

HE WHO NEVER SLEEPS

By Denis Bushlatov

- I...know...you... - The demon's voice continues, but now he hears it in his head and realizes that nothing else can drown it out. - Someday... In ninety years... and three years... the demon whispers. - Someday... Those words are burned into the wall of his memory, and he realizes that they will not fade over the years, but they will poison him more and more. Someday... Not now, not today or tomorrow, but someday.....

In a semi-darkened ward, a dead woman lies on the floor. Next to her, almost touching her, half-sitting, leaning against the wall, is a completely gray-haired man. On his left wrist there is a circular scar. A trace of the kiss of darkness.

Prologue

The whole world has become a sound. If you listen, the sound, annoying as the buzzing of a fly, breaks into pieces. And each of these pieces cuts and slices the hearing, digs tiny claws into the ears and tears the eardrums.

There's a quiet drip of water in the kitchen. Must be a leaky faucet. And here are the steam radiators complaining about life. In the room, an old clock ticks endlessly. But this endlessness is only apparent. Sooner or later the pendulum will stop, and then, only then, she will be rid of at least a small part of the sounds that torment her.

And then there's a grinding noise. What's that? Someone must be peeling wallpaper off the walls, far, far away, far away. Or maybe they're sawing a board, sanding down some wainscoting.....

Who is she kidding?

It's her own bloody, disheveled fingernails, digging into the tortured tabletop time after time and crawling up and down it. Up and down.

The fingernail on her pinky, which until a few days ago had been well-groomed and shiny with polish, now looked more like a tooth rotted to the root, a black crack snaking down the center... It was strange that she felt no pain, and every time she swiped at the wood, mindlessly trying to scratch it to its living core, the crack opened horribly, exposing pink flesh.

The round wound on her wrist continues to itch, and she enjoys sinking the sharp fragments of her nails into it. The itching becomes unbearable, and she scratches and scratches, feeling the loose, raw flesh give way.

It must have taken her forever to sit here, in this chair, staring at the wall opposite. The tile just below the ceiling had chipped away, just a little, but it was enough to make an ugly gray-black gash that looked like a deep, rotten wound in the fading dusk.

She sighed, and the sound of her own breathing seemed as horrible as the creaking of a coffin board.

That's enough.

She fumbled for her cell phone and, bringing it up to her eyes, realized with some surprise that the wall and the gash were now hidden from her. That was okay, it wouldn't be long now. And then, when it is over, she could stare at the wall forever. Forever... until the clock stopped. Her fingers dialed the familiar number, leaving ugly paprika-colored stains and bits of dried blood on the screen.

She put the phone to her ear, and the jumble of horrible sounds around her faded into the background, the long beeps of a lighthouse. God, what a horrible, horrible place—a lighthouse, a monstrosity growing out of a festering sea, the fang of an unknown creature ready to devour the world!

She cried silently, unable to move, and in answer to her tears, to the prayer contained in those tears, the humming stopped.

- Hello. - Andrei's voice seemed unfamiliar to her, even hostile.

She remained silent. Now that the end was so near, she was horrified.

- Hello? - repeated the voice with a questioning intonation. - Olya? Where are you?! I can't hear you!

- No!- she almost screamed. He'd hang up and never call back, never call back, and even if he did....

She won't be able to answer.

- Listen, Andrei... - Her own voice seemed to her woven from the thin frost on the windows, from brittle snowflakes, from the smallest ice dust. A moment, and it would melt away without a trace. There was little time, and she tried to give her next words as much weight as possible to convey to him....

To let him know...

To...

Save him.

- Andrei... please come... - And before he could answer:
- There's... a *murderer* here.

SESSION 1

AWAKENING OF THE BEAST

Nina did not understand how Mitya had managed to get lost. Just a second ago he had been there, just like an obedient dog at his mistress's feet, clinging tightly to her hand with his tiny and warm hand, and babbling and pulling her aside, and then... Then he simply disappeared.

She could still feel the warmth of his palm on her skin but he was gone.

Mitya disappeared. He disappeared in a lazy sea of human bodies and counters, counters, counters, counters, on the warm surface of which pale meat was spread, well-fed headless chickens and rabbits, so much like skinned children. The vendors towered above the crowd like buoys in the ocean.

Nina stood in the middle of this human cloaca. The thick spirit coming from the carcasses hanging on the hooks mixed with the sharp smell of spices, enveloped her in a poisonous fog, went straight to her mouth, depriving her of the ability to speak.

- Mitya... she whispered and, making up her mind, shouted: Mitya! Mitya!

Several heads turned toward her, and from somewhere a hoarse, accented voice said, I'm Mitka! There was a muffled laugh.

- Mitenka! - she shouted again. A fat woman with thick lipstick on her lips, who was pushing through the crowd with a blunt, bull-like persistence, stopped and opened her mouth to ask something, but suddenly she grimaced and walked past Nina, shoving her with her shoulder.

Barely able to stand on her feet, Nina tried again to see her son's blond hair in the midst of the human sea, but instead her eye kept straying to a terribly skinny red dog lounging at the beef counter. A green fly nestled on the dog's sagging lower lip.

Somehow this particular fly, its emerald body, its wings reflecting the late sun, seemed to Nina absolutely disgusting signs, and she, without stopping to call her son, began to squeeze through the crowd, diligently shrugging her shoulders and not paying attention to the rude exclamations behind her back.

She was haunted by the smell of meat rotting in the heat. A minute later she was standing in front of a policeman. His uniform shirt was unbuttoned almost to the navel, and a large gold cross made of blown gold lay on his chest, overgrown with black shiny hair. A gold crown gleamed dimly in his mouth. For some reason he was smiling, as if Nina were telling him dirty jokes.

- I don't understand at all... We... there's a crowd and he somehow got out or he was... pushed back, maybe, she mumbled, feeling like a guilty schoolgirl. The policeman gleamed gold and smiled. He reeked of stale sweat.

- And I call him, I call him, but look how many people there are! - She jabbed her finger hatefully at the wide-open window, beyond which a sea of people - black heads, red heads, bold heads - still flowed lazily. Severed pig heads looked sternly and reproachfully at the people from the counters.

- He's out there somewhere! But we should... I don't know... - She looked at the smiling policeman, and he nodded like a dummy.

- Something has to be done! A four-year-old child is lost, why don't you say something! - she exploded. The policeman looked up at her with cloudy, dead eyes and suddenly stopped smiling, causing his face to slam shut like a trap.

- You shouldn't have let him go, mama, he stretched lazily.

Nina recoiled as if she'd been punched in the face.

- How... I mean...

- All right, whatever, the policeman smiled again. - It's no big deal. We have three or four kids go missing every day. We'll find your little brat. Moreover, it's a butcher's aisle. He must have been scared of the carcasses... He stretched out the last word with an unpleasant longing in his eyes. - He's standing there now, crying. Nothing happened to him, mama. What'd you say he was, five? Blondie?

- W-four, Nina mumbled, stammering. It seemed to her that everything that was happening was an idiotic dream. She must have fainted from the heat and the smell and was now lying on the dirty, scrubby asphalt. - He's... in a white T-shirt and... a cap with a rabbit on it, you know, Bugs Bunny?

- Gee-gee-gee-gee! - cackled the policeman. - Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!

She stared at him in perfect horror.

- It's from a cartoon! - He explained, smiling with a full mouth now. The gold crown shone dimly surrounded by dark, smoky teeth. - The cap, okay, what color is the cap?

- Well... a white one, too... with a rabbit, and then... here, red keds, I mean sneakers. You know, bright red ones, he really liked them, and I... She stammered, feeling like she was about to burst into tears. The sense of the unreality of what was happening was growing, but now it was joined by a new emotion, the nature of which she couldn't yet understand.

- All right, mom, said the policeman in a businesslike manner. - You stay here and don't run anywhere. I'll go to the control room, and then we'll organize a search. But I give you my word. - He again gleamed disgustingly with a crown, and at the same moment Nina realized what

kind of feeling she was experiencing along with the ever-increasing grief and fear for her son's fate.

It was
premonition
of *imminent disaster*.

- Listen to this. - She started going through her purse.
- If you need money...

- Well, well, well, the policeman shook his finger admonitively. - We're not even talking about that. - He spoke as if Russian was not his native language. - Our task is what? To help and protect! And to look for the boys!

Nina didn't listen to him. Suddenly everything - the meat stench, the heat, the annoying image of the red dog in front of her eyes - ceased to matter. The colors merged into a single dull gray hue, and for some reason she felt an urgent need to look at the phone, a prehistoric disk machine set on a desk darkened by time. Something with the phone... Something... Something...

Something terrible. Oh, my God, something terrible!

- ...and we'll find him... she heard from a distance. She nodded automatically, and all this time she was begging, howling without opening her mouth. Just don't ring. Just don't ring!

The phone rang.

The policeman hesitated half a word, reached out and took the receiver off the lever. He put it to his ear, and before he could open his mouth, Nina realized that everything had already happened. The stench of meat instantly intensified, a thick, slimy worm in her nostrils. It was hard to breathe, and she sank to the rickety chair, unable to feel her legs.

- Yes, the policeman said curtly into the phone. His face had become puffy. - What did you find? What the fuck are you... - He glanced at Nina and smiled again deadly.
- I'll be right there.

He threw the receiver on the lever and hiding his eyes, began to rummage through the papers on the table. Nina stared at his hands, two swift cockroaches scurrying between the papers. Everything has lost its meaning now.

- I'll tell you what, the policeman muttered, still looking at his aimlessly wandering hands. - There... well, what did you say... The red sneakers?

- The sneakers... she whispered. Hands, how disgusting his hands were... And that dog with the fly stuck to his lower lip.

- Sneakers. Right. I'll go there, see? - He finally took his hands off the countertop and jabbed his index finger through the window to the right. - It's not far, okay? Is that clear?

She nodded mechanically.

- It's a dump, the policeman explained for some reason.
- Meat strips, intestines, and other... you know, right?
Offal.

Offal. That's what he said, but he wasn't really talking about the entrails of dead animals over which the flies, the mates of the emerald creature that sucked blood from the dog's lip, were swarming. He was talking about...

- I'll be right back, he said irritably, but he didn't move. He stood there, staring hatefully at the black phone, and finally, abruptly, like a puppet on strings, rushed to the side and jumped out of the room.

Nina remained seated. It was as if she were wrapped in an invisible blanket, tightly covered on all sides, and now she had to sit and think about flies.

About the offal.

Suddenly she remembered how Mitya had fallen off the swing in the yard two weeks ago. He had fallen on the soft, wet sand and immediately tried to get up, and she had watched mesmerized and vividly imagined how the heavy metal seat flying over his head would hit her boy on the back of the head, and Mitka would fly to the ground again, only this time he would stay still.

But Mitya stopped getting up and, apparently feeling threatened, crawled away. He sat down a little to the left of the still swinging swings, wrinkled his face and almost roared, but changed his mind, being interested in a May beetle crawling by.

And she looked at him, but saw the metal corner of the seat crashing into the back of the child's head with a muffled, almost inaudible sound. The realization that her boy, her son, could have been hurt, not just hurt, but... Even in her thoughts she wouldn't allow herself to say that horrible word. The death of her own child seemed to her something as monstrous as it was ridiculous, absurd.

Was he wearing red sneakers that time? It's important. The sneakers. Then and now. Swings can crush a child's head. Cars can smash a toddler to smithereens on the pavement. Balconies are so easy to fall off and leave a bloody blot on the ground. But not in sneakers - nothing will happen to him in sneakers.

She thoughtlessly lifted her head and looked at the phone. It seemed non-threatening to her now, but empty, like a set that had played its part.

Still looking at the phone, she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. She lifted her head and through the open window she saw the policeman approaching her with a strange, uncertain gait. He walked slowly, hard, floating in the viscous, meaty air. When he came almost close to the door, he stopped, looked at her through the window and, coughing for some reason, entered the room.

There was a strange, incongruous change in his figure, as well as in his gait. His whole body became soft, like ice cream softened by heat.

Trying not to look at her, the policeman sat down at the table, remained silent for a while and said:

- Red sneakers, huh?

- The sneakers... Nina whispered. She was afraid to breathe.

Suddenly he raised his watery, streaked eyes to her and almost growled:

- What were you looking at? What were you thinking, mom? She wanted to scream back, but invisible fingers clutched her throat. The air in the room, hot and full of meat miasmas, pressed against her chest with a heavy fist. The policeman continued to glare at her, and suddenly Nina felt funny. He looked like a man who had a toothache under the threshold of a dentist's office, but couldn't find the strength to go in.

As if sensing her thoughts, the policeman rubbed his nose nervously and got up from the table.

- Let's go, he said curtly, and walked forward without looking back. Nina followed on soft, melting feet.

- It's not far, the policeman mumbled as he walked. She followed his footsteps and wondered why everything was so quiet. The market, with its terrible cacophony of human clatter, was now silent. The crowd parted before them almost inaudibly, and just as inaudibly closed in on them as they passed. The vendors, surrounded by shiny pink carcasses, stared hard at them. The pig heads on the stalls stared at Nina with the round lenses of dead eyes. In the strange, almost magical silence, she heard only the buzzing of flies.

- I... I need you to, well... The policeman stopped, so abruptly that Nina almost bumped into his broad, sweaty back and smelled his animal odor. They had almost passed the meat row and were in front of a row of garbage cans filled with multi-colored garbage. Trash was lying near the bins as well. There were also a few skinny, shabby dogs hanging around. A crowd stood quietly and respectfully around, and Nina thought that all these people had come to guard the stinking scraps.

No! - said someone in her head.

Of course, it wasn't.

All these people came here to stare at the....

...red sneakers.

- Here we go. - The policeman was still standing there as still as a rock. - Don't you worry, mama. Take one look, that's all, and that's enough.

- It's her, it's her... - the crowd whispered in unison. The people moved closer, and Nina felt them pressing in behind her. She and the policeman were trapped in the

center of a narrow, smelly circle. The crowd consisted of curious eyes, sweaty, shiny faces, black mouths, but it was completely devoid of individuality. In the humid, shivering air, human features were smeared and turned into rough sketches. Nina felt suffocated, but at the same time, as soon as the policeman took a step aside, she followed him, suffocating in the hot stench. She didn't want him to leave her alone, alone with what... with what his back hid... with... with...

...red sneakers.

But he did step back, abruptly and nervously, and immediately turned toward her, and in his face, sweaty, greasy, with large black pores, she saw the same expectation as in the collective face of the crowd around them.

And then...

Then she saw Mitka.

And it was strange and funny, because there were all these people around, and no one, not the policeman, not the shopkeepers, not even the pig heads, thought to come and help her boy up. It was obvious that Mitka had stumbled and fallen, and he had fallen unluckily, right into a pile of someone's discarded garbage, a whitish-blue pile of intestines. And there he lay, his white T-shirt smeared with blood. His cap was off his head, and his snow-white hair moved as if alive in the breeze. And he seemed to sleep with his eyes open. And he seemed to smile lightly at his hidden thoughts. And of course, he was wearing red sneakers, and this is the most important thing, because God protects children, and children dressed in red sneakers....

She didn't realize how she'd ended up next to him, kneeling in a smelly, greasy heap. She held his head with both hands, looked into his serene, wide-open blue eyes, and tried to wake him up, but he was still staring at her, through her, and for some reason he wouldn't close his mouth, and she thought - how indecent, and screamed at him, and started to shake him, but someone picked her up from behind and dragged her away. She clung to Mitya... to Mitya's doll, because it was certainly not Mitya, but some prank, and began to growl, but she was stubbornly dragged away, and then someone - it must have been a policeman - caught hold of Mitya and pulled him aside, and she even felt funny and scared at the same time, because they could tear... tear her boy... God, her boy, her fair-haired prince....

...was dead.

In the dream, not nightmarish yet, but disturbing, frozen in anticipation, as a fly is frozen for a moment before continuing to strike the glass with endless persistence,

Olya felt chilly. Not cold, no, but chilly and uncomfortable. She was in a dusky and immense space. A monotonous gray haze stretched in every direction, but somehow Olya knew that beyond this unimpressive murk, far, far away and above her head, just as unreachably high, was the vaulted ceiling. She stood there, surrounded by the gray haze, waiting... And she was cold. Particles of the thick fog settled on her bare skin in wet, sticky scales. Their touch, light as the legs of a centipede, caused a nervous, almost irresistible desire to wipe them off, but Olya knew that nothing would work - she would only get covered in the transparent, thick slime that covered almost her entire body.

Someone was standing behind her, and whenever she tried to turn around and see him, the stranger was out of her sight again.

She was not afraid of the stranger, no, oh no. He inspired in her the same nervous repulsion. And at the same time she saw no point in running away from him. After all, this was his world, in which she was a caged bird.

It occurred to her that the locked nightingales were not really singing, but screaming, shrieking in terror. And as soon as she thought about it, she heard a low, velvety voice behind her. The voice seemed pleasant, but there was something about it that made it sound like a viscous fog. Behind the ostensible participation there was a cold curiosity. Olya imagined the stranger's icy snake eyes drilling her, getting closer and closer, and now he was so close that she could feel his warm breath on her neck, just below the hairline.

- You're cold. - It wasn't a question. The stranger was stating a fact.

Olya was silent in response. She wanted to close her eyes, and she squeezed them shut, but there, behind the wall of her eyelids, was still the same slippery twilight.

- You're shivering. - She could feel the sticky warmth of his breath on her skin now.

- You're so beautiful. - He spoke in a monotone, almost without intonation.

- I'll give you a fur coat, if you want. - Not a hint of question in his voice.

- Well, well, the stranger muttered, and she could smell the warm stench of his breath, as if there was a dead man's warehouse in the grave of his mouth. - You needn't be afraid.

Now she feels that this dream is destined to turn into a nightmare. She feels something enveloping her naked body from head to toe. She lowers her eyes and sees that she

is covered in a carpet of large black butterflies. The butterflies are in constant motion, crawling, crawling over each other; she even thinks she can hear their wings rubbing together with a low, dry rustle.

- There is no future for them, the stranger says from her right. She turns fearfully toward the voice, but there is no one there. A wall of fog recedes into infinity. - They can't collect pollen, and only you, only you... Let them *pollinate* you... - For the first time, the vicious notes and the hunger of a rapist slip into the voice.

Olya opens her mouth to object or perhaps to shout, for the nightingales in the cages shout, shout.... but butterflies immediately flow into her mouth in a stubborn, rustling stream, and now she feels them crawling along the inner walls of the larynx, along the esophageal tube, and lower down, below..... She can feel the butterflies in her stomach, and it's hardly the most disgusting sensation she's ever experienced in her life. The stranger, now to her left, exclaims cheerfully and light-heartedly:

- Look at that! What is that? What's that thing? She looks down, still feeling the gagging butterflies swarming in her stomach, and sees something bursting outward near her solar plexus. There is a gap in the flock of butterflies, and the white patch of skin contrasts unnaturally with their black velvet flesh. Before her eyes it swells, cracks, spreads out in all directions like a bloodless pale anemone, and from her own gut emerges something that looks like a dry, thick branch, except that the branch is moving, with smaller, rippling branches growing out of its wrinkled, woody body... Not branches, no. Paws.

- Of course! - exclaims the stranger, and she realizes that now his voice is coming from everywhere at once, and the dream has finally turned into a nightmare, and she begins to scream-no, roar, as a nightingale should. - It's a stick insect! - The stranger continues merrily, ignoring her screams. - Look how fat it has gotten! And she stares, unable to look away, staring at the brown huge thing that climbs and climbs and climbs out of her belly.

- No, that won't do, the voice said mundanely, and the moving stick froze. Its forelegs claw convulsively at her flesh. It's impossibly large, the size of a child's hand, and she realizes with horror that most of it is still hidden deep inside her body, deep where butterflies flitting about.

Something touches her hand, and for a moment she feels a searing sharp pain and sees - or thinks she sees - as if

in a fog, a pile of decaying garbage, on which, as if on a featherbed, lies... lies....

- It's my gift, the stranger whispers, the warmth of decaying flesh against her. - It's yours to the end now. Olya screams and chokes on the fog.

She wakes up and screams again. She takes a breath, opens her eyes - like a little girl, not immediately, but gradually, squinting - and looks around.

Above her is the seemingly gray ceiling and chandelier - even in the semi-darkness she can see threads of spider web like air bridges between the plafonds.

Olya continues to stare at the ceiling and reaches her hand to her stomach. Beneath the warm fabric of her T-shirt she feels smooth, soft flesh. Of course, what else did she expect to feel there? A wand?

She smirks through the force. Surprisingly, the images of the nightmare don't fade, as they usually do with waking dreams, but stay with her, as if they've been burned into her consciousness.

Olya shakes her head stubbornly and gets out of bed, throwing back the blanket. The morning light streamed into the room through the loose curtains.

She walks over to the window and stares out the narrow bright slit for a while, blinking against the sunlight. The floor feels especially cold under her bare feet, and the sensation is very pleasant. There is a certain peaceful reality in the cold. Olya shuffles from foot to foot and suddenly opens the curtains sharply. The sun bathes her in a shower of light, and she feels the room, still gray and dark, transforming behind her.

She stands at the window in just a short t-shirt, looking out at the waking city spread out at her feet.

The nightmare let go slowly, reluctantly. In the shower, under the jets of hot, almost scalding water, Olya caught herself looking at the skin on her stomach near the solar plexus. Skin like skin, nothing special. She clumsily ran her fingers across her belly, moved a little lower, and, grasping the lower part of her belly below her navel, murmured:

- Fat cow!

She pulled her stomach in and tried again to grasp the same treacherous crease, but it was gone.

Butterflies... Her imagination could be poetic, but this kind of dream was more suited to a pubescent, pimply schoolgirl than to a woman in... She juttred out her belly again and pinched herself painfully in the crease. ...In full bloom, a psychologist and a smarty-pants.

- And a beauty she mumbled, and turned off the water, not without regret. She looked down at her belly again, water droplets dripping merrily down her skin, toward her navel and down to the thick curls of hair between her legs.

- Beauty, hmmm... - She hastily wiped herself down and wrapped herself in a towel and stepped out of the shower.

It was warm in the bedroom: the sun, pouring out of the open window, gilded the room. Olya went to the window again and looked for a while at the green sea of trees, in which the streets, and houses, and seemingly tiny cars, and ant-like people. Do they know that from the height of the 23rd floor a young... well, let's say not very young and beautiful... not really beautiful and almost naked... Suddenly, giving in to an impulse, Olya let the towel fall in a shapeless heap on the floor and exposed her body to the sun. Well, a naked woman with an almost imperceptible crease on her stomach, and who at 38 does not have a crease, I ask you?

She stretched toward the sun and laughed, not knowing why. Now the details of the dream were finally beginning to fade, to flat, black and white. Soon they would be dirty, faded flakes, and by the end of the day they would be gone.

And yet - a stick insect!

- You're not getting enough sex, auntie, she grinned. She picked up the towel from the floor, wrapped it around her hips again, but left her breasts uncovered, because at such a height they could only be seen by a UFO flying by, sat down on the soft pouf next to the dressing table and stared at her reflection in the mirror carefully, even grimly. - A woman with an oar, Olya muttered.

The mirror reflected a perky brunette with thick curls that spread over her bare shoulders. Her eyebrows, matching her hair, were also thick, almost fused at the bridge of her nose. From the brown, slightly squinted eyes, rays of wrinkles were scattered in all directions. Similar wrinkles appeared on her forehead. What's this... more of them since yesterday? She stretched out her hands and tried to smooth her skin. She looked at herself critically, abstracting away from the wrinkles - still, no matter how you look at them, they don't get any smaller, she muttered. She still had beautiful eyes, straight, too strict for such eyes, but no less cute nose and full, inviting lips.

Her gaze slid lower. Her neck, long enough, and her breasts... She straightened up sharply, and her breasts stood up properly again, boldly aiming pink nipples at the mirror. There, that's better. For a second, literally, it seemed to her that....

- It's too early for you to sag, Olya ordered her left or right one, but thought to herself that it should not be too early, but just right, and in general, one should never neglect bras at her age. - I accept my body, she whispered.

She thought about it, reached for her phone and took a quick selfie, making a face. She looked at the picture and giggled - an old rag in her sixties was staring back at her. In the sunlight, all the wrinkles and folds deepened and looked terrible.

- And I accept my body, Olya repeated stubbornly, like at a seminar, and sent the photo to Facebook. Let the followers swallow it!

She quickly ate her snack, trying not to meet Amvrosy's eyes: the cat climbed up on the chair opposite, wrapped his fat, round body cozily with his tail and stared at her with his swampy yellow unblinking eyes, yawning and licking ostentatiously every now and then. Amvrosy did not eat oatmeal and begged for it solely out of cat principle. As soon as Olya put the last spoonful into her mouth, the cat, with a short and contemptuous meow, jumped down from the chair, came, almost sweeping the floor with his belly, to his own bowl, poked his face into it and sat down next to her, devouring Olya with the same contemptuous and demanding look.

- There is something left, Olya mumbled, trying not to give in to the cat's blackmail.

Amvrosy muttered something profane and with a completely human sigh began to eat yesterday's food, which, in his opinion, was far from fresh.

- You better behave, Olya threatened, but the cat didn't react. He chewed with a loud crunch.

She got dressed, noting once again that her jeans had shrunk a lot over the past few months, and if this kept up, she'd have to throw them out, looked in the mirror one more time for good measure, gave herself a tongue-lashing, and picked up the bag she'd packed the day before and left the apartment. She hesitated for a while at the front door, trying to remember what she had forgotten, locked the door, and, on the way to the elevator, suddenly hurried back.

When she unlocked the door, she almost stepped on Amvrosy. The damned castrato sat right on the passage and glared at her viciously. In his understanding, Olga had to be at home around the clock, pet him, clean his litter box, and feed him, changing the water every half an hour. And pet him again.

- Get out, Olya said expressionlessly, but Amvrosy didn't move. She shoved him off with her foot, picked up the car keys from the shelf under the mirror, thought

again, and, shrugging her shoulders, went out onto the landing.

Despite the early morning sun was blazing, and the leather seat was almost red-hot. Olya quickly drove out of the yard, miraculously avoiding a collision with a garbage can that stood in the middle of the driveway, and a few minutes later she was driving through the half-empty streets.

-Tell me, Olga Nikolayevna, she added, looking at the reflection in the rearview mirror, then at the road, over which the maze was already rising, is it true that all psychologists are..., well...?

- Crazy as hell? - she asked the reflection in a low bass. - Of course not. For example... Take for example... Suddenly the car rumbled beneath her, losing its grip on the hot asphalt. It seemed to Olya that the steering wheel no longer controlled the wheels, and her little Yaris was about to spin like a figure skater on ice. Forgetting everything she had been taught, she sharply pressed the brake and immediately squeezed her eyes shut, realizing that now it will definitely go into a skid, and maybe even overturn. And suddenly it was all over. The car stopped abruptly, with a squeak, and immediately there was an angry bleating from behind. Without stopping honking, a squat Infiniti pulled up next to it. The driver's window was down, and a red-bearded man stared at Olga.

- Bloody cow,- he said in a low voice and sped away.

- A cow, - she agreed, turning the steering wheel left and right in puzzlement. Still, what had just happened?

- Maybe it's time for me to see a doctor... A psychologist. Or maybe a psychiatrist... She smiled, but the smile in the mirror was fake, as if she'd just learned she had cancer or the plague.

There were no free parking spaces at the office, located in a cozy, shaded, but incredibly narrow alley, and Olya had to park fifty meters away. The office itself was a remodeled two-bedroom with a high front entrance. The three step entrance led to the porch shared by two offices but the neighboring one had been empty for two years already. Once in front of the front door, Olya hummed puzzled. On the wall, next to the smudged glass door of the adjacent office, hung a sign that appeared out of nowhere: "Way Home Volunteer Foundation". And below that: "Everyone should have a home."

Olya came closer and, folding her palms, tried to look into the room, but the glass was so dirty that she could only see the window sill covered with flies.

- Open yet?

Olya almost fell down the stairs in surprise. A thick, tart stench wafted up her nose. She looked back. One step below stood an elderly bum with a soaked purple face. Olya caught herself in an absurd thought. There was something in the bum's face....

missing

She jerked back sharply and felt her back against the door of her own office.

The man had no nose.

In its place was a wet scarlet hole running deep into his face.

- I'm awake! - The homeless man smiled toothlessly. - Ninety years I haven't slept! - He emitted thick, pulsating waves of stench. - Is the asylum open yet?

- I don't know, she finally found herself, I don't work here.....

Without looking, she fumbled for the doorknob and tried to turn it, but the door wouldn't open.

- What about you? - the homeless man whispered curiously. - Do you feed us too?

- I don't... feed- She tried not to look at the hole that stole half of his face, but it sucked her in, drew her in.

- It doesn't matter. I'm wounded in the war, the bum mumbled, I don't sleep! What about you?

- Me? - She could hardly suppress the urge to scream. - I'm a psychologist. This is my office.

- What's your name?

- Olya... - She thought that if she turned around, he would immediately be right behind her, and then...

- We'll be friends, the homeless man took a few steps back. - We'll see each other often, Olya.

She turned her back on him, feeling an absurd urge to thank him for finally moving away so she wouldn't be suffocating in a cloud of his stench, and pressed her finger into the bell button and didn't let go until the door finally opened with a click. She slipped into the coolness of the office and slammed the door shut behind her without turning around, still feeling the homeless man's gaze on her back.

- Hello, Olga Nikolayevna. - Masha looked around conspiratorially, as if there was someone to eavesdrop on in the completely empty waiting room. - And I kept wondering where you'd disappeared to, and then I looked into the camera, and - my sweet Jesus, there you were! - She clicked her mouse and the Facebook page on her laptop screen magically turned into the main page of the Psychology Today website.

- I wanted to tell you something, Masha rambled on, not giving Olya a chance. - This morning, right after the

opening, Yurkevich called... she clucked her tongue, ...drunk as a skunk. He was so indecent!

- Masha! Olya shouted, and Masha faltered, looking at her with round, completely blank eyes.

- Masha, Yurkevych is our best client. Best one! - she emphasized and raised her index finger to the ceiling. - Vvery drunk, huh?

- Pissed! He tried to get under my skirt!

- On the phone? - Olya asked doubtfully.

- Well... he tried... Bloody horndog.

- Masha! I'll fire you!

Masha sighed.

- I can't be fired under any circumstances, she whispered confidentially, I haven't told you everything yet. Well, for example, about ten minutes ago there was a call from the Housing and Utilities Department and they say that from three to six there would be no water... - She was silent for a moment and added sadly: - And no electricity. And then, there was another call...

- Also from the Housing and Utilities Department? - Olya stopped on the threshold of her office, involuntarily fascinated by all this gibberish. Sometimes she thought that in fact Masha was not a stuffed up fool at all, but a cunning young lady in her own mind, but every time she looked into Masha's bottomless and empty eyes, she was convinced that she was still a bit of a fool, even though she was a completely wonderful assistant.

- No, Masha replied in a tragic whisper. - From the police... - and left significantly. - That guy...

- And what did he want? That guy...

- He said he wants you. He's a horndog, too.

- Masha!

- Said he'd call back later.

- Okay. - Olya grabbed the doorknob, and suddenly Masha let out a mouse-like squeak.

- I completely forgot! - The assistant slapped her forehead. - Nischenko is... in your office. Since this morning. . I forgot about him because... - She jabbed her finger at the computer screen, - 've been busy reading. Olya crossed her arms over her chest.

- Did I tell you to keep the clients in the waiting room? Did I? - she asked without raising her voice.

- You know him, - Masha hissed, still pointing her finger at the screen, - He gives me the creeps, Olga Nikolayevna. - She lowered her voice so that Olya could barely make out the words. - He needs a real psychiatrist!

- Maybe you need a psychiatrist,- Olya said. It was impossible to be angry with Masha.

- All right. Make me coffee. Make it strong. No sugar... oh, hell, four spoonfuls. To wash your delirium off, - she nodded toward the door.

- Should I make him coffee, too?

- Did you ask him?

Masha stared at her like she was crazy.

- I'm afraid to go near him without my helmet.

- Oh, that's it, doll. Make coffee.

- Oh ,- said Masha suddenly ,- about that picture you posted... Well, Facebook. This morning. - Her lips curved painfully.

- What about it? - Olya asked cautiously.

- Well... It's... beautiful...,- Masha answered with a doubtful smile.

As she entered the office, she remembered that she hadn't asked Masha about that bloody Way Home foundation. The image of a homeless man with a wet, breathing hole in the center of his soaked face came to her mind. She shook her head stubbornly. She didn't want to fall apart in front of... in front of that damn kid!

It was absolutely dark in the office. . Olya went to the window and pulled the cord of the blinds.

- What the hell did you do that for? - came from behind. She turned and saw that Nishchenko was sitting in her chair, at her desk, and lazily going through her papers. Without raising his eyes, he muttered:

- Sit down, Olga Nikolayevna, wherever you like.

- I'd prefer to sit down at my desk, if you don't mind, Vadim. - Olya tried to speak calmly, but her voice treacherously trembled. Nishchenko infuriated her. He deliberately looked for weaknesses in her defense and enjoyed watching her try to maintain role parity and remain a psychologist and professional.

- Well... - he murmured nonchalantly.

He slowly stood up from the table, picked up someone's questionnaire and immediately unconsciously unclenched his fingers. The questionnaire fell silently to the tabletop.

- I thought of something today. - Nishchenko left the table and began to walk along the wall covered with photographs. - Our meetings with you... They are like sex, right? You as a domina, and I am your slave, and you fuck me with the strapon. - He smiled broadly, making his sunlit face look childlike and deceptively innocent. - Don't you think so?

Olya squeezed past him, close enough to smell cologne and bubble gum and something else, apples or something, and finally sat down at the table.

- I think, she said, - that you have once again come to provoke me. And I think that our meetings are becoming

less and less productive, because you perceive everything that happens solely as a warm-up for your mind, nothing more.

- So you think I'm a faker, do you? - He turned his back to her; his silhouette seemed completely black against the window. - that I'm a faker, right? And a scoundrel, too.

- You're being carried away, - Olya cut him off. - Believe me, Vadim, I don't think you're a scoundrel at all, and....

- Even after what I did? - Nishchenko interrupted her.

- Even after what you've done, but I can't evaluate your actions, much less the motives behind them, until you open up to me and stop ...

- But tonight, I couldn't sleep. - He turned and took a few steps toward her, ending up at the table. - I was really thinking about you and me... communicating, in short. - And he smiled broadly, childishly again, revealing an even row of white teeth. - And it occurred to me that perhaps you're right, and I'm doing myself a disservice by mocking you and not letting you, well... do your thing, all these tricks, you know? And then... - Suddenly he came even closer and put his hands on the table, right on the papers. He was hovering over Olya, and she fought the instinctive urge to move back against the wall. - Then I looked out the window, and there was the moon, full and yellow, like pus, and I looked at that moon, and I thought... He stopped smiling, instantly growing twenty years older. His black eyes looked at Olya and through her at the same time, and for the umpteenth time she thought that behind all this bravado and farce there might be a deeply sick and dangerous man. - I thought of how pleasant it would be to go into my mother's bedroom ... quietly, tiptoe up to her and pull the pillow out from under her head! That's hilarious! - He laughed, strangely not smiling. - And when she wakes up, but only on condition that at that moment the moon doesn't hide behind the clouds, only in that case... I thought... And you know what, Olga Nikolayevna? - He stepped aside and sat down on the sofa, hanging his hands between his legs, - It turned out that, while I was imagining all this, I must have fallen asleep or been lost somehow, but I found myself right in my mother's room, and she was sleeping on her back, just as I had imagined, and the moon wasn't behind the clouds, so the whole room was... well, glowing with this stupid pus, you know, Olga Nikolayevna, and I came close to her.... Jesus! - went through her mind.

- ...and I took hold of this pillow, you know, so gently...and you have no idea what happened next! He

looked up at her, his eyes completely black, and grinned.

- Well, can you guess?

- What happened then? - She asked in an even voice.

- Then the fucking moon did hide behind the clouds. I knew it, I knew it! And that's it, ladies and gentlemen! The play is over.

- What exactly did you do, Vadim? - Olya spoke calmly, evenly, mentally counting the beats of her own heart, the stubborn pulse in her temples.

- But it is elementary, my dear Watson! - He jumped up from the sofa and walked with crane-like steps. - I turned on the light and shouted: Hooray! And then again, like this: Hoor-rah! My mother woke up and looked at me like an owl. How do you like that, Olga Nikolayevna?

- Vadim, I... It's a wonderful story, but why did you tell it to me? - She stared into his youthful, innocent face, trying to look deeper, to the place where behind the masks hid the true Vadim Nishchenko, nineteen-year-old student of biology, excellent student, athlete, joker and a natural leader. Vadim Nishchenko, who received a presidential scholarship. Vadim Nishchenko, the pride of his parents and the favorite of the ladies at the faculty.

Youtuber Nishchenko.

At the thought of Vadim's cozy blog on YouTube, Olga shuddered.

- Well, it's hard for me to say. Why am I here?

- I suppose you know the reasons, - Olya replied dryly.

- You have to figure out if I'm worth your attention or not. Sorry, wrong wording. You're trying to figure out if I'm suffering from a simple disorder that requires psychological correction, or if my... - he smiled, - ...condition requires more serious treatment. Compulsory treatment? Or is it still wrong? Maybe I'm just messing with you and there's no disorder?

- Vadim... We're losing time. And I'm not a priest, and you're not in confession. In three, what do you call them, sessions, right?... In three sessions, we haven't made an inch of progress. You came to me locked up like a safe, and you're still a safe. If you think you're being original, you're very much mistaken. - Olya tried to speak dryly and at the same time weightily, but it seemed to her that Vadim did not even listen to her words. - And I, unfortunately, do not have time for this kind of communication. Our meetings, as I said, are completely counterproductive, and I will have to....

- Olga Nikolayevna, what will you do if I remain, well, a locked safe? Call the university, right? Tell them about the blog? About the kittens?

- I haven't come to a final decision yet, - replied Olya, - But I suppose..

- Look, you're probably sick of cats yourself. They put cats everywhere, don't they? I'm asking you, do you think I'm sick? That I'm schizophrenic? Or a serial killer like Dahmer?

He stopped and fell silent.

- - That's it for today. - Olya said, - I'll take a break, say, for two days, and you think about whether we should continue our meetings. If yes, then I'm waiting for a response. In any other case... I'll have to think about it, depending on...

- How dangerous am I? - Vadim asked lazily. He was standing with his back to her again, a black stencil against the shining window opening.

- Yes. How much of what you're telling me - all those pillows and the full moon you saw yesterday which is of course impossible on a new moon-is true in your head. So far, with all due respect to your intelligence, I doubt it.

- Well, that's fair enough. - Vadim turned to her and nodded seriously. - I just made it up for laughs, didn't I? Just to have something to talk about.

- Is there nothing else we need to talk about?

- Except for the cats. But I don't do that anymore.

- That's good to hear. Why don't you do it anymore?

- Because- He hesitated again. - Because, as you said yourself, this conversation is over for today. And you need to think about it. But don't just give up on me, okay? Give me another chance? I promise to be a good boy. Olya nodded demurely.

- Good. - He gave her a jester's bow. - And YouTube... who needs it? It's impossible to take care of all the cats in the world..

- Wednesday, okay with you?

- Of course. Wednesday, same time, I'll be at your place, right here. - And he jabbed his finger almost to her forehead.

- Goodbye, Olga Nikolayevna.

- See you later, Vadim.

He turned and walked briskly out of the office.

A moment later, the office door opened and Masha appeared on the threshold.

- Well? Did you tell him that he needs a psychiatrist? Forced treatment and stuff? He's a real maniac. They all started with kittens.

At the mention of kittens, Olya involuntarily shuddered.

- Let me decide for myself, okay?

- It's up to you, of course, but when he kills someone, it's you they'll come to. They will come to you!

- Masha!

- Okay, I'm not the psychologist here. Yeah, you got another call from the police. Same horndog.

- What did he want?

- He said he'd call back. What do they all want?

- Masha, get out, - Olya said angrily, and Masha, flushed with false indignation, went out, banging the door angrily.

- Yes, - Olya muttered. - Good servants are hard to find these days....

She sat for a while, gathering her thoughts, reached out and with difficulty found a transparent holder with **Nishchenko** written on it. Contrary to the general computerization and Masha's indignation, she preferred to keep patient files at hand and study them in printed form.

She opened the folder and stared at Vadim's smiling, half-childish face. It was written in red marker across the page: Joker.

It would have been more reasonable to write "Liar", but Vadim was not just a liar. He enjoyed his antics and perceived the sessions exclusively as an exciting duel, in which there were no limits or rules.

Twenty-five minutes after the first meeting had begun, he informed Olya with a smile that he considered his first conscious memory to be the day his mother had masturbated in front of him.

- She'd fuck me if she could, - he laughed as if he'd just told a particularly good joke, - but I haven't... well, the hydraulics haven't worked yet, you know? And five minutes later, with an equally charming smile, he informed her that he had made the whole story up. He easily jumped from subject to subject, imitated obsessions and phobias, juggled with meaningless phrases, and suddenly fell into a stupor only to ask a minute later cheerfully whether he had succeeded in complete mutism and whether he had correctly demonstrated the phenomenon of circumstantial thinking. He had an excellent grasp of psychological terms and was especially pleased when he succeeded in fooling her.

He was a liar and an actor. But there was something about him, some tiny detail hidden behind the layers of nihilism and malicious buffoonery. A small flaw, a crack in the amalgam, distorting the proportions of the reflection and giving it frightening features. This trait... this strangeness had kept Olya from throwing both Vadim and his blog out of her mind until now.

Sometimes it seemed to her that behind every fictional story there was a riddle, a cipher, and only by solving it, she would be able to find the combination to the door behind which hid the real Vadim, a frightened and very sick boy.

Vadim himself showed his mom his blog. And his *art installations*, as he called them. And offered her to take part in one of these installations as a... co-author.

- He always loved cats, - his mother said nervously and quickly, crumpling her words like a handkerchief in her hands. - He never hurt animals at all. It was his decision to join the bio faculty -. I tried to explain to him that they don't pay money for biology nowadays, but he doesn't care about money.

Vadim was indeed completely indifferent to money and the pleasures it offered. However, Olya thought that this indifference was contrived. The family was far from poor. Nishchenko senior, divorced from his wife more than ten years ago, faithfully sent alimony, and these alimony only grew with his considerable wealth. He hardly ever saw his son, but Vadim could call his father at any time and ask him for almost any favor.

About a year ago, he did just that. He stated that he needed a professional camera to be successful in his university projects.

- Because full-frame is the best when it comes to color,- he explained happily to Olya. - And color is what I need, as you might have noticed already..

And then he started a video blog and began creating his short *art installations*.

- A week later, they deleted it. Like, it contained shocking footage and blah, blah, blah, blah, Vadim said eagerly, reclining on the sofa. - That's fine. I opened it from a new IP, that's all. And then, you know, it's funny, of course, because they say that, say, you want gore and guts - go to Gorezone, but it's all nonsense. The administration of YouTube doesn't care what kind of stuff they post. Because they have no legal responsibility for these materials. They're just... well, all they want is the money. And my videos have been really popular. I mean, it's cool when you're a girl and you have long legs and high heels and you're cute but I didn't have high heels and my stupid mom refused to... you know... put the pedal to the metal, so to say.

His mom not only refused, but immediately called her cousin, who was a doctor, and the latter advised her to consult a psychologist immediately. And suggested an option, and the option just happened to be Olga.

- It's all bullshit, - Vadim waved his hand nonchalantly. - I mean, the statement about us being merciful and stuff... In general, people love violence. The more violence, the higher the ratings. Have you read the Bible? It's a mess! Anyway, I had this blog deleted five times, and then... And then that was it. They stopped. They put a restriction on it. Something about shocking content,.. - he chuckled, - do not watch it,

if you care about your balls and food in your stomach. And the people just poured in... Man, I could really become a millionaire but it's not like I did it for the money.

She looked into his eyes, looked at his innocent face with barely fluffed cheeks, at his thick, girlish eyebrows, and could hardly contain a shiver.

- And it's also funny... well, with animal defenders. We have no legal framework in this aspect at all, - Vadim continued. - And I think it's completely wrong, because all living things, all of them without exception, in my opinion, are endowed with consciousness. And so the stench, of course, rose to the heavens, and some ultras even promised to find me and execute me. But they haven't executed me yet!

Initially, Olya planned to watch all six videos on the channel, but gave up after the first one. Vadim was right: the full-frame camera transmitted the color perfectly.

There he is, standing in front of the camera, dressed in faded jeans, a Mickey Mouse T-shirt and heavy Dr. Martins boots. Behind him is a littered, yellow-green field of uncut grass. In his hands he holds a tiny black lump with bright yellow eyes.

- It's a cat, - Vadim pronounces solemnly. - But it is not only a cat, but also an object. And, like any object, it is a point of intersection of power lines. Probabilities. Possibilities. And in the end, when all lines without exception converge at one point, above the object's head, the pressure becomes unbearable. Then comes the *terminus*. The starting point, after which the object ceases to be a center of material forces and passes into another plane of reality. That's how it happens.

He carefully places the kitten on the cracked bare ground in front of him. The kitten stands on awkward legs for a while, then flops on its side and licks itself. Vadim pulls a remote control out of his pocket, and the camera's eye comes close to the kitten - now its face fills the entire screen. Two colors remain: yellow and black.

- *Terminus*, - says Vadim, now invisible, and the kitten's head begins to bow to the ground. It squeaks, trying to break free, but in vain - its muzzle is pressed into the ground. A shoe enlarged to a huge size appears in the frame. It presses on the kitten's head, and the kitten begins to scream. Its yellow eyes grow like balloons; thick, black-red blood flows from its open mouth, adding another color to the frame. There is a dry, barely audible crunch, as if a branch had snapped

somewhere, and the kitten's head suddenly loses volume, flattened by the inexorable pressure of the boot. He keeps screaming, and it's impossible, because he's dead, of course he's dead, but he's screaming, choking on the scream.

One of the eyes, unable to withstand the monstrous pressure, falls out of the eye socket and hangs on the nerve for a few more seconds until the boot crushes it too, turning the yellow star into a white pus-filled mess.

The scream is cut short.

The end of the movie.

Vadim really wanted his mother to help him by putting on her high-heeled shoes and using them "for their intended purpose", as he put it.

- But she brought me to you, - he smiles, and now what do we do? Well, after we've sorted out my cinematic experiments. What do you think in general? Does it remind you of the Andalusian Dog? Look, I know you can't torture kittens. But I'm just protesting against this... this abomination of a world we are all stuck in!

He was frighteningly normal, this cruel, heartless boy, he was.....

...too normal.

Olya reached out, took a ballpoint pen with a half-erased print: "Gestalt this, mate!" and crossed out the word "Joker." She thought for a moment and drew a big question mark.

- He might be too much for you, girl,-she muttered.

Without knocking, Masha entered the room.

- Well, Olga Nikolayevna, I warned you! - She crossed her arms triumphantly over her chest. - We have guests. From the police.

SESSION 2

PSYCHOANALYSIS

NOW

Olya lies in the semi-darkness, with her nose against his naked shoulder, furtively looking at him from under half-closed eyelids. Maxim is awake, of course. His long, stubborn nose is pointed at the ceiling. He squints slightly, as if trying to see something hidden behind the cobwebbed web of cracks in the once-white plaster.

He smells like Old Spice and a little bit of sweat, but it's clean and completely familiar smell. Olya nuzzles her nose into his shoulder and purrs softly, feeling like a little girl hiding in her daddy's arms.

He smiles faintly and absent-mindedly places his palm on her right breast. Slender, long fingers gently touch the flaccid nipple, and Olya feels her flesh responding and

stretching to meet those fingers that tease, touching the sensitive skin again and again. There is almost no sex in these touches, scattered and barely perceptible, but at the same time there is some half-formed hint in them, as if Maxim hadn't decided what to do next.

He turns his head to her and whispers softly:

- You're a lecherous little whore, Olga Nikolayevna.

Olya growls ostentatiously, but there is no hint of an attempt to hurt her in his words. On the contrary, the voice, usually so dry and cynical, sounds... almost admiring.

- Someone just screwed me like one, - she finally replies.

Maxim looks at her carefully, without a smile. His eyes reflect her eyes, and her eyes reflect the abysses of his pupils, and in them, like in black pools, one can sink and sink and never swim to the surface.

- Someone didn't mind, he replies seriously. He turns away, awkwardly reaches out with his free hand and pulls out a cigarette from the pack. He looks at it thoughtfully, brings it to his nose and inhales it with pleasure. And puts it on the nightstand. - I'd smoke the whole pack right now, - he says in the voice of a disgruntled boy.

- You wait half an hour. I'll be gone and you can smoke it. Three at a time.

- Half an hour? - He looks at her with feigned amazement. - But we've already fucked! What else is there to do?

Olya tries to pull away, but his hand tightens around her body, his fingers continuing to play with her hard nipple.

- No, no, no, no, - he says quietly. - It's mine. And only mine.

- It's yours... And you are mine, - She smiles and adds, - And who else needs you, Dr. Stepanov? At your forty-two? - I'm eighteen, - he says uncertainly, - and I'd be careful if I were you. There's a punishment for saying things like that!

- Please ... - Olya purrs sleepily, letting the light electric waves spread from the nipple rubbed by his fingers all over her body.

- There are many variants, and there is a different Latin name for each of them, - Maxim says sternly. - Coitus... - he frowns, - cunilingus ... And a bunch of other lingus.

- Maxim Viktorovich, you're a real psychiatrist. You know how to calm a patient down!

- In the nineteenth century, female hysteria was treated with orgasms, - he states sternly.

- It's all wonderful, of course, - Olya smiles sleepily. - But if I remember correctly, someone has to go to work in an hour, and that someone is unlikely to have time to finish what they've started. His fingers on her nipple freeze and increase the pressure slightly. It hurts, but she doesn't have time to say a word before Maxim removes his fingers and pulls his hand out from under her.

- Hmm, - he says mundanely. - That's right. You'll have to find a young body-builder and give yourself to him.

- More than once, - Olya agrees. - Listen, when are we going to start fucking at your place? Or at my place? Or... well, I don't know... And tell me, tell me, why don't you marry me?

Maxim props himself up on his elbow and looks at her expressionlessly.

- Too many questions at once, - he finally says. - I won't marry you, because of metaphysics. Or something like that. Look, we've been over this, haven't we?

- No, Olya says. - And yes. Whatever, forget it. It's just a question.

- I have to take care of my mom, Maxim says. - Well, what's the point now?

- No point... - Olya smiles and slaps him lightly on the arm. - It doesn't matter. You're paying for the room, not me.

- Let me answer your questions honestly and impartially... say, next week, okay? You're willing to wait a week, right?

- Is that what you tell your patients? I'll take you off the haloperidol in, say, a week, okay?

- Haloperidol? - He looks at her perplexed. - We don't...

- Whatever, Stepanov. I don't care if it's diazolin. All right, let's get dressed, it's time.

Maxim shrugged, and she remembered how painfully his fingers had tensed against her breasts. His face - long, ugly, but still youthfully handsome - crinkled as if she'd just spit in his eyes or told him she was pregnant. It wouldn't be a bad thing... She doubted it would make any radical changes, though.

He pokes his head into the pullover and looks up at her, tangled in the sleeves. She holds out her hands and habitually helps him dress.

- Listen, why... He stammers, clearly forgetting what he wanted to ask. - Why... What's going on with that cop, with... what's his name, god dammit?

- Oh, yeah, I completely forgot.

- We fucked, Maxim nods. - That's was way more important, - So what did he want? What did he come for?

- He... came to tell me a story... An ugly one..

Olya begins to talk, reluctantly at first, but gradually becoming more and more involved, not caring whether Maxim is listening or has already fallen asleep, tired of her chatter. She needs to talk. The story wouldn't let her go, embedded under her skin like old dirt.

THEN

Despite the fact that Andrei was dressed not as a representative of the authorities, but rather as an old punk, in torn jeans and a T-shirt with some idiotic print, the clothes seemed more like a disguise, as if he were a wolf, ineptly hidden under a sheep's skin.

- Buenos dias, little ones! - He grinned and grabbed Masha by the shoulders. - Ooh, baby!

- It's police abuse! - Masha hissed, but she didn't pull away, instead rounding her eyes toward Olya and making a wild face.

Andrei turned her around like a doll and slapped her lightly just below the back.

- Go and make the doctor and me some tea. Will the doctor have tea?

- What do I owe the pleasure, Andrei Stepanovich? - she asked in a deliberately formal manner. - You know I have so much to do, and I can't....

- I said, do you want tea?

- I don't. - In her own voice she heard a puppyish note.

- Andrei, please...

-One tea, then. Green, no sugar! - shouted.

- And a spoonful of rat poison, - Olya added. A horse snort came from the next room.

Without a glance Andrei plopped down on the sofa and, turning his balding head toward Olya and putting his hands behind his head, stared pensively at the ceiling.

- Listen, -, he said at last. - I was thinking, well... no offense only. All this therapy... It's like a gypsy circus, right?

- This is the first time I've heard of a gypsy circus.

- Me, too. But not the point. - He spoke in a lazy, relaxed way. - But you get it, right? People come to you, talking all that bullshit about their complexes, about their relatives, about how their father visited them in their room, and his face was purple, and he was covered in foam... - Andrei jabbed his finger at the ceiling. - But it's all nonsense, because what people really need is what? People need ears. And you give them your ears. That's the whole therapy. You don't even have the right to prescribe medicine.

Masha materialized in the doorway. Andrei sat up jerkily, snatched the cup with steaming tea from her hands, managing not to spill it, and made a bar gesture.

- Get outta here, baby.

- You are so rude! - Masha replied languidly and dematerialized.

- And shut the door behind your precious bottom! Andrei sipped noisily from the cup. He put the cup on the floor, between his feet and looked at Olya without a smile.

- I called you five times, - he finally said.

- And I've been busy.

- Yeah... You're always busy for me.

- I don't like the police, you know.

- - There was a James Bond movie. Never Say Never. Did you see it?

- I'm not really into spies. Are you here to talk about movies? Or about our nonexistent love? If so...

Andrei raised both hands up in a conciliatory gesture, but the gesture came out too harshly, as if he were ordering her to shut up.

- No. Not for that. - He stopped talking, looking down at the floor, at the cup. - Let's just say I'm coming to you as an official to an official. And not to you alone, but to you first of all. Is that clear?

Olya nodded just in case.

- I think...-he said quietly, - we've got a maniac in our town, in our cute little town.

NOW

- Wow... - Maxim gets out of bed, walks over to the window and looks out into the street. - A maniac? And you are Dr. Lecter? Helping the police?

- Look, do you want me to tell you, or do you already know everything? - Olya felt a sharp prick of irritation and remembered again how his fingers had squeezed her nipple. Sometimes it seemed to her that Maxim was not a man at all, but a black swamp, beneath the oily surface of which, beneath the lilies and lily pads, anything could hide. He was always teasing her, and not always the teasing was pleasant, friendly. It was as if he...
...wanted to hurt ...

Sensing her emotions, he smiles, walks over to her and puts his arm around her shoulders.

- I'm sorry, okay? What happened?

She nods absent-mindedly:

- Yes... Andrei had never asked me to help before. But I don't think it's ever happened before, not to him anyway. It's not like we live in New York. Okay. He said there's... a monster in our town.

THEN

She continues to narrate. Now that Maxim is interested, she realizes that she expected his support from the beginning. His cold analytical mind is as necessary to

her as a glass of cold water on a hot afternoon. After all, he is a psychiatrist! He should be the one hunting down serial killers and fixing their brains!

- Maniac? - Olya interjected.

- Uh-huh. - Andrei gave a quick, nervous smile. - Is this a fun start?

- I don't...

- Don't interrupt, okay?

She nodded again, willy-nilly feeling like a Chinese dummy with an empty porcelain head.

There was a suspicious silence in the waiting room. Olya suspected, and not without reason, that her diminutive assistant had magically transformed into a pair of huge ears.

- Anyway... A couple months ago, this... old rag came to me.

- An old rag? With a huge purse? - She couldn't help herself.

- Well, you could say that. An old rag is an old rag... And she...

- Can you even tell me about such things? - Olya interrupted him. Involuntarily she felt that the story, not yet told, not yet begun, was already gripping her.

- Well...hell knows. Yeah, I guess so. Technically, there's no maniac. I made it all up.

She raised her eyebrows perplexedly, but Andrew continued, deliberately not noticing her gesture:

- It was funny, really. Imagine, it rained in the morning, and I was twenty minutes late for work. Anyway, I go into the office and do not even have time to put the umbrella down, as this ... well, old rag comes through the door. She's fat and disheveled, like a cat. Or a dog. - He stopped smiling. - Yeah, like a dog. And she starts literally screaming me. See, she wanted me to catch a murderer. ASAP.

- A murderer?

- Uh-huh. I told her that the statement was serious, even scandalous in a way, and we should first sort out who had killed whom. Then she interrupts me and says sharply, almost like Mikhailych, remember Mikhailych, my boss? The big guy? Anyway, she says that what cops are paid for... To sort out who killed whom, and that she knows without me that we are talking about a murderer. Do you follow me? Good. So I asked her who the victim was and she said... It was her dog. The dog was murdered... By an awl.

- A dog? - Olya couldn't help herself. Andrei looked at her without anger, and she was silent.

- I was freaked out, too. I wanted to tell her that dogs are a bit far and away from the scope of my professional interest but she didn't give me a chance. She got angry,

and I realized that she got through to me in the same way - by yelling. So finally I felt sorry for her and I thought, the hell with it, I will give her a chance. All right, I said, tell me about your doggy. She did. She had one of those things, like a tiny terrier or something and every morning, early, she'd walk that abomination in the park. It's a tiny place, really. Lots of kids and drunks, and all that. She'd take her dog to the park and let her off the leash to run around, take a shit, oh....

Andrei covered his mouth with his hand, but Olya waved her hand dismissively and he continued:

But in the last few days, she stopped letting the dog run around by itself. I asked her why. She told me to listen. I felt like a schoolboy at the principal's office. So I listened. She told me that she walked the dog out on the leash, then set on the bench to admire fresh air or used condoms, I don't know... And somehow she got distracted. That's when it started to get weird. I ask her, if she fell asleep... If looks could kill I would have been shot on the spot. She repeated that she was distracted. And at the same time, listen, She had such an expression in her eyes as if ... she did not quite understand what happened. When she came to her senses, her doggie didn't need the leash anymore. - He paused, staring at his big hands. - It was nailed to the ground. With an awl in it's ear... like a butterfly in a collection, you know?

Olya nodded cautiously.

- And she didn't see anyone... She didn't hear anyone and.. she bloody swore again and again that noone was there but her and her now dead dog. Still on the leash. And then she told me why she didn't let the dog run freely and shit wherever it desired..

- Because something like this had happened before?
Andrei nodded.

- Yeah. Two or three dogs. Owner's dogs, Olga. Same way. A couple of cats, they were just nailed to trees. Always through the ear. And a couple of crows. I think it was crows first, then cats, then dogs. I understand that progression, but I don't understand how he... how he could pull that trick in front of the owners. Nonsense. Okay, I calmed her down as best I could and promised her I'd look into it. I didn't register anything, and she didn't insist. I only asked her where she'd put that thing... The awl or whatever it was. She threw it away, she said but the way she looked at me it seemed she... forgot just like she forgot about whoever killed her dog in front of her.

- Didn't you think it was her? With that dog and the others?

Andrei shrugged.

- Of course I did. It was the first thing that came to mind. I checked on her. History teacher. Retired. No record. No nothing.

- Chikatilo was a teacher, too.

- Uh-huh. He wasn't the only one. Well, she didn't look like a psychopath, ok? I may be wrong of course but I have... certain experience in the field.

- Okay. So? What did you do?

He stared at her as if she had just made an obscene sound.

- Oh, come on. What am I, a dog hunter? I've got nine unsolved murders for Christ's sake! - Andrei shrugged. - So, I put this story out of my mind. And there was no time... - he was silent, looking at his hands with some surprise, - but recently I remembered. Three days ago there was situation at the local market. Did you hear about it?

Olya shook her head.

- That's weird. The whole town was buzzing about it. Without going into detail. there's a kid dead. A kid, four years old. The stupid mom took him with her and lost him. Like losing a key. So she went to the police station... They found the boy almost immediately. There's a dump in the butcher's aisle.. They hardly ever clean up the garbage, and the local vendors dump all the shit, all the garbage, right on the ground. You can imagine the stink, can't you? That's where they found the kid. Right in the pig intestines.

- Dead? - Olya asked dumbly.

Andrei looked at her, again at his hands. Again at her.

- Nah, he just passed out. Dead, of course. Murdered, to be exact. Do you know exactly how he was killed? She remained silent, though the answer now seemed quite obvious.

- Yeah. An awl in the ear. An awl or a shiv, but that doesn't change the point, does it?

- Andrei... What are you saying? It's a bloody market! There are people there! Thousands of witnesses!

- It's a shithole. If it were up to me, I'd have torn it all down and bulldozed it over. Besides, you're always alone in a crowd.

He fell silent.

- When I saw that kid, it was like an electric shock. And I thought at the time: if I hadn't let that old rag go... But you and me, we got it wrong. Because the old lady couldn't have killed the kid. You see, - he smiled suddenly wide, toothy, - she died about a month ago. That's all. Oh, not all. The mother... She claims the kid was with her the whole time. That she held his hand all the time, you know? And then he just disappeared. Poof! - He spread his hands. - Ring any bells?

NOW

Olya falls silent, looking at her lover.

- Wow! - Maxim rubs his hands together, as if the story gave him a thrill. - What does he want from you?

- You're such a fool.

- I'm always stupid, sweetie. Sometimes I pretend to be smart. Maybe I'm not even here and this is all a figment of your girlish imagination. OK, OK...

- Are you interested in the story or are you gonna go fuck yourself right now?

He smirks, as if his goal was to elicit just that reaction.

- Interesting, my dear Dr. Lecter. Of course... Go on, I'm all ears.

- There's not much more to tell... I did something stupid. I asked him...

THEN

- And what does all this mean? - Olya asked.

- I don't know. Nobody knows. One thing I do know. This guy... This bastard won't stop. And if I don't catch him, there's gonna be more bodies. Child corpses.

- I understand,- she said cautiously. - But, with all due respect, how can I help you?

- I don't know... Look, I know you keep your clients' secrets, but we're not in a movie, we're in real life. And in real life, hiding something automatically makes you an accessory. You understand that, don't you? You're... you're a good specialist, Olya. And you've been working for years. And if... If... you have...

- Maniacs among the patients?

- Yes!- Andrei shouted, as if he'd been waiting for it.

- Maniacs, potential maniacs, psychopaths, mommy panty wankers, anything!

- Andrei, I have half of my patients come in with acute psychosis....

- You know what I'm talking about. - His voice became harsh, wired. - If you think that anyone... Any of your patients have ... that potential... You have to tell me about it. It's not a request, Olya. Consider it an order.

- Come on.

- And tell your coworkers. I don't think we have very much time before he does it again, you know? And I don't want to see any more of this. I don't get paid that much.

- Okay. - She made up her mind out of the blue. - But I'm going to need something from you in return.

- Go ahead.

- I need pictures and...

- Are you crazy? - Andrei said evenly.

- ...case files. And don't give me that confidentiality crap about the investigation and all that. Otherwise, I'm afraid I can't help you.

- Do you have any idea what's in those pictures?

- No. I don't want to imagine. But I have to look at them. Look, people come here with their troubles. Sometimes they seem dangerous. But in nine years of practice, I have never, repeat, never met a real psychopath. This... this creature could very well be a good citizen, like Chikatilo. Taking out the trash every day, shopping instead of his wife.

-There have been precedents for psychiatrists identifying.....

- I see you're well prepared, - Olya smiled. - I don't know. I've never been interested in this subject... I haven't studied it, to be more precise. That's why I'll need the case files. And I want to warn you right away. Don't expect a miracle from me or whoever else you go to. Most likely, it won't work, and your maniac will get caught on something...petite.

Andrei was silent, rubbing his chin nervously.

- Okay, - he finally said,- I'll give you the materials. Not all of them, and... well, I'll give you what I think you need. Again, if you... If you have someone in mind, you need to tell me.

Andrei stood up abruptly, adjusted his pants and, looking at her now from top to bottom, said: - I'll send everything to your email in the evening. My phone is always on. Always, Olya. I ask you very much...

- OK.

- Thank you. - He came to the door, stopped. - Who were you arguing with while I was in the waiting room? Who's the kid?

- What's the difference, Andrey? Are you going to suspect everyone now?

- Whatever you say. So long, shrink! - He smiled, nodded, and walked out the door.

Olya remained alone in the office. She couldn't rest her own hands. They kept wanting to grasp something, whether it was a pen or a computer mouse. She forced herself to sit still, took several deep breaths and held her breath, feeling the humming, measured beats of her own heart.

She thought of Vadim.

She thought of kittens.

NOW

Once again there is silence in the hotel room, where the air is saturated with the odors of her perfume and recent sex. Maxim is silent, pensively gazing at the ceiling, as if there, among the thin web of cracks, hides something

far more important than all her stories put together. Finally he sighs, turning his head toward her.

- Do you suspect your client? That Vadim? - He asks with a strange sneer in his voice.

- Uh-huh. Pet lover.

- Well, that's not a fact. I had a buddy when I was a kid. Used to hang cats. He grew up, settled down. He's living the good life. Degenerate, but not a maniac.

- From a psychiatrist with three hundred years of experience, I expected a somewhat more professional comment.

Maxim smiles wickedly.

- What's his story? Unhappy childhood? Raped by his father, maybe?

- Nothing like that

- Well, - he chuckles triumphantly, - I've always said that psychology is deviant and profane. You don't know shit, Dr. Serbinova. Do you even know the basics of brain physiology? The frontal and temporal lobes are where your cop needs to look. And while the frontal is responsible for talking and shit, the temporal is responsible for morality. Ethics. In psychopaths, as a rule, disorders are detected in the amygdala, - he takes a mentor's pose, - in the hippocampus, in the anterior and posterior cingulate cortex and, dear fellow profane... the temporal pole. Have you read Kent Kiehl?

- No,- she said, not holding back her irritation.

- Yikes! How are you gonna become a maniac catcher? Speaking of maniac catchers. I hope you didn't give that cop my cell phone number.

- Don't worry. He'll find you. He's stubborn.

- Well, I don't think so. I've got nothing to do with maniacs. Even though... I might be of assistance.

- Aren't you in a hurry to get somewhere? To see your mom or go to work?

Maxim looks at her with a strange, pitying expression.

- Well, baby, you love me because I make fun of you all the time. That's the way you are!

- Fuck you, - she said, feeling her irritation turn to anger, and that anger filled her with thick, thick tar.

- I'd love to! - Maxim revives. - But you're always against it. - He laughs again, a caustic, evil laugh. - Okay, I'll offer to help you again. Do you want it?

- I would...I wouldn't say no, - she says neutrally.

- Here we go. That's a whole different story. I'll tell you what. When you get those holiday pictures from the cop, you let me know. I'll think about it.

At this very moment, Olya wanted to send him to hell. To send him a message that would penetrate even through his thick crocodile skin.

Instead, she smiles miserably and nods.