

Pavel Zhang and Other River Creatures
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Sample translated from the Russian by Lisa C. Hayden

Pavel remembered a dark-eyed young woman who was as nimble as an alley cat. She was one of the female students who'd come to their house six months after his father disappeared. His mother greeted her coldly. She hadn't liked Pavel's father's students: she was jealous of them and thought of them as parasites who'd paid for an hour but actually took all his father's time. Pavel was sent to his room to do his homework so didn't hear what they talked about. Only bits of what they said reached him, uttered in a whistling whisper that made the whole conversation sound like a ball of hissing snakes. Then the door clicked shut; floorboards groaned, adding sound to his mother's path into the living room; and he began to smell tobacco smoke.

Pavel didn't bother asking why Marina had come over. He didn't want to get walloped.

Who knew she'd resurface when Pavel was getting ready to start college?

When Pavel received a package slip at his communal apartment, he made a lengthy trip around the neighborhood. He walked, futilely hiding from the rain under an umbrella and searching for the post office on a map. The wind got under his umbrella, first from one side, then from the other, flinging raindrops in his face. Mist settled on his smart glasses, making the camera malfunction so he couldn't enlarge an image properly and figure out which courtyard to turn into. Meanwhile, thoughts swarmed in his head: What had Marina sent and why? How did she find him? Maybe she'd seen the blog posts? All but the laziest were writing about the orphanage and "the boy versus the system." But nobody had mentioned his name or shown his face.

The local post office was hidden away in part of a residential building, under an arch of yellowed lilacs, right next to the Taobao flea market. An ancient, grandmotherly woman sat inside the post office, behind a window that looked like a cat flap. The system for receiving packages couldn't have been more ancient, either. No biometrics, she just scanned Pavel's ID, then walked away for about ten minutes, and returned with a slender parcel wrapped in film. It was addressed to "Zhang Baolu," the name Pavel's father called him. Inside was *The Path*, the exact same book he remembered, with a dried circle, a tea stain, on the cover.

The Path had lain on his father's little end table, usually under other books he was reading. Pavel's father loved paper pages and refused to download from the Internet, something that infuriated Pavel's mother terribly: "The whole house is filled with these books from the dump, who the hell needs them but you?" Pavel remembered the tangy smell of his father's robe when he pressed his cheek against his father's shoulder and peered at the book. "*Ba*, what's that?" he'd ask, pointing at an unfamiliar Chinese character, and *ba* would read quietly so as not to waken Pavel's mother in the next room. The building's walls were thick but his mother somehow heard everything anyway, then she'd come in, demanding they not shout.

His father drew a long finger through the columns so Pavel could follow. His voice grew less distinct, falling into the background as Pavel imagined a valley at the base of the Great Wall. The calvary galloped, hoofs stirred up dust, and a black rain of arrows fell from the wall. Somewhere beyond the valley, the emperor sat on pillows in a castle as a courier raced to him like a tiny dot on the road. Pavel imagined himself as that courier, feeling the wind beat at his face and the horse's muscular flanks under his knees.

When Pavel was in the orphanage, he thought his father's things had been lost long ago. In his nightmares, he dreamt the doors were open and items – shirts, torn books, notes, his

father's suits, everything that lay in boxes in the storage loft – were strewn on the veranda and the earth, all darkened by rain. The emperor, the Great Wall, and his father's voice dispersed from the cold rooms, slipped through broken windows, and wafted over the garden.

And then *The Path* returned, reminding Pavel of who he was.

It was a restless, stuffy, night, despite an open window. Pavel dreamt of something murky: a colossus that looked like a castle, and a tall, empty courtyard where someone was speaking with him. A streetlight over an awning, the sickening smell of sour, meaty soup, and a men's bathroom steeped in urine and tobacco, where a bubble-like lamp on the wall diffused the light... they'd all come together in one swirling dance. "Just Call Me Kostya" was peering out of a distant stall; an eye and a high forehead were visible. And hefty Borisovna's bass voice was saying something behind Pavel as her fingers, armored in rings, clutched his shoulder. Pavel wanted to hide from her thick, bumblebee bass that just wouldn't be quiet, but he couldn't leave the bathroom, no matter how he tried.

He sat up in bed, panting hard. There was a putrid taste in his mouth and a sweat-soaked sheet stuck to his legs. His heart pounded, pulsing painfully in his head. The clock glowed 4:04 and night was departing outside; a distant train cut through the quietness, its wheels knocking intermittently. The outline of a male figure froze on the wall, as black as oil.

Pavel blinked and the shadow disappeared.

"What is it?" Sonya muttered without opening her eyes. "Why are you shouting?"

He'd shouted? Pavel didn't remember, he only had the sense of pressure on his chest and a lack of air. The vague picture dissolved in his memory like fizzy aspirin tablets dropped in

water, though Borisovna's voice remained. There was something about her in the dream that was even more repulsive for him.

"Everything's fine," he said, but Sonya was already asleep. She was lying on her side, holding one arm under a pillow, the other stretched along her body. The blanket had slid off so reflected light from outside whitened her ear, a cheek with its colorless fluff, her chest, and a bare shoulder. The rest was lost in Pavel's blue-gray shadow.

He wasn't able to fall back to sleep. He tossed and turned until seven, watching the room brighten. Then came the alarm clock, news that switched on automatically, a warm shower with Sonya, the buzz of the toothbrush and the hiss of the water flosser, careful shaving, the growly coffee machine, and strong coffee that chased off the remaining sleepiness. Even so, his head was still as heavy as if it were filled with water, where thoughts about the past and yesterday's chance meeting jostled around like sluggish fish.

Pavel drove Sonya to work on Tverskaya Street. After giving him a quick kiss, she raised the hood of her coat and jumped out of the car, letting in cold air. Once she'd disappeared inside the store's tinted glass door, Pavel crept along through the traffic jams, toward Moscow-City-2's office towers.

Snowflakes as large as goose down suddenly powdered the windshield. Visibility dropped to nothing; even the windshield wipers and defroster didn't help. Only occasionally were neon signs visible through the white mush: РУССКИЙ SOUVENIRS 紀念品¹! MASSAGE SALON 小姐²! CHINESE FOOD! Conga lines of tourists stretched along the sidewalk and gleaming, wasp-like selfie drones circled. A middle-aged man in a suit and coat

¹ Souvenirs (Chinese)

² 1) An appeal to an unmarried woman, 2) prostitute (Chinese)

hurried along, screening his head with his briefcase. Nobody but Chinese men, politicians, and Pavel wore suits to anything but weddings and similar ceremonies. The wind changed, blowing a young woman in a glossy black fur coat and mini-skirt out of the fluffy snow. She treaded slowly in spike-heeled boots, following the little conga line of tourists the way a fox follows hens from a distance. The tourists hadn't noticed her yet; they were more interested in what their cameras had captured.

Pavel's mother was walking behind the woman and the tourists. Tall, with coppery golden hair over the collar of her down coat, she was grasping the arm of her companion, who wasn't especially tall and looked like a crow in his dark, slim coat. Gusts of wind pushed at their backs, hurrying them along, and his mother shook her head as if something had surprised her. Pavel almost heard her uneven voice, "I love snow, it makes everything clean but how about you, what do you think of it, is there snow like this in China?"

She turned sideways and burst out laughing – large nose, high forehead covered by bangs – and then Pavel no longer recognized her.

He looked away in disappointment. The blues started playing on the radio and everything together – the blues and the snowfall – seemed to fling Pavel back into December so the holidays were approaching once again, meaning dreary days off and, as usual, nowhere to spend them.

Oddly enough, Pavel arrived at the office with time to spare. He parked, flattening the fresh snow, and killed the engine. He sneezed; his nose was itchy, like after cleaning a dusty rug.

Sonya had permeated the car without Pavel noticing: a long hair was stuck to the headrest on the passenger side, a gum wrapper lay by the door, and there was an elusive scent of shower gel. Pavel tossed the gum wrapper in the bin, removed the hair from the headrest with a sticky

roller, and opened the window. Then he absentmindedly dialed a number he'd saved long ago. That happened all by itself; he just wanted to assure himself of something.

"Penal Colony number three, hello," someone said in one tired sigh.

Pavel stated a name and asked to speak with that person.

"Who's calling?"

"A relative," Pavel lied without blinking. "From Krasnodar. Kurbatov."

Borisovna's relatives really did live in southern Russia and Pavel knew them by name. Borisovna had loved calling up her girlfriends when she worked the night shift; she'd lean her elbows into a windowsill in the hallway and all the kids in Pavel's group heard about how her husband was an ass who didn't give her money, about how her poor excuse for a son got terrible grades in school, about her sweet little daughter, and about the scumbucket of a neighbor woman who left the trash in the stairwell by her door instead of taking it out. Over the years, the people she mentioned took on faces and flesh so Pavel knew their habits as well as if he lived next door. He promised himself that when he grew up he'd never end up in a home where the neighbor woman leaves the garbage by the door to rot and stink up the whole place, the electrician goes on a bender, and the relatives ask for loans they don't repay. Everything would be different for Pavel anyway because he had nobody left to start making demands or pulling him back, meaning there was nobody he'd have to reckon with or share an apartment with.

While Pavel waited, he picked at a hangnail and looked out the car window at dawn's lemony halo over a traffic jam on the Third Ring Road. Snow gradually started sticking to the whole windshield and the cold nipped his elbow a little through the open window.

At the prison on the other end of the line, something jingled, a grumbling voice resounded, and a bar or door clanked. A shiver ran down Pavel's spine when he heard heavy shuffling.

"Hi, Vasily," said Borisovna's bumblebee bass voice.

Pavel imagined sweat over her lip and sloping shoulders. And her short, fleshy fingers holding the phone. Or maybe Borisovna was pressing it between her shoulder and flabby cheek, she used to do that.

"Vasily, can you hear me?"

Pavel couldn't answer. It was as if he'd shriveled up, shrunk in size. Adult words stuck in his throat.

There was sniffing on the other end.

"Pasha is that you?" Borisovna cautiously asked. And then she said, in a voice that no longer trembled, "You louse, you little orphanage riff..."

Pavel hung up.

Chapter 4

Borisovna was a solid woman, a veritable slab of bone and muscle. She had strong square shoulders that had sprouted short (but equally strong) arms with shovel-like hands. She wore a dozen bracelets on her fleshy wrists and a ring on each finger. Her hair was permed and teased; her narrow mouth made up in crimson. Pavel couldn't bring himself to call her Mama, just as he couldn't call the caregivers Mama, though the younger children did. Pavel remembered his own

mother and Borisovna was nothing like her. His mother had been shapely and long-legged, with luxurious light, red-tinged hair that she combed for a long time and plaited into a thick braid. Little Pavel loved climbing on his mother's back and holding that braid like a mountaineer holds a rope, but he truly didn't understand why that made his mother yell so much.

Pavel learned the caregivers' names quickly and called each by her first name and patronymic, maintaining his distance from them. Some understood that and spoke to him with the same respect, not using the formal "you," of course, but still treating him as a reasonable adult. Not Borisovna, though. She reduced them all to little riffraff and took any convenient occasion to use her heavy hand and slap the backs of their heads so they'd throb later. Over all, she gave the impression she'd been sick and tired of the children for a long time – "I-don't-care-if-you-die-even-the-government-doesn't-need-you-just-watch-TV-look-what's-going-on" – and was only keeping the orphanage job because some kind of black mark compelled her to keep slogging away.

Borisovna was friends with the orphanage director. They smoked together by the back entrance and often snuck drinks in the director's office, consuming their International Women's Day and birthday presents. After one of those drinking sessions, Borisovna came back to Pavel's group with a surprise for Pavel. Someone would take Pavel for a day, for an outing. It actually turned out to be only a few hours, an evening.

This was Pavel's first outing in the year he'd spent at the orphanage.

The boys in his group started murmuring and Vanya, the teary-eyed youngest, asked:

"Mama, when will they invite me?"

"Never if you're going to snivel," Borisovna said, cutting him off. She pointed at the door, "Let's go, Zhang. Time is money."

Pavel prepared himself to meet someone new, thinking they were waiting for him downstairs, wondering who they might be. Some volunteers? Maybe they'd noticed him at a concert? Would they come to visit every week, like Roma in group seven got visitors? But Borisovna wasn't wasting her breath, she just pointed at her black SUV.

"Careful with your feet there, don't get the seat dirty," she ordered Pavel, pressing the ignition button when he got into the back. Gravel crunched under the tires as if it were bursting under the car's weight.

Borisovna lit a cigarette. Gross. It wasn't enough that she was poisoning herself, she was forcing Pavel to breathe it, too. He associated cigarettes with the year he lived without his father, when his mother managed to fill the whole house with smoke in her fits of savage, interminable anguish and rage.

"Do we have to go far?"

"Not very." Borisovna exhaled smoke through her nostrils. "If he likes you, he might adopt you or give us some money. Tell him you're just going to turn twelve. And make that face of yours look a little friendlier."

Pavel silently smirked. Nope, it was obvious he was small and frail, he didn't look thirteen, and, sure, parents more readily took younger kids. But everything was written in his file, the way things really were, you couldn't change that. And what was the point of lying?

On the one hand, it wouldn't be bad to leave the orphanage. On the other, he'd be discharged pretty soon. It was the little kids who dreamed about a family and Pavel didn't need anybody now. He'd seen who came for teenagers: they were all either boozers who just wanted child benefits or strange, untidy middle-aged women in black shawls.

A woman like that had taken Polina, who'd been in the group next door. Pavel liked Polina, who was light-haired, calm, and smart, with grades as good as his. She hadn't grown up in the orphanage, either, and had only come recently. He heard that the girls in her group blindfolded her and beat her up but she didn't complain. Two people came later: a woman in a dress to her ankles who looked contorted, like something was pressing her a little from above; her pale face was ageless, so she seemed young even though her gaze was weary and sad, and there were creases by her thin-lipped mouth and bags under her eyes. Basically, she was strange. The bearded man with her had a potbelly that bulged over his waistband. They went to the lounge. They sat Polina on a child's chair so she was looking up at everyone, with her slender hands folded on her knees. The woman settled in on the edge of the sofa and her husband sprawled out next to her, looking at Polina in a slightly unfriendly way. Then they closed the door to the room, though Pavel had a chance to hear a raspy question, "Have you read the Holy Scriptures?"

Polina left with them later and never came back. Someone said there were already six kids in the family even before her, that they lived in a big house in the country. Farm, chickens, goats, the works.

Meaning it was basically unclear who you'd end up with. It was easier to just be on your own and fend for yourself until you're eighteen, when you're free.

Before long, Borisovna was driving into an old part of town. She smoked one cigarette after another so the air didn't have time to clear and Pavel started feeling nauseous. He tried not to breathe deeply as he stared out the window at the barrack-like buildings crawling by, bare tree branches, and the sun setting at the edge of a field. The car turned into a residential area, then toward garages – masonry blocks covered in moss – and the car barely made it out of a watery

rut before stopping behind a dumpster area. Not a soul around. They went further on foot, Borisovna taking mincing steps out front, balancing despite the slippery mud and damp wind, and Pavel stepping along behind her, keeping his hands in his pockets and lowering his head into the collar of his jacket. Someone was waiting for them around the bend, in the next section of the labyrinth of garages.

The man turned out to be tall and as unprepossessing as an autumn morning. Close-set, persistent eyes on a narrow, weary face. Leather jacket over a sweatshirt with a holographic print, sweatpants. He was strange. Allegedly a grownup but dressed like a ninth-grader. Pavel recognized him: he'd approached Pavel after a performance and talked about telephones and some other things, asked what model Pavel had, and peered inquisitively at his face. There was something a little creepy about him, inappropriately childlike, and Pavel had escaped that time.

But Borisovna acted courteously with the guy, as if he were someone from the ministry who was checking up on things at the orphanage.

"He's only just turned twelve," she told him, as if she were justifying something.

"I'm thirteen," Pavel jumped in.

Borisovna clucked, sounding smothered; Pavel didn't initially realize it was laughter.

"He's joking, he's one of our jokers. Zhang, at least don't lie to the nice man."

The man sized up Pavel out of the corner of his eye, nodded, and shoved some folded money at Borisovna. Borisovna accepted the money, counted it, and briskly stuffed it in her purse.

"Pasha, let me introduce you to Konstantin," she said with a smile. The smile just didn't fit her face, it didn't seem to belong.

"Just call me Kostya," the guy accommodatingly said and extended his hand.

Pavel was in no hurry to shake that hand. He already didn't like "Call Me Kostya" but he didn't know if he could refuse right away, just as things were getting started. And was it normal to pay for an outing with an orphan? Was it like this every time? Pavel turned toward Borisovna, who waved him off:

"Go on, go. Konstantin, I've introduced you so you can come to an agreement yourselves about next time. You'll bring him back, right?"

"Of course Lyudmila Borisovna," nodded Call Me Kostya.

Pavel looked around at the deserted garages. Go? There? With this incomprehensible guy? Were they messing with him or something?

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "And there won't be a next time, I don't want it."

"You'll go." Familiar annoyance resounded in Borisovna's voice; her good-natured mask had slipped a little. "Right this minute."

"I'm not going. I'll write a complaint to the public prosecutor's office about you," Pavel said, not at a loss for words.

Call Me Kostya shuddered and recoiled a bit at the word "prosecutor" but Borisovna, on the other hand, assumed a dignified air, spread her wings, and was instantly true to form again.

"Pro-se-cu-tor," she drawled. "Well, who cares about you there, anyway? Who'd believe you, riffraff from an orphanage? A dummy, a complete zero."

Pavel kept gloomily silent. The scathing words seemed to have reduced him, turning him into that orphanage riffraff that nobody'd believe because who needed the hassle of opening a case for an orphan? He'd been rounded down to zero and there was a hollow, gaping hole in his chest.

“I’m not going,” Pavel repeated, quieter this time. He was trying not to look at Borisovna.

“Do you remember Serezha Yerofeev?”

Yerofeev had fallen down the stairs, they’d said he had an epileptic fit. But everybody knew the older kids beat him up. After the hospital, they sent him to a home for the mentally ill and he never came back. Hardly anybody noticed the disappearance of unremarkable Seryozha, who was always sniffly; another boy took his bed in his group’s room and a new toothbrush appeared by the sink. But Pavel remembered.

Well, that’s what the flight of stairs was.

“So do you remember or not?” After sensing Pavel’s doubt, Borisovna pressed him, feeling something of a triumph. “My patience is about to come to an end and if we go back, you’ll have only yourself to blame! I’m not going to stand here until dark. Oh, Konstantin, for god’s sake, excuse me that it worked out like this, I hadn’t expected it myself...”

Call Me Kostya hesitated and looked around, his sunken eyes gazing dolefully at Pavel as if imploring to end this outrageous conversation, allow him to do what they’d met for, and return to normal life. That’s what everybody wanted, right? Ordinary life, spotless, the way things should be. He wasn’t a pedophile or a homo, he just had certain needs.

But Pavel required unbroken bones and an uncracked skull, normal references and a medical record without diagnoses so he could get out of the orphanage. So he could go to college. So he could live like regular people. Sure, he could run away now, but then what? Be homeless at train stations and sell himself to someone like Kostya anyway?

Pavel shook his head and was the first to walk away, going behind a garage and rustling the dry leaves. He stepped over a torn, bulging garbage bag, and crunched broken glass. Once Borisovna could no longer see him, he turned and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Only in the mouth, you got that?” he sternly said.

“I’m the one who sets the conditions here, Pavlusha,” said Call Me Kostya’s melodic voice. He touched Pavel on the jaw near a fading bruise from school. “I see they beat you up.”

He unzipped his fly. Pavel knelt and tightly closed his eyes, hoping with all his might that this would all turn out to be a bad dream.

He wondered if his mother had done this, too. Had she felt the same way in the beginning but then grown accustomed to it?

...But Pavel couldn’t grow accustomed to it. After those meetings, those trips, he felt like he’d been through atomic warfare. “Riffraff, riffraffriffraff,” droned in his head, reverberating like evil laughter, burning his skin, leaving behind an inflamed “Riffraff” mark. You earned it, you know you were doomed from the start, you have to suck for money and spread your legs, just like your mama. You’re orphanage riffraff, with no shame or conscience.

He didn’t have a choice. Or did he? But Pavel was simply a coward, he took the easy route. He was the one to blame: he couldn’t defend himself and he kept quiet, meaning he went along with it. Fine, though. He convinced himself he’d survive. After all, he was a descendent of a great civilization, a warrior with pure reason. Beijing awaited him, he had to make it there.

And so he’d cope.

Pavel coped for about a year and a half. Sometimes Call Me Kostya would disappear for a month, sometimes he’d get Pavel three times a week. During warm weather, he’d bring Pavel

to local forests and spread a blanket on the grass behind bushes. When the weather cooled, he was limited to his car, sometimes the stairwell of an apartment building, a windowsill dotted with cigarette ash, or (twice) a garage. Pavel's days turned into anxious waiting: When would he show up again? Today? Tomorrow? What if Call Me Kostya wasn't alone? What if Borisovna brought in someone else? Or if they found out about this in his orphanage group or at school? He'd never survive that, he'd go hang himself or jump off the roof.

He thought he was scummy and deserved this. That he, spineless and a coward, had provoked things, that just his appearance made it obvious what was *allowed* with him. If he were Romka from group seven, nobody would have thought to take him behind a garage.

Pavel started smoking and even drank some vodka one time but he threw it right up. For a while he scratched his skin with a pen, under his sleeve, so nobody'd see. Then he looked at himself as an outsider would and realized that could also go on his medical record and he'd be seen as psychotic and undeserving of normal treatment. He even imagined his father standing next to him, shaking his head in disappointment. "You're far better than this," he would have said. "You're a warrior who doesn't surrender, no matter what happens." Pavel hadn't harmed himself since; he left that to others.

Something arose inside him that either flared up like a fire of dry branches or died down without ever going away, smoldering under his ribs, coiling and wickedly tangling. Pavel tried to push *that* inside himself: his father had taught him to get by with words, without fighting: "fighting's the fool's path, the smart person finds ways to make do without fists." He'd almost gotten used to living in a crouch. And to keeping quiet more often and not looking someone in the eye: the eyes give away what's sometimes worth hiding. All he had to do was wait until graduating. But the Riffraff within Pavel had grown, slipped into his body as if it were a suit, and

ingratiatingly whispered: “How long are we going to wait? Another three years or until he gets tired of you? What are we going to do? Let all of them – him and the asses at school – off the hook?”

It was the Riffraff, not Pavel, that was the first to involve teeth and fists.

It was the Riffraff that beat up a classmate and then a couple other kids, too. It wasn't Pavel. Pavel was a smart guy, he wouldn't have considered putting himself in harm's way.

He found another solution: he started recording conversations by waiting at doors with his phone or hiding it in the staff room. He photographed Call Me Kostya, making sure it was from a distance, though the image came out fuzzy. He tried using the photo to look for social media accounts but didn't unearth anything. Then he installed a simple app on Borisovna's mobile. It recorded and saved all her calls to the cloud so Pavel could send links to bloggers, news channels, and the prosecutor's office.

That turned out to be very easy since nobody expected that Zhang, sensible and powerless Zhang, would pull a stunt like that. After all, everything was working out for each of them: Call Me Kostya let off steam, Borisovna and the orphanage director split the profits, and Pavel was still alive and almost well. And then, suddenly, there was an uproar.

The story of children being trafficked at a Moscow-area orphanage was trumpeted on various Telegram channels and Facebook blogs (which hadn't yet been banned) and written about all over Weibo (which had already come into being and was hitting its stride). Some stood up for Pavel, others accused him of lies and called the recordings fakes, though he'd been gathering them for half a year.

He started doing pushups, pounding a punching bag, and running in the mornings. He sought out familiar faces among pedestrians and orphanage visitors, and was ready to make a run

for it at a second's notice. He wanted to swipe the guest log but it managed to completely disappear, along with all the visitors' names. Pavel shut himself in the computer classroom and scoured the web, panicked and fearing his identity would be revealed. That his sorrowful dark face would be everywhere with the caption "There he is, unfortunate Pavel Zhang" and the whole country would find out. People would gawk on the streets, make offers and propositions, and mock.

He searched databases for his father, too, but didn't find anything; his father had vanished. Six months later, his mother and father were officially declared deceased, though Pavel didn't care either way.

And then Herman Lvovich Goldman, a middle-aged Moscow attorney with vast experience, entered his life. He'd volunteered to represent Pavel in court pro bono and explained that, by law, journalists had no right to divulge a minor's identity. His first recommendation was to sit tight and keep a low profile: don't show your face, don't answer calls or messages, redirect them all to him. If Call Me Kostya makes an appearance, don't speak with him, run immediately, call the police.

Herman Lvovich petitioned for Pavel to be transferred to an orphanage closer to Moscow and the transfer was kept strictly confidential. Pavel wasn't allowed to fight in the new place and he had to avoid drawing attention to himself. He drew attention anyway, though, with just his physical appearance, studies, and how he carried himself and spoke. The others in his group assessed him, looking him over, probing, and testing him.

That made Pavel feel like a monkey in a cage.

He didn't want fame. He asked only that Call Me Kostya be found and locked up in a cell with convicts. Pavel watched the news media, expecting a headline like "Pedophile captured" but

there was no headline. He went through a series of medical evaluations: urological, psychological, and psychiatric exams, as well as a polygraph test. In a closed court session, everybody looked at him as if he were the guilty one, as if he shouldn't have muddied the water, that he should have sat under a rock and not bothered honest people with his filth. In video from the court that was somehow leaked online, his face was blurred but his pose, his voice, and the words he uttered all seemed so pathetic and recognizable that Pavel looked around in fear for a long time.

Comments about the video only confirmed his speculation. People wrote that he'd lied, that he'd been the seducer and might be slandering a decent, innocent man and slandering the caregivers... and meanwhile ten people had been shot at a college in Samara and wouldn't it have been better to put bureaucratic public servants on trial and write about the law that was enacted in May rather than about some "buttboy" from an orphanage. Others followed his story with the same lazy curiosity as children poking a dead pigeon with a stick on a dusty sidewalk. They observed Pavel from a safe online distance, adding zest to life, invigorating it with adrenaline, and sighing, relieved, while thinking, How nice that's not us.

In the end, Borisovna and the orphanage director were convicted, certain "clients" of theirs remained shielded, and Goldman became famous throughout the country. The hubbub soon subsided and everybody switched over to something else: abusive treatment of animals, the sale of factories to China, a TV show host's adultery. Pavel's story was forgotten.

And Call Me Kostya was never found.