

"But they're domestic geese."

"Let me have it, Pa."

"And where would you keep it, on the balcony? Besides, your kids will torment it to death the very first day."

"What about me having it then, Pa?"

"Oh no. You'll be drafted into the army in a month!"

Somebody seemed to be walking in the dawn turned gray with hoar frost. The gosling wanted to look out of the barrel, but he could not jump up to the rim. He tried to flap one wing, then the other, after which he flapped both and jumped onto the rim of the barrel. He saw his long-necked gray daddy, lean and bedraggled, waddling from the river across the leafy potato tops in the kitchen garden.



## GOOD NIGHT

The sun was setting in front of the fox cub's den. After it had set, the forest became dark, the quarry turned a deep blue, and the pine tree that was close to his den shimmered gold.

He did not want to crawl out of the den, and, besides, his ear had started to ache; there seemed to be no reason at all for it to ache — yet it ached.

"I've had my fill of sausage, so why should I go anywhere? No, I won't go anywhere. It's warm in the den, isn't it? It is. My ear aches, doesn't it? It does. So here you stay. Listen to the sounds in the sky over the pine tree, hum to yourself through your snout if you like, and if you don't like — don't hum."

The bees avoided the mullein patch. At night, when the bees were asleep, the old rusty body of the mullein would burst into bloom, straining all it could — from under the old growth there suddenly appeared young flowers of glimmering golden hues, but still the bees did not like them.

"All right, so I'll sniff you myself," the fox said to the mullein. Little as he wanted to, he crawled out of his den. He went onto the sand bleached by the summer sun, the sand tickled his paws, and he lay down on it to absorb the last warmth of the day from it. After he had warmed himself somewhat, he bent the mullein toward his snout with a paw, sniffed the highest flower, then the one beneath it, and then one beneath that one, then the one still lower down, and then the one growing almost directly out of the sand.

"You won't fool me," he said to the mullein, "because your highest flower smells the sweetest."

A fish jumped in the water-filled quarry, an airplane flew over the forest.

"Go on flying, you! Now I'll crawl back

into my den and you won't see me any more this night," he said to the airplane.

The airplane, it seemed, got angry, because it made a sharp turn in the sky just as it reached the top of the pine tree and its thin tail flashed gold in the sun.

The sight of the airplane made the fox laugh:

"Fly on. Good night to you. Fly on; even though your tail is still in the sun you must find yourself somewhere to spend the night."

And the airplane flew away.

High dump trucks breathed heavily by the crag on the other side of the quarry. Those dump trucks were a boon for the fox at midday when the drivers had their lunch on the granite boulders; he would sneak up to them and lie low in the wormwood.

"I'm here," he would make the men understand. "As if you didn't know I was lying in the wormwood behind your backs. You know very well, because you'll leave me some sausage, and then look down from your trucks and see how I gobble it up."

The fox pounced on a bumblebee. That bumblebee had been a real nuisance for a long time, as he wanted very much to drive the fox out of the den and live there instead. The bumblebee knew that this was not the fox's den but a badger's. But it was the fox who had occupied it first. He had occupied it when his mother was still alive.

All puffed up, the bumblebee beat a hasty retreat — it could not even fly properly!

"Off with you or I'll catch you!" the fox shouted, but instead of running after the bumblebee he remained in the mullein. "You won't fool me, because I know where you want to lure me away to."

In fact, the bumblebee was luring the fox toward the gander. It had all happened last week when he came flying around lunchtime







just as the fox was returning from the dump trucks. With his wings he described a circle in front of the fox's snout as if to say that this was his, the bumblebee's den. Without much ado the fox smacked him with his paw. The bumblebee, though stunned, did not fall to the ground; he knocked some petals off the mullein and buzzed off into the sky.

"So you've ruined my mullein too!" cried

the fox and went after the bumblebee, knowing it would not stay on the wing for long: you see, a bumblebee isn't an airplane. And he did catch up with him, but they had already reached the village beyond the quarry and the puddle where the gander was swimming. Exhausted by the chase, the bumblebee dropped into the puddle behind the gander who was whetting his beak on the water. The

fox ran smack into the gander, and that sharp beak of his made the fox see stars which looked very much like the yellow mullein petals flashing him goodbye.

Just then little Serhiy Prots was returning from school! Although that day, September 1, he was all dignity and pride because the teacher had called him a first-grader, he jumped into the puddle along with his new schoolbag, gave the gander a kick, picked up the fox and ran off to his home.

The gander looked after little Serhiy in his soaking wet school uniform, with his webbed foot he stirred up the sky reflected in the muddy puddle, and again took to whetting his beak on the water, from time to time eyeing the bumblebee drying on the schoolbag.

"Mommy, look."

"Don't you give me that 'Mommy' of yours! You've brought a fox into the house all right, but where's your schoolbag?"

"Mommy..."

"Oh my, he's so wet and little and so yellow... Right off you go to get your schoolbag! Just wait till Father comes home!"

Little Serhiy went after his schoolbag: looking at him from his wet ABC was a gander under the letter G and on another page a bumblebee under the letter B.

"You won't lure me away this time!" the fox said. "Now Serhiy will come back from school and lie by my side on the warm sand here at the den. You think the mullein and the pine tree have nothing to do with the trucks and the airplane? They do, just as much as I and Serhiy."

In the quarry fish jumped, sending silvery ripples across the water, which made him blink. He blinked and blinked until the mullein wished him "Good night" with a nod of its stalk.





## SUMMER EVENING

Grandpa took the shepherd's crook standing in the corner and went out of the house. I followed him.

"Grandpa, how many watermelons will you give me — as many as I can carry, eh?"

"Yes, as many as you can carry."

"And what if I eat yet another one at your place?"

"I don't mind."

"And have you got muskmelons?"

"Sure, there are muskmelons too."

The marigolds echoed:

"Sure, there are muskmelons too."

Grandpa doesn't hear the marigolds. He only hears himself and me.

"There are muskmelons and everything. Well, I'll be going!"

The marigolds repeated after Grandpa:

"Well, I'll be going!"

"I'll be seeing you, Grandpa!"

And here the stork on the rooftop repeated:

"I'll be seeing you!"

I looked at the marigolds, at the air, and raised my head to look at the stork.

"Clat-tat-tat!" the stork clattered and took off from the thatched rooftop.

That stork of ours was a thief. In the evening, when nobody was looking, he stole stars from the sky. He stood on the roof on one leg, threw his head back on his long neck into the star-studded sky, reached for a star, and — snatch! — beaked it. The star was hot, it got stuck in his throat, and he could not swallow it, so he cooled it in his beak and clattered away — clat-tat-tat!

Our stork slept standing on one leg the whole spring and summer through — that's something I took note of. Meanwhile, his other leg rested. He was sparing it for Africa. When he got there, he stood on his rested leg and drew in the one he'd been standing on in our part of the world. That's how he lived: with one leg meant for Africa, and the other for our rooftop.

"You'd better go and get the cow in from the herd!"

I went for the cow.

Again the marigold echoed:

"Go and get the cow in!"

The wind repeated it from the sky:

"Go and get the cow in!"

I walked on.

And over all of us was the sky, a sky as homely as the marigolds. I love the sky. Sometimes Mother was not at home, but the sky always stayed in place. Besides, I loved the sky most when the stork flew through it to our house and Grandpa walked to the house with his shepherd's crook over his shoulder. I love the sky over our house and I also love it shining over Mother.



НИКОЛАЙ СТЕПАНОВИЧ  
ВИНГРАНОВСКИЙ

ЛЕТНИЙ ВЕЧЕР

Рассказы

Перевод с украинского А. Н. Беленко

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