



ALEXANDER POTESKIN

THE BONDAGE

ESSAY FOR ONESELF

 edition fischer

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Defects are the essence of
our perverted virtues

Nikolai Fyodorov

... And only when you have all denied me
will I return to you.

Friedrich Nietzsche

CHASING SHADOWS

So here is the Third Ring Road. Yaroslav Station is just around the corner. My brain is no longer being stoked with opium fuel. The agonies are beginning, the precursor to abstinence, to put it in medical terms, when the body loses the last glow from the dying embers of *that very thing*. I urgently need another dose, but I, Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov, have run out. With the last remnants of willpower I suppress my desperate craving for the enchanting bloom. I am suffering a coughing attack, my mouth is filling with saliva, my nose is running, my eyes are watering, and beads of sweat are popping out on my forehead. My undershirt and shirt are sticking to my back. My socks are damp, it feels as though I have been walking through puddles. My stomach hurts, my heart feels heavy, my pulse has quickened, my eyes are clouding over, and a stubborn thought bores into my mind, “If only I can hold out another thirty minutes or so. Otherwise my withdrawal symptoms threaten to knock me flat right here in the street. I might find myself in the hospital suffering from horrendous convulsions or kicking the bucket in hellish torment without fulfilling my promise to myself: to leave this detestable Moscow and finally attain freedom!”

I look out of the window. The gray May morning nods despondently at me with a frown. Drizzle falls silently on the windscreen, fragmenting my moribund thoughts even more. My mind is becoming increasingly impartial, I seem to have lost it altogether. Only fragments of earlier experiences flash chaotically before my eyes.

Now I assiduously wipe the sweat from my forehead with a satin handkerchief and greedily chew on it, hoping to deaden the pain of abstinence, now the five-cubic syringe of morphine does not have a needle and is impossible to find... In a kind of profound frenzy I try unsuccessfully to stick it with all my might into my vein. The fight with my unyielding body finally gets the better of me. I am covered in blood... Suddenly I find myself in a poppy field. I am surrounded by the cherished plant as far as the eye can see. The size of a fist, it stands tall, its blooms with their yellowish, white-blue petals are driving me crazy; I have this overwhelming desire to eat them until I burst. But I am helpless, my arms are tightly clamped to my thighs. I want to break off the heads with my teeth and chew them as quickly as possible, enjoying the wondrous milk, feeling the luxurious high, but my mouth will not open. My teeth are clenched as though pinched closed by an overwhelming weight. Damnation!... At that moment, the scene changes. Not understanding what is happening, I lose my last sense of reason, I am on the brink of insanity. I swallow codeine pills by the fistful, but the withdrawal symptoms do not abate. Usually five or six pills not only relieve me of the agonies, they provide quite a reasonable high. But now I feel nothing! My agony not only continues, it is getting worse. I am feeling worse and worse. Now I no longer feel human. I have become a faceless, senseless, unrecognizable creature. "Is this really me? Is it me? Me?" Parfenchikov harped on to himself in confusion. His state was becoming intolerable. At this juncture it should be noted that Peter Petrovich had the habit of thinking about himself now in the third, now in the first person. Incidentally, this was not the only strange thing about him. Thank goodness that a new topic distracted him from his awful conclusions, otherwise he would have driven himself to complete hysterics with his questioning.

Peter Petrovich exerted every effort and endured the outburst of desperation to return to reality. But this did not bring him any relief. Parfenchikov discovered with astonishment that he was approaching the three stations. He had an appointment next to the square.

Peter Petrovich was exchanging his Peugeot for ten kilograms of ground opium and two small sacks of poppy seed. He was also acquiring an abandoned wooden house in the town of Kan in the Krasonyarsk Territory and a train ticket to get there, with ten thousand rubles thrown in. To be honest, he did not haggle for long, feeling that the offer was extremely attractive. It was not a very lucrative deal though, he could have gotten far more for his new car. But he was dreaming of escaping from Moscow and finding himself in an entirely different, shall we say, format. By the way, Peter Petrovich bought the Peugeot for the sole purpose of driving either to the Bryansk Region or to the Kaluga Region for poppy head that he briskly bought up from local pensioners. But now he would have a house, land as far as the eye could see for sowing poppy, and complete solitude. This was what he so obsessively yearned for of late. The prospect revived him and he immediately began making plans. Parfenchikov wanted to fulfill himself in his roaming dreams, in the games of his inflamed mind. With no publicity and no discussions. He must fit the whole world inside his head and take it with him into oblivion. This is what he passionately dreamed of, where he was eagerly rushing, what made him groan. "Oh, Lord, everyone to his own!" thought Peter Petrovich. "I have no intention of imposing my lifestyle on anyone else. What do I care about everyone else, about the flora and fauna, physics and biology, the world in general that is not controlled by my common sense but is entirely subject to my poppy-excited imagination. For to plant a field with poppy, and gather its harvest, and keep opium milk in different forms—in glass, in cheesecloth, in rods, on the roaster, in joints—is just as monumental as owning a world empire, becoming the landlord of the Kremlin, the White House, the Wall of China, Mount Fuji, the Vatican, or Windsor Palace... The well-known aphorism that everything is brilliantly simple has in my case acquired the most convincing confirmation. The craving to become the owner of a poppy field in Kan has reached its peak.

The transaction at Yaroslav Station went quickly. With a light heart and full of anticipation about the great changes in his life,

Parfenchikov handed over his Peugeot to the buyers, received from them what they had agreed upon, and they went their separate ways. The following phrases rang long in his ears, “Why do you need a key? The house is not locked. It’s three kilometers to the northeast of Kan. There’s no one else around. Tell the taxi driver to take you to Fatya’s, that is, to Eugenia Fateeva’s. She’s long dead, but was a well-known local sage. Many knew her in the district. Well, good luck...” “Fatya, fate, fatality; there must be something behind these enchanting words ...” thought Peter Petrovich.

Train number 19/20 Moscow—Beijing was already standing at platform No. 4. To be honest, Parfenchikov was surprised at first by how unkempt the train looked. China was a tempestuously developing country with a powerful contemporary industry, while our disgraceful twenty-five-year-old carriages should have aroused nothing but a condescending sneer in the citizens of the Celestial Kingdom, as though to say, these Russians cannot even build or buy a decent train. But Peter Petrovich pushed away such thoughts, got out a spoon so that he would be able to stick it into the bag of opium as soon as possible, and settled himself in the eighth sleeper, thinking only of one thing—how quickly he could fill his stomach with the precious powder. He needed to take a huge dose without delay. He simply had to relieve himself of his withdrawal symptoms as soon as possible. After his opium starvation or, to be more precise, semi-starvation, his soul begged to be intoxicated with opiates. There was no water at hand. Without lingering, without thinking about anything apart from *that very thing*, he began chewing feverishly, swallowing the desired powder dry. The koknar stuck to his gums, under his tongue, between his teeth, even to his tonsils. Taking it dry was a rather difficult procedure, but was that going to stop him? He would rather have died choking on it.

After four teaspoons, Parfenchikov caught his breath, solicitously licked up the precious powder and, closing his eyes, lay down in satisfaction. If he had a couple of glasses of tea at hand, the koknar would have started working in about fifteen or twenty minutes. But Peter Petrovich realized that no one would be serving tea

during the jostling of passengers and stowing of heavy luggage that accompanied departure, so he resigned himself to waiting approximately forty excruciating minutes for his high to come. However, he was ready to give up on time and space entirely, erase the borders of the imaginary and real in his mind, become prostrate, disappear into the bohemian masses, curse the miracle of life, and jubilate over its ugly lowlands. He was very well acquainted with that magnificent state. “There is no way it will come sooner. But when the moment of truth does arrive, I am sure that my mind will incandesce for real, in true Parfenchikov style!” he assured himself, anticipating a magnificent psychic eruption. For he had taken four whole spoonfuls! Peter Petrovich began waiting patiently. The train started, the conductor collected the tickets. Without opening his eyes, he continued laying facedown on his bunk. He was completely indifferent to his immediate surroundings. Parfenchikov only heard someone asking him some mundane question. They asked him either to move over, or to get up so they could put away their things, or to change places, or something else. But he was waiting for his time to come and had absolutely no interest in the bustle around him. What is more, he was feeling hostility toward everyone at the moment. Without answering, he tried not even to hear so as not to distract himself from the jubilation he was about to experience. Yes, yes, four spoonfuls meant that the most faery gala of mind awaited him! Few may believe it, but this had been his experience for three years now. “A-a-a, it’s starting... It’s kicked in, oh, how it’s kicked in! Oh, what a high! Come on, come on now... Ah, it’s happening, the energy is building, hey, hey, hey! I’m being transported! I’m being carried heavenward... Oh, Peter Petrovich, what these wondrous spoonfuls are doing to you.... Oh, oh, how marvelous! Every cell has revived! I can even feel the narcotic heat in my anus. My entire body is enveloped in some firework burst of Aurora! What a magnificent commodity! Oh-oh-oh! Just a little more and the onset will pass and the five-hour race of my excited consciousness will begin. All my energy, all my will, all my passion for life rushes out with irresistible force at this moment. Anger

about my morbid state, about my inhuman suffering, quickly shifts to benignity toward myself. The cherished dream is beginning to come true. Now I need to wait silently for a few minutes. At last! He began scratching his neck, then his nose, his tongue had become moist, soft, and pliable. He raised his eyelids and began to look around him in interest. Where would the thoughts of the young man with the poppy fortune take him today? Where would he find himself? “Come on, come on, show me what you are made of!” he urged on the koknar that was beginning to work powerfully in his mind and body. “This has proven to be no ordinary ground poppy, but a genuine one-hundred-carat diamond.” Dazzling pictures moved through his mind like a swarm of lightning bugs, his soul began to fill with ecstasy. And then the most important, divine metamorphosis took place. Peter Petrovich turns from a sorry ailing person into an active volcano of fantasies. Truly desperate glory! The devilish intoxication is bringing me to a state of exultation. You don’t know what is real and what is an illusion. You try to feel the world around you, touch it with your palm, your feet dig into the ground, your nose draws in amazing smells, your gaze flits over pleasant shapes, your hearing catches the music of an existence that caresses your heart. You begin to really love yourself, your voice, your dry cough, the dandruff on your collar and shoulders, the smell of your agony-soaked feet. You are absolutely certain that you are looking right at the world of your *own ego*. All I need are a few minutes to observe myself, pay heed to the thoughts that sweep over me, become immersed in the game of my extravagant imagination, as though from an excess of feelings, then I excitedly shout out a phrase borrowed from Pushkin: “Oh, Parfenchikov, oh, you son-of-a-bitch!” Can a new Peugeot really be worth a moment like this? After all, what a piteous sight I was just recently on the approaches to Moscow!

As soon as he understood this, he found himself precisely in that wondrous reality he dreamed of. “I will always defend freedom of spirit, ideas, and actions, while I recognize the mind as the highest origin, but not the ordinary human mind, rather one enhanced by

opium. Yes, the opium mind! For there can be no doubting its origin! The Master also created it! And at this great moment of euphoria, I not only lose part of my human essence, I acquire unity with all that is real, in its boundless diversity ... Now then, everything has been going extremely well so far," he decided. "After all, I have managed to live for twenty-nine years. But how many other people have passed over into the other world in this short time? One hundred and twenty million people die on Earth every year. This means that in twenty-nine years around three and half billion people of very different ages and nationalities have parted ways with the world. But Peter Petrovich is alive! Be he doped, euphoric, or in withdrawal, he is alive! These figures also convince me of something else—life itself is not worth one iota. Five thousand years separate me from the Bronze Age. But what have these fifty centuries given humankind? Yes, the average lifespan has increased. It was thirty-five, and now it is fifty-five. But still, what significant or fundamental thing has happened? After all, around two hundred generations have changed hands since that time. People have become literate, production enterprises have appeared, houses with all the amenities have been built. People have delved into science, traveled into space! What else? What? People themselves have hardly changed at all, and this means they have not achieved the most important thing. They have not come anywhere close. But people must change. And as quickly as possible! They are the weakest link in the Universe. Since I have come to know koknar, I have become fundamentally aware that only this substance can help make qualitative changes in Homo sapiens. It is excellently suited to this, because there is no need to invest in complex technological equipment. There will be essentially no expenses! Grow yourself some poppy, psychedelic mushrooms, hemp, Mexican cabbage, spiked agave, or cocaine, take it in dosed amounts, and Parfenchikov's scientific fantasies will blossom in the most magnificent way. And the needs of the stomach will be well taken care of, you might even grow some belly fat. After all, poppy porridge, grilled agave pulp, marinated mushrooms, and stewed Mexican

cabbage are very high in calories. So you can resolve the most important issue of actively carrying out scientific research in human improvement. All you need is half a hectare of land, a small hut, some seedlings, a spade, a small stove, and some kindling wood. And don't forget to write down your imaginings on this topic in a notebook or save them up in your inflamed mind. This would seem to be a simple truth, but not everyone has access to or understands it. So many eke out their short lives unhappy and angry at the world around them. I was the same way! I discovered the enthralling power of poppy head by accident just three years ago. I don't know if He created man, but God definitely created *it*, in order to open up all the richness of the world, the entire depth of our consciousness. Now I recall as though in a dream what I was interested in before I discovered it. Clothes, cars, money, women, the career of a civil servant, fame. I dreamed of owning the best outfits from well-known designers, of having my pockets full of unlimited credit cards from respectable banks. I dreamed of the most prestigious brands of car, about rendezvous with beautiful girls from the famous fashion houses and the capital's theaters. I wanted, while occupying the prestigious position of a presidential administration employee, to give interviews to illustrious radio and television channels, present the elite with foreign policy forecasts, and discuss the achievements in building Russia's democratic institutions. I considered that kind of life to be ideal. I strove for it, pushing an endless throng of competitors out of the way. The farcical noise of the chic life drew me into intoxicating confusion. And how did it all begin? When the time came to do my national service. My parents did not want me to serve my stint in the army. They dreamed of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations or Moscow State University. But I preferred the quiet of the reading rooms of the city's libraries to the mayhem of student life. However, my father was insistent and ambitious. He went missing for hours as he made the rounds of bars with the military commission members and doctors, inundating them with booze and presents. You just cannot imagine all the different diagnoses I was given! I had never even

heard of such words. I had to lay around for months in hospitals before my medical record could be drawn up. In the end, all those concerned finally agreed on a diagnosis, I had “a crooked spine.” They put the x-ray of someone’s damaged spine in my call-up file and for five thousand dollars scratched together a verdict, “Unfit for military service.” My youthfully naïve and romantic views collapsed once and for all under the influence of this corporative effort. After bidding a slightly forlorn farewell to my past, I changed my worldview—Peter Petrovich understood that the sky is the limit! Nothing is impossible, some things are always permissible. So at nineteen I became convinced of one thing—money is the answer to everything! And only a job in the civil service would provide unprecedented wealth. At that time it seemed that life’s wonders could only be enjoyed as an ideal consumer. I imagined the future as a continuous flow of satisfaction, and I wanted all the joys of life to be handed to me on a platter, without exerting the slightest effort. My logic was simple and ironclad—if you possess money and power, you are in charge of the world around and within you!

So what? What have I achieved in six years? What episodes of my own biography can I be proud of? I squandered my father’s fortune—a furniture factory in Smolensk and a canning plant in Torzhok. Many newspapers wrote that the price was artificially low, Parfenchikov Jr. had taken the buyers for a ride. My father drank shamelessly and did not interfere in the bargaining, and after he went bankrupt, he ended up in the nuthouse. I had to sell all the family real estate—my maternal grandfather and grandmother’s apartment and dacha. After that, my grandfather died and I had to put my grandmother in an old people’s home. I forced my father’s parents to sell their condo in Moscow and a small house in Tarasovka. Now all of my father’s relatives live in the communal apartment that is left... During those years, in pursuit of the obsessive illusion of the good life, I squandered more than fifteen million dollars. I made myself out to be an influential lucky guy, I was always suntanned and wore suits from Yakimoto or Brioni. I rode

around Moscow in the latest models of BMW with well-known members of the beau monde, and I socialized only with people of the second and third level of the capital's elite. I forked out a million dollars for the post of a governor's assistant. They wanted five million dollars for the seat of a deputy minister! But I was no longer able to rake up that much. So I did not move any further up the career ladder. I would have had to invest tens of millions. But I did not have any income, apart from the revenue I received from selling the family assets. So at the age of twenty-six I found myself back at square one with nothing to show for my efforts. I was not the lord of my life, but a servant. First my money disappeared, then my friends, girls, and business contacts. The vainglory of an inveterate partygoer had been struck a blow, it was as though someone was constantly giving me a slap in my disgruntled face. I even began selling off the clothes I had taken such delight in recently and that had aroused the undisguised envy of my friends. And finally, despairing Peter Petrovich just happened to make the acquaintance of poppy head. In literally the second or third chapter of this wonderful novel, the fear of irreversible failure that had been pursuing me abruptly disappeared. An unknown, mysterious force made me take a look around. I began to take a scrutinizingly close look myself. This was essentially the first time I thought about myself without the interference of the TV, radio, glossy magazines, glamorous parties, kitschy books, and idle beau monde chats about the successful life. I did some serious thinking and shrugged my shoulders—people need only *that* and nothing else. I struck everything I used to think about out of my head. In order to be totally free, all you need is to cultivate a passion for this enchanting bloom. There is nothing else to it! Extremely sensitive by nature, with a developed intuition, I understood that there was nothing to ruminate over. And I became absolutely certain that the age-old Russian idea of moral revival is associated in the closest way with scientific research on the study of powdered poppy. Only koknar is capable of revealing the secret formula for improving humankind. And then people will be inundated by a ten-point tidal wave. Do you want to

become president? No problem! An oligarch? A film director? A marshal? Become one for a day, two days, a year, an eternity! Opium will help you! It will sculpt you into whoever you want to be. It will fulfill any instantaneous whim. It will create whoever you want to be, allow you to shape your own person, while the administrative resource, bribes, a mighty fortune, or a thirty-five-centimeter penis mean nothing. There is only one eternal and amazing magician—poppy head with its barely perceptible yellowish tinge. It will immerse you in a world of true wonders. Lord, how amazingly simple everything is! Why did I not come to this fantastical conclusion sooner? I could have saved my family, who do not know the main meaning of life, a lot of heartache. Whereas instead I let everything go to pot, destroyed myself and my relatives, and only then saw the light. How stupidly everything went! How I bungled it all! Sobering up from my unfortunate past proved terribly expensive. But now I know the cherished secret of existence and no one will lead me away from my true path. It's impossible! I found the path to my utter and uncompromising liberation myself. I have confronted my former wretched mentality with the crystal pure world of a wild flower. This world has already fully opened up to me and, I hope, forever. Passion for poppy, I am convinced, is the highest form of creativity. Touching an object of delight gives birth to second all-penetrating sight in us. You begin to build your life without outside help and money. The only debt you have is to entice in yourself a passion for *that very thing*. How unexpectedly I grabbed for the golden key from the higher worlds and kingdom of unheard of pleasures. This wonderful discovery will be solicitously kept in the depths of my mind like a rare insect in the collection of a pedantic etymologist. As someone close to the absolute idea, I, in the embrace of this wondrous state, giving myself the title of the divine elect, have begun to despise my past, hate the snobbish pose of a big city partygoer. "I am rubbish, rubbish!" I shouted about myself every minute. "Enough! I threw away fifteen million dollars, and didn't derive any joy from it. No matter how I search my memory, only human ruin gushes from it in an endless flow. Each time I

get the feeling that Parfenchikov has burst out of true hell despite the devil's will. But to hell with it all! I am at the end of my tether. My illusions have been destroyed. My eyes have been opened! I will no longer fall into the disgusting confusion of the past. Having become a voluntary slave of opium, I am certain that only it will save me from everything unclean, particularly from the people who swarm in the elite circles of the capital. I have accepted the weed unconditionally, with mind and soul, passionately embraced it with the same frantic and insane frenzy that Rogozhin flung himself at Nastasia Filippovna. Oh, if only more people could ignite themselves with poppy energy! Our people would find themselves in a very different world. In noble solitude, in the fantasy of the rebellious spirit, in the games of an inflamed mind. And this would mean a step is being taken toward improving the Russian and Homo sapiens in general. This is so urgent! Now I have learned how to direct my own mind in a superb way. So I am immeasurably proud of how different I am from everyone else! For who are they all today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century? People looking for themselves and not stopping at anything in this senseless search? With proudly raised heads not giving a damn about the law, conscience, religious traditions, biological programs, and the world around them? And with such inspiration that it truly seems as though humankind is the last scoundrel. Yes-yes, many of them are proving this very thing. I convinced myself of this for more than six years in their company, particularly to the east of the Bug, Tisza, and Neman rivers. It is time to own up to the fact that feeling myself to be a bastard, while socializing by the hour with the gallivanting elite, was also extremely pleasant. I am not doing that now, of course, but I was back then, when I rushed around the capital weaving intrigues in the high spheres. For if you are not an inveterate scumbag yourself, how can you be friends with scoundrels? They will recognize you as a black sheep and immediately throw you off the chic liner. And anyone sent away from the table in our current Homeland without opium is sure to perish immediately. It is difficult to imagine a decent person in the capital's high society who has

enough honor, moral principles, conscience, and firm civic position. I, at least, have never met one, although I rushed around Moscow every day, talking to hundreds of people. Oh, how I would like to meet one!

At that very moment, an unprepossessing bespectacled man appeared before Peter Petrovich. He was not very tall, balding with a protruding wrinkled brow, and had vivid blue veins on his large crimson nose. He began with endearing obsequiousness, “You called? Allow me to introduce myself—Professor Koshmarov. Eugene Koshmarov!”

At first Parfenchikov thought he was having another fleeting hallucination. He hesitated for a minute in doubt—was the stranger a figment of his imagination, or did he actually exist? “I just happen to be engaged in the problems you are concerned about,” continued the bespectacled man. “I intend to tell you a lot of interesting things in order to solicit your participation in my studies.” Peter Petrovich had to surface from his dreams into wretched reality. With a grim smirk he asked, “How could I call on someone utterly unknown to me? And how can you know what questions I am reflecting on? This is all extremely suspicious mystics... What did you say? Mister Koshmarov? Professor? I’ve never heard of you!” However, at this point Parfenchikov was wondering whether the bespectacled gentleman had actually confirmed his name.

“You are right!” the bald man eagerly took up. “I am not going to prove that we know each other. The abhorrently extravagant metropolitan socialite circuit, which has hypocritically assumed the role of the intellectual part of society, has pushed me off stage. So the public cannot see me. However, I am proud to note that, nevertheless, I always appear unbidden in an attempt to prove my scientific exclusiveness. I agree that until now you did not need me, but I am absolutely certain that in a couple of minutes you would have begun asking for advice. Whereby you would have insisted on it. I am, after all, the only person who can give a reliable prediction of the near future. No, I am not a soothsayer or an oracle. I am a modulator of the new times, so to speak. And you, as I know, are

dreaming of participating in such scientific experiments. You even agree to unconditionally sacrifice yourself. I genuinely welcome that way of thinking. We do not have that much time Mr. Parfenchikov, so shall we begin?"

"What do you mean?" asked Peter Petrovich.

"To begin with, we will have to change your genetic programming and social characteristics. Today being only Russian, Polynesian, Arab, or Japanese is extremely dangerous. There is absolutely no future in living in a monocultural environment. This stymies the ethnicity and gives it no opportunity to preserve itself during evolution. In order to change the situation for the better and look at Russia's future with optimism, I must add fifteen percent of German genetic brew to your blood. This will qualitatively renew the biomechanisms responsible for organization and legal discipline in Russians. Ten percent of Chinese blood will raise labor activity and enhance the ability for internal concentration. Ten percent of Jewish blood will ensure the development of efficiency and frugality. And another five percent of Georgian blood will undoubtedly improve the Russian's external features and increase his or her emotionality and zest for life."

"So I will be left with only sixty percent of my Russian blood?" I cried out almost in horror. "But what if we did away with the Jewish and German blood, would that be possible Professor Koshmarov?"

"There is no way we can manage without the contribution of these two ethnicities to your chromosome makeup. You are rather a nondescript individual. Sparse brown hair, wide cheekbones, a squashed boxer-like nose, and a receding chin. You also have very little stubble—women don't like that. And you have colorless eyes, what are they, gray, light green? Nor does your height do anything for you, you are no taller than 5'5". Isn't that right? Georgian genes will turn you into a life-loving hunk, a social favorite. And would you have sold your father's factories for a song if you had had something Jewish in your genetic programming? Never! With the starting capital you had in Smolensk and Tver and if you were ten

percent Jewish, you could have already become a well-known oligarch. Your name would have been listed among the richest people on the planet!” exclaimed Koshmarov, his eyes shining mockingly from behind his glasses.

“Ten percent, five percent—how is it calculated?” Parfenchikov thought to himself skeptically. But the professor immediately answered, clearly taking delight in the discussion that was unfolding. “For what is ten or five percent? A grandmother or grandfather on either side could have been half Georgian or Jewish. That is a small but vitally important drop in the formation of a successful Russian ethnicity. Do not refuse, take everything I offer you proudly. In the beginning you seemed ready for anything. What do you need the cries of radical nationalists for? There is no future with them, they won’t buy you a ticket to a prosperous country.”

The professor was finally arousing some curiosity in Peter Petrovich. “But what if a Russian already has some of the blood of one or two of the ethnicities you mention? What then? Is he to doubt your presumptions?”

“In that case, you need to make up for what is lacking. For you, only the ethnic cocktail I already mentioned will be the most successful,” the guest said, raising his voice with emphasis.

“Tell me, professor, is there anyone who needs our Russian blood?” asked Peter Petrovich, a little hesitatingly.

“Yes indeed! The tempest of an inflamed mind is the most important instigator of human development and this quality is most vividly expressed in Russians. There is no other ethnicity that has the Russian’s exorbitant passion for an object of admiration or inspiration, this is why we so effortlessly and devotedly create idols for ourselves. We are the only nation that so easily falls for a skillfully presented lie, a tawdry myth, as though it were the most genuine event, because we live more within ourselves than outside ourselves. Praises have been sung for eons about Russians’ self-assertion and fearlessness, and these qualities have been engraved on the scrolls of world civilization. I don’t think any other nation has given world culture as many geniuses as Russia. One of the latest

additions to this this list is Stalin...” Parfenchikov felt a malicious chill in Koshmarov’s grimace.

“Stalin? Stalin?” I frowned.

“Yes-yes, genius and scoundrel Stalin. An experimenter who did his conjuring tricks on human material, who dreamed of putting the individual human mind into a giant cauldron of one proletarian truth. If it hadn’t been for his tragic experiments, the utopian idea of the possibility and benefit of such development would have become more deeply ensconced in the minds of the masses,” intoned the bespectacled gentleman, his voice, previously deep and low, now becoming like veritable rolls of thunder.

“But why were you not able to whisper to him in confidence that experiments with the cooperative proletarian mind had no prospects?” Parfenchikov asked heatedly.

Koshmarov went pale and confessed in a whisper, “I was unable to *appear* to him. On the contrary, he appeared to me, and I was inflamed with this very idea. This time I was wrong in my forecasts. O, I am far from convinced of my exclusiveness. Yes-yes, even I can go wrong. So shall we begin? You, Mister Parfenchikov, are in for an entertaining experiment!”

“I think I will consent. But what will be the result? Whom will I serve in these studies?” Peter Petrovich asked with genuine interest.

“A strange question. Russians, who else! At this very difficult historical time of global processing, they will be an example of multiethnicity, enrich themselves with the best genes of contemporary populations, and immensely increase their vitality, which will allow them to step confidently into the future. And in general, mixing ethnicities is the driving force behind the active mutations that stimulate evolution. The new status of Russians will ensure them a secure place in the development of civilization. This is something you are interested in, isn’t it?” Koshmarov finished fervently.

“Of course! That is why I am at your service,” Parfenchikov announced resolutely. “It is wonderful to serve a lofty goal. This striving is particularly characteristic of the Russian soul. I see you have a syringe ready. So you are going to give me an injection?”

“Yes. Lay on your stomach. I want to warn you that this experiment consists of several components. A collective pill combining all four nationalities has not been prepared yet. We are beginning with the German. Then we will work on the Jewish, and so on. We need to wait for the results. How will Parfenchikov change?” The professor opened his shabby suitcase, pulled on some rubber gloves, picked up an ampoule bearing the label “German,” and, breaking off the tip, began drawing some red liquid into a huge syringe. “You will feel the effects of the first injection for no more than an hour. If you like it, we will go on to the next procedure. And if you want, I can change your ethnic composition in the future to a ratio of 60 to 40. By the way, whenever you want to meet me, to discuss this question, be my guest. I will appear every time you take five spoonfuls of ground poppy head,” the professor said matter-of-factly.

“And what if this is a wallop dose of opium milk?” thought Peter Petrovich hopefully, looking over his shoulder at the syringe full of the mysterious liquid. Incidentally, at this point he noticed another three ampoules in the suitcase. “Jewish,” “Chinese,” and “Georgian,” he read the inscriptions. He joyously anticipated some incredible miracle. This excited him no less than koknar that turned yellow from the abundance of opium.

After the injection, the professor commanded, “Close your eyes!”

Parfenchikov felt that something inconceivable was happening to him. His mind, bedeviled by the powered poppy head, craved an enchanting spectacle. After an acute seizure of indescribable euphoria, Peter Petrovich passed out...

He woke up in a modestly furnished room. Looking out of the window, he saw that he was in St. Petersburg. This fact in no way surprised him. The golden needle of the Peter and Paul Fortress was drowning in the gray waters of the Neva. The sun was already blinding the eyes, but the Palace Bridge was still raised. “White nights. June,” went through his utterly sober head. The clock showed 5.20 in the morning. He jumped out of bed and rushed to

the bathroom. In thirty minutes he would have to climb into his Omega and rush through the city to arrive at his office on Ligovka Street at precisely seven o'clock. In summer, work began at seven. In winter, at eight. Being late was out of the question. Fervent work inspired Mr. Parfenchikov. Yesterday he sat until late over his papers. He wanted to put in more time than was officially required in order to prove to everyone that the company he worked for was a leading world manufacturer of small river and sea vessels. After all, work is the main means of self-expression in life. After taking a shower, he shaved and sprayed his face with Kenzo eau de toilette. The mirror reflected his solarium-tanned face with its light-colored eyes. His thick short hair was parted with gel. Looking himself over with satisfaction, Parfenchikov thought about the upcoming day. He had important clients today. Two ladies from Norway were planning to buy three ships for local trips through the fjords. He was meeting with them in the morning. Another client from Greece was scheduled for after lunch. He wanted to order a representative-class ship for his guests from Piraeus. Instead of a Volvo engine, the Greek wanted a Mercedes engine. But Mercedes does not put out engines for the St. Petersburg company Mr. Parfenchikov worked for. So today he was going to have to charm, flatter, and beguile his customers, find solutions to fill out the contract portfolio, and raise the prestigious status of his enterprise in the world market of small fleets. The outer appearance of a charming hunk, diligence, discipline, and commercial skill would undoubtedly help him in his tussle for the customer. He had already succeeded in earning one hundred and twelve thousand dollars in the company, although he began with almost nothing. And in five and a half years, by carrying out the advice of his elders, saving on everything, without even buying dogs but, if necessary, barking himself, he had achieved impressive results. He had been able to save! He even gained some kind of amazing satisfaction from this. He took joy in economizing. He might only save a ruble, but his soul filled with a tremor beyond compare. He was congratulating himself when a simple but extremely useful thought came into his head.

“Why,” he thought, “do I need four burners on my stove? When I cook meat, so much energy goes to waste! It is uneconomical. Useless! Such squandering makes me uncomfortable. Wouldn’t it be better to place a smaller saucepan on top of a larger saucepan so that one sits exactly in the other?”

He tried it. It worked out wonderfully. While beef was boiling in the first saucepan, rice became nicely plumped up in the second. Taking heart, he noticed that energy was also evaporating from the first saucepan. So he took yesterday’s potato cakes out of the refrigerator and easily, and most important entirely for free, heated them up. It was these small things that brought joy to his heart. Then he began thinking about hygiene. It seemed to be wasteful.

“There must be a way to reduce expenditure here too,” he thought. “What about reusing the water left after brushing my teeth, shaving, and washing my face? Wouldn’t it be more economical to gather it in a bowl, for example, and use it to swab the toilet?”

He was delighted at this simple idea, which significantly reduced his use of water. It was these simple things that made life a joy. “Each time, I convince myself that I have well-oiled brains! And they work tirelessly for my pocket. This is evidently why my account in the Bank of Moscow is constantly growing. At first, I deposited the rubles I saved in it, now I am enjoying an increase in my dollar capital. I have decided that only after I save enough money to keep my family in comfort will I think about getting married and having children. For how can it be otherwise? Can I think about a wife and offspring if I don’t have a cent to my name? What will this mean for my near and dear ones? Starvation, a wretched existence! No, I need to save up enough money first. A family that lives in want has much to be desired. If it doesn’t fall apart immediately, the husband will quite quickly take to the bottle and the wife will be perverted by the meager joys of occasional sex. Simple arguments ... But without these banalities, I cannot build a decent life.”

With these thoughts, he rushed to the wardrobe, put on his boots, threw on a shirt and began carefully knotting his tie. He looked himself over and was happy to see the picture of a successful busi-

nessman. The anticipation of success inspired him. He wanted to live and take joy in the kopeck-sized remunerations and cent-sized achievements his mind, his wisdom, and his nature were participating in. This was what Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov was all about. A person, despite his low origin, who was successfully creating himself!

He always tried to be the first one at the office so that the company boss noticed his desire not only to earn his salary, but also to make an extra effort to help the company prosper. And today, ahead of his colleagues, he was the first to sit down at his desk. There was still about twenty minutes before the start of the work day. After opening the company's electronic mail, Peter Petrovich began looking at the reports that had come in. Most of the correspondence was routine messages. But there were three letters that were worth a closer look. One of them concerned the intentions of a Ukrainian holding company to order ten small passenger ships for Black Sea shipping lines. It wanted to put two-deck steamboats for 150 people on the Kerch-Feodosia-Yalta-Yevpatoria-Kherson-Nikolaev-Odessa-Ismail passenger routes. "Bravo! Bravo!" Peter Petrovich exulted to himself. "I am the one who gets to tell my boss this wonderful news. And this is very lucky! The early bird catches the worm," remembered Parfenchikov. "Each ship could cost around one million dollars. That means the company's contract portfolio for 2009 will increase by ten to fifteen million. And if I am the one to come to an agreement with the Ukrainians, it will be logical to contend for the post of deputy general director of commerce. In any case, I will have an excellent chance. I will have to take advantage of it to become the manager. I'm tired of waiting! The best work results but no career advance. What is a senior specialist? At my age and with my sales volume? With my customer base? Yes, they pay pretty well, but where is the career growth? Parfenchikov should ultimately become one of the company bosses. With my brains, diligence, and healthy ambitions these are very reasonable claims. It is just incredible that I am bypassed and not promoted. What injustice! I must fight in every way I can. Remain polite and friendly

with my colleagues, while also crawling my way up. If I receive two percent of each contract, my personal capital will grow by 200,000 dollars! Even if my boss is stingy and decides to only give me one percent from the deal, I will still get an impressive bonus. Some of the money will have to be spent on an image-making campaign in the press, on the Internet, and on the radio. Something will definitely come of it, if not at this company, then at another. I will be offered a high post, my salary and bonuses will be raised. That is the combination I am interested in. I am almost thirty, and I am still only a senior specialist! I always remember how my mother used to say, ‘Life, son, is a miracle of your own making!’”

Peter Petrovich’s face turned red in his exertion to do something to boost his own career, it seemed as though the precursor of great luck was knocking commandingly right on his temples. In order to prevent anyone else from interfering in the upcoming transaction, he moved the inquiry from the Kiev company to his own personal computer desk and marked it with a categorical “Parfenchikov is working on this project!”

In the second message, Captain Fridon Surmanidze from the Batumi port was asking for three ships of the same class to be leased to the Georgian port. Peter Petrovich knew that the company’s boss preferred traditional sales, but listened to such requests from customers with great satisfaction. What is more, when a major buyer from the company visits, he will most certainly turn to the manager who first told him about this inquiry. “Successfully addressing the boss in the presence of customers and guests,” thought Parfenchikov, “is the best way to draw attention to myself and advance up the career ladder, reinforce my status in the company team.” He also moved the Batumi *dépêche* to his own desk with a note, “Parfenchikov is studying the project!”

In the third letter, Hungarians were complaining about the quality of paint. About two years ago, they had bought two ships for cruises on the Danube. The company had given them a five-year guarantee, but two years later, the quality of the paint left much to be desired. He also took this letter and replied that photos would

have to be taken of those places on the ship where the paint defects were particularly noticeable in order to evaluate the situation. What is more, Peter Petrovich decided to write to the Finns about it. The paint manufacturers should know about the complaints. There is no need to tell the boss about this. Negative information always puts a pall on the messenger. Why stir up trouble for myself? It would be better to print out the letter from the Hungarians, my reply and letter to the Finns and put it all in the boss's business correspondence folder for review. If he is wise, and I have no doubt that he is, he will appreciate my modesty and professionalism. And this is extremely important. There can be no trivialities on the job. Everything must be remembered, everything foreseen. A hasty step could be detrimental to the entire company. And this cannot be allowed. For accumulating one's own prosperity is most closely associated with the financial situation of the organization you work in. The first never happens without the second. And the higher your personal ambitions, the more time and intellect you must give the company.

The office slowly filled. It was still not eight o'clock when the boss walked past. He said with restrained politeness, "Good morning! I am happy to see everyone. If anyone has some urgent news, please come to my office." This is what he said every morning, greeting everyone at large, but as though addressing each employee individually. Peter Petrovich stood up and followed him, ready to eloquently and with seeming enthusiasm tell of the enticing advantageous orders. Meetings with the boss always brought him profound satisfaction. And this time he went back to his desk with a feeling of inner jubilation. Parfenchikov had made an good impression and was awarded with praise. But was that what really interested him?

Now he had to hold a good meeting with the blonds from Norway. They had sent short resumes and passport size photographs by email. Had it not been for the same year of birth—one was born in March and the other in June—he might have thought the women were sisters. The first was called Gertrude Melenberger and the second Betina Grashoffer.

Over the interoffice telephone, the secretary informed him that

the Norwegian women had already gone into the negotiation room. Looking at himself in the mirror standing on the table, smoothing down his brows, and flicking himself on the nose, as though to say, go on now, don't be shy, be convincing, uphold the company's interests, Parfenchikov set off for the meeting. When he entered, the secretary gave him some coffee. Shaking their hands, Peter Petrovich looked into the foreign women's eyes with that special open look that had often brought him success at talks. The whole world and all his efforts were now concentrated on one thing—how to sell the company's products. For this he was ready for anything, extremely well aware that the meaning of life lay exclusively in success in everything and primarily in work. The discussion with its endless “for” and “against” was over by noon. The women signed a preliminary contract envisaging that payment of thirty percent of the cost of the first ship would mean the main project—building three new ships—had been launched. The price of one ship, not including delivery to Oslo, was one million one hundred and seventy thousand Euros. This was a great victory for the company and for Peter Petrovich personally. He had saved around eleven percent, which he had the right to lower if the customer insisted on a concession. But everything ended favorably. And Parfenchikov was over the moon with joy. He knew that he could expect another compliment from the boss. Two praises in one day from the company boss - was that not an outstanding event in the young man's life? Yes-yes-yes! There could be nothing more joyful. During lunch with the Norwegians, his smile was as friendly as ever, but he was thinking only of his meeting with the Greek. This required not only looking good, but keeping a sharp ear out all the time. Greeks are pernicious traders. If you give them some slack, they'll have your guts for garters.

“Good day, Mr. Iliadis,” began Peter Petrovich, shaking his hand. “We are happy to welcome you to our office, to our country.”

The Greek was stoutish, with a beer belly hanging heavily over his trouser belt. His broad bloated face swam into a bald patch, making his head seem enormous. His unprepossessing figure, and

short, thin legs could have aroused mirth. But the particular features of his anthropology were not something Peter Petrovich paid the slightest attention to. This was one of the company's customers, and Parfenchikov was obliged to bend over backwards in order to sign a contract with him. "I was as handsome as you when I was young, Mr. Parfenchikov!" noted the Greek. However, he retained his haughtiness. "You have kept your good looks," Peter Petrovich hastened to assure him. "Although the way a man looks is entirely inconsequential. The main thing is intellect, fortune, and good morals!"

"I would prefer cold calculation to good morals. Incidentally, I asked about a discount. Have you conceded? If we are talking about some insignificant amount, I will drink my coffee and go see your competitors. Or have you thought everything over and want to offer a significant revision? I proposed ten percent. Then your ships will become famous throughout the Mediterranean."

"Dear Mr. Iliadis!" began Peter Petrovich. "This is our fourth meeting. At each one, you ask about ten percent. The first time, we made a concession and reduced the price by six percent. The second time, we decreased the price by another two-and-a-half percent. The third time, by half a percent. And you seemed to be in agreement and even signed a joint statement. I get one percent of the deal. The most I can do is reduce my earnings by fifty percent and lower the price by another half percent. I have no other reserves."

"Wait a minute. You are young, you have everything ahead of you. Is it proper to earn money on an old and ailing man? At my age, ten thousand dollars is an enormous amount of money. Medicine is extremely expensive these days. While even one thousand dollars will be quite enough for you. Leave yourself, not one, but point one percent! At your age, I would have been happy to earn a hundred dollars. Whereas you want to make a whole ten thousand off of me. Do you mean to say that one thousand is not enough for you? So, we have reached a compromise on this question. Now I want to whisper an important secret in your ear. I am already used to you

and can permit myself to speak frankly with you. If you lower the price by another ten percent, I will give you three percent, that is, thirty thousand dollars, in cash. This is three times more than your earnings.”

“I will not enter a conspiracy with customers. I ask you please not to discuss this topic any further. My interest is exclusively corporate. I am willing to lower the price of the deal at the expense of my earnings, but I will never go for a secret commission. I appreciate your generosity and magnanimity and consider it a good harbinger of the contract. Before our meeting, I was left with the most meager reserves—one percent of my commission fee. I am willing to give it up entirely. No one will know about our private conversation. It is not our habit to discuss the sensitive proposals of our customers. If you are willing to sign the deal, here is the contract.”

He took the contract out of the folder, corrected the price with a ball-point pen, reducing it by one percent, and turned to the Greek, “Shall I give it to the secretary so she can print it out again? And then give it to you for signing?”

“Poli kala!”* Iliadis said sulkily and broke out in a sweat. Strange guy. Finally, he raised his eyebrows in amazement and, looking at Parfenchikov gloomily, muttered something to himself. Then he added, “Go take care of your piece of paper...”

With his head raised high, Parfenchikov returned to his office. He wanted to think over the business for tomorrow before the end of the work day, and, in addition, send several offers to Rumania and Albania. He understood that these countries had quite a lot of purchasing power. After work, Peter Petrovich went to a symphony concert. The program included composers he loved—Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, and Borodin. But on the way home he began dreaming of his career and these thoughts made him overly excited. As soon as he walked in the door, he sat down at the table. He had to think about what he would write in a letter to the owners of the company he wanted to tell of his professional merits and plans for com-

* Greek for very well.

pany development. But suddenly Peter Petrovich stopped and decided to first write an anonymous letter complaining about the head of the commercial department and director of the company's commercial management. A few days ago, he had found out about some of their sins and shortcomings. Immediately, his brilliant intuition manifested in a desire to give the company owners privy to the piquant details in the hope of compromising the mentioned persons forever. And Parfenchikov began writing with immense inspiration.

To his own great surprise, he was unable to stop. It seemed that Peter Petrovich had even forgotten what had prompted him to begin writing in the epistolary genre to begin with. It was already after eight in the morning and he had totally forgotten that he should be at work, continuing to write his anonymous letter without the slightest sign of fatigue ...

... Upon awakening, Parfenchikov saw the same bespectacled man before him. The professor was looking at him closely with a rather sad expression on his face, and when their eyes met, he frowned slightly and said, "So what do you think of the reincarnation experiment?"

"I don't remember anything," replied Peter Petrovich. "What happened?"

"Well, thank goodness. I was able to follow the stimulating mechanism of my pharmaceutical brainchild. I cannot say that a miracle happened, but it seems it is already very close. Now I want to activate your mutation system, only not with opium energy, not with the intoxicated fantasies of alcohol, not with meditation in the manner of yogis, but with another injection. As we agreed, I will add ten percent of Jewish blood to your gene pool. Are you up for it?"

"Wait, wait. Let me have three spoonfuls of my wonderful powder. I am about to experience withdrawal symptoms ..."

"I see you have come to. Shall we begin? Shall we take another step toward the success of my scientific experiment? I want to see something encouraging."

“Get the syringe ready!”

“Close your eyes...”

The alarm clock deafened sleepy Peter Petrovich. He woke up and looked at the clock. He got up and went to the bathroom. On work days he took a shower at the office. Parfenchikov kept strict tabs on his utility expenditures. He never brushed his teeth with the tap turned on, but poured water into a glass, wet his toothbrush in it and rubbed his teeth. Then he rinsed his mouth with water from the cup, but only used part of it. He also washed himself in a rather unusual way. He wet a towel under a thin stream of water and wiped his face, neck, and chest with it. Peter Petrovich only urinated into the sink in order not to flush the nine-liter toilet bowl. He rinsed away the urine with the water left in the glass. But he did not simply pour the water into the sink, but carefully, even somewhat solicitously, washed away the traces of urine, taking a close look at every yellowish drop. Parfenchikov only ate breakfast at the office. Not only because the company offered its employees coffee and sugar free of charge, while he brought sandwiches with him, but because after breakfast, as usual, he had a bowel movement, which meant he would have to use up water to flush the toilet. He could not permit himself this, keeping close watch over his utility payments as he did.

He dressed neatly, in the suit of an office manager, he did not have his own car, but took public transportation to work. “I have important clients today. Two ladies from Norway. Rather wealthy, I must say. They plan to buy three ships for local trips through the fjords. In the afternoon, I have a meeting with a Greek. He wants to buy a luxury yacht. So Parfenchikov is in for a day of big business. I must think about the company and myself. If I did not worry about myself, would I have been able to save four hundred and thirty thousand dollars in five-and-a-half years? No, I, Peter Parfenchikov, am not your ordinary person. And my money is in three of the most prestigious banks—VTB, Alfa-Bank, and Sberbank. And I also deposited it intelligently—twenty percent of the total capital in rubles, and forty each in dollars and Euros. The Euro rises as much

as the dollar decreases, and vice versa. And this is like communicating cups! There can be no loss here. While the rubles are in a deposit account with an eighteen percent interest rate from January until August 1. After that I will convert them and deposit them in a dollar and Euro account. That will be more reliable. Money does not like to be disturbed—it likes peace and quiet. Without these components it becomes ordinary change, its power turns into commercial rot. Puritanism in consumption and modesty in daily living are my unshakeable principles. If I am able to save on myself, I am sincerely glad, while if I can save on others, I encourage myself with simple arguments, “To hell with it! Everyone pays for himself. It can be no other way!” Many people confuse thrift with greed, but these are entirely different concepts. Greed is when you have a great desire to have something material, but you don’t want to spend. While thrift is a life philosophy. You are content with little not because you can’t permit yourself more, but because you think that more is not important, insignificant, and utterly unnecessary.

The first thing I did when I rushed into the office was have a good breakfast. Free coffee always seems to taste better. Then I went to the lavatory. After taking care of my immediate needs, I returned to my office and began waiting for the two dollies from Norway. Lately, since I now have more than four hundred thousand dollars to my name, I have begun thinking about opening my own business. I knew essentially all the small fleet manufacturers from China to Canada. I had the addresses of many customers interested in yachts, motor launches, hydroplanes, and other sailing vessels. I was personally acquainted with some of the customers, while I had communicated with others on the Internet and by telephone. So at the end of the year I was planning to establish my own ship sales company. It was my dream to become an independent businessman. After looking through the mail, I ignored the complaint from Hungarian customers about the quality of paint. “Why associate my name with a conflict situation?” I thought. “Our company used paint from a Finnish company for these ships. When I begin my own business, the Finns will give me a discount on their products

and the good price will allow me to sell their products to the Danube Shipping Company. In addition to the three ships our company sold the Hungarians last year, their fleet consists of more than a hundred sailing vessels. While defending some, I will definitely spoil relations with others. This is not in my interests. In this question, it is better to act from behind the scenes. I am not giving great significance to the letter from Head of the Batumi Shipping Company Surmanidze, who wants to lease three of our ships. The global crisis is in full swing—what if the Georgians can't pay under the contract? Then the company directors will put me in charge of resolving the conflict. Is this something I need? All my time will be spent on this conflict. I won't have enough time for sales, which means my earnings will be less. Let other people deal with this headache. It's the job of lawyers to settle disputes, but I am a sales manager!

At this point, I was informed that the foreign women were already in the negotiation room. I hurried to meet them. The blondes from Norway were attractive and looked very alike. I did not miss the opportunity to tell them how pleasant it was to do business with such charming ladies. During the talks I was thinking constantly about the future, how I could use each customer in my own business. So I associated my task of successfully selling the company's ships with my future business opportunities. I lowered the price by three percent for the Scandinavians, and they went away very satisfied with the outcome. This came to a two-percent premium for the company from the total cost of the deal and good prospects for doing business with the Norwegians in the future when I became the owner of a commercial agency. So I had achieved a double win. A superb balance.

After a break, I met with Greek Iliadis. This guy had been annoying me with his requests for a discount. The tedious conversation that consisted of repetitive phrases and exclamations went on for around an hour. Toward the end, the situation even began to amuse me. But when the Greek offered thirty thousand dollars in cash for lowering the price by ten percent, I decided to take the risk and signed the contract. A reprimand from the company directors

would be much cheaper than thirty thousand dollars in cash. A person can get out of even the trickiest situation if he sets his mind to it. Particularly since it does not look as though I will be working here much longer; so why not throw all caution to the wind! Today I have moved even closer to my goal of opening my own business.

I rushed out of the office earlier than I would normally do. I had to deposit the cash from Iliadis in Alfa-Bank. After the bank, I grabbed a bite to eat, stopped by the chess club, played a few rounds, and went home to rest ...

“The experiments with one ethnicity do not really satisfy me,” the professor muttered to himself. “I don’t find anything attractive in Parfenchikov’s changes. The synthesis of two gene types—Russian and German, and Russian and Jewish—does not impress me. If I continue my experiments along the same lines, I will most likely get the same result. I must create a nano pill that combines four ethnicities of choice. After all, the whole of human history has been accompanied by ethnic mutations. Civilizations have been fortified by means of this very factor. I have set myself the scientific task of enhancing the average Russian and am simply compelled to continue my research. In the meantime, I will leave Peter Petrovich peacefully sleeping in order to come up with an ideal nano pill. It will be very interesting to see what he looks like tomorrow in the same role of ship sales manager but without the external genetic influence.”

After saying this, the bespectacled gentleman temporarily disappeared.

Peter Petrovich woke up and began unenthusiastically getting ready to go to work. “What do I need this job for,” the obsessive thought kept worming its way into Parfenchikov’s head. “Why do I need a couple of thousand dollars a month? What am I, a Finn or a Swede, to scrimp and save? And Europeans have an awful life anyway ... Saving up dollars one by one for a rainy day? Denying yourself pleasure? No way! Never! To sit for the whole evening in a bar over one mug of beer and smile disconcertedly at some Russian guest who puts away one glass after the other of expensive

drinks and pinches luscious beauties?” Slightly depressed, Peter Petrovich padded to the bathroom and, not even bothering to look at his unexpressive face in the mirror, became even more dejected. “Perhaps I should send my job to hell?” he thought fleetingly. “I’ve been working laboriously in sales for three years, and what do I have to show for it? Nothing! Nor are there any prospects. Others are turning over billions, while I am selling other people’s little ships. And they are not selling well at that, no one is lining up for them, that’s for sure. I would prefer it if I was not the one looking for customers, but that they were running after me, bringing me gifts to get ahead of the others in line and sign a contract on the sly. That way I can count on a high fee in cash from customers, and there is a better chance of receiving a bonus from my employer. For it would be an awful injustice to have to look for customers myself. Ridiculous! Where am I going to find them? Am I going to spend nights surfing the web? Writing letters to all the interested companies in the country, the world? Regularly looking through newspapers and magazines, fishing for potential buyers in them? That would mean abandoning my personal life and forgetting about its joys. No! Oh, I’m not going to shave or brush my teeth, I’m going back to bed. I’ll have a glass of wine, expel the doldrums from my head, fill my heart with Bacchus tenderness and drown in dreams of establishing order in Russia.”

Knowing from experience that it was impossible to discuss such topics without some spunky drink, he hurriedly downed a glass of Cabernet—an open bottle stood on the bedside table from yesterday. Red wine always represented the yeast of delight! At first slowly and dully, but then all the more loudly, bells began ringing in his ears. Their all-penetrating, intoxicating ringing excited, touched, and filled his entire being with genuine love for the Homeland. Immediately in the depths of his mind, strange visions began to appear. Parfenchikov was walking along a main street in the Land of Divine Peace. It was Moscow, but an utterly different one, with a different appearance. The faces of wealthily dressed people standing by their Porsches, Mazerattis, Bentleys, and other elite cars

looked despondent and even somehow downtrodden. It seemed they were ashamed of their status, which was in no way to be envied. Most of them looked bewildered at the enraptured behavior of their fellow citizens from another class. Impoverished clothing, fake sincerity, irrepressible merriment, and extreme courtesy aroused anxious envy in the rich people. The impression was created that the ragamuffins had forever deprived them of their living space and privileges. But we are not still living in 1917, are we? You don't see any sailors with Mausers or workers with Berdan rifles. There are no posters with revolutionary slogans in the streets and squares. Instead of armored vehicles with soldiers, thousands of happy cyclists ride along the streets. It seems they have firmly grabbed their dream by the tail and are delightedly pursuing it, without looking back. Russians are dreaming of the future of humankind about their own genetic evolution. You won't ride off into tomorrow in luxurious limousines—this is a truth everyone understands. Down with the boutique, fashion house, and couturier! Away with the celebrations of taste, smells, antiques, fabrics, and luxury that darken the soul. Down with sex, brothels, erotic shops, sports competitions, chic resorts, creams and medication that desecrate the flesh! Instead, in a moment of emotional national upswing, let's throw off the consumer mentality forever with incredible wondrous force. A new spiritual world will come to replace the solemn march. It has the two most important professions—the academic and the librarian. And no one else! No! Now the main question in life is not the kind of house you live in, the brand of watch you wear, the car you ride in, the clothes you wear, how many carats your ring and necklace have, but what you think about, what your brain is occupied with, what grandiose thing you are creating, what you are inspirationally dreaming of! This flow of tempting thoughts arouses the desire to drink another glass of wine. After a few gulps you have the burning desire for Russia to become the first intellectual country in the world. Topics that interest you quickly begin coming into your head—forms of life in organic substances of double spirals, questions about universal gravity during

the self-organization of the Universe, the problems of physical constants, synergy, and global evolution ... At this point Russians should be ahead of everyone on the planet. My fellow countrymen are capable of solving such tasks. But hardly had he finished off the Cabernet than his passionate desire to change the world acquired real expression. The energy of consumerism by means of some mysterious photosynthesis transformed in the Russian into a manicacal thirst for spirituality. Fantasies of luxurious recreation were replaced with a volcanic surge of thought. It seemed that our people now had the driving urge to discover all the secrets of the universe. Happy voices blend together in harmony. Someone calculates the volume of the Universe right in the street. Another group tries to decipher out loud the mystery of the First Bang. Young people heatedly argue about the transport spheres of the Milky Way. A few elderly people dispute loudly about the speeds of the galaxies of the Third Radius ... Wherever you look, whoever you listen to, academic terms sound everywhere. These pictures of daily life in the capital are filled with unprecedented joy. Russia is rising out of the ashes! He wanted to sip some more wine in order to feel this boundless freedom more acutely.

Finally he looked at the clock. The hands showed 7.50. "I'm late for work again," thought Peter Petrovich. "Oh so what. What do I need it for?" He unenthusiastically brushed his teeth, for some reason did not finish shaving, one side of his cheek was still stubbly, and wiped his face and hands with a damp cloth. "Many of my colleagues come to work in suits and ties," reflected Peter Petrovich, "but I couldn't give a damn about my career. Today I am dressing democratically as usual—jeans, a light short-sleeved linen shirt, and sneakers. When I go into the company's building, I want everyone to see that I couldn't care less about discipline. I even want the boss himself to notice I am late. So I slam the door so that the building literally shakes. I let everyone know that Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov has arrived. And is obviously late!" he smirked. "To be honest, I have very often wanted to be fired from work. Even with much pomp and ado, as they say. I like the image of an outcast

much more than my own career and high salary. For I do not see any significant difference between a salary of two thousand dollars and unemployment benefits of two hundred dollars. Both amounts are enough for one night on the town. Well, maybe two. How can you value your job in such conditions? There's no way!"

As soon as he walked into my office, the department secretary rushed up to him, "Petrovich, two ladies from Norway are already waiting for you in the negotiation room. Hurry up. The boss has already asked for you twice..." "At this point, he remembered that he had two business meetings with buyers of the company's products on the agenda today. But that in no way perked him up. So without the least enthusiasm, even rather listlessly, he slumped off to engage in commerce. The two blonds, young women of around thirty, express a desire to buy the company's small ships. Well, good! Why engage in long talks? What else? He remembered they were from Norway. What difference does that make if they have expressed the desire to pay the declared amounts. They can find out the technical specifications by reading the instruction manuals, the prices are given. He had absolutely no desire to ask what waters the ships would be sailing in. Or whether the Norwegians wanted to purchase another batch. They could easily come and visit again. Questions regarding visas are also resolved easily. There is a Russian Consulate in Kirkin. And what was he supposed to talk to Scandinavians about? They have such a small world. What else apart from legends about the Lapland Father Christmas and epic about the Vikings? So he chose the most correct tactic—listen and keep quiet! He did not want to smile either, or they would think he liked them. What's more, the women were not his type. They had almost flat breasts. Their lips seemed to be pumped up with gel. And their behinds were tight, like a fist, there was not anything to grab onto when most needed. All he did was have a cup of coffee with them and began preparing the contract for signing.

"Goodbye, goodbye, barbarian girlies!" he thought to myself as he headed for the toilet. He had been drinking too much liquid since he got up that morning ...

Oh, and now this Greek Iliadis! Why is he taking so long to get to the point? He sweated and huffed and puffed. Heavy eyelids, grey bloodshot eyes, fat, smirking lips, a huge belly covered by a cotton shirt, trembling moist fingers, and his way of showering his partner with questions all aroused disdain in Parfenchikov. “Oh, kirios, give me, give me khrimata*,” he urged. “Then you will get a discount on your shippies. And don’t worry, give it to me here, right in the negotiation room. This is where I am signing the cost of the sale. If you don’t want to, if you don’t believe me, if fear and greed are suffocating you, like a cockroach after a dose of Raptor, then I will give your contract to my colleagues, and they will skin you alive. After all, I am saving you twenty-five thousand dollars for a total of ten percent. Give me two and a half thousand and take your ready contract. Don’t expect another version, there won’t be one. Come on, hurry up! Khrimata okhi, okhi simvolio**.” The Greek muttered something to himself in his irksome voice, then took a fat wad of dollars out of his pocket, counted me off twenty-five hundreds and pushed the rest away again. “Hell,” went through his head, “it is awful humiliation of Peter Petrovich’s honor. Why am I not a sorcerer? I so want to transfer Greek money to my Russian pocket ...”

In the office, he put on a show of getting down to business. He pretended to be looking for customers, briefly surfed the web, leafed through a periodical, supposedly examined the official correspondence. Of course, nothing came into his head. He burned with joy over the extra cash he had earned that was now resting in his jeans pocket. Saying that the residents of his building were being tested for infectious hepatitis and that he had to go for a blood test, he left the office with the feeling of an amnestied prisoner. His soul was striving for heroic feats, while the Greek money was igniting the passion of a playboy. The only thing left was to decide where to go. He wanted something new—people he didn’t know, a

* Kirios – Greek for mister, khrimata – Greek for money

** Greek for “No money, no contract”

vibrant company, exotic drinks, erotic games. After all, what else is life good for? He remembered some information he had fished out of the worldwide web about a new brothel that had opened. The address, to be honest, was not prestigious, somewhere in the Grazhnanki district, on Sophia Kovalevskaya Street built up with five-story apartment buildings. But they promised beautiful, fresh girls. On the screen they look almost chaste. Admittedly, advertising is one thing, while face-to-face acquaintance is another. But still he decided to go and check it out. It was not yet four, so he would be able to take his time looking over the girls and choosing one who suited him. Without further delay, he got into his car and drove off in a southeasterly direction. A law had already come into effect about high fines for traffic violations. He was anxious to get one, to give a traffic warden money, but not in the way most do it, looking around and discretely handing over a bribe. What satisfaction is there in that? He always tried to act openly, slapping the warden on the cheeks and nose with a hundred-dollar bill. Such desperate gestures aroused delight and even an erection. But although he broke nearly every regulation as he drove, he was out of luck—the traffic wardens in the north of the capital just happened to be changing shifts. So he arrived at his destination without being fined. The first floor of the prefab building looked rather gloomy. Only a small sign reading “Massage and more...” indicated that the place was indeed the one he had rushed through the whole city to reach. At his insistent ring, the door was opened by an attractive middle-aged woman who looked like a secondary-school teacher.

“What do you want?” she asked, smiling.

“I want to have some fun with wine, women and song ...”

“How did you find out about us?” she asked me gently, as though I were a schoolchild.

“From the Internet.”

“Come in ... Let me note that we do not accept credit cards.”

“No, no, I have cash. What does your establishment think of dollars?”

“We are happy to accept them for our services ...”

“Then I want to begin making my acquaintance with your services with a glass of Chilean cabernet.”

“This way. Take a seat. What would you prefer—the main room or a separate salon?”

“Evidently to take a look at what you have, I would do better in the main room.”

“Be my guest. But you can also do that in a salon. Each of our personnel will come in to see you in turn.”

He sat down in an armchair, “And how many are there?”

“Fourteen, but three ladies are occupied.”

“In that case, I will accept your offer and go immediately to a salon. And one more thing, don’t bring me a glass of wine or even a bottle. Bring me two at once. And I would also like some parmesan and olives.”

“We will do everything at the highest level. You will be happy. Excuse me, but we have our own procedures. You must first leave a deposit in the till. The minimum amount is one thousand dollars. If you want to receive business class services, you will need to make a two-thousand-dollar deposit. What do you choose?”

“Business class!” he exclaimed pulling Iliadias’ remuneration out of his pocket and counting out two thousand dollars.

“Go into salon number four. Make yourself at home. In a few minutes, our pleasure expert will bring a guest card and receipt for your deposit. What name can I enter your deposit in? You can use a pseudonym.”

“Peter Korablev! Yes, yes, that’s what it must be!”

“Have fun. You may choose your own companion. Please use this right at your utmost discretion. Our establishment is distinguished by a high level of service.” The “teacher” smiled sweetly, as though about to give him a good grade, and closed the door of the salon behind her.

The atmosphere in the suite was quite tolerable. He had barely made himself comfortable on the bed when a young girl came in. “Welcome to our little nest,” she said, handing him several sheets of paper on a tray. “Why are you wearing a gown? And so tightly

fastened?" he asked. She had a very pleasant face, he was not at all irritated by it. "Please, I am willing to take it off. But that is a service. It costs twenty dollars and a glass of Chablis costing ten dollars." "This is something new," the thought flashed through his head. "Okay," he said. "So you want me to take off my gown?" she asked him again a bit too loudly. "Yes-yes! I want to look at your figure. Otherwise I can't see anything." While he thought to himself that they were probably recording what he said. That's the kind of people they are. They need proof. "I have a wonderful figure!" the lady said as she threw off the gown, her eyes glistened, and she licked her lips with her tongue. She really was very lovely. He instantly felt an erection. He wanted to take a closer look at her hair, but it was tied up in a bun. "Let your hair down. What is it like. I can only see that you are blond."

"As you wish. That service costs thirty dollars and a glass of Veuve Clicquot for twenty."

"Okay!"

"So you want me to let my hair down?"

He already understood that this was their way of doing things and confirmed, "Yes, yes, let it down!" With her hair down she looked like a real sex bomb. He so wanted to pull her into bed. "Tell me, what's your name?"

"I can give you my nickname for free. My name is Ka!"

"What do you mean Ka? That's all?"

"Ka is free. It you want to know my full name you will have to pay fifty dollars and buy me a Firebird cocktail for thirty dollars."

"Listen, Ka, first bring me some Chilean wine. Your fees are too much for my sober head to get around. We haven't done anything yet, but already ... Bring me some cabernet. I want a drink."

"A different girl will bring you the wine. I will call her ..." She pressed a button and girl of rare beauty came into the salon, also wrapped in a gown with her dark hair tied in a bun. She was carrying a basket of wine. "So we begin again?" he thought. "One bottle of Chilean cabernet costs one hundred and fifteen dollars. Shall I open it?" "Come on, hurry up." He thought that the least he could

do was to get her to take off that damned gown. Then he could choose. Her face was perfect, but her body? After drinking down a glass of wine, he immediately commanded, "Take off your gown!"

"My services cost fifty dollars plus a glass of Moet champagne for forty dollars."

He drank some more and nodded, "Okay!" Hardly had she taken off the gown than he jumped from erotic shock. And after the girl let down her hair for seventy dollars and a glass of XO Hennessy, he shouted out resolutely, "Ka, goodbye! I want to be with your friend!"

As soon as Ka left the room, he immediately drank another glass of wine and demanded that the girl tell him her name. For a hundred dollars, the girl said her name was Alla. He had never liked that name, but so what? She was fabulous. After he drank some more wine, he threw off his shirt and demanded that she take off her bra. "That service costs two hundred dollars. Do you want me to take off my bra?"

"Yes, yes, to hell with it." The cabernet and the thought of having sex with this girl were making his head spin. Her breast looked like a pink peeled pomelo. He felt like a piece of bark being drawn to her by the incredible force of a raging mountain river. But at that moment someone knocked at the door and a true goddess came in. Graciously with a charming virtuous smile, she brought him a tray bearing china plates of parmesan and olives. She was not wearing a gown, but was in lacy underwear with flowing silky hair that came down to her slim waist. Her ripe supple breasts were of some wondrous form. Her blue eyes sparkled like diamonds. He had never seen anything more beautiful in his life. After taking another drink, and feverishly pulling off he pants, he shouted, "Take off your bra. Immediately!" Alla instantly disappeared, while the goddess asked, "You want me to take off my bra? I will do it with pleasure for one thousand dollars, Mister Korablev!"

"Okay! Take it off and come to me ..." At that moment he heard a voice over the intercom. "Mister Korablev! Your deposit has run out. If you want to continue, you need to make another down payment of five thousand dollars!"

He did not immediately understand whom the voice was addressing. Only later did he remember that he was Korablev. The gorgeous girl held out a china dish. "The office is waiting for a deposit," she demanded, a charming smile glistening on her lips.

"But I only have a little more than five hundred dollars ..." he groaned in complaint.

"Then goodbye." She silently vanished from the room leaving him in a state of desperate stimulation. As soon as she left, two muscled strongmen appeared in the room. "Mister Korablev! Drink up your wine and leave the salon. You have ten minutes. We will come and escort you out. It has been a pleasure serving you ..."

When they left, he had no other choice but to go into the bathroom and evoke an orgasm under his own devices. Of course, masturbation was poor comfort. But what else can you do when your supple organ threatens to rip out your pocket? It's a tragedy when you don't have enough money for the small joys of life. He blamed damned Iliadis for everything ... he should have made him cough up ten thousand dollars! Could he really call that a job? Ugh! Scum! Rubbish! Irritated, he went out into the street, got into his car and, cursing, finished drinking the wine straight from the bottle. The alcohol quite quickly calmed him down.

A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

I woke up, shuddered from the click of the train wheels, and began slowly returning to reality. I was immediately overcome by the smell of garlic. There is nothing worse than getting a nervous shock instead of enjoying the morning rebound from yesterday's euphoria. Opening my eyes, I saw two plump ladies sitting at the carriage table, both chewing, their mouths full, on cold cuts, bread and garlic. A more repugnant picture upon awakening with withdrawal symptoms was hard to imagine. I looked at them with outright disgust, having no idea what to do to rid myself of their company. My passionate desire to transport myself as quickly as possible from reality to the fantasies of my fuzzy imagination forced me to pick up a spoon and stick it into the bag of dope. At such repulsive moments, I wished I had superhuman powers to prevent myself from experiencing withdrawal. I pulled the sheet over my head and in addition to the opiates keeping me intoxicated added another three spoonfuls of the wondrous substance. After this, I immediately went on looking for a solution. This required putting the mind to great lengths to get rid of the fat ladies and the awful smell. At first this insignificant desire that every Russian capable of fantasizing experiences when disappointed seemed unpromising. I was simply irritated and wistfully wondering how I could move the train carriage scenario to a far corner of my mind in the hope that the picture would stop pestering me with its vulgarity. I could come up with nothing else. While waiting for the opium to take effect, I even lost heart for a few minutes and admonished myself for my impatience. But suddenly, as the poppy began to open up in my stomach and its wondrous energy spread through the labyrinth of veins and capillaries, something unexpected, untoward, and even perfidious crept into my mind, arousing extreme surprise. This disturbing thought became visible in the expression on my face. I suddenly wanted to direct my flighty passion toward complete dehumanization of

myself in order to become an absolute monster. I immediately imagined that it would be good not simply to be able to remove someone or something, but to acquire the unearthly power to completely destroy anything I felt like. Yes-yes! Nothing less! What a thing to enter Peter Petrovich's inflamed head! Just a minute ago, I would have never believed such a thing possible. "If this thought is born of opium intoxication, it has excellent prospects for unprecedented boldness," went through my head. Suddenly I wanted to destroy absolutely everything I could get my hands on. And not even do it myself, but also tell someone about my desire to do this and have it immediately carried out!

This utterly unexpected idea made me cry out joyfully from under the sheet, "Oh, I want it! Oh, I dream of it! Oooh! If I am going to make a stab at something, then it should naturally be something very unusual and daring!" I liked the fact that the koknar had finally begun to powerfully expand the boundaries of my mind. The carriage with the women disappeared without a trace. I saw myself on a small podium in the middle of a huge exhibition in the MAX-2008 International Airspace Salon. I was not strolling among the chalets of corporations and companies, I was not standing beside an air acrobat-MIG-35 bomber with a variable engine thrust vector, I was not sitting at the steering wheel of a YAK-130 attack bomber, on the suspension carriage of which hung bombs, or in the cockpit of a SU-35 equipped with missiles, rather I was sitting ceremoniously in a magnificent armchair in my own exhibit section surrounded by an arborvitae of nursery plants. Above me hung an enormous sign with the inscription: "Peter Parfenchikov, Russian. I destroy targets anywhere in the world. Your wish is my command!" Picturing this scene sent me into intellectual ecstasy. I was ready to discuss and take delight in my super capabilities. Nothing existed any more beyond the boundaries of my opium-enriched mind—my own personal world had become the world of the entire Universe. The public read the announcement with interest, people looked me over with a smile, but no one had yet come up and engaged me in conversation. The order log did not bear a single blemish. I was

sunning all by myself in the Moscow suburb of Zhukovsky and contemplating sipping a glass of chilled kvass. Finally, a middle-aged man came up to me. He was not very tall, skinny, and sported a sparse beard. "I am not interested in other people's secrets, but please may I ask a few questions," he said, addressing me politely. "Could I be introduced to Peter Parfenchikov?"

I did not deny myself the pleasure of introducing myself. Standing up, I held out my hand. "You are talking to him in person. With whom do I have the pleasure?"

"Pismarchik. Vladimir Pismarchik."

"How can I help you?" I asked leisurely.

"How should your advertisement be understood? Figuratively? Or do you destroy targets on a game computer?"

"No-no. I am carrying out orders in real time, I take on real targets and physically eliminate any object, regardless of criminal codes. What can Parfenchikov be accused of, after all? I destroy everything I want to, but not with the help of the airplanes, missiles, and bombs displayed at this exhibition. I do not rely on dynamite, hexogen, or fougasse, but target the object with the incredible destructive energy of thought. So there is no and cannot be any proof of my guilt. Who knows what might go through a person's head. Boldness is not a reprehensible act today in Russia!"

"I find it very hard to believe, dear Mr. Parfenchikov, that you are capable of such a thing. Would you like to demonstrate your amazing talents?"

"Be my guest, since you ask. In a second, I will destroy all your clothing. You will be naked. Are you ready?"

"Destroy my clothes? That easily, with a click of your fingers? With a few dapper words from an Oriental fairytale? Ha-ha-ha! You are crazy! What else can I call you? That's what everyone thinks!" Pismarchik looked back at the crowd of amused visitors who had gathered around the stand. He was almost bent double with laughter. Disdain could be read in his nasty look. I was hurt. The temptation to immediately manifest my extraordinary capabilities intensified. I looked closely at the crowd with a wildly beating heart. I

gasped for breath in my trepidation. A feeling of malice prompted me to act. “Mr. Pismarchik’s clothes are destroyed!” I announced in a loud voice. I could have just made them vanish in my mind, but I wanted a spectacle and to hear the shouts of the amazed onlookers. And I got what I wanted—before me stood an absolutely naked Pismarchik with his eyes popping out of his head! He sheepishly covered his genitals with a flower pot and looked around as though insane. It seemed as though the poppy heads were laughing along with me.

“What did you do?” he asked, first in a whisper and then louder and louder. “Put my clothes back on! I do not want to be a laughing stock! I said, put my clothes back on now!” In his extreme perturbation, Pismarchik did not know what to do. But I was satisfied, more than that, I was overcome with delight. I felt with my whole heart the crazy enjoyment that comes with being able to be a superman.

“You asked for proof, Mr. Pismarchik! There you go! Be convinced! Be convinced! The proof is very significant. But to recreate what I destroyed is not, I am sorry to say, something I promised. I don’t have that kind of program yet. Farewell, doubting Thomas! I will no longer lift a finger for you!”

The crowd rushed toward my stand with shouts and screams. Some asked hysterically how much one order cost. Some grabbed my hands and began kissing them. Someone else fell down on their knees. A young man, grabbing hold of my trousers, plaintively begged me to destroy the entire road traffic inspection service once and for all.

“Anyone who begins working in that damned establishment should be shot on the spot. Please. We can’t go on this way...”

“Kill all fire inspectors. Save Russia. They are suffocating us with their fees. I beg you...” sobbed a plump blonde woman.

“Blow up the immigration service!” wailed a healthy red-faced man. “Destroy those blood-suckers! They take workers away from my construction site every day to check their documents. They can’t find fault with their registration, but they continue to take

away the same people in order to extort money from me. This perfidy violates the construction schedule. I am losing money! Drop bombs on that gang of swindlers!”

At this point, a squeaky female voice was heard, “Mr. Parfenchikov, you are our hope! Send all the inspectors from the Russian Consumer Surveillance Office to the graveyard. They are monsters! Genderless beings who experience orgasms from taking bribes. They are suffocating us! There is no bringing them to justice!” The petitioner’s reddened face was twitching with emotion.

A group of strong men boomed out in unison, “Strike a fatal blow to the construction inspection office. What nasty people they are—like cockroaches and rats, they can hide in the dark corners of basements. Don’t miss now. Exterminate them all to the very last one! The state couldn’t give a damn about their tyranny! You at least can save us! Squash those scoundrels!”

“Flush all judges down the toilet. They are destroying the country with their across-the-board corruptibility,” another group of citizens carrying an enormous board cried out. Several young people insistently demanded that television be closed down and all journalists be sent to Moscow’s No. 1 Psychiatric Hospital. I was seized with pity and fright. I feared I would not have the power to perform this great project to rid my fellow countrymen of all the bureaucratic parasites and media sharks. I instantly came to my senses, took up my bag of powdered poppy, swallowed down two more dry spoonfuls and began waiting for renewed strength to flow into me. It was no longer enough for me to hear and reflect on the world around me as billions of people today do, particularly those who sit in front of their television sets. I wanted much more—to feel it, think about it, improve it. And *that most important thing* helped me wondrously in this matter. For in order to get hooked on opium, you had to have an expansive soul and an ironically inclined mind. My present life, however, was directed only inward, toward the fantastical state of my subconscious. And it has an incredible number of different floors, whimsical characters hide in its many corners, the outlines of fantastical themes peek out from behind every door, and

manuscript texts just beg to be discovered. So now I was sure that the additional energy of the opiates would inflame my mind, arouse in me a new radical power capable in an instant of destroying all of these rogues. For the most terrible misunderstandings that penetrate all present social doctrines say that people should not be killed, no matter how grossly they violate the laws of coexistence. Well I'll be darned! Ha! Ha! Ha! But how can human nature be changed for the better? Where can we expect renewal remedies to come from? Can we expect them to come tumbling down from the sky? But religion has long gone bankrupt, it took one-and-a-half thousand years for the mind to begin taking a disparaging view of the divine scriptures, and it could not be otherwise. How long can we believe in miracles? And not only external ones, about which there is a whole squall of antiscientific statements, but also internal? For example, the statement that says people can make qualitative changes to their spiritual credo with the help of theological texts. Supposedly the scrolls of the Bible differ from all other texts in their divine power. Logically, this is precisely how it should be. After all, if the holy books really are the word of God, these texts have to have some wonderworking power that changes human essence. But has the history of Christianity proven by even one iota the divine energy of these sources? Are there men of wisdom today capable of insisting on this or scientifically proving the fantasy envisaged by the primogenitors? Of course a few will be found, let's say one or two percent of the entire population, but not masses of people! And the masses are what count. If He created everyone, that is, and not just some select group. At this point, I remembered my friend Tairov, who asked me not to ask him tricky questions relating to religion. "Do not ask me about that, my faith is still weak! You must understand that I do not want to hear anything that might place my religious convictions in doubt..."

"But you have been spending day and night in church for forty years. You read the Gospels and the Old Testament. I think those are the only books you read, you haven't even opened the Apocalypses. Why is your Christianity only skin deep? Do you mean to say that

you read and listen to the words of God without the proper application? Forgetfully? Inattentively, with a feeble mind? Or do they not have any power? In response to all my disputed passages all I hear are your sweeping or empty responses, or hysterical exclamations, 'Leave me alone, I am still weak...' To hell with him, that Tairov, I said to myself. One thing is clear, all of these holy texts are one big literary fabrication! They have not only stopped having an influence on my convictions, and did they ever have an influence? They no longer have an effect on culture. Only people weak in spirit turn to God for illusory help, while actually rarely expecting any real effect. Carried on from generation to generation by momentum, so to speak. While everyone understands in their soul that nothing will come of it, but on the off chance? How can someone be of sober mind, if indeed they have a mind and ask for help, understanding that seven billion other people are also asking for it? It's all a load of rubbish, absolute rubbish ... Why not destroy human voodoo? After all, weeds can be pulled up! Without weeding, humankind will turn into parasites and ultimately become extinct. And this process is already obvious. Take me for example! Who was I in the recent past? A scumbag, scumbag! I want to put the past through the meat grinder with a wave of the hand, tear the clumsily lived years off the calendar. So I can say that I was born the first time I took opium. This has become the guiding light of my present life. If my biological father is Peter Parfenchikov, my spiritual father is Poppy Opiatovich Koknar. What am I without him? Parfenchikov multiplied by zero! Zero! Only this fabulous plant has given me genuine life ..."

At this point I realized that I had promised the public to destroy all bureaucrats. After assuming the pose of an agricultural specialist looking for cultivation defects in nursery plants incurred by unintelligent students, I commanded with inspiration and without the risk of disappointing myself that all road inspectors, building inspectors, Russian Consumer Surveillance auditors, the entire corps of judges, immigration officers, sanitary doctors, all precinct policemen, firemen, Duma deputies and senators, as well as

journalists be flushed in a state of paralysis down the toilet so that they could never crawl out again. Destroy them, strike them dead with the bite of a scorpion, send them to the graveyard!

“Hurrah! Hurrah! Bravo! Finally! We’re done with the bureaucracy!” screamed and screeched the crowd. Incidentally, these people had also begun arousing my antipathy lately. At some point it even flashed through my mind, why not send them the same way? But suddenly, through the boom of gratitude, the clicking of train wheels reached me. This insistent sound distracted me and, after waking fully, I found myself lying with my legs pulled up to my chin on the bunk in my carriage. The seizures that had insistently come to me recently disappeared altogether. The world of my imagination fell away. I was overcome by a deep sense of shame. For I have always preferred the imaginings of a flighty mind to tangible reality, because no physical pain is capable of touching a soul enraptured by opium ...

It was light, but my neighbors were sleeping. Sonorous snoring came from the top bunk. I looked faintheartedly out of the window at the despondent familiar landscape—sparse trees growing along the tracks with a carpet of yellow tulip-like flowers around them. I instantly recalled how they tasted, could taste their roots on my lips, dug up and eaten as a child, which brought me abruptly back to my thoughts about poppy head. Incidentally, my thoughts were immediately interrupted, and I noticed a milestone—1,463. At that moment, I had fully returned to my senses. “Another 1,376 kilometers to Kan,” flashed through my head. I praised myself for my ability to perform an instant mathematical calculation. Then it came to me that it was precisely spoonfuls of powdered poppy, their constant addition and multiplication, concern there would not be enough, or caution not to overdo it so as not to fall into a coma that constantly stimulated me to engage in arithmetical exercises. I was constantly having to count how much I had taken, how much time had passed since the last dose, and how long this divine flower would last, regularly making a detailed inventory of the remainder. And I had to keep all these figures in my head. Imperceptibly and extremely

quickly I fell again into a state of anticipation of the next dose of *that very thing*. My imagination dulled, my mind stopped pulsating with memories, and my reason ebbed away. I needed to take a refresher, perk myself up, rouse myself with phantasmagoric thoughts. Living without them was entirely insufferable. Wasting no more time, I hurriedly swallowed five spoonfuls of powdered poppy head, took a bite from a cookie lying on a plate, drank it down with some cold tea the conductor had evidently left and, after flopping down on my flat pillow, covered myself with my sheet in anticipation of the onset. “Now the koknar will open up faster, starchy foods stimulate digestion,” I thought, closing my eyes. The energy discharged by the opium breakdown soon inflamed my conscience, and my mind became enswathed in rapture. But at this juncture I was visited by a certain humiliating vision. I swore several times in the hope it would disappear. Then I thumped myself on the head, assuring myself that I could knock all this stupidity out of it. But nothing happened. Then I began pinching and biting myself, thinking that the pain would switch my brain to other visions. At some point I even began shouting that I had the strength and repeated this wild cry several times. But no, nothing worked, nothing helped. The horrible picture stood stubbornly before my eyes, stuck to me like a leech. Someone else might have been elated by such enticement, but not I. However, there was nothing I could do about it and incessantly became immersed in the sexual arousal that ran riot within me. I imagined I was kissing the full breasts of some girl I hardly knew. The thing was that I could never remember faces. I might not know her at all, she could be an image designed on the computer and then hung on an advertizing billboard. But this was not so much what irritated me, as my inability to curb my lowdown lust. I was increasingly drawn to the breasts of this woman, or perhaps even of some phantom, ghost. I became even more immersed in her than in my inflamed opium world. I stroked her with a sweet enjoyment that I never experienced when pressing yellow poppy heads to my heart. I became intoxicated by her nipples with more self-abandon and detachment than I felt for teaspoons of the

bronze-colored weed. I was filled with much greater satisfaction from the aroma of these wondrous nipples than from the magical smells of opium poppy milk. I was drowning in a whirlpool of unprecedented sensations. This is what amazed me, this is what made me see red—a female breast was captivating me much more than the opiates that had become my reason for being. With some inexplicable force, she pulled me further and further, cancelling out our mutual purpose. No! No! I just could not allow this! For Peter Parfenchikov to betray his great savior? Never! It would be better to do away with myself, not live any more, than experience such treachery from my own body. Evidently I was not myself from intense intoxication. But I entirely unexpectedly began taking delight in my suffering, and the more I tormented myself with erotic feelings, the less I was able to resist them. Subordinating myself to reason, I nevertheless forced myself to swallow a few spoonfuls of powdered poppy, drank them down with cold tea, after which I curled up on my bunk and covered my head tightly with the sheet. Almost immediately, I felt as though I was on a merry-go-round. It began turning faster and faster. I felt as though I were a piece of dough, or some other biomass, rising in a pan, which I could for some reason observe from above, whereby my eye looked like a loosely screwed bolt. “What sort of strangeness is this?” I wondered. “Some kind of nonsense.” At that moment, everything unexpectedly disappeared, and I turned into the suntanned female breast covered in small beads of sweat that I had recently been kissing with such abandon. My small penis became a nipple from which a thin stream of opium poppy milk that looked like sperm flowed. My heart beat in excitement—I so wanted to quickly lick up this liquid, but, unfortunately, my tongue had utterly disappeared. I was thinking I would draw this tempting liquid into me with my nose, but it disappeared too. And Peter Petrovich himself had become transformed and looked extremely absurd. How could I explain to myself why I had suddenly become a nipple from which a substance that excited the mind was flowing? “What a pity,” I thought bitterly. “I had to become seduced by erotica to turn into its attribute! It looks as though

an overdose is to blame ... Yes-yes, I've had too much! The poppy is strong, it warps the mind, fills the conscience with illusions! There is no other explanation for such a metamorphosis. I was worried about those awful spasms of nausea beginning again, like they used to sometimes. The bitter lump in my throat intensified the premonition. My eyes rolled out of their orbits from the suppressed spasms and, it seems, like plastic balls, rolled under the bed. In order to fight my fear, not see anything, not hear anything, not feel and not wait, I turned to the wall and tightly screwed up my eyes in perturbation. As though deceiving my sight could save me from my bad presentiment. Where did such an idea come from? Terribly stupid! Nevertheless, I was able to go off into oblivion, delight had apparently tightly enveloped all my organs. Dreams, hallucinations, and thoughts left my brain. For some time, I entirely lost myself. "My energy is running out!" I thought. My body scrunched up and I fell into oblivion ...

I was awoken by a hysterical voice. The carriage was empty, the door into the corridor was open. Some unknown man standing with his back to me was shouting into a cell phone. "... Yes stop the train, do you hear? What am I supposed to do, truck back eighty kilometers? Give them a thousand dollars, but have the train stop for a minute at Valov. To hell with the schedule. You think this is the first time? What else does he need the administrative resource for? And where is he? Then offer it to the station superintendent. Tell him to switch on the red light. Tell him that if he refuses to take the thousand and doesn't let me off, I punch him in the face, screw his daughter and wife, and put his son in army fatigues and send him to a hot spot. And burn his house to the ground. Hello, hello, hello, do you hear me? Shit, I got cut off ... Those asses at MTS can't spread their network nationwide. Hello, hello? Hey, conductor, are you in touch with the engine driver? Are you listening?"

"Yes, yes, I'm here! What are you getting so het up about? I'll stop the train for you for eight hundred dollars ... You want me to?"

"How?"

“I’ll give the people in the second carriage two hundred with orders to pull the emergency brake toward them one third just as we enter the station. I’ll leave another two hundred dollars for the emergency brake to be let off two thirds at the very same moment. And I’ll give another two hundred to the carriage before the last, the fourteenth, so they let the brake off completely. And our train will stop dead ...”

“But won’t the train turn over?”

“No, we’ve got it down to a tee. You’re not the only one who asks. Ha-ha! And I’ll have to give the chief of station police two hundred so he doesn’t start an investigation. No one will know, it’s cheaper, and your wish has been fulfilled. You’ll need to get ready, we’ll be at Valov soon. So are you game? Count off eight hundred with the well-known face in the oval frame ...”

Evidently the guy paid up the exact amount and the exchange went smoothly, because I heard, “Well, I’ll be off then ... And you get ready.”

“A country of boundless possibilities,” I thought. “Maybe I should also dream about something like *that*? Shouldn’t I hurry to do it before the euphoria has set in, for it would be pretentious to give myself over to nonsensical fantasies? After all, we in Russia have been taught to take everything we want ... But if the purse is empty and the passion for money has waned, the success of my incredible plan could be attained some other way, including by playing with my rich imagination. What other way can I satisfy my own ambition in the era of out-and-out consumption?”

I stood up, tightly closed the door of the carriage, and wanted to take a few more spoonfuls of poppy powder. However, I summoned up enough willpower to stop myself so that the new reality emerged not somewhere in the corridors of my opium mind, but in the sober head of Peter Petrovich. But he was unable to give free rein to his fantasies—quite unexpectedly, Professor Koshmarov appeared again before his eyes. The balding bespectacled man with bright blue veins on his pug nose literally ran into the carriage, sat down on the free bunk opposite and hurriedly, with a kind of

desperation, began, “Mr. Parfenchikov, I would like to inform you that *up there* a decision has been made to offer you two civilian states for conducting the experiments on implementing the national project. You can either become a prison chief from That Party, or put on the striped uniform of a convict from This Party and take up residence in the isolation cell of a prison for extremely dangerous prisoners. I must urgently tell them *up there* what your decision is so they can adopt a resolution. You have no more than a minute to decide. This is an urgent matter! People are waiting!”

“You have rightly flabbergasted me ... I had no intention even in my wildest dreams of occupying any government posts and never even considered prison,” I retorted in alarm. “I am headed for Kan to engage in crop breeding. I am taking well-known seed with me ... But what do you suggest? Couldn’t I refuse altogether, write a letter of thanks to them *up there*? I’ve even drawn up a vegetative plan for the Kan fields, scheduled the harvests, made a list of the tools I need to buy ...” I added in extreme confusion.

“No! No! Come on now! I don’t have the right to give advice on this issue. Choose! And as quickly as possible!”

“What should I do?” I asked myself aloud. Placing his palm to my ear, Koshmarov whispered, “Oh what the hey, I’ll give you some advice. You are not a very literate person, and the work of a prison chief is painstaking and even public to some extent. You could quickly expose yourself as an ignoramus. Agree to being a prisoner. It will be much easier for you to serve your term than organize protection of such a complex facility as a prison and maintain exemplary discipline in it. I will tell them that you have agreed to be a prisoner and are ready to be transported to Razuev Central.”

“But what kind of organization is This Party?”

“What difference does it make? Ordinary people dreaming of power ... There are tons of people like that in our country today.”

“What goal is it trying to achieve by placing me on a higher order in the slammer? And what is this strange national project in the isolation cell of a maximum security prison?”

“Peter Petrovich, my dear, you are showing your complete

ignorance. All you need to know is that all Russian evolutionary projects—scientific, technical, or social—have come into being in prisons. Even though you are someone without a classical education and with little to show in such scholarly subjects, you do have a very good imagination. By the way, I know very well where it comes from and with the help of which substance you manage to so diligently feed it. Do not worry, you will have plenty of it *there*, whereby of impeccable quality. Koknar? Pooh! That’s proletarian poppy powder! It can only be compared with home-brewed liquor. Whereas *there* you will be provided with unlimited supplies of elite purified opium similar to a diamond of blue water. Or to the very best *Bolshoi!* vodka brewed from the best grades of wheat and filtered five times from reconstituted oils. Oh! That is what excites my mind! However, each to his own, as they say. You will be dressed in a robe of cheap cotton, but warm enough. You’ll be given a jacket and tarpaulin boots, as well as a place in a solitary-confinement cell.”

“What, does each prisoner have his own cell?” I asked in surprise.

“No, but you will have your own ...”

“The other inmates will begin envying me and decide that I am a rich man who has bought a single room for himself and conflicts will arise ... But I don’t have the body or muscles to fight back ... No, I think then it would be better to be in a common cell ...”

“Don’t be in such a rush! I will give you a batch of special pills that will cause you to have constipation and terrible flatulence all the time. The inmates themselves will ask for you to be moved out ... And how will you be able to take your opium with an audience? But without it the experiment makes no sense, and you will refuse to participate in it. For without *that very thing* you won’t be able to ...”

At this point an entirely stupefying thought came into my head, “There is something I don’t get, what state am I in? Am I euphoric or in withdrawal? That is, dreaming or awake? Seems I haven’t taken any poppy for a while, but everything going on in my head is

more like hallucination. Or am I not coming out of my intoxication and this is my natural state? Eternal opium bondage? Or perhaps *it* has stopped having an effect on me, and now I am imprisoned in reality? After all, vodka does not make alcoholics drunk, it only dehumanizes them. Seems the same thing is happening to me—the abstention syndrome is intensifying the sense of reality. I could swear that Professor Koshmarov is not a ghost, not a figment of Peter Petrovich’s sick imagination, but a real person sitting opposite me. He is ultimately imposing a national project I don’t understand, but apparently Russia today is full of ideas like that. It all seems crazy, but in fact it makes the most profound sense. I think I’ll agree to the professor’s offer. Of course, allowing a stink to come from my own flesh certainly does not flatter my charming idea of myself, but for the sake of the national good I will have to agree to my own humiliation. Even stooping as low as to emit a jet of disgusting gas. But I think for the qualitative improvement of the experiment results it would be better for me to join the two offers into one. I need to tell Koshmarov that I am willing to accept the entire set of experiments. One day I will be the prison chief and the next a prisoner in a maximum security prison kept in a solitary-confinement cell. In that event, without knowing the subject of the research, but understanding the gist of events, I can hope, purely intuitively, for the success of this noble undertaking.

After telling the professor my final decision, I asked, “Dear Mr. Koshmarov, what is the subject of the research? What aspect of the relations between these two people—official and convict—are the organizers of the experiment interested in?”

“My friend, you know that I have the capacity to see into the future and at times even create it. Recently I had an argument with the highest representatives of This Party. I upheld the rather banal point of view that the genetic program inherent in it primarily influences the behavior mentality of any animal, including people. If the mind is formed by drilling propaganda into it, this will produce a low-quality product. My opponents desperately tried to prove the opposite, saying that man behaves according to his propaganda-induced

worldview, as well as under the influence of the reality around him. Traces of the Bolshevik idea of reason and belief in the efficacy of propagandistic work can be seen in this hypothesis. I see that This Party dreamed of reviving the ideological attacks on the citizens of its homeland, without fully understanding the entire inconsequence of the attempts to change the mind using media assets. So we agreed to carry out research. I leave you the way you are and the way you could be in these two roles. They, on the other hand, apparently intend to influence you with the help of the most diverse contrivances. The arsenal of factors of influence is extremely wide: the entire government is at your service. Yes, incidentally, how did you like the previous experiment? When I injected the blood of several nationalities into you? It was great wasn't it? I regularly observed your behavior and derived great satisfaction. What about you?"

"Not bad, but next time I would like to suggest a different cocktail. I understand that you are working on creating a new Russian gene type."

"That's right!"

"Not a bad idea. It is high time we were improved, our ethnicity has become stuck in a mire. All everyone does is strive for power, money, and sex. We need to interfere. So I am ready for new experiments."

"Splendid. So shall we begin?" he looked at me not without doubt.

"I think so... Only on the condition that I will always have enough opium..." I began slowly sinking into my own depths...

... They fell on me from the ceiling, quickly made their way under my prison jacket, settled down on the barely perceptible protrusions of my chest and, making no noise at all, drew blood from me. I did not feel anything, I only understood that they were busy. It should be said that I was long used to the status of victim, and this, what might seem a humiliating fact from the outside, did not arouse any protest in me. "Of course, mites drink blood, what is unusual or even annoying about that, after all, everyone else drinks it too," I reflected. "Be they prison wardens, surveillance prosecu-

tors, judges, or lawyers... You think the press doesn't drink it? Hinsteins, Mralauls, for example? They all pull at the veins, lapping up, some in drops, some in great swallows, the blue blood of Peter Parfenchikov. Seems I was born for other people to enjoy, and my veins are also enticing—their blue lines on my pale body arouse a vicious appetite in many. Sometimes they undress me when there is a jail shakedown and roll such passionate eyes over my emaciated body and prod me with such trepidation that it makes me unwittingly and fundamentally convinced that not only bedbugs are interested in my blood. Another alternative is possible—they don't want to admit they are poppy slaves, so they nurture fond hopes that no one will notice their opium dependence. But is my blood not opiate? Is it not capable of exciting the mind? Even the bedbugs lap it up for fifteen or twenty minutes and then, exerting their last strength, jump down to the ground and lie as though dead in euphoria for more than a day. Understanding their state, I try to walk around them. But when there are so many of them that there is no place left to walk, I take a sheet of paper and push their drug-induced bodies under the bed so as not to squash them by mistake. They may be parasites, but they are living creatures after all, and as stubborn as life. I wonder how much blood they take from me? Five or ten grams? Am I going to begrudge them so little? And if I don't treat them, who is going to share their food with them? People in prisons are cruel, they are not used to being sentimental. Empathizing with a living creature who sucks your own blood does not have much going for it. A heel, fist, rock, harsh word will put an end to encroachment on any form of property once and for all. My cell is called bedbug heaven. These creatures have taken a real fancy to it. And I like it too. At least I have someone to talk to in my solitude. Otherwise I might totally turn sour. Admittedly, the opium I have now is impeccable, two spoonfuls keep me going and inspire me the whole day. And if I want to go totally crazy, I can take three spoonfuls and literally float in the clouds. It tenderly and adoringly exhorts dependence and conquers, enslaves with its delight. In the interludes, during withdrawal, I want to grumble at someone with-

out any malicious intent or throw some untargeted and endearing words around. They are echoed and my heart warms. This is a purely human state after all. Nevertheless, everything human is becoming more and more alien to me. And how can it be otherwise? The time spent locked up takes its toll. A new prison superintendent was appointed recently. He has exactly the same name as me—he is also Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov! And some strange revival has been going on in the slammer, not so much among the prisoners as among the staff. Whereby it was precisely the new superintendent that ruffled the calm. As an active member of This Party, he began forming a party cell in solitary confinement. There is already talk that soon we inmates are going to be drawn into party life. We too are needed for some special national mission. I couldn't care less, you are not going to tempt me with anything from *that* life, I have become totally alienated from reality and nothing, apart from the derivative of poppy head, can interest me. But the new superintendent has managed to arouse an unprecedented interest in party activity in the wardens. They have these nonsensical feelings not as a reaction to some departmental circulations, secret resolutions, decrees, or leading articles in the federal press, but under the influence of the superintendent's gift of the gab, his phenomenal, hypnotic ability to convince. This is what has prompted the radical change in relations between the prisoners and wardens, whereby perhaps also in the whole of society beyond the prison walls, which I have absolutely no interest in ...

The deadbolt rumbled, the key clanked, the door opened, and on the threshold appeared block warden Neelov.

"Enough feeding the bedbugs," he began with the look of someone who has had his best feelings insulted. "Get up! A new life is beginning. Get used to it, otherwise you won't make it! From now on you are going to have to financially support our party organization. What can you do? Only don't tell me tales about how poor you are. We know all about your big spending sprees around town. How much will you give?"

"Boss," I sniffled. "I give fifteen dollars a month as it is, how

can I increase the payment while I am locked up? What money can Parfenchikov have if he has been sitting for seven years already in a closed prison?"

"You are forbidden from saying that name. Your cell is number 57! So call yourself that—fifty-seven. And what am I going to do with your pennies? American currency is constantly losing value. 400 rubles ... What a joke! If the money isn't in the party kitty by this Thursday, I will have to put you in the dungeon. Then even lower, in a heavy security cell. There you will rot ... Give us the money, fifty-seven, and stop wagging your tongue!" The threat of a heavy security cell had a severely defeating effect on me. I made a new attempt to defend myself.

"Hey, boss, there are a hundred and twenty convicts on our floor, and more than a thousand in the whole slammer. If you get fifteen from each on our first floor alone, that's one thousand and eight hundred dollars a month. They say that some give you even more. So you have quite a cushy life. You get all your clothing and footwear, food and medical services, laundry and wages from the government. And you draw a ton of money from us on top of that. You have enough to go on holiday down south, and my family provides you with somewhere to sleep and feeds you for free when you are in the capital. You, boss, are a true local oligarch. Don't you think it's enough? What more money do you need? You want me to deprive my old mother of her entire pension? What is she supposed to live on? And prices are going up as it is ..."

"Stop giving me the run-around, you hear? You are supposed to put two hundred dollars in the party kitty every month. Where you get it from is your problem. If you can't pay, there'll be no normal conditions, fifty-seven, you'll perish cold and starving. You got it? You got it, I'm asking? Ignoramus, I have to fork out too."

"So you are forcing us, is that it?"

"What do you think? That's the way the cookie crumbles. I didn't make it up ... It's an order!"

"Put me in the dungeon then, boss, there won't be any money. Your regular fifteen will stop coming too."

“You think you can scare me with that... I’ll get your greenbacks from another prisoner. But your song will end in a couple of days in some nameless churchyard. Stubborn dolt!” Neelov spat out, his eyes gleaming in malice, and slammed the door with all his might.

“The bedbugs won’t let me die, who will feed them?” I smirked, consoling myself. “They will protect me from the damp and cold with their bodies and the magnificent powder will save me from starvation. All I need to do is increase the dosage, take four or five spoonfuls instead of two or three. But what is that party kitty they’ve thought up? Did the superintendent give them that idea? He has passed on his incomprehensible malice to the guards. After all, everything used to be fine. There was order and respect. I recall a cautious knock at the door. It opens and in the doorway appears Neelov’s smiling face. ‘How are you feeling, prisoner?’ ‘Still with it so far, boss.’ ‘Good, good, keep it up. Can I help with anything?’ ‘Bring me a piece of boiled beetroot the size of a matchbox please. I’m having constipation for the third day now, the pills aren’t helping.’ ‘You poor thing, I’ll definitely bring you some after lunch.’ ‘What about you boss, any problems? My life is beastly, but yours is no bowl of cherries either. We need to help each other. What can I do?’ ‘I have a nephew in Smolensk who is finishing up his national service, is there any way of finding him a job in the police force? In the Federal Highway Traffic Safety Administration? You can make a good living at the inspection posts there. Any vehicle passing through has to pay up to avoid a search. You can get up to two hundred dollars from a truck. Do you know anyone who could help out?’ ‘But isn’t it risky? It’s bribes after all ...’ ‘But where can you find a safe job these days? Death can creep up on you anywhere ...’ ‘I do have a classmate. My mother wrote that he is working at the main police headquarters now. I’ll have to find out if he can help. Bring me a cell phone when you can. I’ll ask him directly. He won’t refuse me.’ ‘Hey, bro, it’s not that easy. You don’t get a job in the police force for nothing these days. Careful maneuvering is needed. Is this classmate a close friend of yours?’ ‘Close

enough ... We were friends all through school.' 'See what you can do, we could give him some money, but only if this will guarantee him a well-paid job. Otherwise, what does a lad do when he returns from doing his national service? Take to the streets? Lounge around without a job? Or give him a job here, put him on guard in the watch tower, let him go to hell? The other way he can make some money, open his own store, put his life on the right tracks. It makes a lot of sense to work for the police.'

In the seven years I've been here I remember quite a number of those friendly talks with the warden. But today he suddenly comes on with that pig-headed aggression. It's as though Neelov has been replaced by someone else, and not only him, but the entire prison staff. What has the new superintendent done to them? Now that droning bell—lights out! I'll take a spoonful of *that very thing* and lie down. I have another five years ahead of me ... See you later, Peter Petrovich. In my sleep I always see myself as someone totally different. After all, poppy head is the only joy of my existence, it works real miracles with me ... I had barely managed to peel a ripe banana in my dreams, when someone hit me painfully on the shoulder and shouted right in my year, "Time to get up, fifty-seven!" Although I wanted to finish eating the banana, someone's powerful hand reminiscent of a fork lift, picked me up from my bed and pushed me toward the door. "Stop sleeping! Go to the dungeon!" I wanted to shout, "What for?" but I received a kick in the face. And not even a kick exactly, rather something like the way people squash a bedbug or grind out a cigarette—a stubborn, dirty heel ground into my face until it drew blood. Then I was evidently beaten more than once, because when I came to after passing out in the dark damp dungeon, my whole body throbbled from abrasions and bruises. My spine was particularly sore. Unexpectedly, while looking around the dungeon, I saw bedbugs all along the bottom of the wall. Not one of them had allowed itself to sit on my wounds and have a feast. Although there was plenty of blood. They had frozen in trepid anticipation, watching my morbid state, dear things. I wanted to share my ailments with them, ask what had

happened recently. But two wardens appeared in the doorway. I had never seen their mugs before.

“You had the audacity to refuse money for our colleague’s special fund? Right?”

“Yes,” I managed to say, “I don’t have any money.”

“Say it again?”

“I’m empty, I don’t have a penny ...”

“Well, if you don’t have any money, take this ...”

I felt another two or three punches and even, it seemed, heard some voices, “... we’ll be beating you like tenderized steak in the kitchen every two hours ...” “I’ll make boiled mutton out of you, scoundrel ...” Then I lost consciousness. The first thing I heard when I came to was heavy drops of rain pounding on the asphalt on the upper part of the grated window of the dungeon.

“I’m alive, still alive, damn this life,” flashed through my mind. “I wish the rain would flood my basement. Hey, wind, break the window! Hey, rain, send your streams into my dungeon,” I whispered, my lips barely moving. I looked around. There were more bedbugs. They had gathered together, as though they had decided the time had come to read the last rites.

“Not yet, brothers, I’m still alive, but if they do me in a few more times,” I said to them, “of course, I’ll croak. But that would all be for the best ... My only regret would be leaving you. There is an old saying: “Old enemies are your best friends. Memories bring you closer.”

In order to make it easier to suffer the pain, I, although I found it difficult to move my tongue, swallowed two spoonfuls of the wonderful product.

“Is there poppy head in the other world? That would be great, and many others would beat a hasty retreat in the same direction,” I thought, smiling skeptically. While I was waiting for the opium to work its wonders, my dungeon was again visited by two wardens coming to squash my ribs. I cringed up, pressing my body to the bed. I recognized their fists and feet as they struck, their jeering and swearing, but while I was still conscious, I did not groan, but only

let out an extended howl ... A loud clanging “Get up!” brought me back to my senses. My eyes, bloated and bruised, would not open, my neck, covered with gashes, would not move, my deformed extremities would not be raised, I could only move my fingers with some difficulty, and my mind was beginning to restore its functions. “What have they become so brutal about?” was the first thing that came to mind. “They beat me up with such frenzy that it seems the end of the world is coming. What are they pummeling me for? Why are they turning me into raw meat? I am minding my own business, following the regulations, sending money regularly to the block warden and deputy superintendent, not writing any complaints, I am as indifferent to thievish ideas as the Swiss are to the European Union, I don’t support them but I don’t deplore them either. If you take an objective look at Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov you’ll see an ideal prisoner for a quiet job, even for a bureaucratic career. I understand why they are calling me fifty-seven, it couldn’t be otherwise, the explanation is hard-fast, but how can such crazy beating be explained, I just can’t figure it out ...” At that moment, the door opened and the superintendent, nicknamed Kolyma, walked in.

“Hello, fifty-seven. I want you to know that you are mine! You understand?”

“N-o-o,” I barely got out.

“Shall I explain?”

“Y-e-s!”

“If you get me seventy votes for the elections to the Duma I’ll stop them from bothering you at night. I’ll send you to the hospital for treatment ... I’ll give you butter for a week and white bread for two weeks. I’ll let you have an unscheduled meeting with relatives or even with a dame. Although I know you don’t have one. But you can look for one if you want. I’ll give you a list from my personal archive. It has some pretty okay girls ... Ha-ha-ha! They don’t see men for years. Will you cope? So now do you understand?”

I evidently took too long to wonder what he was talking about. My induced pause broke his initially business-like tone. “Say

something, you louse. If you don't get me the votes, they'll find you some time in the morning croaking in a noose made from your own pants. We'll give the reason for death as suicide. And send you to the morgue straightaway. And the rats are hungry there, they have a better appetite than wolves. By the time they bury you in the prison grave, by the time the medical commission gets together, there'll be nothing left of you but bones. You understand, you bum? Fifty-seven is my number. I don't have much else to say to you—either seventy votes, or a chewed-over skeleton on the rubbish heap. Take your pick! And quickly, I don't have the time!”

“Should I write to my relatives?”

“Think for yourself who to write to.”

“I can hardly move my fingers ... Give me a pen and some paper ...”

“Here!” Kolyma opened his folder. I was unable to stand up, so I had to fall on him with a wild groan.

“What is your party? Who are people supposed to vote for? What should I write?”

I seemed to be losing it, not properly understanding what was expected of me. And toward the end I fell silent altogether and closed my eyes in fright.

“Fifty-seven! Hey! Write! This Party, This! Open your eyes, cretin! Write!”

Gathering my last strength, I began scribbling, “My dears, if you want to see me again, if you wish me well, if you still have even the slightest pity for me in your hearts, please, vote for This Party. Ask the neighbors, my teachers, classmates, army friends, Spartak fans I went to every game with at Luzhniki, all my relatives—I need seventy votes! This Party will save me. Your Peter Parfenchikov.” Kolyma, watching what I wrote, tore my letter away from me, read it, and shouted threateningly, “You have Spartak fans in your arsenal? Wonderful! Cross out the word seventy and write one hundred and forty. And add that you need guarantees, a recorded list of the voters. We will check them out ... We will know everything about each of them ...”

After I had done what he asked, Kolyma took the piece of paper and locked the dungeon. I stared at the ceiling. Why did I need this kind of life? Why hadn't I sent him to hell? I had one foot in the grave as it was, what did I have to lose or gain?

I banged my head and woke up. The brakes were screeching. It seemed as though the train was not riding, but sliding along the rails. The screech of metal ultimately brought me to my senses. What rubbish was I thinking about? But I immediately remembered that when the abstention syndrome starts and reality stops being poppy-induced, scenes of terrible violence come to mind. I could not find an explanation for the effect, instead I shrugged my shoulders and began paying attention to my state. My joints ached and I could feel goose bumps crawling now over the back of my head, now over my spine. My nose was running and my socks felt damp. A lump of saliva was caught in my throat and I could not swallow it, my throat felt raw and sore as though I had tonsillitis. My palms were sweaty, my pulse had quickened and become entirely feeble and barely perceptible. For a fraction of a second I wondered about arousing real withdrawal in order to intensify the illusion of appalling violence. Indeed, why not continue to victimize myself? To ring the changes? But I had not taken to a poppy-induced perception of the world in order to avoid reality. "No, no! Again no!" I shouted to myself. Driving away the nonsensical thought, I immediately reached for the bag of my salvation and quickly swallowed three spoonfuls of powdered poppy head followed by a gulp of cold tea. There were no cookies left, although it would be good to follow the opium with something that would speed up its effect. I frowned discontentedly, realizing that I almost always forget to buy something to snack on, even the most insignificant thing, like a banana or some gingerbread. And understanding that it was my passion for *that very thing* that caused my forgetfulness, I hid under the sheet. "Go on, get going, fire of Parfenchikov energy. Come on now, come on! For I was not interested in someone else's reality, so only poppy head helps to create my own. It is

life's illusions, and not its veracity, that inspire and charm Peter Petrovich ... I gave the famous plant many more compliments, but around forty minutes or more passed while I, all wrapped up in my sheets, waited for the last bouquet to open. Yes, it did heat me up, but rather weakly, it was enough to remove the pre-withdrawal symptoms only a little. But I wanted to see the world glowing in turbulent passions. This is precisely what I needed the wondrous poppy flower for. I swallowed another three spoonfuls and calmed down ...

"Is everyone here?" I asked the secretary.

"There are four hundred and twenty-three in the hall, thirty-nine on duty, twenty-six on vacation, and ten on sick leave. So everyone is waiting for you."

"If I, the boss, gave instructions for everyone to be here at eleven o'clock, just try not to come," I smirked. "This is the first time I am meeting with the staff in an assembly hall. Tell them all to stand when I walk in the room. And this is to be the rule from now on. I hope the hall has been aired? You know what our employees are like, they use the cheapest shoe polish. Check the air and report back to me immediately. I cannot stand a stink. You understand? By the way, in my reception room, which is also where you work, I often sense untoward smells. Muslims have a good tradition—they take their shoes off when they enter a house or mosque. If I sense a bad smell again in the reception room, I am going to have to give an official order for everyone to take off their shoes before they come in. And another thing. I noticed some officers and wardens have higher heels than the regulations call for. Why? Because they want to be taller than me? I do not want every subordinate to be pointing out my physical shortcoming. Okay, so I am short, but I have a clear head in the direct and metaphorical sense. But what kind of heads do my personnel have? I have my doubts so far that they can arouse satisfaction. By the way, check and see if a podium has been set up for me. I gave those instructions yesterday. I want to stand above everyone else. Do you understand? Go! I'm waiting for you to report back."

“If This Party wins the election, and I have no doubt that it will and I will do everything I can to see it happens, I can expect a significant promotion,” I got to thinking as I lounged back in my chair. “I have one thousand three hundred and forty-three prisoners and four hundred and ninety-seven people on my personal staff plus sixty-one freelance employees. That makes a total of one thousand nine hundred and one subjects. If I gather fifty thousand votes, I will be promoted to the district administration, if I gather one hundred thousand I will be appointed to Moscow as a department head. But if I get three hundred or four hundred thousand votes I can count on very high posts. For example, the seat of deputy head of the department of correctional institutions of the Ministry of Justice. These are my three levels. Reaching the first will give me a C and rather weak consolation. Fulfilling program number two will give me a confident B. Here I will have to shrug my shoulders and dream about a new date for the election campaign or about early transfer of the election. But if I get to the third level ... Wonderful! I would even shout out my favorite apotheosis word, “Valcalepio! Valcalepio!” And start packing my bags. The superintendent of Razuev Central is not bad for a thirty-year-old. But I have great ambitions. I am dreaming about the federal heights. Another head might spin from an extra star, but mine spins from craving absolute power. It aches, burns, demands something higher and higher. It grabs you in the same way as when you are idolized, when people bow down at your feet, listen to what you say, create a cult of the best of the best in all affairs, in all matters, in all languages, in the most different strata of society. They are afraid to look you in the eye and if they have to, with my short height, they manage to drop their eyes, looking from below up. Valcalepio! Valcalepio! How can it be otherwise! They say the conference hall is ready to listen to me. The air is as clean as in a birch grove. The silence is as still as in the St. George Hall during supreme celebrations. I am coming. No, I am unhurriedly mincing my steps. I hope that their sound will reach the heart and soul of my subjects. What will I say? In what tone? Who will I fire in the grips of total unemployment? Who will

I raise to a new pedestal in a region out of which everyone dreams of making a beeline? Who will be left without a crumb of bread, and who will get a new piece of the pie? Who will get stuck in the taiga snow, and who will get into a car and drive around the streets of the district centers? It will be how I say! Only from the lips of Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov will a ceremonial march be heard leading to success, or a grievous melody signifying a career fiasco. Such moments of power excite my mind in the most unusual way. He who does not have such elevation of his own spirit is a feeble-minded and worthless imbecile. He deserves a place on the bunks of my closed prison. And not even in a cell, but in the darkest dungeon.

At last I entered the hall and without raising my head climbed the podium. My temples throbbed dully—three steps, each one fifteen centimeters. That's 45, plus my 162. That means I am taller than everyone. Only after these comforting calculations did I take a look at those gathered. They were not only standing as people stand after the command "At ease!" They were standing at attention as though they were waiting for another command, "Whoever is not standing right, off with their head! Immediately!" I looked unhurriedly around the hall. I read unconditional devotion and obedience on the faces of my subjects. It seemed they were looking fixedly at one spot and this wondrously unified reaction showed their willingness for unquestioning subordination. Such unconditional intensity of servility filled me with delight. "Sit down!" They sat down in unison without a noise, just like flies land on a windowsill warmed by the setting sun. Only the chins of many shuddered, ears hung, hair on the head became ruffled of its own accord. At first I wanted to walk through the aisles in order to get a better look at their obsequious faces. Then I changed my mind, even when sitting some of them might be taller than me. "I cannot allow that!" I thought fleetingly. After some hesitation, I began my speech.

"Dear colleagues! On the eve of the elections, passions in the country are running high. The explosions on the Petersburg Express and trolleybus in Tolyatti have brought the situation to almost

boiling point. Only This Party is capable of reliably governing our state. So we must do everything we can ...” And so on, and so forth.

To tell the truth, I could not recall the whole of my inflamed speech, what is more, it was often interrupted with applause. I finished by asking all the section heads to remain in the hall, explaining that I would talk with the unit commanders in my office and later have a parley with the service heads and their deputies. I needed to offer each of them some career prospect if we fulfilled the election plan. I asked them to make use of all conceivable and inconceivable ways, persuasion, threats, and blackmail to vouch for the necessary number of people willing to vote for This Party. Lock some up in the dungeon, others in a heavy security cell, deprive still others of exercise, meals, personal meetings, letters from relatives, wives, and lovers. Refuse them medical treatment, prohibit them from using the prison store. In short, make things so unbearable that when the prison literally starts howling, when the groans of the inmates can be heard all the way back home, a marvelous solution can be offered. Everything will resume its natural course, and what is more, each will get some relief and even the incentive of being released early providing that all of the prisoners’ families, all of their relatives, neighbors, buddies on the outside, cronies and crime partners in solitary confinement, in police precincts, even on the run vote for This Party. At all times, blackmail has served as the most significant argument for reaching some inconceivable goal. Every prison employee, including volunteers, was also set the stringent task of recruiting fifty votes. Those who did not succeed would be fired, thrown out without redundancy payment. While those who over fulfilled the plan could expect a wonderful career, new stars on their shoulder boards, vacations to elite in-house health resorts, high-glass pieces of leather for their boots and cuts of gabardine for their parade uniform, and, finally, money benefits. When the task was set, I ordered the wing wardens and officers of the prison department to begin clamping down on the prisoners, using the most sophisticated levers of pressure on them, the most inconceivable tricks to achieve the main goal—votes at

the election. I set a deadline in an irrevocable tone—in one week the yells and groans of the prisoners should be heard all over Russia. Especially among their relatives. If my dream comes true, all my fellow countrymen will gain—the country will prosper, millions of new apartments will appear, pensions will increase by thirty percent, national projects will be successfully carried out . . . Demography will improve, the army and navy will strengthen, the strategic forces will be replenished with modern technology, the Olympic Games in Sochi will be triumphant. We will even be able to build roads. I must admit, if only to myself, that they are in a dreadful state in our country. Envious people in the West will choke on their bile in displeasure and the East will be awash in bitter tears of envy. All resources will have to be mobilized to ensure that This Party dominates in the Duma, and that I am promoted to a high post in Moscow. And to hell with these prisoners, admittedly, in my case, these dregs of humanity should be of some benefit, all I need to do is put some skilful pressure on them . . .

Suddenly the door of the carriage was thrown open. The conductor, handing me a ticket, said, “Get ready, we will be arriving in Kan in twenty minutes. You haven’t forgotten that you are getting out there have you?”

“No, no,” I nodded, “but I don’t need a ticket. Thank you!”

“I knew you weren’t on a business trip. Hurry up!”

I opened my eyes more quickly than usual, looked around and felt ill at ease. The methodical click of the wheels intensified it. “Kan, Kan, what awaits me here, in Siberia? The end or the beginning of something unknown?”

I did not need long to gather my things—my most important treasure, the bag of *that very thing*, I held close to my breast. Nothing else interested me—I felt automatically for my passport and money, but I could not have cared less about my travel bag. I spent a couple of minutes in the lavatory, then drank a glass of tea with a cookie, handed in my bed sheets, paid for them, profusely thanked the conductress, and at that moment heard the screech of brakes . . .

Here I was in Kan territory. As soon as I stepped onto it, I

screwed up my eyes—the morning sun hit Peter Petrovich painfully in the eyes. “A very unfriendly welcome...” went through my head. I clutched the bag of poppy tighter to me and, turning away from the bright orb, followed the trickle of passengers toward the exit. The conductors dumped bags of waste into the garbage container on the platform. Homeless children with herpes, dogs, half-drunk vagabonds, and three filthy dirt-incrusted cows awaited their hour in tense anticipation nearby. I stopped for an instant, evidently intuition compelled me to slow my pace. As soon as the last conductor threw his sack into the container, the starving group stormed it. The dogs were the first to reach the food bags. The vagabonds had already begun fighting with them. A few men and women unsuccessfully tried to push aside the pack. The stray dogs bit at their rivals’ heels in a frenzy, while the people desperately swung at their jaws and sides. The cows, although tardy, joined the fray. They pushed the first and the second out of the way with their horns, clearing the path to the container. They kicked those who resisted with their hooves, pushed them aside with their heads, and pressed them back with their enormous weight. When the cloven-hoofed had taken full possession of the container, a bull slowly meandered in. He went up to the container, ripped open several sacks with his horns, selected the tastiest morsels, and only after that allowed the cows to touch the food. The people and dogs held back in great agitation, waiting for their turn at the feast table. The first armed themselves with sticks and stones, but were in no hurry to put them into action, they merely brandished them menacingly. The second, saliva flying, barked in a frenzy and maliciously scraped the worn platform asphalt with their hind paws.

“I would be very willing to get into a real fight, but only for koknar, not for food. I would attack the enemy in every way I could...” I thought and walked on. I asked someone I saw standing in the station square if he knew where I could find a taxi. Wiping his eyes, the lad did not answer and loped on by.

“I need to get used to the provinces,” I sighed and looked around. A few brick houses had clumsily found their way into the

wooden district of town. Someone came up to me: “Where are you going? I can take you.”

“To Fateeva’s ...”

“Old woman Fata, you mean? But she died.”

“To her old house.”

“The one across the river?”

“Yes!”

“Let’s go. It’ll cost you fifty rubles ... How are you related, are you a nephew or a grandson?”

“Grandson.”

“A strange grandmother you had there.”

“I know, I am also strange ...”

“If you are anything like your grandmother, give me the money in advance. I know the likes of her. I remember how she didn’t pay for my services for months ...”

I gave him fifty rubles, after which my chauffeur started the engine.

“Sorry for that. Money doesn’t come easy here, like it does in the big cities, we break our backs day and night, but have nothing in our pockets. And the price of gas had gone up.”

I did not answer, and he too fell silent. We rode for no more than fifteen minutes. Finally, he pulled up to a gate and said, “You’ve paid and I’ve done what I promised. Goodbye. If you need a car, ask for Lex Skvrotsov. You’ll always get a discount. I’ll take you to Krasnoyarsk and back for 1300 rubles plus gas. You won’t find others offering those kinds of prices. They ask for two hundred dollars, and it is no cheaper by train. Seven hundred kilometers after all ...”

“I’ll keep it in mind, so long,” I interrupted him and got out of the Korean Hyundai.

Walking cautiously around the fence, I saw an oldish but still solid house made of blackened round timber. A single light bulb burned forlornly on the porch, despite the bright sun. The windows, covered over in gray, evidently time-stained, fabric seemed to hide past secrets. I rummaged around in my pockets, then remembered

that the house was open, and with some trepidation went up to the door. It opened easily, and I found myself in a dimly lit chamber. It led into a larger room. There it was bright and dry. The flowers in pots standing on the floor and windowsills had wilted and the photographs on the walls were covered in dust. Several chunks of wood lay in front of the oven. It was rather forlorn, but quite tidy. A door from the room led into a bedroom. A colored blanket lay rolled up against the back of a metal bed, two fluffy pillows were stacked in a pile at the other end. It seemed that someone had tidied up the house after Fateeva passed away. Looking out of the window, I became truly excited—a huge empty field spread out like the palm of a hand. My eyes twinkled, I felt the familiar prick in my heart that always led me unconstrained to poppy heads. I could already see my own garden full of white-blue flowers with heads the size of a fist stretching out as far as the horizon. My heart started pounding, being drawn toward the spoon, my body was insistently demanding *that very thing*. I opened the treasured bag, took a whole spoonful, and then remembered about water. There was none close at hand. I had to swallow the first spoonful dry. In order to save time and feel the onset faster, I needed water. The lavatory at grandmother Fata's was out in the yard, and I couldn't find anything apart from empty saucepans in the kitchen. Recalling the wells people who live in such villages use, I rushed out into the yard. Going around the house, I came across the round wall of a well, waist-high. I feverishly lowered the bucket, filled it with water and, forgetting my original idea "to just give myself a pickup," I began swallowing spoonful after spoonful. I stopped at the seventh. I recovered my breath, came back to my senses, and took delight in my plot of land. I went to its edge, fell onto the damp earth covered with the first green growth with the hope of listening to its pulse, but for some reason began sobbing. I cannot explain what evoked it. I sobbed long and bitterly, like a child who has been separated from his mother and suddenly, to his incredible joy, is reunited with her. "I am not lonely, no, I am not at all lonely in this desolate world," I repeated, embracing my own field. These embraces reminded me

of my mother's tenderness, the touch of her hands, the smell of her body, the fragrance of her hair ... The poppy was doing its thing. Sweet euphoria began to engulf me. I fell into ecstasy, everything that had gone before disappeared into the subconscious or was completely forgotten. If I began preparing the field for planting my most favorite plant in this wonderful state, its quality would be impeccable. I immediately jumped up and began rushing around the house in search of a spade. "The depth of the furrows should be no more than twenty centimeters. You understand, Peter Petrovich, you understand? This is very important, otherwise it won't take seed. Heaven forbid! That would be the end!" I muttered to myself. When I found the garden tool, I grabbed it and rushed to the house, took out the sack of poppy seeds and ran back out into the garden. Before I began digging, I looked around. Now I was able to assess the plot of land, which was surrounded by a barbed wire fence—it was more than a hectare. "Wonderful, wonderful. The harvest should last me for two years. Now it is the end of May, *it* should be ready by mid-August! The flowers will fall off, the heads will open, they will become yellow with barely perceptible chocolate-colored veins... And then the real paradisiacal gathering of illusions, dreams, happy excitement, and amazing spectacles will begin," I dreamed in excitement. "I can make syrup for tea with the fallen flowers, and the stems will serve well for stoking the stove. The house will forever be imbibed in opium, Peter Petrovich will not only eat opium to his heart's content, without looking to see how much is left, without counting his future out in spoonfuls, but also enjoy it with miraculous energy without hangovers and withdrawals. He will also breathe and drink up this poppy aroma, thus intensifying its miraculous effect. What exciting happiness awaits me! I can hardly believe it ... Can such self-made joy be possible? After all, there is little room in life for successful self-expression. But here in Kan, the magic is very likely to happen. All I need to do is dig the field as quickly and carefully as possible and plant the noble flower. And then wait patiently with hope in my heart for August for hapless Peter to propose to the Poppy Queen, marry her,

and begin building their married life. Is not illusion the best of friends in an earthly existence? There can be no doubt that it is the most incredible, flattering, and wonderful!”

I set to work with renewed energy. It turned out that it is not that easy to dig up a field. This was the first time in my life I was engaging in physical work. A couple of hours later, my hands were covered in blisters, my right shoulder and back were aching, the spade would hardly do what it was told, and I was seeing stars before my eyes. But I went on working. My enthusiasm did not wane, although I significantly slowed my pace. By midday, I realized I could do no more, berated myself, managed to make it to the house, and collapsed on the bed. It seemed I did not even have the strength to breathe and soon passed out completely ...

ABOUT OF FRENETIC ZEAL

Leonid Ivanovich Efimkin found himself living on the banks of the River Kan completely by chance. Forced by circumstances to quit his job at the criminal investigation department in the Ural town of Ishim, where he worked as an officer, Efimkin, in a huff, left his wife, who supposedly refused to help him when he was dismissed, or maybe it was just a convenient excuse, and went in search of a new life. He was originally from the Siberian town of Barabinsk, which was why he began his search for a new place to live in the backwaters of his home environs. He tried to find a job in Reshety, in Tulun, in Ilansk, and even went to Taiga ... Which is how he chanced to end up in Kan, where he finally found a job as water bailiff. And, after calming down, he took up residence with an elderly widow as a single man. This put an end to his employment and living ordeals. Now the future looked all rosy and peachy. He fancied himself as an important figure in the Kan region. He did not pay much for his lodgings—a thousand rubles a month, although for that amount he had to help around the house, chopping wood, planting potatoes, and looking after the yard fowl; all the while keeping his eye out to see how and from whom he might buy deceased neighbor Fateeva's house. Leonid Ivanovich decided there was no way he was going to look for another woman companion. He had convinced himself once and for all that he was feeble and not capable of sharing his bed with anyone. And while he had never particularly liked that sort of thing in the past, of late he had stopped thinking about it altogether. Even in his dreams, both drunken and sober, he was never visited by naked women, but had visions of increasingly larger amounts of money of the most variegated colors and embellishments, as well as a multitude of things that he was in a hurry to buy to set up his new residential expanse. It could be presumed that all of Mr. Efimkin's male passion had wandered over into money-grubbing, an occupation deserving genuine respect.

But if your heart is bereft of human compassion, the threshold of permissibility in this delicate matter becomes partially erased or even indistinguishable from the very outset. The damned truth, how to earn an extra penny, did not reveal itself to Leonid Ivanovich immediately, whereas now he felt it to the marrow of his bones and believed that he had discovered a talent for this noble deed. If Mr. Efimkin had lived in a large capital city, he would have long become a factory, plant, or steamship manager. Recalling the past, in which he would never have dreamed of raking in money, Leonid Ivanovich truly took a nose dive and really went to town on showing how angry he was at life. He was even ready to sentence himself! So after being fired and taking a good look at the reality of life, he swore through and through not to become sentimental but to work exclusively to fill his own pockets. “You can’t live if you are too honest. You’ll be decimated!” he told himself in encouragement.

Three weeks had passed since the River Kan had freed itself from its icy shell. Fishing was still prohibited, but as soon as night fell fishermen thronged to the awakening river. The fish were jumping. And who, if not inspector Efimkin, was acutely aware of this. Since his very first day on the job, Leonid Ivanovich took pains to impose tithes on all those willing to comply. Making their acquaintance, he told each one that he wanted thirty percent of the catch. And being mistrustful and conscientious by nature, he would first grow pale and frown, dropping his eyes. However, this state of confusion soon passed, and he took with increasingly confidence to his authorities as government official. Today it was not only control over part of his income that got the fish inspector up bright and early. An entirely new life was opening up before him, intriguing, unknown, dangerous, but desired. Yesterday, Saturday, he had been on duty at a hidden observation post in front of the bus station and railroad station and noticed many new faces bringing fishing tackle to town. “I will have to do some work for the government. I’ll have to choose three of four of the most obstinate yellers from the couple of dozen new poachers, draw up a record, confiscate their gear, and

report them to the department,” thought Efimkin. An average of three or four people were arrested every season for breaking environmental laws. Leonid Ivanovich had no intention of entering new figures into the statistical reports of the federal service, so he decided to arrest the same number of lawbreakers as everyone else, and no more.

So, donning his official uniform, he left his house, look despondently at Fateeva’s empty house and set off down to the river. He was in an utterly foul mood. He had indeed begun working, but he was still not accumulating more money. On the way to his motor boat, the inspector stopped by his smokehouse. He had set it up a couple of days ago in the simplest old-world way, in cooperation with a police captain, and registered it as a temporary structure in the name of the mother-in-law of his partner, precinct officer Sergei Pogorelov. Efimkin found him in the smokehouse. The captain was chopping wood, filling the bucket with shavings, cleaning the oven, and getting ready to receive the first fish. Looking at him, Efimkin noticed his strange mouth—his partner’s lips went in different directions. Leonid Ivanovich thought, “A face like that is bound to deceive me. But how? In what way?” However, out loud he said, “Go on, Sergei, get the oven ready. There should be lots of fish today.”

“Oh it’s you, Ivanich, hello. Yes, the station vendors are asking for a hundred, and sometimes more, kilograms a day. Trains have been going south since the end of April. People are traveling with money and want to spend it. You do your bit too. Our smokehouse can handle large amounts. We can expand business without additional cost.”

“Tell me, Sergei, do you make anything for home in the smokehouse while I’m not here? How am I supposed to keep an eye on where you are baking potatoes or boiling soup? We share work expenses, but what goes on at home is your own business. I contribute to buying wood and everything else like clockwork, but I don’t have proper control over how the company’s materials are used. If I don’t even trust myself, how can I trust others?”

“Give over, Leonid Ivanovich! You see how my oven at home is smoking almost all day. I have a large family, my wife never leaves the stove.”

“But still I am concerned about the accounts!” The inspector raised his hand and quickly went out of the smokehouse. On the way, he continued the conversation with himself. “Yes, I think this cop is stealing from me. He is most likely taking one log out of every three home. And things won’t be right with the fish either. We receive seventy kilograms of fresh fish but produce fifty in end product, natural loss during smoking, he’ll say. I’m going to have to read up on this and find out what the loss is, so I can run the accounts properly from the very outset. Oh, I don’t believe anyone. I will have to buy a whip and rap people’s knuckles. Idiot, why spend the money, wouldn’t it be better to take some fishing line and a lead sinker from the tackle I confiscate and rap people on the knuckles with that? Ouch! Take that! And I can sell the line too, there will be plenty of people wanting to buy it, why transfer the money. Wouldn’t it be better to take my grandmother’s iron and clobber thieves with it? Terrible pain should be remembered, what are instructive measures without pain? I just started the job in the early spring and had to spend a thousand dollars on a Volvo engine. I make more with it. Poachers these days have speed boats. But am I right? No! I should have used the iron on myself, to make me think again. Why did I go into my own pockets instead of writing letters of complaint to the higher departments to ask for budget money? Emotions and passions only hinder business. I agree that I should not only be rapping other people’s knuckles, but my own too. Otherwise I will collect no money at all! And why not raise the percentage I get from the fishermen? It’s been at thirty percent for a week now. I set the amount myself. Last year, in 2008, the price of butter, meat, dairy products, and more increased by about forty percent. So why don’t I say something? Am I richer than everyone else, or what? I must urgently raise my income. After all they won’t earn anything without my consent. How much should I ask for? Let’s say that from 25 May to 31 June I raise the percentage to thirty point

something. What's that compared with the general increase in prices? Nothing! Forty percent of the catch! And from 1 July I'll raise it by another twenty-five percent. That means I'll begin getting fifty percent from the entire catch. One fish for you, the next for me! Of course! Business should be shared. I should be sent even further—to the locals in Krasnoyarsk, to the federal district in Novosibirsk, and to the highest bosses in Moscow. This is only a quarter, but it's time to giving more. I have to give half to Pogorelov for managing the smokehouse. Admittedly after smoking. Even though he's a partner, fifty percent is a lot. I provide the fish. With the new quotas, I will need to make the prosecutor a partner. Give him thirty percent, and leave seventy for myself. Incidentally, that's a good idea, look for someone who has better illegal smoking equipment in the district. Norwegian. It could be confiscated and then sold to our company at a closed tender for a few kopecks. That way our smokehouse can run for almost nothing. But why establish a company? To pay taxes? Organize a staff of workers? Rake in a few kopecks again? No! We don't need any legal company. Let's start producing and sell the products. After all, the prosecutor is on the side of the law. Let him look the other way. This is the best approach to take in business, since that way you don't have to pay taxes. Let the oil producers, gas manufacturers, builders, and military-industrial complex pay. Their production is growing, business is bringing them money, but what can you expect from small businesses? A few kopecks are not going to save our state, while millions are something we can't provide. What kind of money are you going to get from one or two hundred kilograms of fish? Nothing much! A governor's bodyguard costs the treasury more. I recently thought up execution for wrong doing. Bring the iron down on them! But I didn't think about perks. Very stupid of me! I've just had this pretty good idea about how to increase my own capital. So does this mean I should forget about perks again? But how will know-how be encouraged then? I am going to have to carry grandma's iron around with me to give anyone who might need it a clunk on the head. Perhaps I'll smarten up. What sort of big spender

am I? I am my own worst enemy. So that's decided—I'll offer the prosecutor twenty-five instead of thirty percent in our joint business. The extra five percent I earn on him will be my reward for my magnificent idea. Or perhaps not five, what about seven? Twenty-three will be enough for him. He has other business, and quite substantial at that. He earns one hundred dollars per prison day. If he gets a convict's sentence reduced by a year, he puts thirty-six thousand dollars in his pocket. And he has more than a hundred criminal cases every quarter. Admittedly, not everyone pays, some are willing to do their term rather than pay that kind of money, but he does have clients, and quite a few. Why has he taken an interest in the fishing business? Ha, what if he is shown the door tomorrow ... And he will be, if not tomorrow, then the day after. People like him don't stay longer than two years in one job. They have two alternatives, either up the career ladder or onto the streets to look for a niche in commerce. They know all too well that you can't keep all your eggs in one basket. And I should keep that in mind too. I need to diversify my business, not only engage in fishing, but constantly keep my eyes out for something new. Selling boats, for instance. I can use my authority and fob off a boat on everyone. Not only demand fifty percent of the catch, but also make them do their fishing using my boats. A bureaucrat doesn't have a long life. So why only boats? I could add engines too. They can be delivered from Omsk. Have them buy engines too, they will add to my income. What else? My boat, my engine, what about gasoline or diesel oil? There you go, of course, it's time to sell fuels and lubricants. I can get the chief of police in on the act. He is planning to retire in a couple of years and dreaming of profit. A marvelous candidate. Twenty-three percent will send him over the moon. But why so much, nineteen, no, seventeen, will be enough for him ... I'll give him fifteen percent, a lovely number and so impressive. What else? What else? Ah yes, tackle, nets, rods, hooks, sinkers, fish food? I've thought about these things before, but now it's time to get down to business and open a fishing tackle store. I would do better to engage the head of the municipal unit in this, well, not him personally, but his wife.

She's a perky gal. I'll have to give her a few hints, although she's smart, she'll catch on, make sure she understands only to issue a fishing license if tackle is bought in our store. She won't agree to less than forty percent. I'll have to do some brainstorming to figure out how to reduce this a bit. At least by two-and-a-half percent ... That's also money. What else, what else, what else? What about the smokehouse? The administrative resource won't help here, you can't be going searching every home, that kind of thing will cause a ruckus. But what about renting out all the station platforms, the entire area around the station, every meter around the bus station? A wonderful idea. So that the vendors don't pay the police officers, or the station superintendent, but pay me. And invite the head of the city court and the train and bus station directors to participate. Offer each of them ten percent. The main thing is for the judge to agree, and then recruit the two directors by referring to him. Who would refuse to have a representative of jurisprudence among his partners? They aren't crazy after all, or suicide prospects. What else, what else? Come on, think! Things are really kicking today, ideas are pouring forth. Life is bearing its teeth. So I'm having to think! I've had enough of the world around me. So, what else? What else? Where else can I grab some money? What about renting a room and opening a fish exchange in it? I could involve the wife of the municipal unit head in this as well. Twenty, no, twenty-five percent into the company's account from each kilogram of fish sold, or better yet, straight into our pockets. And have the head draw up a corresponding resolution. Although he is probably not erudite enough to do that. I'll have to go and see the editor of the local newspaper and ask him to whip up this official statement for a modest, but cash, remuneration. All the fish caught ... and why only the amount caught ... all the fish caught, as well as domestic and imported fish delivered, should be sold exclusively at the fish exchange. There you have it! Signed by the administration head. Not bad at all, wonderful. I can count on a flow of money.

I am feeling incredible inspiration. Money is rustling before my eyes. I am a lucky man. So what if I don't have a woman by my

side? Maybe I'll start liking men ... Who cares! What else, what else? Where else can I raise some business with the help of the authorities? Engine, boat, fishing gear, smokehouse repairs? Yes, yes, not bad. What else? What else? Think! What about vacuum-packing the smoked fish? The original taste will be preserved, Kan merchandise can be sent to other regions. All I need to do is buy the machinery and rent a facility ... But why buy it? Why? Again using my own funds? Rubbish! Talk to a local customs officer, have him follow the movement of goods through Kan station. As soon as some vacuum machinery comes his way, he can immediately remove it from the train and confiscate it. He can always find an excuse, like it didn't have a sanitary hygiene certificate, the stamp on the foreign trade operation document is illegible, there is no national technical registration, quality documents were not presented, the country of origin was not shown, no executive signature can be seen. Thousands of reasons can be found for taking possession of the equipment for free. Then the customs officer will get his share of the business. But I should only establish partnership relations with him for the time he is on the job. I will not offer him any percentages in the joint business. Then we'll know what to do later. What else, what else? Come on, think, Leonid Ivanovich! I'll need a colored stamp machine. Ready products have to look impeccable. Where should I buy one, or better, of course, get my hands on one? Confiscate it from illegal workers? I know a couple of places where they operate. But then I'll have to recruit the prosecutor or chief of police again. Or even both. With a team in place, an ideally organized business, revenue going up, I can start thinking about my own future. Perhaps I should become a deputy? Of course, not in the district or urban structures, but at the territorial or even federal level. And why not? I'm no worse than anyone else, am I? I have a good head on my shoulders, I have money (or should have), I have connections, and I have a satisfactory biography. I'll join This Party. Of course, I'll have to cough up quite a bit ... Idiot, you deserve a clout with the iron right now. Wouldn't it be better to find sponsors? Ha-ha, of course, it would be better to build your career with their

help. My partners will become my sponsors. The profit from our joint business can be used to promote me to parliament. But I won't announce anything straightaway, I'll do that later, when the time comes to divvy up the money. Otherwise I might scare them off, after all they might get the same ideas and want to ask me to be their sponsor. No, it would be better to wait. And when divvying up becomes par for the course, I'll hint that to protect our enterprise I should try for deputy. The main thing here is to find the right moment and present myself as someone who has the same interests. I think I can safely say that none of my future partners will be thinking about the federal Duma. They at best have their sights set on local deputy seats. And I will help them in every way I can. I am willing to barter—you lobby and finance my advance to Moscow, and I will support you at the local level. No idiot would dare to have a go at our business with this prospect. We'll squash them! Send them to all four corners! If I can put together a strong team, I can look around. Why not take over one of the fish factories, then another, and then all of the fish enterprises in Russia? Grandiose plans, but I need to start somewhere—I'll begin with raising my percent of the catch. Today I still look like the same Leonid Efimkin, but my head and heart are very different.

My desires have become all the more ambitious. And what a nonsensical schedule I've thought up. May, June, July ... No schedules, from this day on everyone has to give me half of their catch. Full stop! I'll need to start talking about the new fees as though it's no big deal, without making a big thing of it, without a greedy gleam in my eye. Make it look as though I couldn't care less. Show no emotions. No! As though the law itself is compelling me to come up with this way of divvying things up.

These were the thoughts swimming in Mr. Efimkin's head as he jumped into his motor boat and, cursing himself for his extravagance, started the engine. It was getting light. Cruising slowly, he began examining the fishermen and their floating devices through his binoculars. Ah, 444, someone he could trust, I'll go and talk to him after he's finished fishing and tell him about the new tax. And

who is that? Whose is boat number 033? Oh yes, it's Mukorez, he's about to get some good news from me. What about number 91? I can't remember ... Can it be Piryatin? Yes, it's him, he's shaved, that's why I didn't recognize him straightaway. There'll be no problem with him. But whose boat is number 066? Duganov? Right, Duganov! To make sure I get half of the catch from him, I'd better tell him seventy percent. He'll swindle me and give fifty, or even forty, the scoundrel! How can I catch him cheating? I'll punch his lights out! Take away his boat. Now who's that? Some new number – SHO-133. Obviously from Nizhneudinsk. They add letters on there. I'll get to him too. What about 023? Also someone new. His boat's filled with line, you're about to find out how to do some illegal fishing. I'll get to you all. Today the bailiff is working for the state. Four of you will be on my hook right off, and I'll get another one or two by mid-summer. Toward the end of the season, I'll have everyone's guts for garters, anyone who's tried to dupe me, anyone who's permitted themselves to take Efimkin for a ride.

"Hi there, Mukorez," said the bailiff, approaching the boat. "I have some good news for you. Starting from today, you are going to give me half of your catch and not a gram less. You got it?" "How come, Leonid Ivanich. You'll ruin my family, for goodness sake!"

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's, as they say. Got it? Come on now, the river will feed everyone."

"Am I the only one getting this treatment? Look how many other gannets there are," complained Mukorez.

"Don't fret, we're doing this with everyone."

Piryatin answered unequivocally, "If that's what you say, boss, so be it!"

Duganov fretted, saying, "Boss, I've only caught one pike in two hours. What is there here to divide up?"

"You mean you're already calling it a day?" retorted Efimkin. "You're probably planning on staying until late. So there will be more fish. If you don't catch anything else, I get seventy percent of your pike. Don't fret, you'll get the tail and head. You going to argue?"

“Fine, you took me at my word.”

Leonid Ivanovich was starting to feel upset, it was all too easy. Why had he not decided to do this earlier? From the very beginning? Morning one tax, evening another. The rate changes every hour at currency exchange shops. “What held me back?” he said to himself out loud in surprise. When Mr. Efimkin drew up to boat number SHO-133, he was genuinely taken aback. An unknown woman was fishing in the boat. “Who are you and where do you come from? The law is still valid—fishing at this time is categorically prohibited!” he shouted.

“So why are others allowed to?” objected the fisherwoman. “There are so many fishermen around me.”

“Each of them will be punished. I am going now to write up a report and confiscate their catch and equipment. I’ll do the same with you. All according to the law, no ad-libbing.”

“But an acquaintance recommended that I fish here. And he said there would be no problem. I want to gain some experience, you see, before going on a corporate fishing trip to the Mexican Gulf.”

“Whoever gave you that recommendation should know that there are laws in the Russian Federation ...”

“Just a moment, I’ll tell you his name, perhaps that will calm you down?”

“I am observing the law, working in the interests of the state...” Mr. Efimkin said proudly. “I am going to have to confiscate everything, your wonderful motor boat and your equipment.”

“Have you heard of Anatoly Fyodorovich Preshchemikhin?” the fisherwoman asked quietly.

“Who is he?”

“You mean you don’t know the deputy head of the Siberian Federal District in charge of legal issues?”

“You can say anything you like. Your references are not enough. Now if you had a letter with an official’s resolution permitting you to fish during the spawning season, which is against federal law ...”

“I’m training here,” said the young woman, confused. “Search my boat, there’s nothing incriminating there. If I catch anything I immediately let it go again.”

“The budget of the State Fishing Inspectorate would not have enough money to appoint an inspector for each commercial fisherman who would support your version. And what if your fish were about to lay eggs, you would not only be killing one fish, but hundreds. In short, we’re going to investigate.”

“Why don’t you believe me when I say I am under the protection of a government official? He can remove you from your post or promote you in an instant.”

“It’s part of my job not to believe anyone. If I begin taking everyone at their word, what point is there in my official instructions? Follow me, I need to write up a report.”

“Just a minute, let me call Anatoly Fyodorovich.”

The bailiff fell silent, but thought to himself that it would not be a bad idea to play along.

“Anatoly, it’s me,” his victim blurted out, after reaching her patron, “some bailiff wants to confiscate my boat! Yes, but he doesn’t believe me ... What’s his name? What’s your name?”

“Leonid Ivanovich Efimkin,” said the inspector.

“Efimkin, his name is Efimkin. I’ll pass him the phone.”

“State bailiff, second class, of the State Fishing Inspectorate Leonid Ivanovich Efimkin on the line ...” the official introduced himself with dignity.

“My dear friend, this is Preshchemikhin, deputy head of the Siberian Federal District. What do you mean by giving the girl a fright?”

“Dear Mr. Preshchemikhin, a commission from Moscow is visiting us today. Zhitvol, Varnishchenko, Borchinok, and others. They arrived incognito to check out how well Russia’s water resources are being looked after. The patrol wrote down the number of your acquaintance’s boat. I’ve been instructed to take her ashore to write up a report and confiscate all the contents. Of course, the case will go to court. You are a representative of the regional

administration, but representatives from the center are waiting for me on shore with an arrested vessel. What am I supposed to do?"

"Can you think of something so that there will be no report or confiscation?" said the voice over the line despondently.

"I would take the risk, but I have to be sure that you are who you say you are. Give me the telephone number of your reception and tell them to pass on my call to you. Today is Sunday, but your reception should be working. Then I will wrack my brains as to how to save our lady here from any difficulties. Incidentally, Channel Two is preparing a report on the results of the audit for News of The Week."

"Write down my phone numbers and call. We need to do all we can to prevent a scandal," the voice of the federal official had clearly become more polite.

"Do you have money with you?" asked the bailiff with contrived indifference, addressing the woman.

"How much to do need?"

"Not me, you, my dear. I am impressed that you have such a respected person looking out for you. But I won't be able to tell the commission members that he is your patron. Otherwise the scandal will grow and have very unfavorable consequences. You'll most likely have to give money to the television crew and team of auditors, they like taking money. If I don't take you ashore, a crowd of law-enforcers will be after you. I'll call Anatoly Fyodorovich, I need to ask him something else." The bailiff coughed and made his voice sound important. "This is Efimkin, next time you want to send your friends fishing, please call me in advance. As for your acquaintance, there is one solution. I'll get in touch with my secretary. She'll draw up an order appointing... What is your name?" he asked the young woman. "Lusnetsova!" "Lusnetsova as a freelance water bailiff. In addition to that, we're going to have to show the television crew and team of auditors from Krasnoyarsk some Siberian hospitality. The problem is that I took a call for a malicious violator. That means I don't know the boat. How can that be, she's my inspector, but I don't know the boat? Seems a bit suspicious, don't

you think? So she'll have to be registered to show she has the right to stop water vehicles for inspection. There is another option—you call Zhitvol or Varnishchenko, as well as the directors of News of The Week, and solve the problem without me, independently. I'll hold down the fort here, so to speak. In short, either she does precisely what I tell her or you figure things out for yourselves.”

“Hmm, I like your first suggestion better. Give Natalia the phone, I'll explain everything to her.”

As he passed her the phone, Leonid Ivanovich noticed a splendid hunting knife lying in the boat. “It's probably imported,” he thought to himself, “I've never seen such a magnificent one. I'm going to have to see if I can't get my hands on it.”

In the meantime, the young woman had finished talking and turned to Efimkin. “I have one thousand dollars on me,” she said in a guilty voice.

“That's too much. You have more experience, tell me, how much do you think will buy a good spread for fifteen people? I have never had to do that before...”

“Where?”

“Here in Kan.”

“I don't know what your prices are like. Let's say fifty or sixty dollars per person.”

“So let's multiply fifteen by sixty ... Nine hundred dollars. Give me that amount. I'll call my secretary and have her draw up an order to appoint you as a freelance inspector.”

Efimkin turned away and began dictating in a bossy voice, “Shurochka, draw up an order in the name of Natalia Lusnetsova. She is being appointed as a freelance inspector from May 1. Her boat number is SHO-133. This water vehicle has the right to travel in the river basin under our control at any time of the night or day. Did you write all that down? Good girl! What knife, I don't have a knife with me. What for? For preparing grilled fish? My dear, do you have a hunting knife?”

“I do, why?”

“Shurochka, I found a knife, don't worry. I'll borrow it for a

while... Where is it?" The bailiff was given the knife and, without further ado, pushed it into his pocket. "The first part of our business is already taken care of, my dear. Now things will be easier. You are now a freelance water bailiff. Things are looking up, but we still have a few more things to do," Leonid Ivanovich looked at his victim. "We've taken care of the money? Okay, great. Now I am going to set off a yellow flare. For the people onshore it means that your boat, on our instructions, is heading south. So you will crank up the engine and move to the right. After you've gone fifteen kilometers you'll be utterly safe. Or we could try something else, I like this idea better—we'll make the round of the violators together, write up arrest reports, confiscate illegal catch items, and even get into fights sometimes. No need to worry—the river police will show up at the first alarm. Our campaign will go on until evening."

"No, no, I'll manage on my own... But what about my car? I have a Citroen with a trailer..."

"Leave me your cell phone number, when everything calms down and the government team is already seated at the table for the Siberian feast, I'll let you know. Then you can return for your car. But for now, happy fishing. With your new documents you can fish here all year round. I will call Anatoly Fyodorovich and put him at ease."

Efimkin had already climbed back into his own boat to start it up when he heard, "Wait a minute, here's my calling card. It has my cell number on it."

"Well now, you bitch, you haven't succeeded in throwing inspector Efimkin for a loop. Whereas I can still have it in for you and your lover boy," the bailiff thought gleefully, taking the calling card. Then he pulled out a flare and set it off. Lusnetsova started up her boat.

"Farewell!" shouted Leonid Ivanovich and immediately dialed the federal district deputy head's number. "Anatoly Fyodorovich, I did just as you asked. Natalia herself calculated how much was needed for the journalists from News of The Week and gave me the money. I am sure that everything will be tops. Now she can fish

here all year round. I registered her, as you permitted, as a freelance bailiff. I had to send off a flare. It means that another bailiff has begun work. They should know that onshore. She chose not to take me up on my offer of going with me to expose poachers. I understand, a lovely women, why would she want to spend her time doing something like that. I sent her out of the government audit zone just in case. Please allow me to send you an assortment of fresh fish. All the best. Goodbye!”

“So I earned nine hundred dollars just like that,” thought Leonid Ivanovich. “I have to worship rich and famous people, they are much more generous than the treasury. And a new administrative channel could be extremely promising. If only civil servants would not suck our blood, we would be capable of many great things. Oh, if only I had power and money. What a country I could build! What do I need a university education for, if I have decided to serve the government while I can? But now I need to continue my own business. Like Russian explorer Yerofey Pavlovich Khabarov, I will mark off my boundaries with buoys so that no one but me can poke his nose in. It is time to draw the dividing line—I get the goodies and the state the violators. But I am going to have to limit their numbers, otherwise how will I make any money? There, I already see one. And an outsider to boot... Decent equipment and an expensive boat. Oh-ho, he has a Mercedes engine. And classy glasses, superman-style. And a super case for his equipment. I will definitely have to win them over; Russian law even prescribes that civil servants put such luxurious accessories in their pockets. How else can the government serve on such a miserly salary? It’s obvious that the guy in the boat is not from a working settlement. Looks like I could make a pretty penny here. I’ll sucker him to the max. Take everything I want, I have a real skill for that now. Birds like him are rare in our parts. And what can you expect! My time has finally come. Who knows how long it will last. So I need to hurry and make some money. So that my appetite doesn’t wane I need to keep it whetted. Make myself angry with thoughts about other people’s money, about luxury. Today has started off pretty well, keep going,

keep going with the same enthusiasm, dear Leonid Ivanovich. How else are you going to make money and feel free? Gain some dignity? Oh, how much I, Efimkin, a Russian man, need this. After all, I can't live like some scum with a few coppers in my pocket. Although, perhaps I am still not used to wealth? Banknotes have still not settled in my bank account, but I am already beginning to feel their enticing rustle."

A self-satisfied gleam appeared in his eyes. Most important, he believed in his own capabilities, in his talent as a businessman that had so unexpectedly revealed itself on his first real work day. Success inspired him. If he kept it up, a vast fortune awaited him very soon. He would not allow himself anything underhand in his operations, would do everything to be ranked as one of the richest people in Russia. An expression of delight lit up Leonid Ivanovich's face. "Money is the source of true enjoyment," he thought in joyous excitement. "My abilities to plan and develop business, as well as foresee an advantageous situation are opening a gateway into a world of boundless power. That is where real life is in full swing. So I need to go for it at full tilt with no favors, favoritism, or sentiments. There should be nothing of the kind ..."

The water bailiff had a glorious Sunday. He made more money than he had in the past two years of accidental earnings. There were dollars and rubles and things that were just pure rarities in these parts. And a new share of the catch. Efimkin understood that the few extraneous rich people who had wandered into this region was a stroke of luck at the beginning of the season. It would be unlikely that this would happen again more than two or three times a year. What could really bring him profit was his business relations with the local poachers. And it seemed that these relations were beginning to develop. He took around two hundred kilograms of fish—cisco, whitefish, Siberian salmon, grayling, burbot, Siberian roach, perch—to Captain Pogorelov in the smokehouse. "Sergei, I've been thinking. Let's put things in order, we share the smokehouse. Fifty-fifty. Now we need fish. That's true, isn't it? Yes, it's true. And where are we going to get it? A certain Mr. Efimkin brings it to

us. But what does he get for that? Fifty percent, or less because of natural loss. So this poor soul only gets forty-five percent. Why, in that case, should Mr. Efimkin give our enterprise fish? He'll give it to someone else, pay ten percent plus natural loss to have it processed and gain around eighty-five percent from the finished product. Now do you understand what you wanted to pull over on me? I am offering a different breakdown, a fair one. Servicing the smokehouse costs an average of ten percent. So we, the owners of the oven, should get around one hundred and eighty-five kilograms from two hundred kilograms minus seven or eight percent natural loss from drying. You get half of this split and I get the other. That means your net profit from smoking is a little more than ten kilograms. And no more. After all, the fish is mine, and no one else's. But it is very possible that I will start getting fish for smoking from others at eight or even seven percent. Then your share will really go down. I am supposed to get an agent's commission from the smokehouse for an additional split! In our region, businessmen get seven to ten percent for intermediary services. After all, I could give this amount of fish to other smokehouses and get my commission fee there. Let's say I take the average rate of eight-and-a-half percent. Then..."

"Enough, enough, you are making my head spin with your calculations. I have never duped you; it was you who went for opening a smoking business on shares. Now, however, it looks as though you want to dupe me. According to your arithmetic, you are getting everything, while I get the scraps and even without butter? How is that? I am going to have to call in my mother-in-law, she has a better sense of all this ..."

A couple of minutes later, a vigorous plump old woman came in. She had long worked as director of the factory cafeteria. As soon as she walked in, she said, talking with a lisp, "Business begins with arguments. That's what I thought! Do you really think two policemen could work things out? Leonid, tell me what's going on. I am going to have to bring you out into the open ..."

Mr. Efimkin repeated his arguments and finished in a friendly

way by saying that their partner relations were still good, he appreciated them, but before playing the first business hand, everything had to be set straight to avoid any misunderstandings. “You sly thing, Leonid. But what will my family get for having your business registered in my name? And our Sergei, who sweats it out here from early morning? He’s been neglecting his wife for a month now. What does that mean, doesn’t that cost money? And what about electricity? And land rental? And Sergei’s authority—he’s a police captain after all . . . You, lad, get to work now to our benefit. If not, I’ll get rid of this amateur kitchen and I couldn’t care less about your business.”

“Let’s count how much a smokehouse employee costs. One hundred-one hundred and fifty dollars a month? Right?”

“But what if he’s a captain?” put in the old woman.

“So why does a captain, and a police captain at that, need this business?”

“But he is providing you with protection,” spat out the old bag.

“It is still not clear who is protecting whom,” shot back the bailiff. “Okay, let’s say a worker costs one hundred dollars a month plus two hundred dollars for protection. Is that okay?”

“Go on,” the mother-in-law pulled a pencil and notebook out of her pocket and began writing. “We pay equal amounts for electricity. What about land rent? The smokehouse is thirty-five square meters. One meter costs one dollar a month. Is that fair?”

“What forty-five meters are you talking about? And what about the firewood thrown around the grounds, and all the shavings? Who is going to pay for them?”

“Okay, I’ll add another five meters . . .” “Not five, ten.”

“Plus fifty-five dollars a month. What else?”

“The smokehouse pollutes the air and shortens my life! I demand money for vitamins, treatment, recuperation. Put that down.”

“Another one hundred dollars a month.”

“What can I buy with your one hundred dollars? Fiend! You’ll get a coffin without a lid. Add another hundred.”

“Some clarification—we are only talking about the months of the fishing season. From October to April, there is no work, so no payments,” Efimkin was beginning to get nervous.

“I don’t know, I don’t know, these days it’s still warm in October. The river does not stand still, last year there was a lot of fish to be had,” retorted the old woman, livening up.

“But what should I get? After all, the documents say I am the owner.”

“Fifty dollars a month...”

“No, I don’t agree. A hundred!”

“The budget won’t stretch to a hundred. Sixty!” puffed Leonid Ivanovich, turning crimson.

“We agree on eighty,” she held her chubby hand out to the bailiff and gave him a toothless smile. “So all in all, in addition to the shared profit, you should be giving our family six hundred and thirty-five dollars from the joint kitty. Plus expenses for electricity by the meter. Shake hands. I am going to finish watching my serial.”

“But we still haven’t decided,” said Efimkin anxiously.

“Give me time to think it over. Six hundred and thirty-five dollars plus electricity? So my monthly share of the expenses is a little over three hundred and seventy dollars... Am I going to agree to such a burden?”

Leonid Ivanovich stepped aside and began thinking. “This entire wretched business cost us eight hundred and seventy dollars. I contributed half, which makes four hundred and thirty-five bucks. This amount includes the money spent on three cubic feet of firewood, two tons of shavings, plus all kinds of other trifles... If I give the fish to someone else to smoke I won’t have any problems. I pay to have it smoked and that’s all. No medical treatment or other expenditures. I could even make an agreement for nine percent. Or go even further, make the smoker sell the fish that goes to paying my quota of the smoking through my channels. Wonderful! I will get a commission of seven or eight percent, or even more, for being an agent. The important thing here is who will be in charge of the smokehouse. I will have to find a suitable person. The best candi-

date would be an illegal worker. That would be three times cheaper than paying the captain and his mother-in-law. But Pogorelov might squeal on me, informing the powers that be that I am engaged in illegal business activity and sucker the poachers. What decision should I make? Wouldn't it be more practical to be the captain's direct boss for protection? Not a bad move! And sign a deed of ownership with the policeman. Have him take my share in the joint business with all the management expenses. He smokes me fish for a month for free and I give him all the rights to our illegal company. In that case, he will receive my share at a cheaper price than I paid for it and much cheaper than I evaluate it. And my evaluation is as follows: fifteen hundred dollars and not a ruble less. But he has to stop thinking about denouncing me, I'll have to give him some of my poacher customers for a while who don't have smokehouses. Some contracts require a personal signature. Supposedly for in-house use. He has no idea about any of that and will sign any invoice. He'll even sign receipt on the dotted line for money obtained for processing the fish. But if I have some serious compromising material against him, why do I need protection from his boss? I agree, I don't need it at all. To hell with it... I'll just make a copy of his invoices and before we part, that is, in a month, give them to him with a warning. 'Hey, you there, keep your mouth shut. Or you'll find yourself on the prison bench next to me.' In this way, I will not only raise business indices, but also be able to blow off any protection racket. And he will gain full ownership of the smokehouse. And pay only three hundred and seventy bucks instead of fifteen hundred... Maybe I could get more from him? I'll begin with three months. Then perhaps I will agree to two. Two months, that's 635 dollars. A bigger share in the smokehouse is not worth it. Fifteen hundred is the dream of any vendor. So? I think I have thought it all out wisely. Now I need to get my thoughts in order and tell Pogorelov."

The bailiff went back inside and told him his final decision. He was not expecting it to be accepted without any adjustments.

The partners knocked back a couple of shots to celebrate the

beginning of the smoking season. They didn't say much, some tension remained. Finally, Leonid Ivanovich decided to put an end to the silent feasting. He stood up and went home with one thought in his head—how to find a reliable and cheap smoker. He had to send a package to the Siberian Federal District in the morning. The goods had to be impeccable. He placed particular hopes on some tasty Siberian salmon. Mr. Efimkin was very interested in the new administrative resource. As he passed by deceased Fateeva's house, he stood and reflected for a while, saying to it, "I will get you, I will definitely get you," and with a sense of growing dignity sauntered off home.

He slept badly. It seemed he fell asleep quite quickly, but he woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep again. Unrelated fragments of memories from different times kept coming to mind. But sometimes it seemed that everything was falling into place in accordance with some pre-prepared plan. Mr. Efimkin woke up after he imagined himself becoming fantastically rich. In fact such dreams had not been a rarity during his last unemployed years. However, this time, not only did wealth not bring the newly baked civil servant joy, it rather depressed him in the most unpardonable way. "Why is that?" Leonid Ivanovich cried out in sincere indignation in his sleep. "Why has everything so radically changed?" He was robbed of his peace of mind and just could not get back to sleep. Now awake, his memory began tormenting him.

He had been sent on his first case with an experienced inspector. On the way out of town, a Mitsubishi jeep had knocked down and killed two pedestrians, a mother and her son. He had to examine the site along with the road traffic officials. On the way, the senior officer, saying he had some urgent business, got out of the car and told him to go on by himself to get some experience. When he arrived at the site, Efimkin met, to his surprise, only one road inspector and a junior sergeant at that. "According to the instructions, there should be officers here," he thought at the time. "And where is the jeep's driver?" he asked.

"How should I know. He's either run off, or he's disappeared ...

Here, take our initial measurements and unfinished report, I have to get back to my post...”

“Where are the officers?”

“How should I know, gone their own way... And I need to go too. They told me to tell you to finish up all the necessities yourself. Bye now!”

“Has an ambulance been called to take away the dead bodies?” asked Leonid Ivanovich.

“Yes, it will be here in a minute. I’m off...”

Efimkin was surprised to see that the inspection report did not give the license plate or make of the car. “Professionals, and they don’t know the simplest things.” When he finished gathering the evidence, he went to the department. The bosses were in no rush to take the case to pass it on to the investigators. A couple of days later it transpired that it was not a Mitsubishi jeep that had run down the pedestrians, but some unknown truck that had taken off after the accident.

“I have all the evidence, let’s call the vehicle owner in for questioning,” insisted Efimkin.

One well-wisher whispered to him in the hall, “Colleague, forget about this case. You can’t bring back the dead, and it was the son of a very high-standing boss who ran them down ...”

He was rushing to a summons. The district center of Obluchensk had tipped the department off that some businessmen were forcibly detaining deaf-and-dumb people and sending them to work at a ballpoint pen factory. They were treating them like feudal peasants, forcing them to work seventeen hours a day for bed and board. Some private security guards had put down a night rebellion instigated by the invalids, but two or three poor souls had managed to escape. No one knew where they were now, but someone had informed the man on duty at the police department of something by phone. Criminal investigation inspector Leonid Efimkin, who had been put on the case, knew that more than half of this information did not correspond to reality. He decided to go and check it out alone. It took his twenty-year-old business Volga more than an hour

to cover the forty kilometers. District centers in godforsaken Siberian holes all look alike. At best there will be one or two low brick buildings, all the rest are old sagging wooden houses. “Where can you find room to accommodate fifty workers here?” Efimkin thought skeptically to himself as he looked around after arriving in Obluchensk. The municipal administration building was already locked, the post office too. Leonid Ivanovich decided to go to the store. He might be a relatively young criminal investigation inspector, but he understood that there was no point in rushing to make known who he was. He would buy some crackers and a bottle of vodka, and do some chatting. “Hi there, blondie,” he said as he went in. “What do you have to drink?”

“Where are you from, you’re obviously not a local?”

“I was driving by and thought I would take a break and get myself a bite to eat.”

“And just where were you driving by to? Obluchensk is the end of the road. Further is only taiga... You’re not a mushroom-picker are you?”

The inspector sensed that the woman was a little drunk.

“I came looking for a bride. They say your town is full of pretty girls...” He took out some money and continued, “Give me something to drink, only nothing alcoholic.”

“What sort of guy are you if you don’t drink alcohol?”

“I am driving.”

“We recommend vodka for everyone whether they are driving or not. So tell me why you are here?”

“What, you don’t believe me?”

“Who would believe you? I am the only girl here. There are some young ones, of course. One is eleven, another nine, ha-ha!”

“Are you going to give me something to drink?”

“Only vodka, we don’t sell non-alcoholic swills to men. Over there, there’s a big sign on the door... You know what my advice is, get out of here as quickly as you can. You think I don’t see you are a cop? They’re the only sober ones around here, and not all of them, only ones that don’t belong here. Some sober guy shows up, asks

for lemonade... What am I supposed to think of him? That he is an artist? Why has he come here? A business man? There's no business here! A postman? Our local one goes on foot. A tram driver? Ha-ha! Who can some stranger be, and sober at that, and driving a bedraggled Volga? A cop! Cop! Either get out or tell me why you've come? I only have to give the sign and even your innards will be scratched and bruised. And your bones will be smashed to smithereens like an empty bottle..."

"I've been told that there are some unregistered people in your settlement."

"You hear what the newcomer is saying Vovka? He's talking about illegal people!"

Three pie-eyed sturdy lads came out of the storeroom, "Tell us why you came. Or we'll beat you up," said one of them in a bass voice, grinning.

"I've already said, I am checking on illegal migrants in the settlement."

"Stop taking us for a ride, tell us why you came, we're asking," repeated the man with the bestial grin. The policeman did not say anything. He was only surprised at how unlike these people he was. "We're going to have to beat an admission out of you... Get your fists ready," the same guy instructed. The three moved toward the inspector. "Careful lads, I'm armed..."

"Oh, he's armed as well, what are we paying you for, you crummy bug... So that you come to us armed. Take that..."

Efimkin woke up late at night. He was lying on the back seat of his Volga. He could not find his pistol or official identification. He reeked of stale alcohol. Leonid Ivanovich felt rather like a broken bottle. It seemed he had been torn apart and thrown into the car. It took him a long time to gather his wits. At last, he sat up. He got out of the car with difficulty in order to sit in the driver's seat. When he opened the driver's door, the light went on in the car. On the seat was a sheet of paper. "A report!" Efimkin threw the paper aside. "Bastards! They poured vodka into me and wrote a report..." The inspector started the car and set off for the police station. He was

dying to raise the whole investigative team and immediately set off to catch the criminals. Seven kilometers along the way, he was stopped at the road inspection post. Efimkin had no identification to show. He reeked of liquor. His face was all bloodied. His left headlight was smashed, the hood was dented. He was taken in handcuffs to the station where he served. The next morning, the bosses would not accept the report Leonid Ivanovich wrote about what happened. However, some pensioner, a war veteran appeared in the station and witnessed that Efimkin had bought a bottle of vodka, and instead of money had left his police identification as a deposit. According to the pensioner, Leonid Ivanovich handed over his gun for a second bottle. The shopkeeper said that the customer was rude, came on to her and wanted to rape her. His colleagues understood that this was all pure lies, but they could not do anything. Someone had given orders for the case to be closed and the young employee to be given a severe reprimand.

Leonid Ivanovich had barely recovered from that night, his hands were still bandaged, when something else happened. A new hotel with twenty-seven rooms opened in Barabinsk. In local terms, this was a noteworthy event. Turks had finished building it, furniture had been brought from China, and the staff was trained in Ekaterinburg. Soon this establishment became a constant target of city gossip. One morning the deputy head instructed Efimkin to investigate a scandal at the hotel. "There's been some trouble, the staff is asking for help. Go see what's going on, only don't get involved..." The policeman walked to the hotel, the case did not seem to be too difficult. "Either a customer is refusing to pay, or is unhappy with the service and giving vent to his feelings," he thought. But everything proved very different. The evening before, a dozen respectable gentlemen who had come to town in splendid cars for some audit from This Party had been carousing in their rooms. First some young people had brought in crates of all kinds of food and drink, then the guests had showed up. The party went on all night, things were smoking. In the morning the guests left, and the hotel staff were in shock. The tables, beds, and bedside

stands had been used to open beer bottles, the new furniture had been broken, light fixtures smashed, mattresses torn, there were cigarette burns on the table cloths, the sheets were smeared with either blood, or wine. Baths had overflowed and the water seeped down to the lower floors and several toilets had been cracked. There were slogans scrawled in lipstick on the mirrors, "Vote for This Party!" Pieces of meat and vegetables had been trodden into the carpets. The room keys had disappeared... The tears and hysterics of the hotel staff and owners were understandable—urgent repairs were needed and a complete set of new furniture. The owners—two widows of officers who had been killed in hotspots—were asking for help. The tight deadlines for paying back loans did not permit them to close for even a week. And now they would have to close the business for a few months and take out new loans. The inspector invited attesting witnesses and wrote a report, establishing the damage. He worked on this for more than three hours. Then he asked the names of the guests in the unfortunate rooms. It turns out they had registered under a request from This Party of the following content: "Please accommodate 14 participants of the Duma-2008 conference." In order to establish the identity of the guests, he had to call the regional department. The inspector introduced himself, explained what had happened, and asked for the names of the guests who had spent the night at the Barabinsk hotel. This began a huge scandal. He had not imagined the aggressive reach of the state machinery. In a couple of hours the town was full of district defense and security officers. The prosecutor started yelling about how cheap provocations would not be allowed before the elections. The deputy governor confiscated the hotel's license and said that this facility was self-built and the furniture was imported in violation of the customs legislation. (But just a week ago, he had opened it ceremoniously and called it the first swallow on the business field of our town in his speech.) The head of the district department of internal affairs fired Efimkin on a backdated aggregate of disciplinary violations and instigated a criminal case against the hotel owners for participating in illegal business. The

mayor of Barabinsk himself knocked down the sign of the Dear Heart Hotel with a hammer. And the military inspection officer sent new recruits to haul the damaged furniture out into the yard and burn it.

So all evidence of the riotous behavior was removed, and Leonid Ivanovich was left without a job. At first, he felt very ashamed. But then he took to rethinking life anew, but not according to books and articles of the law, but according to the way it was in reality. Whom should he serve in his own Homeland? This was his main thrust of thought. After spending a month in this deep thought, Efimkin understood that he could not expect the municipal authorities to save him. He would have to crawl out of his hole himself. After cardinally changing his worldview, he decided to engage exclusively in his own person.

IN PURSUIT OF FREEDOM

Gregory Semyonovich Pomeshkin always woke up with a feeling of joy. As soon as he opened his eyes, he was filled with a strong conviction that he was a magnificent adornment to the world. And he often saw himself as a unique creation in his dreams too. Whereas an ordinary mortal usually wakes up and rub his eyes with the desire to do something routine, like brush his teeth or release the slag accumulated overnight into the toilet, Gregory Semyonovich woke up taking immense joy in the very fact of his existence. He lived happily with this feeling, paying no attention to the world around him, and even disdaining it.

Gregory Semyonovich was nothing to look at, he had no special quality that distinguished him from other people. He was of medium height, ordinary build, with a snub nose, small brown eyes, protruding ears, and a large, wide mouth. There was always dandruff on Mr. Pomeshkin's shoulders, his shirt collar had a glossy unwashed sheen, and his hands were covered in eczema spots. But he was so in love with himself that no one else could arouse sexual feelings in him. It was not surprising that Gregory Semyonovich often masturbated while looking at himself in the mirror. He was thirty years old, but he had never given any thought to a career. After struggling his way through school, Gregory lost all interest in studying, although he always made quite decent grades. The young man wanted to read certain authors, but he was told to read entirely different ones, and with moralizing and speculative political slogans to boot. Young Greg thought that only lazy and well-off blockheads were capable of studying all kinds of hogwash. One rainy day he stopped studying and subsequently spent his time at home reading dubious books. He did not socialize with anyone, did not open up to anyone, and for seven years now considered all people, even his grandmother with whom he lived and who fed him, damaged goods.

So, after waking up, Gregory Semyonovich again joyfully convinced himself how absurd the world would look without him in it. What is more, while waking up, the young man considered this vital topic from the most different viewpoints, combining hate with irony. And this morning was no exception. He went out onto the porch. The air was fresh. The early morning stillness always gave our protagonist a pleasant feeling of pacification. True, Gregory Semyonovich understood that this was a very illusive state. He glanced with vexation at the cloudless sky, looked at the houses nearby, smirked at the neighbor's dog, spat at a car standing outside the gates, swore at the authorities, shook his fist at the occasional person who walked by, and threw out his favorite phrase, "Perishable creations! I hate you all!" Thus he charged himself with the necessary amount of aggression and went back into the house. Only when he went into the bathroom and saw himself in the mirror did he perk up. He began smiling. His eyes lit up. He stroked himself approvingly on the head. He covered his own hands in passionate kisses, then, bending over, licked his knees in ecstasy. He smacked his lips, blew himself a kiss, and closed his eyes with a sigh. Then he pulled himself together. He recalled that today was his day off and a thought he had been nurturing since his last shift came to him again. Mr. Pomeshkin worked as a guard for the traffic department on the bridge over the River Kan. Every three days he took up his guard post where he had more than enough time to think about the world and about himself. The young man enhanced his world with the use of a pair of powerful binoculars he always carried with him. They offered him a wonderful opportunity to observe life in the town in the minutest details. Gregory Semyonovich had even learned to lip read, so he was able to find out almost everything about anyone he focused his keen attention on. The few shelves in his small room were stacked with folders holding photographs and records of conversations. Pomeshkin's way of evaluating the things he observed was extremely complicated; not many could understand what aroused extreme despondence, a state of high excitement, or complete indifference in him—this remained a mystery.

Gregory Semyonovich, of course, knew very well that a new water bailiff, Mr. Efimkin, had arrived in Kan and begun performing his official duties. So he decided to watch him closely on his very first day off. “What has brought this extremely unpleasant character to the banks of the Kan?” grumbled Pomeskin. With his binoculars round his neck, he stepped out of his house and headed for the observation deck. Passing the station, he bumped into someone who was obviously not a local. “Excuse me, I was so busy watching the hot fight going on at the waste container,” he said, looking around in confusion. “Where can I find a taxi here? And are there any taxis here? This is my first time in the provinces...” Mr. Pomeskin did not reply, sneered at the stranger’s Moscow accent, gave him a disdainful look, noting that he was dressed in expensive clothes, not like the locals, and quickly moved away. “What kind of weirdo has come to our town?” he surmised. “With an ugly bag, and holding a sack rather fervently to his chest. Inflamed eyes, as though he’s sick or been crying. I’ll have to keep my eye on this schizophrenic. The people our crazy world produces. Another bastard? He’s probably also come to our parts to see what he can lay his hands on. What else do people come to Kan for? True, the stage for stealing in our town is rotting, not very stable, but it is still standing. You can do a single turn here and then move on. There are plenty more scraggly towns along the Trans-Siberian railroad, most of them are on their last legs, but you can still find something to grab. And if that character from Moscow has run away, it means he is a loser. People like him steal with a vengeance, grabbing whatever they can get their hands on. They have the appetite of starving dogs.”

Irritated, he walked on through the dusty, pot-holed, streets. He arrived at the dilapidated building, looked it over, and chastised it in a friendly way, “Who, apart from me, shows an interest in you, my friend? Everyone else looks at you in disdain or with indifference. While I spend all my free time visiting you. Value our relationship, old man! Let’s see what’s going on in this awful world today. Unfortunately, I am unable to drastically change it, although

I would really like to ... I would never try to change you though. I like you just the unkempt way you are. If you were brought up to European standards, given new walls and roof, there would be many people wishing to buy your living space. And I would lose my only friend. No, that's not in my interests! So go on standing here derelict and unneeded by anyone. Forgive me, dear friend, you are only needed by me ...” The young man unhurriedly climbed up to the ramshackle attic of the three-story semi-dilapidated residential building he had so touchingly addressed, laid his notebook and pen out in front of him, and began fervently looking through the binoculars. “I have a difficult, but unusual task today. I have to watch two targets at once. Whereas the behavior of the government official is quite predictable, the second target is a total mystery. The stranger seemed suspicious to me. Will I be able to understand him? Intensify and generalize my impression of him, get to the gist of him? Although most people are basically the same. I have a tickle in my throat. Surely I am not getting nervous?” Another, habitual question immediately formed in his head, “But why I am watching them all, keeping notes on everyone? Writing up detailed accounts of their actions and words? What is this obsession I have? Probably to prove to myself again that the world around me is full of shit, does not deserve the least respect, and is powerless in the face of my main conviction that ‘Man, I hate you! I will prove that you are guilty! Only I deserve love and respect in this world.’” At this point, Gregory Semyonovich picked up a pencil with his right hand, as was his habit, and began skillfully managing the binoculars with his left.

On Sunday, Kan woke up slowly. The cloud-shrouded sun shyly lit up the almost deserted streets. The end of May had dressed the trees in green. The birches began whispering in the spring-warm breeze, the pines were growing new needles, and violet candles were stretching skyward in the roadside grass—the lupine, Siberia's first flower, was in bloom. The rampant woodland undergrowth crowned with Siberian basalt teeth ran down to the bulrush-endowed river banks. The expansive river that flowed off into mist-

filled distance seemed to reflect the endlessness of Pomeshkin's unusual task. Gregory Semyonovich's binocular lenses drew him to the house where Mr. Efimkin lived. He could not see the landlord and began examining the route the new water bailiff normally took. He found the bailiff's boat moored in the mouth of the Chernuskha, a smaller river that ran into the Kan. The bailiff's vessel was moored in a small bay concealed by supple bulrush. A boat-hook would be needed to pull it up to the small berth. "So he isn't on duty yet," thought Gregory Semyonovich angrily and moved the binoculars back to Leonid Ivanovich's house. At this point, Pomeshkin happened to notice the face of that same young man he had bumped into that morning in the station square in the garden of recently deceased old woman Fateeva. The stranger, covered in sweat and constantly sniffing, was going to town on Fateeva's garden. "What is he doing there, and with a spade no less? He has absolutely no idea how to use it, and he is obviously nervous. Perhaps he's looking for buried treasure? Old woman Fata made a pretty penny buying and selling all kinds of haberdashery. Wait a minute, she had a grandson! He lived somewhere in the west, either in Bryansk or Kaluga. No, no, this character looks nothing like him. Fateeva's grandson was a burly chap, a downright monument to the conqueror of Siberia. But this guy is some sort of wimp. And he's sweating, as though he's not too healthy. This stranger has intrigued me. I wonder what he's doing here? Why has he come?"

After looking a little closer, Pomeshkin was surprised at the short breath and morbid paleness of the new arrival and had to admit, "He looks rather like me... But I don't have his sweatiness and paleness. All the same, I hate you all!" He recalled the water bailiff once more and shifted his binoculars to Efimkin's presumed path of movement. The second attempt proved successful. Pomeshkin saw Leonid Ivanovich coming out of the gates of the district policeman's garden. The bailiff had a self-satisfied look on his face, as though determined to take care of some urgent task. Gregory Semyonovich immediately set his sights on Efimkin and began closely following his movement along the sunny streets of

Kan. In order to experience delight, all he had to do was think up graphic examples of mankind's boundless baseness. "For I know very well why people take such jobs," he smirked to himself. "They want to steal and share the loot. Civil service provides ample opportunities for illegal business—make yourself rich! And it doesn't matter who takes that path—Efimkin, Murkin, Purkin, or Gurkin. They all have one dream—stuffing their pockets as full as they can. There's nothing else doing! And how could there be? The whole country has become fundamentally immersed in this crazy passion. Only I, Pomeschkin, do not give a hoot about material wellbeing, about all the splendors of the commodity and property world, about capitalization itself! About rubles and dollars, pounds and yuan, may they all be damned for eternity! They are the main culprits, the ones defacing civilization. But I would do better to think about that on a work day while I am on duty. I always have plenty of time for that. Now, however, I am extremely interested in the new-baked residents of Kan. I will keep a file on each of them. It will be interesting to know which of them proves to be the biggest scoundrel. I can only imagine what an awful character that new bailiff is, but I need weighty proof to underpin my presumptions. And what about the second? What kind of migrant bird is he? What criminal plans is he hatching? There must be some secretive idea that forced this strange creature to leave the capital. I must understand him, dig down to the depths. Because I hope that one fine day I can present both of them with indisputable accusations! And prove to myself again that there is nothing more monstrous on earth than human beings! I am a full-fledged Homo sapiens, but around me, to my great chagrin, I meet only deformed likenesses of the representatives of this species ..." Pomeschkin's face distorted in a grimace. He pressed the binoculars closer to his eyes, grabbed his pencil, and became immersed in contemplation.

What did the author of the Gospels mean when he wrote, "So be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect?" I thought, smiling ironically. Surely in two thousand years not one member of the

clergy or even some intelligent Christian has understood the meaning of these simple words calling us to perfect ourselves not so much spiritually as biologically and, primarily, even physically!?

At that very moment, Professor Koshmarov, my mysterious visitor, appeared before my eyes. The bespectacled gentleman's squished nose seemed to have grown even more crimson. But I paid absolutely no attention to this. I was interested in something else, "Why has he shown up so unexpectedly? Why has he come? What topic of conversation will he begin? He always has something strange in mind."

"You, Peter Petrovich, are taking up a lot of my time," the professor began. "I am extremely interested in an important national project—improvement of the Kan population. But we will talk about this main vector of research later. In order to prepare a high-quality proposal, I need to inform you of a few details that in time will form the basis of my concept. Are you ready to cooperate? We managed quite well in the past, and we have taken the first steps."

"What awaits me today?"

"Only some open discussion. What do you understand by God? I appeared after I heard your question about what the Gospel means by 'So be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.' Are you ready for an argument on this subject?"

"Go ahead!"

"Can I start?"

"I have no objections."

"To begin with I would like to ask, what is He beyond His moral demands, appeals, and instructions? There is no chance of talking to Him, there is never any opportunity to meet him, there is no hope of hearing His voice, shaking His hand, taking a look at how He writes, seeing His footprints, or sensing His smell. No one is able to do that. For it is impossible to touch air, so it follows that the Holy Heavenly Spirit cannot be touched either."

"Not the Spirit! The Lord—God-Man called Himself the Son of Man," I objected. "He was a being clothed in human flesh. All of Christianity is based on the dogma of divine embodiment. This is

the cornerstone of a grandiose structure that has been erected for more than two thousand years now. It is no accident that the Birth of Christ, birth of the Lord on earth, birth in the image of a God-Infant, is the greatest church celebration.”

“But how can we then become like Him? You asked the right question,” the professor said, looking at me with a cunning smile. “How are we supposed to pull ourselves up by the hair, the ears, to His divine level? Become perfect and ideal? And who should we then believe, whom should we worship, if everyone becomes like Him, and you yourself will not be any different from Him? Does the Universe need so many people in His likeness? But he demands that we become like him! He even threatens us with eternal hell ... Or should we operate from apophatic, constant denial, telling ourselves, no, He is not that one, or that one, or the one over there, and certainly not that one, and definitely not who you imagined... There is no need to look for Him, we are at such a low level of consciousness that we will never be able to hear Him or meet Him. But how can we become as perfect as Him then? If our minds are not capable of even distinguishing Him? If we cannot imagine what He looks like, where He lives, His character, the language He converses in. How can we be like nothing, but at the same time like absolutely everything? Does this not mean that the Lord has begun revealing himself to us too soon? He did not mean for us to understand Him, but merely wanted to show us that soon we will be replaced by a very different being who is capable of understanding Him and becoming the same as Him. If He is who He is, He must be an entity. And if He is an entity, He must be located somewhere, somewhere very specific. We cannot presume that He is absolutely Everything! In that case we are a microscopic part of Him, and if we are a part of Him, how can we perfect ourselves apart from Him? By perfecting ourselves and becoming like Him, can we really preserve Him? Will we not destroy Him utterly? And if we destroy Him, can He really want, moreover, demand, under threat of severe punishment, that instead of Him alone there appear billions like Him? You cannot ask one of your own moles, earlobes,

or body cells to become the same as yourself. That is total nonsense!”

“Only absurd at first glance,” flashed through my mind. “A part can be commensurable with the whole. Not only do mystics talk about this, but contemporary scientists do too. Let’s recall the holograph. The church teaches that thanks to the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the whole of Christ is invariably present in each particle of the sacred gifts—the body and blood of Christ—the fullness of His divine blessing. But do I want to get into this discussion now? No, no, it is not my subject!”

“But if He is not one or the other, and not anything whatsoever, how should we all, or I by myself, strive to be like Him?” the bespectacled gentleman went on heatedly. “Not this, or that, or anything at all? I can only become that after I undergo total decomposition, after even my bones turn to dust. But in that case, I come to the awful conclusion that He is us in decomposed form. Perhaps this is why we are just unable to conquer death? Through death we become Him? The more of us who die, the more powerful He becomes? Only in death do we become as perfect as He? When the Holy Scriptures call for us to become like Him, they are warning us to preserve our mortality. Otherwise He cannot be perfect, because His perfection is created by the total mass of human substance. This means He is not life, but death! By creating us, He is able to gather gray matter little by little, bit by bit in order to enrich and perfect Himself. So the Lord exists with a minus sign. So our insignificant mind, by coming together, fusing, perfects Him. We can innocently believe that we are the material from which unearthly power is molded. He created us as a factory for cultivating the intellect. From Russians, He perfected Himself using Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tchaikovsky, Tolstoy, Kandinsky. From Germans, He took Kant, Beethoven, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, from the French he chose Descartes, San Simone, Hugo, Proust, from Italians, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Verdi, Vivaldi, Morricone, and so on and so forth. From billions and billions of people, that is, from his own flower garden, He takes a few hundred of the brightest bulbs and

continues His own perfection. Of course, someone will stupidly say, but what use is a dead person? Ha-ha! He takes a blend of sperm from the specific bulb that a genius grows from and implants it in Himself! For it is a factory mutation product, and He is capable of discovering the secret of its chemical component without any particular difficulty. Why else would He need to produce man? What's the point? To create the likes of Himself? But what for? If He is everything! Rubbish, rubbish! But there must be a reason! Yes, yes, indeed! I can presume that the reason is His desire for his own perfection. If everything tends toward qualitative growth, He must also ascend. For the entire Universe is constantly growing, complicating its essence and form, if we are all in Him, so He should be in all of us. But if He is in all of us, and it seems this goes without saying, He must also be in poppy head. In that very opium milk without which you cannot live. And if that is so, of which there can be no doubt, the fantasies of your opium-inflamed mind are also working for His development. Of course, barely perceptible, hard to define, almost illusively, but with some small secretive aspect that influences Him or interests Him. I am sure that this is precisely how it is!"

The professor finished his metaphysical tirade with the words, "However, I sense that this question does not interest you in the slightest. This is unfortunate. It holds the secret to human life. I will take my leave, but not for long. I want to prepare you for an extremely important mission. It will result in a fantastic strengthening of the national ethnicity."

He fell silent, as though falling deep into thought, and then quickly disappeared.

"And believers say that man perfects himself by the grace of God through life and thanks to life," I thought anxiously. "Death can be considered the continuation of life in a new form. Perhaps this is why the Paschal greeting says, 'by death he has trampled on death.'" They believe that all the dead shall rise. Only this presumption has absolutely no effect on me. But why did the professor choose this topic? Yes, yes, what for? To bolster my opium pas-

sions? I am not the only one interested in this state, he is also interested. Or am I only talking to myself and using every excuse to convince myself that my interest in poppy head is not the morbid onslaught of a lonely weirdo, a hermit, but a small part of the global development of the Universe?"

As soon as Koshmarov vanished, an extremely unusual thought entered my excited head that I had never had before. I even shouted from its unexpected insistence and instantly suspected that the professor had implanted it. What if I leave Him two things when I die? The first—a composition of my own mutation. He will receive it Himself, if He wants. And the second—a mutational cocktail of my offspring. But I am going to have to participate in that. No matter how apathetic I am about sex, I am going to have to urge myself on if I want to engage in this extremely important undertaking. At the moment of orgasm I must be at the highest level of opium intoxication so that my thoughts soar to the clouds, my nose constantly itches, and feelings heightened by ecstasy become transformed into sexual excitement. In that case, I can hope that the mutational bouquet will be typical Parfenchikov. I must admit, however, that I can't recall the last time I had an erection. And will I ever have another one? Perhaps I am no longer capable? A pity ... Distracting myself from this nonsensical reflection, I thought that He is also far from sex and is even sexless. But if we are supposed to become like Him? Like Him in everything? Then maybe I have taken the first step. I am no longer very interested in sexual arousal. Some will say that the poppy milk is to blame. But the magical flower is also His creation... A moment later, a new thought pushed out all the others. "Thank God, Peter Petrovich, if your capacity for sexual arousal has ultimately been lost... You should rejoice. The white monks also purged themselves of carnal thoughts in order to devote their minds, their entire lives to Him. While I am dreaming with all my emotions and the entire force of my intellect of using the magical, amazing plant that begins with the letter P." I have no idea why I began so unexpectedly to think about sex. Perhaps these doubts had long crept into my subconscious, but this was the first time I had

consciously admitted it so honestly, as though being released from something that had been so deeply pestering me. In any case, in order not to reject the experiment with producing an heir in a state of high excitement, I quickly opened the sack and swallowed three spoonfuls of the powdered poppy head. “I am going to have to devote the necessary time to this subject. But now I need to think about where I am going to find a suitable woman for implanting my unusual seed. Of course, it would be less bothersome to do it in vitro. No courting, no feelings, just cold calculation. And what about her, the future mother? What can I tempt a woman with? With the ideas of a stranger? With my unappealing body and generally unimpressive appearance? With empty pockets? With powdered poppy head? What should I offer her so that she’ll agree to conception? For I am nothing, I’m bankrupt. A total loner, nothing in the world interests me, apart from *that main thing*. What can I offer a woman so that she will agree to bear my child? The situation is aggravated by the fact that I personally have absolutely no need for a baby. I thought it up only as a bold experiment, a gift to Him, and nothing more. My decision is based on the provoking lines from the Bible, “So be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.” It seems to me that this is only possible with the help of the most wonderful product, especially created for that noble goal—opium milk. This wondrous building material has been created by Him in order to appease the imagination. With its help man perfects himself and comes closer to Him. What else can this divine product serve? It is important to remember that the wondrous milk is not an artificial commodity that alchemists, practitioners of black magic, and all manner of servers of Satan have conjured up, but something indigenously natural that has been filled with fantastical power in the Lord’s oven, the sun, soaked up mysterious magic under His cover, the starry sky, and tied with deep roots to the Earth, the greatest creation in the Universe.

At this juncture, an incredible force compelled me to reach for the sack. I quickly, as though satisfying acute hunger, deftly helped by my index finger, stuffed three spoonfuls of the dry power into

my mouth, and swallowed them without difficulty. After waiting a while, I again wanted to think about the woman and my own offspring. “If, for thousands of years, man has sacrificed infants to the gods, I am the first to sacrifice a child not to the afterlife, but to real life,” I thought, beginning another phase in my reflection, but was unable to take it any further. Everyday images began crowding my mind. I had worked pretty well yesterday. I had dug up a quarter of the field and planted the Kashkar poppy. It was arduous work, my arms were still aching. The earth was like stone, as though no one had touched it for many years. True, a small area before a birch stump had been extremely easy to dig. If the whole plot had been that soft, I could have dug it up in a day. When my treasure starts to sprout, I will arrange ritual dances with a fire and sacrificial offerings. I will sprinkle ten table spoons of powdered poppy in a thin layer, like butter on bread, in a frying pan. When the sun reaches the horizon, and the red rays touch the koknar and fiery sparks begin to play in its fine, pearl-like, grains, I will light a poppy stem to bring the god of fertility an aromatic, intoxicating sacrifice. They say that the ritual of those obsessed by the extravagant flower promotes a good harvest. But now I need to get up, the May morning has long been pouring its bright light on the Siberian expanses, so it is time to take up the spade and continue my life’s mission—planting opium poppy.

I got up, felt the ache of my muscles and stubbornly went out into the yard. On the way, I remembered that in the last two days I had only eaten a few cookies and drunk some cold tea and water from the well. “But I have no desire to eat,” I noted. “I have a few hundred rubles left, I’ll have to buy some cheap tea, bread, and sugar. A cup of tea after koknar is a dream!” I picked up the spade and began digging. When I tired, I took some poppy seeds out of my pocket and assiduously pushed them into the dug-up ground, planting one seed every seven centimeters. This painstaking, exhausting, and boring work brought me a feeling of delight. When the sun hit its zenith, I was once more close to that same birch stump around which the earth seemed so much softer yesterday

than in other areas of the yard I had dug up. The spade went in easily, even disappeared into the ground as though I were digging peat. Although I saw that it was earth, not peat, that stuck to the spade, I nevertheless picked up a clump and squeezed it. "I am an urban resident, but I still feel the earth in my hands. Dense but soft. Black earth! Perhaps someone worked on it recently? Of course, not yesterday, but last fall or spring. And what if something is buried here? The very thing I am looking for day and night? I suddenly thought. Raw opium, a sack of koknar, pressed slabs of opiate, powdered poppy head, an inflamed mind, pages covered in the secrets of cultivating the magical plant, opium milk in a thermos, a basement full of dry, chocolate-streaked heads of the divine flower... I don't need anything else. I have never dreamed of anything else!" I began fervently working with the spade, like a small excavator, the hole became deeper and deeper. Suddenly the metal blade of the spade struck something hard. A scrape was heard. My heart froze. I was breathing heavily. Was I about to find what my heart desired? Throwing aside the spade, I bent down to touch my find as though it were some narcotic wonder. I found myself clutching an iron box. Without moving, I did not take my eyes off it. I was in a temporary stupor. Finally, in extreme agitation, I began to brush the earth off my find and soon felt a padlock. "How can I open it?" I immediately thought. Grabbing the spade, I began feverishly trying to break into the box. The smell of opium was driving me crazy. It seemed the divine commodity was somewhere close. A few minutes later, the padlock gave way. I grabbed the lid and instantly opened it. To my surprise and disappointment, the box was stuffed with Russian banknotes. Bank-sealed stacks of thousand-ruble notes filled the entire box. And I had almost been sure I would find a stash of opium. Stalling for a while, I nevertheless began examining the money I had found. I knew that my face had turned pale yellow in bewilderment. It always took on that morbid color at critical times. "Money will also come in handy," I thought. "I can use it to buy plots of land and expand my poppy fields. The bigger the harvest, the faster I can go from koknar to pure opium, gathering only

the milk of the pale blue flower in glass bottles. And when it dries I will clean it, rolling it into wondrous balls the size of chicken eggs. One ball will last a week. Fifty-two balls will last a year. I will have to prepare eight balls as presents. Who knows who I will meet here in Kan. And if I don't meet anyone, I can always treat myself, that is acceptable enough. Ten hectares will allow me to cultivate enough to last me for five years. I do not think I will live any longer than that. I will have ruminated over every conceivable topic of existence in that time. Why exhaust the mind a second time around? But in what extraordinary satisfaction, with what intoxicating delight I will spend these years! With such a commodity it will be easy to reach an unprecedentedly inflamed state. And I don't need anything else in life. I will heat the house with poppy stems. Its gentle fragrant warmth will bring comfort to the home. Will I recall the false world around me while spending time so magnificently? No! Never! Thank goodness, it will remain beyond the bounds of my consciousness."

I began avidly imagining the satisfaction to come. Ideas of how to purchase another plot of land filled my mind. I wondered about buying a tractor to dig up the field myself, instead of hiring laborers. I am having trouble working one hectare, and here I will have ten. Without hiring help or machinery, it will be very difficult, simply impossible, to work over one hundred thousand square meters by myself. And why go to the trouble? Now I have money. I wonder how much is here? I'll have to take the box into the house to count it. And I can count the stacks, not the individual notes. There is one hundred thousand rubles in each. I picked up the box, took it into the house and, after counting, determined how much I had gained. It was a simply incredible amount in my unenviable position. There were five stacks in one pile. Multiply by five piles in a row. And there was a total of fifteen rows in the box. That came to a total of three hundred and seventy-five stacks of one hundred thousand rubles each. So I was in possession of thirty-seven million five hundred thousand rubles, or around one-and-a-half million dollars. "Fateeva was a rich woman," I smirked. "What should I do with so

much money? And do I need it? A hectare of land in Kan costs no more than two hundred bucks. Ten hectares is only two thousand dollars. Plus a tractor—another five thousand. Of course, the chances of me being able to conceive a child have now grown. The government now pays new mothers eleven thousand dollars for giving birth. I will add another twenty, or even thirty or fifty thousand. So finding a woman who will agree to give me a child for that money won't be difficult. The main thing is that she not expect any lovey-dovey from me or want to be kissing me. But what shall I do with the rest? I swore not to return to reality at any cost, but remain only in the wonderful world of my imagination.

Closing the box, I pushed it under the bed and decided to go into town. I needed to do some shopping, stop by the real estate office, and take a look at the local girls. The day is long, I will have enough time to dig up the yard and plant all the poppy before nightfall. Oh, how I dream of seeing it all a-grow with budding plants. It is an immense pleasure to watch poppy head grow. First it is the size of a pea, then a cherry, just a little more and it is the size of a walnut, and then a whole fist. I was overcome with delight. After all, narcotics are one of the most important components of energy, and its opium flow is part of the trinity of life—energy, matter, and information.

Kan was the first provincial town I had ever been in. It was a cheerlessly hot day, glazed over with an oil-fired stench coming from the river port. The rusty dead cranes looked like enormous wizened poplars. There were very few people about, the movement of life seemed to have been interrupted, a kind of unhealthy enervation pervaded. I sauntered along the sidewalk. There was no asphalt, but the dirt was well-packed, though yielding, like the soil in deceased Fateeva's yard. "My charming plant could also be grown here! If only some daring soul would plant opium poppy in all the free spaces in town. And why only in the town, why not the whole of Western Siberia?" were the thoughts that came unexpectedly to mind. I began to suspect that I could be that very person. I took great delight in the thought. Finding it difficult to differentiate between bold fantasies and bleak reality, I wandered on. Down below,

between the basalt cliffs, where I glanced now and again, flowed the languid waters of the Kan. The colorful skirts and long, still spring-white legs of the girls walking across the bridge were reflected on its unruffled, turquoise-glinting surface. They were reflected so vibrantly and clearly that I had to look away. “Or someone will think I am interested in women,” I thought, looking around in vexation. Fields stretched out to the right of the Kan. Last year’s gray haystacks looked like dirty marks on the green carpet of emerging crops. Soon I found a grocery store. I helped myself to gingerbread, crackers, tea, sugar, bread, some apple jam, and a bag of prunes to help with constipation. A young woman moved quickly to take up her place at the till. I noticed that her left leg was bowed. A thought zipped like lightning through my mind, “She won’t refuse. I need to propose to her. She needs money and is unlikely to have a boyfriend. Her, her! Go on! Never mind that she has a slight physical defect. I am not looking for love, I am not choosing some beauty, I am not dreaming of a fantastic sex life, I just want to conceive a child. For Him! The child itself and the mother’s future do not concern me in the least. After all, who else will agree to have anything to do with me, who will want to have a child from such a nondescript person as I? Go on, Peter Petrovich... But won’t she laugh right in my face, won’t she burst at the seams as she yells, ‘You dolt! Get lost!’ Or worse, spit with hatred in my unsightly face. Then I will abandon the very idea. No! I must not rush. I need to look around first, I have time ...”

The lame girl deftly sat down at the cash register and, after throwing me a quick look, greeted me with, “Will this be all? Shall I tally up?”

“Yes!” I replied.

“I see you are not from around here. So I can tell you that we receive bread deliveries every day. That way you can always buy it fresh. Although, perhaps you are not buying it for yourself...” Her thin upper lip, which was not at all in fashion by the capital’s standards, trembled. I found it very enticing. Then I suddenly thought, “Indeed, why do I need to be buying three loaves?”

“You’re right. I took them without thinking. I would put two loaves back. Can I?”

“Leave them here, I’ll put them back...”

“I arrived a couple of days ago, now I can’t recall when precisely...” I explained for no known reason. And indeed I could not in fact remember when I had arrived. “And the house is empty, not a crumb. So I got carried away ...”

“So what have you been eating then? Air?” she smiled, but quickly clapped her hand over her mouth.

“I don’t need much,” I replied, noting her provincial mannerisms. No one in the capital would do such a thing.

“And you live alone?” she continued, beginning to print out the check.

“Physically alone, but my head is full of the most diverse thoughts, so I do not feel lonely at all.” I had no idea why I was being so candid with her.

“But you probably have a television or radio, don’t you?” she burst out, her blue eyes widening.

“I don’t think so. But I don’t like them.”

“What, you don’t even listen to music?”

“No, I agree, that is a bit strange. But the voices in my own head are enough for me.”

“You seem very unusual to me ... Five hundred and forty-three rubles please...”

I put my six hundred rubles on the counter. When she had counted out the change, I suddenly grabbed her hand, and totally unconsciously, as though raving, covered it with kisses, after which I rushed out of the shop.

“What a crazy thing to do, Parfenchikov. What’s the matter with you? Have you lost it?” I admonished myself when I had caught my breath and recovered. “How do you explain such nonsensical behavior? This is not the Peter Petrovich I know, or perhaps I don’t know you at all. What kind of person are you? You’ve lived for almost thirty years and you haven’t figured yourself out? You haven’t identified all the mysteries of your own passions, haven’t

looked into all the dark corners of your Parfenchikov soul, haven't discovered all the mystery of the impulses that cause inappropriate behavior. Where did I get that despicable desire to kiss her hand? Where did such an incomprehensible feeling come from? Shame! What if the genetic scientists are right who claim that mutations in man continue throughout life. Today I am one person, tomorrow another, in three days someone else totally unlike the former. I change so often that I unwittingly wonder if I am in my right senses? Constant changes in behavior are particularly characteristic of people living in permanently extreme conditions in the bondage of some super idea or cloying profound illusion. They give themselves wholeheartedly to spontaneous feelings and desires, and at some point can begin everything over again or depart for the other world. Yes, a strange, very suspicious thing to do. It has sent me for a loop. I don't even want to keep calling myself Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov, but something entirely different, like Vasily Vasilievich Vykrutasov, so unlike myself was I with that idiotic kissing."

Forgetting about looking for a real estate office, I rushed home in order to take a couple of spoonfuls of koknar as quickly as possible and drink down that wonderful commodity with tea and apple jam on a slice of bread. "Then it will open up instantly, helping me to erupt the volcanic energy of passion!" I teased myself. After this admission, a single stubborn thought bore into my mind, "Vykrutasov, get a move on! Or what's your name now, hey, hey, you there, stranger, hurry up! The amazing state of flighty reason awaits you! With its help, I want to finally understand you, have a dig around in all the cracks of my own mind. What else am I capable of?"

Panting from the pace I was walking, I literally ran into the house. Of course, the first thing I did was rush for my wonderful powdered poppy. Intolerable withdrawal was bringing me out of the opium state, while I always rushed to enter it over and over again as quickly as possible. About ten minutes later, after a few spoonfuls of poppy, I took to the food. First I ate five prunes, then I

hungrily swallowed some bread and jam, drinking it down with tea from a half-liter glass jar—I couldn't find anything else to drink from in the kitchen. Stuffed from eating so much food, I lay down to wait for the onsurge. At such moments, the tension of feelings fills the mind, an impatient prescience of qualitative rebirth or even resurrection arises. For I had become myself, the person I always dreamed of being after this great event—acquaintance with opium milk. Finally the poppy heads opened up and the energy of the wonderworking plant began to transform my mind with its secret power. Strangely enough, an image of the shop assistant flashed occasionally through my head, but, thank goodness, did not take up permanent residence there. I was a little disconcerted by why she, even though fleetingly, was coming to mind at all. Even this seemed too much. I was becoming deeper and deeper immersed in the euphoria of flighty and at times even crazy ideas. Never before had they had anything to do with women. What could a woman arouse in an inflamed mind? Absolutely nothing! These questions had never interested me, nor had they anything to do with everyday life in general. Money, career, love, success, comfort, and sex ceased to exist for me after I made the acquaintance of this particular flower. Recollections of them often aroused fits of frenzied anger in me, and sometimes vomiting. So it was not difficult to see that I only wanted to experience joy of mind and not fantasies of the libido or enjoyments of the flesh. Of course, I would exchange anything from everyday life, be it exciting or banal, for a garbage bag of poppy chaff without skipping a beat. Yes, yes, yes! Koknar is the luxurious fertilizer that ripens the fruits of an inflamed mind. For this is the most important state for a flighty mind capable of masking the insanity in which a moment becomes eternity. *It* is the ticket to the imaginary world, the means capable of accelerating the flight from reality. Oh, how wonderful it is to constantly lose your essence. Can civilization really develop without chaotic mind games? Of course not! For chaos is the promise of tempestuous progress. This is why all great people spend time in euphoria; in the most intense multifaceted and permanent excitement. Because

after *it* you always feel as though the world has placed you on a pedestal. At this point, I suddenly became immersed in the topic of national ethnicity. I have no idea why it came to me. I had never thought of this before. Even when I agreed to participate in the ethnic experiment Koshmarov is conducting. Not much time had passed since then, but I had never once wanted to try the genetic cocktail of four nationalities again—German, Chinese, Jewish, and Georgian. It didn't even occur to me then to wonder why the professor chose those nationalities in particular and not Indians, Japanese, Hungarians, or Albanians, for instance. Or Mongols, Arabs, Spaniards, and Moldavians? Seems my mind was asleep, it did not pay the slightest attention to the blend. But now it had suddenly awoken and cottoned on. There are four races, I thought, as I began my journey along an unexplored road. The oldest of them is Negroid. The first person to appear in the territory of present-day Tanzania. Then come the Polynesians, or the red race. Then the Tian Shan people, who are yellow, and the Caucasians, who are white. Modern civilization was created by the intellect of the Caucasians. And the most powerful ethnicity among the whites is the Germans. More than seventy percent of Nobel Prize winners are representatives of the German ethnicity. Who are the English? Twenty percent Celtic, five percent Roman, and the rest Saxon. Who did the French come from? From Celts, Romans, Gauls, and Germans. Without his German fellow tribesmen, Carl the Great could not have created the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation in the ninth century, which led later to the formation of independent France. Incidentally, France comes from the word "Francs," and Francs are classic German tribes. Both in the past and today their capital is Nuremberg. The Dutch, Norwegians, Swedes, Australians, Swiss, Belgians, Danish, Icelanders, North Italians, around sixty percent of Americans, and more than seventy percent of Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders have German roots. There is a total of around three hundred million of them or around five percent of the Earth's population, and what an enormous contribution they have made to the evolution of civilization!

They have made nine out of ten of the most important discoveries in science and technology. They are responsible for outstanding achievements in philosophy, music, art, architecture, and engineering. Now I understand why Professor Koshmarov suggested enhancing Russian genetics with the German phenomenon. But there is also a Chinese trait in the ascension of humankind. The yellow race came into being twenty thousand years before the white. It is clearly inferior to the Caucasian in intellectual capacity. But it also has some advantages. It is distinguished by its incredible capability for work. The white finds pacification in creativity and comfort, while the Tian Shan finds it in detached service to a cause. The Russian is in dire need of this quality. I approve of the professor's choice. For both I myself and many of my fellow countrymen do not like work, avoid it. So in order to make a qualitative change in our nature, the Chinese element is very desirable. Jewish blood comprises ten percent of the blend. This nationality is distinguished by a fantastic sense of business and in-depth engagement in science. They are world champions in commerce, in any branch business, and are ahead of everyone in music. They have the best access to administrative resources and contacts with all kinds of people beneficial for commerce. Jews can smell money a few kilometers away, like bees smell nectar. This intuition is very weakly developed in our people. I understand Koshmarov, we need to enhance Russians with this quality. In addition to everything else, Jews are very solicitous of their fellow tribesmen. A Jew is a real brother to the Jew. But we have nothing like this. We more often treat each other with hostility than with friendliness. But why do we need five percent of Georgian blood? Oh yes, the professor spoke of the Georgian's love of life, emotionality, and attractive appearance. They have a highly accentuated artistic taste. Their optimism is also a very valuable attribute—Georgians have the lowest suicide rate. Against the background of our national despondence, pessimism, and gloominess of spirit, a few drops of Georgian mutational cocktail would be just the thing. But why have I begun showing such concern about my ethnicity, I thought, bringing myself up

short. I used to care nothing about it. And it is not only me, every one of my fellow countrymen looks at another without particular interest. Although quite often like a wolf looks at a hare. I don't know how it is in other regions, but in Moscow that is quite the way people think. These days only corporative interests and nothing else bring Russians closer. Even love has dropped to fourth place, after money, career, and sex. So something must urgently be done to fortify the national genotype with outside blood or we won't be able to beat the competition with other races. After all, globalization is not a competition of individuality, but primarily a battle for intellectual capabilities.

At this moment, Koshmarov appeared before me again. The professor, smirking, looked at me with interest. "So, my project has caught your interest?" he said. "Your question is not idle. Communists, socialists, leftists of all breeds have been imposing a nonsensical concept on the world for one hundred and fifty years, trying to make people believe that all people and races are equal. Rubbish! Nonsense! They are not equal not only in terms of rights, but also in terms of obligation. If the rights of the particularly strong in mind are not soon legalized constitutionally, the intellectuals, after receiving what they need to build their lives, and the artificial chromosome has already been injected, will totally pester the life out of people with low IQs. The social struggle and political opposition will escalate from the inroads of terrorists, building barricades, and carrying out protest marches to the offices of genetic scientists. Today, media centers are taking active part in shaping minds. Tomorrow, it seems, intellectuals capable of drastically changing the political, national, and social ideas of the masses in keeping with their individual whims will occupy their eternal place. But why have I put the Caucasian and Tian Shan races in first place? Evidently, I subconsciously believe that in one hundred years, the red race will ultimately disappear. This should not distress you at all. The Polynesians have not done anything to distinguish themselves. The descriptions by James Fenimore Cooper and Thomas Mayne Reid of their everyday life and "achievements" can only be inter-

esting to primary schoolchildren. Incidentally, here it is appropriate to mention that the intellect's benefit is ensured by its mass. Why has civilization been developing so slowly then? Why did it take millennia for the wheel to be discovered and another one hundred thousand years to create electricity? The answer is simple, the intellectual mass has been growing rather slowly. As the planet's population reached the three-and-a-half billion mark, a slow but sure penetration into the secrets of science and creation of technological wonder began. The white man was always among the leaders on the threshold of discoveries in science and technology, while the red always remained in the background, satisfied with the way things were and not striving to understand the world ...

“Does contemporary etiquette really allow for this to be talked about in public?” I asked, surprised. “Are we not insulting the Polynesians with this pitiful diagnosis? I personally couldn't care less what they may think. All I want is not to miss the changes going on in human psychology. Although I couldn't care about that either...”

“Man should become more demanding and strict, in order to preserve himself in the future. The time for sentimental feelings is passing. In ten years you will not recognize the world. The price of a barrel of oil will reach thousands of dollars, and a thousand cubic meters of gas will cost three thousand bucks. And in twenty-five years, hydrocarbons will disappear altogether. What then? Return to the past? With an eight billion population? Impossible! I would give Academic Valikov a thousand slaps on the cheek for his story about thermonuclear energy. This scientific pulp-writer planted hope in the illiterate, for the idea was a complete bluff from the very beginning. Where on earth will you find a wall for channeling plasma heated to 150-200 million degrees? On the Sun, it is held down by gravity. But how can it be preserved on Earth? There can be no solution. Another component of this bluff is just as absurd. How can we protect plasma if for even one fraction of a second the installation is shut off from its energy supply? What do you think we should do, Peter Petrovich? How shall we go on? Uranium 235 will disappear before hydrocarbons. And many have placed all

their hopes on it. And there is no other alternative. What is more, we already know to our chagrin that the Universe consists of six quarks, six leptons, and four interactions—gravitational, electromagnetic, strong (neuron), and weak (neutron). There is nothing more to say here. But at the end of the twentieth century the Nobel Prize Committee held a hearing called ‘Has World Science Ended?’ No matter what happens, our first duty is to save the intellect. I am engaged in this every hour. The experiments with you are just one in a chain of many complicated research studies. I am more and more inclined to think that in a couple of decades there will only be one way left to preserve and develop the mind—move into outer space. I personally see this happening, which is why I am carrying out scientific preparatory work, but the concept is already clear—we need to begin intensive genetic modification of ourselves straightaway!”

“Do you think the genetic cocktail will save us?”

“Any complicated cause always consists of several stages. The first is to change our own gene pool. We need to take all the very best qualities of man in order to then begin gradually modifying him. When will our minds finally understand that Homo sapiens is only material for building the likes of Him? The sooner we begin relating to our own biological essence as compositional fragments for creating a more perfect being, the faster we will fulfill His recommendation ‘be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect’.”

“What role do you have for me this time?” asked Parfenchikov.

“I want you to become the participant in a cycle of scientific experiments and give yourself wholeheartedly to creating a new man.”

“O, I quite often embrace the most incredible and interesting topics in my wild and woolly fantasies. But, unfortunately, a shortage of opium constantly returns me, even pushes me back. As though some defect of the sober mind makes it impossible to live in the vibrant world of my dreams for long. Often I don’t even have enough time to get into it, become immersed in another reality before the energy of the miraculous koknar ends and I am back in this hated world.”

“In that case, you need to give it up. You are already hooked enough on the drug. Now the time has come to cool off, become engaged in a national cause with a sober head. Will you be able to part with that devilish stuff?”

“Don’t even think of it. Never! And if you repeat that frightful demand, I will stop talking to you forever. I agree to any proposal, only I will be forever full of opium milk. Do not expect anything else.”

“Demand is not the word for it. Appeal or even wish, that’s all. I have prepared something amazing for you. Nowadays, the government is launching useless campaigns to supposedly improve the existence of Russians. I won’t list them, they are long known. In my project, however, the effect will be almost instant. You will be its main performer, and I the main architect. We will make our fellow countrymen the leaders of the Earth. Unusual vegetation will with unprecedented speed promote the blossoming of the Russian ethnicity. Roads will be built, trains will begin to travel though the expanses of our homeland at more than three hundred kilometers an hour. How can you love a country if you can’t get to know it? It is five thousand kilometers from Moscow to Baikal, and the journey takes one hundred and ten hours one way. What point is there in wasting time and living for weeks in discomfort? The Trans-Siberian Railway was launched in 1904. The average speed one hundred years ago was forty-three kilometers an hour. Today it is fifty-six on express trains, and only two hundred and forty kilometers a day on freight trains. How can anyone know and love a country at those rates? The heads of our railway departments have issued an amazing order—engine drivers are to be awarded for saving electricity. It is minus thirty or even lower outside. To win an award, the train crew are saving energy, so it is no more than three degrees on the train. Passengers are wrapped in sheepskins, felt boots, and blankets. So who wants to convince me that my project is not popular? Contrived? I do not want to hear anything about it... Without it the country will perish, and the Russian ethnicity will disappear. Become extinct! We urgently need to begin changing the national

genetics, which have been fundamentally spoiled by the repressive administrative regime. The country and the world are facing global problems. The matter concerns the fate of our fellow countrymen, for in two generations our energy resources will run out, and then scientists and intellectuals should move into the foreground. But our televisions and radios are full of boring artistes and sexually attractive partygoers. All people are talking about is how to safeguard their power, about profit and billions, about sex, career, and despicable serials, about makeup on stupid faces... Hey! Citizens! Where have your minds gone, fellow countrymen? Where is your will, my dears? We wonder if we ever had it in the first place? I want Russia to wake up in the 23rd century by taking just one step! For us to soar in reason and the force of willful deeds. So I am very much hoping that you, Peter Petrovich, will become the exclusive executor of this grandiose project. We need to make Russians do good to Russians without reward. We need to teach our ethnicity to distinguish between the personal and national, good and evil, imbibe diligence, revive honesty and obedience to the law. With your help, people will discover the secrets of the universe, genetically change themselves, foresee the future, explore outer space, and not suffocate in consumption, not ruin the flesh with perverted sex, not reach for the bottle or let their fists fly, not succumb to the passion of senseless accumulation. The time has come to firmly and consciously take a giant step along the path of our own intellectual perfection. The time has come to genetically modify our essence. The hour for intimate admission has struck, man has no other option than to listen to His main advice and become like Him. We have to regard ourselves exclusively as building material, as the bio brick of future generations. Otherwise we will rot in the abyss of the Universe. And our farewell howl of 'Oh, what a fool I was!' will sound in the endless expanses of space."

"I do not know how well I can meet your plan, for all you have said is of absolutely no interest to me, even frightens me." Peter Petrovich was seized by insurmountable disquiet. "But tell me what you want me to do? I am ready to do anything if I am

guaranteed a good harvest of my beloved flower oozing with divine milk.”

“I want to warn you that this time everything will be serious and you will not be able to jump from one story to another, interrupt one scandalous subject with another. If you become an obedient assistant, I will guarantee you a good poppy harvest in the valley of the River Pianj. There heads are the size of a heavyweight’s fist and the wondrous flowers ooze with as much opium as tins of condensed milk.”

“O-o-o-o-o!! I will do anything for a Pianj flower! Tell me what to do, professor! I am eager to go as soon as possible. I am entirely willing to become like Him in one fell swoop! All I want is to remain a crazy drug addict. If I could take as much koknar as needed for eternity, I would not spend one day on this earth. Just one question though, I am thinking of having a child, but not for myself, for Him. Have him get to know the mutations of a person hooked on His flower creation. What do you say?”

“I am not interested in your personal life. I will only follow the strictness of your thoughts and actions. In order to become deeper immersed in the topic of man’s genetic renaissance, you must be constantly occupied with ideas of that order in your opium intoxication. How to change the human race? That will be the topic of your obsessive hawering. Since we are both Russian, our ethnicity must acquire preferences. At the first stage we will change not everyone all together, some should not be changed, even science cannot help here. We will forget about them, and they will disappear themselves in time and space. We will begin perfecting only Russians, and not all residents of the Russian Federation, but the residents of the town of Kan. There are more than one hundred and thirty thousand people here. You will begin establishing the first genetic breeding ground here. If the experiment is a success, we will continue it throughout the whole of the Krasnoyarsk Territory, then the Siberian Federal District, and only later will we tackle the whole of Russia. And then we will begin changing the blend, creating cocktails using the genetics of the most diverse mammals. You

remember the size of the first computer? It was as big as a three-story house. But now it will fit in an ordinary button. The same will happen with our intellect. But we will change the biology of the body, using eternal super-strong materials. And this genetic engineering will not arouse misunderstanding in anyone. You understand?”

An instant later, flabbergasted Parfenchikov gasped, “I am ready. But what am I supposed to do?”

“Swallow a few spoonfuls of koknar so that you better understand me.”

“Yes, yes, that would be very good. I had already begun thinking about it. The roof of my mouth and tongue have become damp.” Peter Petrovich opened the sack, took out two portions of powdered poppy, put them in his mouth and began swallowing. He immediately felt an opium onsurge of the utmost delight for which he constantly strove.

“Drink something,” said the bespectacled professor, frowning. “It’s hard to look at, never mind eat something like that ... It’s so dry!”

“I want to keep myself in shape. It is too easy to become lackadaisical, but what if I don’t have any water at hand, I am not going to go into withdrawal because of such a trifle...”

“No comment. Let’s get back to the task at hand. I gave you an injection not long ago. The genetic blend of the most vibrant ethnicities that, in my opinion, is capable of effectively changing the Russian mentality... After which you found yourself in St. Petersburg and quite eloquently showed the difference between a Russian who has been injected and who has not. Let’s begin with the same blend, although it marks only the first stage of our perfection. In addition to the injection, I also have pills. Your task is to look for any opportunity to slip the town residents a nano pill, find out the name of the person and write it in your report. For example: Mikhail Poteryaev, 37, address: 9, Mednaya Street. Took the pill on 29 May, 2009.

“I have no idea how I am going to slip someone a pill so that they will take it and not throw it out.”

“There are tons of ways. If you have trouble, ask. For example,

there is a five-story building on Mednaya Street. Go in, ring at the first door. ‘What do you want?’ they ask. ‘I am from the culture department. We are planning to open a town library. We want to ask people what books will be in demand. This is a free service. What would you like to read? I’ll write it down.’ You open a notebook and take out a pen... You go on, ‘I have some sugar with me, would you give me a cup of tea? I’m tired. Your building is the eleventh... Please, put the teapot on the table, I like my tea weak, I’ll pour it myself, if you don’t mind...’ Then you put a pill surreptitiously into the teapot or into the landlord’s or landlady’s cup. If they drink it with you, great, if they drink it later, after you’ve gone, that’s not bad either. You write down all the people who live in the apartment, two pills will be enough for any family. That’s the whole trick, and you have a thousand pills, enough for all the town dwellers. It’s the same blend—fifty percent German genes, ten percent Chinese, ten Jewish, and five Georgian. Get to work! Your award is a great harvest of Pianj-like poppy head. Do not worry, I won’t leave my assistant in a state of withdrawal. Incidentally, I know that you found Fateeva’s money. That will give you a helping hand. Think about how you can use it well in our cause. Your head works very enterprisingly under the effect of the koknar, and great things await you—raising the efficiency of the Russian. He should be the best of the best, the cleverest of the cleverest, the longest lasting, the strongest, omnipotent, like our Father in Heaven, and at some point even become God Himself! Remember the most important thing, each of us is only building material for creating God-Man. Due to their animal egoism, the human masses just do not want to understand this highly important purpose! Let us begin at last to radically change the Russian! It’s time!”

“Can I ask you something?” Peter Petrovich asked, smirking. “How did the Georgian fragment get into the cocktail? There are so many other nationalities to choose from...”

“So that’s what’s bothering you...” the bespectacled gentlemen nodded with understanding. “Judge for yourself, around ninety percent of the intellectual elite of the Russian-Soviet empire was born

in three south-north geographical arcs—Tiflis—Moscow—St. Petersburg. The country’s vast territory in its 1988 borders accounts for the other ten percent. Of twenty-two million square kilometers, three belts of particular demographic efficiency occupy around five thousand square kilometers. And this means that the overwhelming majority with the highest IQ appear in less than one four-thousandth part of the empire. This strange circumstance, which is frightening in its inexplicable mystery and full of some mystic power, interests me. So in a minute of creativity, when creating the gene blend, without the least external coercion, and exclusively from intuition, I included the Georgian gene in it. And I am sure that I did the right thing.”

“Are there that many Georgians among Russian intellectuals?” asked Peter Petrovich in surprise.

“There are many representatives of all nationalities. But the inexplicable genetic aura of that ethnicity, the magical power of that country, has indisputably had an effect on the amazing phenomenon on the talent of people born in the Tiflis arc of effectiveness.

“Can you name even a few natives from this arc? I don’t think I know anyone,” asked Parfenchikov.

“Why only a few, I can think of hundreds: Dolgoruky-Argutinsky, Blavatskaya, Pirosmani, Lyubetkin, Zhordania, Borodin, Mayakovsky, Otto Vitte, Bagriaton, Stalin, Vakhtangov, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Meskhishvili, Beriya, Parajanov, Tabidze, Orbeli, Khachaturian, LEbedev, Gudiashvili, Kogan, Vlasenko, Daneliya, Bokeriya, Sotkilava, Legran, Beybutov, Kalatozov, Mamardashvili, Tseylin, Aganberyan, Tovstonogov, Tariverdiev, Marjanov, Burakovsky, Primakov, Zdanevich, Kancheli, Roy and Zhores Medvedev, Sturua, Prokhanov, Virsaladze, Paliashvili, Yavlinsky, Meskhiev, Yashvili, Neuymin, Ginzburg, Tamirov, Ananiashvili, Nikitin, Khutsiev, Chabukiani, Petrosyan, Shchelkin, Vekua, Kulijanov, Gelovani, Pot ...”

“That’s enough! Thank you! I don’t know a good half of them ... I am no longer asking. Tell me professor, is there an explanation for this phenomenon?”

“Have I convinced you with the number of names? When I finish the experiment with the nano pill I dream about researching it. My main task is to raise the Russian ethnicity to world intellectual leaders. So I will become immersed once more in long years of scientific pursuit.”

As soon as he had finished talking, he disappeared, suddenly and without a trace. To be honest, this is the first time I’ve thought that it is not some Professor Koshmarov, a bespectacled old man and schemer, that has been appearing to me, but my own alter ego. “After all, he has never appeared before me during withdrawal. I only meet him when I am in a state of euphoria. When I am soaring in the clouds to purify my thoughts. I am going to have to keep a close watch on myself to ultimately understand who this strange professor is. Myself in thirty years, a mystification from the future of my own young years, or indeed a mysterious old man who passionately wishes to experiment with the human genome. But why do I need this? In order to console myself with the truth or with self-exposure? In order to find out how to do this so as to move in space and time in opposite directions? Or perhaps become even more convinced that I am of different ages at the same time? If an ordinary person without opium milk only exists in the present, I, in my obsessed state, live in different dimensions at the same time, while space and time entirely cease to exist for me. This is one more reason for rapture! For self-admiration! It puts a stamp of superhuman value on my decision to be in opium dreams. And since that is how it is, I need to accept the offer of bespectacled Koshmarov (which is perhaps my own) and take active part in the experiments. Let this be my final interference in human history. What if the intrigue truly engages? Although if it does no damage to my morphine state what is there to worry about? Why hold back? For another alternative is also very possible—I will get into the swing of it, trying in all kinds of ways to slip the people of Kan nano pills, and in the end experience an intensification of the onsurge, inflow of wondrous energy. Everything will happen after taking the powdered poppy from the valley of Pianj. Oh-oh! My dream!”

Astounded, Peter Petrovich waved his arms around. Koshmarov had promised that he would help cultivate the royal pale blue flower with the carbuncle veins the color of a late sunset. Wow! The back of his head tingled in delight. His nostrils began to itch, his hair to stand on end, and his eyelids to batter, as though in a fainting swoon. No, no, I want nothing, I dream of nothing at all, apart from *it*. Only *it*, oozing sizzling milk, calls me to self-sacrifice, only *it* is the beginning and end of all of Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov. It is *this* that transforms my mind into a source of exclusive, life-giving energy, arousing a passion to escape from everyone! For I surrender to the magical milk in order to expose the essence of customary things, achieve supremacy over everything, by becoming immersed in my own enjoyment. Come on, come on, I will try, the temptation is great, to jump head first into the divine opium force of the Pianj valley. For *it* inspires my imagination, makes it possible for me to touch the mysteries of the world, think about them, look for metaphysical answers to what would seem to be simple arithmetical puzzles. For someone this may be two times two is four, but for me it is the purest metaphysics! Now I need to accept wholeheartedly Koshmarov's offer and begin modifying the town population. I must not only treat my fellow citizens as building material, but myself too. Yes, yes, I am a brick and nothing more. At one time, I successfully suppressed my desire for power and consumption. And, to be frank, this has brought me the greatest satisfaction. Lowdown needs have been erased from my mind. Now I need to repress all that is traditionally human in me and treat the people around me only as participants in this great experiment. The cries of Muscovites at the exhibition of contemporary flying machines are no longer, but they trouble the mind. While their requests to destroy various strata of civil servants no longer seem crazy to me. One thing is clear—man does not have all his wits about him...

In intense agitation, Parfenchikov stood up and went out onto the porch. His inner voice insistently said, "You must urgently begin the experiment. The contradiction between the intensifying craving for perverted consumption and moral postulates is grow-

ing. The second round of the most severe crisis will break into everyday life in the very near future. But what can Professor Koshmarov's nano pill do to the people of Kan that is so incredible?" This was the thought that literally bore into Peter Petrovich's mind.

MATERIALIZING THOUGHTS

Leonid Ivanovich was gaining an increasingly strong foothold in town. He walked into the offices of the local authorities without prior notice, as though he were an insider. His gait had changed, it had become more resolute, more confident, and his disconcerted look had been replaced with a cold, calculating one. He wore clothes from chic boutiques, and a wallet stuffed full of large bills sat deep in the back pocket of his trousers. He took tight control fairly quickly over the illegal fishing business, and now he was engaged in looking for a way to increase his own income in other spheres. He was interested in municipal land and areas where he might establish small and medium businesses, such as restaurants, cafes, laundries, stores, hairdressers, billiard rooms, and so on. After acquainting himself with the multitude of federal instructions and local administrative obstacles hindering business initiatives, Mr. Efimkin quickly caught onto the fact that this bureaucratic field was a veritable gold mine. And he began worming his way into it with the far-reaching goal of laying a one-way street, along which only he was permitted right of way. Without special preferences for maneuvering legislative demands, bureaucratic business would not yield the desirable result.

Now Mr. Efimkin, holding tightly onto the handle of his briefcase, was rushing to see the mayor. Climbing the stairs to the third floor, he repeated to himself convincing arguments to justify his particular authority to decide whom to issue a license, whom to make wait, and whom to deny outright. There was no point in counting on bribes without administrative know-how.

He gave the secretary a small nod, but he had such a determined expression on his face that she did not dare say one word in objection. Leonid Ivanovich walked into the mayor's office without knocking.

“Greetings, Eugene Alexandrovich! I have come to seek your

advice on a very important matter regarding the townsfolk.” His voice dripped servility and his face glowed and puckered in obeisance. “Would you like to listen to a music program? Morricone is going to be playing all day on long wave. He performed a concert in the capital this spring.” Efimkin went up to the radio, turned it on, found some music, and turned up the volume. Then he looked around the office and whispered, “I think that someone may want to record our conversation. Times are tense. So let’s keep ourselves out of trouble, so to speak. Now we can talk. Eugene Alexandrovich, my dear Gene, why are entirely unprofessional people in charge of the most important issues of developing small business? For the country’s president has clearly said on many occasions that if the bureaucratic barriers and obstacles are not removed, we will not be able to draw millions of our fellow countrymen into business. And this is extremely important for Russia, more than that, it is vital!”

“What are you talking about? Get to the point! If you have some touchy subject you want to talk about, turn up the volume even higher,” smirked the mayor. He was a tall well-built man with sparse sandy hair and extremely ruddy face. The impression he gave was of someone who had just gotten up from the feasting table. The mayor constantly clicked his tongue as though there were particles of food stuck between his teeth.

“I suggest establishing a public economic council under the mayor’s office that will give the green light to local economic development projects. Not one project can be considered legitimate without the council’s consent, without its chairman’s resolution, without the signature of Leonid Ivanovich Efimkin himself. Not one city civil service will be allowed to interfere in issuing permits to open a business without the mayor’s approval. Only I will decide all questions! In this way, we will simplify the life of local investors and fulfill the order of the head of state to ease businessmen’s access to commerce.”

“And what do I get?” asked the mayor in innocent surprise, spreading his hands. He stepped aside, drawing together his thick sandy brows.

“I will give you fifty thousand dollars for the post of council chairman. And every month I will pay you another ten thousand. I will raise the image of the city municipality and its head. For the central government is currently demanding that all permits be obtained at a one stop shop... So fulfill these orders, my dear friend! Create a council, and I will throw open the window of local business to all entrepreneurs. Our Kan will prosper!”

“What do I need your ten for? I have to make regular payments to the territorial structures and the federal district apparatus. No, no, ten does not suit me at all,” the mayor snorted with a complaining grimace. “And what about the fund for receiving federal inspectors? They have capital-size appetites—they order Cointreau as an aperitif, Chateau de Lafite for the second course, and Hennessy Paradise for desert. And don’t forget that I have to finance the programs of This Party and pay the leaders of the City Duma bonuses. This money does not come out of the treasury after all! Remember that I have to deal with all the town complainers and oppositionists, if you don’t give them some money, they will send petitions to the Kremlin with all kinds of complaints about the mayor, saying it is time for him to be removed. Not to mention the family celebrations of territorial heads. One is celebrating his daughter’s wedding, another the christening of his grandson, a third is defending his son’s dissertation, or rejoicing in an appointment to a new high position... So what use is your ten?”

“Will twenty be enough?” Leonid Ivanovich asked dryly and coldly.

“And that is not enough... I told you, I don’t need the money for a lark!”

“I can’t give you more than thirty. Money doesn’t grow on trees around here. It’s a small town, there are only about a hundred thousand residents...” Efimkin was angry at himself for being so impetuous and rash.

“Thirty every month—that’s the minimum. But I’ll need an annual increase of fifteen percent. Only on those terms can I congratulate you on your new appointment. Oh yes, did you bring

your fifty thousand membership fee? A good cause needs to be paid for!”

“The money is in my briefcase. Write up the order!” Efimkin blurted out hurriedly, as though worried that the price would go up again and the bargaining would continue. Reflecting on the commerce, he would have agreed to pay more to gain exclusive right to permitting business in the town. The water bailiff was long not only interested in money, but also in power. It excited his ambition just as much.

“No, first give me the money..”

“What, don’t you believe me? You don’t believe me? This is something new!” Leonid Ivanovich exclaimed, raising his voice. His voice revealed more undisguised joy than vexation.

“I believe you, I believe you, but I want to see it! Show me the money, businessman! I don’t need words of honor! Money, money!” At this point, the mayor even rose, and his entire body expressed a dire need. His eyes were popping out of his head, his face went stony, and his outstretched arms seemed to be convulsing.

“Here is it, here! Look, crisp new notes, right off the printing press!” assured Leonid Ivanovich, dramatically pulling out the stacks of money. “But you will get them after the exchange—you give me the order, I give you the dollars. Business has its unwritten laws...”

“You’re an idiot, Leonid! What does your order mean to me? I sign it at eleven, and at five past I tear it up and flush it down the toilet. And a copy of the document will not get you the post you want. Come on! Hurry up! Otherwise you can go to hell! Here you are trying to dictate your terms! The cheek of it! You’ve forgotten your place—I can send you packing in an instant. Run you out forever,” the mayor shot at Leonid Ivanovich, spit flying.

“Take it! I brought it all for you! And I always will! I was just joking. After all, jokes are permitted between friends... Oh, how shameful! But I won’t do it any more,” he burst out laughing engagingly. “Do you have something to drink? You’ve given me a fright...” Leonid Ivanovich put the stacks of dollars on the table,

stood before the mayor, and looked at him with a smile, “Will you pour me a drink?”

“Open the cupboard. Choose what you want. And pour me a glass of Bolshoi vodka.”

“I was thinking of that myself.”

They silently drank back a glass each, then a second.

“Begin work tomorrow. I will defend your status with corresponding orders. But make sure that I get thirty thousand dollars every fifth of the month. If you can’t earn it, if there is no income, or you get sick, get married, become a participant in the elections, I don’t care, I will accept no excuses. You will have to pay me out of your own pocket. You are beholden to me no matter what! You understand?”

Efimkin seemed to hang onto the mayor’s every word, but he was thinking about something else. With this, they parted.

Leonid Ivanovich had prepared for his new activity in advance. But after buying his new post, he began thinking more soberly about where he should begin so as not only to pay his dues, but actively replenish his own capital. “The business of a bureaucrat begins with instructions,” he thought. “First off, I will need to make a list of documents for obtaining a license for any type of activity. In order to make money on that I will have to add to the instructions that the documents submitted by the businessmen must be certified by a notary public. This means that the first thing I must do is set up three of my own notary public offices. And before I do that I will have to cancel all the previously issued licenses for that activity. Then I need to find three women to be notary publics, enter a contract with them to divide up the revenue from each office—seventy percent, no seventy-five percent for me, and twenty-five for them. No, hang on, eighty for me and twenty for them. Give these first women permits and delay the others for different reasons. Then I will have to compile an extremely detailed list of documents for issuing licenses. The more there are, the more bribes will be needed and the higher the income of the notary public offices. For example, a document permitting water use is extremely important. This pro-

cedure must be improved. I will have to demand acts on hidden work on building bases, foundations, stands, strengthening of groundwork, and doing insulation work from the businessman. Certificates and technical instructions for pipes, casing, equipment, and materials. And recommend buying the listed inventory in those stores that enter contracts of remuneration with me. I can ask them to submit a certificate on testing concrete blocks for strength, if commercial cement was used. Here is the same technique: a cut of the experts' remunerations and hard-earned notary fees. The list of documents will include reports on welded bands indicating the names of the welders and numbers of their permits, acts of hydraulic testing for strength, and sealing of no more than two years. Also guarantee of the building company on the facility being handed over, certificate on the performance of anticorrosion measures and certificate on the materials used, and an act on television examination of the pipeline of no more than two years, even one year! A report on the limitations of balance affiliation and exploitation responsibility of the local pipeline... And don't forget the plan of the basement with a diagram of the water metering unit, a certificate from the address service on assimilation of the police address, certificate of IGASN No.22a 01 with a notarized signature and stamp of the organization's representative installing the water meters.

Hey, brother, you could drum up quite a bit of capital on water. What else? What else? What about opening a restaurant? That could bring in quite a bit of money too. We will demand contracts with town services for heat, electricity, water and sewage, garbage disposal, and telephone service. Certificates stating that the type and class of establishment has been determined, notarized copies of the registration of trade mark of the restaurant. A contract on rodent control, pest control, and disinfection, on installing an alarm system. An agreement with the State Fire Inspection Office, a contract on video observation, a copy of the contract on security of the facility with an organization that has a license for security activity. An agreement with the city organization of billboards and a permit for

placing advertizing accounts. I can obtain a license for retail trade and circulation of alcoholic beverages with statements, instituting documents, INN certificates, certificates on absence of debts, sanitary epidemiological conclusion permitting work with food, a report on observing fire safety regulations, a description and certificates of monitoring and cash registers... Plus right-establishing documents for the facilities, BTI documents, a phase-by-phase plan, explication, form 1a, copy of a certificate on entering small business entities on the register, act of submission of the security alarm system into use, certificate on the payment of authorized capital, copy of staff schedule, a sanitary record, agreement on carrying out work on servicing the ventilation and air conditioning systems. I will obtain a certificate of correspondence for the services rendered, enter an agreement with a laundry, as well as an agreement on eavesdropping and the use of phonograms. I will also need a contract for utilizing mercury-containing lamps and for obtaining a certificate of veterinary records for products used during food preparation. I will also check for logs: quality-control, sanitary, monitoring, "health," incoming control of raw material, medical examination, selecting samples, accounting for the temperature-humidity regime in workshops. I will need to inspect the registration of instructions on the job for labor protection, washing and disinfection of beer equipment, accounting of work books, registering of personal cases, acts of personal staff, giving holidays, orders on business trips, registration of incoming correspondence, registration of selection of samples. Records of auditing technological equipment, temperature conditions in warehouses, the existence of three adjusted moveable battery lamps... What else, what else? How else can I get rich? Think, think! After Litvinenko's poisoning in London, I will have to monitor warehouse, office, and trade facilities for the presence of 210 and, after the recent downing of the American spy satellite, 238 polonium. Although the first decays relatively quickly, it will take eighty-six years for traces of the second to totally disappear. The American satellite was shot down at an altitude of two hundred and thirty kilometers. It had between

thirty and fifty kilograms of polonium-238 on board. But, according to WHO, 500 grams of this poison is capable of bringing all of the earth's inhabitants down with cancer! It will fall to earth in two or three years. Breathe it in and you're a goner, Litvinenko has taken you with him. I will have to urgently set up my own laboratory of chemical and nuclear security. Oh, that will be a Klondike! In this sector of the market, it smells like millions. Every record, certificate, act, journal, license could cost from one hundred to one thousand dollars. And I also have hairdressers, car repair shops, tailor's shops, building companies, educational institutions, gas stations, department stores, boutiques, bakeries... I foresee that there will be no trouble making a billion! Billionaire Efimkin! But why Efimkin? I could change my name so that it sounds more impressive. Pliusov! Bogateev! Kapitalov! Zolotov! Billionaire Bogateev! How does that sound? It sounds great! It sounds magnificent, he suddenly thought proudly, believing in his power. What else? What else? What else can I think of to increase my own income? I need to enforce a permit issuing deadline of one month so that people hurry, the waiting line grows, bribes increase... A month, better two, yes two! Clever! The bribes will jump even higher. I'm getting ahead of myself again, why two, and not three? Yes, three months for issuing documents permitting the opening of a business, and no less. For the stricter I begin, respond with a refusal, the louder I cry "No!" the more money will find its way into my pockets. Businessmen will start signing up on the waiting list, they will have to wait around the clock outside my door, shouting back and forth. And oh how I like this fuss! I can make three, five, ten thousand dollars, not one, on each signature.

There are three thousand economic entities in town. If at least one thousand dollars from each of them reaches my pocket, that is three million a year. And what about ten? Then all thirty million will end up in my accounts. Plus the fishing business, notary public, and commercial cuts... Everyone looks enviously at such fashionable crimes today. Oh, how good it is to live in Russia! You could go crazy with pleasure. Why do I need Fateeva's old house next

door? I will build myself a new mansion... What else? What else? Where can I find an extra penny? Oh, how dear it is to my heart! So I am going to have to cancel all the previous business licenses and permits issued in town. I need to make preparations for this, create a consulting company that will take care of drawing up new registration formulas. But so the idea does not look petty, I need to make all tricky requests more complicated. Then money will flow. In a year or two, the Kan model can be extended to the entire territory. By that time, I will even be able to buy the most important post in the district administration in order to boldly operate prices and market volumes on a different scale. Our region is blessed, and there is a wealth of ways to make it rich. If I am lucky, and luck is primarily inspired effort, in time destiny will surely lead me to the federal level, to the capital. I will settle in Moscow with the bourgeois sweep of a migrant. I will invite guests with national names. I will become a Russian of the capital, for here in Siberia there is no way of figuring out who's Russian and who's a Caucasian, Asian, or Far Eastern Eskimo without half a bottle of vodka.

He quickened his pace, walked past the dilapidated buildings on the main street, counted the stores and companies slumped up one against the other and, inspired by his comforting thoughts, set off for home. He couldn't wait to put his business plan down on paper and begin acting. Carefully but expansively, boldly and decisively, but without going beyond the permissible unwritten boundaries.

He sat for a long time filling out pages in a sweeping hand with the fantasies of a skilled bureaucrat who had manifested literally out of nothing. Our people have a definite talent—entirely unexpectedly the chef of a decrepit tavern becomes a prominent financial magnate, a sly prosecutor-rogue fired for taking bribes becomes a popular fashion designer or film director, a pick-pocket bracing himself after another stint in prison becomes a popular public figure, while a petty vendor in one of the capital's suburbs selling counterfeit brands finds himself in the shoes of a prominent member of the State Duma or even a menacing federal minister.

Thanks to these national features, former policeman loser Leonid Ivanovich quite quickly became an extremely successful holder of the administrative resource, deciding the fate of his fellow countrymen.

Around two in the morning, Leonid Ivanovich had finished his bureaucratic creation capable of emptying the pockets of any businessman in favor of his own bank account. After which he slumped down on his bed, closed his eyes, and saw before him incredible pictures of his imminent omnipotence. New recruits get self-made gushes after their first physical workouts in the army. In his emotional tension, Efimkin's hands did not itch from a successful commercial transaction, nine-digit figures in foreign currency did not dance before his eyes, crisp new banknotes did not rustle enticingly in his ears, but a long forgotten orgasm forced him to cry out in delight, "O-o-o-o! More, more, more! Ah, ah, ah....Dear, dearest, Dollar..." It is difficult to say just what appeared to the newly-baked disposer of regional business in these mysterious illusions. But it was obviously true ecstasy.

The next morning, Mr. Efimkin handed the city head his ambitious plan and began energetically carrying out the ideas envisioned in them. He organized notary public offices, established a consulting company, signed agreements with banks for safe boxes for keeping his cash, registered a laboratory of chemical and nuclear protection, received an exclusive for his own fund from the town authorities for checking the performance by management entities of the circulars they compiled themselves, and so on. He found an hour to examine the catch from the River Kan with the desire to expose violators. A local businessman Razzhivin, a large man of around forty, came up to him on the shore. He stood in Leonid Ivanovich's way and without beating about the bush, said, "Here's a thousand dollars, but tomorrow morning give the go-ahead to switch on the electricity. At noon I must open my establishment. I have everything ready, but at the mayor's office I was told that without your consent I won't get any electricity."

"They didn't tell you everything then," smirked Leonid

Ivanovich. “All of your permits are no longer valid. You need new ones!”

“How come? I am tired of coming to you. I have already sold everything, you have sucked all the life out of me. Give me a permit, then we’ll figure it out.”

“Did you understand what I said? We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Listen here, crack ball, in my left hand is my last thousand dollars. But my right is clenched in a tight fist. I have spent a million dollars on building and setting up my tavern. So joking aside. Take the thousand and give me light or I’ll give you the kind of beating the Swedes got near Poltava... I have had enough of your money-grubbing. I can’t take it any more. Switch on the electricity...”

“Stop trying to frighten me, I don’t scare easily. If you want to open your business, go ask the Slavika consulting company. They’ll help you there, although you’ll have to fork out more than your sorry thousand... You think that’s an impressive sum?! Ha-ha-ha!”

“So you’re not going to hook me up?”

“I’ve told you already, no... Move aside...”

“You only have yourself to blame ...” Having said this, Mr. Razzhivin began pounding Leonid Ivanovich’s face and chest. After the sixth or seventh blow, he fell, while the irate restaurant-keeper continued to pummel him, now with his feet. When Efimkin went quiet, the businessman stopped kicking him. He raised the bloody head of his victim and yelled, “Tomorrow at eight o’clock I’ll be waiting for with a permit in my tavern *Angara*. If you don’t bring it, I’ll kill you!” After which, he cursed and walked away.

The water bailiff slowly came to. He gasped both in pain and from his wounded sense of pride. He began hatching plans of revenge. He crawled to the water’s edge, washed the dried blood from his face with effort and, groaning, stood up. “In the past that kind of humiliation would have demanded a duel. But what is his life or my honor worth today?” he thought angrily. “Absolutely nothing. I can presume that my beating was a specific sign from above. What is the most important thing in our life these days?

Property! Liquid assets! And the best result of any contemporary duel is the weaning of property. While there were no raiders in Kan in the past,” he thought angrily, clenching his teeth, “today they have appeared. And I will be the first! I never imagined that I would own a restaurant, and now I am simply convinced that *Angara*, costing a million dollars, will be mine. And I deserve it! I will give the chief of police twenty percent, the prosecutor fifteen, and I’ll take the restaurant. Why have I suddenly become so generous? He’s beaten me to a pulp! That was me groaning in a state of unconsciousness on the shore, it’s me who has bruised ribs and a beaten face, ten percent each will be enough. I can give five to the judge so as to have someone on my side, in the event of court proceedings, who will protect my property in the necessary place. And if this incident involving the restaurant ends favorably, I will continue using the raider technique. And not only in Kan, but throughout the entire district, and then throughout the entire territory... And perhaps I will go further. There is a lot of wealth in other people’s hands. The time has come to take a closer look at it—who has their hands on it, who has sins to their name, even the most insignificant. It is my job to make mountains out of molehills and organize the necessary special contingent of strong men around me. I’ll invite those who want to increase their fortune and not live on a miserly wage. I would be better to recruit retired servicemen, over the age of forty. People who know how to use guns, who have kept their fighting spirit. What kind of income do they have? Two hundred, maybe three hundred dollars a month. I will offer them five hundred, or even a thousand, and a bonus of one thousand for each raid. And if I get my hands on a large factory, I can offer two thousand, or even three! Where else will they receive such money apart from with my technology? For that’s the way today’s capital elite is built. At one time, Gumilev said that if you scratch any Russian, you will find a Tatar underneath. Today you can definitely say that if you scratch any wealthy Russian, you will find a raider underneath... Incidentally, Russian capitalism is based on raiding. What else could it be based on if prior to privatization of the state’s vast property, every citizen

of the country only had a holey pocket and an empty stomach. I'll start my team by recruiting Black Hood, a SWAT veteran. He has a ham fist, while his brain is no bigger than a cuckoo's egg. You give the likes of him a ruble, and he will give you a hundred rubles' worth of work in return. And he will draw others to him..." With these thoughts, Leonid Ivanovich walked into the office of the city chief of police.

"What's the matter with you, Leonid? Who has been having such a go at you, you poor thing?" asked Nikolai Koryagin with affected chagrin. In fact, the policeman did not seem to be at all disheartened to see the beaten-up face of his business partner.

"I am beginning a new project. Your share is around one hundred thousand dollars. For a few hours, or a day at the most, I need an empty cell, a trusty team of policemen to stand on duty, and free access to it for the people I tell you. At the end of the deal, you will get eight-five percent, or maybe all one hundred, or some property for the same amount."

"Is the property liquid at least?" asked Koryagin scratching his head. "Maybe you'll give me some rundown hut on the outskirts of town and tell me that my share costs one hundred thousand dollars. Things need to be spelled out in black and white with you..."

"You can have your pick—cash or property. Partner's word!"

"Eighty-five or one hundred? You do see that there is a difference ..."

"If you bring the owner of *Angara* to the cell in handcuffs, I'll give you one hundred."

"What am I going to arrest him for? Will you give me a hint?"

"For the incident on the shores of the Kan."

"So it was him who beat you up?"

"You can arrest him on any accusation. Agreed? I will organize things so that there will be no evidence. Don't worry, if things get messy, you can tell on me. I permit you to give me in. That is one of your favorite occupations after all."

"Okay! When do you want him?"

"Toward evening, at ten o'clock... If your guys give him a

couple of hard kicks, all the better. I'm off. I need to make preparations."

Efimkin set off for the gym. That was where Black Hood, with whom he was in a hurry to meet, usually hung out. The place was rundown, the ramshackle building indicated that only in the distant past was it seething with sports activity. A few men were sitting on the bench in front of the entrance. Leonid Ivanovich recognized one of them as the former special forces officer. He caught his eye and nodded to indicate that he wanted him to come over and talk business. Black Hood was over six foot tall with an open kind face. He was wearing an old sweat suit and worn-down sneakers. His bouncing gait and hands curled into fists showed that Black Hood was a strong-willed person.

"Hello there, Ivanich. What's brought the boss looking for a forgotten pensioner?" he said from a distance, before reaching Efimkin. "Whose been beating you up? You need protection? Who needs some bones broken or ears cut off? In Afghanistan, if you killed a guerilla you had to prove it by showing his cut-off ears. It wasn't officer's work to drag bodies around the mountains."

"Tell me, chum, how much is your pension?"

"Not much. You have some work for me? I could buy myself a suit, get my children some new clothes, give the wife some money. Eat my fill finally. What do you want me to do?"

"Do everything I tell you. Like in the war, like in Afghanistan..."

"The main question here is how much will I get paid?"

"Seven hundred dollars a month plus a bonus of a thousand dollars when you complete the job successfully."

"Tell me what I have to do."

"Do what I say without any questions."

"Does that include killing?"

"Maybe, but only in an emergency. The bonus for performing that kind of job is five thousand dollars and police-prosecutor protection."

"Not bad. But what about if I get killed, what will my family get?"

“That won’t happen, but what do you think? How much?”

“At least ten thousand dollars.”

“Okay!”

“But in advance.”

“I can only give part in advance. Three thousand.”

“When do I get the rest?”

“After the first successful job.”

“How am I supposed to know if the job was a success?”

“I give you an assignment, you carry it out. If you do, you receive your bonus.”

“When is the first assignment?”

“This evening. Put together a team. Around six will do for the moment. Your fighters will get five hundred dollars each and a five-hundred-dollar bonus. I will only give you the general assignment, the others I can only give individual orders. Got it? We’ll meet by the house of culture at nine in the evening. Have your guys bring clamps, electric irons, pincers, and electric shockers with them. A scoundrel in pre-trial detention needs to be shown a thing or two. It would be a good idea to wear masks too, it’s a small town, best to remain anonymous... And bring some bandages. You will go into the cell first. The lout will be in handcuffs, so you will not have any trouble binding his head. Leave only his mouth and nostrils open. He will have to breathe... Beat him up to the hilt for twenty minutes, but don’t touch his face. Burn him with a hot iron, crush his skull with clamps, knock him out with an electric shocker. Then leave; fifteen minutes later I come in. We keep repeating the same thing until we get what we want from him. The story ends with the notary public and witnesses being brought into the cell.”

“What about the cops?”

“You’re in luck! The cops are on our side. Only they won’t see anything or hear anything. Who will believe that outsiders went into the cell with guards there and beat up a prisoner? Nonsense! No way! The prosecutor will be categorical in his opinion, after all, he’s on our side too.”

“But why do I have to bind his head in bandages?”

“It is a small town, maybe one of your guys will recognize him or he’s someone’s relative. Just to keep out of trouble.”

“That certainly takes some doing. Brother, uncle, aunt don’t count. It’s very traumatic for someone to see his own brother beating him. You understand? So don’t think about it. I’ll throw a sack over his head, to avoid damage to his skull. When will I get the money for myself and my men?”

“You’ll get it this evening.”

“So I get seven hundred dollars for the month ahead of time and three thousand advance for funeral expenses. That is three thousand seven hundred. My guys get five hundred each, that is three thousand and a life insurance advance of two hundred each. That makes a total of seven thousand nine hundred dollars. Right?”

“That’s exactly right!”

“And then a bonus as well!”

“Yes!”

“Does he have to sign something?”

“Yes!”

“He’ll sign everything. He will sign in the voice of an Afghan eunuch. Would you like me to sell you an idea?”

“How much?”

“A thousand bucks. No, two thousand.”

“That’s too much. I’ll pay five hundred.”

“Okay, five hundred. In Afghanistan, I learned how to do a skillful castration because a castrated man is no longer capable of malice or revenge. Maybe you’ll give me a thousand after all? It’s a good idea...”

“Not bad, not bad... I’ll pay two hundred dollars each, not for the idea, but for carrying it out. The amount will be much more than five hundred or a thousand for the idea. If you haven’t forgotten your arithmetic, agree.”

“How many times am I going to have to castrate?”

“Quite a few, and each time you get two hundred dollars!”

“I agree. I’ll bring my instruments with me today. I haven’t used them for twenty years.”

“Get back into it all again, it’s a very beneficial thing to know. But you are responsible for each of your men. The work must be secret. You do it and you go your separate ways, no talk before or after. Put all your SWAT operations out of your mind. You understand?”

“We know all about that, after all, it was the best school in the world. We were taught how to crush the skull of any talkers with one blow.”

“There you go, wonderful, you will also be needing that skill. And have you wrenched out bones with pincers? Burned with irons? Cracked skulls with clamps?”

“No, nothing like that. But that’s not difficult. We’ll do anything, Ivanich,” he said, an innocent childlike smile appearing on his face. It seemed to Efimkin that the special forces officer was serious. “Good-natured lad and beneficial personnel. How good that I remembered him!” he thought and continued giving instructions. “Okay, friend, to keep things confidential we will manage without names. You and your whole team will call me Mathematician, you are Train Superintendant, and call your team members as follows – leaders with names of animals, for example, Fox, Bear, Wolf, Boar, Lynx, and so on. And the fighters with names of their favorite food. For clarity, I’ll explain: a fox hunts for chickens, ducks, geese, doves, pheasants, and so on. So in Fox’s team the fighters will have those names. A bear loves blueberries, cranberries, whortleberries, salmon, trout. Boars like acorns, chestnuts, truffles, beets, corn. So his team will have Acorn, Chestnut, Truffle... You get it?”

“I like it. But tell me, Mathematician, how many of us will be in a team? You’re not preparing a whole battalion are you? I’ll do any work, apart from seizing power. Politics is not my thing!”

“No, no, no politics at all. Chapaev, Lazo, Frunze are not our heroes. We want to eat well, dress elegantly, fill the barn with money, buy a classy limousine, fill the till with Nornikel, Base Element and Gazprom shares, while prices are low, crisis-driven, and roll the golden ruble in front of us. So that a pleasant ring can be heard in the ears, and everyone can dance into a life of luxury with glee. Is there anything else you want?”

“Yes, yes... You forgot about girls. How can I manage without them? I would start a harem. Five, even ten first-class girls would enhance our recreation time.”

“You are right. Well, I’m off. See you at nine.”

“Just a minute, so how many should there be in the team?”

“We’ll begin with six. If things go well, we can always add more. Development of business will depend on the company’s income and on the self-sacrifice of the employees. That’s what simple wisdom says. Show us this evening what you are capable of Train Superintendent...”

After these words, Efimkin walked quickly away. He needed to talk to the prosecutor and judge.

At the appointed time, the first team had gathered. Leonid Ivanovich did not expect to meet such tall men with open Slavic faces. Only one was short, pockmarked, balding, and looked like a Crimean Tatar. The faces of the fighters were softened by friendly smiles. It seemed as though they were talking about some ordinary trifles of life. Each of them was wearing a worn sweat suit, the way sports veterans dress in the provinces. It was impossible even to imagine that these people had agreed to participate in a serious criminal vendetta. They looked much more like peers gathered after a hard day to play some game. Train Superintendent took his leave of the group and walked towards Mathematician.

“Have you brought the money?”

“There is no need to make such a show of it. I put the money in an envelope in your mail box. Call home, have your wife go and get it and count it. Here’s a cell phone,” Leonid Ivanovich handed Black Hood his Motorola.

“She won’t count it, but I’ll tell her to get the envelop. I hope the money in it is not fake.”

Efimkin didn’t reply, a stony expression on his face.

“I was joking. And I won’t call. Who is going to take anything from my mail box? There’s never been any mail in it since I don’t know how long. It’s probably totally rusted. I go and get my pension myself and I never get any letters, maybe on the odd occasion,

but I don't remember. I'll go get the envelope myself after the job. Explain the assignment again."

"The target was put in the cell in handcuffs half an hour ago. You go in first wearing a mask to bind his head. Don't let a single hair fall. After that the entire team comes in and begins beating him. Silently! That goes on for fifteen minutes. Then you leave. About ten minutes later, I go in to talk to him..."

"I think it will take at least thirty minutes, if not an hour, for him to come to. I've planned it all. First round—group beating. Second—selected torture. Third—to ultimately break his will—sexual insult. Fourth round—cutting off body parts. At that point, anyone will be ready to sign what's needed. I think he will break after the second round, and the notary public will have to be called in. I hope this won't be nighttime already. I want to receive my bonus before midnight. Then I'll begin the castration after the notary public, right?"

"Yes, yes! Okay, I'm off! The cops, prosecutor, judge, notary public are all waiting for their command. Only don't overdo it so that he dies before the notary public gets to him. Then the whole thing has failed..." Leonid Ivanovich thought to himself, "If he does die, we'll make the notary public sign the gift deed anyway." After that, he hurried away.

A forty-watt lamp weakly lit a spacious cell. Businessman Razzhivin was sitting on a cot that divided the room into two parts. He could not lie down, his hands were tightly bound behind his back in handcuffs. The cell was designed for twelve to fourteen prisoners. But Razzhivin was sitting alone on a cot made of planks sixty centimeters high. The businessman had no idea why he was there. Although it did occasionally flash through his mind that the water bailiff was behind his arrest. "If he is the client, I am going to have to buy myself out," thought the prisoner. "And urgently, before the investigation. How much should I offer to close the case? Thirty thousand to Efimkin and twenty to the cops... Will that be enough? And how should I offer it? There are two guards in the pre-trial prison. I'll offer them a thousand dollars for the call... I must urgently warn some friends."

Razzhivin stood up and began kicking the massive cell door.

Ten minutes later, the feeding hatch opened.

“What do you want?” the guard asked clanging the keys on the metal cover.

“Friend, I’ll give you a thousand if you let me make a call. I want to call my mother, I’m not home, they’ll be worrying. I’ll be quick, just tell them I’m alive and well. Okay, I’ll give you three thousand. Three calls for a thousand each. It’s dollars after all!”

“Go to hell... You’re pockets are empty. We don’t work without immediate payment. We know the likes of you. If you knock again, I’ll beat you up,” said the warden closing the hatchway.

“Why am I being kept in handcuffs? How fed up I am of fighting bureaucrats. I am sure I am not the only one being asked for bribes, the whole middle class is under the yoke, even oligarchs are down on their knees, like feudal peasants, before the Kremlin. I so want to love Russia, but for what? Give me something to love it for! If only something small, some tidbit to calm the nerves. I get the feeling the country is held in some enchanted soap bubble of imaginary blessing. It’s not life, but the plague. Some absolute political bluff! Today I couldn’t restrain myself and beat up the scoundrel. But they’ve sucked so much of my blood. I’ve been building my restaurant for three years. Six hundred square meters. It could have been bringing in profit for two and a half years now. But I’m only working for the bureaucrats. I’ve forked out three hundred thousand in bribes alone. Coordinating the project, extending coordination of the project, getting the construction order, hooking up the water supply, electricity, heating, signatures of the fire brigade, countless records with the sanitary epidemiological services... I’ve had to knock on more than eighty doors to start up a restaurant. And I gave them all they asked. I was even in too much of a hurry to give it to them sometimes, what else can you do? And they take it, only they don’t do much, so that they can take a second, third, fifth time. They can never get enough! For no one’s going to bring them down a peg or two. Power does not exist in the country. But business costs money. Money is not working, equipment is rusting, the soul is suf-

fering, the heart bleeds. Then they set a new round... Can a person really keep his wits about him enough not to slap this power in the face? And not with a woman's glove, but with a beefy fist! Today I struck out at Efimkin in all my anger. I realize I was wrong. But this world of ubiquitous bribe-taking quickly deprives you of everything human. I kept control of myself for long enough. It is a national trait of Russians not to snarl at the authorities. The French, German, Italian, English, Spaniard, or Swede would not even tolerate such humiliation. They would fight together in columns, en masse. But we, hoping that someone new will show up any moment in the Kremlin and change everything, squelch the debauchery of bureaucrats by giving them money. I lost control, I beat up the strangler of Russian business, and now I am sitting locked up in handcuffs. I have no idea what awaits me. An case of hooliganism will get me five years in prison. They might accuse me of attempted murder. That will get me ten years. But the worst thing in all these cases is the constant humiliation. That first pervasive feeling accompanies us from an early age to the grave. Has the Russian spirit ever been truly wonderful, just, and bright? The intellect, yes, there have been enough examples throughout time, but honor, dignity? I doubt it... Have privatization and the shoots of capitalism really been able to fundamentally spoil the nation in such a short time?"

Just then, Razzhivin heard the cell door opening. "Have they come to take off the handcuffs?" he wondered briefly. "Or is it the investigator ..."

However, a few strapping guys wearing masks came into the cell. One of them grabbed Razzhivin by the throat, another threw a pillowcase over his head, and, without any explanation, they began beating him. They beat him long and mercilessly, with fists and feet. They turned his ninety-kilogram body into a raw steak beaten tender for putting on the grill. At some point, he passed out. He had barely gained consciousness and through the intolerable pain, flabbergasted at realizing what had happened to him, tried to get up, when he heard someone's voice. "I want you to understand what this is all about. You are being punished for the incident by the river.

The punishment is evaluated at the cost of the Angara Restaurant. If you are willing in the presence of a notary public and witnesses to sign a deed of gift and a statement that you have received the amount in full, you will be left alone, no more beatings. If not, you are in for endless nighttime horrors. We will not back off: either the restaurant, or your life. If you don't pass the Angara on to me, you won't get out of here. Your dead body will be removed from here in secret and thrown on the garbage heap. In a day the rats will have picked your bones clean. The choice is yours. If we were able to bring you into the pre-trial prison, it will be no problem for us to feed you to the rats for supper. I am waiting. Don't say anything else. If I hear anything else apart from "I agree" from you, I will leave, and a team will come in my place capable of all kinds of ...

"Ne-ver..." Razzhivin managed to whisper. Tears were suffocating him, pain distorted his face. "I was wrong to beat you. I only caused trouble for myself. I didn't know what I was doing. Understand, *Angara* is my... dream, I cannot give it up. How will I live? I am a culinary man, I sold my father's house, my brother-in-law's house and began building... The building is almost finished. Forgive me... Take something else... Although I don't have anything else... I would rather die than give away *Angara*."

Efimkin did not listen to any more. He left the cell and dryly told the men waiting, "Carry on!" Again he noticed that that the faces of his fighters, who had pulled off their masks for the time being, were in no way malevolent. They were talking about something amusing among themselves, smiling openly, engaging the prison wardens in conversation. It seemed they were discussing a new kind of con-
dom that had appeared in town. "And I was wondering if I could start a successful raid business. With these people, the answer is 'yes!' It's time for me to look for my next victim!" Leonid Ivanovich thought, inadvertently laughing. "I even know who it will be. The owner of the meat factory. He has a good income. But the main thing is to set up a production chain for the business. Not scattered enterprises that are in no way linked to each other, but an organized chain. Meat comes to the restaurant, I already own the

fish, which means I can do what I want with the prices and quickly raise the profit. After the meat factory, I'll need to deal with the farms. Take control over pig and calf breeding, then turn to agricultural companies, in order to feed the cattle with my own fodder. After that I can think about other restaurants. Then consider a new line. And we'll see what opens up from there... Otherwise money will not come my way. And I have some grand lads. Only I'll have to see to it that they don't decide to beat me up one day. Russians have dark souls and their intellect is not bad either..."

Meanwhile, the second round was beginning in the cell. A red-hot iron was placed on Razzhivin's buttocks. His trousers instantly burned on that spot. There was an acrid smell of burned flesh. The fighters did not stand on ceremony. Their clamps pressed all the tighter into the poor man's skull. It seemed his head would burst open like a water melon. Then they began pulling out his toes with pincers. One toe broke – it had to be pulled in pieces. They placed an electric shocker in his ear and turned it on every minute. Razzhivin was saved from death by the intolerable pain. His mind shut off, and he fell unconscious. He came to an hour later. After the torture, his hands shook. He had barely regained consciousness, when he heard the same voice. "Agree to sign the gift deed and it will all be over. Say the magic word, after which the notary public will come and you are free. Well? By the way, you should know that whether you sign or not, the notary public will still witness the sale and transfer of the money."

Razzhivin did not speak. He raised his hand with difficulty and made a negative gesture. "Would the notary public really deceive me? He is my cousin! I don't believe it... I'm going to have to tolerate this hell," he thought feverishly. "Pain is usually temporary, and I have another thirty years to live. But how can I live if I've invested all my resources in *Angara*? I am bankrupt without it. But if I die, my family will inherit the assets at least. I would be better giving up the ghost than dying for a long thirty years every day out of need. I hope these beasts won't bother my children."

Efimkin left. "Carry on!" he ordered irritably.

The third round began. The fighter by the name of Cock took off his trousers... The three watching began exclaiming, "Look how good he is at it. He's a born homosexual. How he twirls his butt, oh-oh-oh! And uses his tongue! Fantastic! Ha-ha-ha! Better than any woman. We'll hold him off. When we don't have any girls, he will take over..."

"Oh, I never thought that men could arouse such a fantastic orgasm," said Pheasant, moving closer.

Razzhivin could not put up any resistance, was unable to die an instant death, did not have the wonderworking force needed to stop the violence. The prisoner fell, his willpower down, and quietly groaned.

"More, more! Oh, good!" cried one of them drawn to sex.

"Good lad, Razzhivin. Now everyone in town will know that he's not a man, but a homo. I'll have to have a go at his wife. She's a tasty morsel, she'll be happy to join the fray. And he has a daughter, she's already thirteen. Time to teach her too. And what about the boy? He's ten, we can try him too soon. If he's anything like his father, his homosexual talents will definitely come to life. All we need to do is develop these capabilities in the right way," took up Drake.

"I remember someone saying that the king of all homos of Siberia lives in Kan. Now we know who he is! That a boy, Razzhivin, you did a good job of hiding," snickered Blackcock.

"Enough, maybe you'll leave some for me. You think I have nerves of steel. My trousers are popping from my erection. Leave him, it's my turn now," Train Superintendant commanded.

"What about me? Just because I am short, it means I can't? Get your butt over here, only not the burned side," the short fighter demanded.

Efimkin came into the cell again. "Leave us alone," he ordered.

"You liked it too?" someone shouted. But all of them left the room.

"Don't you think it's enough? Haven't you gone far enough in your stubbornness? Sign the document and we will forget it. My

people are professionals, no one in town will know about this incident. Your family will be safe. And if you are a culinary man, then take over the kitchen. I will appoint you chef. We'll advertize you as follows: 'The best chef in Siberia Razzhavin is cooking for you!' Otherwise you will live in the barracks, where you will become a girl for the special force fighters. You will be fucked every day and they'll get to your family too. Agree. The lads have prepared a few more rounds for you. You will agree anyway, even the strongest person will not tolerate the whole program. It's better to say 'yes' straightaway. The notary public will be here in a minute. The documents are ready. First sign the contract on buy-sell of the facility. You don't even have ownership rights of *Angara* yet. So you will sign the paper on concession of propriety rights to me. The second document is the record stating that in the presence of witnesses, I paid you the full amount in keeping with the contract. That's all. And you are free. You'll live quietly with your family, no one will bother you, you will work as a chef under my protection. So, shall I call the notary public? Yes?"

"Call him, you venom! But it's my cousin, Nikolai," blurted out Razzhavin.

"You are wrong. I have a new notary public. You are about to make her acquaintance."

"I am going to have to make it my life goal to kill all this scum," thought Razzhavin. "I'll need two or three days to recover and then I'll shoot them all with my hunting rifle. Such scum will get to my family and start raping my children. I'll sign everything now and then do them in! One by one, with the same perverted tricks. With a set of the same techniques."

Efimkin instantly ran from the room. The first raid deal had been a success. The profit amounted to a million dollars, more than two hundred thousand of which he had to give his partners. "So easy, seven hundred and sixty thousand in three hours!" he thought happily. "Wonderful! So I got my own face beaten, but I would be happy to let anyone who paid seven hundred thousand have a go. I have another question—is capital really a way to achieve moral

triumph? But how can this not mean the inevitable loss of everything human? I did not think I was capable of such... Oh, never mind! Show me an ideal person. Does one exist? And I will give it, raise my hand. Equality is a naïve utopia. Millennia of attempts trying to prove it is possible have come to naught.”

However, Leonid Ivanovich did not think about this for long and ended his internal dispute with a triumphant shout, “Notary public!”

“Bravo! Bonus!” shouted the fighters. Their expressions were happy, like people who have done something worthwhile. Looking at the show of general happiness, Mathematician thought that the members of his team had nothing sacred left today. But did they have it in the first place?

“Send Train Superintendent to me,” ordered Efimkin. He took Black Hood aside and gave him Razzhivin’s passport. “The notary public and witnesses are on their way. Take the sack off his head, take him to the officer’s room, sit him down in a chair, and put the passport in his pocket. Put a bottle of water and glass on the table, as is fitting. Dust him down. Everything must look natural, even though we are dealing with our own people. After the formalities, take him back to the cell and begin your operation. I will not wait to see it through. I’m tired. I have tons to do tomorrow. That’s all. Now what did I say, not a bad job. And good money. Where else in our district will you make that kind of money? In a couple of days, we’ll begin the next stage. The financial terms are the same. But not a word!”

After the notary public and witnesses appeared, the formalities were quickly taken care of. Efimkin, as promised, left. Tortured Razzhivin was taken back to the cell as though to finish up. As soon as the door closed, Black Hood knocked him out with a single blow. Then, laying his victim on the cot, Train Superintendent readied his trusty tool and began the forgotten barbarous procedure ...

THE ART OF FEELING SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Gregory Semyonovich continued observing life in his home town. The two newcomers to town drew his particular attention. The way they were behaving was not entirely typical of the people of Kan. He was mostly interested in the person who had taken up residence in deceased Fateeva's house. Why was the young man digging with such zeal in the garden? This greatly intrigued Gregory Semyonovich. The local youths were only interested in beer, the guitar, and sex. But here was this guy with his strange occupation. The Muscovite was not only digging up the soil, he was planting some seeds in it, obviously with tenderness, sometimes stroking, kissing, and even talking to them. "What does this character want to grow in our Siberian soil? And is it suited to that? It is only warm here for three months out of the year. The rest of the time, even if the sun does shine, it is not warm." The observer got the idea of secretly going into the garden and finding out what his new neighbor was planting. And there were other things that made him curious about the newcomer. Why was he constantly rubbing his nose with an ecstatic expression on his face? When Pomeskin caught the Muscovite at such moments, he, afraid to admit it, even envied the satisfaction his target was experiencing. Gregory Semyonovich repeatedly tried to rub his own nose, but nothing came of it apart from a lingering cold and involuntary erection. "What is his secret?" asked Pomeskin, looking unsuccessfully for an answer. "What if he knows how to obtain erotic satisfaction from different parts of his own body? What else can you rub, squeeze, stroke, or scratch, what can you knock or hit to arouse such deep delight that lightens up his face while he's rubbing his nose?"

The restless Kan resident could not wait to find this out from the neighbor himself, although it was a well-known fact that he categorically avoided all informal contact with people. In short, the Muscovite occupied Gregory Semyonovich's attention much more

than the water bailiff. Today too Pomeschkin was watching the movements of his mysterious neighbor. This strange character had again come out into the yard with a spade in his hand. Two bags were tied at his waist. The left one probably held seeds, and the right some food, nuts or sunflower seeds. The neighbor either took out a nut or a pinch of something unknown and chewed with pleasure. Indeed, the left side did not interest Gregory Semyonovich at all. He did not have any interest in agriculture and had no idea about this endeavor.

This time the Muscovite was not turning over soil, but digging a hole. It gradually became so deep that the neighbor disappeared in it. A little while later, he climbed out, without the spade, but carrying a case. Gregory Semyonovich watched excitedly as the newcomer lugged the case into the house. "What kind of treasure could old woman Fateeva have had? Perhaps it isn't her treasure? But something left from czarist merchants? How many years have passed? Three or four generations, less than a century. That is nothing in the larger scheme of things. I am not interested in valuables, but in the intrigue. Whose treasure is it, and how did he know about it when he has just come from the capital? You would need to be a chronicler of Kan life to know and not some dandy from Moscow. In order to unravel the mystery I'm going to have to pay him a visit. Only I'll wait until he goes out..."

No matter how much Gregory Semyonovich wished to continue following him after the stranger disappeared inside, he was unable to. The newcomer's figure flashed occasionally in the window, but he could see nothing else. Disappointed, Pomeschkin put down the binoculars. "Why am I so interested in this? I, who only feels sarcasm for the world around me? Why has this character so intrigued me? Me, who hates them all with all my soul, with my morbid detachment? Who at his age comes to Kan from the capital to dig up a garden all day with a sweaty face? Maybe I am interested in him because he is very strange and even a bit like me? At any rate, I will tell myself again who I am and who I consider myself to be. I, Gregory Semyonovich Pomeschkin, am a person of some third

gender and new species. I find everything human, culture and religion, not only repugnant, revolting, and hideous, but downright abhorrent and arousing nothing but disgust. I often dream about possessing enough incredible strength to punish the human race for its indelible decay. I am deeply convinced that I will soon have this incredible ability and I will at last be able to rid myself of this most despicable coexistence. How many times have I, possessing unearthly capabilities, imagined punishing everyone in turn in the cruelest way. Sexy girls, make-up artists, plastic surgeons, perfume manufacturers, and designers for their deliberate provocation of animal instincts! Politicians for their insatiable passion for power, money-grubbing, and confidence in their infallibility. Bureaucrats for not caring less about the law, their hypocrisy and extortion. Policemen, prosecutors, judges, military people, fiscal inspectors, and defense and security officers for their selectivity in the use of punitive measures. Journalists, artists, image-makers, writers, and poets for their intentional distortion of reality and corruption. And I hate all the others just as much. I am ready to humiliate them to the core, even sentence them to death for their insulting tolerance of the general vileness. Don't I have the right to call myself a creature unlike any other with incredible potential for hating everything around me, a representative of the third gender and new species? I have come across sexual attraction to oneself in some narcissist people. But such frenetic sexual passion I feel for myself, when I get an erection from touching any part of my body and a ecstatic organism from seeing my own reflection in the mirror, can confidently be called a most rare and unique phenomenon. Why then is such a unique creature as I so deeply interested in this stranger from the capital? I can understand my interest in the water bailiff, I need him for social background. But the Muscovite? A quiet, morbid little mouse with a glassy stare? What force is compelling me to pay attention to him?"

At that moment, the door of Fateeva's house burst open. The young man ran from the porch and, without looking round, rushed along the street in the direction of the town center. He seemed to be

on some urgent business. At first Gregory Semyonovich wanted to hurry after him, but he quickly changed in mind. “No, no, his lodgings are much more interesting than he is. And the door is not locked... I’m going to have to hurry, I have about thirty minutes, and that will be more than enough.”

Pomeshkin jumped up, hid the binoculars, and hurried to Fateeva’s house. When he opened the gate of the high fence and walked toward the house, his nostrils filled with the fresh smell of newly dug black earth. “At least I will know what the earth smells like I will have to lie in for eternity,” he sniffed. “But maybe I will be cremated? Land is becoming so expensive that few people will have enough money for a grave.”

He opened the door and cautiously slipped inside. It was stuffy and empty. However, this was the very atmosphere that Gregory Semyonovich liked and kept in his own home. He saw small portions of some unfamiliar powder in a bowl on the kitchen table. “Is this what the resident chews with such pleasure?” wondered Pomeshkin, bringing the bowl up to his nose. “It doesn’t smell like anything in particular. Ordinary powdered chaff, the color of autumn crops.” He took a pinch of the powder, placed it on his tongue, chewed, and swallowed. The uncustomary potion made him cough. He picked up a cup, scooped up some water from a bucket and drank it down. “What possible use could this chaff have? Should I try some more? Crush it with my teeth and then drink it down with some water? Like he does?” The second try did not have any effect either, apart from an unpleasant sensation in his throat. Rinsing out his mouth, Gregory Semyonovich decided not to try any more. “However, cattle chew that rubbish for two thirds of the year, and give milk...” he smirked. At that moment he caught sight of a suitcase under the high bed. The clumps of earth clinging to the sides were still damp and fresh finger marks could be seen on the lid. “There’s the treasure he recently took out of the hole,” he thought. “And the lock is open. Let’s look and see what’s in there. It’s evidently already been opened...”

Pomeshkin squatted down and dragged the suitcase out into the

middle of the slovenly room. Then he threw open the lid and not without disappointment saw the money, densely packed light-blue colored stacks. There was a whole slew of them. "I'll be darned..." Gregory Semyonovich blurted out. He returned to the kitchen, looked through the empty cupboards and shrugged his shoulders. "I knew that some strange character had taken up residence here. There is hardly any food in the house, not enough for a man to have a decent meal, while he finds a case of money and does not take any of it. He leaves the case open and does not lock the house. Anyone could walk right in and help themselves to this huge fortune. Evidently he has no interest in money. Anyone else would have stuffed his pockets and headed for the store, not him though... But then I have no interest in it either, and I wouldn't have touched it either. How can I hate *them all* and value the main symbol of their despicable life? But this guy is very curious... But he has to be interested in something! Now I need to take a look at what he is sowing. What surprise awaits me?"

At that moment, Pomeshkin experienced an unusual lightness, as though he had been relieved of some invisible weight. The disappointment aroused by the prosaic find under the stranger's bed vanished. Gregory Semyonovich felt himself literally soaring. He immediately mellowed and the world he always felt such hatred toward seemed not so terrible after all. He felt a pleasant swaying as though he had just been on a swing or drunk a glass of wine. "What's the matter with me? I no longer recognize myself. Some kind of fantastical, unfamiliar feeling. It seems his lodgings are some magical place! Is this a miraculous reincarnation or sorcery? And do I need it? Won't I lose my identity? Oh no, I don't want to! But how can I stop it?" he pleaded. However, a few minutes later, he forgot where he was, stopped asking himself questions about the nature of his state and, contrary to his will, became fully immersed in reflection. He thought about how the thoughts and deeds of one and the same species of *Homo sapiens* do not correspond. He recalled a note he read one time about how some structures not entirely customary for the country's religious culture had appeared

in China. For example, precise copies of the Catholic cathedral in Cologne, the Andronikov Cathedral in Moscow, the Tiflis synagogue, and so on. What did this mean? That a few Chinese citizens were interested in Christianity or Judaism? No, no! Nothing of the sort! But then why were they building centers in accordance with well-known examples of the religious cult? The Chinese themselves say that they simply like beautiful architectural forms. Is this not enough? But what about the cross? Or the Star of David? These are symbols of faith! So what? There is no religion here! But what is in these buildings? One of them houses the local parliament. Another a restaurant and antique booths. A third is used for wedding ceremonies and anniversary evenings, glasses of champagne clink and toasts are chanted. We aren't insulting anyone's feelings, after all, but giving tribute to architectural thought. But what would the Pope of Rome, the Patriarch of Moscow, or the Rabbi of the Tiflis synagogue say? Won't they feel insulted? And won't all Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Jews not erupt in anger and indignation? What does anger have to do with it, the Chinese say in response. After all, it was a Russian who said that beauty saves the world. So we are creating beauty around us. Being the center of the world, we are choosing all the best... How else can China be treated, where the oldest and largest nation on the planet lives? There are more people living in Shanghai and Guangzhou than in the whole of France. And more in small Harbin than in Belgium. And the provincial town of Uhan on the banks of the Yanji has more residents than Sweden. At rush hour, two hundred million people move around. This is more than all the people in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Chinese airplanes raise the same number of passengers into the air as constitutes the total population of Switzerland. All the elevators in Chinese high rises hold as many people as live in Israel. And the Beijing region has as many residents as the United States of America... So who has the right to say what is good and what is bad? Let's take your democratic social system and vote. The Chinese win! So what your Pope, Patriarch, or Rabbi say will be a voice crying in the wilderness...

Gregory Semyonovich had become so carried away by this dispute in his head that he totally forgot where he was and why he had come to his neighbor's house. There can be no doubt that his illusions would have continued to dominate, after all he was under the strong influence of koknar. But at some point, when Pomeskin was reflecting at the kitchen window about the contradictions of the world, the voice of Peter Petrovich Parfenchikov brought him to his senses.

"Hello there, dear!" the house resident repeated.

"What?" said Gregory Semyonovich, looking around in surprise.

"I am happy to see you!" Peter Petrovich immediately noticed that a teaspoon was lying in the bowl of koknar. He realized that the guest had taken a dose, which meant he was a like-minded colleague. The Muscovite thought well of this and added in a friendly way, "Shall we make some tea? A cup of tea is a wonderful thing, especially after *that very thing*... Or shall we brew some koknar? To intensify the vibrancy of our worldview? Add some zest? God himself insistently recommended that. I remember you. We happened to meet in the station square on the day I arrived. You are the first person I spoke to in Kan. I asked you something... Oh, yes 'where can I find a taxi around here?'"

Gregory Semyonovich did not know what "koknar" or "adding some zest" meant. He decided to act cautiously. "You think I showed up here to answer your question. After the fact? Okay! I often call myself a slowcoach. There are lots of taxis in town. Raise your hand and any car will stop. Everyone wants to make some money. There are not that many jobs." Why am I being so talkative, he wondered in surprise. There was definitely some kind of sorcery going on here. But to hell with it, I feel great, I don't even know myself, and these changes do not irritate me at all.

"I am happy to meet you. My name is Peter Parfenchikov."

"I am local resident Gregory Pomeskin.

"Did you know Fateeva?"

"Of course. Everyone here knew her. Isn't she a relative of

yours?” Pomeshkin kept talking in order to avoid being asked the logical question in such circumstances, “So what are you doing here?”

“No. I bought this house from her heirs.”

“Yes, I recall she had a son somewhere. He either lived in Pskov or in Smolensk. Is that where you are from?”

“I am from Moscow. And I got to know the sellers in the capital. Was one of them her son? That was not something that interested me. Then again, such insignificant things are instantly forgotten. I’m putting the kettle on. There is some gingerbread, sugar, and prunes. All very beneficial. They help *it* to open up faster. Will you join me?”

“Willingly. Can I ask a question? I am interested in why you decided to move to our downtrodden Kan from the capital. I would never go anywhere else, but an indigenous Muscovite...it makes no sense! But I understand my question is not very polite. There may be a thousand reasons, and it is not necessarily something you would want tell the first person you meet. Please forgive me if that is the case.”

“No, no, it’s all very simple! I couldn’t stand Moscow’s hypocrisy any longer. All people think about is money! Not even about money as such, but about big money. Even that is not quite true, all they think about is enormous fortunes. Even tens or hundreds of millions of dollars are not enough for people these days. They want billions, tens of billions—this is what the people of my circle idolize. And this poisonous infection is dramatically changing the psychology of the masses. The nation is becoming single-minded. Everything that is not directly associated with material wealth is devalued, like in hyperinflation, or to be more precise, like in complete bankruptcy. You don’t need to be a great scientist to understand that miserly prices for spiritual products are leading to ethnic degradation. That’s basically why I left the capital and sought isolation, I beg your pardon, in the sleepy provinces. Here you can really feel yourself. And if you have *it* with you, and of excellent quality to boot, you can feel as though you are in seventh

heaven. Talking of which, *it* has boiled. I don't have any cups, only jars. Do you mind?" Without waiting for an answer, Mr. Parfenchikov began pouring out the koknar. "Here you go!" He handed a mayonnaise jar to Pomeskin.

Brewed koknar looks about the same as tea. If the tea is low quality, the kind that is sold everywhere in the Russian provinces, tea and powdered poppy also smell the same. It is not surprising that, in his ignorance, Gregory Semyonovich might think the word "koknar" was the name of a type of tea. But Mr. Parfenchikov, who was absolutely sure that his guest had tried *that very thing* and knew what he was talking about, offered him the cherished treat without any particular explanation.

The new acquaintances began drinking in small sips. Peter Petrovich was waiting for exclamations of praise. The brew was strong for seasoned lovers of *that most important thing*. After a few sips, Parfenchikov could not resist asking, "How do you like it?"

"A bit bitter..."

"No surprise there, I used fifteen tablespoons to brew it," said Peter Petrovich with light pride. "Take some sugar with it. That's the way we do it in Moscow. What about here?"

"They offer jam and dabble in sugar..."

"It's the same everywhere. Have some gingerbread. You will quickly feel the wonderworking power."

No more than a hundred and thirty grams of liquid would fit into the old type of mayonnaise jar. Two-and-a-half tablespoons of koknar could be dissolved in this amount. This was an extreme dose for the first time. Without suspecting whom he was dealing with, Peter Petrovich decided to enhance their acquaintance with finely powdered Pianj poppy, which would help reach a state of royal euphoria. The young man poured two doses out of the cherished bag and, returning, noticed from the threshold of the kitchen that something was wrong with his guest. Pomeskin's eyes were closed and he was barely breathing.

"How are you feeling?" asked the host cautiously.

“E-e-e-e-e... A-a-a-a-a...” Gregory Semyonovich bleated incoherently.

Peter Petrovich was worried, he picked up his hand and began feeling his pulse. One hundred and five beats a minute! Parfenchikov understood that his guest was at the initial stage of profound intoxication. When the magic of the poppy fully manifests itself, the pulse quickens and the person can have a heart attack. He was dumbfounded, even horrified. As an experienced adherent of *that very thing*, the Muscovite always had some atenolol with him, used to treat hypertension, and valerian, a mild tranquilizer. Parfenchikov again rushed for his bag, took out the pills, broke one in half, worried that rapid slowing of the pulse could lower the blood pressure. Then something irreversible would happen. He grabbed a glass of water. But Pomeshkin was unconscious and could not swallow. So Parfenchikov tried something else. First he forced the half pill into Gregory Semyonovich’s mouth. Then he began spooning in water, worried that he might choke. Finally, the water washed the pill down into his stomach. “Thank goodness,” the young man said, happily. “Now I need to lie him on his stomach and lower his head. Otherwise he could swallow his tongue.” Peter Petrovich moved the bed away from the wall, lugged Gregory over to it and placed him on it. He propped his shoulders up on two stools so that he wouldn’t fall and returned to the kitchen to finish drinking his koknar.

“Either he didn’t know what he was drinking, or he is a newcomer and my doses are fatal for him. But what was he doing in my house? Did he want to make my acquaintance or look around the house while I wasn’t home? I’d better check to see if the suitcase is still there. How did I not notice it when I moved the bed? Perhaps he’s already stolen it? What a pity... I could have bought myself another ten hectares. I could have replenished by supplies *of that* and royally treated any guest. Everything’s okay, the suitcase is here, but it looks as though it has been opened. The lid is not on tightly. But nothing has been touched. His pulse is no longer as rapid. In another ten minutes it will be back to normal... I knew it would stop

at eighty beats and the guest's state will stabilize. This has happened to me more than once too at the very beginning of my acquaintance with the desired flower.”

Wiping the spittle from the sufferer's lips, I washed my hand, closed the case and pushed it with my foot into the corner and returned to the kitchen. There was still some koknar in the pan, which I was so drawn to. Maybe I should try the professor's pills on him, I thought, drinking sip after sip straight from the pan. But there would be no anonymity. We already know each other, he seems like an okay guy. He had too much, but not because he is greedy or overdoing it, but because he didn't know. I am interested to know how his character, mentality, behavior change. But in order to do that I need to know him better, look deeper into his personality. And what point is there slipping him a pill without registering the changes? Will I have to ask Koshmarov himself how Gregory Semyonovich becomes metamorphosized?

“Yes, yes, only after I see qualitative personal changes using Pomeshkin as an example will I consent to participate in the professor's mass experiment with his nano pills. But what is a qualitative change for me? What criteria will I take into account? And what is quality when applied to people after all? I don't have an answer yet. I can't change people according to some unclear criteria. I will need Koshmarov for this. Hey professor, where are you? I need your help!”

Before I could swallow some more koknar, I heard, “You know that I am always close by. I picked up on your doubts and am ready to help. So, let's start at the beginning. What do we want to achieve? Qualitative changes in people! Achieving this goal presumes three stages. First, we change Russians, not only because they are the ones who need it most, although there is colossal impurity here, but because we are Russian, which means we need to think about ourselves first. From the scientific viewpoint, it is absolute rubbish, but as a factor of personal motivation, it is extremely important. We are conducting the experiment on the people of Kan. And only after the most convincing success will we go on to other regions. Local

resident Gregory Pomeshkin is coming to. He's about to regain consciousness. Make it a rule to ask someone what he knows *about that* and what dose he takes before giving him *any of that*. You understand? I would like for him to participate in our dispute too. The topic is what sort of person we would like a Kan resident to be. Wake him up, even though he is under the strong influence of opium poppy."

Peter Petrovich went over to the bed. Gregory's breathing was even, his pulse had returned to normal.

"How do you feel?" asked Parfenchikov cautiously.

"I don't know. I seem to still be alive..."

"Sit up, you'll feel better. Can you?"

"I'll try. What happened to me?"

"You were apparently extremely worn out. Everything's okay."

"Worn out, that's a rather strange diagnosis. Doesn't seem we were engaged in any physical labor," said Gregory hoarsely, getting up with difficulty. "And I've lost my voice. What happened? I remember I was drinking tea or some kind of concoction. Then I passed out. Admittedly, I was having sweet dreams, but I don't remember what they were about now."

"Let's go into the kitchen and have talk. A third person has joined us."

"Who?"

"Professor Koshmarov"

"Where is he from?"

"From Moscow."

"When did he arrive?"

"At the same time as me. He always accompanies me."

"Strange that I have never met him. But... Let's take a look at your scientist from the capital. Where is he, I don't see him..."

At that moment Peter Petrovich heard Koshmarov's voice, "I think it is too early for me to be seen. I will talk to him through you. I need to understand what he's about. You talk to him openly."

"The professor will participate in our conversation from a

distance, as though virtually. I will be a translator of his thoughts. Do you mind?”

“What a wonderful day it has been today. So much new and unusual. I don’t want to refuse anyone. If I were a woman I would agree today to be intimate with all the men in the world. What do you think of that? I am in a superb mood! All sorts of thoughts are coming to me, only my voice fails me. What are we going to talk about?”

“What we would like the ideal citizen of Kan to be. Each of us gives his version, and the professor will sum up.”

“What for? Scientific work or a political contract for studying the electorate?”

“After summing up our recommendations, the professor will prepare a nano pill. It will help on the genomolecular level to keep in mind our wishes and create an ideal Kan resident. I have already expressed my worries. Different people have different ideas of what an ideal person should be like. For a tractor driver, it is a mechanic. For a conductor, it is the train superintendent, and for a woman a rich controllable man. So it is very difficult to model the necessary target. So, shall we begin?”

“Go ahead,” smirked Grigory Semyonovich.

“Are you listening to us, professor? We are beginning...”

“I am all ears,” came the response. However, Mr. Parfenchikov was the only one who heard it.

“First, people need to be reduced in size. They should be no taller than five foot and weigh no more than a hundred and twenty pounds. Each new generation should be a couple of inches shorter and weigh a couple of pounds less. This is not only an economic and microbiological question, but also largely an astronomical one. Unifying height will make it possible to save natural resources. What is more, people will need less food, less space, so less energy. If we reduce consumption one-hundred-, and then one-thousand-fold, Homo sapiens will not have to look for somewhere else to live in the Universe. Height and weight directly depend on the third and most important aspect of our species—intellect. By maintaining it

in its present form, we are forced to significantly reduce our volume, because our modest brain does not correspond to our biological mass. If we cannot stop the increase in consumption, we will soon disappear as a species. If we can't keep within the limits of the available resources, we do not have a future. At first glance, the intellect greatly exceeds biology, which is functioning without its interference. While in some outstanding people it is simply limitless. However, in their mass, or shall we say, in their gray matter, people are outrageously primitive. Going on to the next question, I would like to say immediately that I am a convicted support not of the ethnic principle of dividing people, but of the intellectual. States need to be created not based on history or on culture. For example, the Country of the Genetically Modified, the Republic of Agricultural Manufacturers, the Empire of Migrants into the Universe, the Republic of Athletes and Hunters, the Union of Artists of Thought and Excited Minds, the Autonomous Region of Parasites, the Colony of Alcoholics and Artistes, the Territory of the Oversexed and Overeaters, the Province of Skilled Workers and Craftsmen, the State of Criminals and Gossipers, the Department of Servers of Various Cults... And so on. There have been frequent attempts to divide humankind in terms of social status in world history, but they have unfortunately ended in wars. Why? The answer is simple—there is not enough intellectual mass. So there it is, go on and take it from there! Use it! Here I would like to note that under the effect of koknar some thoughts very often contradict others. But I see something wonderful in this. Recently I was tormented by the thought of whether it was possible to become like Him. Similar thoughts on the topic, but entirely different.”

“The two of us just happen to be five foot. But we won't focus on individuals. What limit of height and weight would you like to reach?”

“I understand that Gregory either did not understand what I was telling him about my thoughts of growing in His likeness, or did not hear me at all,” I thought. But I could consider that another time, so I went on, “I personally would be happy with being a couple of

inches tall and weighing one or two pounds as long as I had the same IQ. I am not the most intelligent person, but I am happy with what I have. The ideal person of the future should have similar parameters. But in general, these characteristics should be flexible. Scientific solutions will be found, according to which in some cases you can be a giant, and in others you turn into an invisible node of energy or a ray. Then nature will not be so mercilessly plundered, while the intellect can finally truly step out into the Universe. At first, I would make a few fibers of the body artificial in order to maintain the body's dependence on the energy of food breakdown. Then we can move on to more radical transformations. So what ideas do you have about yourself and the ideal design of a Kan resident?" he asked, looking expectantly at Pomeskin. "We are talking about the near future, say the next one hundred years."

"Height and weight are not an issue for me at all. I am not concerned about that. Of course, mobility would decide a lot. I myself am not against turning into a bug or spider at my own discretion, particularly into a wasp or even gadfly. Let's say some scoundrel is receiving a prize or state award, order from the highest hands, after all, they often endow people with such honors in the Kremlin. Right at the most important moment you bite him in the most sensitive spot. And then with a sense of duty well performed and not without glee you will watch him suffer and the dumbfounded faces of the other villains present at the ceremony. A wonderful prospect. Or even better, you get the right from your professor to mete out the cruelest punishment of all kinds of rogues. How else can justice be won? All the defense and security structures are behind them, they won't touch their own people, they are allowed to do anything! How can you get to them through the heads of the hangers-on? How can you punch them in the face and beat their asses? Your Koshmarov's enigmatic pill should be able to help here. There is no one else to count on. We are putting up with it. If I had the opportunity to carry out law and order exclusively at my own discretion, I would leave no more than one hundred people in our town unpunished. I would begin with the main one... With the mayor, for

instance. I am imagining the following scene. A press conference is underway. Journalists are asking questions. I am also in there with them and also raise my hand. ‘What do you want to ask, Gregory Semyonovich?’ asks the host. ‘I want to ask the mayor why he has surrounded himself with louts and hoodlums who think only about stuffing their own pockets and are not interested in anything else. Whereas they could tell you that at the end of the press conference you won’t be able to stand because your left leg has been removed. And tomorrow at half past eight, your right hand will be paralyzed. And at ten past two you will go blind in your left eye. But the worst thing will happen at ten o’clock. You will begin to constantly vomit and so violently that you will burst your own stomach. From the convulsions, your ears will fall off and your teeth fall out, and your last sparse hairs will fly from your head. This is the result of you surrounding yourself not with professionals, but with self-seekers. After this, something similar will happen to your first deputy... But I will tell you that story later.’ That is how I would like to change not every resident of Kan, but primarily myself. If you promise me these capabilities, give me the pill! I am even demanding it. For I can no longer stand the tyranny of this national obscurantism. Then I will deal with them with incredible passion! Legends will be told of my hate. The number of victims does not scare me. Give me Koshmarov’s pill and you will see yourself what Gregory Pomeshkin is capable of. I am willing to give millions, even tens of millions what they deserve!”

“Ask him,” the professor whispered to me, “how he will behave without my pill? What does he feel about it today? After all, I want to cultivate a new, ideal type of Kan resident, and not intensify emotions that already exist. Develop decisiveness and ability to act.”

“Gregory, our task is to draw the outlines of the person of the future and not get even with anyone,” explained Parfenchikov. “I can understand your hate of functionaries. But why don’t you act? Why don’t you put your passion into practice? Tell me what it is that keeps you from taking radical steps today?”

“I hate everyone. But my hate is not born of malice in general, but of an insane love of myself. I don’t have enough left for anyone else. For love is such a limited resource, like time or volume. And if it runs out, you will have look for something else. Hate could be that new thing. This is what happened to me. I really am not like anyone else. This is the answer to your question. I do not want my purest hands to be smeared in the blood of creatures I hate. Why am I placing my hopes on the professor’s pill? I have repeatedly asked myself this. Either I will cure myself of my extreme self-love or I will break myself and declare war on the damned world.”

“But why don’t you like your current feelings? After all, you are a nice person, pleasant to talk to. I, at least, feel comfortable in your company,” noted Peter Petrovich. “So I do not want to believe in your extremism.”

“Really? That’s very nice to hear. This is the first time anyone has said anything like that to me. Thank you. Lately, I have been feeling increasing dissatisfaction, and it could become a detonator. I will tell you honestly that it scares me. What will I be left with in that case? My radicalism is growing. This is apparently why I am looking for a reserve ideology. I need alternative feelings, or the same ones but artificially or naturally intensified.”

“Let me ask you something else. What were you drinking in my kitchen?” I probed, feeling that he did not understand me.

“At first I thought it was tea. But after I woke up on the bed, it seemed to me that I had drunk some kind of unfamiliar potion. Now I feel wonderful and am even interested in our conversation. That’s why I forgot to ask you what you gave me. Tell me, if it isn’t a secret.”

“I gave you what I thought you were familiar with, something you had already taken before.”

“What? I don’t understand...”

“I was sure that in my absence you had taken some of the koknar, the yellowish powder from the copper bowl. I decided you knew about *that very thing*, so out of hospitality I offered you some more.”

“Oh yes, I did... I tried a little of that strange powder out of curiosity. So what is it?”

“Powdered opium poppy... Koknar in the Pashto language.”

“Oh, my lord! But where did you get it? I have never come across anything like it in our parts. Some sort of mysticism!”

“I brought it with me. It helps me to exist. It makes it easier to endure the insults and bitterness of life. I could not live in our Russian world without it.”

Pomeshkin could not restrain himself and asked quickly, “Do you really hate reality so much? Or are you just dependent on opium?”

“Not so much physiologically, as spiritually. I take a couple of spoonfuls and then look for somewhere to hide from the entire world. I am my own master and slave. *It* arouses mind games and they have become my greatest pleasure. Nothing can be better than them. After *it*, I completely forget any sadness or heartfelt bitterness.” He took another two spoonfuls. Of course, this was perversion. But after five years of close mutual acquaintance, desire spoke louder than deed. “There is no messing around here,” continued Peter Petrovich. “Opium chaff is a serious thing. It can do anything with your mind. Send you into the past, or trap you in the future for a long time.” He took a bite of gingerbread and stared at Pomeshkin. He wanted to hear some comments about the situation he had just told him about. Gregory was stubbornly silent. It seemed that his neighbor’s words had touched him deeply. Peter Petrovich had finished eating the gingerbread when Gregory suddenly said, “Oh so that’s why I feel so different. I quickly fell into some strange state. Seemed I was talking about China to myself. Or was I dreaming it? I just can’t fathom it. I don’t think I lost my mind, but it was as though I lost myself. And I was pursued by the haunting thought that I am not Gregory Semyonovich, but some unfamiliar being. I have never really known myself that well, although I loved myself so wildly. But here I completely lost myself and my feelings toward myself cooled off. Not that I am vexed about that, on the contrary, I am secretly happy that suddenly I am

talking so freely. Maybe I'll start to live more freely. In my usual state, I would never do anything like this. Tell me honestly, is that koknar in fact your nano pill? It has drastically changed me. And rather quickly and intrepidly, I must say. I am simply afraid to believe it! And I am wondering all the time which Pomeskin is better? Without koknar or with it? Before I met you or after? Should I continue feeding myself with poppy or stop? And say no to it forever. A difficult dilemma. A couple of hours ago, I would never have thought about this, I was sure that my life ideology was set. And now I find myself at this crossroads. And where is this koknar found? You said, opium poppy. It doesn't grow here in Siberia."

"It needs forty days of warmth and sun, and then it oozes with opium milk," explained Peter Petrovich, his eyes gleaming. "Your short, but hot summer will be enough to be able to gather a good harvest at the end of August. Of course, the heads will be the size of a female fist rather than a male one. But after you grind them, you won't remember their size or what a poor harvest it was. The main thing is not the size of the heads, but the amount of milk. I am planting poppy in my plot, hoping that the harvest will provide me with enough to last two or three years. That is keeping in mind treating invited guests," he said with a slight smirk, looking at Gregory, "and uninvited guests. You plant, then you lie in ecstasy, playing your excited mind games. While *it* goes on growing, filling up with divine energy."

"I was so surprised and couldn't figure out what this stranger from the capital was sowing in Fateeva's garden," Pomeskin shuddered. "He's sowing poppy. Poppy! Wonderful!"

"Do people quickly get addicted to *that very thing*?" he asked.

"On the seventh to ninth day. It's different for everyone. It mainly depends on the dose. The bigger the dose, the faster you become addicted. If you get used to one dose and it has stopped pinching the mind, does not arouse a rush, the peak of euphoria, after which the world, the Universe, opens up, it must be increased. And that has to be done every two or three weeks."

“And what happens if you get hooked, but you don’t have any and can’t get some? Are you in a bad way?”

“Just the thought of that gives me the shudders. Withdrawal, or abstinence, is a difficult thing to overcome. If you have been hooked on it for a long time, it could be fatal.”

“How can you avoid withdrawal?”

“Don’t become addicted and don’t take any more.”

“But you aren’t doing that...”

Parfenchikov wanted to tell him that it would be better to leave it alone, that it’s dangerous and he would have to look for the weed himself soon. He would be better just to go on with his life, why did he need this headache and obsession? But looking at his dumb-founded neighbor, who had an expression of pure admiration on his face, Peter Petrovich thought again. “He’s going to get hooked on it anyway,” flashed through his mind. “And how much danger awaits him at first? Don’t you feel sorry for this honest lad? He didn’t touch the money, but he could have easily taken it and headed off. I don’t think I could bear to let him go off alone.” He thought about it some more and decided to openly tell his new acquaintance everything about the enraptured unstable feeling. “I don’t suffer from abstinence, although withdrawal is a burdensome thing for the human heart to bear. It is particularly difficult for those who are really hooked on it. With experience you learn how to ease the morbid state. For example, never take the last three spoonfuls until you have managed to get some more. Stretch it out. Let the withdrawal symptoms bring to the brink of passing out. Take half a spoonful at a time. Then tolerate it as long as you can, then reduce the dose to quarter of a spoon. Of course, it is an awful feeling, but you can keep going and have the energy to keep looking for more of *that very thing*... That way you can stretch out three spoonfuls for three or four days. After that you can get through another day without it, when you don’t even have a gram or pinch. On the second day without it, you need to have at least one ampoule of medication that will help in the event of phosphorous poisoning. You keep going until you are about to drop. And not until you are about to kick the bucket

do you inject yourself intramuscularly with one third of a gram, a quarter of the ampoule. Three quarters of the ampoule will last you for two days at the most. If your body can stand it, you will suffer terribly for around a month. Then you will spend another month in bed, but you will begin to move around. You will only begin to feel better the fourth month, although your whole body will feel weak. You'll have diarrhea all the time, your nose and eyes will run, you will break out in a sweat, you will lose up to twenty-five or thirty percent of your body weight. Your teeth will turn black, come loose, and fall out. You won't be able to eat, you won't have the strength to digest food. You won't be able to have sex, you'll be impotent for a long time. Your breath will smell like acetone, your sight will falter. But what might happen if your body cannot withstand the abstinence syndrome, and this is more realistic, because no one hooked on opiates is in good health, is you will die a few hours after the last anti-phosphorous injection, when you have no more of *that* left. This is what happens to people in love with opium. There is nothing optimistic about it. I have been through this suffering. The price for a few minutes of mental flight is high. But it is worth it. So I stick with koknar. I don't have to look for anything else. This is forever. But I don't recommend playing around with it. Either don't have anything to do with at all. Or you go with it to the end. I give myself another two, at the most three years. But such wonderful years! The most expensive sobriety cannot compare with it. And the most delightful thing is that you always feel deep solitude even amidst the faerie thoughts. That's what's best! After *it* you become an entirely different person. If you were a hater, full of sarcasm, a skeptic who denies morality, you will turn into a shy altruist. Life today rids people of all their wonderful qualities, the economy perverts the soul and body, daily graft afflicts the mind with malice. Everything beautiful that each person is inevitably born with perishes. But powdered poppy head stops the perfidious intrusion of this kind of life into the consciousness. Whereby koknar enables the flight into rapture where you can take delight and revel in the unprecedented state of your inflamed mind.

You become unreceptive to the world around you and open to unmotivated ecstasy. Caught in opium illusion, I become the whim of omnipresent dreams. And this is so important! For today's era will go down in national history as a time of the insane ambition of people with absolutely no knowledge or talent. I know what I am talking about. I have had money, lived a carousing life, surrendered to the pleasures of the flesh, been considered one of the top partygoers of the capital's chicary, but none of that has any meaning. Only powdered poppy head provides truly divine detachment from reality. For the ordinary world puts restraints on us. Imagine a person who does not need anything. He does not demand anything of anyone. Neither a house—he can sleep anywhere. Nor registration—he usually lives in poppy fields. Nor an official education, although he reads more than the students of the best universities. Nor the rights and freedoms mandatory for members of society. Nor clothes, nor food. He will betray his love for his mother and wife, for his own children, God, and the devil for *that*. He does not care who is in power, who is at its feeding trough... He could not care about anything, but without joy or malice. It would even be better to say that he is oblivious and does not want to recall anything that is too human. He only has one problem, how to get hold of *that very thing*. And nothing else! I found a case of money. It's in my bedroom. I know that you've seen it. But I don't need money. I am the consumer of exclusively one self-growing product and not only do not look at anything else, I do not even want to know about anything else, even the most tempting or greatest thing. I can eat the root of any bush or tree, the leaves of a birch, woodland mushrooms and berries, worms, cockroaches, flies, spiders, any biological substance at all. But the most important thing is to have a supply of dried opium head with its chocolate-colored veins. That's all! All and nothing else. I would cut off my penis if necessary to get more opium in a state of withdrawal. If they asked for my kidneys, or other parts or organs of my body, I would be happy to be operated on and have them taken. I could even exist as an invalid without arms and legs, I do not need hearing or sight, a medical assistant or

emergency aid. All I need is to have a supply of powdered poppy at hand. Do you understand how much you have to love it? What feeling of devotion you need to feel toward it? Only then will it give you what you deserve and completely conquer your mind. And your reward for becoming wild and isolating yourself from the flow of existence is elevation to an unprecedented feeling. Although disdained, we opium addicts hold our heads high. Koknar gives us a feeling of supremacy over everyone! Heads of the wondrous flower are not for slaves. We believe in the exclusiveness of opium. There is a saying that those who reach the top are pulled into the abyss. But with us it is the other way around, the higher you climb the further up you want to ascend.”

Turning pale, Gregory Semyonovich was listening intently to Parfenchikov. He was extremely anxious and tense. Then he began speaking, talking more to himself. “Perhaps I should give it a try? There is clearly something missing in my life. I have never had an idol, apart from myself. But evidently the time has come. Let’s see what intellectual joy the dry milk of the poppy flower will give Gregory Semyonovich. I am finding it hard to believe that it is so special, although I feel wonderful... Tell me, friend, if koknar does not suit me, can I be released from its captivity? You probably know dozens of ways of letting go of it painlessly.”

“If you have doubts, it would be better not to start. I cannot advise you in this matter. Of course, I will help if things get bad. But you should have do doubts. Don’t torture yourself with indecision.”

“How much does your powder cost? I don’t have much money.”

“It is seventy days until the new harvest. My supplies will last for three months. But I have money and can buy more. I don’t know that the prices are like here. If we buy land and plant poppy together I am willing to take you on for free. Let’s presume we can’t find any opium in town. In that case, in six weeks we can cut off the green heads of the new harvest. There won’t be much milk in them, but there won’t be any withdrawal, let alone abstention syndrome. Withdrawal comes before abstention. There is powdered poppy in the bowl. There is brew still in the saucepan. There is enough for

another two jars. I wouldn't advise drinking it now. A little more than an hour has passed since you came to. Wait until tomorrow."

"I would like to have a little more today... How about half a jar?"

"Don't ask me. I've already told you what I think."

Gregory Semyonovich went up to the kitchen table. He picked up each of the containers in turn, sniffed them and thought. He decided to pour himself half a jar of koknar and began drinking it in small sips.

"So will this professor of yours ever show up? Or was it just a way of getting me to talk?" snickered Pomeskin. "Nano pill, nano pill, but it all turned out to be poppy... By the way, I don't object, I like the idea of *it*. The fact that I managed to survive the first opium onslaught gives me hope. But when will I begin to understand *it*? That is also very important to know. After the first dose, I've been having very unusual thoughts. It was as though my limbs had disappeared and only my brain was on overload. My mind became dissociated from my body and soared of its own accord. A topic arose that I had never even considered before. I still cannot understand how it came to me. Who presented it to me so skillfully? And most important, why? When sober I would never fill my head with such things. Not that I began thinking stupid things, but entirely alien things. I have never considered what life is like in China, but it suddenly became so important... And where did so much information unexpectedly come from? Then after we drank koknar together for the second time I passed out entirely!"

"You are right, you need to get used to *it*. And you soon will. But it is different for everyone. I began to understand *it* after the fifth to seventh dose. *It* slowly revealed its secrets to me. Little by little, as they say. For some people one day is enough, others quickly give it up because it had no particular effect on them. *It* is cunning and cautious, does not rush to demonstrate its phenomenal possibilities. It carefully tests everyone out to choose a real adept. So beware of inattention and false friendship. Never mix *its* state with alcohol or mushroom intoxication. Toadstools and vodka are *its* unworthy

rivals. *It* is a philosopher, the lord of the world and intellect, and they are poor contenders for *its* pedestal. I know a lot of people who allow themselves to flirt and sometimes, while living with *it*, have affairs on the side with alcohol and mushrooms. These idiots have long passed away. *It* cunningly hides from them to arouse abstinence. They decide to betray it and begin taking toadstool concoctions, drink port and vodka, hoping to save themselves from withdrawals. But no miracle occurs, because there is no substitute for *it*. They know that, but their weakness of spirit does not allow them to swear devotion to *it*. And *it* is particularly merciless to those who, out of greed, rise to betray eternal values by being tempted by false ones. For Opium is the origin of all origins, but they surrender to all kinds of rubbish, such as hemp. They end up with cirrhosis of the liver, pulmonary arrest, suffocating in their own vomit, and constipation that fatally poisons the body. And there they are at the cemetery or in the cremation room. There is no other end. Do you understand what force you are dealing with? What you want to come into communion with? Masonic lodges, the Order of the Templars, the Communist Party of the times of Dzerzhinsky, or the Gestapo under the control of Muller are nothing compared with *this* eternal power. It fills people with incredible notions. For the human spirit is by nature narcotic. A couple of hours ago, you didn't know anything about *it*. But after only half a teaspoon you have been drawn irresistibly to *it*. See the power *it* possesses! Be careful, think again and again. Everything else will have to be subjugated, and your response will be an irresistible striving for voluntary insanity! It would be better to stop today than find yourself tomorrow, after torturous suffering, going up the crematorium chimney in smoke."

"I accept the challenge. I surrender myself to this marvelous koknar. I will become its submissive servant. Baron Koknarov, I am yours, yours! Here the voice of slave Pomeskin, I am yours, baron," intoned Gregory Semyonovich beside himself in rapture. His eyes shone, his tongue went dry, his forehead became damp, his nose began to itch, without arousing any orgasm, and Gregory Semyonovich began to slip into the world of dreams and illusions.

“Well now, Gregory is off, he’s been taken,” concluded Parfenchikov. “Where is he off to now? To what heights of spirit is he soaring? Into what depth of passions will he plunge? Then he will be surprised again. Although I started the same way. But now I am rather worried about him. Is it my fault? Did I push him? After all it has already become a standing joke that everyone who becomes the friend of opium skillfully draws a new supporter in order to take advantage of him when his own resources run out. Seems that’s it! By telling him about all the dangers of living with *it*, I was constantly elevating *its* power, and the ordinary person is always drawn to power. So indirectly, with the magic of opium power, I provoked Pomeskin to become the same as me. To totally surrender himself to this friendship. But I was not consciously aware of this desire. It just happened. If he proves to be a devoted servant of *that very thing*, it will be easier for us to plant the divine flower together. And the harvest will last for a long time. So we will be celebrating. The powder eases my aggressiveness but arouses a passion for finding out the details of something new. This is precisely how I am so drastically different from everyone else when it comes to consumerism. I am absorbed only with enraptured mind games, while I couldn’t care less about the outside world.”

It was getting dark. Forgetting about his new friend, his interest in him was gradually waning, Parfenchikov enraptured, losing touch with time and space, became immersed in himself. He suddenly found himself outside hurrying toward the shop where he had recently met the limping young woman. This circumstance at first embarrassed him. Since his acquaintance with *that very thing*, anything to do with sex had stopped engaging him, nor was he thinking about buying anything, food was the last thing on his mind. So why was he being drawn to the shop? Insistently and irritably, he began searching his mind for the reason he was taking this strange route. And recalling his earlier fleeting thoughts, he returned to the idea of bringing his offspring into the world. Not an ordinary child, but one conceived in a state of intense intoxication with Pianj koknar. “This would be a significant contribution of genetic engineering to muta-

tional experiments on qualitative changes to the national ethnicity,” he thought. “Perhaps the old man is skillfully manipulating my mind? He is the one obsessed with improving the Russian nationality. I am only a participant in the professor’s ingenious experiment. If I am really going to see that bandy-legged girl to ask her to have sex with me, which is ridiculous, what makes me think she will agree? Will she want to have anything to do with or go to bed with me, give birth to my child? Am I a handsome lad? No! A super star whom every girl dreams of? No! A wealthy magnate? No! Although, wait a minute, what about the suitcase under the bed stuffed with money? Does it not make me a Russian oligarch? I hate to admit that though, but it is a fact. A millionaire! So it is true I am rich and can introduce myself that way, if need be.

“I had better go back home and get a few stacks of thousand-ruble notes, then use this impure power to tempt the lame girl to consider bearing my child. I cannot be sure that the mutations of our genes will create an extraordinary human product, but there is still hope. And this hope is reinforced with faith in the divine designation of opium. I am sure that it is capable of the most incredible transformations. Perhaps my offspring will have some exceptional thoughts about the purpose of man? Or he will acquire magical power over himself and opium will become an anachronism for him? However, I am not risking anything, Peter Petrovich is only building material for a new being, while mutation is something only absolute reason is capable of. I cannot predict anything, particularly the results of the experiment.”

Immersed in these confused thoughts, Mr. Parfenchikov ran into the house. In immense excitement he pulled several stacks of money out the enormous suitcase feeling that the money would give him some unfamiliar mystical strength and decided to reinforce it, immediately swallowing three spoonfuls of the powdered poppy head. He was already stepping out the door, but returned, took another two spoonfuls and, sure of himself, rushed along the same route. The dose aroused a new upsurge of rapture and anticipation of the new plotline. “What do I recall about that woman?” he

thought hurriedly. “She limps, she has thin lips and a sweet smile. What else? But what do I want to know about her? An interesting question! Well, there is nothing I want to know. So why am I asking? The only interesting thing is whether she will agree to the experiment or not. Neither she nor I can control any of the rest.” He smirked mysteriously, as though some wise thought had entered his head. But in actual fact he had been thinking about that repeatedly and often came to the same conclusion. He was even angry at himself that the same conclusion kept occurring to him. So why was he so gleefully happy about this very insignificant thought at this particular moment? This all intensified the intrigue of the upcoming meeting. Parfenchikov seemed to believe that there would be no objections and everything would go according to his imagined plan with the lady donor.

Peter Petrovich quickened his pace, surprised at how excited he was and pleasantly upbeat. “Maybe it is the professor casting his spells?” flashed through his mind. “For I no longer recognize myself...” However, a practical question concerned him at the moment, how was he going to explain himself to the young woman? How would he describe the idea he believed in and for the sake of which he was rushing to meet her? “This is a ticklish matter,” thought Parfenchikov, “I’m not going to rush in and say right out – okay let’s get into bed!.. But I have no time for sweetening her up. No bar, no movies, no bench in nighttime parks under the moon to inspire me. I don’t want to hug her round the waist, stroke her breast, kiss her thin lips, take her chestnut-colored hair in my hands. And does she have chestnut-colored hair? Those are not the passions that excite a person in love with poppy head. Words of tenderness and admissions of love have long ceased to exist in my vocabulary. This is a matter of principle that has to be seen through to its conclusion. That’s all! But I cannot spend more than one night on it. If it doesn’t work out today, I will never return to this idea. It will cease to exist for me. It is entirely possible that tomorrow I will already stop being ashamed and laugh at my idiotic experiment. Make myself go red from the insane desire to give my opium sperm

to a mutational cocktail of mankind. I will begin calling myself a queer type or even fool. All the same, some mysterious calling of the soul prompted me to kiss her hands. Although later I thought that this was the stupidest thing to do...”

The thoughts that inundated him gave Mr. Parfenchikov much food for thought. He slowed his pace and cooled his passion. However, a couple of steps later he found himself in front of the shop and stepped into its empty interior. The financial crisis and shameful slump of the ruble meant that many people of Kan no longer used the services of the commodity market. The local residents now had to feed themselves on what they produced in their own gardens. The girl sitting at the cash register looked up from her book and smiled, whereby in a particular way, at Peter Petrovich. Parfenchikov could not remember anyone else looking at him like that. It had most likely never happened at all. The Muscovite lost his bearings. “Why is she looking with such interest?” he thought. “Perhaps she also has some preconceived plan? Her smile is distracting me. I am getting embarrassed.”

The girl’s voice brought him back to his senses. “The boss warned that if there are less than ten customers a day, I will be fired tomorrow and he will close down. You are our eleventh! I am very happy about that, it means I can still work tomorrow. But why aren’t you picking out anything? We don’t leave expired goods on the shelves... Can I help you? To be honest, we are four hundred and seventy rubles short of the daily quota. No, no, I am not asking you to buy anything, I didn’t mean to say anything about the quota... Sorry.”

She looked at Parfenchikov in extreme embarrassment. It seemed to him, or perhaps it was indeed, that tears were running down her cheeks. He had a lump in his throat. Peter Petrovich’s eyes ran over the shelves. Then distractedly, he pulled the four packs of bound banknotes out of his pocket and put them on the counter. The only thing he was able to force out was, “That’s for you! Let’s go!”

“What are you doing? I can’t take that... And I cost much less...”

Why so much? No one has ever offered me that much... Once someone gave me five hundred rubles, two times three hundred, but four hundred thousand... Lord, that's a vast fortune... Put it away, otherwise I will burst out crying... I am an invalid... They'll kill me her over so much money... They'll cut my throat... Put it away, I beg you!"

"It's for you!" insisted Parfenchikov. "Let's go!" He could not find anything else to say.

"Buy something for four hundred and seventy rubles instead," the lame girl babbled. "Then I will get my daily earnings... They pay me one hundred and twenty rubles a day. Hide your stacks... I advise you to bury them somewhere. You are new to our town, if they find out you have a lot of money, there'll be trouble... Poverty makes our people malicious... Terrible... They can kill for a mere pittance, for a gulp of vodka, for a couple of potato bushes. But for that fortune... It doesn't bear thinking about..."

Finally his timidity passed and Peter Petrovich came to and said, "So if I don't buy anything, you will be fired. How will you live? The unemployed have it particularly hard. Take the money and come with me. If you get pregnant I will give you two, three, five times more. But we need to go now. I won't have any other time for this."

Embarrassed, but without the least anger, she looked at him, "Do you really want a baby? But why have you chosen me? I am lame, and I have small breasts. I am not at all sexy, and I don't have much experience. Of course, I would like a child myself... It is impossible to find a husband in our town, even slim girls with big boobs and lovely faces cannot find a husband, so what can I hope for with my credentials? But a baby the first time... Is that possible? And how will I raise it? Will you pay alimony?"

"Take this money as future alimony then," he found the words to say. "This can be for you and for the baby. How will you manage without it. You have to pay for everything these days."

"But what do you want a baby for and why are you in such a rush? Seems as though someone is chasing you. Or are you

leaving? We could take our time, you could come and live with me, I have my own room, a television..."

"No, no, I have my reasons for rushing, but let's not get into that. So shall we go?"

"What's your name?"

"Peter Parfenchikov. Please, hurry up."

"You don't even know my name, but you want to have my child! At least ask me what my name is."

"I'll ask, I'll definitely ask. Although you could tell me yourself. Let's go!"

"I can't just get up and go. Who will take care of the shop, who will I give the day's takings to? Hide the money away and wait for me outside. In quarter of an hour, I'll join you. And my name is Katy Loskutkina. You will know the name of the mother of your future child... That is, with God's help."

Putting the stacks of banknotes in the inside pockets of his jacket, Parfenchikov went out of the store. He did not expect the negotiations to be so easy. "So I was embarrassed, so I was timid and didn't know what to say, but I did not humiliate myself, I didn't ask, but even demanded," he thought, comforting himself.

It was after eight in the evening, but it was still light. It even seemed as though the sun had forgotten to hide below the horizon and, as was common for May, doused the town in rosy light. In the quiet of the empty street, Peter Petrovich heard the lock clicking. He turned around. Loskutkina took him by the arm and, looking to the side, said in a subdued voice, "Let's go to my house." The uncustomary rhythm of the click of her heels reminded him of the uneven beats of his own heart when he took an overdose of koknar.

Her little room was no bigger than fifteen square meters. It held a bed and bedside stand with an old television on it. In one corner was a suitcase, in another stood shoes covered with a newspaper. Coats hung on hooks on the walls, and a battered refrigerator hummed outside the door. "This is how I live. I am poor, but I am not impoverished, I have not surrendered to the demon alcohol, although in our village all my classmates have already taken to the

bottle. You would never guess that they are only twenty-five. Bloated faces, ruined lives, entirely destitute. Take a seat on the bed, Peter. I don't have a chair." She sat down herself and pulled Parfenchikov toward her, as though to say, don't be shy, sit down. Then she fell silent, as though waiting for him to do something. Peter Petrovich took out the money, leaned back on the pillow, closed his eyes, and seemed to have forgotten why he had come. It is hard to say how much time passed. But at some point he felt her touch him. "Peter, if you are tired and want to sleep, take your clothes off... Lie down. Although I can undress you if you like." He had difficulty prying open his eyelids. "Oh, it's you. I'm sorry, I got sidetracked, became self-absorbed." After looking around, he remembered where he was. Everything looked familiar, four stacks of banknotes lay on the bedding in front of the bed. "I put them there," flashed through his head. At this point, he finally remembered why he was here, but now the whole situation looked banal, boring, and entirely uncanny.

"So shall I undress you?" she repeated.

"No, thank you, later..."

"What, is it still too light?"

"Yes," he agreed, without knowing why.

"What should I do? Take off my dress? Lie down beside you?.. You want a baby after all..."

At these words, Mr. Parfenchikov suddenly took fright. "What if it doesn't work out? I thought about an offspring, about mutations of opium sperm, about participating in an experiment to qualitatively renew the Russian, but I did not ask myself the most important thing—am I capable of it? I can't recall feeling anything moving below my belt any time recently. It seems to exist, hanging there like a rag, even my underwear doesn't really feel it. Seems it's there but paralyzed, without befitting functions, without the least interest in its purpose."

Katy seemed to hear his thoughts, because she asked, "How long has it been since you had a woman?"

Peter Petrovich did not want to answer, but nevertheless blurted

out, “I can’t remember exactly, but it’s been a long time.” Although he immediately recalled how he had been with a whore in Egypt a couple of years ago. Seemed that everything functioned then. He paid her five hundred dollars a day, took delight in her body, and several times a day elated himself with excellent organisms. But that was in 2006. He still did not know then his unconditional love for the powdered head of the magical flower.

“Shall I help you? If you like I will fondle you, stroke you, conquer your body with kisses?” Loskutkina asked quietly. “I am not very skilled in the matter, but I hope to awaken your male desire. Shall we give it a try?”

Without asking any more questions, she took off his jacket, pulled off his shoes, and then his trousers, and unbuttoned his shirt. He looked at his body—emaciated bony limbs, sunken chest, sticking-out ribs, and pale yellowish skin reminiscent of the wrinkled head of dried poppy. “It will come as no surprise if just touching my opium-imbibed body sends her into an ecstatic drug-induced spin,” he snickered to himself. “She could also get hooked. No, no, I will never introduce her to koknar. I cannot permit myself such perfidy. She could become the mother of my child. Or should I tempt her after all? Make her a feudal servant of *its* majesty? O, come on now, Peter Petrovich, don’t even think about it. This sweet woman has steered clear of alcohol, why draw her into the fatal noose of opium? There should be some drop of humanness left in me... Strange that I am forcing myself to think of all kinds of trifles to distract me from the purpose of my visit to this lady. For I am almost sure that I am not going to be able to do what I came here to do. Although, let her give it a try, perhaps it will come to life under the tender administrations of a woman. But if not, won’t I feel embarrassed? Won’t I burn in shame at my male incompetence? No! I would reproach myself in every possible way if I allowed myself to be carried away by erotic feelings and responded to her kisses. I will not be tempted by the world of alien sensations.”

At this moment, Parfenchikov felt her lips, supple breast, hair, and fingers on his anemic body. “How can my pitiful body arouse

passion?” he wondered. “None of this is sincere, it is not genuine, but bought, paid for and then some, artificially prepared. Idiot, idiot, she said herself that she wants to help me—awaken my slumbering male origin. She is trying make me understand whether I am capable of conceiving a child or whether I have fallen asleep for eternity and there is no hope of revival. I would do better not to think just now, but to listen to myself, particularly to the organ below my belt. What is going on with it? Has it woken up? Is it capable of making even the smallest twitch? Has some light smoke appeared, after which the flame of erotic passion may well flare up? No, I can’t hear anything. Neither her tongue on my chest, nor the kisses on my koknar-yellowed lips are arousing anything in me at all. And I was hoping to participate in the mutations, to implant my sperm for conceiving a qualitatively new being. At the same time, though, I am relieved to know what I was recently even scared of. Perhaps it is weak comfort, but I knew that Mr. Parfenchikov simply could not betray poppy head. He is devoted to it to the grave, and there is nothing that is capable of removing *that most important thing* even for a fraction of a second. Coming to that conclusion, Peter Petrovich got up from the bed and began hurriedly getting dressed.

“Seems it’s my lameness that’s bothering you. You are thinking about it all the time, so nothing is working for you. I am to blame... It’s all my fault... Take the money, we didn’t do anything... Why would you want to leave that amount of money? Peter!” Her big blue eyes were full of confusion. “Don’t be angry,” she barely managed to say ...

Without saying goodbye, he wordlessly left the room and went down to the street. Parfenchikov bumped into passersby, they pushed him away, shouted at him, but he did not feel anything and hardly heard anything. He forgot about the recent confusion very quickly and was even convinced he had not suffered in any way. Entirely new topics began coming into his head. It began with feeling a certain amount of confusion, not knowing what to do now. For he always felt himself a servant of the opium kingdom and strove

for it every minute. It could not be otherwise. Poppy head was created by the Almighty to ensure complete solitude, the games of a powerful imagination, for manifestations of the imagination, mind, and talent. What could life be without it? He would become a member of the masses again, living by consumer stereotypes. Future scenarios flitted imperceptibly through his head, when suddenly he understood that he needed to draw up a detailed written plan for the rest of his time on earth. He was evidently subconsciously prompted to do this by the sight of his own naked body, which was so pitiful, morbid, and decrepit that he understood beyond the shadow of a doubt that he had only two or three, maybe even fewer, years left to live. This bitter revelation by human standards did not discourage Peter Petrovich in the least, did not arouse panic or fear, but demanded only that he painstakingly write down all the things he either wanted to finish or wanted to start in the near future. “I’m going to have to abandon all I have not finished,” flashed through his head. “That’s the humane, the Russian way to do it. But how can I go to the other world then? They might not accept me there otherwise...”

He smirked, catching himself thinking that the national trait was quite well entrenched in him—begin something, then abandon it, forget about, and start something entirely new. His life during the past opium years had literally been a mass of undertakings that he had not seen through to the end. Like a leaf in the wind, he was swept from one idea to another. And there was no end to them! Take this last episode when he wanted to improve the Russian species by means of narcotic mutations. The idea was patriotic in itself perhaps and scientific, but he had run away from it. He had given up before really trying, surrendered and, like the last coward, left the bed—the scene of the bold academic experiment. That lame girl had been more courageous, she insistently asked him to stay, to try again, and then again and again. Otherwise they could not reach their goal. Although perhaps there was no need at all to reach the goal. He circled around koknar like a tied dog around its hut. One step forward and one back so as not to find himself without opium

milk during withdrawal. It is enough for people who move like that, like dogs, to designate their desire, that is, only bark. Make a noise in their own minds. He remembered very well what it felt like when he first became hooked on the dope. It was indescribable exaltation. “Oh, Peter Petrovich, I know your defects very well,” he went off again. “Some, apparently most, people try to live by their talents. While some miniscule part, to which I belong, derives enjoyment from routine internal fecklessness. For if I had some special talent, would I have become drawn to the flower of self-sufficiency? At the moment I am being drawn to write down a plan of Parfenchikov action. It even seems to me that without it I am a goner. This obsessive thought sits so deeply and profoundly within me. But this plan will most likely only be an impulse that lasts for one evening. In the morning, I will have forgotten everything and will surrender to new obsessions. Which ones in particular? I do not know. Mutations of opium energy can give rise to the most unusual outbreaks—from the desire to turn into a garden worm to the need to cut my veins and experience departure for eternal rest. Perhaps this is the meaning of human existence or, to be more precise, the existence of Peter Petrovich? But what has been the most noteworthy thought in my mind recently? The closest to my mentality, what project could I really become interested in? Something almost as important as poppy head that will stop me from jumping from one batch of thoughts to another. This idea could be participating in Professor Koshmarov’s plan to make qualitative changes to my fellow countrymen by mixing an ethnic blend in their blood, an ensemble of German, Chinese, Jewish, and Georgian genetics. In what other more effective way can I serve my own people? The old man promised to give me nano pills. So I will begin. Starting tomorrow. I will give them to everyone, but I won’t touch them myself. I will begin with Loskutkina. It will be very interesting to watch how she changes. What new Russian person she becomes. What she will do. What idea will take priority for her. Because what if the experiment goes the other way? Instead of an active respectable citizen, Katy turns into a terrible creature like her classmates? I will have to make

sure old two-eyes gives me a guarantee that his program can be reversed. After all, don't they say that what might be good for the German or Frenchman spells death to the Russian."

So I have set my course. Once and for all. Apart from opium, I will begin engaging exclusively in the spiritual, moral, and physical improvement of my fellow countrymen. In that case, there is no need to write up a plan for the rest of my life. It has already been determined. Clearly and precisely! Pomeschkin and I will grow poppy in Fateev's field, fertilize our minds with opium, and distribute nano pills among the people of Kan along the way. This is the most beneficial way to improve the Russian gene pool.

Now my main task is to arouse love and respect in Russians for their own country and their own people with the help of genetic engineering. Since there is absolutely no one to love, no state, and no friendly fellow countrymen. This may be precisely the way to overcome the national spiritual crisis. The only thing of value Russia has in its scientific and political arsenal these days is the nano pill. It will replace the ineffective slogans of political parties. The spirit of genuine creativity, freedom, and openness will reign on the radio and television, public lies will be punished, conscientious people will join the bureaucracy. The spiritual atmosphere in the country will change, Russians will be loved instead of feared. But why do I need all of that? Why does Peter Petrovich, who is addicted to the powdered divine flower, need society's headaches? Am I building my career, striving for power, wanting to acquire privileges in business? Am I dreaming of using the administrative resource for my personal ends? Everything is very simple! This is what my opium-excited mind wants! Sober people do not want this, they couldn't care less about the nation's spiritual wellbeing; alcoholics don't think about this, after vodka they are quite happy to lie around on the pavement in Bacchus dreams, while civil servants of various levels do nothing but dream of the degradation of the population. Only a spiritual slave fears going against perfidy and gives bribes. Seems there is only one hope in the country—Professor Koshmarov's scientific invention and the active participation of

opium-elated Mr. Parfenchikov will decide everything. Only they are trying, only they want to save the nation, no one else could care less. Oh, Peter Petrovich, will you remember all this rubbish tomorrow morning, won't you say to hell with all this social vigor? If someone offers you heads of Fergana poppy with its chocolate-colored veins or Pianj opium milk ripened in the eastern sun, are you likely to remember the wise passages of today's Kan evening? Won't you ask yourself about immeasurable, boundless opium happiness, will you not go crazy from lofty feelings? You couldn't even lay that woman, but you are striving for a genetic revolution. With your intellectual and physical potential? Pah! You're not with it at all. And you're tired. It's time to take a few spoonfuls of powered poppy and take another trip through the nooks and crannies of your own mind. These simple things are all your life consists of, only there do you count for something. It is pointless trying to think up something else for yourself, never mind go beyond your own dimensions. Thanks to your humility, the government tolerates you, for you won't poke your nose any further than two or three steps from the koknar. You hold yourself on a tight leash, you have never been noticed in opposition campaigns or protest meetings. Otherwise, you will quickly be brought to withdrawal and, instead of buried in a coffin with people mourning you, you will be thrown on the rubbish heap and sprinkled with chlorine so that your stink does not prevent others from enjoying the air they breathe. But I would like to note that submissive obedience to poppy head has its advantages. I can assert with a genuinely elevated heart and mind that my love, my devotion to koknar is the most cherished and mystical human feeling. It is so profound, so mysterious, so, I must admit, illusive, that it has the right to claim eternity. This is probably why I never forbid anyone anything and never demand anything from anyone. Even if someone makes an attempt on my life, I will give it up without regret or surprise, although only after I have had some dope. Of course, it would be better to die from the fervor of an overexcited mind than from some social disorder.... I have long decided that I am not going to take any healthy organs in my own

body with me to the grave. I am sure that I have hepatitis, a few stomach ulcers, ischemia, pancreatitis, and that my lungs are damaged by tuberculosis. I am content to make these illnesses worse by eating poorly and taking ever larger doses of koknar. There can be no other way. Here I am recalling how my world went no further than the Moscow Ring Road before I became acquainted with poppy. Now my thoughts flow far afield and ever further and deeper.

After this admission I shivered, pulled my head into my shoulders, cautiously looked around and hurried home. I could not shake the feeling that some unseen hand was about to pull at my trousers and a severe prosecutorial voice ring out, “Stop, stop, Parfenchikov! Stop! You are under arrest! Eating powdered poppy head is a crime! Prison awaits you!”

Rushing into his house, he closed the door tightly behind him and immediately ran to the sack of poppy. “Thank goodness, it’s still here!” shouted Mr. Parfenchikov with joy, beginning in a panic to stuff the desired product into his mouth. After three spoonfuls, he calmed down. And instead of snickering on the sly, he began laughing out loud. To be honest, he had no idea why he was so delighted, either he was happy about the koknar, or perhaps he had gotten the better of someone, although he did not know who precisely and in what way. Or some fragment of thought flew instantly through his head and he did not have time to remember it, but the reaction of his subconscious was expressed in laughter. The familiar delicious sensation arose and grew with each passing minute. Peter Petrovich finally revived, livened up. Continuous intoxication with poppy, the understanding that mankind had not discovered a more effective way to achieve this state, convinced him every time that he had chosen his destiny well.

He walked around the kitchen, looked into the bedroom and saw Pomeshkin lying on the bed in a deep poppy sleep. Gregory Semyonovich was terribly pale, breathing through his mouth and making barely perceptible groans. It was not difficult to make a diagnosis—his guest had withdrawn from his overdose and was immersed

in opium dreams. Peter Petrovich also began getting ready to call it a night. Since the only bed was occupied, he spread some newspapers on the kitchen floor and used his own worn boots as a pillow, first wrapping them in a plastic bag he had been given when he made his last purchases at Loskutkina's store. Then he covered himself with his jacket and closed his eyes. The same instantaneous thought came to mind that he could not remember at the time, but that had caused him to laugh loudly. And this is what he thought—no matter what I say or plan or swear to myself, I will nevertheless act in an entirely different way and will not be able to foresee even a few moments ahead of time what decision I will make, what precisely I will designate, what step I will take, or what I will say. Active mutations of thoughts do not allow Peter Petrovich to clearly establish his line of existence. Life only has a clear plotline in other peoples' biographies: beginning—development—end. With me it is the other way around. Frequently today's steps are ahead of the actions of the day after tomorrow, and what I had to do a month ago I am doing today or I put off until the distant future, or forget about altogether. If someone undertook a study of my life, apart from chaotic thoughts that are difficult to gather together, he would be unable to deduce anything and would in no way understand either my character, or my worldview, or my life plans. And do I have any? A biographer will be able to say clearly that Peter Petrovich is a poppy chaotic and he can only be understood by those with a similar poppy-induced mind. And the researcher will be absolutely right. I not only do not understand myself, but I have absolutely no desire to forecast my behavior. Will I need myself if I begin building my life according to some scenario? With detailed instructions, for the day, week, month, about what to buy, how much to spend, what I need to do, with minute-by-minute recommendations, with a diary of my sex life and notes of the birthdays of influential people, on whom your career and life in general depend. For me that is boring, absurd, and repulsive. I know the most important and most necessary thing—I need the flower of life day and night, in a large amount and in different forms. In my pocket, on a

plate, under my nose, in my mouth, in my stomach, in my blood, and in my intestines. I have very little interest in anything else, and if it does arouse interest, only for exciting the mind, for a vibrant meeting with the opium onrush, for waves of poppy energy of different scales, for games of the inflamed mind. That is all! Not even an iota more! Like a musician cannot be interested in a feeble score, like a drunk will walk past an empty vodka bottle, like a homosexual will never look passionately at a glamorous lady, so do I never pay any attention to a measured life that goes according to schedule. And not only according to strict order, but even according to wishes carelessly written down on a sorry piece of paper.

At this point Peter Petrovich found himself thinking that after such categorical admissions he was at an entire loss. A question he thought answered came up again—did he want to participate in the professor's experiment with the nano pills? Just recently he had been seriously interested in it, he had even become full of patriotic zeal, saying that serving the Homeland was an insistent necessity for everyone. But now, just a short time later, he was returning to this dilemma again. So what should he do, agree or run away, like from Loskutkina's bed? Did he want Russians to live better, freer, in plenty and comfort? Yes or no?

The answer proved rather unexpected even for himself—Mr. Parfenchikov had nothing to do with it. He is not thinking about it, and he does not want anyone to worry about him or care about him. He could not care less about their social status. The poor in spirit, impoverished in wealth, rich in the administrative resource, the owners of factories and the biggest bank accounts, the homeless, prostitutes—no one interested him. If they do not protest, do not beat each other up, do not bandy their power around, do not build barricades, it means everything is fine with them, as it is with me. For I am perfectly happy with everything too. And if everything is hunky dory and the national mind is quite happy, why change the ethnic blend of the Russian and even add to his genetics something from nationalities that are not very friendly toward us—Germans, Chinese, Jews, and Georgians? We were even at war with the latter

recently. However, he was contradicting himself. If he couldn't care less, what difference did it make whom old two-eyes used for concocting the ethnic cocktail for his fellow countrymen.

Suddenly Peter Petrovich became convinced that the opium factor should be present in the genetic ensemble. In that case, the project results might prove to be extraordinary. He even jumped with joy and shook his arms, enthralled with the idea of convincing Koshmarov that one of the four ethnicities should be head over heels in love with poppy head. And not only virtually, detachedly, but adore it in practice. So that he could not live without it, like Peter Petrovich himself. In that case, his interest in the project would be desperate. He would become fully immersed in it. But he immediately wondered whom he could recommend as feudal servants of *that very important thing*. "I personally do not know any Chinese or Germans. So they are out of the question," his thoughts beginning to run. "I know Jews and Georgians quite well. Russians could glean a lot of benefit from the strict and sober minds of the first. But what about Georgians? What use are they? It seems, though, that the professor said they were good for something. They have a carefree, happy-go-lucky attitude toward life... oh yes, and the least number of suicides. But our people also have an abundance of these traits. Our fellow countrymen are best known for this precise thing. People live in the gutter on a miserly pension and paltry wage, but feel like nobles. Why intensify that national characteristic? So we are left with their appearance and artistic capabilities. This interests me least of all. So five percent of Georgian genetics should be steeped in koknar brew. Then what? Will I agree to participate in the experiment with the nano pills? Yes! I give my word! Okay, we've agreed!"

His habit of talking to himself started after he made the acquaintance with powdered poppy. Why? Because he often wandered off in his solitude? But the question remained unanswered, since it was at this point that a new thought brought him to an impasse. What about the idea to try and become "...as perfect as your Heavenly Father" that Koshmarov had tossed out from the Bible? He remem-

bered it again. And it had an intrigue that was deeply tied to the promise he made himself to begin a local genetic revolution tomorrow or, to be more exact, a counterrevolution. “For I will be interfering in God’s work,” Mr. Parfenchikov began to think, “that is, I will be complaining that He created the Russian with his left hand, while half asleep, or on an empty stomach. Because most of our people are almost always still looking for something to eat. However, there are ethnicities that are worse off, so it can be presumed that while they were being created He was, to put it mildly, occupied with something entirely different. In any case, it is quite an interesting thing to argue with Him, but the new, improved product of the Russian person I will acquire with the help of the bespectacled professor’s nano pill will, I hope, arouse even greater delight in me. If we are all a part of Him and He is a part of all of us, what I am doing should not cause any insult or reproof in Him. Particularly since during my actions to improve the nation I will be under the passionate rapture of His most beloved creation—opium poppy.

So I am designating my action plan. In order to summon the professor I will have to freshen up. Otherwise he will not appear. Three of four spoonfuls will be enough not to become immersed in another topic. It usually happens that if I under or overdo it, my mind goes off into other spheres. Valuable thoughts are forgotten, often forever. Entirely new plans, subjects, and projects emerge that fundamentally confuse me. I must keep a constant check on the number of spoonfuls of poppy I take and how heaped they are, as though I am running a record. But all the more often, several spoonfuls, even heaped, have not been enough lately. I have to increase their number. I’ll need to watch that my calculations do not confuse debit with credit.

Peter Petrovich jumped up so as not to forget the topic he had begun thinking about. He consumed the poppy with a crust of bread. He felt how it scraped the roof of his mouth and gums, and grimaced. Too lazy to spread out the sheets of newspaper that had scattered around the room, he lay back down right on the bare floor. Now he had to wait a few minutes for the flower of wisdom to open

out in his stomach. He had to continue his brainstorm on the genetic counterrevolution. Poppy made his life carefree and full of wonder, that is, precisely the life he wanted to have. The god of opium adoration is a coincidence. “It is awful to think how my life might have developed if destiny had not brought me to koknar that wonderful evening at *The Mill*,” smirked Peter Petrovich. “I would be the unhappiest person on earth. Poppy head couches me in tender loving care, it has given me, poisoned by the hustling capital life, a new understanding of the world and imparted faith in my own mind. Only koknar allows me to delight in life in this alien and unjust world. Perhaps it will be short, but it is extremely vibrant. Yes, I have built my life on extremes, but on wonderful extremes. Ordinary people consider the likes of me, who live in mind games, sick or even freaks. But I could not care less what they think. How different was I from my fellow countrymen immersed in usury, corruption, hooliganism of all types, prostitution, and toadying, with which Russia is overflowing? Then, one fine day, after making the acquaintance of the divine flower, I decided to leave that society. But where was I to go? On what shore was I to put down my anchor? I wanted to become immersed in one social environment, a second, third, fourth—but no matter where you look all you see is the most terrible moral decadence. Rust! I finally found harmless solitude adorned with poppy head. After all it has been said since time immemorial that two heads are better than one. How is my lifestyle worse than an alcoholic’s, a corrupt bureaucrat’s, a bribe-taker’s, or a public liar’s? I live for myself, and the outside world is of absolutely no interest to me. Yes, I am unable to live without the sweetest of meadow flowers! But that is all! Nothing else! So those who profane the likes of me and douse them in slops have no idea of the truth. But I don’t say anything, and the passion of revenge does not grab me at all. Peter Petrovich is looking only for harmony in himself! The higher powers have blessed my choice, I bow down to this coincidence and will carry this thing through to the end.”

The furnace was heating up, Parfenchikov felt the warmth spreading through his veins. Then his head caught fire, and things

went on and up, took off; the tedious waiting was replaced with rapture. “Oh, how wonderful!” he thought, with a burning desire to shout this out, but he only said it in his mind. Perhaps because he only permitted himself to be open with himself.

At that moment, Professor Koshmarov appeared before Peter Petrovich. “Hi, friend,” he said coldly. “So you’re bandying about again? Get down to work. I expect action. If you don’t do anything this time, I will stop talking to you. What kind of mother’s child are you? You seem to be Russian, but you don’t want to help your own people. Here you go, I’ve brought you some nano pills.” He held out a bag similar to the one he kept his powdered heads of energy flower in. “There is no more time to lose, your fellow countrymen are in need of immediate salvation. This experiment will give us a sense of universal peace—our national characteristic, which can in no way come to full maturation without the nano pill. The Russian must become the Lord and my unique method is capable of making him such. If we, Russians, comprise only one-and-a-half percent of the population of Earth, we are simply obligated to become its better part. Your indifference to reality is still not final. I am beginning to wonder how I can return you to reality. The time will still come for my proposal...”

“Oh, drop it, professor! I would rather die of pity for myself... But let’s get down to business. Strange that your pills are very like powdered poppy in color. Only the dose doesn’t coincide, yours are a bit bigger,” noted Peter Petrovich. “I promise to begin the experiment tomorrow. You should not doubt, I do have the desire to help my people, but another thought concerns me, do the people themselves want it? After all, there are no discussions in society on the topic of our Russian imperfection. The media centers are singing dirges to the national spirit, culture, and history. How can we not help but ask whether the recipe we wish to offer is false? One hundred and forty million citizens of the country could not give a damn about it. They do not consider themselves half-baked! Moreover, some of them have suddenly begun calling themselves the ‘world elite’ for some reason and demanding their due planetary respect.

And if they don't get it, there's no knowing what they will do. They are already getting ready to secretly disseminate their own nano pills abroad to make people respect us. There might be no stopping us! Your pills might damage not only the best of the best, particularly in both capitals, but also the ordinary people from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic. This is what concerns me most right now," said Mr. Parfenchikov with a smirk, although prior to this conversation he had never given even a single thought to such things. "Your guarantees are frail, professor. You are simply hoping for your brainchild, but what if something is not right? Huh?"

"But things worked with you, didn't they? You became a different person, compared to the one who used to sell yachts in St. Petersburg."

"I had even forgotten about that," thought Peter Petrovich. "Okay, okay. I agree. I'll start tomorrow," he continued out loud. "But tell me in advance, how will people change? What specifically will happen to them? Will they start thinking differently or have a different attitude toward things? And won't the time of economic crisis worsen their position, which is difficult anyway?"

"I'll explain. Take the German. At the very beginning of the crisis, if he rents his real estate, he will definitely tell the renter that starting next month, the rent will go down ten, or even fifteen percent. Why?"

"I don't think about that kind of thing," muttered Parfenchikov disgruntled.

"Now that is a purely Russian response. But you should be constantly thinking about such questions. He does it to keep the renter. Because during a crisis people cut back on their spending and look for cheaper apartments. And it is rather difficult to rent real estate during universal slumps. You understand? Our people, like you, don't think about that. Or let's take the Jew. As soon as there is even the smell of a crisis, Abram goes to his employer and asks him to cut his salary. Yes, yes! He says, 'Dear Moisha, my heart tells me that a crisis will soon come knocking at our door. O, I alas am familiar with this scoundrel. Cut my salary today, then we will have a

better chance of surviving it together. I want to be the first to tighten my belt so that yours doesn't burst later, and we won't both find us at the unemployment exchange'."

"What about the Chinese?"

"He acts wisely. He begins economizing on everything. He gives up electricity and gas. He begins making a fire in the yard, gathering chips. And he will fry eggs on a spade, not a frying pan... He will save water, it also costs money. The frying pan must be washed after frying eggs. The spade is washed at the end of the work day. Why waste water on both, if the spade can be used instead of the frying pan? Not to mention that he won't wait for his salary or pension, which is paid irregularly, to put it mildly, during a crisis, in order to buy what he needs to eat, but will begin catching beetles, spiders, and worms, getting his hands on any biological material in order to assuage his hunger. I would like to tell you the reason for the current financial and economic crisis. First, it is perverted consumption. Each person dreams of having everything! Possessing everything immediately! At some point in its history, mankind will perish from it. Now do you understand why your people need Koshmarov's nano pill? The Russian Orthodox are placing their hopes on God, their boss, the system, on anyone, only not on themselves. This reduces their chance of survival. Begin. Choose your first patient. Keep an eye on him. If you notice positive development of personality, its perfection, continue looking for others. Act boldly and decisively. The Russian ethnicity is in urgent need of saving. Along all the thousands of kilometers of its borders, neighbors are looking at our territory like a tasty morsel. Everyone is irresistibly hoping, relying on our backwardness, to cut Russia into appetizing pieces. For bombs and missiles do not provide any advantages these days. My nano pills will put an end to national powerlessness, and the Russian will ride through the centuries to come high in the saddle."

"This old two-eyes is mighty strange," thought Mr. Parfenchikov to himself in chagrin. "He is asking me, someone who lives in an opium fog, who exists in an unrealistic world, to observe positive

changes in personalities. What a farce! My criteria of positivity, Mr. Koshmarov, are entirely different from yours, a member of the academic circles. What I think is excellent no one else wants to know about. While they are not concerned about withdrawal and the abstinence syndrome. If life were a collective affair, I would not argue. But it is individual. I am the one living, and not a collective of Russians or Chinese. I am the one who dies, and not Jews or Germans. He is clever, but he has no understanding that such characters as I, and there are not many of us, live only by metaphysical sensations, and what is going on with the Russian world, with the world at large, is the least of our worries. My only concern is how close I am to koknar. That's all! And even absolutely all! But here he is taking me for a ride. Damn it all! Incidentally, there is something mystical in this collective topic of life and death. Yes, yes. What if we select a collective (the unifying trait could be anything) and enter an agreement—when one member of the community dies, all the rest also head for the other world. Then caring for each other would be colossal. Not like it is today when people take great delight in insulting their neighbor and punching the first person they meet in the face. Yes, those are today's morals. So there is a lot of interesting, metaphysical things to be found in the concept of collective life and death. I am going to have to give this topic some serious thought and include the professor."

For a moment Peter Petrovich was worried he was going crazy. But he only shrugged his shoulders and said to the bespectacled man in a business-like tone, "I have one condition, without which I won't even move a finger. The Georgian fragment in the national blend must be steeped in opium brew. You want to add five percent Georgian to the Russian gene pool. This is around one percent out of one hundred. Not very much, but without it the Russian of the future will be incapable of inspired thinking. And this is extremely necessary for a creative person—for without it not one global idea can be realized. I want to remind you that opium energy has a divine origin in every way. Please agree, professor. You have convinced me of your version of the project, so I want to ask you to concede to

my idea, since I am sure that the energy of koknar in small doses is necessary for the creative development of the personality. If you approve of my idea and make the adjustments to the nano pill, I swear, I will begin acting tomorrow. And rather efficiently.”

“I am against it! I am a person of different views, but you have forced me to agree. When the new nano pill is ready, I will find you myself. Do not think that making it will take a lot of time. See you soon. Bye for now!”

After these words, the professor disappeared. Parfenchikov had not asked the old man about his new thoughts on the Bible’s call to “...be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.” Peter Petrovich had simply forgotten both the old man’s and his own opinion on this question they had been discussing a while ago. Topics of conversation came and went. What is more, the Biblical metaphor was an empty poetic image for him. Man cannot be like Him, believed Mr. Parfenchikov, and He cannot be like all of us. And there is nothing of us in Him, and there is not an iota of Him in us. This Peter Petrovich believed. The Muscovite was convinced that He had created the poppy flower. No one apart from Him could have made such a highly sensitive substance, such an extremely subtle intellectual suspension as opium milk. There was something incredible in its power, a whole charge of natural energy could be found in one poppy head alone. But he did not have any particular desire to participate in discussions about God and his creations. Everyone should remain with his own thoughts, and if he doesn’t have any, he should be quiet and listen. If, however, the desire arises to become acquainted with the original, read the Bible.

Parfenchikov yawned. His nose began to itch, pleasant poppy tickles ran over his heels, his eyes closed, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He wanted to be in this state in complete solitude and immersed himself in it. “Thank goodness. What else could keep me holding onto life apart from servile dependence on poppy head,” was the last thing that flitted through his mind.

MUSES OF AN INCOMPLETE CIRCLE

Mr. Pomeshkin was wondering what he might like better—following all that was going on in the town of Kan and living the life he was used to, or giving himself up to the new splendors of opium dreams. Although a Siberian, Gregory Semyonovich was not a very decisive person, or it might be better to say, was an extremely timorous person. What exactly enticed the strange Kan resident in this new experiment to which he had so unexpectedly been drawn in his neighbor's home? First, the incredible intellectual power his mind easily acquired after a few swallows of the unfamiliar brew. Such powerful energy was just what Gregory Semyonovich lacked in order to live more confidently. But he was plagued by a question he still did not have an answer for. He well recalled the words of Peter Petrovich that *this most important thing* must truly be the top priority in life. Otherwise it would be better not to start, since other ways of socializing with the magical plant—acquaintance, friendship, amicable relations—were deadly. Once a person became engaged to poppy head, there was no breaking off the relationship. Compromises were out of the question. But what was Mr. Pomeshkin to do about the narcissism that obsessed him? For the time being, he was willing to rank second in feelings and affections, although, after he woke up, he began to feel a growing craving for the yellow powder.

He looked around the house, which was dimly lit from the light in the hallway. Recalling that the bowl of koknar was in the kitchen, he got up and shuffled toward it. He found Parfenchikov sleeping on the floor by the cupboard. Gregory Semyonovich stepped over him, reached the bowl, and swallowed one level table spoon of the powder. He remembered Peter Petrovich's advice not to overdo it. After that, he broke off a piece of bread and drank it down with water. Then he went back to bed, made himself comfortable, and waited for the dope to take effect. It crept upon him imperceptibly

though, his mind becoming immersed in all kinds of thoughts before he had time to register them. All of a sudden, from his habitual place in the abandoned building of the Siberian town, he seemed to be watching the life of some big boss in an unfamiliar, but large city. His binoculars were trained fixedly on the object. The official's face was familiar, but Pomeskin normally did not remember the names of people, particularly those who were not native Kan residents. Without a personal life of his own, Gregory Semyonovich was only interested in the generalities of other people's lives. So, this big bureaucrat N., who was around fifty and constantly appeared on the screen and the pages of the regional newspapers, was talking aloud to himself while standing in the bathroom in front of the mirror. Since Pomeskin had long learned to lip-read, he easily followed not only the movements of Mr. N., but also what he was saying. But why had this particular well-known individual come into Mr. Pomeskin's feverish mind? Probably the unknown power of the miraculous flower was to blame for the confusion. N., puffing out his cheeks, was getting ready to shave. The furrows of the wrinkles on his brow, the uneven bumps on his cheekbones, and the blubbery skin on his neck caused him to vent about his bureaucratic fate. "You work from morning to night for someone else, and never get promoted. I have long outgrown my department, am capable of having a more eminent position, managing much more important affairs, performing world-level projects. But I am not moving up the career ladder, age is creeping up on me, I may not have time to reveal my talents... My sights are being drawn more and more recently to the chambers of the Kremlin." At this point, Pomeskin had to laugh out loud in glee, "So that's what he's dreaming about!"

"I have a flexible mind, I show indulgence toward my colleagues, especially those who are not culturally scintillating, I don't have any debts, I am complementary toward the higher administration—I have it all. So why am I not being promoted? This torturous question is literally eating me up. After all, the desire for power is like craving water in the Sahara Desert. But whereas someone else may only need a sip to quench their thirst, that is, some minor posi-

tion in a municipal structure or office with a secretary in the governor's administration, I need something much more elevated! How can I conquer this insatiable thirst? How can I set aside my grand-scale ambitions? For the requirements of the mind and heart are much stronger than the call of physiological needs. By suppressing my passion for power, will I not doom myself to constant torment? Will I not ultimately send a bullet through my temple? But how can I love the boss so that he will notice me? Appreciate me? Promote me up the power ladder? What else can I do? I praise him, shower him in kisses, wait for him to call, talk to me, invite me to meetings like manna from heaven. I show him how I adore him in every possible way, all the walls of my office and home are hung with his portraits. They show him on a cruiser, on a war bomber, sitting astride a horse, on a glider, standing on Moscow squares, in the streets of Berlin, Paris, St. Petersburg... Him talking, him listening, him praying in church, giving orders, receiving famous guests, patting a child on the head, fishing, admonishing ill-wishers. I do not have and do not want to have such a large number of photos of my own children, my wife, or my parents, because I am constantly in awe of him, devoted unconditionally to him and his current power. And then we'll see... Oh, I hope they're not eavesdropping! I keep myself well in check, so as always to be at the ready, so as never to show under any circumstances in even the slightest way that I feel even the tiniest disappointment in him. Nor do I allow any, absolutely no, criticism, not even criticism, but the slightest discontent. He is the most of the most, the best of the best! In our world, there is no one else worth standing next to! He is above everyone else in all manner of intellect, spirituality, and goodness. I often think that I love him more than myself, but I still try to love him even more than everyone else! I am not shy of expressing these feelings to him in public, calling them my own. I couldn't care less what others think, even the people closest to me. My utmost primary task is to draw his attention with my admiration of him, glorify his affairs and instructions, and sing the praises of his intellect and magnanimity. And I must do all of this with extreme sincerity and inspiration."

“Boy, that guy’s really getting carried away!” thought Pomeskin in wonder.

“I need to make sure that no one notices, no one suspects I am not sincere,” the federal official continued effusively, “that no one whispers behind his hand that I want to obtain a high post, so that no one reports I am a toady, that my adoration is pure hypocrisy. But I couldn’t care less what they say, report, or write about my professional performance, what slops they pour on my head, how my work turns out, whether it leads to crisis or collapse, that people striving for my seat will denounce me. Today at the Russian Way and Development of World Civilization conference, I will have to find something new praising his talents, something that makes his heart sing.” The bureaucrat finished shaving, patted himself on the cheeks, squeezed a pimple on his nose, sprayed his face with eau d’ cologne, and, after dressing, clenched his fists and drew himself up in a stately pose.

“The country is half full of characters like him,” sighed Gregory Semyonovich, putting down the binoculars. “Boring. I would rather find something more original to look at.”

He put the binoculars to his eyes again and found himself in the bedroom of two young people. They were making love. Pomeskin had no desire to watch them, so he continued moving the binoculars from window to window of a multi-apartment building. A woman of around forty was hitting a rather sturdy man with a scoop. “Banal,” grunted Gregory Semyonovich. Then his gaze stopped on a group of young people. There was either a teapot or a coffeepot standing on the table they were sitting at. There were some biscuits on a plate. The friends were clearly having a heated kitchen discussion. This greatly interested him. Something straight out of the past. After all, young people do not often get together these days without booze and sex. Zooming in closer, Pomeskin read the phrases being spoken from the lips of those gathered.

“Our country is not for a peaceful life, but for constant struggle,” said a blue-eyed young man who was prematurely balding. “It seems to me that some unearthly power has endowed the Russian

nation with a particular revolutionary spirit. We are undoubtedly ahead of the rest of the world in flights of social fancy, although this is not expressed in gatherings on squares or at meetings, but in our inflamed minds. I am categorically against the idea of leaving the Homeland. There is no way I can accept your point of view that, supposedly, the country is ultimately lost, impoverished, the housing fund is entirely dilapidated, and it would be better to look for one's vocation abroad, in China, for example. Whose idea was that—to emigrate to the Celestial Kingdom? I do not understand how a Russian can live in other countries, in other cultures, particularly in another ethnic environment or even in a different race? I would be nagged by a feeling of deep loneliness and nostalgia. How many millions of Russians moved to France, the States, Germany, and Serbia after the October Revolution? Where are they now, where can they be found? You'll only find Russian names, their bearers do not know our language or culture, and often do not want to know. Would it not be better to gather young forces and try to change the situation and enhance the country?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, Andrei," interrupted a girl wearing a colored headscarf and hip-hugging jeans. Her thin face, focused look, and protruding forehead showed that she was of remarkable emotional mettle. She stood up, walked around the table, as though gathering her thoughts, and began talking with pure Russian vitality and even passion. "You are a couple of decades behind the times, if not more. The world is suffering from all kinds of social and national ideas. The era of globalization has arrived. This is a global process, not only economic, it is much deeper, it affects ethnic relations and ties. The concept of nationality as such is giving way to universal values. I will never feel closer to a Russian rascal than to a law-abiding Chinese, Angolan, or Chilean citizen. The contemporary world is readjusting, people are beginning to take pride not in their origin, but in their abilities, qualifications, honesty, and business qualities. And if they don't have any of these qualities, at least in their respect for the law. There are no other individual criteria and cannot be. And national

affiliation does not have anything to do with it. Thank goodness, this parameter is ceasing to exist in people's perception, and in a few generations it will disappear altogether. Those who manipulate the national idea have become caught in the past, are behind the times, and are detrimental to their own people. I do not want to convince you to deny your convictions, but I will say that the phrase 'I am a person of the world' is not grandiloquence, not an eloquent expression, not pacifism. It is a requirement of today and of the future! What is China today? It can be compared with a twenty-five-year-old youth at the peak of his physical capacities and intellect, admired for his diligence, economic prospects, and cultural wealth. What is Russia today? Do I need to tell you or can you figure it out for yourselves?"

"Tell us, tell us," demanded another girl, pale, like a gypsum statue.

"Russia today reminds me of an old, stark raving mad hatter, money-grabber, bureaucrat, power-lover, and tyrant, who is completely impotent in state-building issues. And you want our generation to find its future here? Andrei, I appreciate your patriotism, but I do not want to spend my only life fighting for the illusory good of my fellow countrymen if they do not want this good themselves and do not understand how to achieve it. In Russian history, only a few isolated people raised the people, but that time has ended. If the people want to, let them raise themselves now. I do not want to play the role of the active revolutionary, I like passive protest. I will soon be leaving for Beijing. There people are valued not for their position, but for their intellect and work discipline."

"Russia has again begun building aircraft carriers, while there are people in many Siberian cities living in five-, seven-, and nine-story buildings without elevators. Water, heat, and electricity comes in fits and starts," a young cross-eyed man said, joining the argument." Pomeshkin could not catch his eyes in the binoculars. "But in China even three-story buildings have elevators. Electricity, heat, and water, be my guest, as much as you want, round-the-clock, without bribes and extortions. There's modern life for you!

Somewhere in the oceans, our multibillion aircraft carriers are plowing the waters for who knows what reason, while tens of millions of Russian citizens cannot afford the minimum conveniences. Or another example—in Chinese stores a fur coat costs eight yuan, that is about twelve dollars, or three hundred and fifty rubles. If you buy wholesale, the price might be five or six dollars. In Siberia—at least twenty-five million people live in the Baikal Region, in the Krasnoyarsk, Khabarovsk, and Primoriya territories, one hundred thousand of which are still wearing clothes bought in communist times. Their piteous, bedraggled, freezing, barbarous look makes a lump rise in my throat, sometimes it brings me to tears. All a person needs is five dollars so as not to freeze in the cold and look neat and tidy. But where is the ordinary Russian, who is just incapable of crawling from impoverishment to poverty, to get this mere pittance, these five dollars? He can't earn it, there are no jobs. He could of course hit a wealthy person over the head with a brick and take this small amount from him. Some do this. After which they don prison gowns for fifteen to twenty years. But the country still has a reserve fund, a national wealth fund, a gold and currency reserve—these financial resources reached around four hundred and fifty billion dollars by January 2009. There is the Ministry of Public Health and Social Security. The officials of this department do not need revolutionary ardor or any special love for the people. It is enough to simply know the country and imagine the difficulties its citizens experience. So, Andrei, in order to dress our fellow countrymen in new winter coats, all you need is to give each of them five dollars. In order to add warm mittens to the winter outfit, another thirteen cents. Felt boots will cost two dollars a pair. So around one hundred and eighty million dollars will need to be spent from the treasury. This will dress the Russian people living in the expanses of Siberia in warm colored items and relieve them of their depression over their impenetrable poverty. And they will at last be able to leave the house, their poorly heated apartment during the winter. After all, half of our people sit at home all winter or have one coat that is worn in turns by the whole family. This campaign will cost the

government only five hundredths of a percent of the state's savings. Five hundredths of a percent! A mere pittance! Absolutely nothing. But how much joy and happiness! The ordinary Russian person living in impoverishment, cold and starving, will raise his head. So what? Does anyone in the ministry think about such simple questions, but ones that are so necessary for the country and its citizens? And the ministry leaders themselves publically strut about in expensive clothes... You have not been in our neck of the woods recently, go and see how the people are faring. They are not asking for money, they understand that no one will give it to them, not because they are stingy, but simply because they don't have any. They are asking for soap to wash with snow and remove the dirt from their faces, begging for a crust of bread to fill the hole in their stomachs. And I think the topic of military opposition, military threat that comes up from time to time in society, is extreme, contrived according to someone's will. This is the purest fabrication for domestic consumption. It is important to understand that not one country of the world today is capable of assimilating Russia. Even a union of a few of the largest countries will not shoulder the task. There is no free demographic resource in the world today. I am talking about the economically developed world. What can the U.S. offer? One-an-a-half million average specialists at most. Japan has no more than two hundred thousand people. China has no more than five million unqualified workers. India has no more than one hundred thousand people. The European Union, for instance, has one million. That makes a total of less than eight million. This is a mere drop in ocean of the Russian expanses. A few teardrops! I exclude military intervention into our country outright. One hundred and fifty thousand servicemen in Iraq set the U.S. budget back a billion dollars every day. What is a one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand army for our country? Its soldiers will not be able to find each other between Smolensk, Pskov, and Moscow. In order to occupy such a country as ours, you would need an army of thirty-five to forty million people and no less than another million units of various armored hardware, including tanks. Around one-and-a-half thousand

tanks were used in the Georgian campaign, and Georgia occupies a territory of around seventy thousand square kilometers, forty-five percent of which is inaccessible mountains. But Russia is more than seventeen million square kilometers in area. A direct calculation shows that more than half a million tanks will be required. And if we turn to military sources, we will discover that one tank is designated for one-and-a-half combat operations. And that's all! No one, either in the NATO countries or in the magnificent seven, or in India or China attached to them, has this kind of resource, neither industrial, nor demographic, nor financial. Who needs a hollow victory at the cost of one's own catastrophic decline? No one, that's clear! So a possible war with Russia is just another myth made up by our politicians. Andrei, Russia does not need revolutionaries, but analysts and economists capable of offering efficient reforms. But will political power permit this? So I have also decided to move to China. By the way, I want to do this as soon as possible. Patriotism today must be understood anew. I would wish for all my peers, between the ages of seventeen and forty, to leave Russia and move abroad. Now that would be a real revolutionary demarche. I would like to hear the bureaucrats howl when there is no one left to take bribes from."

"That would leave the country with no more than seventy million," interjected the pale girl.

"A country like ours needs no more than that. We have around ten million bureaucrats at present. Let them stay. They choke the life out of people, so let them be happy with their existence," replied the girl in the jeans in support.

"But what about our parents and pensioners? We'll have to abandon them... How will they survive without us?" asked a very young guy with a freckly face.

"Each person chooses his own path," the girl in the jeans put in again. "I posted some protest information on our website. The gist of it is that fighting our fellow countrymen, particularly if it is an armed struggle, is a dirty, unworthy cause. I categorically reject any violence. There is a wonderful alternative to armed resistance—

buy a ticket and move to China. In the Middle Ages, there was a state formation called Moskoviya, the Moscow Principality, let it be reborn again. All of our bureaucrats can become its residents, and we will call them ‘moscalia’ from abroad. I would like to see what becomes of that kind of country. In short, whoever is not with us will have to go it alone. By the way, you can be sure that there will be people among those who stay with contemporary ways of thinking capable of changing something... I do not know anyone with the gumption or insane enough to see their demands of the government to reform Russia through to the end. And is there any point in this? The government primarily teaches us not to listen to anyone and not to think of anyone. What is the point of living in a country with a government like that? So onward, friends, to China!”

“Don’t be in such a rush, Sonya!” exclaimed Andrei, waving his arms. “Don’t be so blasphemous. How can you leave your homeland, the graves of your ancestors? I agree, the country has problems, but show me one that doesn’t. Every country has its difficulties. Can China be home for the Russian? Let’s all think about it, come up with an action plan, and begin a reform campaign. I am sure that a lot of what we demand will happen. We will change our home Russia and life in it will be wonderful. I suggest beginning by registering a new party. We’ll call it ‘Step for Step Into the Future!’ And another thing, isn’t genetic purity something to value? They’re yellow after all...”

“That’s ridiculous! Couldn’t you think of something stupider to offer? Smells like mold! The Chinese aren’t yellow, they’re golden! Yes! Golden!” smirked the pale-faced girl. She only looked timid at first glance.

“By the time we get our party registered, they will have shot all our nerves, squeezed out all our juice, deviously extorted all our modest funds, and will we actually be able to register it at all? We will spend the rest of our lives just trying to get the party legalized!” Sonya broke in, waving her arms and shaking her head. “No, I don’t agree. I couldn’t care less about your parties, it’s time for me to get married, have children, put a roof over my head, find a job, earn a

living. Don't be telling me a bunch of fairy stories. I have no desire to be an outcast in my own country, although I could consent to this in another country. Almost two hundred years have passed since the uprising of the Decembrists. This means ten generations have been dreaming about making qualitative changes in Russia. The country is not changing, there is no way it can be changed. The door opens a crack, the light begins to shine in, the sun comes out, hopes and dreams are born, then everything collapses again, the long and oppressive darkness sets in once more. Our ancestors went to the gallows, to hard labor camps, into exile, to prison. They destroyed their lives, but they were unable to do anything, even though they exerted inconceivable amounts of energy, passion, and intellect. One step forward in our country has always ended in two steps back! Let's take a vote – who is in favor of going to China and getting others to follow suit, raise your hands! So, there are four of us. One against. Now all the talk about Russia is over. Take a look at history—how many great nations have vanished without a trace over time. Hundreds! I want to say a couple of more words to you, Andrei, before we go. If you are thinking about asking for money from any of us, know that we will only give you enough to buy a ticket on train number twenty leaving for China. And we won't give you cash, we'll send you the ticket itself. You got it? And if you end up in prison, don't expect me to send you any food parcels. Reap the consequences of your own errors. If the history of your own country hasn't taught you anything, then go through all the calamities yourself."

"Are we really going to part that easily? Are you putting consumerism higher than national ideals? Yes, we are living at a terrible time! Of course, if that's the way you think, you would be better to leave. I don't really want to live with people, even friends, who have such an indifferent worldview," burst out Andrei.

"Sorry, Sonya," said the girl with the pale face, pouring herself some tea. "I have a couple of more words to say. Andrei, tell me please, what is man and what does he live for? This may seem like a rhetorical question, but the answer to it will dot all the 'i's.'"

“An unspiritual person cannot express himself fully, that is, discover his talents. But spirituality and national self-awareness are like a girl’s plait. The brighter the mane of hair, the richer and more beautiful that amazing plait looks...”

“You just threw out that meaningless phrase,” sniffed the pale-faced girl. “Poor example, my friend, poor example. Okay, tell me which of our fellow countrymen serves as an example for you? There is no need to give dozens of names, name one, well maybe two representatives of the Russian people who could be someone to emulate for our contemporaries.”

“Just a minute...”

“It is difficult to find someone, I am sure you can’t come up with anyone. Any name will immediately be brushed aside. Go on, name someone...” the girl said, openly sneering now.

“Who is he going to name? Everyone who served the Homeland received their salary from the treasury,” put in Sonya. “Privileges, career, awards, estates, feudal servants. And what is the treasury? It is made up of taxes from people like us. Alexander Menshikov, hero of the war with Sweden, victor of the battles at Kalisha, Baturin, and Oposhna, who routed Ross’s army and forced the Swedish troops to capitulate, received ninety thousand feudal servants from Peter, owned six cities, had five million in gold and ten million in the banks of England and Holland. But what did he begin with? Or another example, a simple civil servant, Kurakin, Alexander Borisovich. Vice chancellor, head of the collegium of foreign affairs, active compiler of the provisions of the Tilzit peace treaty. He received five thousand servants from Paul I and twenty-five thousand hectares, as well as a fishing business on the Volga. Later, when he was ambassador of Russia to France, he acquired valuable information about Napoleon’s plans for Alexander I. During the ball in Paris on the occasion of the arrival of Napoleon’s wife Maria Louise, there was a terrible fire. Dozens of people died. Kurakin’s jacket saved him. It was embroidered in gold and diamonds. It is no accident that he was known as the Diamond Prince. Peter Kleinmichel, who supervised restoration of the burned Win-

ter Palace in 1937, head of the railroads and public titles. During his rule, the Nikolai (now Lieutenant Smith) bridge across the Neva, new Hermitage buildings were built, and the Petersburg-Moscow railroad was erected. He gained the reputation of a bribe-taker... After his death, a huge fortune of precious jewels was found in Bolshevik Sverdlov's personal safe. Where did he get the gold and diamonds? Zhukov received permission to bring several carriages of precious trophies out of Germany... And if we add up all the precious stones and metals in the George Kostantinovich awards, we will get dozens of kilograms of gold and as many carats of diamonds. The Order of Victory alone has stones worth sixteen carats. Stalin handed out awards, but who paid for them? The people, dear Andrei. My and your grandfathers! Sakharov was awarded Stalin and Lenin prizes. This is a huge amount of money. Take any name in national history. Who has served the Homeland selflessly? Who has given the awards he received to the people and gone to live in the same kind of ramshackle hut that most of our people live in? We know everyone you can name. They are talented managers who were always well paid for their work and still are. They were paid in money, and in fame, and in love. This is the entire transparent history. After you understand this, all of your elevated national fervor will disappear and each of the great national heroes will prove to be a talented Russian person who is in service to his people and will never forget to count his blessings. So fervor is inappropriate here. If our grandfathers had not worked well, what would the treasury have been filled with and what would our government have used to pay all these so-called saviors of Russia? I find the word 'hero' disgusting in general. There is so much falsity in it that you feel like bursting in indignation. All you need is to be in the right place at the right time, and you are a hero! Today, as apparently in the past, few people know who the heroes are, they are people who keep a very low profile. What could they have done to receive such a high title during a time of national decline? Did they promote the prosperity that led to the terrible crisis? To our total impoverishment? Rather strange... I would never be able to go to bed

with a man who has a hero's star pinned to his lapel. Yuck! Okay, we're off. I don't even know what to wish you in parting. You are quite a stubborn character. Think, Andrei, think! Only a head that is capable of analyzing and digesting information without prejudice is worth anything."

"I would like to add a few words, perhaps they will dampen Andrei's revolutionary ardor," said a young man in glasses. "Russia with its vast underpopulated territory is a bankrupt country. This is not my hypothesis, but the conclusion of economic theory. With such a small population—and today we have a little more than one hundred and thirty-two million—it will never be possible to establish a normal, say, life, one that meets world standards. We need at least five hundred million, or more. Where are we to get such a colossal demographic resource? Invite immigrants into the country. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the U.S. accepted around one hundred million people and still accepts more than two hundred thousand a year. What about us? It takes months to even invite a girl you know from Sweden or Korea, say, for a visit even. What needs to be done for the people in power to finally understand that no matter what the price of hydrocarbons, no matter what the democratic changes, only one fate awaits Russia and that is bankruptcy, division, transfer of territory to the management of other countries. We do not need a revolution, dear Andrei, we need only one law, that everyone who comes to our country gets three hectares of land each free of charge and twenty-five cubic meters of lumber for building his own home. The powers of the bureaucracy should be reduced tenfold and the inconceivable number of bureaucrats radically cut back. That's all! That's absolutely all! Revolutionary slogans and goals have been exhausted. The time has come for god-sends. If that happens, I will stay in Russia, because then it will be possible to believe in it. It is impossible to believe in the country the way it is today. I am going to China!"

Sonya stood up, the others followed her. Gregory Semyonovich lowered his binoculars and rubbed his eyes. This was the first time he had witnessed such an unexpected discussion. In provincial

Kan, he had not met any people with such a mindset. Pomeskin shrugged his shoulders, interesting, but still none of that really bothered him. However, still, something had caught in his opium-filled head. He raised the binoculars to his eyes again. The lenses settled on a man who was having difficulty putting his false leg on—his leg had been cut off above the knee. Then Pomeskin looked in another direction and found a young boy sitting over his homework. He raised the binoculars and saw a woman busy in the kitchen. He dropped down to the third floor and there not only squinted in interest, but even put his other hand up to the binoculars. His attention had been drawn by something unusual. In one of the rooms of a small apartment a gray-haired old man was explaining something using two mannequins dressed in ordinary clothing. One mannequin was a woman of around forty, the other a man of the same age. Five adolescents were listening attentively to the old man. “What sort of master class is this?” thought Pomeskin in interest. “Who is he? A local designer giving lessons on the art of dressmaking? Or a sommelier teaching his students how to elegantly present food and wine? Or perhaps I have come across a ballroom dancing lesson, at the stage of the first pa-de-de and pa-de-tur?”

Gregory Semyonovich focused the lenses on the maestro and began to read his lips.

“When you go to work, you have to assume a new role every time,” the old man was saying. “One day you are wearing a railroad worker’s uniform and peaked cap, and another time you are an athlete – a tennis player or hockey player. They always have a bag with them for carrying their sports equipment, this is important. This is your aid. Your aid might also be a briefcase, violin case, guinea pig, thermos, small bird cage, easel, arm in a sling, sometimes even an ordinary book, or, if push comes to shove, a newspaper or magazine. Who can tell me and show me what an aid is needed for?” he asked, squinting.

“I can!” shouted out a slender girl of around twenty, with an angelic face.

“I can too!” put in a boy, not very tall with a squashed nose.

“Liza, go on, tell your comrades. And then you can have your say, Kolya,” said the old man.

“An aid can help me to distract a scoundrel. I set it right before him and then do what I want with his pockets. Just like that!” She took off her blouse, hung it over her arm, went up to the mannequin and first put her hand in the inside pocket of his jacket and then in the back pocket of his trousers.

“Excellent. Now do it again. I will turn on the electric current at a low voltage. If the work is crude you will get a small shock, and lights will go on in the scoundrel’s ears. I’m putting a wallet weighing fifty grams in the inside jacket pocket. Begin!”

The girl with the angelic face deftly did the exercise.

“Good. Excellent. Now I will place the same wallet in the back trouser pocket. Wonderful. Good girl. We will raise the weight of the wallet to one hundred and fifty, and then to two hundred grams. We will begin again with the inside jacket pocket.” This time the angelic girl cried out and lights lit up on the mannequin. “How many times have I told you, the most important thing about a successful pickpocket is a well-trained body, particularly wrist and fingers. So, pick up your stones and begin rolling them along the back and outside of your wrists. One stone, one wrist. Do not allow your other hand to help. Whoever can keep the stone on their wrists fifteen times can consider they have passed the test. Everyone else keep training. That’s it, be bolder, faster. Henry, what are you doing, rolling a pound stone about? It weighs no more than thirty grams. Why are you being so slow? Go faster. It doesn’t matter if it falls, start again. Suvorov once said, train hard...”

“Who was he, this Suvorov, a law-based pickpocket?” asked a girl with pigtailed.

“Go on, go on, work at it, he is an authority, but for another cause... Now we are going to do the main exercise for the day. Imagine a scoundrel gets on the bus. He has a wad of money in his front trouser pocket, closer to the body, as they say. How are you supposed to get this money if the scoundrel is feeling it all the time?

He is exposing himself by showing that he has a lot of money. You could use the Greek technique. You've felt the money, determined the size of the roll. Give the sign to your partner, he makes a dummy out of paper. You need to determine how often the scoundrel checks to make sure the money is in place. You notice that he touches it every minute. That means that within the time between touches you need to remove the money and replace it with the dummy. It is not easy work, but after thousands of training sessions you can do it. First, make a dummy and take up the right position. Stand with your back to the trouser pocket and work with your middle finger only. Pushing the wad up from below, lift it so that it sticks out of the pocket a little. When the wad has been raised, turn around and face the scoundrel. At that moment, everything should happen. While you turn you instantly move the dummy from your left hand to your right, with the little finger of your right hand pull out the wad, and with your index and middle fingers put the dummy in the scoundrel's pocket. Any abrupt movement will alert the client, he will immediately want to feel his money. He will instantly put his hand on his pocket and relax since he is assured the money is there. And you slowly move toward the exit or pass the steal clandestinely on to your partner. The situation will tell you what to do next. Tailors began sewing the first front pockets in trousers in Athens. And the first person to use this technique and take money from a sitting duck was long-fingered pickpocket Setrak from Thessalonica. Now many are familiar with this technique and use it magnificently. I have been told that this summer a Rostov swindler pulled twenty thousand Euro in five hundreds from a front trouser pocket. Learn, work at it, perfect this skill. And you will have a radiant future—house, family, good car, devoted friends, and reputation of a dignified pickpocket. And this is the elite of the gangster world. By the way, a few words about reputation. Authority is quickly lost and hard won. The most terrible technological sin in our profession is hoodwinking your partner. If you work with a partner and pulled out the wallet yourself, you have to share with him, to the last penny. God forbid that you swiped two thousand rubles, decide to

hoodwink, and tell your partner that you only took five hundred or even one thousand five hundred. Anyone who stoops so low must be sent packing immediately, but before you expel him from your team, he needs to be beaten, or even have his stomach slit. And then make sure that everyone in the thieves' world knows that Vasily, let's say, is a hoodwinker. In that case, he will either become a lonely thief on provincial shuttle buses or go to jail. And if he ends up in the slammer, the fraternity will appoint him a janitor. There is no room for someone like him in our circles. It is even worse if you squeal on your partner. In that case, the punishments can be extreme: a man will be raped and turned into a homosexual or will be knifed. We'll talk about that next time. Now let's continue training."

Pomeshkin removed the binoculars from his eyes. "What an amazing world. It only seems as though I am living in the same country as my compatriots. We may exist in the territory of the same state, but really we live in diverse worlds thousands of miles apart. I have only been looking at one building, but all I have seen is so alien, I can't identify with it at all! Where can I look to find myself? What can I come close to? Or should I remain alone, but with my new miracle—opium? I am happy being a recluse. I want to extend the illusions with another spoonful of koknar and instantly find myself in the extraordinary world of pure imagination. It is magnificent when such a powerful, passionate soul resides in a non-descript, morbid, but so beloved body. I do not know how things will go, but I am extremely grateful to my neighbor for this wonderful acquaintance. China has a population of around two billion. Do they know about this amazing flower?"

He found himself thinking that the topic of China had mysteriously taken up roost in his mind. "What, has Sonya had an influence?" the anxious thought flashed in his mind. "No! I do not want to believe such a thing—that whole discussion did not arouse any serious interest in me. I would rather move to deceased Fateeva's house or to meadows where poppy thrives."

Pomeshkin stood up and went to the kitchen again, to refresh

himself with some poppy straw. Gregory Semyonovich's entire being commandingly demanded it. Going into the kitchen, he found his neighbor doing precisely what he had intended doing.

"How are you feeling, friend?" asked Parfenchikov, smiling weakly.

"I came for a spoonful. Can I?"

"How can you not want to treat yourself to a pick-me-up first thing in the morning. I would be the last scoundrel to deny anyone such an important thing. Go ahead... But don't overdo it. Yesterday, toward evening, you succeeded in having too much. Don't be in a hurry to eat your fill, keep your appetite in check. Take a spoonful, but no more. You may be letting yourself in for trouble. Don't rush..."

"Your dope has really gotten to me, oh indeed. During the evening I understood the most important thing—opium is capable of rebuffing the most perfidious attack of reality. I like that most of all. But now I am strictly keeping to your recommendations."

"Okay. Today I am beginning a new project. Professor Koshmarov suggested it. Maybe you will also be interested in it. The gist of it is that the professor wants to change the genetic code of Russians and so significantly improve their quality. He has created a certain nano pill that ensures reproduction of genetic characteristics of the most vibrant of ethnicities living today, German, Chinese, Jewish, and for some reason, Georgian, maybe because Georgians are the oldest European nation. The Colchis kingdom has been known since the fifth century before our times. This nano pill is supposedly capable of helping our compatriots in the most difficult times of the moral and economic crisis we are currently experiencing. What do you think of that?"

"I am against eugenics. I studied it in school, was even interested for a while, but then came to the conclusion that there are too many mystical things in that science and our national culture does not jive with it. So I chose my method of isolating from society, withdrawing into myself. And it worked for me. I observe reality from my surreal nest. And am very happy. But now, since you have

helped me to become acquainted with this new energy substance, I hope to significantly improve my inner world. The nano pill might interest me only as an outside observer. I am not at all interested in whether the Russian person changes or not. I am only afraid of changing myself, undermining my love for myself, disrupting my solitude. But what happens to the world doesn't bother me at all, or, to use the new slang, I don't give a hoot. After all, nothing going on around me affects me. So what difference does it make to me what is happening outside myself if the external world doesn't exist for me anyway?" Pomeschkin thought that he had heard something similar recently while watching the young people's conversation. However, he did not tell Peter Petrovich about this.

"But I am interested in how the Russian who receives forty percent of other people's genetics will change. And I admit that I insisted that an opium fragment be present in the Georgian blend. It will amount to around one percent of the overall cocktail. And if we calculate it according to the new genetic component of the Russian, the figure will be even smaller—twenty-five hundredths of a percent. I am sure that no vibrant creative individual can be achieved without this addition. For this is precisely the kind of person the author of the project wants to obtain."

"But why are you interested in it?" asked Pomeschkin.

"I don't really know, but I have the suspicion that the process of changing a specific person could arouse the most whimsical mind games. I will begin fantasizing about what else must be changed, what character trait should be eliminated, what should be added or intensified. I will begin imagining a genetically modified Russian, take part in modeling a new type of compatriot—that should be interesting. I want to give the first pill to one young woman today. And I will immediately begin watching how she changes. The professor guarantees the quality of his product. How about you? Would you like to try the pill yourself?" Peter Petrovich offered, smirking.

"Thank you! I have my sights more set on a certain level spoonful right now!" Mr. Pomeschkin snapped disconcertedly.

“Well, go on, I will also finish taking my portion,” nodded Parfenchikov, sipping the brew.

“I do not believe in the success of all your ideas. No nano pill is going to help,” said Gregory Semyonovich a couple of minutes later. “This requires tectonic shifts. Millions of years! By the way, can I go with you and watch too. Who is she?”

“She works at the local grocery store. Although she may already be unemployed. She’s an invalid, has trouble walking. Yesterday evening I wanted to lay her, although it was not sexual feelings that attracted me to her, but the desire to carry out an experiment—unite opium sperm with an ordinary ovum. But nothing came of it.”

“She refused?” asked Pomeskin indifferently.

Peter Petrovich replied without offense, “No, I didn’t have an erection. I waited for an hour or two, then gave up and left.”

“What about her, did she get mad?”

“Not really. She asked me to come back.”

“So are you going to try again?”

“Well, no, I’ve given up on that for now. Sex is not my thing. It doesn’t interest me at all, neither while asleep, nor while awake.”

Gregory Semyonovich wanted to tell of his own erotic passion for himself. However, he decided not to rush to make such a touchy admission, but wait for a while. “First I need to earn my neighbor’s trust,” he thought, “and only then share my most innermost secrets. Suggest that he take a good look at himself in the mirror? Take delight in some arousing features on his face, on his earlobes, on his lips? Perhaps feelings will be aroused, then he won’t have to wait for an erection. I, for example, am most frequently aroused by the dimple on my chin. It has some inexplicable erotic charge, literally drives me mad. No sooner do I catch a glimpse of it than I want to have myself.”

“Well then, are you coming with me to see the test subject? I have already tried the pill in a daily dose. But I don’t remember much. It would be good to have an objective view of what happens to a person. Maybe you know her—Katy Loskutkina. She’s not been living in Kan long. Do you know her?”

“Not so far. I rarely go to the store. It’s expensive. It’s cheaper to buy straight from private gardeners. Potatoes, beets, carrots, and I get meat, rather bones, at the abattoir, but also rarely. What kind of salary does a bridge keeper have? Four-and-a-half thousand rubles. After I pay for utilities, what’s left? Two thousand a month. That’s sixty-seven rubles a day. And meat costs one hundred and fifty a kilogram. How much can you buy? But I am used to it. Porridge with onion, potatoes and beets, pickles and bread—that’s my diet. Seems I don’t need anything else. They gave less in Auschwitz. What do you eat? You don’t look very well fed...”

“I think I have about five years left to live. I don’t want any more. So I am not concerned about food. If there’s a crust of bread, a potato, a cookie, I’ll eat it, if not, I don’t think about it. As long as poppy is always at hand. By the way, I have a suitcase of money... Oh yes, you know about it, feel free to take as much as you like. Buy yourself something good to eat and eat as much as you want. In my case, a hungry person understands a full one very well. But I don’t need money, it gives rise to decadent consumerism. I am only partial to one dish, the most important and only one—poppy head.”

“Thank you, but I don’t need it either. I have learned to manage without it,” explained Pomeskin. “Why do you think I love myself so fervently? I don’t need any other partner, neither man, nor woman. Who else are you going to love, when you don’t have money and there is no prospect of having any in the future? Love without money won’t work. It is like a light bulb without electricity or a car without fuel. But my heart will always prompt me to be kind to myself. Isn’t conquering yourself the greatest victory of all? It is better to be crazy about yourself than about someone else. Pragmatism? Yes! It’s cheap! And I will do everything for myself that my soul desires.”

“I do not entirely understand the principle of your sexual satisfaction, I plus I! Although there is something mysterious about it. But sex stopped occupying me after the vast boundless arena for inflamed mind games fully opened up. Nothing can be compared with this miracle. The incredible possibilities charm you so much

that you forget everything else, even your own gender. And how can sexual ardor be assessed? This pastime is not worth a cent, because it does not come from your intellect, but from your instinct. And I want to live by my intellect. The higher your IQ, the deeper you can become immersed in the world of imagination. And instinct is the accursed illness of abstention. So what about the professor's experiment? If you just want to be an observer, be my guest! I am going to see Loskutkina."

"It's raining. Do you have an umbrella?" asked Pomeshkin uncertainly.

"My dear man, it is obvious that a lot more time will pass and you will have to take dozens of kilograms of powdered weed to be able to distance yourself from the time, weather, and world around you. I have long lost interest in all of that. I don't notice the things and circumstances that surround Peter Petrovich. Rain, wind, light, dark, shouts of joy or cries for help, cars or yachts... All of that only exists for me if koknar has for a moment drawn it from my memory. Any other time, I do not see any of that, I do not steer clear of anything, I don't look on in wonder, I am not ashamed. It is all beyond me! From the outside I am a flat person with a detached look, a character that needs to be avoided. Although of course I would never hurt a fly. Even the project with Loskutkina only exists in my mind. Learn to live like Parfenchikov, and the wonderful world of opium will open up before you with its incredible stage sets and characters. You are not destined to have another life experience richer in colors and circumstances than the one in your own head. It has long been set. What is permitted for a few is categorically prohibited for the masses. And another thing. Please do not disappoint me with questions about umbrellas and other worldly rubbish. The world of things only exists for the powers that be and the wealthy. And for those such as you and I, it is revealed by means of the divine flower. You have taken a spoonful of koknar, can you really still be afraid of rain and capable of thinking of something so banal after the magic has bloomed? Hurry up!"

Mr. Parfenchikov was taking avid enjoyment in the work being

performed by the opium weed. His rapture was so strong that he entirely forgot about Pomeshtkin moseying along beside him. Anticipation of the upcoming experiment and metamorphoses that Katy Loskutkina would undergo prompted him to swallow a couple more spoonfuls of opium, even heaped spoonfuls. There can never be too much of the excellent. Oh, how angry I am at myself, how I chastised Parfenchikov for not taking the bag of koknar with him...

EXCTASY

A summer drizzle was falling in Kan. The small town was skulking in the slumberous twilight. Weakly lit barges, disappearing into the tousel of wooded hills, slowly crept north along the dark smooth waters of the winding river. While the silently falling leaves were reminiscent of the long farewells that Siberian women call to their men as they see them off on an extended journey.

Leonid Ivanovich Efimkin was lying on the couch in his apartment wrapped in a cotton blanket. After the successful raid of the restaurant, followed by a meat factory, furniture plant, timber processing plant, confectionary workshop, coal quarry, transport company, a thirty-five-percent set of shares in an enterprise that supplies Central Siberia with electricity, the port's coastline, and gaining control over the whole of Kan business, the town was feeling too small for him. Almost all the companies, all the businessmen, all the amateur fishermen and hunters had been besieged. Now he was losing all interest in life in Siberia. Efimkin had appointed special service veteran Black Hood to watch over the vast business. Train Superintendent's structure, created by Leonid Ivanovich, had grown into an impressive private security company, with a license for firearms. There were now thirty people on the staff. In short, the time had come to decide where to go next. Work in the capital of the Siberian Federal District, or take a stab at Moscow? With an income of seven hundred thousand dollars a month, he could contend for a seat in the Federation Council or for a mandate of This Party in the State Duma. With his feet firmly planted in reality, Leonid Ivanovich had well-functioning contacts along the horizontal and benevolent relations along the vertical. This was a resource that gave him the luxury of picking and choosing what would be best for him. The post of deputy governor was assessed in the market at five million dollars, the seat of deputy head of the Siberian Federal District at ten million. The seat of a

department head of an important ministry in Moscow cost no more than five.

“Why stay in Siberia,” Efimkin debated, “after all, there are many more opportunities for a bureaucrat to earn a living in the capital. Yes, in the provinces you are in the limelight, everyone bows to you, surrounds you in a show of respect, panders to you with all kinds of gifts. But there is less money here, and each innovation is snatched on in private and dragged through the mire. Whereas in the capital, the post of a department head is low-key, it is screened by higher power. That kind of post does not arouse the keen interest of the wide business community. It is watched by businessmen from the department sector, along the entire vertical of the federal pyramid—from Moscow to the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. They are rushing to the capital, striving to stroke you with banknotes, coax you with incomes and shares, invite you to major transactions as a godfather, offer part of their property for protection. Of course, I need to choose Moscow! Moscow, Moscow! The capital! The department head of a federal ministry is not that prestigious a job, but very lucrative, and in a year or two I can move up to deputy minister. Then further on and further up! What department should I choose? In what field should I unfold my talents? The energy industry? Excellent! What else? Commerce? Wonderful! What else? Management of natural resources? Superb! But perhaps I could go for something quieter, almost silent, but profitable, such as the National Reserve Fund! Who knows what it is? What is its budget? Where it is located? Some kind of quiet haven of efficient civil service. For I am right, the National Reserve Fund has unheard of amounts of money and cash bribes. But what department should I choose? Energy resources? No! Weak! Building materials? No-no! What else? Medication? That’s better! But what else? Food? Hurrah! Of course, of course, food! There bribes from purchases will rain in on all sides: for salt and sugar, pepper and tobacco, vegetables and dried fruit, corn and buckwheat, butter and oils, fish and meat. Yes, yes, I will have to buy that post. Pile on the administrative ties, financial resources, capacity of a flatterer, and take the

seat of department head no matter what. According to my information, I will need five million dollars. But what if I need more? How much can I give? Six, seven? No, that can't be right, the country is in an economic crisis after all. The exorbitant appetites of the sponsors of this all-round beneficial enterprise have to be dampened. Why not offer four or even three million for starters? Or even better, start bargaining at two and half... Or even at one-and-a-half million.

An excellent price! Whoever pays first assumes all the risks of the future business. What if in a month or two the boss changes and the new one sells the post I've paid for? I will need a guarantee that I can keep the post for at least a year, in order to return the money invested. I will try to return it in a month. It is no sin to amass capital, but a necessity consecrated by national traditions. And there is no other way to build a career in the capital. Resources must be significant. So I will go to Moscow with my hopes pinned first on Dmitri Zyabukhin and Ivan Prishchepkin. They are business-like people and will help me set myself up. I must always remember about my own financial resources, but be in no hurry to show them. Although it is clear that the road will lead to success if it is strewn with green bills. But rushing is so darn detrimental here! Money, even if it is for a good cause, needs to be given away with tears in the eyes and pain in the heart. Only then will it begin sticking to you. These gentlemen sponsors are swindlers of the highest guild, but their services should cost me as little as possible. This is the art of an entrepreneur. You don't need much brain to throw money around. It needs to hover around for a while before you open your pocket. As for honesty... Who doesn't have itchy fingers these days? And what does that archaic expression "not to have itchy fingers" mean? With that kind of old-fashioned mentality, there is no way you will be able to find your way in the company of bureaucrats and business colleagues—you won't earn a penny. And what will you live on? Money is the wellspring of the individual, his fulcrum. While a dearth of money pulls you into all kinds of devilry.

That's enough thinking. The decision to move to the capital has

been made. My bad inclinations, bad habits, and lowdown passions will flourish in that wonderful city with extraordinary force. This is what a true citizen lives for in Russia! And let those who feel compelled to do good emigrate to distant lands and look for a way to achieve moral perfection there. Oh these eternal extremes! After all, moving from one guise to another and back, then back again, is endlessly sweet! I feel that these truths will fully open up to me a little later when unperturbed self-satisfaction is replaced with conciliatory disappointment.

To Moscow! To the modern-day Babylon! To the kingdom of utter depravity of soul and body! The uncompromising choice of my mind is to be in the epicenter of incredible appetites and perverted consumption.

... He rented a decent house on Rublevka, in Razdory. The two-story building in the Victorian style that took the fancy of Moscow chicary was surrounded by a high stone wall of the era of early Russian capitalism. The house had twelve rooms, a swimming pool, steam room, workout room, and a three-car garage. The five-thousand square meter plot of land was cultivated by modern florists and looked impeccable. Before the crisis, such a mansion would have cost no less than forty thousand dollars a month. But since December 2008, the prices had been going down, so six months later the newly baked Muscovite was able to rent this mansion for twenty thousand dollars a month, all utility expenses included. Leonid Ivanovich instructed the brokers to find him three chauffeurs and two body guards to escort him around in his cars, and three armed lads who were to take it in turns to keep an eye on the rented property. He planned on having three cars for his own needs. Leonid Ivanovich wanted to go to parties with the strong of this world in a Bentley, meet with business colleagues in a Mercedes 600, and take weekend trips in an Audi Q7. He gave his personal chauffeurs two five-year-old Peugeot 407 to drive from the working districts of the capital to his mansion in Razdory and back home after their shift. He had also hired a housekeeper, cook, and accountant.

One of the first people he met in the capital was local businessman Mikhail Kartuzov. They met by accident at Barvikha Village when they were picking out Bentlies.

“Excuse me, but what color should I choose?” asked Leonid Ivanovich first. “I just moved to Moscow from Siberia a couple of days ago and still don’t know the tastes and traditions of the VIPs of this wonderful city. I don’t want to ask the salesmen, they will never tell the truth, but recommend the color that is not selling. Let me introduce myself, Leonid Efimkin, from the Krasnoyarsk Territory.”

“Pleased to meet you. I am Mikhail Kartuzov, I have been living in Moscow for thirty years,” replied the new acquaintance with a broad smile, giving the Siberian a friendly but attentive look, as though he had known him for many years already. Kartuzov looked to be around fifty, tall, well-built, immaculately dressed, with the features of someone from the south of Russia.

“To answer your question, I need to know what business you are in. If you are in raw materials, commerce or food, it would be best to pick black. If you are a producer, in show business, advertizing or the media, choose orange or gold. If it is construction, real estate, law or tourism you are engaged in, you would do well to pick cherry. And if you are into precious stones, gold, and jewelry, buy a steel-colored car.”

“Are there such distinguishing features?” asked Efimkin in surprise.

“I don’t know about distinguishing features, but that is how the market has developed corporately,” replied Kartuzov, smirking again.

“What business does bottle green indicate? That was the color I liked best.”

“That is the color of an arrogant, extravagant, closed person with irrepressible ambitions, but without corporate ties and obligations. Excuse me, and often even with criminal inclinations, open to any new enterprise. I hope I have not upset you?” Kartuzov replied, his entire powerful body shaking with laughter. However, the laughter was not malignant, but friendly.

“No, on the contrary, I am very grateful for such details and frankness,” said Leonid Ivanovich. “Indeed I do not have many ties, but I do have a surplus of ambitious plans. I confirm that I am open to any new kind of business.”

“At this difficult time, you are even willing to invest?”

“Judge for yourself, I will pay three hundred and sixty thousand dollars for the Bentley. And in addition to this beauty, I am also buying two luxury cars. Of course, I am interested in business. If I like a project I will find the investments.”

“Do you have a discount in the car salon?”

“No, this is my first visit.”

“How many cars will you buy?”

“One.”

“I have a discount of ten percent. But if I say, and they will believe me, they know me here, that I brought you to the salon, we will get a fifteen percent discount for two cars. I suggest dividing your discount in half. After we confirm the new price, you pay me seven-and-a-half percent in cash. Do you agree?”

“I would have thought that the salon would lower the price itself in these crisis times. Mikhail, if we are talking about sharing possible income, I think it’s time to be on more familiar terms. What do you think?”

“That’s fine with me!”

“What if I ask about a discount myself?”

“You’ll give yourself away as a provincial. Only regular, registered customers with company cards get discounts on world class brands and top products. You can try, but you will be refused, and then I won’t be able to say that the payment for two cars is coming from the same pocket.”

“Four percent, and that’s settled...” said Leonid Ivanovich hurriedly.

“Five, and it’s agreed,” smirked Kartuzov.

“Five plus four is nine. Divide nine by half—four-and-a-half. A compromise of the two proposals. It is logical to acknowledge this figure as final. Let’s shake on it...”

Kartuzov snickered, shook Efimkin's hand, and clapped him on the shoulder.

"I respect commercial people," he said smiling. "Business is an art, but it's not interesting without a zesty topic. A person who does not fight until he is hoarse over the price is soon forgotten. It is even boring to earn big money with those kinds of people. They are spineless and without character. But you made a bright show of yourself in our first transaction. Are there lots like you in Siberia?"

"We have enough of everything."

"Oh, don't tell me... There is a shortage of interesting people at all times and in all latitudes. What else do we want to buy?"

"Is your business in agent services?"

"I try to earn on everything but in a way that my partners make a real profit. For example, this meeting with me earned you sixteen thousand two hundred dollars. And we have been talking for only fifteen minutes. That means each minute of our chatter has brought you more than a thousand dollars profit. Not a bad result..."

"But you also gained..."

"Of course! You gain and I don't lose either. Without the stimulating factor, the economy is always in stagnation. We ourselves are witnesses to the greatest breakdown in the history of civilization, and it is explained by the main principle of social development—material motivation. Soviet ideology categorically denied it, so that powerful country disappeared. So, what is this newly baked Muscovite intending to buy?"

"I need a Mercedes 600, Audi Q7, and two modest cars for my chauffeurs. I've rented a house not far away..."

"So they are going to have to get from the city to Rublevka. You want all new ones?"

"For me, of course, new ones. For the chauffeurs, five years old."

"You need some help? If our agreement for the Bentley of four-and-a-half percent extends to your other purchases, I am willing to include my commercial ties. I have significant discounts in all elite car salons, restaurants, boutiques, and art galleries. For example,

you are not dressed for the city. Any partygoer in the capital will know as soon as he looks at you that you are from the provinces. You can't ride around in a Bentley in such sorry-looking, I beg your pardon, clothes. The local girls will have your number in a jiffy and it will be difficult and expensive to rid yourself of their insulting labels. Take your awful shoes for instance. And what about the color of your suit? And your tie? Shame on you! Made in Mongolia? Do you know the old saying—clothes count for first impressions. I'll offer you a deal—you pay me the same percent with discount and I will not only take on the responsibility for picking out your cars, but will also set you up as an international VIP, clothes, shoes, and all. I will get you everything, from Bentlies and Mercedes to elite Petrus and Chateau Margot wines. From Gucci and Zitti underwear to Armani and Brioni fur coats. From Patek Phillips and Frank Muller watches to Bulgari and Cartier rings and cufflinks. Whereas deputy Pipingarov asks one hundred thousand dollars, and not a cent less, for an hour-long conversation, I will acquaint you with all the deputies of the State Duma for three hundred thousand dollars. And if you pay me half a million dollars, I'll include all the members of the Federation Council in the list. If you add another half million, you will socialize with the entire political and administrative elite of Russia and also have the governors of any Federation constituency as your friend. But remember, I want to get my legal four-and-a-half percent from every transaction. For that I am willing to open any door leading to successful business. By the way, a million dollars does not include payment for the services and socialization with representatives of the fiscal, investigation, and other defense and security bodies. That is a separate topic. Here the price depends on the circumstances and appeal requirements. What do you say, Leon? Or what will you decide, you lucky Siberian Leonid Ivanovich?"

"My head is spinning. Give me time to think about it, allow it all to settle down in my head..."

"I am not rushing you. Think! But now we'll go and pay for the Bentley. Have you decided on the green one? I would choose the black."

“Yes!”

“Why have you not answered my question about the business you are in?”

“All the big deals in Siberia have been intercepted by Muscovites. I have a few areas in medium business—the electricity network, lumber, a meat factory, transport, and so on. But I’ve come to the capital...”

“We’ll talk more later. The sales manager is walking towards us,” Kartuzov interrupted Leonid Ivanovich in a whisper. And began with a smile, “Hello, director! That was a lovely girl I saw you with at Mario’s in Zhukovka. I know almost all the girls around here, but yours is the tops. Great gal. Where did you find her? I envy you. Although I could offer you a swap. When you get tired of her, we could do a change. I will give you two super girls for her. One of them you even tried to get at *The Czar’s Hunt*. Remember? Alena from Tver? She’s a marvelous little devil! No one in the world is as good as her in bed. Flaming lips and a pearly smile. And what breasts! Like freshly baked buns with their marzipan aroma and succulence. And her bum is like a silk cushion filled with swan down. One touch and you will have an instant orgasm. And her thighs! They’re like peaches, they give you an erection in minutes... Super! You could die on her from an overdose of feeling.”

“Careful now, Mikhail Alexandrovich. Keep your colorful images to yourself, or I’ll want to run off right now. Your description has given me an erection... What about the second? Who is she?” the manager asked, his neutral business-like expression changing to a starry-eyed look.

“She is the purest diamond. I found her at *Korona* last spring. Her name is Yanochka. She’s from Elets. So as not to torment you with erotic details, I’ll just say that if she were a contemporary of Da Vinci and Botticelli, our Yanochka would be on the canvas instead of the Mona Lisa and her face would crown the painting *The Birth of Venus*. That’s that kind of girl she is. When shall we go?”

“How much money do they expect from a boyfriend?”

"I pay each of them a hundred and fifty a month. How about you?"

"Thirty."

"You've got it good. Lucky you. Who did you get her from?"

"We met in an airplane. When I offered her thirty, I knew I had overdone it. I think she would have agreed to five. She and I have been together for more than two months now..."

"Is a hundred a month too much for you? Are sales going down?"

"Yes, it's hard."

"Can you pay a hundred and fifty? I mean for one?"

"If I have to pay forty, I will have to take it out of the kitty. In a couple of months I will be able to pay twenty without too much trouble. We're in a crisis..."

"For which one?"

"For Yana. I remember her..."

"I don't know if she'll agree to that money. Maybe we could discuss another alternative. I'll give you thirty bucks and you give me your girl. Add another twenty and you can live for a month with Yanochka. And I'll set Alena up with my friend Leonid Efimkin. By the way, here he is. We came to buy two cars. And we want a twenty percent discount from you."

The men exchanged nods.

"Let's separate the two deals. We began with the girls, let's finish that. Your offer suits me. Your thirty, the rest is mine and I live for a month with Yana. Agreed? But only a month. Goodness knows how business will continue."

"What's your girl's name?"

"Victoria, from Rostov."

"Okay! Does she live with you or do you rent a place for her?"

"She lives with me."

"When should my driver come and get her?"

"Tomorrow morning, around twelve."

"Done! I'll pay up with you. What about the cars?"

"I can't do twenty percent. Fifteen plus winter tires. Eight tires cost more than thirty bucks. How will you pay?"

“I’ll pay with my credit card, what about you?” Mikhail Alexandrovich asked Efimkin.

“I’ll pay in cash.”

“Where is it?”

“Here in my case.”

“You give me thirty out of your part of the payment, and I will pay that amount with my credit card. Did you hear, I need cash to pay for Victoria. Between the two of us, don’t ever go around town again with that kind of money on you. This is not Siberia. They’ll do you in, and there will be no one to pay for the funeral. It will take several months for them to find any relatives, if you have any that is. And the prosecutor is a well entrenched business. It is not profitable for them to look for relatives, they’ll keep the body for three months and then send it to the crematorium. But only the paperwork, in actual fact, they’ll sell it to medical institutes for anatomy lessons. In addition to everything else, a place in the cemetery in Moscow goes for two hundred thousand dollars. And they will ask a million for a place with a name. So come on, pay up.”

“When will we get the cars?”

“In a couple of days.”

“You aren’t taking four-and-a-half percent from me for protection! It’s a steal!”

“Protection costs four thousand dollars. Four times four—sixteen thousand. My share of that is seven hundred and twenty dollars. According to commercial laws, you must pay me. You are obligated! But... I propose the following. This evening you pay for a table at the Del Sol restaurant. Order lobster, oysters, and a bottle of wine. If you come with a girl, there will be four of us. If you are alone, I’ll invite lovely Alena. To be honest, it’s a pity to give her away. But tomorrow I will already be with Vika. In short, if you like her, you can have her, but not only for one night, one-nighters don’t appear in our circles. If you take her, it has to be for a few months. Do you remember the terms? But there can be no bargaining here. Save your talent for other deals. You’re only allowed to say one phrase: let’s go. Otherwise you say nothing. You understand? I am

under the impression that I am becoming a consultant in initiating a provincial into the ways of the capital's chicary. And what do I get in exchange?"

The new acquaintances soon finished registering the documents, paid, and moved toward the exit.

"Do you have any friends in Moscow? Although if you came alone with a briefcase full of cash to buy an elite car, I presume you don't have any."

"I do, but not very many."

"How many and who are they? If they are not friends, but acquaintances, I will understand. And if they are friends, I can see they are utter asses. Not one decent friend would let an out-of-towner go to by a Bentley alone with a case of money in a city like Moscow. Tell me their names."

"Dmitri Zyabukhin and Ivan Prishchepkin. Do you know them?"

"Zyabukhin, Zyabukhin. Dmitri Zyabukhin.... You understand, Leon, even if I have never heard his name before, in Moscow he is absolutely nothing. Of course, I am not familiar with his human qualities, but in the capital he is no one. But Prishchepkin is an old stinker. I want to tell you that all the capital's scoundrels who can't make a name for themselves here travel around the provinces, introducing themselves as decent and important persons. I knew him even before the beginning of perestroika. Incredibly mean. A jackal of the lowest kind. He says 'Hi!' and lies! He's been dug into the ground twice, burned several times, and beaten like cattle for his swindling. What do you have with him?"

"We met in Novosibirsk a few times, in Kemerovo and Krasnoyarsk. Apart from general talk, I don't have anything with him at all. He offered to help set me up with a job in Moscow. I think that's all."

"What, are you looking for work?" Mikhail Alexandrovich asked in surprise.

"I've given bureaucrats so much money that I want to occupy a bureaucratic position for a while. I want to return some of it."

“That’s surprising. Why do you need a Bentley then?”

“For going out... What, is that not right?”

“I would not advise it. But never mind. What have you chosen? What post do you want?”

“I want to work in the National Reserve Fund, as head of the food department.”

“Who is going to protect you, not Prishchepkin?”

“No. Although I was planning to discuss it with him. After what you said though, I don’t know what to do...”

“A new head was appointed there recently. Of course, they gave him the carte blanche to replace the staff. I will try and find out what chance you have. How much will you pay for the post?”

“A million... Maybe a little more... Dollars!”

“No one will even talk to you for a million. That’s not money in the capital. Even during a crisis.”

“How much then?”

“I don’t know... Maybe around seven million. Or maybe they will agree to five just now.”

“Five is a bit much, out of my range. I might be able to give two million, but with guarantees.”

“What guarantees?”

“That I won’t be kicked out in a month. If I am, I would want a refund. For myself, of course, but that doesn’t make it any easier. Money must be paid back, particularly debts to yourself.”

“Let’s not talk about that. Let me find out first whether I can help you. And will you be paying for the post in cash?”

“Yes, how else?”

“Do you know there are banks?”

“But I have unlaundered money. They ask ten percent to cash it. And thank goodness I’ve saved myself from their services. Seven out of ten banks in Siberia have gone bankrupt. Otherwise my money would have gone into other people’s pockets and throughout the Russian expanses. But under the mattress they are safe. One of my companies is a security enterprise, Afghan veterans watch the assets. Of course, Mikhail, I need a friend in the capital whom I

could be of use to myself. You can't get by without help in our world."

"How did you get here?"

"By taxi."

"What do you mean by taxi?"

"I have only been in Moscow for three days. The first day I found a broker, the second I rented a house, and the third, with your help, I bought a car. Now I need to buy a Mercedes 600 and an Audi. And a lot of other stuff. As you can see, I have begun very actively settling down in the capital," Leonid Ivanovich concluded, already very hobnob.

"And this evening you are inviting Yanochka and me to Del Sol! I want to celebrate saying farewell to my girl. It's a pity, but we have to part. And will you bring your girl? You've begun so aggressively, maybe you already have that question sorted out too."

"No, I will alone. She hasn't come to Moscow yet."

"Don't give a hoot about a Siberian girl," said Kartuzov shaking with laughter. "There are tons of girls here, you'll choke on the multicolored and multi-assorted offers. So I will bring Yana..."

Efimkin suddenly felt a passing suffocation, like a desperate need to resist this idea. He gave his companion a hounded look, covered his face with his hands and cried out in a muffled voice, "No! No! Please! That won't be necessary! I don't want that! You understand, I don't want that!" Then, dampening his sudden outburst of malice, he added in a softer tone, "There's time. I have come to the capital for the long haul. If you have the time, let's go get the cars now."

Kartuzov noticed the inappropriate reaction of his new acquaintance to the entirely, it would seem, appropriate offer. It confused him, but he did not show it, reasoning that the provincial mentality of a Siberian must be to blame. He'll adapt! Moscow can break and squeeze the juice out of anyone, particularly at first! But he was going to have to keep his eye on what kind of bloke this was who had come to this scheming, but wonderful city. If he was a normal kind of guy, that was one thing, but if not... Of course, changing the

line of business is right up my street. But here I have an eternal dilemma—why exert effort on understanding the truth, wouldn't it be better to remain misguided?" he smirked to himself. "Fate is always throwing extravagant topics at me, they are literally like raisins in an Easter cake for me, you always hurry to dig them out. And wouldn't it be good to begin tempting Efimkin with depraved consumption?.."

"I have the time. Get into my car. We'll go shopping. I love earning money," smirked Mikhail Alexandrovich. "It is not a wonderful thing to replenish your capital while also indulging yourself?"

It was already noon. They drove along Rublevka in a throng of luxurious foreign cars that filled the air with the usual stench of exhaust gases. The three-year-old trees and bushes along the highway looked drab and dehydrated. Carousing revelers were returning home after night parties. They were racing along, overtaking each other, in sleek black limousines with the trivial story of "I was delayed at work," escorted by bodyguards and often the police. In the other direction went big bureaucrats headed for the center of the metropolis after official meetings, business people from elite settlements of the Rublevka estate, luxurious prostitutes and singers, their eyes constantly alight with lust in luxury cars after night erotic shows, as well as messengers of different ranks with reports about things it was not safe to talk about over the phone. The designs of these people were based on greed, the aggressive desire to earn money and possess everything always.

Leonid Ivanovich sat in the back seat in the luxurious cab of Kartuzov's Mazzerati. The car's license plate with the numbers "001" engraved in mountain crystal from the Svarovsky Company, cell phones in diamond frames, and two Berret guns made of gold inserted in half-open patent leather sheaths on either side of the doors all enraptured the Siberian. Such accessories in the provincial image of the strong of this world turned Mikhail Kartuzov into a star capital aristocrat who had to copy everyone in everything. Efimkin had the acute desire to become immersed as quickly as possible in the enticing chaos of Russian chicary. It seemed to him

that Kartuzov and the people he socialized with were indeed people with a capital letter, whom he wished to emulate with all his heart and had come to Moscow explicitly to meet.

The other world he had left behind in Siberia and which, of course, could still be found in the throngs of the capital, did not intrigue him at all. He was entirely oblivious to suffering and deprivation, grief and despair—the eternal companions of mere mortals. “How unfortunate that I did not move to the capital sooner. For it is people like Kartuzov who can heal the wounds of the past and erase all my previous suffering.” Leonid Ivanovich was consumed by this thought. “But will this fantastical world accept and embrace me? Will I get used to it, will I not drown in it? I am expecting a great deal of myself, but do I have what it takes to charm and win over this world? It is not humanness, but interminable ambition, not kindness or welcoming gestures, but virulent aggression and mercilessness that are required. Will I be able to assimilate those specific abilities? Will I learn them to a tee, or will I fail? But without them I will not be successful. I must, I must learn this art of living! These ways of making it rich. This style of being liked. It must be not simply success, but immense success. Of national proportions! I want people to look at me in stunned admiration, like I looked at Kartuzov. I want people to listen to what I say as soon as I meet them. I want everyone to know me and want to be pleasant and interesting to everyone, like Mikhail.”

Efimkin’s face lit up in delight. Mikhail Alexandrovich caught his reflection in the mirror.

“You like Moscow?”

“Ye-e-es...” replied Leonid Ivanovich, letting out a mellow sigh.

“What method should I choose?” Kartuzov was thinking to himself in the meantime. “One that will allow him to ripen slowly like a vegetable in cool rainy weather, or quickly, in a couple of days, like strawberries in July? I’ll wait until this evening, wait until he opens up more fully. And I will have a better chance to see into his soul, find out what’s there...”

“Moscow is a metropolis with two worthy, often intercepting levels of human mentality. One is legitimate and benevolent. The other is sinful and criminal. Each of them manifests itself in us in the most magnificent way. The combination in Muscovites of these opposing origins creates an entirely new person of the contemporary world. Whereas in the past one step only separated a few people from purity to filth, today this duality has become an intrinsic component of each of us. Like the left and right halves of the brain, like first name and last name. According to his own discretion and proceeding exclusively from his highest personal interests, a Muscovite can be now a policeman, now a thief, now wise, now doomed. This unexpected circumstance makes our life deeply mysterious. The amazing thing is that you cannot predict your actions. The fulcrum that holds an individual in one state has been eroded. You are always different, so you are not only extremely interesting to yourself, but to those around you as well. This anomaly not only directs our lives, but increases interest in it, awakens a passion for its vicissitudes. Perversions allow us to give ourselves to the true debauch of ambition, like a panacea of indulgent self-assertion. Of course, I am talking about the character of capital residents. I am not familiar enough with the representatives of other metropolitan cities to understand their psychology. In time, you too will get to know this vibrant distinguishing trait of Muscovites.”

“There is nothing really outlandish in your story. You can meet the same kind of people in our Kan. I have lived in Barabinsk, and I have often been to Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, other places, it’s all the same, essentially the same human mass. You have obviously not travelled around the country much, so you are not really in the know. But I, having closely watched my fellow countrymen, notice how similar they are in spirit. And without thinking twice, I moved to the capital. I understand very well that people with the same inquiries and stereotypes as those who live in my former Siberian town also live here, live throughout the whole country. Different appetites and needs? Yes! But all of them share integrity, a monolith of duality! This is what distinguishes us most from the Western

world—two opposites—good and evil—coexist in harmony in each of us. But why opposites? I am long convinced that this paradoxical combination will brighten anyone in both the West and the East.”

“Maybe, maybe. Now not only Muscovites have this trait, it has already affected, changed citizens throughout the country,” agreed Kartuzov. “I am presuming that it will soon cross the borders and destroy ethnic foundations. After all, the globalizing market is bringing people together so that they can survive in the new reality. This reality is interrupting the history of spiritual perfection and returning people to their natural instincts. It is instincts that are beginning to rule us again. I personally am in favor of this! I have my own hypothetical bait in the form of a new dogma—anything goes if the game is well arranged, if the boundary between purity and filth has been erased by gentle words, condescension, and aristocratic manners. I have noticed that people have taken a liking to this new dogma and begun to feel truly happy. Whenever has this been possible in the past? But enough of that. Let’s return to the matter at hand. Do you want a exclusive license plate for your Bentley? If so, tell me the numbers.”

“Two zeros with an odd number, apart from three.”

“A license number like that will cost a thousand dollars. Consider it my present. What about a coupon that allows you to violate traffic rules? It costs fifty thousand dollars. You want one? You can’t get away without one here. You’ll spend hours in traffic jams...”

“One for all my cars?”

“No,” said Kartuzov, laughing out loud, “you will need one for each of them. It’s a very serious matter.”

“I’ll take two, for the Bentley and the Mercedes.”

“And a siren. It costs two hundred thousand dollars. But what resonance and prestige it has...”

“I am not rich enough to order two. I’ll take one... But can I bargain?”

“Yes. But the price will not change.”

“One.”

“You want a police escort? That will raise your prestige even higher.”

“How much does it cost?”

“Fifty thousand dollars a month. A car and two guards with Kalashnikovs round the clock. I recommend paying for this service. It is prestigious and excludes accidental risks with criminal run-ins...”

“Are they still going on?”

“Not often, but they happen. The main thing is not to leave tracks.”

“Won’t having personal armed guards interfere with getting a government job?”

“Why should it? There are quite a few deputies and bureaucrats who take advantage of such services. You pay once a quarter, but in advance...”

“Okay. I’ll take it.”

“Let’s tally up—two special coupons, one siren, police escort for a year. That comes to six hundred and eighty thousand dollars. Plus my agent fees—thirty thousand six hundred. You can pay me now, you’ll make the other payments yourself, I’ll tell you where to go...”

“Okay!” repeated Leonid Ivanovich. After which he took three stacks of dollars from his briefcase, pulled the rest out of his wallet, and handed it all to Kartuzov. He wanted to object to why the agent’s percent was calculated from the yearly fee, since he was still not sure he would keep the guards for an entire year. But then he decided that if he had offered a similar service himself, he would also have calculated it for the year, and not four-and-a-half percent, but all ten. “These Muscovites only think they are business wolves, really they are cubs, immature,” snickered Efimkin to himself.

That day Leonid Ivanovich acquired a Mercedes and Audi at a significant discount. Mikhail Alexandrovich also dressed him in the clothes of a respectable Muscovite. A couple of suitcases of clothes, a few crates of elite wine, a Rolex and a Washeron

Constantine, as well as other accessories were loaded into the Mazzerati. When the shopping was over, Kartuzov counted his personal profit— during the first day of their acquaintance, the newly baked Muscovite had spent one million three hundred and ninety-five thousand dollars, so his profit as an agent amounted to almost sixty-five thousand bucks. For the crisis year of 2009, this was not a bad income. Kartuzov was pleased with himself, for he had been able to enforce his authority in the provincial guy's mind. "Efimkin already feels belittled. This gives me the opportunity to build far-reaching plans," he finished with satisfaction.

In the evening, Leonid Ivanovich, tired and happy, was waiting for Kartuzov and his girlfriend in the Del Sol restaurant. Recalling the past few days, he realized how absolutely new everything was for him. The luxurious boutiques, exquisite women, proud rich people, world brands he had never heard of before, engaging looks of slender salesgirls, incredible prices, glossy interiors, exotic dishes—and his head was spinning again. But gradually, despite the euphoria, Efimkin began to feel a oppressive melancholy settle over him from the enormous amount of money he had had to fork out in order to claim his status in the capital. The melancholy rapidly grew into a fear that he would suddenly find himself penniless. Leonid Ivanovich began reproaching himself for his stupid fear. However, his move to the capital was looking like an erroneous and nonsensical step, while losing control over himself during the purchases seemed unforgiveable. "I knew I was going to have to spend money, but I was not quite with it when I spent all that extra on those coupons, sirens, and so on, that Kartuzov enticed me with. All of that set me back an additional half million dollars and more. I spent more than twenty percent of all my cash in one day! And that is during an economic slump! All I wanted was to find a quiet job among high-ranking federal bureaucrats and modestly multiply my small amount of capital with bribes and fees. But I ended up being your typical provincial customer who couldn't resist all the rich people's toys. What is most important for me? Saving money for a greater cause, or spending my time doing nothing? I have a choice

here—either to become truly rich or to content myself with the role of a Joe Blow from the boonies. Instead of paying for an advantageous post at the National Reserve Fund and beginning a career in the capital, I am buying imitation grandeur. I didn't expect that I would fall so easily for the temptations of chicary. It's as though I've forgotten the insults of my past life! I wanted to go from rags to riches in an instant..."

He continued talking to himself in such pejorative monologues until Kartuzov and his girlfriend showed up. His monologues were accompanied by outbursts of anger at his arduous inability to withstand temptation, Siberian lies about his own refinement, appeals to conquer his passion for consumption and sew his pockets tightly closed...

Mikhail Alexandrovich and Yana entered the room with a certain amount of pomp and show. The lady turned to examine the aquarium in which Atlantic lobsters were lurking as soon as she stepped across the threshold. It seemed that not even a bomb exploding would be able to distract her. This unflinching, concentrated look astounded Efimkin more than the girl's beauty. "What's the matter with her?" he thought, anxiously. "Confusion?"

Leonid Ivanovich stood up and, rather nonplussed, said, "Good evening!"

"Yanochka, dear," said Kartuzov, inclining toward the girl, "this is my new friend. He is from Siberia. An interesting and talented man. He just moved to Moscow a couple of days ago, so he needs recommendations and references. Please take him under your wing, show him the ways of high society, give the Siberian some support."

"I am going to have to fulfill my promise to pay for dinner," sighed Efimkin. "I believe that Kartuzov will help me acquire a high-paying post. But I will not order more than a salad and a glass of wine for myself. I am spending too much... I need to be thriftier!"

"I am in no hurry to join your hobnobbing," he admitted, trying to put on a smile. "I don't think I will be up to it. Siberians are modest creatures, not like you people here..."

“Mikhail told me that you bought a very modest car today, and not only one,” snickered the girl. “I will give you some very modest advice. It is not fashionable to be shy in Moscow, it’s even in bad taste. If you start acting all modest and declare how strict your morals are, you won’t have any friends or beloved women. A successful person would never call himself modest—that would not be logical. Even a world crisis does not permit you to talk about your modesty. A shy, eccentric person cannot expect much success. It would be better at first to put on a mask of mystery, create an air of vagueness, and keep intriguingly quiet about your biography. You can hint at your income, whereby you should exaggerate it slightly. That will intrigue those you want to interest, they will want to find out more about you. But if you downgrade yourself from the very beginning, society will soon lose interest in you. Feelings of pity and empathy will disappear in a few minutes. You will be forgotten without even being asked your name. After all, no one wants to ask a home cook why the soup has gone sour. And then it will be almost impossible to attract attention again. Of course, there is a chance, but it will cost you ten times more than if you showed the capital’s partygoers the generosity customary in this area from the very beginning. In the world of consumption—modesty is a defect. It is boring, nauseating, depressing! It’s all to do with morals. But morals is yearning for the endless, whereas the endless is derived from an abstract mind that is incapable of engaging in business, which means it is impotent.” At this point, Yana, who had been looking around the room, switched her gaze with joyous curiosity to the Siberian and graciously, like a Bolshoi Theater ballerina, sat down. Mikhail Alexandrovich had pulled out a chair for her in advance.

“That morbid trait of character is incompatible with the gigantic market of global merchandise,” she continued. “Practically no one from our circle could stand the isolation a modest person is doomed to. Today Russia needs men who with the snap of their fingers, in an instant, can set up life to the hilt or, with their depraved whims, obliterate the assets of someone that does not suit them. A person is

capable of spending huge amounts of money for the sake of revenge, hate, or love! That is the kind of friend the capital's beauties dream of having. Not a desire for knowledge, poetry, or art, but an extraordinary gift for consumption—that is what is highly valued in the capital today. . . . Dear,” she turned to Kartuzov, “I haven't burdened our Siberian too much now have I? You asked me to help, so I'm trying. Although I am not sure yet if he has understood me.”

Efimkin had never before heard such a long and coherent speech from a woman. He looked at the young lady donned in glittering jewels, her well-groomed hands folded on a silk napkin, and tried feverishly to understand who she really was. “Mikhail talked about a prostitute called Yana,” recalled Leonid Ivanovich, “he wanted to part with this evening to pass her on to the manager of the Bentley salon. Can ladies of the night in Moscow be so educated? Evidently, which is why she costs fifty thousand dollars a month! If I was interested in women, I wouldn't mind having her for three months. No, for two. Or perhaps for one. But, thank goodness, that topic does not interest me at all, and most important, I have no intention of throwing more money around.”

“You are doing fine,” nodded Kartuzov. “Your advice will be good for Leonid Ivanovich. I see from his eyes that our Siberian is not feeling too jolly. He spent more than a million dollars today and feels sad, even rather angry at himself. Gave himself his strict word to limit his own spending. Am I right, Mr. Efimkin? Yana and I know you provincials. You are a kind and intelligent man,” Kartuzov said, sitting down. “And kind and intelligent people always get depressed after spending large amounts of money. First they decide to buy everything, and for two or three days after they've been shopping they go around with gloomy expressions of their face. They promise themselves not to spend a ruble more. Recently one eccentric from your neck of the woods was dining with us. He fell in love with someone else's girl, got drunk, and in front of everyone offered her one hundred thousand dollars to kiss her butt! Yanochka, with her joking nature, of course, interfered. ‘Why only one hundred thousand? In Moscow, people give more.’ ‘How much

more?’ asked the goon. ‘Some give three hundred, others five hundred. It is the greatest satisfaction in the capital to kiss a girl’s bottom in public for half a million dollars. You, Angela, won’t agree to less than three hundred and fifty thousand dollars now, will you? Or Maxim, the landlord of Norilsk, will take offense. He paid three hundred thousand for a kiss like that.’ ‘Maxim from Norilsk,’ the other said in surprise. ‘Oh-hoh! That’s a big fish. In that case, I’ll pay three hundred and ten thousand dollars. Lift your skirt! Lift it!’ ‘But where’s the money?’ asks Yanochka. ‘Later! I promised, that means, I’ll pay!’ ‘If you are a businessman, you should know that auctions honor the one-step concept. Well then, for the right to kiss Angela’s charming bottom one step costs fifty thousand dollars. Maxim paid three hundred thousand. The next step is three hundred and fifty thousand! Other offers are not accepted.’ We sat and wondered if the Irkutsk lumber magnate would go for such spending. And suddenly, he picks up his cell phone and commands, ‘Bring me my briefcase.’ They brought it to him. He sent the courier away, took a key out of his pocket, opened the briefcase, pulled out the dollars, and began counting out stacks in front of everyone. ‘I only have one hundred and seventy two thousand. Can I pay the rest tomorrow?’ ‘No, dear, that is not allowed. Pay tomorrow, tomorrow you will get your gratification.’ ‘What should I do? Maybe someone will lend it to me?’ At this point, the young woman had a brilliant idea. She went up to the restaurant manager—all the best establishments in the capital know us well. She whispered something to him, offered twenty-two percent plus three percent bank interest, making a total of twenty-five percent of the total one hundred and seventy-eight thousand dollars, and that makes forty-four thousand five hundred in net income. And says to the lumber magnate, ‘There’s an alternative that will save your excited feelings. You have one hundred and seventy-two thousand in cash. The restaurant will ride your credit card, take out one hundred and seventy-eight thousand dollars from it, the total comes to three hundred and fifty thousand, and you get the right to kiss Angela’s most wonderful bottom in the world in public. Oh, you lucky thing, do you

agree?’ ‘Yes, yes, yes, yes!’ groaned the Irkutian, intoxicated by the upcoming performance and from Bolshoi vodka. He put so much rapture into the kiss that in the end he was all the worse for it and fell asleep right on the girl’s bottom. Yanochka shared the money with Angela and paid the bill for the unusual dinner. We have such talented women. They should run the state. But problems began the very next morning. The lumber magnate raised a ruckus and demanded that the restaurant return the slip from the credit card and give him Angela’s address so he could get back the cash. He stood the directors of the establishment on their ears, threatened the cash-in-transit guards, and the bank. The special forces had to be brought in. We paid seven officers thirty-five thousand bucks and they took him in handcuffs straight to the airport and sent him to the banks of the Irkut River. I have never seen him again in Moscow. Yes, you Siberians are originals. But that’s enough about that. Yana and I are saying farewell to each other this evening. Tomorrow she is going to live with my acquaintance, a well-known manager. I am happy, he is a great guy. And he is in seventh heaven over Yanochka. We loved each other, but now it has turned into genuine friendship. It is so wonderful to know that a true friend lives somewhere nearby. I will value our friendly relations all my life. Do you have a friend?”

“Of course!” lied Efimkin.

“Wonderful. Okay, let’s order. We’ll begin with a bottle of Moët champagne. Some parmesan to go along with it, my lovely is wild about it, only not sliced, but in cubes. Then oysters, lobster, lamb, truffles, red wine, and mineral water. Leonid, you don’t know the menu, perhaps you will allow Yanochka to order for you? Do you mind?”

“Go ahead, let her take charge. But I only want a salad. And a glass of wine.”

“Wonderful. But we have healthy appetites,” snickered Kartuzov. “I have some good news. I found a beaten track into the National Reserve Fund. God loves you—the post you want just happens to be vacant. You will be interviewed tomorrow and then approved. They are asking seven million dollars. That is not a lot, if

you know the department's budget. It amounts to one hundred billion rubles, or, at the current exchange rate, around three million dollars a year. Two percent of the annual turnover—a wonderful price for the position of administrator of such a financial resource. The income will be divided in four. The main boss will take fifty percent. His deputy, twenty-five, from your quarter first you will give me my four-and-a-half percent, then you will give your deputies two percent each. That will leave you with sixteen and a half percent. If you get even one percent of three billion dollars, you will almost reimburse your spending. You could even up the compensation to two percent. And someone as talented as you, Leonid, will get three from supplies, even three-and-a-half. Think about it, pal. Seven million for them, my four-and-a-half percent, and Leonid Ivanovich Efimkin gets a position at the National Reserve Fund. I will get three hundred and fifteen thousand dollars from you for this fantastical post—a laughable sum for business in the capital. There, at the top, you will get a three-year guarantee. Until the next election of the head of the state, the government will not change. So work for the glory of the Homeland, the prosperity of your bosses, friends, and yourself. A couple of words about my fee. I do not have the right to break the agreement, but no one will stop you from doing that. If you raise my fee exclusively in that event, I will be very grateful.” Kartuzov's eyes shone with imperceptible glee.

“My dear Mikhail Alexandrovich,” exclaimed Efimkin, forgetting outright his sorrowful thoughts about spending. “You make life wonderful! Oh, I will be happy to comply. Of course, if I get that post, you will certainly receive a premium. All assistance has a high price tag.” He was about to say he would pay him a premium of five hundred thousand dollars, but then he caught himself, almost said three hundred, but taking control of himself and already less resolutely, even in a muffled voice promised Kartuzov one hundred thousand dollars.

“I am as wide and expansive as Siberia with its rivers and forests, steeped in its berries, nuts, and honey, but spoiled by hur-

ried bribes. For in our country if you don't fork out straightaway, the petty clerk will take off somewhere thousands of kilometers away, and business will come to a standstill while you look for him in the snowy expanses," Leonid Ivanovich insisted to himself. "I am offering him money before I have had time to do an analysis, I am not giving myself a minute to think over business. This needs calculation, real figures, and it is no good spontaneously throwing them around like a flunking school kid in math class. I am experiencing some kind of constant battle between a high spender and a miser, a crazy investor and a strict accountant. I need to calm down and concentrate on restraint if I want to be successful in business; it may be less effective, but it will lead directly to wealth. I need to stop myself from losing control during unexpected financial outlays. That is why I dream of learning the art of saving. Only it will lead to long-term success. I will get the post, but until I return my investments, I will not socialize with the capital's bohemia. Their lifestyle will cost me dearly, they have no idea what it is like to be poor. But how can I forget that state? When you have nothing to wear apart from what you left the national service in. Neither socks, nor shoes, nor a coat, nor pants... I had to repair my canvas boots and make adjustments to my pants, jacket, and pea coat. I didn't have enough money to invite a girl to the cinema, or even buy a bottle of beer... That's why I went to work for the police! That's the only place for ragamuffins."

"One hundred thousand is also decent money, thank you," Mikhail Alexandrovich's voice brought Efimkin back from his fleeting thoughts.

"You're being too generous for words," said Yanochka huffily. "That's not like you, you're not arguing, you're not trying to raise the price. Perhaps this Siberian is a sorcerer? You've drawn me involuntarily into your business negotiations. You could take that into account and offer me a few thousand for a chinchilla wrap."

"It is not customary in Siberia to give women you don't know well presents, particularly those with powerful beaus," remarked Efimkin. "You are parting ways this evening. It is very possible that

bitter tears will appear in your eyes, or I will hear shouts of rapture. I think that in addition to the farewell ‘Ciao’ a chinchilla wrap would be just the thing. You will remember it, as you will the days you lived together.”

“Leon is right! I agree! How much does that wonder cost?” asked Kartuzov, snickering. “I have often given my girlfriends money, but never asked what they would like to buy with it.”

“A light fur jacket costs twenty-five thousand dollars!” Yanochka exclaimed, biting her crimson lips, her big eyes shining. “But you, you, Leonid,” said the girl, giving him a long, searchingly cold look, “how will you please a young charming woman, from whom you expect help in establishing social contacts? A diamond necklace, two-carat diamond, diamond bracelet, sapphire earrings? If I wear them and everyone around begins asking where I got these magnificent things from, I will exclaim, tenderly stroking your present, ‘It’s a gift from a wonderful man from Siberia. He understands the gist of business, but also appreciates intelligent women.’ Such an advertisement, Leonid, costs much more than any piece of jewelry from Bulgari or Cartier. What do you say, dear?”

“Let’s talk about this at the end of the evening. I am preoccupied with other thoughts just now. I need to get my bearings. The news has taken me aback. I’m sorry...” Efimkin said, looking away to hide the irritation in his eyes. “Why did Mikhail start talking business in her presence? How incautious. And will I get that appointment? The more enticing the goal, the harder it is to reach, and I have become a suspicious, hasty, and morbid person. It’s going to take all my willpower to stop myself from asking Mikhail for all the details right now. But I can’t do that in front of Yana. Otherwise the whole of Moscow will know in a flash of lightening all the minutest details of the start to Efimkin’s career. I won’t be able to escape the snide talk and will have to return to Kan with my tail between my legs. I must keep silent. My new escort around the capital is Mikhail Alexandrovich, a worthy man, for me relations with him will be the best springboard to my cherished goal.”

“Back off, Yanochka. I am always telling you not to force people to fork out their money without particular need,” Kartuzov said merrily. “Leon, forgive her, Yanochka is a wonderful person. I have been happier with her than with anyone. Let’s agree Yana to tell each other everything that is still bothering us in our relationship as we part tonight. We need to come clean, forgive any insults, if there are any, and get on a business footing. We can make a pretty penny together. And Leonid Ivanovich, with his warmth and Russian congeniality, will be our partner. We need to approach his generosity with moderation, then he will be happy to comply, expressing gratitude for our protection. That’s all he needs. Only to be recommended to beneficial people. After all, he knows his business. And I can trust him, he is full of Siberian power. I’ve seen him in action, he is a strong person. So, fire away. Like that Iraqi journalist who threw a shoe at Bush, you throw me the first complaint. And don’t have any pity! I am not at all shy of Efimkin, what is more, I’ll ask him to be the arbitrator. Do you mind?” he asked the Siberian.

“Okay.”

“Thank goodness we are no longer talking about precious stones and presents,” thought Leonid Ivanovich to himself.

“You are asking me to be honest?” Yana was replying in the meantime. “You are ready to hear it all? I, of course, cannot vouch for being right, but I have quite a few complaints. I wasn’t sure whether to tell you or not. But if you are asking yourself... Although, I don’t need an arbitrator between us. You think someone who just arrived from Siberia two days ago can see the true essence of our depraved capital life? I very much doubt it. Let him sit and keep his mouth shut. It seems to me that he will be quite happy doing that,” she noted, her beautiful eyes glistening. “First. I have always felt, Mikhail, that you have directed the benefits earned during the time we’ve lived together exclusively in one direction, as though I didn’t exist. I agree that we did not have an agreement on profit sharing or about my, even miserly, share in your income. But for the past ten months I have been by your side

almost the whole time. And I often helped your earnings. During that time alone with my, albeit passive, participation, you have earned, and, knowing that we were parting today, I counted it, more than seventy million dollars. And if we recall specific deals, I have very rarely been passive. I have worked actively to make your profit. And I can presume that in addition to that you have seized just as much. That makes a total of one hundred and forty million dollars! But what about me? My monthly salary is fifty thousand dollars, the rare gift on my birthday, angel day, to celebrate our first one hundred days... I think that on the day we are parting it would be fair to receive a final million dollars from you. That is less than one-and-a-half percent of the total amount. A mere trifle. In that case, I have no other complaints.”

The waiter brought the parmesan, olives, and other appetizers.

“My dear,” countered Kartuzov peaceably, “if you count the cost of the presents, they are more than a million dollars. And speaking loftily, I gave them to you according to the dictates of my soul, the call of my heart. I was thanking you for the happy times together. You are magnificent. If I lived in the twentieth or nineteenth centuries or earlier and met such a girl as you, I would have certainly proposed to you. And then all my income would have remained in the family. But we are living in the present. Our generation has departed from traditional marriage. Almost all of my friends have three or four families, whereby the word ‘family’ must be put in quotes. And two or three permanent romances. A person of the distant or near past could permit himself one family happiness, but that is by no means the limit. Why can’t someone have three, seven, fifteen happy families? If our intellect is capable of doing a million to the tenth degree operations at the same time, why is the soul, heart, capable of so little? One love, one family, devotion to one woman? Our biological species, my dear, is constantly, ceaselessly, improving. And even during a crisis, some people in step with the times are permitting themselves a little more than what was entrenched in us from the past. But what has happened to tradition? First of all, our weaknesses. Audacious thinking is the fate

of a few of the strongest people. So it is difficult for it to become the legislator of fashion. While social labels show only the level of the mass consciousness. You, Yana, were my best woman from October 2008 to July 2009. But I, Mikhail Kartuzov, like all people, am constantly mutating. In August 2009, I am already a different Mikhail Kartuzov. And in February or April 2010, I will again be different. And you are also different, so you are also mutating, like me. The word 'mutation' can easily be replaced with 'renewal,' 'change.' If we admit, and science is a wonderful prompter here, that our species is in a constant state of mutation, for this is the main law of evolution, it becomes understandable that the new approach to family is based on the principle of social freedom. What is the foundation of a good life for the masses? Capital and nothing but capital! And the foundation of the individual freedom of rare persons is the intellect. What keeps us men and women from divorce at the mass level? Only the financial question. Why is divorce, romance, relations on the side a customary thing for rich people that does not arouse profound depression? Obviously refined complementariness. You say goodbye to one girlfriend or boyfriend and immediately find another. Without a doubt, and immediately. You know that physical loneliness does not threaten you or go beyond your bank account. For a person without a decent amount of money, family quarrels mean destruction of protection and reliance. But for the rich they are a wonderful opportunity to open up the world of new human relations and erotic experiences. It is certainly not a matter of who is better and who is worse. Each of my temporary partners has been wonderful in their own way. Brunettes, redheads, blonds. With one, you talk in English, with another in German, with a third in Hebrew... One is uneducated, but timid and tender. Another is well-versed and can make refined talk, preferring the topic of the principle negation of spiritual origins. The third is interested in botany, knows a lot of beneficial things about plants. The fourth is charmed by your voice and wants to listen to you and no one else. A rich person does not live only one life, but manages to be in several guises at once. Leonid Ivanovich here says that he has a

woman, but she is still in Siberia. Before he has time to breathe his fill of the capital's oxygen, he will have another women, then a third, fifth, tenth. We will be witnesses to his coming into being. Perhaps even you, Yanochka, will find Efimkin a target of your time and passion in a couple of years."

"Never. Not for any amount of money!"

Wine, oysters, gutted lobster, pieces of avocado, and grilled vegetables were placed on the table. "How much will all this cost?" thought Leonid Ivanovich in fright.

"Why are you so categorical?"

"I am from the provinces myself, I have absolutely no desire to return to the past."

"But what if he gets rid of his provincialism? Two years is quite a decent amount of time."

"I doubt it. At his age, he will need at least five years to change."

"Alright. That's enough about that. What do you say, Leonid? After all Yana has said, do you think I owe this wonderful woman so much as a penny?"

"No! I think that any business requires a contract. If there is no agreement, there is no profit. A businessman should incorporate his expenses into the calculation before business begins. I would not give her anything... Have you fully paid up with her under the monthly cohabitation agreement?"

"Of course."

"If you respect the existing business procedure and rules, you owe nothing else. The claims are unfounded!"

"There you have the opinion of an independent arbitrator, my darling."

"I do not accept it! Your arbitrator is a man. One hundred women would prove I am right."

"And one hundred men would uphold my opinion. So what shall we do?"

"I agree, there is a question, but I have the advantage. One hundred women are always more than one hundred men," she spat out.

"How's that?" asked Kartuzov, guffawing.

“Very simple. In Russia, women make up fifty-six percent of the population, and men forty-four.”

“What shall I do, Leon?”

“Have dinner and go your separate ways. Don’t pay any attention to her demands.”

“But her logic is so rock-solid. I feel as though I have lost... Okay, I give in. You know, my dear, that kindness is my weakness. That’s why you attack. Many people take advantage of this circumstance. To be honest, I did not want Mr. Efimkin to be a witness to my spinelessness. Now he too will gain an advantage in future commercial showdowns.”

“My absolute honesty guarantees that such perfidious behavior is impossible. Mikhail, dear friend, I always rely only on an agreement. Other motivations do not exist for me. So don’t worry.”

“To be frank, I have been worried. Because the most important thing for me is emotional purity. I have never had any other thoughts and will never have. Insulting a person is like driving a knife into my own heart. But thank goodness I am nurturing the hope that I am dealing with a classical businessman.”

“Honesty is nothing to be proud of these days, people hide it,” burst out Yanochka. “So what about my friendly request? Am I correct in understanding that you surrender? Which means that my Chanel purse will see a million dollars by the end of our farewell evening?”

“I don’t have cash. If you don’t object, I can write a check.”

“In special cases, it is permissible to be content with a bank check. And from your hands I am willing to accept anything. The ‘Recipient’ column should bear my name, the ‘Total’ column – three words ‘One million dollars,’ and your signature.”

“I would never give a million dollars – that’s an entire fortune. Her demands are unjustified. They can neither be proven or denied. According to business laws, such claims are considered empty trifles. Come to your senses, Mikhail!” exclaimed Efimkin, staring in mortification at Kartuzov.

“You have a paltry soul, Leon. And it has nothing to do with you, Siberian.”

“Mikhail Alexandrovich asked me to be arbitrator.”

“He will write out a check now and this will all be over with,” the young woman cut in. “What you people in Siberia think an empty trifle, we high-flying people recognize as a million gratitude. You not only give yourself away as a provincial with your remarks, but also as a man who is not at all wealthy. The whole evening you are fretting over expenses in boutiques and salons that amounted to a little over a million, while Kartuzov threw me this million without batting an eyelid. Those are the kind of men that not only women demand, but also high-ranking officials. It is easy to live with them. I doubt that you can expect an outstanding career in Moscow. You are just some Joe Blow looking around for something to enjoy during his free time, like Angela’s bottom. And there is nothing more dangerous than trusting provincials who have just arrived in the capital. People like you can come close to hobnobbing reality exclusively by means of failures and errors.”

“Here’s a million dollars for you!” said Kartuzov, pleased with himself, interrupting her monologue, and handing her a check. “Thank you, my dear, for the time we spent together, for the ton of money earned thanks to your charming smile.” He stood up, stepped toward the girl, and gave her a friendly hug. Then he poured himself a glass of red wine, looked at Efimkin with a benevolent smile, after which he looked long and enraptured at Yanochka. “I hope our friendship will only grow stronger. Each of us has a wealth of talent, so let’s join forces and intensify our attack in the business field. I propose a toast. Let’s drink to always remembering that money adorns our life, expands the boundaries of comfort, but most important, joint earnings create a firm foundation for friendly relations. We should remember that people are great not so much in terms of financial assets, as in terms of generosity. And then friendship will be the dominating criterion in our affairs. This will refute the constant public accusations that, supposedly, the

wealth we so voraciously strive for is pushing us into a swamp of spiritless cynicism. Let's show them that this is not true!"

"What wonderful words! I have never heard such toast," exclaimed Leonid Ivanovich. "I support you entirely and take pleasure in drinking with you, but, I'm sorry, without words. I have not learned to speak so eloquently. That's not something we do where I'm from..."

Kartuzov sat back down. Leonid Ivanovich leaned toward him and asked in a whisper, "Will we be able to talk tete-a-tete today?"

"Of course," he whispered back.

"Can't we speed up our business?" asked Efimkin hotly.

"Please! Give me a couple of minutes to say goodbye to my beloved girlfriend," pleaded Mikhail and turned to the girl, "Yanochka, you said that after you receive a million, you will remove all other claims. What do you mean?"

"I will keep my promise," the lovely girl said, looking at him. "But what about the chinchilla?"

"I know your size, but you choose yourself, call me from the boutique, and I will give you the number of my credit card. Okay?"

"Great. I understand that you are going to instruct your provincial? Not a very enviable job. You will get nothing but hemorrhoids. You will have to explain everything to him from the very beginning. The best school here, which each of us has been through, is to let him loose alone in the city. Let him get a few bumps and bruises, a few kicks and black eyes, heartaches. And if he is able to retain his independence and good name, you can start your course with him and give him a master class. The three hundred thousand you are expecting from him for protection, can that money really decide anything? It is nothing for you! If we were talking about three hundred million dollars, I would not have said anything, I was only dreaming of my percent of the profit. So I'm off." She stood up, hugged Kartuzov, stroking his graying hair, and kissed him. Then she said to Efimkin in a commanding voice, "Listen to everything he says like a beloved father! You are lucky that you met Mikhail Alexandrovich as soon as you came to the capital.

But I don't believe anything decent will come of you. Prove me wrong. So long!"

"So long. Tomorrow morning my driver will stop by for you," warned Kartuzov.

"Be ready to leave, girlie, is that what you want to say?"

"Until we meet again, my dear. Don't rush to spend your million. Bye now."

"Bye!" replied Yanochka and left the restaurant.

"You must look at life in Moscow as a constant struggle between your own interests and the appetites of competitors. It's almost like an armed opposition. Whereby you have to fight every minute. You get up in the morning, turn on the news, you hear such rubbish from the box that you boil over, while the desire to whip each television commentator for such pure lies grows like a snowball. You leave for work. On Rublevka, Kutuzovsk Boulevard, officers are constantly stopping people to check their identification. You are fuming. You are indignant. You damn the traffic police. You go to get registered, otherwise the officers will torment you with bribes. Before you can get your registration, you are inundated with questions, references, the most stupid collaborations, this rigmarole takes a couple of weeks. You go to get your license plates. You are tormented by claims, endless checking for stealing, property, whether your insurance policy and driver's license are genuine or not, registering your car with the military recruitment office... That takes another two weeks. You establish a company, receive a license, register the deed, confirm the brand name, submit documents for a general citizen passport, to receive property rights, receive a visa from the sanitary-epidemiological service, the fire department, the office of technical inventory, architects, technical commission, water channel, electricity grids, municipal office, traffic agency, department of consumer market, immigration department, and from your neighbors to boot. And so on and so forth... You also need to be very feisty, own firearms and tons of cash, and have loads of time." At this point, Kartuzov noticed that Leonid Ivanovich, who was usually poker-faced, had suddenly

begun smiling, so he told him jokingly, “If you find it funny that means there should be no problem initiating you into the ways of the city. But still, what do you find so amusing?”

“I set up businesses in Kan. I know that whole game inside out. I already have sufficient experience and income of a bureaucrat, began business activity in the Krasnoyarsk Territory and then spread out through out the rest of Siberia. Without that kind of background, I would not have decided to move to Moscow. The career of a federal high-ranking bureaucrat is an excellent springboard for big Russian business. Tell me the details of my appointment, please. I have been burning with impatience all evening. I want to know everything, even the smallest details.”

“Oh, it’s all very simple. You can expect it to be routine. The talent pipeline in the capital has been functioning for decades. Every day hundreds of officials are dismissed and appointed. We are going to the White House. I will introduce you to the deputy head of the government apparatus. Your future post of department head of the federal service does not presume a different level of agent, or, contact person, so to speak. We will go in and I will introduce you. In short, I will tell him about you, he will ask a few customary questions. At some point, I will make a sign for you to leave the office. I will stay and talk to the deputy head. He will tell me whether you suit him or not and how much your appointment will cost. Although I obtained information in advance that you need to have seven million ready. But maybe he will reduce it for some reason or, which is rare, but happens, raise the stakes. But it is not a fantastic offer now is it?”

“I’m ready, I’m ready...” broke in Leonid Ivanovich. The expression in his eyes had become childishly innocent.

“Don’t rush now. Where is the money?”

“I have a small amount with me, the rest will be delivered.”

“We can’t go to the White House without money.”

“What, I am supposed to take it with me?”

“You don’t have to take it with you. But imagine the entire scenario. The talk is over, the amount has been determined. What

next? I will not permit myself to say, wait, my dear sir, the money is not here yet, we are waiting for it to be delivered. It's in Siberia, stashed away in a reliable safe, guarded by a fearsome dog... Official appointments won't stand for such childishness. If he says 'yes,' we will have to pay up in a couple of hours. If he says 'no,' we'll have to look for something else. You will pay me my fee in advance, before our visit to the White House. I do not insist on my version. We can part ways. If you need me, call..." Kartuzov stood up and held out his hand. "So long!"

"Wait, wait, Mikhail Alexandrovich, please, sit with me some more. You do things so quickly here in Moscow, I don't have time to think, see the entire picture. Just a couple more minutes, please..."

"I warned you that for me time is money. I helped you today, you spent less than you expected and I gained some. That is my business. I am not rushing to socialize with you for no reason, because I am interested in you as a person, but I can earn money with you and quite a lot. If you agree, we can start making money together. Then we will become closer. But you will have to adjust to my approach to life. For me work time has an indisputable advantage over personal time. So I prefer business conversations to friendly contacts. I told you what to expect with regards to the appointment. If you agree to go that route, but you need more details, ask. If you want to think, think, it's beneficial. Have a good think. When you decide, call me. If the post is still open, if I am in Moscow, if the person from the White House has not left on a business trip, been removed from his post, left on vacation, ended up in the hospital, we'll try again... When there are many 'or's, things usually end in nothing. Everything is set to go today. All we need to do is exert a little effort, have the money delivered from Krasnoyarsk to Moscow. What's the problem? Take a personal jet. For a hundred thousand dollars we will find a ton of offers at Vnukovo. I will lend you my bodyguards. Four-and-a-half hour flight to Krasnoyarsk, the same back, plus a couple of hours to get yourself together, so you will spend twelve to fourteen hours, and seven hundred one-

hundred dollar stacks will be in Moscow. I will arrange a meeting at the House of Government for 17:00 tomorrow, at 18:00 I will hand over the money. And at 19:30 you will be reading the order on your appointment as department head of the food section of the National Reserve Fund with a budget of one hundred billion rubles. I will always get a share of four-and-a-half percent. That's all! You understand, Leon, that's it! Why cool your heels? There's a deal and there's a solution! It's worse when there is a deal, but no solution. So, now it is around nine in the evening. You have nineteen hours until 16:30 tomorrow. If before 15:00 tomorrow you do not confirm that you have seven million dollars ready and they are in Moscow, and you yourself are dressed in a suit and tie, I remove my obligations. There is a window of opportunity until tomorrow evening. If we don't make it in the time allotted, new negotiations will be needed. It is always extremely difficult to explain why things did not work out the first time. Time, speed, lightning decisions is the law of business. Thinking, analysis, study, experiments are the characteristics of scientific activity. What are you thinking of, Mr. Efimkin? Do you want to become a university post-graduate student or a bureaucrat-businessman who spends one hundred billion rubles a year? Do you want to be pouring over dog-eared volumes on philology until late into the night or count seven-digit income in dollars every day? Do you want to be a frequenter of the reading rooms of scientific library with a subscription-filled card or a VIP customer of Russia's leading banks with gold and platinum credit cards of the world financial institutions? This is the question. Choose."

"What are our risks?" asked Efimkin, ultimately depressed by these arguments.

"Oh, there are risks, and big ones. You know the joke about how it is dangerous to ride in trains because airplanes crash? There you have risk number one. I do not know who you entrusted your money to. So I am not ready to answer whether they will give you the money or not. The second risk. I am not familiar with your medical record. What condition is your heart in? Are you prone to heart

attacks, do you suffer from cirrhosis of the liver, do you have an oncological disease, is your brain inflicted with encephalitis, or do you have AIDS?”

“No, no, I am healthy,” exclaimed Leonid Ivanovich joyfully.

“What other risks can there be?” said Kartuzov, rolling his eyes in thought. “Oh yes, are you sure your bills are not counterfeit? Before you pass them on, I will certainly take a sample to be checked in a first-class bank. Risks, risks... Yes, yes, there is another alternative—we pay up, you are appointed, and then a day or two, or a week later, you don’t want to work at that job and demand your money back. In that case, know in advance that I do not take any responsibility for the money for all the listed reasons. The post cannot be returned. Do you have any more questions?”

“But what risks are you responsible for?”

“Let me think a minute. There is only one risk I am personally responsible for, if after he gets his money our official in the White House dies or is arrested by the police for taking a bribe... That’s all!”

“What else, what else, what else?” thought Efimkin feverishly looking for pitfalls. But nothing came to mind, apart from one terrible scenario, “What if Mikhail takes the money and disappears?” That scenario was so devastating that Leonid Ivanovich was even afraid to think about it.

“If you don’t have any more questions, I will be on my way. Business is calling, it demands that I move on, otherwise it is impossible to make your daily bread. So, if by 15:00 tomorrow you do not have seven million plus my fee ready, your appointment will be postponed indefinitely.” Kartuzov stood up and extended his hand. “Call by the appointed time or farewell!”

“You said I can get a plane at Vnukovo? I so dream of getting that post,” Efimkin wanted to say thoughtfully after pausing for a while.

But Mikhail Alexandrovich was already striding toward the exit.

“What should I do? It is so unexpected, this game of fate has be-

come so revved up. This is not getting the better of poachers, taking away enterprises by force, demanding money for licenses. This requires thought, and not just that, but incredible intuition, being initiated in the most intricate techniques of trickery, and having a developed instinct of self-preservation. But do I have all these qualities, these abilities? Do they correspond to my ambitions? Who can I ask for advice? My head is spinning. I want to acquire a high post, but this feverish desire is making it difficult for me to think clearly and see all the possible risks. The burning desire to change my own status, the cult of wealth that is becoming ingrained in my mind, is depriving me of my sense of reality. Say to hell with it all, clench my teeth and return to Kan, content myself with the not very appealing status of a provincial rich man, carouse, hunt, participate in banal intrigues of the local beau monde, shut the mouths of exposers and enviers and, in so doing, squelch any feelings of indignation so as not to lose all my assets in one fell swoop. Power hates people who protest. Although these questions concern me least of all. It's not in a Siberian's nature to be interested in politics. Or... Or take risks and, with god's help, occupy a high post in the National Reserve Fund, return my investment, energetically replenish my personal capital, and rise up the career ladder? What about the risk with Kartuzov? Everything is a risk! In Russia, there are risks all over the place, no one knows when a brick might fall on their head. So what should I do? Maybe look for another channel for lobbying? No matter who I find, who I involve in my project—Kartuzov, Zyabukhin, Prishchepkin, any other agent—there will always be a question of trust. Whatever happens, I will have to give the agent money in advance to be passed on to the powerful person or persons making the decision I want. In our country, people always want money in advance. What happens to it next is anyone's guess. In my euphoria over moving to Moscow, I did not think about that, this question is only coming up now. Now it is even a bit late to be thinking about it. I've rented a house, bought cars, appointed staff, and I have to pay for this dinner... Go on and take the risk, Leonid Ivanovich. Kartuzov seems to be a straight guy, if he gave his girl a

million dollars without blinking an eye. He is unlikely to be interested in taking me for a ride. We have big joint projects. He gets a share of them all. If you are scared of wolves, don't go walking in the woods. I've decided! Decided and that's the end to it! I will pay the bill and go to Vnukovo. I feel as though fate is smiling on me. A post in the National Reserve Fund is extremely appealing to me, my inner voice is whispering to me all the time, "This is where you will earn a great fortune. Here! Here! Here!"

He made arrangements to fly to Krasnoyarsk and back for eighty-five thousand dollars. When they found out he was paying cash and did not need an invoice, they took the VAT fees off the price. Saving so much so quickly pleased Leonid Ivanovich, but, after counting off seventy thousand, he again fell into gloomy thought and boarded the plane with a heavy heart. "It's a terrible thing to part with seven million dollars. But if I was going to receive that amount or even something close, but less, I would of course be flying high in immense enjoyment. Oh, when will that wonderful time come? Can there really be something more magnificent than the delight you feel about an increase in your own bank account? How can I guess the coming of this shining hour? When the customary numbers you see everywhere conceal the mystery of countless green bills? One billion dollars is one million kilograms of one-dollar bills. Or one thousand tons of money, or twenty railroad carriages packed full of bills. O-ho-ho! What endless, wondrous figures! I need that post, followed by even higher posts up the power vertical. Without them, I, a stubborn idealist and accumulator of banknotes, am a goner!"

He could not get these obsessive thoughts out of his head. It seemed that nothing else interested Efimkin. But at this point his heart leapt again, not from happiness, but from deep disappointment, even horror. "But what will I do if Kartuzov does indeed dump me? If I am left without any money? Without any hope of beginning a successful career in the capital? The only thing left in the current time of crisis is to obtain miserly bribes from enterprises under my control. Can such a sad prospect satisfy my heightened

vanity? No, I am going to have to take the risk and rely on Kartuzov. There is no other choice, the thought that I will have to return to the past does not bear thinking about. If that happens, my indifference about everything will quickly turn to hate, and it is one step from hate to irrational acts. I will have to exert all the force cultivated by business to prevent such a grievous end. I will have to trust fate, and it will definitely help me... Maybe late, but I will become its blue-eyed boy.”

The money would have fit into two suitcases, but Efimkin decided not to spend any extra money buying them, instead he bought Chinese polyethylene bags, known as “shuttle bags,” for 100 rubles each and, accompanied by two armed guards from his own security company, arrived back in Moscow. He called Kartuzov on the phone. They agreed to meet at 17:00 in front of the Ukraine Hotel, which was closed for major repairs. This seemingly simple undertaking made Leonid Ivanovich extremely nervous. He had an uneasy premonition as though something was not right. “Where shall I leave the money? Where can I hide seven million dollars? It will not be safe to leave it at home. I don’t have a safe yet, and what good would a safe do, it can be taken along with the money. But who would take it?” he asked himself, in some surprise. “A servant, guard, goodness knows who else. If I take it with me in the car, I will have to get out at the White House for the meeting with an important look on my face. The bags of money will stay with my Siberian guards. How can I be sure they will wait for me? How do I know they won’t take off who knows where with the money? The history of civilization is full of those kinds of story. Take the money with me? That means writing my own sentence—fifteen years in prison with full confiscation of property. The cash will fall into the ‘property’ column. And that’s all the money I have, my stash is almost gone. Only a small amount is left. No, I am not capable of predicting all the difficulties and thinking up a way to hand over the money, which means I could lose my entire fortune. And I will be as naked as a newborn baby again. But perhaps, as someone said, a person’s value does indeed grow in direct proportion to how he

renounces himself. There is only one solution to my current dilemma, I will have to trust Kartuzov. I will leave the bag of money in his car. If he has decided to do a quick one on me, he'll do it no matter what. If I am doomed to be punished, no wise force will get me out of it. So there is absolutely no point in bringing in new people or thinking up cunning moves in a city I am unfamiliar with. I can only understand what is happening as it happens. I have never had to go all the way so far, but I am going to have to get used to such bold steps. So, I humbly accept the challenge of fate with all my heart and mind with the conviction that I have no other choice and never could have. And with the understanding that wounds heal and elation abates."

"Hi there, Siberian. Hurry up, they're waiting for us at the White House," said Mikhail Alexandrovich amicably. "Do you have your passport with you?"

"Good day. Yes, everything is fine. Listen, Mikhail, I have seven million dollars in my car. Perhaps I could put it in yours?"

"I've already asked you not to carry money around Moscow with you," said Kartuzov in irritation.

"But I don't have anywhere to hide it!" retorted Efimkin offended.

"There are banks, and banks have safe boxes. I told you to call and ask if you had any questions."

"There's no time now," said Leonid Ivanovich perplexedly.

"In fifteen minutes the deputy head of the country's government apparatus is waiting to see us. I cannot call him and postpone the meeting. And we don't have enough time to enter an agreement and put the cash in a bank safe. Leave it in your car, I see you have people there. Are they your guards?"

"Yes. But seven million – that's an incredible temptation..."

"How do they know there is money in the bags?"

"Our Kan is a small town. Everyone knows everything. What else could I be taking to Moscow by special delivery in two stuffed bags? They are not stupid..."

"You are right, it's dangerous. Thank you for trusting me. Put

your bags in my car. I will leave the car in the guarded parking lot. My driver is armed. Although, it would be a good idea to take a look at your dollars. I need to be sure that they are not counterfeit and the money is in the full amount. It is not going to a market vendor for Nakhichev tomatoes, but to a Kremlin official for a high-income post of state administrator. Are you sure yourself that all is well, meaning the money is genuine and in the full amount?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Efimkin.

"Okay. So there is seven million here plus my fee?"

"As we agreed!"

"Put the bags in my trunk then."

Kartuzov's car rolled into the parking lot in front of the White House. There was silence in the car, the only sound being the subdued voice of a newscaster on Echo of Moscow. Efimkin did not know what to say, after all, everything had gone as planned so far. He felt at ease, his intuition told him that there was nothing suspicious as of yet. Mikhail Alexandrovich's behavior and habits were judicious, his face calm, his voice even. Efimkin felt reassured and was even thinking of saying something pleasant but restrained himself. "If he is up to something, I will definitely read the underhand thought on his face. I am a professional cop after all, quite well versed in those things. I am worrying more than he is. But that is how it should be. My seven million are in his car. He could throw me out of the car and that would be the end of the game. Where would you go to lodge a complaint about that? Regarding whom and for what reason?"

The car rode into the parking lot of the White House.

"Let's go. We are punctual. We'll stop by the pass office and then go up to the eighth floor. Don't be nervous, act calmly, only don't tell any Siberian jokes about drinking and girls. We are meeting with Mr. Stepkin for acquaintance purposes. We will talk about neutral topics. Do not say a word about the crisis. That is not the kind of thing you talk to a top government official about. We are meeting to acquire a post, I will describe you as an experienced person who is concerned about the Russian economy, and not an

expert on crisis issues. If he asks you anything, answer briefly, clearly, with knowledge of the subject. I will come to your aid if need be. There will probably be no need to talk about the National Reserve Fund. And he could offer you a higher post, but we will insist on your choice. When I give you a sign, you leave the room. I will stay for a couple of minutes to hear any comments—what he wants to do with you, will he take on responsibility for protecting you as department head...

“Of the National Reserve Fund?”

“Yes, of course. Where else? What are you frowning about, buddy?”

“What if they give me a different post?”

“But you are going to be writing the application yourself...”

“That’s true!” But then Efimkin suddenly burst out unexpectedly. “Mikhail, do you think they’ll take me for a ride? Pull the wool over my eyes?”

“In the White House?” smiled Kartuzov, and in such a childishly friendly and open way that in the end he embarrassed Efimkin.

“Oh, forgive me, friend. That sucker question just slipped off my tongue. I didn’t mean it...”

“I understand, it’s hard not to worry, seven million is not a pound of raisins.”

“That’s what I mean. It’s my last money. I’m worried. I so hated poverty. I lived in a ragged sheepskin jacket. Oh, better not to remember how poverty victimizes Russian life.” He gave Mikhail Alexandrovich a heavy look, stopped short, and fell silent.

They rode the elevator in silence. Kartuzov straightened his tie, brushed the dandruff from his collar, took a firm hold of his lapel, raised Efimkin’s chin in a familiar way, and finished jokingly, “The spitting image of a department head of the National Reserve Fund. Who would dare to argue? Who would doubt the competence of such a man? And here we are at the office of Mr. Vasily Stepanovich Stepkin. Follow me,” whispered Mikhail Alexandrovich, grinning. “He is a tennis lover. We will talk about the last victories of

Sharapova, Dementieva, Kyznetsova... The Roland Harros recently ended in Paris. France, sport, stunning girls—a marvelous topic for social talk. Are you familiar with tennis?”

“No, I am more of a fisherman, hunter. There are no tennis courts in the taiga...”

“Then keep quiet. Don’t give yourself away as a wild provincial, ha-ha-ha.”

“I won’t,” assured Efimkin.

A young short-haired secretary with brightly painted lips, a deep cleavage, in frayed Capri pants, swaying deliberately on high heels, accompanied the men with mincing steps into the official’s office. The room was huge. The oak finished walls, the austere furniture of the Restoration Age with its gleaming bronze adornments, the wreath of ivory government telephones, the Oriental rug, and the portraits of the country’s leaders, at the sight of whom our people shout wildly, all had a depressing effect on Efimkin. He stood, bringing his heels together as though standing to attention, feeling utterly confused and inapt amid this dignified splendor. Leonid Ivanovich even seemed to have forgotten why he was there, had totally forgotten about the millions left in someone else’s car and about the cherished post. He was seized by a convulsive desire to beat a hasty retreat.

Mr. Stepkin was sitting, leaning lazily back in his chair. There were no papers on the table, only a half-full glass of tea in a silver holder. Almond cookies lay in a china bowl and an ornamental case held a few pens with golden caps. The landlord of the office was a man of a little more than forty. He had a large mole the size of a fire-place match on his forehead. He had a glowering look of contrived importance, thick eyebrows, a protruding lower lip, and a huge shaven head with protruding ears that looked like fins—all of this gave him the appearance of a new type of high-ranking civil servant who seemed like he might have successfully hold over the levers of state power.

“Sit down,” said Stepkin dryly. “I need to get to the Kremlin. I’ve drawn up a proposal for the country’s recovery from the crisis.

Oh, that Central Bank chairman, oh, that minister of finance. What are they doing to the monetary system? They are bringing it to its knees with their incapable actions. I have to think about Russia's future for them. What do you have to say, Nikolai?"

"I heard you were praised at a meeting of the National Security Council," said Kartuzov, inclining obsequiously. "I am very happy. They say Vasily Stepanovich was complimented by the man himself. That kind of information brightens the life of your devoted friends. That deserves celebrating. What are you doing this evening? They are serving white truffles at *The Mill*, I know you are a great fan of that wonderful delicacy."

"I play tennis in the evening."

"Allow me to introduce my friend from Siberia, he's the one I told you about. You think our project will work?"

Stepkin looked at Efimkin and asked dully, "Where are you from?"

"Barabinsk," replied Efimkin with difficulty.

"Hmm, I don't recall where that is. But it doesn't matter.

"In Central Siberia," Kartuzov interjected in time.

"Fine. So what are we talking about? Ah, projects... You should know that all the projects I personally oversee are always implemented. And it doesn't matter where it is. I am strong enough to solve problems in the Siberian Federal District, the Central, Southern, and to support my friends. Vasily Stepanovich always achieves the goal he sets, if it were otherwise, I would have long retired. What keeps me in my post? Exclusive love for the Homeland. Thank you for the invitation to dinner, but I cannot come. What else?"

As he listened to him talk, Kartuzov constantly nodded his head, showing particular interest and participation, and now looked inquiringly at the Siberian, "Leonid Ivanovich, leave us alone for a minute."

Efimkin immediately, overwhelmed from everything, left the room. His gait was wobbly and slouching.

"Is he drunk?" Stepkin asked, looking sternly at Kartuzov.

“Stepanich, what, do you doubt that someone might not be euphoric over your words? The Siberian is sober, but feels giddy after talking with you. Many who socialize with you feel the same. Even I get intoxicated...”

About five minutes later, with a beaming smile, Kartuzov came out into the corridor on the eighth floor and, rushing toward Efimkin, exclaimed in excitement, “Congratulations, you have the job. Let’s go, I’ll leave you at the next post office. You will write an application and I will take the money to the indicated address. We will meet in about an hour-and-a-half. I’ll take application you signed to be initialed by the government. You’ve been appointed! Everything went successfully, buddy, congratulations! This evening, we’ll celebrate your appointment and discuss our future joint business plans.”

“Why can’t I write the application in his reception room?” asked Leonid Ivanovich cautiously in a shaking squashed voice.

“Idiot. He needs a guarantee that the money has been transferred. You understand?”

“Oh, I get it. But why did he call you Nikolai?” Leonid Ivanovich asked, barely able to get it out.

“Nikolai, Mikhail, Andrei, Stanislav, it makes no difference. He has hundreds of people waiting to see him. You think he can remember everyone. The main thing is that he gets things done. And does it really matter what he calls you... Let’s go, dear department director.

“A powerful person that Stepkin! I even lost my breath. The White House, such furniture, incredible rug, huge head, amazing desk with gold flecks, and so many telephones with coats-of-arms!” Efimkin blurted out, his face flinching.

“What else! He is the deputy head of the government apparatus. He has the entire bureaucracy under his thumb. He can squash or raise anyone!”

Kartuzov took Leonid Ivanovich to the post office on Presnensky Street with instructions to write an application for the post of head of the food department of the National Reserve Fund. After

asking for a sheet of paper and pen at the window he gave the woman five hundred rubles, wrote down her phone number, sat Efimkin down at a table, said goodbye, giving him a hug and promising to come for him at eight in the evening.

As he left the post office, he heard Leonid Ivanovich's weak voice, "Mikhail, but will you be back?" Kartuzov paid no attention, but then the voice really was hardly audible. "You always get what you are after," flashed through his mind. He smirked and went outside.

There the lovely Yanochka was waiting for him, looking eagerly forward to snaring the next victim.

SELF-AVOIDANCE

Pomeshkin was beginning to languish. He had not seen himself in the mirror for a couple of days now. Yearning to look at his own reflection and prompted by an inner calling, he jumped out of bed and with a discontented expression on his face walked through Fateeva's house in the hope of finding even a shard of the desired glass in some forsaken corner. But there was no mirror anywhere. The search ignited the heightened feelings the young man felt for himself. He wanted to see himself and take delight in the features of his own face. He experienced particularly strong erotic excitement from the sight of his thin pale lips and folds at the side of his nose that appeared every time he smiled while looking joyfully at himself. At such moments, Gregory Semyonovich was in such a state of sexual enrapture that he might have several orgasms in a row.

Not finding anything suitable to look at himself in and immerse himself in rapture, Pomeshkin secluded himself in a dark corner and closed his eyes. A picture of himself arose before him. The strongest outburst of loving feelings toward himself immediately engulfed Pomeshkin. He invoked the most tender words toward himself. Any loving couple would have bitterly envied such exquisite words, both traditionalists and the destroyers of all customs. He did not have long to wait for a spontaneous ejaculation. After a few minutes of self-adoration, Gregory Semyonovich was shuddering in the convulsions of an orgasm. A couple more minutes passed and his face relaxed, his mind calmed down, and Pomeshkin remembered about *that*. He hurriedly headed for the kitchen, greedily swallowed a spoonful of koknar, broke off a crust of bread, then another, chewed on them, after which he slowly returned to bed and fell into spontaneous reverie.

Gregory Semyonovich began wondering why Leo Tolstoy, when doubting that Jesus Christ was God, did not use the main argument to defend his position? Why did he miss the most important

fact? For it is obvious! When listing all the different things to prove he was right, the classic did not reach the most salient point, one which I would have used in a materialistic argument about Him. For this is the first question we should ask when trying to understand whether He actually existed or whether He was fabricated by wise men who lived two thousand years ago. It is a simple question, but just as essential as the one that popped into Isaac Newton's head back in the 17th century—why does the apple fall? Without resorting to metaphysics, I would look for the answer to the simple “whys.” If He was sent to Earth by His Father to save mankind, why did he not write his divine thoughts Himself or not dictate them to his disciples or hired scribes? After all the spoken word, particularly when you are trying to convey something so innermost and comprehensive, cannot have genuine power, especially sacral power, if it is not enforced in writing by His personal text, specially sent through the immaculate conception by the Most High and Almighty. The main idea of His coming lies in the fact that man should receive divine recommendations and with their help see the true meaning of life. Understand what is good and what is bad. A very sensitive topic. Trusting the conveyers of verbal texts a century, even decades, later is extremely dangerous. Extraneous people may interfere in the process, correcting and editing as they see fit, thus making its authenticity dubious. After all, there were no written messages to mankind right after His death. They appeared much later. And if He did write any texts, why were they not saved, why did divine power not preserve them? The Father sent His Son to Earth precisely for that reason!

Religion should convince both the mystic and the materialist of its truth. I have no desire to pursue theomachy for the sake of proving my point. So-called heresy is only the desire to separate the grain from the chaff. How can we be perfect like Our Father in Heaven, if the teachings about this were written by goodness knows who? After all, couldn't the devil have interfered in the preservation of Christ's verbal teachings? We know that he is a perfidious tempter. What if he changed the gist and meaning of the

New Testament? Is there any irrefutable proof that one Gospel was written by Apostle Matthew and another by Apostle Luke? After all, the authorship has not been established or proven... One Evangelist writes in Ancient Hebrew one hundred years later, another in Aramaic, and the third in Greek... If He spoke in Ancient Hebrew, His disciples should not only have been able to understand that language, it should have been their native tongue. Otherwise it would have been impossible to understand and remember His parables, sayings, and advice. Is it possible to remember what someone said, then one hundred or more years later, when you start writing it down, reproduce the words of the Teacher verbatim? Where are the rough drafts? Why were outlines of His conversations and teachings not preserved? The oldest manuscript to survive, from John, is dated 125, which is almost a century after His execution. Who composed this fragment of the Bible? If the Father by means of a miracle—the Heavenly Spirit—conceived His Son in the womb of a woman, and He Himself in his brief, miracle-filled life repeatedly demonstrated His divine power, why regarding the most important question, in the testimonies to mankind—the Gospels, did neither He, nor His Father wish to preserve the originality of the divine writing for the generations to come? After all, people saved the originals of decrees and letters of the Roman emperors and commanders, Greek dramatists and philosophers, and an even older memorial of writing, the Avesta, without the interference of heavenly powers. This makes you think that His disciples and apostles must have had memories like the most advanced computer of the fifth or even sixth generation. We know how the meaning gets distorted and thousands of mistakes are made when translating a text from one language to another. Without the author's interference, his careful editing of what is written, the public may get nothing but pure nonsense. This may be what happened with the Bible. The New Testament is full of repetition, and most important, the words of the book do not possess divine power. And if they really were written by the Creator of the Universe Himself, Omnipotent and Invincible, they should have enormous power invested in them.

Believers will call my desire to penetrate into the gist of things and the demands I express banal and, perhaps, depraved materialism. "Believe what you want. Belief does not demand any other proof apart from canonic." Can this banal postulate really be capable of enlarging the Christian congregation? Strengthening faith? Or let's take the passage about sending a sinner to hell for eternity. Can He who calls for all forgiveness really have wanted that? He who preaches unconditional love? He who gives lessons in absolute honesty! Someone lives a rational life for fifty years, but he is sent to hell by force for eternity. And what if he atoned for his sins, why can't he earn early release? The Holy Scriptures tell of fallen angels. But absolutely nothing is said about the righteous people in paradise. Are they sinless a priori? Can no one trip up in boundless eternity? For even angels sin and fall. Is the road to hell commissioned from paradise for sins? Or could no one care less there in the groves of paradise? They enjoy complete freedom, like we have today? Which means Sodom and Gomorrah must reign there in paradise.

The dialectics of theomachy are rooted in the problem of evil that people come up against. It does not exist for me so far. That is obviously why I am not tempted to struggle with Christianity. But I have questions I want pragmatic answers to, without all the religious fervor. For example, I have another doubt. Why did He appear to only a seventh part of mankind and, in so doing, split the population of the Earth and exacerbate relations among nations? Why is His appearance ignored by two billion Chinese, one-and-a-half billion Indians, one hundred and thirty million Japanese, one hundred million Koreans, seven hundred million Arabs, eighty million Persians, one hundred and seventy million Turks, two hundred million Africans, one hundred million Indonesians, tens of millions of Malaysians, as well as other numerically small ethnicities and small states? Why was He not recognized by the Jews themselves, even though he belonged to them on his mother's side? And the name of the New Testament sounded rather prosaic, if not strange, for quite a long time, keeping in mind the fervor of the clerics,

“Jewish thoughts in Greek clothing.” What kind? Beautiful? Yes! Intriguing? Yes! How can this name be interpreted? There can be no doubt about the benefit of a book by the wisest Jews, written in the Greek style or in the Greek manner, and perhaps in the Greek rendition. Not only is there no doubt about its authorship, this is not even hinted at. And in the words of the Gospels, eugenics, Jews, Eve, Europe, Euro have the same root – eu – from the Greek “good.” But can the celebration of the Annunciation be considered good news—the news of the first coming of God’s son? “Good” is not a word that can be used to evaluate this great event. Here “magnificent news,” “grandiose news,” “fundamental news,” “the most important world event of all times and peoples” would be more appropriate. Only not at all the modest “good news.” There is hardly anyone who delves deeply into distant history. As a rule, it is skimmed over with a stereotypical fleeting glance. This gives anyone interested the opportunity to work miracles in it, the conclusion being that it is full of falsity and open lies. And another question—why did it take Him so long to appear? I mean, man had been around for one hundred thousand years. So he only appeared after four thousand generations. Why did he not interfere immediately in the formation of the individual in His Divine Image, did not command, “...So be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”

I have so many questions, snickered Pomeskin. Although errors of judgment cannot be justified. Whose phrase is that, Gregory Semyonovich thought, coming up short. Mine or did someone else say it? The opium straw is making me light-hearted, happy, and forgetful. People fill the gaps of their understanding with myths. When we try to get our heads around the endlessness of time and space, we think we are going crazy, so we immediately stop trying. We fill this emptiness with illusions. They appease us, create the impression that we have solid ground under our feet... A quotation from Bernard Shaw came to the young man’s mind, “Being cowards,” he claimed, “we defeat natural selection under cover of philanthropy: being sluggards, we neglect artificial selection under cover of delicacy and morality.”

Suddenly Pomeshkin remembered his agreement with Peter Petrovich to begin Professor Koshmarov's experiment with the nano pills. But what if he suggested that Parfenchikov change the name of the nano pill and give it a more melodious name related to the history of civilization? Euro pill, Euro conscience, ruseugenics, or euro sgrunemkit, for example?

Pomeshkin hurriedly got up, found Peter Petrovich lying with a vacant look on his face on the kitchen floor, crouched down next to him and asked, "I don't know if my observations are correct, but it seems to me that koknar is conducive to reflection. I am having a stronger desire to reflect in solitude and constantly contemplate on something—at times on topics that I never showed the slightest interest in before. You haven't changed your mind about beginning the experiment with the nano pills, have you?"

"No... But it's only six in the morning..." muttered Peter Petrovich. "The best time for talking to yourself. The most unexpected projects come to mind toward morning."

"Sorry, I wasn't watching the time. Can I go on or would you prefer to continue 'projecting' on your own?"

"You may as well go on... You interrupted me in the most interesting place—I was thinking about Hungarians, Moldovans, and Slovenians, and about numerically small peoples in general. I was wondering why they exist at all. Why didn't anyone think of assimilating them with large ethnicities, thus achieving ethnic profitability? The reason for the current economic crisis is that more than half of mankind, we must finally recognize this fact, is bankrupt! People are not capable of earning income either for themselves, or for the state budget! What is Moldova? Its population is barely more than two million, but there are probably more than ten thousand different kinds of bureaucrats. There is one bureaucrat with his infrastructure for every two hundred Moldovans, including children and pensioners. Office, heat, telephone, cell phone, transportation, Internet, office expenses, wear and tear on main assets, registration, buildings, paying for translations from Moldovan to other languages of the world and so on...

The budget of a small country is incapable of sustaining such expenses. A large village in China has a population of two million, that is one eighth of Moscow's population, one tenth of Mexico's, and one thirteenth of San Paulo's. So without external donations and help, Moldova will be constantly balancing between default and total bankruptcy. First I would unite it with Rumania. Similar language and culture. There are over twenty million Rumanians. And thirty million is the threshold of profitability of a contemporary state formation. We need to remember that this threshold is rising with each passing year. As early as 2015, it will reach fifty million, and in 2021–2023 it will rise to one hundred million. I would unite Hungary with its archaic language, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina with Austria and call it the Danube Federation. Particularly since historical traditions also exist there. I would unite Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania with Greece. This country could be called the Hellenic Confederation. I would unite Poland to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Latvia. And it could have a very respectable name, the United Slavic States. You like it? And I would hold a vote for the common language the integrated ethnicity of Europe will speak in thirty years. After all what kind of language is Hungarian? The echo of shouted commands during the steppe raids of nomads! What of it? If you are interested take a look at Hungary's website on the Internet and you will find out everything in ten minutes. So if some country turns out to be only virtual at some point, no harm done. The world culture will be none the worse. Incidentally, the European Union spends around twenty-five billion every year on translations alone, so that the citizens of all the countries in the community can read documents in their native language. Insanity! This money would be enough to heat all the private homes and apartments in Europe. Although what do I care. It's just that powdered opium comes up with these original topics for thought at times. Which is why I am hooked on opium poppy... What did you want to ask?"

"I suggest changing the name of Koshmarov's nano pill to Rusjewgegerchin..."

“What nonsense is that?”

“The professor wants to use the stem cells of Russians, Jews Georgians, Germans, and Chinese. That’s where the abbreviation comes from.”

“To hell with it. I couldn’t care less about the name. Let’s have another spoonful. It’s time. My mouth has gone dry, and a pump is working under my heart.”

“I took some more just half-an-hour ago. You advised not over-doing it.”

“Good for you. That’s right. Can you feel it?”

“Yes, indeed! My head is full of topics I have never been interested in before. My mind is coming up with goodness knows what... incredible. Where does the mind keep them? You read a lot, then it all disappears somewhere, you think forever, but no. Recently, who knows why, I began thinking very intensely about the New Testament or about ‘Jewish thoughts in Greek clothing.’”

“Koknar likes that—forgotten topics suddenly begin appearing from the memory basket. And they appear so ingeniously that you get the impression you were deeply concerned about this question. That happens to me all the time. So I am in love with it up to my ears... Just a minute! Again something of the sort is coming to mind. An unusual thought appeared. Maybe I have already wracked my brains about it at one time. But I don’t remember. This is the thought. A couple of months ago Obama signed a document permitting fundamental research to be funded by the state in the study of stem cells. The US officially recognized eugenics before anyone else in the world. The first law on compulsory sterilization was adopted there in 1907, and the last in 1937. During that time, more than one hundred thousand imperfect people were subjected to compulsory sterilization—idiots, imbeciles, and other outcasts. And then the legislators began reasoning that if the state can take the life of a criminal by sending him to the gallows, it is obligated to prohibit their multiplication. It was considered that only imbeciles were capable of committing crimes. But the discussion on that question went no further. In China, the law of 1994 says that the

health of a fetus must be determined prenatally, and doctors are to independently make decisions about abortions and sterilization. The birth of the worst is undesirable among the representatives of the revolutionary strata, ethnic minorities, those living close to the border and in economically poor regions—this is the official viewpoint of Chinese bureaucrats. The Chinese culture is specific in general and focused on the good of society, not on the individual. I cannot accept that ideology. The first experiments with social ‘purges’ were carried out back in antiquity. Spartans threw weak and defective infants off high cliffs. But, please, dear Gregory, without comment. We are not interested in that thesis. The spring decision of President Obama means a new stage in the development of eugenic science. Let’s dream. The first question, what will fundamental study of stem cells give the US? The second, in what way should the human race be changed? Or would it be better not to do anything and leave it alone? Let it change itself by means of mutations? Admittedly, that will take several tens of thousands of years. Although of course the result is known in advance—nothing good can come of man. Scientists of many countries confirm that our species is steadily degenerating. Recently this process has acquired menacing forms. But who listens to forecasts? The groans of intellectuals are drowning out the consumption advertisements. So what do you think about it?”

“In fifteen or twenty years, such research will lead to a change in the US population. The concept of a superman will begin to take shape in practice. A biological evolution will rapidly bring with it economic and social progress, which also means rebirth of America’s potential. The US will become the world leader in creating a new ethnicity that is unachievable in mental and physical indices. The American idea of the national melting pot will, thanks to eugenics, prove its colossal efficiency. Other races will be faced with extinction. The world of the future will belong to those who first throw open the door to genetic engineering. And the case holding the nuclear button will rather quickly turn into a museum piece. Are you satisfied?”

“General words. Nothing specific. I am interested in your version—how in particular will man change? Or to be more precise, the American. And how will his supremacy over others be expressed? Only without fantasy. Take a spoonful of powdered poppy and penetrate deeper into the gist of the question.” Parfenchikov pulled himself up, picked up the sack, and passed it to Pomeskin. “Chew it! Or drink it down! Your head will begin working better! Keep in mind that I am interested in details, and not la-la-la!”

Gregory Semyonovich drank down a spoonful of the extraordinary flower and ate a crust of bread. He waited, he wanted to catch the rush first, listen to himself, he felt his pulse, and for some unknown reason was surprised and, rolling his eyes, began answering. “We need to define the main question. What should I pay more attention to in my arguments—to the good of society, or to the good of the individual? I want to remember two well-known names. The leading ideologies of the twentieth century are founded on the conceptual ideas of each of them. Joseph Stalin and his advisors declared a romantic but destructive thesis about the social supremacy in the universe of the proletariat and the collective mind of the proletariat. Adolf Hitler and his associates upheld a different opinion. They believed that only a German could be a super person and only the Aryan race a bearer of the collective mind. The first destroyed the social elite that did not have proletarian roots, while the second sent people of non-Aryan origin to death. Many now understand the criminal absurdity of the social misguidance and illusion that envelop the masses and romantic conviction in the truth of the declared postulates. Incidentally, history alleviates the accusations, and I don’t have any at all. Social misguidance will continue to pursue humankind, after all the worldview confusion reflects the human essence. But there is another reason this story attracts my attention—both social experiments destroyed eugenics and science with brilliant prospects capable of making a qualitative change in people. This is what I grieve about. Seventy years have been lost. And thank goodness Obama has given the green light to the research and promised budget funding. I am a supporter of genetic

interference in the improvement of the human race. Without bio engineering, without the stimulation of artificial mutations, without an in-depth study of stem cells, the entire existence of mankind is placed under doubt. Vasily the Great said in the 6th century, “God became man that man might become God!” Seventeen centuries have passed, and who has heard him like I have? The state and society do not interest me much, I am much more interested in man. The individual! How will the initiative of the overseas president affect him? I want to believe it will affect him in the most practical way. Social experiments have shown their impotence over the past two thousand years. Homo sapiens is essentially not changing—just as we have always lived in sin, so do we live in sin to this day. And in recent years, as you said yourself, man has been deteriorating at an increasing rate. The source of happiness is disgracefully primitive these days. Money, goods, feelings are very dubious, variable categories. Sex, power, comfort... Most people never step beyond these zones. While physiological harmony can only arouse sad scoffing. How insignificant man is! We die of cold at a temperature of plus six, and we die of overheating at plus fifty. If we eat only six hundred calories a day we will die in four weeks of emaciation. And if we don't have sex or masturbate for three months, we go crazy. I feel that myself. When the onrush of passion for yourself passes, and that happens fifteen or twenty minutes after orgasm, melancholy sets in... I'll return to the main thought. Nowadays, so much is unclear. A person may not have read one serious book his whole life, but takes regular exercise, and these people are in great demand. But if you are a Nobel Prize winner, you are only remembered at anniversary patriotic meetings. One person is good-looking, while another has an IQ of 100. But the media and society have a thing about appearance and not intellect. And this is the crown of nature? Rubbish! Faulty workmanship. There are so many opportunities around to take the best from the natural environment, gather wonderful building material to create a new person from bio elements of the plant and animal world into a single whole, implant them in our genes in order to become like God as an Invincible,

Omnipotent, and All-Knowing Being. But we are looking for pacification in creating myths full of contradictions and dogmas. But myths are havens of feebleness and a weak mind. Only eugenics is capable of truly improving human nature, creating a new species capable of resisting any challenges of spontaneous phenomena. Genetic engineering is giving us the opportunity to overcome the evolutionary barriers, and manage mutations in the body. This is a colossal breakthrough in the creation of a renewed superman. And ultimate debunking of Darwin, who claims that the moral progress of mankind is a natural process. The old man did not want to distinguish between psychic illness and moral defects. Ugh! How short-sighted!”

“Natural selection?” Peter Petrovich said, livening up. “Here’s a poser for you. The husband is an alcoholic, his wife a prostitute. They gave birth to eight children, each and every one of them mentally retarded. During her ninth pregnancy, the woman was treated for chronic gonorrhea. What would you do?”

“Make her get an abortion. No other way. It would be such a burden to support a family like that. It would be better to use that money to develop eugenic research. This is why genetic intervention is needed, in order to create human ecology as quickly as possible. We applaud the dollar intervention intended to keep the ruble exchange rate in check and maintain the disabled. But our super task is to have a healthy and intelligent species that improves from generation to generation. Let natural selection be something we only find in the wilds. While we need to introduce genetic engineering among people with sufficiently intelligent potential. The time has come to shift from the moral principle of regenerating man, from the canonic “don’t interfere in Divine creation” to scientific research and experiments. Homo sapiens has its beginning, while its end will depend on our active and intelligent interference. I would like man to have a long future, but this is unlikely without the help of eugenics. This is why I am in favor of the compulsory sterilization of invalids and several other unpopular ideas. Man must save himself on his own!”

“I gave that example from real life, and there are probably many more. But what I wanted to say is that the ninth child of those ‘social rejects’ turned out to be the genius Beethoven. Now what do you have to say,” smirked Parfenchikov.

“There is a lottery into which the masses are deliberately and skillfully drawn. There is an anonymous genetic lottery in which all mortals participate passionately and often in a drunken state without thinking about material gain, but only satisfying their blind instincts. I am not interested in how someone like Beethoven appeared in such a despicable atmosphere. I do not participate in lotteries. I am absorbed by different thoughts—what road are we taking? What baggage are we taking with us in order to finally acquire that divinity that Vasily the Great and many others before and after him dreamed of? My banal answer is that I uphold the traditions of Roman and Jewish law in childbirth issues—no one knows who Beethoven’s father was. On the whole, the authenticity of fatherhood is always dubious. Although the sperm of that unknown person could well have stimulated unusual mutations in the mother’s womb that gave the world this great composer.”

“A passive supporter? In a couple of hours you will pass from the passive stage to the active. We are beginning the experiment with Koshmarov’s nano pill. Or what did you want to call it?”

“Rusjewgeogerchin.”

“Impossible to get your tongue around. Let me think... It seems it would be easier to call it *genruk* (the first letters of the Russian for Georgian [Gruzin], Jew [Evrei], German [Nemets], Russian [Rusky], and Chinese [Kitaittsy]—Trans. note). What do you think? Not bad? We need to find a suitable name for it. Then it will take hold everywhere and produce wonderful shoots.”

“But why put Georgians first? They only make up five percent of the mixture.”

“Does it really matter? You’re splitting hairs, buddy. Okay, let’s put Russians first – *rugene* – rudimentary genetics or Russian gene pool. You like it?”

“I don’t object. But first I have a question—why does

Koshmarov only want to change Russians and not the whole of mankind?”

“To be honest, that is of absolutely no consequence to me, so I never even asked. We can find out. I’ll take a couple of more spoonfuls and he will instantly appear.”

“Yes, it would be interesting to know his thoughts. Perhaps there is something more than simple patriotic desire?”

“In order to make contact with him, you will have to take one-and-a-half spoonfuls. I remember that you took a dose an hour ago. You can have some more. I will add another three to the two spoonfuls I took recently, but heaped ones. You go ahead,” said Parfenchikov, passing the sack to Gregory Semyonovich. Then he deftly took his dose, ate a piece of bread, added some jam, and closed his eyes for a couple of minutes. Peter Petrovich did not watch Pomeshkin, it seemed he had forgotten about his guest.

“Professor Koshmarov, we have a question for you,” Gregory Semyonovich heard Parfenchikov’s voice and immediately opened his eyes. “Today we are beginning the experiment with your pills, which we are calling rugene – rudimentary genetics. My colleague Pomeshkin wants to know why you want to improve the Russian gene pool and not all of mankind’s. Although perhaps you have agents in other countries who have already begun this work and we are participating in a global study? Or are you dreaming of winning a third, perhaps already intellectual, world war after improving Russians? Or carrying out some secret mission of the secret services?”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, what do you know about contemporary Russia? A disgrace! You need to read books and newspapers. On 17 March, 2001, my attention was drawn by an article in the newspaper *Izvestia*. It said that a group of European scientists under the supervision of Professor Lunn had drawn up an intellectual map of Europe. It turns out that Germans have the highest IQ in Europe. Russians ranked only sixteenth. Look on the Internet, and you will easily find this article. The data astounded me so much that I began working on a pill capable of improving our ethnicity. We

need to rank among the first five or even the first three European countries after Germany and Holland. I began working even faster when I found out that according to the results of a world survey in 2007, a nation has appeared that arouses the greatest respect in terms of its intellect and greatest appeal in terms of its upbringing and culture. And it was the Germans who took first place again! After that I began working like a madman, day and night. And now the nano pill or, as you want to call it, rugene, is ready at the beginning of summer 2009. It is not easy to advance when you are in sixteenth place. First we need to pull our socks up, raise our rating. So I ask you not to put off spreading the nano pill.”

“All of this really bothers you? Sixteenth place, after whom? But never mind. I must say that listening to this I thought I must have eaten some ground oats just now and not koknar. I feel so awful. What do you think?” Peter Petrovich asked Pomeschkin.

“I couldn’t care less. It’s just as I thought.”

“What shall we do?”

“Participate in the experiment. I would be very willing to talk about how to improve our ethnicity, but I am not very interested in the American. If the President of Russia adopts a law like Obama, much could be done. But I couldn’t care less about the Americans.”

“Go on, I’m interested!”

“Do you still need me?” asked the bespectacled old man. “I have important things to do.”

“We don’t care!” Parfenchikov said hurriedly.

“I’ll be off then.”

“Let’s begin with statistics,” began Gregory Semyonovich. “According to them, our nation is dying out. Every year we lose around seven hundred thousand people. This is particularly dangerous if you keep in mind the rich and vast territory the Russian people live in. At a critical moment in the drop in population, it is very likely that local wars will arise with close and even with distant neighbors. So the main task is to replenish the population. The steps taken to encourage childbirth have not been totally successful and could not significantly change the situation. We cannot manage

without eugenics here. We need radical measures. What animal is closest to man? Don't rush. Listen, and then tell me. What animal does man struggle against all the time and cannot conquer? We infect the enemy with viruses, paratyphoid fever and salmonella, to no avail. We feed it all kinds of poisons, diphenadione, bromadiolone, anticoagulants, in the hope that it will die, dripping blood. But the damned animals mutate and multiply with such speed that the poison becomes their calorific food. This animal lives in every corner and in every space on Earth. It is a wonderful swimmer, recognizes drugs better than dogs, has a high intellect, and quick reaction. It eats absolutely everything. Lives at a temperature from plus fifty to minus thirty. Gives birth at minus twenty. Produces eight hundred offspring a year. Pregnancy lasts three months. The special gene of this animal protects its body from all kinds of sexually-transmitted infections. Another gene passes on practical information to the next generation. These two genes are unique. People have nothing like them. The animal I am talking about is fifty million years older than man. I would like to use it for the genetic renewal of the Russian nation. You can tell me what it is?"

"Listen, I am not a zoologist. And I don't know much in this sphere. I only know that dogs bark, wolves howl, and roosters crow. Tell me what it is?"

"Rats! Ra-ts!! The genome of rats and man almost coincide."

"Rats?" frowned Parfenchikov. Although, he immediately began smiling, "Indeed, wonderful characteristics. I am willing to supplement myself with rat talents. But how do they relate to *that very thing*?" he snickered.

"They love alcohol and *that* too. But the most wonderful thing is that they are the only creatures who do not suffer from the abstinence syndrome."

"Bravo! Bravo! You have astounded me. Wonderful! I would really like to become a rat sapiens. After all, Homo sapiens has many things I categorically do not like, that I simply hate in myself. I have often become confused, thinking about how to cardinaly change myself. I used to get feelings, such obsessive ones, although not

only did I not want them, I absolutely denied them, rejected them, and was even terribly ashamed. For example, the female breast. It excites you, entices, you go for it, its shape prompts you to do crazy things, it even arouses an erection from a distance. You are immediately filled with desire, some crazy passion, in response to what would seem to be a commonplace protrusion of the human body. An incredible need arises to embrace, kiss, bite the breast, dissolve in its tissue and become immersed in immeasurable happiness. I was obviously much too morbidly sensitive to it. I could not find a way to get rid of it. Fighting desperate lust only intensified my disdain for myself. I began repressing my feelings, getting angry, not understanding that I am in some mystic captivity, in the bondage of illusions, that I am unable to throw the nonsense out of my head. I tortuously sought a way out of this bewitched state. I had outbursts of particular anger—in my thoughts, I would put a huge pan of water on the fire, put the breasts of all the women in the world into it and cook them, dancing around the fire until the bottom of the pot began to smoke and the stew disappeared forever. In my fervent dance I detached myself from the magical dependence of spontaneous mutations of the past. Such is the bane of man. You don't want something, but it imposes itself mercilessly on you. Quite often you don't have the strength to say no. You don't have the willpower to refuse. You think a murderer, pedophile, maniac robber or utter scoundrel does not have this exhausting mental struggle before committing a crime? How they go around in fear and agony, how they suffer and cannot carry out a simple task. Temptation or hate lurks in each and mercilessly gnaws away at the will. If the extraordinary power of opium had not dampened these stupid feelings in me I would have long gone crazy. All of that happened to me before I got to know poppy head. You don't want money, but some bewitching power makes you reach for it, constantly think of it, fill your pockets, bank accounts, and safes with this rubbish. You don't want to make a career, but something inside you pushes you, forces you, and inflates outlandish ambitions in you. Day and night your head is filled with high federal posts and positions, decrees signed

at the Kremlin desk, armies of unconditional subjects, approving voices, and applause of the electorate. And you don't know how to free yourself from this. The same goes for clothes from well-known designers, girls for one hour, one-night stands, friendly hobnobs, drinking bouts for the sake of business, buying posts, villas, houses, islands, planes, and yachts. Thank goodness that koknar saved me from being too human... Recalling the past, calming down after the only right decision and thinking about the capacities of rats, I want to tell you, Gregory, I am sticking, without a shadow of a doubt, with poppy head. I personally need nothing else. But I am ready to listen with complete attention to your fantasies about making a qualitative change in Russians. So what can you give the residents of Kan and our other compatriots from a rat gene ensemble?"

"Why was it necessary to shake up the homo sapiens gene?" said Pomeshkin thoughtfully. And answered himself, "These days the moral crisis has been aggravated by the world economic collapse. The well-known methods will be of little use, even dangerous, for finding a solution to the situation. The first thesis—we need to increase state management of the economy. Many scientists are recommending that route. But limiting freedom in economic life will entail infringing on the personal freedoms of citizens, which means a social explosion is inevitable. And what party in Russia or in the Western countries will be bold enough to go for such measures? With the proper ideological platform, new GULAGs could be opened and a renovated Auschwitz put into operation. But there is no such ideological platform! So my solution is to begin intensive research in genetic engineering. And take all the best traits from rats!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" said Peter Petrovich, hunkering down. "Everyone will frown at that creature, apart from me. So what do you propose taking from them?"

"Rats, I repeat, can comfortably live and produce offspring at different temperatures. That is the main thing. We will take these beneficial capacities and inject them into Homo sapiens. It takes four kilograms of wood, a kilogram of coal, three kilograms of

peat, or one-and-half cubic meters of gas a month to raise the temperature by one degree in a room of ten square meters (taking the Russian standard). If a person can feel comfortable at 7 degrees Celsius, and not at 21, 12 cubic meters of gas can be saved a month. That is 147 cubic meters a winter, in other words, fifty dollars. And that is only for ten square meters. How many square meters of housing are there in Russia? Statistics show almost four billion! If we divide this figure by ten, we get almost four hundred and fifty million. If we multiply this figure by 147 cubic meters and by fifty dollars, we get sixty four billion cubic meters of gas (provisionally, since many people use wood, coal, and peat). That's twenty-two billion dollars! And how many production facilities are heated? I don't know the figures for that. Let's presume their area is ten times less than the residential. A total of 70 billion cubic meters of gas for the heating season or almost 25 billion dollars will be saved. This is the budget of the Ural and Siberian federal districts. If these figures are multiplied by 3.5 (today the population of the European Union is 3.5-fold higher than the Russian, and will be five times more soon when Turkey joins the European Union), the savings without indexing (ten square meters per person in Russia, this figure is much higher in Europe, so it needs adjustment) will be impressive—400 billion cubic meters of gas, that is, 120 billion dollars, at Russian prices. And we know that their prices for gas are higher. We can imagine the real amounts of gas consumption in Europe—around 500 billion cubic meters costing more than three hundred billion dollars. But I am even more impressed by the amount of gas saved—it is more than half of the total world consumption. What a contribution to a dramatic cutback in greenhouse gas emissions! And we have used only one of the rat talents. The demographic problem can also be easily resolved using the fantastic capacities these rodents have for breeding. At least five hundred million people should live in our enormous territory, or even better around eight hundred. And genetic engineering will come to our aid again. Reducing the pregnancy term to three or four months will save enormous funds. With the help of these ugly animals, we will

strengthen our immune system. We will be able to pass on practical skills and theoretical knowledge and eradicate the fear of starvation, since we will be able to eat everything we want. We will begin sleeping not as long as the body demands to restore spent energy, but as long as our dreams satisfy us...”

“You forgot the most important thing—rat genes rid mankind of fatal withdrawal symptoms, the abstention syndrome,” interjected Parfenchikov, having trouble keeping his heavy eyelids open.

“Yes, of course, that as well! Early eugenic scientists believed that it was enough to sterilize imperfect people to ensure that each new generation was an improvement over the last. They forgot one thing though—it will take ninety generations to wipe out the pathology inherited in one percent of the population. This would take hundreds of years. I understand that this is way too long. And it is not something to be done with people like me who consider themselves freaks. I am categorically against traditional reproduction. So I spray out sperm at my own reflection in the mirror. That comforts me. Herbert Spencer said that ‘fostering the good-for-nothing at the expense of the good is an extreme cruelty. It deliberately stores up miseries for future generations. There is no greater curse to posterity than that of bequeathing them an increasing population of imbeciles.’ And do you really think it is possible to make love to a partner who does not have a genetic passport? Even if the collegium of the Russian Supreme Court compelled me to have intercourse with a woman, I would refuse, preferring a prison cell or death. The burden of responsibility to the future would repress any basic instinct... When I imagine I am a genetically changed person, I get a wonderful feeling of superiority over the past Pomeshkin. The recent suffering of my own ego is ultimately disappearing. That Gregory who was recently plagued night and day by doubts about whether he was in the world he wanted to be in and whether to kill himself in the search for an alternative place of existence or non-existence, for non-existence is existence with a minus sign, has also disappeared. Expanses are opening up for all kinds of experiments and transformations, creativity and creation. The

meaning of life shines bright and clear. You, like others, will become a superior being capable of the most incredible things. You are entirely indifferent to the elements of nature, the endlessness of time and space, and the mysterious powers of evil.”

“Hey, dear brother, you are really getting carried away. I am listening to you with interest, but without approval. You don’t need genetic engineering for the things you are dreaming of. Three spoonfuls of powdered poppy will make a superman, or superior being, or whoever you wish out of you, very likely a god and devil at once. You are feeling the newly initiated in you. The incredible power of the wonderworking flower has still not taken you fully in its embrace. You are still wandering around in the real world, while I live amidst inflamed allegories. So I do not hide my repulsion of everything social. Up the dose, Gregory Semyonovich! And the world you desire will timidly open up its exquisite topics to you. The quiet squeak of the door into the virtual world will give you far richer emotions than a new genetic ensemble of rat-cockroach talents. Although I am not insisting. Adepts of poppy head value personal freedom above all else, defend only sovereignty, and only search for *that very thing*. Nothing else is needed! And so it has been for eternity! There is a well-known metaphor, ‘architecture is frozen music.’ So the charms of poppy head is the ‘Universe clenched in a fist.’ Open up your fist and grandiose, extremely incredible pictures of the world will emerge before you. Okay, let’s get ready to go. We will drink some tea, take some of the cherished powder, and go visit the young woman. It will be interesting to see how a person begins changing in reality, how our pill transforms the world this Katy Loskutkina sees. Will she experience something like drug intoxication and enter some extravagant surreal space that I always dream about during emotional excitement? I will have to watch closely and see if the professor’s pill has a stronger effect than poppy powder. The girl’s behavior will speak for itself and show whether or not the nano pill really has magic power arousing an outburst of fantasy and reverie. Will it help the Russian to acquire European morality, rationality, respect for the

law, and help us to rise from sixteenth place to the top three on the intellectual map of Europe? Or has Koshmarov only been feeding us a load of nonsense? This speculation only interests me as a game. I love setting off on long journeys after taking *that very thing*. I hope that this time I will take pleasure in coming in contact with an unbeknown power. Put the kettle on, Pomeskin, my friend. Spread some jam on the bread. Do not miss the happy moment. Do not believe in science, penance, capital, repentance, feelings, and gypsy charms. Koknar, only it, it alone is capable of opening up the world of magical imagination we so desire. Our great ancestor wrote, 'I have long stopped wondering whether man created God or God man.'"

"This is the first time in my life that some external event has piqued my interest," muttered Gregory Semyonovich. "I am no cosmopolitan by any stretch of the imagination, although somewhere in the depths of my soul I feel that I am not entirely indifferent to the place Russians hold in the contemporary world. I would indeed like them to reinforce their position and acquire dignity. This is precisely something I do not require for myself. I am entirely happy with watching the world from afar, tenderly convincing myself that I am entirely different, not the same as, somewhat different from all the grains of sand in eternity. And only that pleases me, tempts me to uphold my sovereignty, honoring it as something absolute. I am still guessing at where your opium is leading me. I admit, buddy, I am expecting a surprise! And after tea I am ready to join you on your journey..."

Katy Loskutkina's big blue eyes grew even bigger when she saw Peter Parfenchikov with a young man she did not know standing on the doorstep of her modest abode at this ungodly hour of the morning. The first thought that flashed in her mind was, thank goodness, he has come to get the stack of money he left yesterday. Peter Petrovich greeted her with great ceremony, "Good morning, my friend and I have come for a cup of tea. His name is Gregory, he is a local. Can we come in?" The guest held a cake box in his hand.

Loskutkina recovered somewhat, adjusted her light-colored hair, buttoned up the dressing-gown she had hurriedly thrown on and held open the door.

“Come in,” she said in embarrassment, leaning up against the wall to let the guests pass.

The friends came in and stood in silence. There was nowhere to sit down. The only chair was occupied by the landlady’s clothes.

Katy quickly covered the bed with a knitted blanket and invited them to sit down.

“I have another idea, let’s sit on the floor,” said Parfenchikov. “That’s comfortable and customary. Do you mind? And wouldn’t saying something like, ‘Please make yourself comfortable on the floor!’ or ‘You will have a wonderful time over a cup of tea on my floor!’ or even better, ‘The crumbs from the floor will appease your voracious appetite!’ or, ‘Pig flu is aristocratic in origin, it doesn’t crawl around on the floor’ be so appropriate for our crisis times?” Peter Petrovich snickered and sat down on the bare, peeling boards, settling himself up against the sofa-bed. “Greg, you make yourself comfortable too,” he advised.

“Yes, yes, I often eat dinner sitting on the floor myself. The room is not very big, there is not even enough room for a small table. But the crisis is hardly affecting us. What’s a crisis? No money? Well I never have money anyway! Or no job? It makes no difference whether you have one or not—the pocket is none the wiser. Salaries are so miserly, you never have anything anyway. Life is nothing but poverty... Shall I put the kettle on?”

“Yes, yes! We will have cake for breakfast. So your first day without a job is getting off to a good start. And there may be more pleasant surprises. I believe that life is full of unexpected turns. What does Gregory Semyonovich say?”

“Siberia is not exactly the place for surprises. I create them myself. And I do quite a good job of it.”

“For example?” asked Parfenchikov.

“Before getting to know you, I imagined you were entirely different. I thought you might be a businessman doing anything for

the sake of earning money, or an unceremonious searcher of treasure and church antiques, or an arrogant money-bags who disdains people without a high income, or a stuck-up resident of the capital... But after we met, I am amazed at how unusual you are, something I never suspected. This game with your own imagination comforts me, amuses me, brings a vigorous aroma to Kan's boring life. What else can people do in the Russian provinces? Engage in business—god help them, the bureaucrats are tormented by administrating and fees, or politics—but the national apathy is so deep. However, reform and transformation require such a mass of irrepressible energy that the chances of taking even the first step in that field are equal to zero. Science? No, and there will never be the funding, and it is naïve, utopian, to expect results without intensive investments. Engage in professional perfection? This is also a futile undertaking. For there is no consumer market whatsoever in the provinces. So who or what are you supposed to improve yourself for? Where should you apply your talents and abilities, even if they are amazing? There is absolutely nowhere to go!”

“The only solution is to meet someone like Peter Petrovich,” Parfenchikov hurriedly retorted, bursting out in loud laughter, “and have him initiate you into the great wisdom of a life that takes you away from insane reality. What do you think about that? There you have it! The delight that will open up will save you from melancholy, from provincial apathy. My idol is an outstanding flatterer.”

“I agree, I agree, entirely new opportunities open up for understanding yourself and the world around you. I testify to it, I myself am increasingly and more often being drawn to Parfenchikov, to close communication with him, to his wondrous, bewitching bag, to delightful phantasmagoria,” Gregory Pomeskin uttered dreamily.

“Katy, give me a knife please. I need to cut the cake.” At that moment, Peter Petrovich took out the nano pill and nudged his friend with his leg, as though to say, now she's going to get Koshmarov's rugene.

Loskutkina got down on her knees, spread out a towel, placed a

jar of cherry jam and a plate of biscuits in the middle, poured tea into mugs, and, smiling, asked Parfenchikov, “Maybe you would like to take back your money? It is still lying there untouched. I don’t feel very comfortable with such a large amount. I do not deserve it and never gave so much as a hint about that. Please let me give it back...”

“Out of the question,” Parfenchikov said categorically, interrupting her with obvious irritation. “I will not even look at another’s assets. Hand me a saucer instead. I like drinking tea the old way, it is more satisfying, taking sip after sip.” As soon as the young woman stood up to get a saucer from the dresser, Parfenchikov pressed the soft nano pill into a piece of cake without her noticing and put it on a napkin next to Katy’s mug. “We brought a cream cake, fresh, wonderful, from the local bakery. Try this delicious morsel and unemployment will not seem so terrible. We did not come to take anything, but to serve you, entertain you ... So that a miracle will occur and your life will drastically change. You are a good person, my dear Katy...”

“Why is he being so effusive all of a sudden?” thought the young woman suspiciously. “I am not used to such attention. I am more used to hearing lies, threats...”

After they had drunk their tea, the young men stood up, thanked the landlady, promised to return for lunch, and, happy with their successful start, left the room.

RAMPANT MUTATIONS

Loskutkina caught her breath. The unexpected morning visit had thrown her off guard. She slowly picked up the plates and cups, swept the floor, and lay down on the sofa-bed. She had nowhere to go. She would not get her redundancy pay for a few more days. At first she did not wonder about how she was going to manage. There were not many alternatives—move into a rail carriage for odd-job workers and travel along the Trans-Siberian railroad from Novosibirsk to Chita; work as a seasonal cook in the taiga with a lumber team; or return to her home village and, resigning herself to a despondent life, take to the bottle. No other alternative occurred to her, and there was no other in her mind. Putting her trust in fate, she decided to take a nap for an hour or two.

When she woke up, she found herself filled with an insistent, even demanding desire. She began thinking about her limp and became resolved to cure herself of it as quickly as possible. She remembered an old woman from the next village who had begun treating it with herbs. “Why did I not take the whole treatment course?” thought Katy. “Was I too lazy to gather herbs in the taiga for the old woman by way of payment for her treatment? Could I really not have cared enough about my limp to give it the due attention? What was I thinking about? After all, it was not at all difficult to go out gathering meadowsweet, milk thistle, tamarisk, clematis, woundwort, Baikal skullcap, maral root, ginseng... And then there would have been no trace left of my limp. I would have had a much better chance of being successful, getting married, and having children.”

At this point, her attention was drawn to the stack of money Parfenchikov had left. She did not remember that just a couple of hours ago she had tried to give it back to the owner. Now the young woman picked up the money as though she owned it and began counting it. It turned out that her capital amounted to four hundred

thousand rubles, or more than ten thousand dollars. “Thank goodness, I can start a new life,” flashed through her head. “And not only can I, I must, it is an absolute necessity. Thank goodness that they fired me. Now there is nothing to stop me from spreading my wings. I feel exhilarated by this new ability not to be passive about the world, but creatively adapt it to my growing needs. Nature is expansive and diverse enough to be able to look for and find myself, and not mope away in an eight-by-eight room. Where shall I begin? What is the most important thing? In my position, several tasks must be solved at once—improve my appearance, in particular get rid of my limp, become more knowledgeable, expand my horizons, begin a business career, take a new look at the standard of living, and become acquainted with social policy. Then set a goal to become rich, live comfortably, take care of my health, and stop foolishly frittering away my time. And this all has to be done simultaneously from a strong position. So the first thing to do is find the old healer. She is a treasure-trove of the knowledge I will need for what I intend to do. Siberia’s flowers, herbs, and mushrooms have enormous potential for business, health, knowledge, and transformation. But why did I not start thinking about this earlier? I mean, it’s obvious! And I do not need much investment, only diligence. Strange! Why was I so introverted, browbeaten, and lackadaisical? Now it is goodbye to cowardice and timidity! I am beginning to live anew. I’ve forgotten the herbalist’s name—Pelageya Ivanovna, Polina Ivanovna, or Praskovya Ivanovna? Ah yes, Grandma Nina! But is she still alive? If she is, it shouldn’t be hard to find her. Her house was on the outskirts of Streshnevo village. I still remember the area pretty well. I must hurry to the station. Three hours on the bus and I will be there. I will stay with the old woman for a few days. I need to take a refresher course and add new skills. But where shall I put all this money? Take it to the bank? Only banks are on their last legs just now. The crisis is a dangerous time, financial institutions cannot be trusted. I am going to have to take my money with me. And where did I find such words as ‘financial institutions?’ Goodness knows what is going on with me. Maybe I’ve

finally smartened up? Why?" At this point, Loskutkina jumped up, took a small travel bag from a hook and hurriedly began filling it with the pale blue bills and her own few belongings. She had just finished packing her bag and was about to leave, when someone knocked at the door. At first quietly and then with increasing insistence.

"Who's this now?" she thought bewildered and opened the door. Two people stood on the threshold. Their faces seemed familiar.

"What do you want?" asked Loskutkina rather impatiently.

"Katy, here we are again to see you," said Parfenchikov, giving her a friendly smile. "We've brought you some fruit. We did agree, after all, that we would return around noon."

"Really? I don't remember. But no matter. I have no intention of inviting in men I hardly know. And I am in a rush to get to the station anyhow. I am going to the village on urgent business."

"What's the matter with you, Katy? We had breakfast together this morning. Right here, on the floor. We ate some fresh cake, drank tea, don't you remember? And then we said we would be back for lunch," said Peter Petrovich, feigning surprise and winking at Pomeskin. "What could you possibly have to do in the village? It will not save you from the crisis. There starvation will take an even tighter stranglehold and could be dangerous without a doctor. Are you really not going to let us in?"

"Morning tea? I dreamed about something like that recently. What, do you read other people's dreams? Such wonderful talents can be efficiently used in business. But, unfortunately, I don't have time. If we happen to meet again, I would be interested to hear more about your abilities. I might even be willing to use them in business. Forecasts are particularly useful in crisis times. Do some calculations, determine the regions of development, plan some presentations and advertizing campaigns. Convince the investor and audience of the value of your services. I may also be interested in other alternatives. But for now, so long! So long!" After saying this, she closed the door on the young men without an iota of embarrassment.

“How do like that for rugene? Way to go Koshmarov, way to go!” exclaimed Peter Petrovich spreading his arms. “Such cardinal changes in a girl who was recently so ordinary, provincial, and constantly blushing are even quite scary. She is suddenly all bent on doing big business, a Wall Street magnate has been born. With people like that, Russia will quickly become a world leader in science and economics. The ruble will be declared a planetary currency, while Russian will be the universal language. But I, buddy, have been thinking about something entirely different, we need to ask the professor to create a nano pill for us. For Peter Petrovich and Gregory Semyonovich! A certain ruspop, so we don’t have to grow this wonderful flower every year, not cut each head from the stalk, not fill sacks in poppy fields, not grind the chaff in a coffee-grinder, not portion it out in spoonfuls, not gather it bit by bit, not be afraid of the abstinence syndrome, not suffer from withdrawal... But take just one pill and inflame our enslaved minds forever, until we die. Maybe it will even have an effect in the other world. Let our compatriots conquer cities, nations, and continents in the meantime, own the world and the entire Universe. I couldn’t give a hoot about such victory. What do you think about it? It’s a wonderful prospect after all! Oh, what a superb idea! Professor, where are you, dearest, show up.... Owl-eyes!” begged Peter Petrovich fervently. “It’s a very important moment, show up! Please... No, he won’t come. I do not have enough koknar energy. Let’s hurry home, I want to talk to him. Immediately. I am under the strongest impression from his brainchild. But I need another three or four spoonfuls. Oh, that cursed bag, why didn’t I bring it with me? I know, I know, I don’t carry it around in case I lose it! Let’s go, hurry up, let’s start running... Pomeshkin! Don’t lag behind! I want ruspop! Give me ruspop! Oh how I dream of having it! It is my innermost dream!” Parfenchikov shouted out every now and again as he rushed for home.

In the meantime, Katy Loskutkina left her apartment and headed for the bus station, her left leg bowing under her. As she went, she occasionally noticed piles of household refuse. She was

inundated by the sharp stench of rotting food. “How come I never noticed it before?” thought the young woman in surprise. “How can people live in such an environment? If the city budget doesn’t have enough money, and of course it doesn’t, the residents should be recruited to clean up their own town. It is shameful for contemporary man to live in the direct proximity of such contagion. Why don’t the sanitary services sound the alarm? Why don’t the municipal authorities organize the town-dwellers in a clean environment campaign? After all, these wastes are going into the river, where they are eaten by fish that end up on our table. Has no one thought about how life-threatening this is? Passive acceptance of filth is not the way mankind is going today. The whole world is fighting for a clean environment, but we Russians are not taking any notice. When I return I will definitely sign up for an appointment with the mayor. Such a disgrace cannot be tolerated. Instead of sitting around all day cracking sunflower seeds or guzzling beer and vodka along with salted fish, people should be rushing to do social work that will ultimately improve our daily lives. For society will become stronger when it makes the effort to cleanse itself of the putridity within and around it. Laughing at one’s lack of culture and ignorance is so important for self-improvement.”

An old battered bus stood forlornly at the station. Several unshaven men with large bundles and women with bulging string bags on their knees sat on benches alongside it. Loskutkina went up to the driver, “Will you take me to Streshnevo?” she asked.

“Get in.”

“Where can I buy a ticket?”

“You pay me.”

“How much does it cost?”

“To Streshnevo? Give me a hundred.”

Loskutkina climbed in and handed the driver a hundred rubles. He took it silently, staring detachedly at the road. Katy stood in front of him for around five minutes, then asked, “Can I get a ticket?”

“What ticket?” asked the driver in surprise.

“For the trip!”

“I know you’ve paid. Don’t worry, I’ll deliver you to your destination.”

“But I need a ticket, I’m on a business trip and I need to account for my expenses.”

“Are you from out of town? We never issue tickets...”

“Why are you making such a fuss? Sit down... You think you’re so smart, ticket, ticket, she’s asking,” said a stout middle-aged woman grumpily. “Maybe you would like us to dance for you? I know the likes of you! It’s people like you who cause all the trouble...”

“Why are you making the crisis worse? All passengers must have tickets, and your transport company should pay taxes. Show me your price list and give me a ticket. And not only me, but all the other passengers.”

“Why are you bugging me? I know all the auditors, and you aren’t one of them. Who are you? Where did you come from? A law-abiding citizen has shown up. I’ve seen worse,” blurted out the driver in rage. “I’ll just decide not to go anywhere. I am my own master! Hey, citizens, get out. The bus isn’t going anywhere. I have the right to change the route.” The driver picked up the microphone and nervously, in a shaky voice, said, “The route to Streshnevo is cancelled. The bus is going to Ilanka. Everyone get out!”

Panic ensued in the salted fish imbued bus. Someone shouted, “Throw that bitch off, boss! What do we have to do with it? I have no intention of hanging around here until evening because of that bitch.” A woman with pouchy cheeks yelled, “Push that rat off the bus. I will give you money for a bottle of vodka, take us where we want to go, I left my house unattended.”

A young lad from the third row began shouting, “Hey you, stinkard, get lost! I’ll count to three, if you don’t get off, I’ll throw you off with a blow to your vile face.”

“Chase her off, people! Beat the auditors!” a half-drunk woman shouted hoarsely. The uproar continued, but Loskutkina was no longer listening. She took her hundred rubles from the driver and

silently climbed down from the bus. “How come I never noticed before how many contemptible people there are around me,” she thought. “To hell with them. Now I need to decide how to get to Streshnevo as quickly as possible. What should I do? I need to buy a cell phone. If I had one with me now I could have called the transport department of the mayor’s office, complained to them about the service, and demanded that his license be revoked. And I need to buy myself a bike. I will be able to ride all over the place on it. Of course, only in the summer. Then we’ll see. Where can I buy the one and the other? I’ll go to Bear stall.”

She paid nine hundred and ninety rubles for a used bicycle, managing with some difficulty to get a discount of one hundred and ten rubles. She had to fork out five hundred and fifty rubles for a used phone. She also tried to get a discount on that but no one would concede more than fifty rubles. She had barely mounted the bike, when she heard scoffing and laughter, “A lame girl riding a bike...Ha-ha-ha! What an idiot! Who ever saw lame people riding around on wheels? The only road for them is to the grave!”

“Why are people so cruel?” she thought. “I am being insulted on all sides today. That’s never happened before. What’s happened to the people I have lived next to for twenty-five years? I don’t recognize them! Or have they always been like that? Maybe it’s just a bad day? Maybe there’s some geomagnetic disturbance?”

Katy rode out onto the road and headed for Streshnevo. She planned to cover the thirty-five kilometers in two hours. After crossing the railroad track, the cyclist heard an insistent honking. Turning round, she saw a huge truck bearing down on her without reducing its speed. In order to avoid a crash, Katy tried to turn to the right, but the maneuver did not work, and she fell into the ditch. She banged her knee and her palm was bleeding. The laden truck rushed triumphantly past. She stood up, took a handkerchief out of her road bag, moistened it with some eau de cologne, wiped her scratches, and stubbornly rode on. A feeling of bitter insult burned in her. At the turn toward Udinko, an officer, an obese lad with an infantile smile, stopped her at the state traffic control post.

“Stop! Stop! Whenever do you see a woman with baggage riding a bike along the highway? Are there not enough village or wooded paths?” The policeman walked around her bike, stared at Katy, and asked, “Why aren’t you wearing a helmet? Your violating the rules! That’s not good! How long have you been a cyclist?”

“I bought the bike today. But I used to ride,” answered the young woman meekly.

“Where is the registration number?”

“What number?”

“Before they buy a vehicle, law-abiding citizens study the instructions. Bikes now have to be registered. Violation number two. For the first I will fine you. But for the second...” the officer raised his voice, “I am going to have to confiscate the vehicle until I establish the true owner. Theft is rampant in Kan, why should I believe that you are its owner? No, I serve the law! And I do not rely on word of honor.” He took the bicycle, rolled it up to the control post booth, and went inside. A couple of minutes later, a different officer came out, a little older, but just as corpulent.

“We are going to have to come to some agreement, you can’t be violating the law,” he said to Loskutkina as though in passing.

“Could you please give me the telephone number of your superiors? I would like to find out how lawful your colleague’s actions are,” said Katy, taking the offensive.

“I have to tell you, woman, that all questions need to be resolved on the spot. No superiors are going to help you. Just look at you, you’re drunk. Your arms and legs are covered in bloody cuts. You have grass in your hair, traces of wine on your clothes, and there are clumps of dirt in your wheels. Come to an agreement with the officer. If he has to draw up a report, it will be too late, your case will become much more complicated. I only want to help you. Go and talk to him, try to find a consensus, so to speak.”

“Could you explain what you mean by ‘come to an agreement’? Offer money? I want to understand what I am being accused of and not give bribes.... By the way, you should have a written copy of the law at your post, please show it to me so that I can be sure I have

violated the instructions. Otherwise I am going to have to get in touch with a lawyer and ask him to defend my rights. Give me the instructions or a written copy of what I am being accused of!”

The second officer did not answer, but returned to the booth. A couple of minutes later, the younger policeman who had stopped Katy came out. He was carrying a bottle.

“My colleague said that your knee and hand are bleeding. That’s dangerous. Summer is a bad time for getting tetanus. Wash your cuts and put a plaster on them. Let me see your hands.”

As soon as Katy bent over to rub her cuts, she felt a liquid that smelled strongly of alcohol running down her collar. She felt it on her chin and head.

“What are you doing?” she yelled helplessly.

“You’ve been drinking so much, we’ve had to render you emergency aid. Drunks always have a lot of injuries. We’ll draw up a report, call the ambulance, and put you to rights. Do you have your passport with you?”

“No.”

“You have no right to talk to a police officer with a rank of senior lieutenant without a passport. How do I know who you are? Drunks can say they are anyone, even the lover of some minister. And that’s what I’ll write in the report—a bike was confiscated from a drunk woman whose identity could not be established, in order to prevent an accident. Now we will find witnesses.” The officer walked toward the road and raised his baton, stopping an old Mazda and a small bus. The first to run up to him was the bus driver.

“Hello, boss. I am in a hurry. What’s up?”

“Get back in your vehicle and wait. What are you running around for? Take up your work place.

Then the officer went up to the passenger car.

“Traffic warden senior lieutenant Begunkov. Show me your car registration documents and driver’s license.”

“Boss, my authorization is out of date, by only three days...”

“Get out and come with me.” They went into the booth. “You are violating the law. What am I to do with you?”

“Here’s three hundred rubles, sorry. You know me...”

“Okay, okay.” He put the money in his pocket. “Go out and wait for me for a couple of minutes.”

Officer Begunkov went up to the bus driver, “Moonlighting again?”

“I pay a percentage for every route... I don’t have any debts.”

“Come at the end of your shift. Don’t be late. But now get out. I want you to sign a witness report. I stopped a woman on a bike. She’s drunk, screaming, threatening, covered in bloody scratches. Wait, I’m going to get the second witness.”

The officer gathered them all together and said loudly, “Dear drivers. I, Senior Lieutenant Begunkov, have detained a drunk woman, whose identity I cannot establish. She does not have any ID on her. I ask you to witness in writing that all external evidence shows her to be drunk, that she has fresh cuts and bruises on many parts of her body. Go up to her, and take a look. If you are in any doubt, smell her. She smells like a barrel of home-brewed beer. If I am right, sign. And don’t violate the traffic rules any more!”

“He’s lying,” Loskutkina exclaimed, rushing to defend herself. “I don’t drink...”

“Who in Russia likes to admit they’ve had too much?” smirked the bus driver. “And you really do stink, you can smell it a mile away. You would do better to apologize and give them some money. Fess up. Officers are also human... What are you making such a fuss about?”

The second driver was brief, “I witness, officer, the woman is as drunk as a skunk.”

“Until you can show me a document confirming you own the bike, I am keeping it. You have three months. If you don’t prove it’s yours, it will be confiscated and sold at an auction.”

“Where are you going, woman?” asked the bus driver.

“What shall I do?” thought Loskutkina to herself. “Go to see a lawyer? Go visit the old woman? Or go give a blood test? I need to do everything in the right order. I have to prove that I am not drunk. Our interdistrict laboratory can do an alcohol test. Streshnevo is

seven kilometers from here. So after the medical test I will go to the healer. In three or four days, I'll go see a lawyer. That's what I'll do!" Out loud she asked, "Is the Bagatai regional center on your way?"

"Will you pay me one hundred and twenty rubles?" asked the driver cautiously.

"With a ticket or without?"

"Without, what ticket are you talking about?"

"Well in that case I will pay one hundred and twenty minus twenty, that is, one hundred rubles."

"Why minus twenty?"

"You don't pay tax, so minus."

"Ah, so that's what you're getting at," snickered the driver. "Get in. I don't think you're drunk after all."

There was a free seat next to the driver. Katy sat down, paid the money, and the bus, lurching, moved forward.

"So what were you making such a fuss about? You know that people don't argue with the police around here. Thank goodness they never take all you have. Twenty or thirty percent of your cash or of the fine. That can still be called Christian... The district cops demand up to fifty percent. So I try to stick to local routes. Don't worry, if you give me five hundred rubles, I'll get your bike back for you."

"I am not going to leave things at that. I am going for a blood test, I'll hire a lawyer, and go see the prosecutor and district internal affairs agencies. If I have to I'll go further, only I'll see to it that that scoundrel loses his job. His rudeness knows no bounds. He poured vodka all over me and then went to you, so-called witnesses, saying confirm, my dears, that the arrestee stinks of alcohol. Such things cannot be forgiven. Russia is our country, and if we are expected to love it, we need to be able to respect it. If we are indifferent to everything, we will only be able to hate it. But I want to be an active member of society and an entrepreneur. So not only am I not indifferent, I am terribly aggrieved by that awful incident."

"Don't be angry at me. I am a dependent person. I squirm before

civil servants like a snake in the frying pan. If you put up resistance to a policeman, fiscal officer, judge, prosecutor, or mayor's aide, fireman, sanitary inspector, pope, you've had it. You'll know no peace. They'll drive you insane without batting an eyelid. They couldn't care less. I am giving you some fatherly advice, don't raise your hackles, calm down, forget about complaining to the higher departments—it is not worth your trouble. Quietly mind your own business and don't forget to feed our brothers-in-arms. I don't know how you make a living, but never rock the boat in front of the authorities! Have you read Gogol's *The Inspector General*? Two hundred years have passed, but not much has changed. Today's bureaucrat has become even more high-handed. His appetite and ambitions have taken a mighty leap. I'll tell you a secret," the driver turned the wheel sharply and began to whisper, "Russians will never get the better of their bureaucrats. We can only be saved by a foreign power. Oh, how I wish Europe would conquer us. Some Italian or Dutch mayor would be a hundred times more appealing than our own. You watch European films, read books, watch debates in Strasbourg on the TV, the people seem so nice. So why don't our rulers open up Russia and let people rush in to revive our unkempt expanses? There is nothing the other side of the Volga. Vast empty spaces with no people to be found. Everyone's died out. One person to every two kilometers. And the Russian nation is dying out. If it keeps on the same way, in fifteen to twenty years only the small European part will be left. The population will have been reduced to around seventy million. Thirty percent of them will live in poverty again, forty will be poor, and the rest will guzzle away the profits. The Romanov Dynasty attracted foreigners to Russia for three centuries, gave them land, tax benefits, posh cars. I wouldn't mind that kind of policy now. More than two hundred thousand Germans alone leave their homes every year and settle all over the world. If only we could attract, even perhaps lure, them to our country. After all, there would be a direct advantage! Germans are disciplined and talented people, they like to work. And look how Israel has prospered! It has become stronger with natives from

Russia, become one of the world leaders in many economic indices. Give every Jew five hectares of land free of charge and they will fill Russian with their kibbutzim. Then meat and fish, fruit and vegetables would finally appear in the stores, and not at exorbitant, but at affordable prices. Jobs would appear, wages would rise to European standards, there would be decent housing, life would be hunky dory! For we are still living in the eighteenth century and continue accumulating destructive weapons. No one in our country wants to admit,” at this point the driver’s voice became extremely quiet, “that the Third World War began in 1951 was lost in 1989. We were the defeated side, so we fell apart. This was a war of economic and technological potential. Ideology was chasing a mirage and sank into oblivion. In 2010, after President Obama’s March decree permitting the research of stem cells, that is, budget funding of genetic engineering, the Fourth World War began. It will become a global genetic and demographic standoff. Whoever wins this war, which will evidently be the last one, will ultimately control the world. No one in our country has paid attention to this fact. I am sure that we will lose it too. I am no panic-monger, but there is nothing bright about the life we have been forcibly plunged into. I am a Russian officer, and life has made me an actor. My role is to pander to the authorities. The more skill I develop in this lowly task, the stronger my position will be. And these are not abstract considerations. I have a family, three children. So I am dependent all round. And there are tons more where I come from. Who will look after the children? After all, they need to be fed and clothed every day. So it is impractical to argue with the authorities. It is better to yield. Do you understand me, my girl?”

“Thank you for the lecture. But I am going my own, albeit, thorny route. People need to shape their own destinies. I don’t know how it happened, but something entirely new has awoken in me. I want to do something specific and beneficial for myself, because I have suddenly realized that if my life changes for the better, others will benefit too. That means that the whole of Russia will change, and all of its citizens will begin to truly love and respect

their country. I appreciate your advice, but I have a different viewpoint. I am not waiting for people abroad to change Russian life. I want to be able to improve it myself, and for you to be able to, for all of us to be able to. So I am going to fight these scoundrels. I do not want, will not allow myself to think I have lost. But even if that is what happens, I will not give up, but fight them again and again. The question should be – it's either us or them!"

"Excuse me please, but what nationality are you?"

"Russian. I'm a local."

"I don't believe it. You aren't a typical Russian. One of the women in your genealogy must have sinned."

"I don't know. But as far as I am concerned, a Russian is someone who loves Russia and lives in it. So the question of nationality is a bit odd. Tell me now, without the traffic warden, were you really convinced I was drunk?"

"I knew from the start it was a police setup. But what could I do? Deprive myself of my bread? I realize that you or anyone else in a similar situation will disdain me. But if I do not bring food home, my family will think I am a lowdown good-for-nothing. In short, life is crowding in on all sides. When it is bad on both sides, you act on intuition, you take responsibility for your family. Which way should I turn? To a stranger or to my family? Should I care about a stranger if it is to my disadvantage? Am I supposed to act like a conscientious citizen for some person I've never met before or as a caring husband and father for his family? There is no straight answer. It is easier for demagogues, they can do what they want. But the gist remains the same. After retiring and becoming acquainted with the reality of civilian life, I decided to work only for my own benefit and that of my next of kin. I realize I may not be right, there is some still unknown truth, but there is no other choice at present in our country. For people want to have a family and take delight in well-fed and satisfied children. Go to bed with a happy, affectionate wife, and not with an irritated hateful woman. Forgive me, girlie, for my hypocrisy... If you do not understand me, can't forgive me, you are not Russian, but some foreigner from abroad. In that case,

there is no need for me to ask forgiveness. There is no point. Foreigners look at our wayfaring life in a different way.”

“You have your truth, and I want to find mine. I do not forgive you, but I understand your choice. Let’s not try to re-educate each other. We will remain deaf to each other’s advice. I want to build my life according to my own views formed in my own mind...” Surprise crept into her voice. She herself in no way expected that she was capable of this kind of discussion, that she had the vocabulary and capacity to stand up for herself. “I am not an intellectual capable of teaching someone close to me, never mind a stranger. Imagine Gogol, you mentioned, giving instructions to his nephew, coachman, or lady of the night. Nonsense. Perhaps a maximalist has awoken in me? But I’m not going to let that uniformed officer get the better of me. He is going to have to succumb to the law. I want to believe I can attain justice. Nor can I agree that foreigners look at our life in some different way. They simply look at us with genuine misunderstanding. And there is reason for their bewilderment—our way of life does not fit any social understanding. It just cannot be understood. Why is a nation with thousands of years of rich history unable to make its laws work? All we need to do is establish legal relations between citizens and the government. It would seem simple—change everything, adapt the regulations to world social standards. After all, vast experience has been accumulated in other countries. But our society does not have the brawn and brains for that...”

“You too are going a bit overboard with your instructions...”

“Perhaps, but I am only speaking my thoughts out loud. I am not imposing them. I feel stronger by myself than in any type of partnership, so I am far from wanting to instruct you.”

“I already said that you have nothing Russian about you—you are different, foreign. Whereas our people are distinguished by tolerance, they can also be irascible, high-handed, but judicious, detached, not publically active. And we are happy with our hapless lot. We take great delight in being different, and find harmony in the imbalance of social principles. Life built in keeping with a Swiss watch

mechanism is detrimental and uncomfortable for us. I rarely get the desire to change anything, even regarding my own modest purse or dilapidated home, never mind on a national scale. Such fantasies are always subdued by humility—our Russian essence. It is very possible that Russian Orthodoxy has given us this characteristic.”

After saying this, the driver lit up a caustic-smelling Prima cigarette and fell silent. Loskutkina stared at him for a few moments with her blue eyes. She felt stung by his sneering remarks about Russian reality, she was bewildered by the position of this retired military man. She was genuinely horrified that the worldview of people like him might predominate in the expanses of her homeland. The young woman thrust aside the thought that tolerance and stoic acceptance of reality were what kept Russia going. They travelled for another forty minutes in complete silence. Katy kept looking out of the window and at some point jumped up, “This is where I get off! Thank you.” And she stepped down from the bus.

“A law-monger,” the driver complained to himself. “But maybe she’s right. Whatever the case, though, it would be much better if other people, be they Italians, Germans, or French, helped our country to recover. I would not mind if compatriots, like that girl, began reforms in our country. But I want to think only of my own, fight for my own, and defend my own personal interests, put on the mask of a law-abiding citizen. That is the main thing for me, what do I care about the rest of the world, even if it has a reformed system! You can’t live, feed and clothe your family with just one idea in your head. I am only willing to be a face in the crowd heralding the arrival of a new Western-style order. But I refuse to engage in daily confrontation with even the local government, never mind traffic wardens... They could deprive me of my earnings. And I couldn’t have that. Nor is it possible to rake hot coals out of the fire by other means without talent and patience...”

Satisfied with the course of his thoughts, the driver stepped on the gas and the bus rolled on. The smoke of cheap tobacco aroused a deceptive sense of stability and even a certain amount of comfort.

Katy, hobbling on her left leg, crossed through a glade of young

birches, reached the outskirts of the village, and headed for the tumbledown house of the old woman healer. The sun spread a yellow haze over the earth. Katy noticed that her shadow looked like a humped Lilliputian. However, the young woman only grinned at her reflection on the well-trodden village road as she hurried toward her destination. The gate was open. Loskutkina walked uncertainly into the garden, went up to the door, and called out several times, “Grandma Nina! Grandma Nina!...”

No one answered. So she pushed the door; it easily gave way. From the doorstep, the young woman shouted to the landlady again, “Grandma Nina, are you there?”

Only then did she hear a weak voice, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Katy Loskutkina. Can I come in?”

“Oh, come in, come in, dear...” the old woman called. Her voice was cracked, quiet.

The guest found the healer in bed. She was lying in a darkened room with drapes drawn over the windows. She had a white cotton towel wrapped around her head, and her hands, crossed over her chest, held a wooden cross. It was the size of a door handle, dark in color, somewhat similar to the old woman’s hands. Above the bed hung an icon of the Mother of God decorated with discolored paper daisies.

“I haven’t seen you for a while... What brings you to see me, Katy? No one remembers me very often these days,” said Grandma Nina in a hurt voice. “I’m old... Seems like I’m doomed to loneliness. Everyone forgets, even those I’ve saved from death. Admittedly, I have no strength left now for gathering woodland herbs, healing people, seeing patients. I only have enough strength to repose in a Christian way. It’s time! It’s time! God is calling me. I talk to Him several times a day. He comforts me, He tells me that *there* my modest knowledge may be needed. So I am getting ready to meet Him... You’ve come on business I suppose? Why else would you have come? To see an old woman, bring her a fresh bun, ask how she is doing, wash her linen? Of course not. Tell me... What’s on your mind?”

“I don’t even know where to start... I woke up today after taking a nap and don’t recognize myself. It’s as though I’ve been bewitched. I want to change everything, transform, but I have to begin with myself before going on to make major changes in our Russian home. I have this incredible desire to do some social work, start a business, fight injustice. And also become beautiful, healthy, dress fashionably, live wealthily. What do you think is happening to me, Grandma Nina?”

“These things do happen. An angel or animal suddenly awakens in a person. Or she falls into complete detachment. This can happen after a serious injury or severe illness. I remember you did not finish the treatment after your stroke. You disappeared. You didn’t even write to me. And I waited, worried about you. Wondered if you were having any complications.”

“Yes, I hobble on my left leg.”

“What’s the matter with it?”

“It doesn’t act right, I have to bow it.”

“We’ll try and treat it. What else?”

“That’s all for now.”

“Is that the only reason you came?”

“No... I have come to terms with my ailment, people have even told me it can’t be cured. I came to see you, came to you, to offer you a profitable deal. I have some starting capital, we could try setting up a business. First I will gather medicinal herbs myself. I used to be quite good at it. I was even praised. Then we can hire helpers. You’ll give advice, tell me what diseases different herbs are used for, what they can be mixed with, what blends and brews to prepare. We’ll start a company, register it at a notary office, be accountable to the tax service, and begin delivering ready products to the consumer market through advertizing and pharmacies. We’ll have a network of commercial agents. Once we increase turnover, we’ll hire a lawyer who will help us get patent protection for our medication. This is very important for developing our own brands, which means for our shared income. After that we’ll buy a plot of land not far from the railroad and begin building a small factory for manu-

facturing medicinal herbs. Let's say around a thousand square meters. It being close to the railroad will make it possible to efficiently compete in the sales market, and the extensive grounds will allow us to build factory shops, increase production capacities, and lower prime costs. This is extremely important in a business development concept. And we can't forget about staff policy. We will keep our eye out for talented graduates from institutes in Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, and Irkutsk. And we won't be stingy with our pay. Whoever works hard should get a decent wage. If you trust me, become my partner and consultant, I will put the company on its feet in the next year or two and make good profits. Together we can help thousands to recover from illnesses. I figured it all out—a consumer basket of medicinal herbs on the Siberian market will come to around fifty million dollars, and if we gain access to the national market, it will be around three hundred million. This is something worth striving for. Then we can think about export programs. And they have incredible opportunities. We could make hundreds of millions of dollars. To assure success in the world markets I will begin learning foreign languages starting tomorrow. The Internet will help me to find out what the consumer demand is in different countries. What do you say, Grandma Nina? After all, it is a very enticing prospect. It is something to live for, something to stand on your own two feet for.”

“If I could laugh, I would be chuckling the whole day,” croaked the old woman, smiling with difficulty. “I am already eighty-seven. I am waiting to die, and you are talking about some strange business in words I don't understand. I don't understand you. Tell me straight, what do you want?”

“I want to know your medicinal secrets. What blend of herbs cures infertility? What will prevent recurring stroke, pneumonia, hepatitis, psoriasis, impotence, stomach ulcers? Can you tell me in detail about that? Tell me what doses of medicinal herbs to use in a blend? In what portions and at what time to take the medications necessary for cure? I hope to continue the cause you have devoted your entire life to. Will you agree to help me? I can pay you

money, or anything else for the training... Help me, Grandma Nina..."

The old woman closed her eyes and lay for a long time without moving. Only her rattled breathing showed she was still alive. Finally she opened her eyes, looked intently at Loskutkina, and burst out, "No, I cannot. I don't have the energy! Or the desire! There is no future for women like me either. Not to mention bold desires. Go to the stall instead and bring me some sweets, the ones I loved as a child. Before I die I want to recall my childhood. Don't interrupt my desire to quietly say farewell to this world with your plans."

Katy rushed out of the house and went to the village stall. A couple of minutes later she returned with a bag of sweets. She immediately poured out a few onto a saucer standing near the bed.

"Let me touch the bag," the old woman asked barely audible.

The young woman did as she asked.

"Eighty years have passed, but the paper has not changed," the healer said, smiling weakly. "It's still as rough and yellow as it used to be... And what about the sweets. Bring one up to my lips. The same smell, the same taste. Little changes in our environs. Tell me, Katy, can you bury me according to our customs? With a funeral service..."

"Don't be rushing to die!"

"I will ask again, can you?"

"Of course, I will organize everything as necessary..."

"You promise?"

"I swear!"

"There is a purse under my pillow. Take it out and count the money. I've been saving for my funeral, but my neighbor, who promised to see me on my way, passed away earlier. Now I am entrusting you with this task. Funeral, memorial service, cake and wine, that's all. Modest and quiet. Like the whole of my long life. If you don't spend all the money, divide the rest between you and the church. It doesn't have much of an income these days, but people still need to be buried. I have not heard a baby cry for the past

fifteen years. So I am already used to the grave. It is totally quiet around here. How much money is in my purse, did you count it?"

"Nineteen thousand."

"Will that be enough?"

"I don't know. I've never..."

"So you will find out how much everything costs."

"I have money, I'll pay for it myself."

"No, Katy, I am not destitute, I will not allow other people to use their money to bury me. Swear that you will not deceive me, won't take all my money."

"Come now, Grandma Nina, I could never do anything like that. I swear on my mother's memory, who you knew well, that I will do as you wish."

"Over there, on the bookshelf... is a bundle of papers. There you will find notes on all my secrets. I am giving them to you. Don't be in a rush to cure people. You have been gathering beneficial herbs since you were a child, now learn to use them. It's not that simple... Learning will take a lot of time. Go and look... And now go out into the yard, your visit has exhausted me. Sit on the bench and read. I'll take a nap," she said dully and closed her eyes.

Loskutkina easily found the bundle of old notes and, taking them, noiselessly went outside. She settled herself on a bench under the apple tree and began looking through the yellowed manuscript. The healer's handwriting was neat and clear, the language simple. In just a few minutes, Katy was forming an idea about how to organize her future business. She found notes relating to her own ailment and recommendations about how to eliminate complications. The prescription for her was underlined. "Grandma Nina did not forget me. And I, idiot that I am, did not find the time to come and see her, bring her something, help her in some way," she chastised herself bitterly. "Can I really rid myself of an ailment I've suffered from for twelve years now?" She spent three hours reading. At some point, the young woman decided to go and check on the old woman. "How is my Grandma Nina doing? Maybe she needs something?"

When Loskutkina went into the house, it was deathly quiet. Katy was put on the alert. She moved closer to the bed. The cross had fallen from Grandma Nina's hands onto the floor. Her cheeks were sunken, setting her cheekbones in sharp relief, her nose looked sharp and pointed, lifeless. "She's dead," thought Katy, feeling a lump in her throat. "What shall I do now? Tell the district policeman, call a doctor to certify the death, tell the church elder... And gather the neighbors and arrange a day for the funeral. I am the only one who can do this. Grandma Nina has no relatives."

The residents of Streshnevo and many people from neighboring villages gathered to say farewell to the well-known healer. Around thirty people came in all, mainly old women. A couple of the men pestered Katy to put out some vodka before they went to the cemetery, saying it was the thing to do to commemorate Grandma Nina. The funeral was quick and quiet, but very Christian. The priest, after saying the requiem, hurried to down a glass of vodka, then another, ate a sandwich, then immediately left. Katy had done her best to provide a decent memorial repast. There was more than enough to eat. Some of the guests even took some home, carefully wrapping it in napkins. Katy also served the guests vodka and red and white wine. When the repast was over and the guests began to leave, Katy cleared everything away. Alone in the empty house, knowing that Grandma Nina did not have any relatives and there was no one to claim the ramshackle lodging, she, without giving it any long thought, decided to stay and live in the hut. "Later I will need to buy it, then do some major repairs and renovations. According to the law, if there are no heirs, the municipality should become the legal successor. I'll have to bargain with them. The price should not be too high. Around twenty thousand, no more. And renovation will cost around a hundred and fifty thousand rubles."

She settled down on the old sofa. She could not fall asleep for a long time. Her mind continued to buzz with thoughts about transforming her own life, one crowding in on the other. For the first time in her life, she passionately wanted to create, start her own business, manage money, build her own special world. Her creative

musings long wove themselves into stirring melodies in her head, reinforcing her belief in her own power, in the truth of her new worldview. At some point, she recalled the incident with the traffic warden. The young woman immediately jumped up from the sofa, found several sheets of paper and began writing complaints to different departments. The first she addressed to the Krasnoyarsk Interior Affairs Administration, the second to the territorial prosecutor's office, the third to the city police, and still more to the mayor, head of the Russian Road Traffic Control Department, and Minister of Internal Affairs in Moscow. She described what had happened, and ended by asking why inspectors who flout the country's laws are hired to work in the law-enforcement structures. Long after midnight, she had prepared six envelopes to be sent off. In the hope that the officer would be removed from his post and stop treating his fellow citizens like dogs, Katy, with the satisfied feeling of a job well done, fell asleep.

Early in the morning, after finding some bags for collecting herbs among deceased Grandma Nina's things, Loskutkina set off into the taiga. The incredible energy that had awoken in her did not leave her with an iota of doubt about the success of her plan. "I only need to work continuously, abide by the law, and rebuff any obscurantism. Then the result will not be long in coming. It all depends on me! On each of us! People need to rally together to rebuff social injustice! And then Russia will finally truly rise from its knees!" she thought. "But why did I never think about this before? Everyone treated me like something to wipe their feet on. I constantly felt downtrodden. I was sure that such was my unenviable fate. No! Enough! I must take my life in my own hands! And pass this simple thought on to everyone else! The faster we take a strong hold of each other's hands, for the sake of a common cause, the more vibrantly the spirit of freedom and respect for the individual will awaken in us, the more decisively we will break the chain of bureaucratic bondage! Oh, and here's the first flower. It's yarrow—protector against sorcery. And here's some Siberian clematis, it cures heart and capillary diseases. Price per kilogram is ten dollars.

And basketplant, just the thing for me, it should help rectify musculoskeletal disorders. It costs fourteen dollars a kilo... It will not only help me to stop limping, but also to earn an entire fortune. In time I could set up a museum of Siberian medicinal flowers and grasses in Grandma Nina's hut, and I can build myself a decent brick house. And here's some hemlock—an anti-tumor medicine. It costs around twenty dollars. And its extract will go for forty, or even fifty, dollars in the world market. I will have enough money to buy equipment for putting the extract in capsules, and for making pills from other herbs and flowers. Sage, penny cress, there is so much here. Tons! And here's some wintergreen, it cures infertility. And it's not cheap. I will have to set up a modern laboratory for carrying out quality control of the finished product. Oh, oh, a whole treasure-trove right under my feet! Money is blossoming all around. All I need to do is gather it! Work! There is a lot of canker rose here too. Magnificent botanical species of fir, cedar, pine. I will have to find out at the forestry department whether picking canker rose is prohibited. If not, I can expand my business, create a nursery for growing seedlings. They are in great demand in the market. Then I can buy an Audi Q7, I really like that car. I will wear the latest fashions. Hire a massager, begin using the best body lotions, eat only environmentally pure natural products. I will include visits to all the well-known world fairs of medication and medical equipment in my business schedule. I will be able to go on exquisite foreign tours, visit the Cote d'Azur, Monte Carlo, Nice, Cannes, Forte Village in Sardinia, Florida, and Mauritius ... Why did I not pay any attention to this vast wealth scattered all over Siberia before? Was I really so stupid? What has changed in me? Why have my eyes opened to these incredible opportunities? Never mind! Enough of the past. A new life is beginning. I will not only achieve personal success, I will also be of benefit to my country and people!"

Katy's blue eyes lit up with incredible joy. She was surrounded on all sides by the taiga...

A QUIRK OF FATE

Parfenchikov swallowed spoonful after spoonful. After the fifth, he passed the bag of powdered poppy to Gregory Semyonovich and began eating a bun washed down with tea. “The high will come any minute,” he thought, “then Professor Koshmarov will appear. I will ask him to create ruspop, a nano pill of eternal ecstasy. Hey there, two-eyes! Come here! I have something to tell you about the effect of the nano pill that improves the Russian ethnicity. Professor, where are you? I am already feeling the power of opium exciting my mind. Oh, how my nose and neck are itching, how my tongue has gone dry, how my pulse has quickened. Well, where are you, Koshmarov? A, there you are, hello, welcome! We want to congratulate you. Your nano pill, which we are calling rukgen, has begun its procession around Russia. The first citizen, Katy Loskutkina, is already undergoing incredible transformations. We have been keeping an eye on her for some time. Amazing changes. She has become an entirely different person. You won’t recognize her. We will report further on her metamorphosis. It is extremely interesting!”

“Congratulations! To be honest, I was not expecting such an amazing effect,” said Pomeshkin, joining in and smiling. “A virtuosic effect, the patient has changed beyond recognition.” His attention was suddenly distracted from the bespectacled gentleman, his eyes lit up, Gregory Semyonovich was feeling the jubilant bondage of the wondrous flower.

“We have an urgent request to make of you, Professor Koshmarov,” began Peter Petrovich ingratiatingly. “We want to ask you to create a special nano pill—ruspop. If you are engaged in nano technology, you will definitely be able to help us. It would really be a great relief for us. We won’t have to plant poppy and be constantly bound to powdered opium, to the spoon, to a crust of bread, gulp of water, tea. If I have fallen into bondage, fallen crazily in love with its unusual state, this poppy dependence should be

eternal, all-victorious, all-penetrating—for all times and for all cells of Parfenchikov’s flesh. Not from one dose to the next, not from spoon to spoon, not from portion to portion, but absolute! I should consist totally of koknar! Only it gives food for elevated mind games! Why do I need any other substance? Give me the ruspop nano pill! Undertake a bold scientific experiment! Show the world community what it’s missing. Your brainchild will become a very beneficial study for genetic engineering. What do you think, professor? Agree!...”

“What does your friend Pomeskin think? Is he also enticed by an eternally inflamed mind? For it will be impossible to reverse the process. This effect will accompany you to the grave and even into the world beyond,” said the bespectacled old man, looking inquiringly at Gregory Semyonovich.

“I give my official consent to participation in the experiment. I am willing to sign any document!” Pomeskin exclaimed, waving his hands impatiently. “I particularly like the fact that the nano pill will be effective for all time, even in the other world. Amazing! Incredible!” The young man was seeing something greater in the ruspop than a mere coincidence. It seemed to be a legitimate pattern governing his own destiny, which lately was tending with increasing consistency toward abstraction.

“But ruspop in no way means that we are no longer interested in experiments to improve the Russian nation,” Parfenchikov continued happily. “Think of ruspop as the prize for our active participation in the experiments with the rukgen nano pill. One good turn deserves another. I don’t mean to back you up against the wall, but you don’t have anyone else to perform your scientific-patriotic program, and I don’t think you ever will. So I suggest that you pay in advance, give us ruspop today and tomorrow we will give rukgen to more and more of the Russian population. Compared to the desperation and rapture Pomeskin and I feel in our constant craving for the extraordinary plant, the renewed Russian will look more perfect, manageable, and disciplined. This cannot help but stroke your professional ego, to which, I feel, you attentively adhere.”

“Who is the next guinea pig going to be?” asked the bespectacled gentlemen politely. “You know of course that this kind of experiment works best when contrasting material is chosen, so that it is easier to follow the dynamics of change.”

“Efimkin is back in town, but so downcast and depressed. What do you think of him as a candidate? As I see it, our initial task is to turn a bad commodity into a good one... And this character has a lot of foul things about him,” suggested Gregory Semyonovich hurriedly.

“I don’t agree!” interrupted Parfenchikov. “Pomeshkin and I will be the next test subjects. And then Efimkin and all the others in the national improvement program. Incidentally, I personally have nothing against participating in more of your scientific experiments that change the human essence. I’ve had enough of the mass idiocy we constantly have to deal with. I must confess, in the not-so-distant past, before I found koknar, I was always coming up with despicable, absurd, and repulsive ways to fight these masses. I dreamed of sticking them on pins, like entomologists stick exotic butterflies on collection stands. It is amazing what desires emerge in Parfenchikov’s mind.”

“I am not against Efimkin. And the thesis that first we change bad to good is to my liking,” snickered the professor. “I happened to hear that you keep a record, Gregory Semyonovich, on many citizens in your town. What do you do? Divide the public into good and bad?”

“I do keep the most detailed files on many people,” confirmed Pomeshkin dryly, but with an inner feeling of pride. “I am a nit-picker, I like everything to be in order.”

“So can we depend on you? Do you know for sure who should be changed first?” questioned the professor.

“Yes, yes!”

“When do you want the nano pill from me?”

“The sooner, the better,” Peter Petrovich retorted quickly. “Without it we won’t continue the experiment.”

“And in the meantime Russians will have to be content with a

sorry sixteenth place on the intellectual map of Europe. Hurry up!" said Pomeskin, supporting his friend.

"I have to do a few preliminary elaborations. If I have enough time, I'll be back to see you this evening. Again I want to warn you that there will be no going back. You will remain in the world of dreams and fantasies forever. So long!" the bespectacled old man bid his farewell.

"I can't wait for that great event!" snickered Parfenchikov.

"I knew that this is what would happen! Bravo!" nodded Gregory Semyonovich with an important look on his face.

The professor disappeared. The friends were left on their own.

"What shall we do? What shall we talk about? Something general, or personal?" Peter Petrovich muttered to himself. Although it might well have seemed that he was asking Pomeskin.

"I want to be by myself. Solitude is much more valuable to me than socialization," said Gregory Semyonovich, also by the way. It was not clear at all who he was talking to. It didn't seem he was talking to Parfenchikov. There are people who talk to themselves but, in so doing, do not hear themselves. This was the state Mr. Pomeskin seemed to be in. "I'll go and lie down," he said, although he did not go anywhere, but continued sitting at the kitchen table. Admittedly, he began assiduously rubbing his nose. This was a sure sign that the young man had had too much. "I wonder," continued Pomeskin, "if my own sperm flung around the room would produce Existent or Non-Existent children? For after you've had your fill of opium, everything seems Existent. But as soon as I pick up the binoculars with a sober head and look at the world around me, everything seems absolutely Non-Existent. So the difference between these concepts is insignificant or does not exist at all. Because both products are created by the imagination. But if the imagination is in a state of constant reverie, can the Non-Existent confirm that the Existent is genuine? Or vice versa? If the first cannot confirm the second, then the second cannot confirm the first. If this is so, and there can be no doubt about it, I myself am

constantly migrating between the Existent me and Non-Existent me. And this effect of imitation did not arise in me until I made the happy acquaintance of the great plant. Before that I never felt anything like it. So the main question I want to ask Koshmarov will be, supposing the nano pill transports me forever into the world of reverie, will I still experience this wonderful state of transferring from one guise to another? It, to tell the truth, has totally charmed me. After experiencing this feeling, I have decided to give myself up totally to the wild flower. I have even begun taking less delight in the Existent me, which has been passing over into the Non-Existent me. After becoming acquainted with koknar I have only taken delight in myself twice, scattering the sperm of life around. That used to happen much more often, even daily. If the old man promises that no significant changes will take place and switching from Existent to Non-Existent and back will continue, I will happily take his pill. If the professor cannot give such a guarantee, I will of course refrain. I will take some time out. I will carefully watch Peter Parfenchikov in the time being. I will be particularly interesting in finding out if the reality that emerges by means of opium is capable of being Non-Existent? If so, the answer will be unequivocally no! I will not participate in the experiment with the ruspop pill. But if it turns out that a permanent metamorphosis of Existent into Non-Existent and back occurs in the world, between reality, which is actually not such, and non-reality, which is also not such, then I will definitely take the nano pill. Because I truly want to move forever into the world of variable categories. Who you are and who you aren't, whereby it is impossible to establish whether you are you or you are not you, or even who you are; either Gregory Pomeshkin or No One At All! A wonderful game between the Existent and Non-Existent, between you and not you, illusion and clarity. The person of the future should live in such an entertaining world, when the sense of yourself is so provisional, unclear, and un-specific that there is no need for aggression, or compassion, or money, or power, or love, or hate. I want to live in a world of abstractions, where imitation triumphs over the stereotypes of

reality. Where there is no boundary between what exists and what does not exist!”

The young man continued thinking aloud about the sensuous and inert perception of the world. He did not seem to notice how Mr. Parfenchikov was nervously striding from one corner to the other in deceased Fateeva’s kitchen, rather loudly expounding on very different topics. At the moment, Peter Petrovich was interested in the question of whether there was something in the Universe that could not be used simultaneously for good and for bad. He was looking for an action that was either exclusively bad or produced only good. These reflections were prompted by what Peter wanted to discuss with the professor, who, in Parfenchikov’s opinion, might refrain from the set task and not send him and his friend into the world of everlasting euphoria.

“If Koshmarov argues that ruspop could have a double effect, which means it should not be used, I must beat his arguments to smithereens,” said Peter Petrovich. “But what can I find in this vast world that has only has a plus sign? Life is minus, because it has an end. Death is also minus because it does not have an end. Time is constantly accompanied by three signs: minus—everything in the past, plus—something in the future, and plus with a minus—always in the present. But what about reflections that transform into wisdom? That is an eternal process. It also has a minus sign. Wisdom will eventually become some banal stupidity. And what about mathematical magnitudes? They can have different signs. So I cannot find anything eternal that has a plus sign. This means that everything accessible to my mind in the world has two sides. Murder, abortion, burning poppy plants, political passivity, social detachment, talent, and stupidity. In general, absolutely everything! One side is beneficial and the other detrimental. So in what sense can stupidity be beneficial? If we admit there are two sides, we are automatically saying that everything has two sides to it. It is easier for the wise man to deal with fools. They can be manipulated and money embezzled from them. The same with poppy. It is extremely beneficial to Peter Petrovich. My poppy-obsessed mind is superior

to the self-assured world of any clever clogs who is not like me. For someone else, poppy is a deathly plant. In short, it is not worth responding to the old man's provocations. And will he try anything like that? I don't think the professor will go for any kind of blackmail. What if we slip him his own nano pill? How will he change, eh? That's it! First he supplies us with ruspop. And then we will secretly give him rukgen. And watch how he changes in completely safety. If he sends us, admittedly with our consent, on a journey of no return, he will get a very effective message from us. Koshmarov is clever enough without an ethnic genetic blend, while the nano pill could raise his IQ to 140. This is the highest mental index. It distinguished Schopenhauer, Dostoevsky, Einstein, Max Plank, Leontiev, Bor, and Caynes from all the rest. Then the old man's incredible capabilities will shine like the facets of a diamond. After his transformation, the professor will be able to improve the Russian species, perfect masses of people, particularly bureaucrats and officials with the snap of a finger. And all the mentally backward, premature, and flawed as well, dunces and poor achievers, army warrant officers and policemen. Greg, hey, Gregory? You hear?" Peter Petrovich called to Pomeshkin. "I've been thinking here that after we get the ruspop we should slip the professor his own invention, the rukgen nano pill. What do you think?"

"What for?" Gregory Semyonovich frowned, not completely himself after his intense reflection.

"So that he can change Russians in one sweep, raise them to a high rank on the intellectual map of Europe and the entire world. We will be doing a good thing. Don't you agree?"

"As you will. I don't care. I am thinking about something else. Love for the homeland is an extremely unhealthy feeling for me, the kind that people get who are incapable of enduring social contradictions or blows of fate."

"Only I am wondering how to get him to take it? Not only has he never eaten anything here, he never drinks anything either. Where could we conceal the pill so that it ends up in his stomach? Do you have an idea? Nothing comes to mind."

“But have you ever offered him anything before?”

“What do I have apart from powdered poppy head and bread crusts?”

“Put a pie and three plates on the table. Put pieces of pie on our plates. We could even take a bite of them. Put cups of tea and a sugar bowl near by, to make it look as though we are having tea. Put the nano pill in the third piece. When he finds us drinking tea, it is entirely possible he will want to join us in our modest repast... Drink some tea and eat some pie. It should not arouse any suspicions. If he doesn't say anything, is shy, let's say, we could very cautiously, even somewhat lackadaisically, invite him to join us. But, of course, we can't force him to eat anything. I can't think of anything else.”

“That's what we will do. I will go to the bakery. I hope it's open. Many places have folded due to the crisis... Be back soon!”

It was after seven in the evening. The young men were getting ready to meet Koshmarov. Parfenchikov called out now and again, “Appear, professor! We are tired of waiting for you! We are on our third cup of tea! Hey there! Stop tormenting your friends. Hey there! You promised to come see us by evening...”

Finally, the bespectacled old man appeared before them. “How are you doing, friends?” he asked. He looked around and noted to himself, “Why are they drinking tea with an expensive cake? I have never noticed them doing that before. Do they have something in mind? If they don't offer me tea, I will drink some, if they invite me to join them, I will refuse. What if they have put a pill in the cake and want to feed me my own invention? Weirdos... No matter what they have in mind, I don't like this. I have been friendly toward them after all... In short, I will wait and see.” Out loud he said cheerfully, “I have prepared ruspop for you. I cannot guarantee the quality, but I think it is all in order. Perhaps one of you would like to try it? Who wants to take the pill first?”

“I will,” said Peter Petrovich hurriedly. “After all, aberrations of reality, particularly of one's own personality, intrigue me more than cold, implacable reason.”

“I will,” shouted Pomeshkin after him. “Adherents of the wondrous flower constantly strive for solitude, assuring that only in that state do hallucinations, harbingers of creative understanding of oneself, arise. At some moment, a thought begins to take up residence in the mind that only the spirit is sovereign, only it defines the human essence. While the will is not free, it is under the influence of other people’s wishes, and gives a distorted idea of reality.”

“Let’s compromise and start together!” suggested Parfenchikov. “We thought of it together, so together we will begin. Because we are both constantly striving to look into a world we have no idea about. And you, professor, have some tea and cake while you are waiting. It’s good!”

“Mister Koshmarov doesn’t want to. Why does he need our cake?” said Gregory Semyonovich grumpily. And thought to himself, “Why is Parfenchikov showing his cards ahead of time. Clever clogs.”

“So it is a conspiracy!” thought the old man. “Then I will pull a dirty trick on you too. You will always find me full of little surprises. Let’s see who falls for it.”

“No, friends,” he refused resolutely, “you know that I never eat and never drink. I don’t do that out of caution, but exclusively on my doctor’s orders. He has prescribed me a special diet, so thank you very much, but no thank you. So, shall we begin? I warn you that there is no going back. It is impossible! I will not say goodbye, since I will come and visit you from time to time. I am sure you will not miss me. You will be too engrossed in the energetic uplift. Here are two pills for each of you... Go ahead!” he said with a strange smirk in his voice.

“Why two each?” asked Pomeshkin.

“I couldn’t care less, two, three or five each... The more pills, the more vibrant the state. Maybe you could give us more, professor?” asked Parfenchikov.

“The first pill gives euphoria, and the second ensures it will last for eternity. For you, Peter Petrovich, I will say, that is enough. I don’t permit myself to overdo it and don’t advise others to. Please,

take the pill with your koknar. The intensity of the intoxication you feel is what will remain with you for all time.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Peter Petrovich joyfully. “If that’s the case, let’s go!” And he drank down the poison with cold tea. “Good! Superb! Whereas earlier entirely civilized countries with certain humanoid features that did not fit into the code of laws acted triumphantly and radically, they were made a head shorter, I, as the subject of a sovereign culture, uphold a different idea—I am willing to immediately throw everything below the head into the garbage can. Because Peter Petrovich is not subjected to severe human sins—he is not tempted by the flesh, his blessing is the charm of the koknar spectacle. One head is more than enough for that!”

Pomeshkin followed suit, taking his pills.

“Rather bitter!” he said, screwing up his face.

“And I will be off,” Koshmarov began, bidding his farewell. “If you need me, call. I cannot promise that I will come at every shout, but I will try. You can always reach me. I have a good memory. I remember everything, particularly idiotic schemes...” No one heard him. But he continued to himself, “My revenge is not so terrible. You will spend a few years in the loony bin for compulsory treatment. And I will keep an eye on you on your more lucid days. If you repent, I will return you to the Siberian expanses, if not, farewell gentlemen! You will remain in the world you now frequent. Even I am incapable of understanding what separates reality from your obsessive hallucinations. So it doesn’t really make much difference whether you are in the nut house or at dead old Fateeva’s. When inflammation of the mind is the highest priority and there is nothing more important in life than extravagant mind games, it makes no difference at all where you live. Your only interest is the dimensions and horizons of profuse fantasies. So my punishment is gentle, friendly, and scientific. I want to observe you with the eyes of a genetic researcher. So long!”

After seven heaped spoonfuls taken one after the other, Peter Petrovich began smiling contentedly. It was a huge dose. He followed the koknar with a piece of bread, sat down on the floor and began

waiting for the most magnificent moment called the onrush that causes hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens to fall head over heels in love with opium. But Parfenchikov's current state was especially enraptured. The professor's promise that the joy he initially felt would last an eternity truly seduced him. Parfenchikov had even before experienced such an immense uplift of spirit. This most joyous state would never again leave him. "Ne-ev-er! Ne-ev-er! Ne-ev-er!" ran through his head now and then. "Oh, how sweet it sounds! Like a genuine hymn of victory. Victory of unlimited freedom over the kingdom of depraved consumption. Oh-oh, how wonderful!"

"It's begun! I can feel universal power turning in my body and mind," Parfenchikov began to whisper to himself, even somewhat mysteriously, like a conspirator. "Oh, I'm off! The wondrous attack will crush all obstacles barring the way to Peter Petrovich's biological essence. And do I need them? No! Ugh! Come on, come on, destroy everything, completely, fundamentally, leave only the excited mind, inflamed conscience, and desire to rush around the labyrinths of illusions. Oh, what divine euphoria! What an exquisite state! What a blow of magical intoxicating elements! Oh, oh, Peter Petrovich! I have never felt like this before—I am even farting in ecstasy. What joy! What lightness I feel throughout my body! I have lifted off the ground, begun to soar, float, I am in the heavens, swinging on a magical swing. Euphoria is I, rapture is I! I want, I dream of shouting to the whole world—what a miracle the old man has created with me. Dearest professor! Genius! God of feelings and enjoyment. Gentlemen, can it really be so magnificent, is it really possible to experience such immense joy? O, poppy flower—you are an unearthly divinity, you are a universal celebration, you are eternity itself. I feel so wonderful that my feelings have overcome my mind, I am slurring my words, I am gasping, my pulse is stopping, my entire biological being is dying, I've taken off.... I am becoming immersed in the nirvana of eternity, I have no more strength to talk to myself... Do I need it... Oh, oh... o...o... Hmhm...hmm...heheh...."

While this was going on, Pomeskin was entirely absorbed in

himself and was not paying any attention to what was happening around him. This was the first time he had taken three spoonfuls, so he was a little concerned, constantly felt his pulse and rubbed his nose. He wanted to take off into eternity in a state of immense euphoria, but not disappear into it totally, rather be able to take a peek, that is, sometimes look back into the world he had left. The poppy attack on his mind began faster than he expected. First he experienced levitation. Then Gregory Semyonovich took off on three raven-colored horses, although not through snowy fields, but through a storming sea. Strange, but the spray never reached his burning face. And he so longed to feel its freshness. Suddenly everything disappeared, and he found himself in bed in an entirely unfamiliar place. His mind was again full of the thoughts he had been having recently—was he, Pomeshkin, an Existent or a Non-Existent being? Or did he live simultaneously in two spheres? He wanted to dig down to the gist of this question, if he was simultaneously Existent and Non-Existent, under what circumstances and with the help of what power does this metamorphosis from one state to the other occur? “For example,” he said to himself, “at the moment I feel as though I am a Non-Existent being. And even if I begin beating myself, I will not feel any pain.” He really did begin hitting himself on the face and head. “No pain at all. Does this not prove I am a Non-Existent being? What if I start beating my head against the wall?” He thought for a moment. “Yes, yes, let’s try!” The young man hit his head against the wall a couple of times and noticed without surprise, “I don’t feel pain there either. So it’s true, I am a Non-Existent being.” At that moment he felt a warm liquid running from his nose. “What’s that?” There was blood on his hand. “Strange,” thought Pomeshkin, although he immediately added that there was nothing strange about it. “This clue shows that I have two origins – Existent and Non-Existent. But still the entire question intrigues me, under what circumstances am I Existent and under what am I Non-Existent? I will have to ask someone. Maybe someone will tell me?” With this thought, he walked around the house until he found a man in one of the rooms sprawling on the

floor. Pomeschkin kicked him, “Hey, lad, could you say something about the question I am wracking my brains over? What is the power that transforms me from an Existent into a Non-Existent being? An interesting question, no? Don’t you think it’s interesting? Why aren’t you saying anything? You’ve probably never thought about it before, am I right? Yes? I’ll give you a thump in the face and you tell me if you can feel it, okay?” Gregory Semyonovich got down on his knees, bent over and hit the man in the face once, then again, harder.

“What do you feel? And what if I put some paper between your fingers and light it? Will your Existent being react to it or not? You agree? You’re not answering? Are you afraid? Don’t be afraid. If the expression on your face shows me that the pain has become insufferable, I will put out the flames and won’t continue the experiment.”

Pomeschkin found a piece of yellowed newspaper, tore a small piece off, put it between the fingers of the left hand of the incumbent man and lit it. Looking closely at the detached face of his neighbor, he giggled, “This guy is in a Non-Existent state. He is very deeply into it. Good for you! I will have to find out from him how he gets there. Oh, how wonderful he feels in his Non-Existent state. And I want the same!”

Gregory Semyonovich lay down next to Parfenchikov, who for some reason he did not recognize, and closed his eyes. The young man could smell something burning and imagined that the fire was that power that transformed him from an Existent to a Non-Existent state of being.

Gradually the fire caught hold of Gregory Semyonovich’s clothing. But the young man did not feel anything at all. Enraptured by his unusual state, Pomeschkin began patiently waiting for blinding, magical reincarnation...

*What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly,
man may do providently, quickly, and kindly.*

Francis Galton

EPILOGUE

A beautiful young woman came out of Moscow's National Hotel on Mokhovoi Street. She was dressed in a fashionable bottle-green suit with a silk maroon scarf around her neck and elegant high-heeled shoes on her feet. A golden Russian Orthodox cross hung on her open breast. Turning to the doorman, she asked, "Could you tell me how to get to the State Duma? I need the main entrance...."

"Turn left and go down through the pedestrian tunnel. It is only a three- or four-minute walk from here. Happy to help you, my lovely lady."

"Thank you!" the woman reached out her hand to the footman, not in greeting, but to place a tip in his half-open fist.

"Most appreciative!" the footman said looking askance at the green bill and clenching it tightly.

The young woman set off along the indicated route with a graceful step and clear look in her blue eyes. She was carrying an elegant patent-leather folder with the inscription "Expansion of Medicinal Plant Cultivation until 2020 in the Siberian Federal District." Her heels clicked in unison with the chime of the tower bells. The young woman's unhurried gait showed that she was in plenty of time to reach the meeting with important people from the Lower House at the appointed hour.

Only people who knew her very well, which practically no one did, would have recognized her as Katy Loskutkina from Siberian Kan.

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