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Chapter 3.

Then I walked down the street. The weather had settled unexpectedly. The storm clouds evaporated, and the sun came out. It grew warmer. My mood brightened. Only the cursed nail was still digging into my heel. I tried not to pay any attention to it. And, I must admit, I managed. After two blocks, I stopped into a store to buy cigarettes. There weren't many people there. An Uzbek in a security guard's uniform sat on a plastic chair next to the cash register, asleep. Or maybe not Uzbek? Two guys in uniforms were busy at ATM machine. One of them was replacing a plate on the back of it, while the other looked on.

"Need those?"

"No, these."

There were still forty minutes until the beginning of the shift. I decided to kill time by walking through the aisles. I looked over the rows of canned goods and the dairy products. Nothing interesting there. What am I wasting my life on?! At this very moment, some people are fast asleep, so they can wake up without a feeling of hate and disgust for the reality around them. Others are screwing like wind-up toys, without the slightest feeling of shame or despair. People eat good food, knowing that no one will begrudge them for it. They're born, they wage war, they go to the theater. And none of this is as dreary and meaningless as standing here looking at cans of meat, sprats, and pâté, bottles of milk, and packages of biscuits and crackers. Soon I'll hit forty. And I don't even have my own porn folder on the computer. Not long ago, my manager at work told me to join the "Hamburger Kings" community on Facebook, and I didn't know what to say.

After wandering up and down the aisles a while longer, I went up to the cash register. I had a fifty-ruble note and some change in my pocket. An old woman with a package of cottage cheese and a guy with two bottles of beer were standing in front of me in line. The guy was shaking, and he reeked as though he had taken a bath in port wine before coming to the store. The old woman fumbled with her change, dropping a few small coins. She bent over the counter and scooped them into a little heap with the handle of her cane. The guy couldn't wait any longer. He popped the cap off with his teeth and started drinking straight from the bottle.

"You can't do that," the cashier said, alarmed. "You didn't pay yet."

She looked like my wife. Well, not exactly looked like her. It's just that I got to know Lara that way. I went to buy some chips, and she was selling them. We talked. I liked Lara. After a while I stopped off at that store again. Everything took off from there. Before I knew it, we were in the utility room. I stuck it in from behind, bottles of beer clanking, and I couldn't decide whether to come inside her or not. Then there was a mistake. We shouldn't have run to the courthouse so soon, of course. But I didn't have the balls to run off. She had me in a chokehold from the word go. I had just turned 28, and she was already over thirty. And with a kid. At first, Vladik was a very sweet little boy. Sometimes he even called me "Papa." I got stuck in deep pretty fast. I sold my room in a communal flat, and Lara registered me in her apartment. We renovated the place with the money I got from selling my room. The rest of it just disappeared into thin air. Now I have nowhere else to run to. That utility room destroyed my life.

It was my turn.

"What do you need?" said the cashier. "A bag?"

She was a lot prettier than Lara, I have to admit. For a second, I even imagined that I could take her to the utility room.

"A pack of blue Sovereigns," I said, rummaging around in the pocket of my jacket.

It was empty. I stuck my hand in the other pocket. Then in my pants pockets. For some reason I patted around my chest, my sides, and looked around. It was pointless. They'd cleaned my out. Lara? Vladik? Maybe the wrinkled old hand of the janitor, playing around with his pistol, had snatched it from my pocket? Nonsense. It had to have been Vladik. I was sure of it. The little jerk was no doubt already a chain smoker.

"Twenty-five rubles," the cashier said. Judging by the tone of her voice, she had already said it once before.

"Wait a second," I said, and stuck my hand in my pocket again.

I went through all my pockets, and took out: a lighter, an old piece of toffee, an old mobile phone, a transport ticket, candy wrappers, and the top of a pen. My bankcard lay beside the pile of junk.

"You want to cancel the purchase?" the cashier said.

I read the name on her badge absent-mindedly. Nina. Like Lara. But fresher, somehow.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I'll take out some cash."

I walked over to the ATM. The money collectors had just finished up their job and left.

"I'll cancel it," Nina said behind me.

I stuck in the bankcard and punched in the pin code. The money had already landed in my account; there was more than usual. Two hundred rubles more. I entered the exact sum (right down to the copecks) and pressed "confirm." Nothing happened for a few seconds. The machine stalled and gave no sign of life. What did those idiots do to the machine?! One of my friends got in trouble all because of a glitch in the system. The ATM deducted the amount he wanted, but failed to pay it out. Instead of going to the bank and raising a ruckus, the idiot ran home and returned with a hammer. They sent him up for two years.

Finally, he heard the familiar buzzing sound, like an old pump sucking out oil. Something rustled, and a thick packet of bills pushed through the dispenser slot. Too thick. And too red. I freed the packet from the clasps holding it. Red 5000-ruble bills. It had been a long time since I had received my pay in that denomination. The ATM usually preferred to spit out greenish-blue, 1000-ruble notes when I got my pay. Sometimes 500s. Usually there were exactly twenty of them. And on every single one, if you looked carefully, you could make out a gallows. And on the 100-ruble notes, a male member. Funny money, these hundreds. Too bad they were so useless.

This time, though, the ATM had given me a packet of fifty 5000-ruble banknotes. I didn't have time to count them, but I saw that there couldn't be fewer than fifty. Something had happened. A glitch in my favor? Or a practical joke? The cashier is over there looking at me. Now she'll burst out laughing, and confetti will shower down from the ceiling, and someone with a camera propped on his shoulder will jump out . . .

The ATM buzzed again, bills rustled, and another pack of banknotes was pushed out through the slot. I reached out my hand and grabbed them from the dispenser, as if in a dream. Now I had a packet of 5,000-ruble notes in each hand. Feverishly, I tried to count how many there were, but the calculator in my head broke down suddenly from overexertion. At times like this, the heart pounds like the wheels of a high-speed train. Mine seemed to have stopped altogether; but streams of perspiration running down my back tried to outstrip each other.

An old woman hobbled into the store, then came over and stood just a few steps away from me. She started reading the notices posted on the wall. I cursed her up and down in my mind. She seemed to be looking at me askance. What are you looking at, you old bitch? I stuffed the money into my pockets. Both the left and the right sides. Man, I had hit the jackpot! But where was the money coming from? Were my prayers answered? Meanwhile, after a slight delay, the ATM buzzed a third time, the familiar rustling sounded, and a new packet of 5,000s appeared. The old woman turned to me. I saw right away that she was staring at the money. I saw the hatred and greed in her eyes. Move on, you bow-legged creep! Get lost! The ATM repeated the procedure one more time, and again I found myself holding a packet of banknotes in each hand. This was getting scary. I put the packets into my pockets, which bulged noticeably. That cashier—what was her name? — was did she say about a bag? Yeah, a bag wouldn't hurt right now. The ATM buzzed and buzzed, spitting out one bunch of notes after another. I just barely

managed to catch them and stuff them into my pockets. They wouldn't fit in my jacket pockets anymore; they were too full. I put a couple of them in my pants pockets, and two more in the sleeves of my shirt. The old lady was talking to the security guard, it seemed. Don't come over here, or I'll knock your brains out! How much is there? A million? Two? Three? I have to count it. Once I heard some banker say that anyone who had less than a million could get stuffed. Well, he can get stuffed himself! Man, everyone's looking at me. Who's looking at me? No one at all. But there are video cameras. Those electronic sons-of-bitches are watching me clean out the ATM. But I'm not stealing from it—it's giving me what it wants! Is it my fault? What should I have done, turned around and left? Call security? Pound on the ATM with my old boot, to calm it down? No, no, everything's okay. What am I thinking? My thoughts are getting in the way. They're preventing me from taking the money. My hands are shaking too much. I'm drenched in sweat; my stomach is churning from stress and excitement. How much have I gotten already? Ten packs of bills? Or fifty? I've lost count. And how many bills are in every packet? Fifty? Maybe a hundred? No, that many would never fit through such a narrow slot. Lara also has a narrow slot. Amazing, considering how old she is. That's another way she hooked me. Will this ATM ever stop? There can't be any more money inside. That's all! I felt happy for a moment. Then I saw that some new packets were coming through—not five-thousands, and not even thousands, but a mix of fifties and hundreds. At the very end, some fifties appeared, and a slim packet of tenners. I grabbed them and crushed them in my fist. The ATM went silent. There wasn't a copeck left inside. I had gutted it. Destroyed it. Laid waste to it. I wanted to laugh out loud like an idiot—high-pitched, shrill laughter. But I restrained myself. This was no problem. The problem was something else. I couldn't budge. I was afraid to turn my head. I sensed that a crowd had gathered behind me. The old lady had brought them over to stare at the miracle. They'd tear me to pieces. They'd never forgive me for it. I wouldn't forgive anyone who had that kind of luck either.

But the stupor passed quickly. A moment later, I took myself in hand and looked around. No one was paying the least bit of attention to me. The security guard was still dozing. The cashier was busy ringing up the purchases of another customer. The customer didn't look at me. Looking down, he peered at the change in the palm of his hand and moved the coins around with his pointer finger. It all started to seem funny again. Instead of bursting out in the maniacal laughter of a winner, though, I started to sing. In my head, of course. "Tomorrow's bird of happiness flew to me, chirping choose me, choose me, tomorrow's bird of happiness . . ." It just came into my head all by itself.

I left the store and continued walking down the street, stepping cautiously. My clothes were tight from the money. It felt like any sharp movement on my part might burst the seams, and banknotes would rain down all over the ground. I needed to get someplace where I could lay out all the money and count it. Then everything would become clear. The thought of moving to a new place flashed through my mind. Of buying a car. Of a new wife. Suddenly, I felt cold. From nerves. I raised the collar of my jacket and pulled my hat lower. I should have put a packet of bills in there, too. Or two. And walk along with an elongated skull, like an Egyptian pharaoh.

Mad, foolishly happy thoughts and grandiose plans rushed through my head, preventing me from concentrating on the matter at hand, the most important thing. Though what that was, I had no idea. Oh, yeah! Counting it and organizing it. But where? I couldn't go back home. Lara had a day off. And I would be a total idiot if I let her know about my stroke of luck. As the White Guard lieutenant said in the movie "Kin Among Strangers, a Stranger Among Kin": "Gold is meant for one person alone!" Or was it—a staff captain? To hell with it! Anyway, as soon as he told Lara about the money, she would clean him out.

I won't go home! Never!

When this simple, joyful thought struck me, I even stood still. It was all too unexpected. Something I had only ever dreamed about timidly at night had come true in the wink of an eye. To be more precise, in those few minutes that the ATM went crazy and showered me with money. I couldn't forfeit that. I needed to keep a cool head and stay calm. I couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

I started moving down the street again. I felt like smoking, but I was afraid to stop into a shop to buy cigarettes. I felt that as soon as someone came within two feet of me, they would already know everything about me. Suddenly, I started thinking about a weapon. Yes, I would need a weapon now.

Things would hardly go smoothly with money like this. I thought about the old janitor and his pistol, but this idea didn't sit well. To buy his gun would mean I'd have to backtrack, to go home, and I refused to think about this possibility. I no longer had a home. I didn't even have belongings there that were dear to me, that I wanted to collect.

Meanwhile, another very practical thought occurred to me. But I had no time to reflect on it. Suddenly, someone called out to me. By my last name. This was always unnerving.

"Hey, Khlebnikov! There's just a minute left!"

Roma, my manager, was standing in front of me. I hadn't even noticed that I was walking to work, so engrossed was I in thoughts about the great future ahead of me. I ended up there automatically. Roma had come out to smoke at the service entrance.

"Move your butt, and change your clothes," he said. "Are you drunk or something? Hung over? Why are you walking so funny? Like you shit in your pants."

I looked at him and didn't say anything.

"I'll write a report," Roma said. "You can forget about a bonus."

He loved to tease.

"A bonus?" I said, considering whether to laugh in his face, or spit.

"A bonus," he repeated. "I was right. You're either drunk or hung over. Or on drugs. I'll fire you. Go wash up in the bathroom, till you come to your senses."

"Give me a cigarette."

He handed me one submissively. I took a drag, then blew out a cloud of smoke. My head started to swim slightly. Beautiful. I'm rich. I finally managed to get a cigarette. And I can send this idiot packing.

"I quit," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm leaving. Go stand at the grill yourself."

"Hold on, you can't do that. In the first place, you have to hand in your notice beforehand. In the second place, you still have to work for two weeks. Third . . ."

I grinned and blew some smoke in his face, threw the cigarette over my shoulder (it almost landed on my forehead), then split. That practical thought that he had distracted me from had finally arrived, fully formed. I decided to bring it to life.