

*Translation Sample of*

# **THE WHITE DOVE OF CÓRDOBA**

**By**

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**PART ONE**

CHAPTER ONE

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He decided to call his aunt before his departure, anyway. Typically, he was the first to make a conciliatory move. The important thing here was not to curry favor or pander, but to conduct himself as if there hadn't been a real quarrel—a mere trifle, a light tiff.

“So, tell me,” he asked, “what should I bring you—*castañuelas*?”

“Go to hell!” she snapped. But her voice conveyed a certain satisfaction that he'd telephoned—that he'd called despite everything, hadn't flown off chirring his little wings.

“A fan, then, eh, Zhuka?” he said, smiling into the receiver and picturing her patrician, hook-nosed face within a halo of blue-dyed haze. “We'll stick a beauty mark on your little cheek, and you'll step out onto the balcony of your almshouse like some *maja*, a juicy wench.”

“I don't need anything from you!” she said obstinately.

“So be it.” He himself was as gentle as a dove. “Oo-kaay...In that case I'll bring you a Spanish broom.”

“Why a Spanish one?” she growled. And fell right into his hands.

“But what other kind does your sister fly around on over there?” he exclaimed, exulting the way children do when they make a fool of some ninny and jump around howling: “Gotcha—nya-nya-nya-nya-nya!”

She slammed down the receiver, but it was no longer a full-fledged quarrel, just a thunder shower at the beginning of May, so he could leave with a light heart, especially

since a day before the tiff, he'd gone to the market and crammed Auntie's refrigerator to bursting.

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All that remained was to round off the corners of one more matter, the *subject* of which he'd been arranging and working out (flourishes of details, arabesques of particulars) for three years now.

And tomorrow, finally, at the crack of dawn, against the backdrop of a turquoise stage set, up from the sea foam (let's note: curative-spa sea foam) a *new Venus* would be born under his personal signature: the final wave of the conductor's hand, the impassioned chord of the symphony's finale.

Not hurrying, he laid out his favorite smooth suitcase of olive-colored leather, small but accommodating, like a soldier's knapsack: you jam it to bursting, *to the very*, as Uncle Sema used to say, *I can't*—then look, you can squeeze in another shoe.

Preparing for a trip, he always took great pains to think his outfit through. He lingered over the shirts, exchanged the cream-colored one for the navy, held up against it a pale blue tie from the bunch in his closet, a silk one... Yes: and cufflinks, of course. The ones Irina gave him. And the others that Margo had given him—he absolutely had to: she was observant.

Okay then. Now the *expert* was fittingly outfitted for all five days of *the Spanish project*.

For some reason the word “expert,” uttered in reference to himself, made him laugh to the point of guffaws, even falling face down onto the divan, beside the open

suitcase, and he laughed loudly for two minutes in sheer delight—he was always at his most infectious when guffawing alone by himself.

Continuing to laugh, he rolled to the edge of the divan, leaned over, opened the lower drawer of the wardrobe and, riffling through rumpled briefs and socks, pulled out a pistol.

It was a convenient Colt “Glock” of simple manufacture, with an automatic block firing pin and smooth recoil. What’s more, with the help of a hairpin or nail, one could disassemble it in a minute.

*Let’s hope, dear buddy, that you’ll spend the entirety of tomorrow’s important meeting asleep in the suitcase.*

Late in the evening, he left Jerusalem toward the Dead Sea.

He didn’t like driving those loops in the dark, but the road had recently been widened and partially lit up; it was as if the camel-humped hills that had been squeezing you from both sides, forcing you into the desert funnel, now seemed to be reluctantly parting.

But at the intersection where the road turned after the filling station and followed along the sea, the illumination ended, and the ruinous darkness swollen with salt—the kind found only by the sea, *by this* sea—descended anew, slapping one in the face with the sudden headlights of oncoming cars. On the right, the black cliffs of Qumran towered sullenly; on the left stretched a smooth black salty smoothness with a sudden splash of asphalt, beyond which the Jordanian shore got all teary with distant lights.

About 40 minutes later, from the darkness below, a festive constellation of lights frothed and spilled: Ein Bokek with its hotels, clinics, restaurants and shops—a haven for the wealthy tourist as well as the dead-broke panhandler. And farther down the shore, a certain distance from the resort area, stood the gigantic Hotel Nirvana—alone and stretching its brightly lit white rooftops majestically into the night. In room 513, Irina was most likely already asleep.

Of all his women, she was the only one who would, if it were up to her, go to sleep and wake with the roosters, just as he would. Which turned out to be inconvenient: he didn't like sharing his dawn hours with anyone whomsoever, but safeguarded his store of resilient morning energy when, before a big day, his eyes were both sharp and fresh, and his fingertips were as sensitive as a pianist's, and his noggin was at perfect boil, and all cylinders were sparking in the billowing steam of that first cup of coffee.

For the sake of those precious dawn hours, he fairly often left Irina late at night.

Arriving at the hotel lot, he parked, got his suitcase from the trunk and, taking his time so as to drag out the final minutes of solitude, he headed to the huge propeller revolving at the main entrance.

“You sleeping?” he barked jokingly at the Ethiopian security guard. “I've brought a bomb.”

The guy roused himself, hailed him with the whites of his eyes and mistrustfully stretched his white harmonica of a smile in the darkness: “Well, o-o-o-kay...”

They knew one another by sight. This hotel—bustling with people, and chaotic like the city, standing off to the side of the main resort area—was where he loved to

arrange business meetings, the last and final ones: the very crowning symphonic chord which *the interested party* could reach only after having sawed through that not so inconsequential road between rocky teeth hanging above the sea, all held in place by braces and wires at the hands of some gigantic dentist.

And *it was true*: as Uncle Sema used to say—*the dog that trots about gets the bone*. (By the way, Uncle himself couldn't trot to save his life in that orthopedic boot of his.)

There it is, room 513. Quickly and soundlessly slipping into the slot that electronic key obtained from the bleary desk clerk: *you see, I don't want to wake my wife, the poor thing's suffering from a migraine and went to bed early...*

He'd never had any wife in his life whatsoever.

She wasn't suffering from any migraine whatsoever.

And he intended to wake her on the spot.

Irina was sleeping, as usual—rolled up in a blanket cocoon like white cheese in Druze pita.

Forever wrapping herself, burying herself, twisting herself sideways—hire some archeologists if you like.

Dropping suitcase and jacket to the floor, he tugged off his sweater in the doorway, kicked off—foot against foot—his running shoes, and tumbled beside her on the bed, still in his jeans—he got bogged down in the hilly bend of the zipper—and tee shirt.

Irina woke up, and they began fooling around simultaneously, trying to free themselves from the blanket, from their clothing, mumbling face to face:

“...you promised, you no-account, you promised...”

“...and I’m keeping my promise, you’re practically mummified here...”

“...what kind of wild man are you, falling on me like this! Hold on...wait a minute...”

“...I’m hard already, can’t you feel?”

“...hey you bum...just let me...”

“...who’s not letting you...please, like that, just like that...and...li-i-i...”

...In the open balcony doorway, in sympathy with his rhythm, the lemon moon now shot upward over the railing with a shameless goggle-eyed “bravo!”, now sank below, slowly and smoothly at first, then quicker and quicker—as if carried away by these its first such rockings—now lengthening, now shortening each up-and-down pendulum swing. Then it stood stock still at a dizzying peak, balancing as if to view its heavenly neighborhood for the last time...then suddenly it broke loose and started to rush its tempo, speeding and speeding until it began to moan, snap, flinch without restraint, barely taking a gasp on its dash and—dying down, exhausted, it drooped off somewhere into the backwoods of heaven.

Afterward, Irina splashed in the shower, repeatedly switching the spray from hot to cold (then she jumped into bed—wet as a drowned man, and, come on, warm her up before she gets livid)—whereas he was trying to track with his gaze through the window

those microscopic movements of that pale puffy heavenly body, his recent partner in fornication.

Finally, he got up and stepped out onto the balcony.

The gigantic hotel was submerged in benumbed slumber at the edge of the salty lake. Below, encircled by palms, like a polished grand piano lid, lay the pool where the delicate, yellow moon skipped about. Three dozen meters from the pool stretched the beach with its arthropod-like little mounds of plastic arm and lounge chairs piled for the night.

The freezing glimmerings of salt in the distance imparted to the motionless night an icy muteness, a wintry holiday feel—as if in wait for miracles and gifts.

Well, there was no waiting for gifts.

“Have you lost your mind: naked on the balcony?” spoke the lively voice from behind him. “Don’t you have even the most basic sense of shame? There are people around, for goodness sake...”

Sometimes one wished not so much to shut her off as to softly lower the volume.

He closed the balcony door, drew the blinds and lit the desk lamp.

“You’ve put on a little weight,” he pronounced pensively, lying back on the bed and examining Irina in her wide-open terry robe. “I like it. Now you look like Dina Verní.”

“Wh-a-a-t?! Who’s she?”

“Maillol’s model. Take off that idiotic robe, uh-huh...now turn your back to me. Yes: the same proportions. A strong expressive hip line at the base of a slender back.



And the shoulder connects so smoothly to the neck...Wowwee, what a model! A shame I haven't held a pencil in my hand for a hundred years."

She gave an "ahem," flopped into the deep arm chair beside the bed and reached for a packet of cigarettes. "Okay, come on, keep going...Tell me something else about myself."

"By all means! You see, when a woman puts on a few pounds, her breast becomes more becalming, more unsparing...more welcoming. And her skin color changes. The delicate layer of fat below the skin gives the body a more noble, pearl-like tint. A certain...mmm...transparent glazing develops, you see?"

He wouldn't at all have minded taking a nap before dawn if just for an hour-and-a-half or so. But Irina had begun to smoke, was wide awake and asserting herself. She looked as though about to call for a holy sacrifice again. The main thing was not even to acknowledge the attitude.

"And then, you know...," he continued, yawning and turning on his side, "that rhythmic swaying of the hip, the view from behind and above—can drive a person nuts if your hands..."

"Cordovin, you scuzzball!" Bending over, she hurled the empty cigarette packet at him. "You're nothing but an underhanded siren, Cordovin! Some kind of Casanova, some lowly tempter!"

"Nah," he muttered, irrepressibly dozing off. "I'm just...in love..."

All this was the absolute truth. He loved women. He genuinely loved women—their quick mind, earthy cleverness, strong eye for detail; he never tired of repeating that

if a woman were smart, she was more dangerous than a smart man: for the usual shrewdness was supplemented by a truly primal emotional keenness, an ability to detect—from the surface, *by feel*—what can't be mastered by logic at all.

He befriended them, preferred conducting business with them, considered them more trustworthy companions and generally—better people. He frequently certified himself “a very female person.” He always knew how to warm a woman up, and always found something to love in each.

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He awoke, as usual, at 5:30. For many years now, some sort of zealous and implacable angel had taken to blowing reveille somewhere in the heavenly barracks, and at 5:30 on the dot—regardless of the dream he was having, regardless of the exhaustion that had lain him low two hours before—he was condemned to open his eyes...and, swearing, he'd drag himself to the shower.

But earlier today *they showed him that tin can* again. It's as if he's getting up, struggling to turn his body—*those* dreams always involve an immutable sequence of draggy movements—he's sitting on the bed straining to unstick his eyes...Then he sees *it standing there*, right on the hotel coffee table. Holy Mother of God!—that same *banged-up tin can* standing right there. No, he tells himself (everything per the damn dream scenario learned by heart so long ago)—not a tin can, you're such a swine, but a silver Sabbath wine goblet, an antique family heirloom, although—yes, somewhat dented on one side; but of course that's because it fell from a truck. And Zhuka, an orphan (war, winter, evacuation)—fearlessly climbed beneath the wheel herself and got it! And you,

you louse, scum, swindler...went and sold it off to an antique dealer, brazenly, without batting an eye. And, most important, for a long time now you'd have been able to read what was engraved all around. You couldn't in those years, you didn't understand the odd flourishes, but now you'd be able to read them easily—it was Hebrew, after all, wasn't it?

But Zhu-u-ka, he groaned, as always (the scenario moves, the dream slides downhill; rather, torturously rolls uphill)—forgiveness a hundred times...I realized...searched for it! Why are we arguing again, for God's sake: it's standing right there! It's standing—massive, unpolished forever, heavily tarnished, barely distinguishable from a toy boat—on its silver domed base.

And he stretches out his lead-weighted hand, struggling as if through water, overcoming the thickness of dream. Stretches his hand, reaches...enough, finally, the heavy goblet, rotates it in his fingers, lifts it to his eyes. And a three-masted galleon sails upon three waves, and curling around the silver domed base, the angular—and now totally understandable letters: “**The train to Munich departs from the second platform at 10:30.**”

And only then did he wake up. Sort of wake up. Good Lord, for how long...*Forgive me, Zhuka!*

He stood for a long time under the burning hot lashes of water, then sharply turned it cold and for a minute, sighing in pleasure, scrubbed himself with the wiry loofah he brought with him everywhere.

Then he shaved without hurrying, whistling softly so as not to awaken the boa constrictor there on the bed any earlier than necessary... The splendid, plump boa, whose elastic rings pulsed ever so sweetly, could squeeze... yes indeed. Still, he shouldn't let her get any plumper.

Painstakingly shaving his stuck-out chin (this was his main torture during every morning's shave—craggy as a hard apple, that chin with its tough-to-reach hollow just under his lower lip), he examined himself attentively in the spacious bathroom mirror.

So you've dried up a bit, guy... Uncle Sema would say: *Got all wiry*. He'd been a rather brawny kid in his youth. Often taken for a boxer even. He'd thinned down as he grew, as befitted his face. His nose had somehow... gotten bonier or something... Aristocratic sir? —your mother!

Only the crew-cut of his thick black hair (a persistent family pigment, he'd casually reply to compliments), and those just as jet-black brows, straight and nearly joined over his deep-set gray eyes, had stayed the same as before. *And then too* those vertical hyphens at the corners of his mouth always lending his face the expression of childlike friendliness, an external preparedness to stretch his lips in smile: *I love you, my big wonderful world*.... Yes, that's our trump card. Maybe that's your only trump card, eh, guy?

When he stepped on tiptoe from the bathroom so as to get suit and shirt from the suitcase, it became clear that Irina was also awake—damn, what a nuisance that early bird nature of hers!—and lying in her cocoon, disheveled, in a foul mood and full

fighting form. “You’re running off like a coward,” she said, observing him dress with a careful and mocking look.

“Ahah!” he gave her a broad smile. “I’m a terrible coward! I’m completely afraid of you and most humbly seek your good graces. Take a look at these cuff-links. Recognize them? I adore them and show them off to everyone: ‘a gift from my favorite lady.’”

“From your favorite lady. You’ve got about a hundred of them in every city, right?”

“A hundred?! Why the heck so many? God! ‘Who needs it, and who could bear it?’ as my Uncle Sema from Vinnitsa used to say.”

“You’re such a shit, Cordovin. We decided, didn’t we, that from now on we’d travel together.”

She was wasting her breath. The vile communal joinder—“we”—...*The perpetually wearisome, weakening, weepy weeniness of love*...Not a good symptom. Must he really reconfigure her from lover into girlfriend? A shame, it was so good with Irina, after all. In point of fact, these last three years with her had been ideal, without any kind of base “we”... “us”...*My child, what helps us develop and thrive* is precisely our solitary keenness, that wolfish leanness, the quivering of our nostrils in premonition of a scented trail. What kind of “we” is there in that?

“Don’t force me to drop my trousers again, ma-a-adam,” he drawled in a silly mournful way. “My ba-a-ackside will get cold. See, my sword belt is already cinched.”

All the same, he went to the bed, lay down—right in his suit—beside her, sleepy and wretched; he grabbed and ruthlessly yanked her naked hand out of the pillowcase,

began to kiss it, moving up from fingers to shoulder: meticulously, skillfully, one inch at a time, murmuring something playfully doctorish.

His rule was: no affectionate diminutives. Each only by her complete beautiful resonant name. The female name was holy, to shorten it was heresy, akin to blasphemy.

And she softened up, gave a laugh from his tickling, pressed her bare shoulder toward his ear.

“You smell delicious: jasmine...green tea...What kind of cologne is it?”

“L’Occitane. They were palming it off at Duty-Free in Boston. The salesgirl there was trying so hard, she got on my conscience. ‘An old established firm, an old established firm...Perfume bottles made by hand.’ I bought one so she’d stop.”

He sat up in bed, gave a cursory glance at his watch. “Listen, my joy, seriously: cheer up. I mean, what fun would it be to hang around a university conference with the depressing title, ‘*El Greco: un hombre que no se traicionó a sí mismo*’?”

“What does that mean?”

“What’s the difference? It means, ‘El Greco: a man who didn’t betray himself.’ A senseless theme, another senseless conference. Toledo’s altogether a gloomy city, especially in rainy April...Honest to God it’s better to be catching a tan here. And you can slip into one of those bubble baths, to boot...algae baths, are they? ‘Madame is on holiday, Madame has the right.’”

It was one of those favorite little phrases of theirs that had been piling up over the course of three years: a remark by a salesman at an expensive store in Sorrento where Irina tried not to let herself “drop an awful wad of cash.”

She gave a laugh and said, “Okay, beat it. When’s your plane?”

At this point he glanced at his watch openly and anxiously. “Oooh, I’ve got to run! Or else I won’t make it.”

He jumped up, grabbed his jacket, the suitcase, turned at the doorway—blew a kiss toward the bed. But Irina had already wrapped herself up again; only the disheveled top of her head stuck out from beneath the blanket. *My poor baby, abandoned...*

He set the door quietly ajar behind him.

After going down a flight of stairs, he stopped, cocked an ear to the silence of the still sleeping hotel: somewhere below, by the pool, maids were placidly exchanging echoing remarks, were dragging knotted rings of rubber hoses heavily along wet concrete.

Leaning his back against a door, he opened the suitcase zipper and took out two things: a blue knit glove for his right hand—strange, with slits at the fingertips—and his Glock automatic, sinless to date.

But then, why suddenly...so tense? He slipped the pistol into his jacket pocket, pulled off the glove, shaking his fingers like a pianist before his first bravura passage, then got his cell phone and dialed a number.

“Vladimir Igorevich? I didn’t wake you?”

In answer, a grateful wave of a roar: “Zakhar Mironovich, dear fellow! Hello hello! How marvelous of you not to let me down! I’ve been on my feet since six and fretting the whole while. So, when’s convenient for you? I’m in room 402.”

“Terrific then,” he replied. “I’ll drop by in just a minute.”

And again the pistol dove through the toothy slit of the suitcase zipper: that anxious deferential gratitude he heard in the client's voice was difficult to feign. And, after all, his ear and eye for nuance and intonation were extremely sharp, animal-like.

And it was true: Vladimir Igorevich was waiting for him, with trembling belly, in the open doorway of his suite. Interesting, those inviolable little crannies he must fight his daily morning razor through among all those warts. Why not just let the beard grow—or perhaps in the surreptitious code of these new Croesuses, a beard, like concealment, is a sign of hidden intentions?

“Bad luck,” the fatso exclaimed, “to shake hands over a threshold!” He stepped aside, prepared, his right hand filled with a spatula.

According to certain roundabout information, this newly fledged collector owned some sort of factories in Chelyabinsk. Or mines? Or not in Chelyabinsk, but in Chukotka? God only knew, but it didn't matter. May Archangel Gabriel bless all who invest money in a strip of canvas smeared with casein primer and covered in oil paints.

He'd truly been waiting and obsessing: through the open bedroom doorway—a bed made up with the fastidiousness of a soldier.

The painting, a canvas stretched over a frame, was awaiting its appointed time with face turned to the back of the sofa.

How nevertheless touching these art lover-collectors were. They all trembled before that first moment when the painting was to be pierced by the x-ray eyes of an expert. Sometimes they'd even cover the sofa or arm chair where the painting was positioned with a white sheet as if to protect the *connoisseur's* precious view from any



importunate colorful surroundings. The operating room's antiseptic color scheme or the child's game *of close your eyes tighter, and don't open them until I say!*

In that case, dear Vladimir Igorevich, you'll now hear a small lecture about the insignificance and ephemeral nature of this same *connoisseurship*.

He set his suitcase on the floor, tossed his jacket on top of it. "It's not a problem if I hold out my left?" he asked, awkwardly shaking (he should turn around and hold the hand out from behind his back) the collector's puffy paw, and flashing one of his most open smiles. "Arthritis for many years now, please forgive me. I sometimes cry out in pain like an old woman."

"No! Really?" the fatso said, all upset. "Have you tried 'Gold Mustache' balm? My wife sings its praises."

"What haven't I tried, but let's not go into that. You arrived just yesterday?"

"Of course! As soon as you said you'll be flying off today, and this would be the only chance to catch you, I quickly reserved a room, and like that tenor in the opera—at first light—at your feet."

Where the heck did he hear that opera, interesting. Maybe in his Chelyabinsk? No sweetheart, God forbid you lie at my feet.

A bottle of Courvoisier and two cognac sniffers stood on the coffee table, but it was apparent the poor guy was worn out: he offered neither a seat nor a drink. This really is passion, I understand.

"All right then, let's get to it," said Cordovin. "I don't have much time at all."

"Just a single word," muttered Vladimir Igorevich, rubbing his hands as if screwing one into the other. "It's crucial... You, Zakhar Mironovich, must run into a

broad range of people—these days even a herd of cattle knows where to invest money. And I can imagine your aversion to an acquaintanceship based on duty like ours. Don't object, I know it! But, you see, Zakhar Mironovich... as a collector, actually my age is infantile—I never had the opportunity to collect art before. Where would a run-of-the-mill Soviet engineer-inventor get the money? However, I am an experienced art lover, from my youth. I remember how it was: you show up in Moscow for a three-day business trip, suitcase at the hotel—and you're off at a trot to the Pushkin Museum, the Tretyakovsky Gallery... It's awkward to admit, I monkey around with paint... And, well, I read a lot of things. Your book, *The Fate of Russian Art Abroad*—I searched it out on the Internet, read it. I'd be happy to invite you to my place.”

“To Chelyabinsk?” the expert asked out of curiosity. With attentive pleasure, he observed the sincere client was trying to dissociate himself from *the herd*.

“But why to Chelyabinsk,” laughed Vladimir Igorevich. “I prefer to keep my collection here—at my place in Caesarea. And if today... if Cordovin himself gives a positive opinion of authorship... In a word, if you now pronounce your ‘yes,’ it'll be my third Falk. And the finest!”

He jumped to the sofa—despite his bulkiness, the fatso didn't lack a certain alpine gracefulness—and turned the painting face-front. He stood beside it as if on guard: tense, with a reddening bald spot, and alternating his searching-beseeking glance from canvas to expert. Had he forgotten to take his blood pressure medicine today—that was the question.

Sinking into the arm chair, Cordovin unhurriedly drew glasses from his jacket breast pocket, silently put them on and began to examine the canvas—from a distance.

The painting was a landscape. In the foreground—a shrub, behind it could be seen a dacha’s fence and a small patch of path along which walked a woman, dim in the twilight. In the background—the red roof of a house and a copse of trees.

“From the Khotkovo series?” Cordovin finally muttered.

“Exactly!” Vladimir Igorevich said, lighting up. “This is what it means to be a specialist! It’s actually called, *Overcast Day, Khotkovo*. Even the old lady owner remembers that precise title. Imagine: she forgot the painter’s name, but the title, she says, all these years, like verses, she’s remembered!”

“It happens.” He sighed. “And what sort of *provenance* is there?”

“In my opinion, it’s all irreproachable,” the collector replied, revealing a pleasant knowledge of terminology of *the subject*. “There’s a written confirmation by the owner. The old lady’s the widow of an Israeli lawyer of average means, his second wife, at that. She remembers the painting on the wall the entire 25 years of their marriage; she says her husband brought it from Moscow in ’56.”

“Purchased? A gift? Details?”

“Nothing, unfortunately. The poor old thing has full-fledged Alzheimer’s.” He waved his hand. “But I think that’s even better: at least it all looks like normal family circumstance. And what’s really meaningful is that we’re a decent distance from the Russian market with its out-and-out fakes.”

That was true. As for the Russian market—you’re right on point, most respected fellow. But old widows—of what particular value are they? Weak eyesight and full-fledged Alzheimer’s: they don’t remember a damn thing except what happened this morning.

(Before his eyes momentarily arose the entire, final, drawn out bonanza meeting when the old woman, having stroked fingers through the *packet of greens* he'd given, finally deigned to write out the paper: "Well, I forgot the title again... Take a look, Zakharik, maybe it's written on the back?" And he turned the canvas around and dictated distinctly, straining to see the non-existent inscription: *Overcast Day period Khotkovo.*)

"Shall I hand you the picture?" Vladimir Igorevich was concentrating with his entire being—to clutch and hand it over, to hold it up, to lay it out and shine a light on it... He felt the urge to circle the painting and caress it with hands and glances—completely natural, akin to being in love, a genuine collector's state of being that spreads to the respected expert, as well. Incidentally, the history of *the subject* is known even to include a grateful kissing of hands or two.

"Hold on." Cordovin removed his glasses and carefully folded the sides of the expensive fashionable frames—like the arms of a deceased. He lingered..." First of all, here's something I'd like to clarify: upon completion, do you, Vladimir Igorevich, need just my honest opinion or my actual signature?"

The fatso sighed "ah," blushed. What did you expect... An emotional person and, it seemed, a sincere art lover, not some miser who stole a factory for a song... or a mine, for that matter.

"Zakhar Mironovich! Who the heck would want his collection *ruined by a fake!*"

"Don't tell me," the other said with a laugh. "About eight years ago, I had to be the expert for a buyer. Two paintings, I remember, were being offered: by Mashkov and, by the way, Falk. Even a god-foresaken blind man with ripe cataracts in both eyes would

have made the determination that both paintings had been executed by one and the same hand. Without taking a coffee break, at that. The circumstances seemed clear. However, the ‘collector’ lied through his teeth and in a frenzy demanded to bargain. I was in an idiotic situation. Of course in such circumstances an x-ray comparison would have been ideal—after all, as a rule, counterfeiters imitate only the visible aspect, the texture of the final brush strokes; their little hands don’t achieve a coherent composition. But an x-ray assumes that both radiologist and apparatus are available.”

“So then what?” asked Vladimir Igorevich with the same facial expression one has when watching the final chase in a movie thriller.

“I just got in my car without a word and left—inasmuch as I will never authenticate a forgery. But about two years later, those two cowboy twins were being exhibited at a respected auction, with a more obliging authentication by an expert from Art-Modus, and sold quite well. Quite well, indeed. For five times the price, I recall... Yes. And in the home of the legendary “Exodus” captain—the very one, the very one—I saw an enormous Malevich: two-by-three meters, a size the artist had never created. But the glorious captain had taken an extraordinary fancy to it. Despite the frank reviews of many experts.

“You understand... Vladimir Igorevich,” he continued pensively. “We’re going to look truth in the eye. In recent years the hunt for genuinely valuable works of art has become increasingly merciless. An expert’s authority has acquired a certain disproportionate, unjustified weight. And although this is my profession—you will, please, permit me to be open with you?—I’m loathe now to appear in your eyes a magician or wizard. I’m not a wizard.”

“Good Lord, on my word!” the other clasped his hands. “I understand and completely realize, that—“

“—Now then, if you like, let’s look at it a bit more closely.”

Vladimir Igorevich rushed over, and carefully, with outstretched arms, handed the painting to the expert.

He silently turned it around, started examining the back of the frame and canvas....For several minutes, the silence was broken solely by the fatso’s anxious nasal wheezing, bent as he was in a strained half-bow, and by childlike wails continually breaking out from the floor below, accompanied by wet smacks, and a woman’s voice languorously singing out: “And I say you’ll take it in the a-ass...”

“You know, of course,” Cordovin finally stated, “that a serious expert evaluation is a complex matter; that is to say, besides an art critic’s opinion, an array of technological analyses is essential: an x-ray, a chemical test...One can also practice sorcery through a microscope, mutter a few things about pigments, binders...Such evaluations can be obtained at an established organization of experts.”

“Zakhar Mironovich!” beseeched the collector. “To hell with them, those organizations. I need your opinion exclusively. Just you yourself, what do you think?”

“No, wait. I, of course, am pressed for time, but I value my reputation more than my time. And now I wish to be as open as possible with you. You’re looking upon me like on the Lord God, Vladimir Igorevich, but I, for goodness sake, don’t allocate spots in heaven. The awful truth is that not under any circumstances can anyone take upon himself full responsibility for the conclusions of an expert analysis. You have, of course, read about the most thunderous art scandal of the twentieth century when an expert of

tremendous experience, the art historian Dr. Abraham Bredus, took a forgery by van Meegeren for a work by Vermeer? And the recent scandal with a painting supposedly by Shishkin, but in reality by the Dutchman Marinus Koekkoek, which the Tretyakov let slip? And a certain Russian ‘collector’ for ma-a-any thousands of emerald ducats acquired “absolute bullshit”—by the way, I was enriched with this art term by a dealer with a good ten years of criminal past behind him. He decided to switch his racket to the antique trade since in that business there were higher profits and regard.

“But most tragic-comic of all is that sometimes in our business, the artist himself isn’t in a position to distinguish his own work from a counterfeit. When Madame Claude Latour, the famous Parisian counterfeiter, was unmasked and brought before a court, that very Utrillo found himself in a ridiculous situation: he couldn’t definitively answer whether the painting had been forged, or executed by him. And Vlaminck boasted that he’d once done a painting in the style of Cezanne, who acknowledged it as of his own creation.”

“But...then what the heck?” helplessly exhaled the collector. “So where’s the guarantee?”

“There can’t be any guarantee, my dear!” Cordovin angrily exclaimed. “What kind of guarantee: the world’s museums and private collections are cluttered with forgeries, for all their chemical analyses, x-rays, infra-red and ultraviolet lights! Do you suppose that a master-counterfeiter is dumber than us, the experts? One encounters genuine virtuosi among them, high-class professionals. They become incredibly well-versed in the methodologies of expert evaluations, learning all the technological criteria of authenticity—even the psychology of the experts themselves!”

“Then how the heck can anyone be...”

Cordovin took a handkerchief from his pocket, unhurriedly wiped his glasses and put them on—*I’ve raised the dead*. With evident satisfaction, he inspected his client. Excellent work: the fellow had reached the necessary freezing point. Now we’ll get down to defrosting and reanimating...

“How can anyone be?” he repeated. “By looking and seeing. I prefer to draw conclusions based on the paint layer. That’s what will never let you down or deceive you—assuming you know how to read it. Everything’s right there: the painting’s style, emotional rhythm, individual brush strokes, the means of applying paint—everything characteristic of this, and only this, artist... The way you know in the case of a spy who’s altered his appearance: the shape of brows and nose, hair color—all’s been changed... but he takes a single step with his left foot, and bingo! That very left foot is what unmask him. Although, of course, one can’t deny the significance of technological expert evaluation. And it’s your right to conduct one later. As for me, I simply look at the canvas and—yes, I suppose the authorship to be Falk’s, and I’ll now explain why: but I ask you to bear in mind that this is simply my supposition based exclusively on experience, that is to say, on intuition, and more precisely—by sniffing like a dog, forgive the vulgarity of expression.”

He leaned back into the chair, his left hand balancing the landscape on his knees...

Now that the overture had been played through, that all the major themes of the symphony entitled “Birth of a New Venus from Sea Foam” had been heard, one could switch to loose variations. He loved these sudden switches to meaningless yarns, gossip



about the greats, instructive stories about some passerby...It reminded him of the prelude to love when any impatient movement could crush the growing sweet languor, the craving for possession of—in our situation—a painting rather than of a woman, but it was one and the same. Venus had already come to life...One could say, the tangled red top of her head has already appeared among the foaming waves...Anyway, it wouldn't be bad to straighten the client up, otherwise—the man wasn't young after all—he might even *get lumbago*. And then, indeed, some “Golden Mustache” would be called for.

“In the eighties, in Moscow, on Lavrushinsky Lane, lived an old invalid who moved about on two crutches...So have a seat, for God's sake, Vladimir Igorevich, and relax. Sit right there, opposite; at the same time, take an extra look at your Falk. That's the way, old fellow. He participated on a commission of experts at the Pushkin Museum. Not the one on Volkhonka Street, but the other, the literary one, On Prechistenka. But that's of no importance. When the museum intended to acquire its next painting, they of course convened the commission and all the experts had their say: but the old fellow remained quiet. They let him speak last. Then everyone lapsed into silence, and he leaned over the underside of the canvas and sniffed at it. You understand? He sniffed for a long, long time...And announced his verdict. Nobody knew what he smelled there, in all those old canvases. But they trusted his hairy nostril more than any instrument. You'll agree, this all hardly resembles scientific method. What kind of science is it really—a connoisseur's sheer intuition. However, both art dealers and you collectors make little use of our suppositions. You demand uniform positive conclusions, isn't that so? Look how you worry and want—I see you want very much—for me to acknowledge Falk's authorship! Draw nearer, a little closer...”

The expert got up and, moving the bottle and snifters aside with the edge of his hand, lay the painting flat on the coffee table, perfectly illuminated by the morning light from the open balcony door. “See how perfect the light is before the sun fully rises. I picked such an early time to meet with you for a reason.” He withdrew a magnifying glass from his pocket. “Actually,” he stated, “we don’t need a magnifying glass here. Come, take a look yourself. Now I’ll explain in detail the flow of my reasoning. I’ll make you a co-participant if you’d like—a co-author of the expert evaluation. So then, the first impression: the canvas is in decent condition. Factory priming, I suppose. Falk—as opposed to, for example, Konchalovsky, who primed canvases himself—willingly used prepared Soviet canvases from some Leningrad or Podol factory, although he wouldn’t balk at French ones, but that was before the War...An indigenous stretcher, also old, from the forties. How can one tell? Both of them have aged simultaneously beneath the influence of light. And then the natural soiling. See, there’s a bit more dust and dirt under the frame’s bottom molding. To say nothing of the little fly spots...Flies have been more than moderately busy here, but they’re native ones, in this case our allies. Thus, we’re convinced that the canvas was hardly spread across the stretcher yesterday. Now sir, onward—the paint layer...”

He straightened gently up, winced from the pain in his hand...carefully massaged his wrist a bit.

“Let me tell you, Vladimir Igorevich, what do technology experts first pay attention to during sample selection? To the plasticity of the paint layer. They stick in a pin and immediately say, ‘This was painted yesterday.’ What about our case? It’s

apparent that not so long ago, the painting underwent a delicate and highly professional restoration because of small chips in the paint layer.”

“My gosh, how can you tell?” admiringly exclaimed the collector. “I mean, nothing’s visible at all! They informed me about the restoration, but I couldn’t—“

“Just you take a close look.” The expert held the magnifying glass over the canvas: beneath the glass, the house’s gable looked like a rusty scone. “In two places: right here...and here, you can see ‘mastic repairs,’ that is, the prime coating has been sealed and retouched with great precision. But the color is more...hmmm...just on the surface, much fresher, can’t you tell? Furthermore—the light natural craquelure—these tiny cracks here—all correspond to the appropriate passage of time as well as the sort of decay typical of a Falk. It would seem: the painting’s condition fully speaks to its provenance: However!”

With a teacherly gesture, he raised his index finger and waited out a sharp tiny pause, after which he continued: “But one could get hold of an old canvas; relative ‘young’ craquelure isn’t difficult to counterfeit. What’s most important is not this, but the paint layer itself, its life...Peer closely at it. What do we see? A remarkably multi-layered painting—it’s not easy to counterfeit this sort: the incredible complexity of the whole gamut of gray and green hues...Falk’s widow, Angelina Shchekin-Krotova, recalls somewhere having asked him one day, ‘Did you invent this enormous quantity of gradations of green?’ Pay attention—can you see okay? just draw nearer, closer, don’t be shy—pay attention: on the upper layers, on a par with the brush work, one can clearly see the work of a palette knife. That’s a completely Falkian manner of filling the surface of a painted canvas. The shrub in the foreground is painted in a very broad and

generalized manner; it's as if the viewer's gaze runs past it then rests at the fence...From the state of nature in the painting, one can divine it's the beginning of autumn, which the widow's memoirs support—she explained: summer that year ended abruptly, cold rains began...and that's one more corroboration that the painting's an original. Look, the entire landscape is literally vibrating from the wind; the paint layer in several spots of the canvas...right here...here...and here...pools in precious coagulations.”

Carefully and attentively, like a blind man, he stroked the canvas with the fingertips of both hands, leaned back and smiled broadly, letting the childlike trust-inspiring hyphens at the corners of his mouth grow deeper. “This surface doesn't remind you of anything? Eh? A mosaic, for example...Perhaps you'd be interested to know: in order to refresh the paint layer after partial drying, Falk rubbed the canvas' surface with garlic—so as to soften the outer crust. Aleksandra Venyaminovna Azarkh-Granovskaya, his sister-in-law, explained to a friend of mine, whom she received into her house in extreme old age, that she grew faint one day from the sharp smell in the apartment—she was allergic to garlic. She followed the smell and discovered on the balcony a painting rubbed with garlic. And although about 60 years have passed since this painting's execution, the old fellow we know, our invalid from Lavrushinsky, with that monstrous shnozzle of his, would surely have sniffed out the long-faded scent. Maybe you'll be lucky, too? Stoop lower...”

The intrigued Vladimir Igorevich obediently stooped over, trustingly leaned his face down to the canvas' very surface—the way lips, trembling with passion, draw toward a longed-for breast—and noisily drew air in through his nose. His glossy bald head revealed a celestial scattering of crimson birthmarks.

“Truly—” he said with excitement, gasping. “—there really and truly... is a faint scent! You know, I picked it up last night. Where, I thought, was garlic coming from?”

He appeared shaken, subdued...and already rejoicing.

“No, hold on,” Cordovin stopped him with a raised hand in blue knit glove.

“Where’s your conscientiousness, dear colleague? You’ve got to earn your honorarium, after all. We haven’t finished. In the painting, we repeat, Robert Falk’s favorite palette predominates: extremely varied hues of gray tones—from yellow-greenish-grays to violet-gray-pearls. Two spots explode this general grayish-pale-bluish-ochrous gamut: the emerald green shrub behind the fence and the house’s red roof...By the way, it’s the former home of a priest, with a huge old garden, grand linden trees, a tumbledown terrace...you can read it all in the memoirs of Angelina Vasilyevna, the widow. And with attentive scrutiny one can notice: various greenish and reddish hues are strewn about the entire canvas like an echo, as if in response to the basic color chords. It’s all the very same Falk: surprising pictorial integrity through extremely complex gradations...I see that you’re growing weary?”

“What are you saying. Not a bit!” the fatso exclaimed with fervor. “I’m enjoying this, I’m—!”

“—So, finally. In the corner of the canvas, on the fence, sits a weightless yet animated white dab signifying a dove—ruffling up in a light drizzle.”

“A dove—that’s right!” The collector, screwing up his eyes and staring at the landscape, was moved for some reason. “Fancy that, I didn’t even notice it at first.”

“*And so the summer is over*, as a good poet once wrote...That’s it, Vladimir Igorevich!”

Cordovin leaned back in his chair, removed his glasses and tiredly massaged his closed eyelids a bit with the thumb and index finger of his left hand. “Expressing myself in academic language, this is a private expert’s opinion, based on thorough inspection and analysis of the artwork’s paint layer. But putting it simply, in us-speak: to hell with those bright folks from basement studios somewhere in Daliat-al-Carmel casting aspersions on such a painting. They’d do better to chip away at Kandinsky’s and Malevich’s—those are easier to counterfeit. But a painter like this is out of their league, no....Of course, you could still turn to some sound establishment for a complex expert evaluation, with the application of specialized instruments—icing on the cake, as they say. Nah-nah-nah, I don’t think they’ll convey anything new to you. Dear colleague, hold onto your Falk!”

“Im-pres-sive!”

“Nothing impressive about it, dear Vladimir Igorevich. It’s all simply the hard-earned experience of a fairly long life. In such circumstances, my Uncle Sema from Vinnitsa would say, “After that first swallow, I’ve just been chewing my cud.”

“My goodness, Zakhar Mironovich, you’re really, if you’ll forgive me, just a big kid!”

“We-ell...if one’s fifth decade is childhood, we’ll live to 120. However—enough of my yakkity-yakking! Hold on—I’ve still got to write up my opinion. With this my clumsy hand. Listen, Vladimir Igorevich...I’ll get my personal letterhead, you see, with all its regalia...Don’t refuse, my dear fellow, instead of me writing a couple of words—I’ll dictate some—and I’ll sign it myself with my left hand, which is my right hand’s primary proxy. Then we’ll sign photographs of the work in customary fashion.”

“But of course, of course!”

The fatso solicitously spread out on the table the lilac-colored stationery handed to him, with El Greco's famous self-portrait lightly showing through like a watermark on paper currency, and with bold letterhead at the top of the sheet listing all of Zakhar Mironovich Cordovin's official appointments and titles; he readied himself to write the dictation, for all appearances—a diligent second-grader.

“Everything's simple yet profound, like biblical verses,” said Cordovin. “Scant in words, but rich in meaning. We won't spout art critic twaddle. Write: ‘The landscape *Overcast Day period Khotkovo*, size—65 by 80 centimeters, after conducting an inspection and analysis of the paint layer...’

For about another 10 minutes he spouted a great deal of art critic twaddle... Everything he'd said above was enumerated here, but translated into the standardized expert opinion jargon used by all professional restoration centers.

“...based on the foregoing, I regard the subject work to be an authentic painting by the artist Robert Rafailovich Falk, painted by him just like the other famous canvases of this period, in August 1946, in Khotkovo. That's it. Give me the pen.”

He leaned over the form and with fine, painstaking care—didn't actually sign, but, as always, traced out his name in even, measured, calligraphed letters.

Then he straightened up. “So, isn't my left hand the strong brave lad? I'll soon designate it my right.”

“Hold on!” said Vladimir Igorevich, decisively screwing one hand into the other. “I know you're in a hurry, but without a toast—I won't let you go!”

“And I won't decline, if for a moment. I'm ashamed to admit that I love Courvoisier.”

Vladimir Igorevich dexterously and methodically poured cognac into the snifters. He passed one to Cordovin.

“To your health!” he said, smiling with his eyes, raising the glass and gently swirling the thick amber globule at the bottom.

“No way!” Vladimir Igorevich said indignantly. He reddened, broke out in a sweat, got all excited as if having successfully concluded a deal. A likeable guy, sincerely in love *with art*, that is to say with our filthy swamp. And such a giddy trustfulness in his face. His warts are blazing with emotion. Maybe he really did earn his millions through his own hard work? Maybe he hadn’t murdered anyone, hadn’t robbed, hadn’t burned a hole in the bellies of his competitors by manipulating hard currency?

“No, not to my health, but yours, Zakhar Mironovich! What real class you just showed me, eh? That in itself is worth a bundle! Such generosity, real high class! I mean, given you’re in a hurry you could have chirped an opinion in three minutes and then flown off somewhere else. But you, you see, didn’t stint on time, grasped my passion... You know, I’ve got to confess, I kept hunting for Sarabyanov—such a name in art, it’s understandable. But, just to ship the painting to Russia, then to import it back here... a total mess. I was beside myself. And here Morris, I can’t remember his last name for the life of me... well, from the Perseus Gallery, the one who actually came across the painting, said—to hell with your Sarabyanov when we’ve got Cordovin living here, a world-class expert. So I rushed to call you. And now, after our meeting... I’m simply overwhelmed: outstanding professionalism, fantastic erudition, and most of all—”



“Well, I’m glad, I’m glad,” hastily stated the world-class expert, drinking up his cognac. “Now you’ve got to let me go, dear fellow, Vladimir Igorevich, or else the plane will leave without me. I’ve a flight in three hours!”

The fatso sighed, gently squeezed the expert’s shoulders and led him to the door. Cordovin stopped in the hallway and, before picking up his suitcase, said with extended hand, “And I do everything like Mayakovsky: with the left, left, left!”

“Some ‘Gold Mustache’ balm, remember: ‘Gold Mustache’ at night, and wrap it up warm!”

They firmly clasped *left hand in right*. It was evident that the fatso was ready to give him a heartfelt embrace. No—such intimate delights are, if you please, excessive. Now the final thing. Per that popular poem, we’ll just play “the absent-minded man from Basseinaya Street...”

With an anxious look, he headed toward the door.

“Zakhar Mironovich!!!” the fatso cried out, pressing his temples. “Oh my God!!! But the honorarium, what about the honorarium?!”

They each slapped their foreheads and burst out laughing. The fatso trotted off and flung himself on his jacket hanging on the back of a chair, got tangled up in the pockets—left-right...finally withdrew an envelope and thrust it into Cordovin’s hand. He, not looking inside or counting, stuck it in his pocket.

“Boy, what hot shots,” said Vladimir Igorevich, sighing and rolling his head. “We’re two hot shots!”

And when the expert reached for the doorknob, Vladimir Igorevich grabbed him by the shoulder and exhaled with great feeling, “Please take another look, look for the last time—it’s really good, right? It’s good?!”

Cordovin turned.

Falk’s landscape was standing on the sofa, and in the smoky morning heat-haze from the wide-open balcony doors, it flickered all its precious greens, grayish-yellows, silvers... Venus born of the sea foam!

“Not good,” he stated with emphasis, “but mag-ni-fi-cent!”

Setting his suitcase in the trunk, he took off his jacket and tugged the tie from his sweaty neck. What a climate! The beginning of April, pouring rain everywhere in Europe, but here—steamy year-round.

He pulled off that wool glove he was sick of, and fastidiously tossed it into the back seat. Alrighty then... Mustn’t forget to stop on the way for Bedouin coffee. Nowhere in the world—not in Italy, Greece, or Turkey—could he drink coffee like that, with cardamom, the way he did on his local beach at a rickety glass-windowed café knocked quickly together by hand. We’re off, God willing. How this salt blinds in the sunlight. A robust, even layer of cobalt, *if you touch it up*. But the Falk... what about it, the Falk is good... How could it not be good—after all, it had flowed from his very own, Zakhar Cordovin, hand. The very same one, arthritic.

*If you don’t count the Hong Kong flu he suffered in third grade, he’s never been sick a day in his life.*

The Jordanian Hills, the biblical hills of Moab, were covered in misty pink heat-haze.

He wished to wipe his nonexistent glasses clean or, with his finger, to scrape the film off that lilac-ish ridge the way he used to do with transfer paper in childhood. Uncle Sema (“a child should work at something regardless of what!”) would buy some in the toy section of Vinnitsa’s department store, and it was an entire evening’s activity.

Warm water was poured into a deep soup dish. The picture (a house behind a fence, a tree, a birdie on the roof—pure Falk!), as dull as celluloid, was assiduously cut with scissors from the page and immersed in the water: *it set up*...Next they shook off the droplets, quickly carried it to a clean dry sheet of the sketch pad, stuck it quickly and evenly “backside up” *so it would come out even stronger*...And then, finally, they pressed with two fingertips—those of the index and middle fingers, which even now are the most sensitive and hardest working. Real real gently, with an extremely light circular finger motion, they’d get down to loosening the top layer of paper...They had to work toward the picture, to release the sleeping beauty from its dull, clinging shroud, practically not breathing, ever-so-carefully rolling the wet paper off...And there at the center suddenly lay revealed the pure steel-colored tail of a fighter aircraft! “*Take a look at what this child has gone and made! He’s got little fingers like Volodya the Pickpocket! We should get him into art!*”

Hmm—yes...in essence, actually, it’s all the same process when cleaning a painting, with the very same sinking of one’s heart, and the sticking out of the tip one’s tongue like a child and the forever awaiting of a miracle.

He wasn't driving particularly fast, but at a low speed, feasting his eyes on the shifting play of emerald-cobalt tones to the right, and the encircling elephantine knees and sharp ribs of the karst cliffs projecting onto the road from the left.

*There was nowhere to rush to. His plane wouldn't take off until nighttime.*

As the sun made its rise above the sea, the quality of light changed every minute, and of air, the color of the water: at first a delicate turquoise with long veins of malachite, then an azure satin condensing more and more each minute into an emerald green. Finally the pure and brilliant sapphire ingot began to glisten painfully amid the ashy pink hills...

...So how is it I've never actually brought Zhuka a fan, he suddenly thought in a cheerful frame of mind. Silly shawls from there, assorted souvenirs, brooches and beads. But as for a fan—not once. He used to think—gypsy vulgarity, triteness—a waste. But, in this heat at least the old woman would be able to direct a little breeze toward her nose.

At the fork he turned right, toward the sea, drove about 200 meters along the narrow dirt road to a bumpy, rutted square, parked and got out. They'd recently ennobled this semi-wild beach, enclosing it with a twig fence and knocking together some floor boards down to the water's edge. An abandoned glass-windowed café had been taken in hand by some enterprising Eastern family.

So now it was an amazing oasis—they'd spent a really long time setting up this blessed paradise of the Maghreb: they'd scattered gaudy pillows on wooden benches, set

small glass vases on the plastic tables, hung on the walls raggedy coverlets sewn with beads and little mirrors. The main thing was to make it sparkle brighter, to give a more effervescent feel; after all, setting the standard here by the shore was the largest and most lustrous, most blue-green coverlet mirror of all.

“—but burning hot!” He lifted his finger sharply, and the waiter left to boil coffee. He finally answered the incessantly keening cell phone.

“You’re at the airport? It’s Irina.”

“Yes, darling. Forgive me, I didn’t hear the ring with all the noise. I’m going through Passport Control.”

Screwing up his eyes, he gazed through the wide-open window at the water’s blazing and glittering heavy glycerin skin.

“Was I sort of rude to you this morning?” she inquired tentatively.

He grinned so that she’d *hear* the grin... “Never, not on your life!” he stated firmly. “You’re the tenderest and most gentle soul. You know who you are? My ‘paloma blanca.’”

“What are you saying? I flopped around like a palomino blanket?”

“ ‘Blanca paloma,’ my love, is Spanish for ‘white dove.’”

Without dropping his smile, he nodded to the waiter, silently thanking him for the served coffee and, with his fingers gathered together in a pinch, indicated that he bring nuts or some such... “And that combination of words—*paloma blanca*—are you listening to me?—also bears a religious meaning. That’s how locals refer to the image of the Virgin of Rocio, a town not far from—”

“Oh boy,...here you go again with your ballads about toreadors.”

“—not far from Seville. Every spring, sometime in May-June, for Pentecost—  
The Day of the Holy Spirit—pilgrims head there. An entire procession. And you know,  
it’s quite a striking spectacle: everyone’s in national costume, dancing, singing songs—  
‘Sevillanas,’ flutes delicately whistling, drums trilling: tr-r-r-r-r...tr-r-r-r-r...tra-ta-ta-ta-  
ta!”

“Alright already,” she said, satisfied. “I’m all sweaty here. They’re about to call  
for my massage. To hell with you, fly off to your Spain.”

He shut the cell phone and took a sip of the best coffee in the world, scalding and  
thick. He recalled the little bird ruffling up under the rain in Falk’s landscape. A  
brilliant stroke. That little smile, unnecessary bravado, was, of course, a gamble. But  
also his secret branding.

Oh, how you play, Don Zacarías, with your white doves—Margo repeats to him  
time and again, energetically shaking her red mane and triple chin.

He gazed at the harmonious flashes of long, sun-drenched quills on the sea’s  
viscous blue and felt an exhaustion and happiness that resembled the kind he experienced  
in youth only with his favorite women, and which great performers probably experience  
after a brilliant premiere. Exhaustion, happiness and the proud sense of *possession* of  
something secret: a tiny, yet mighty particle of the genius of humanity.

Money wasn’t the point here. It’s possible that the coming Messiah will be just  
this devastatingly happy after raising the dead...And you, Robert Rafailovich, are you  
happy there in your other-worldly hypostasis? After all, today your new masterpiece was  
born, and every square inch of it irrefutably attests to your authorship. From today on, it

exists and will exist forever—at first let it be in a private collection, in the villa of our respected Vladimir Igorevich. But sooner or later, his kids-grandchildren will put the painting up for auction—they'll put it up without fail—and by that time (when not only the lawyer's widow *will have skated into the other world*, but when even I myself will be grinding inextinguishable colors from the pigments of heaven's yard)—by that time Falk will have risen in price by hundreds of thousands of cheery Euros, and by then it will be an *authentic* Falk with a *genuine* history.

And at that point, my angel, my guardian, patron of the entire flock of white doves released by my hand—at that point, some worthy museum's expert will triumph in the bidding at that future auction.

He nodded at the waiter, who went to the cash register to print out the bill.

2

Passing Maale-Adumim—a white jagged ridge of rooftops in the darkness of the high hill—and leaving Jerusalem to the left, he tore along the new highway at the bottom of Sorek Valley, shot up to the summit where it merged with the main highway to Tel Aviv, and continued moving along the Jerusalem corridor toward the airport. However, at the Shores roundabout, he turned right after the glass-windowed McDonald's, entered the settlement on the left, and made his way slowly up the mountain via a long narrow street (cats were forever wandering here, as were bad-tempered and panicky dogs, decorative pheasants with stained-glass tails, and even peacocks).

The wealthy settlement's main street was terraced with villas, typical of mountain locales: on the left, houses towered two or even three stories high; above the enclosures on the right, the villas' roofs were barely visible, descending two more stories as they did down the mountainside. Above the fences on both right and left, rose prickly cactus paddles, and bougainvillea weighed with luxuriant lianas in various shades of red, yellow, lilac. Those colorful swatches, tiled roofs beneath blue sky peppered with sour cream islands, made the eye grow inexplicably cheerful.

The higher up, the more the street curled. It made two smooth pirouettes graced by new villas—of dark pink and yellow Jerusalem stone, led out onto a straight section of road and for a minute and a half, stretched higher and higher along the very edge of the precipice; finally, it dove to the right where it stumbled and sprawled into a small dirt patch before a dark-ochre-painted wooden fence behind which, it appeared, stood nothing but the valley.

However, something did stand there, of course.

He got out of the car and opened the trunk. The suitcase zipper again revealed the slit from which he extracted the very same, still dozing *peaceful birth of Venus*, the good-for-nothing Glock, which he slipped into his pants pocket.

Fumbling a bit as usual, he opened the warehouse lock on the gate—an old Arab lock with a snout half-human, half-lion: the maw, gaping in amazement constituted an antediluvian key-hole; he'd barely been able to find a master key from some Iranian great-grandfather. He went inside, then put the lock through the same paces and now



hung it through the same loops on the inside of the gate, appearing wooden and decrepit, painted by hack job handiwork in that same nauseating ochre.

Here began a small, unkempt but comforting yard: a few tangerine, three orange and five lemon trees transplanted beside a dirt path, upon which, in turn, variously colored individual tiles had been laid out in a repeating pattern. Such tiles were used for floors in this country: partly gray-speckled, partly coffee-colored, even with a bit of design. All evidently swiped from nearby construction sites. In case of rain.

And farther on—more precisely—deeper in, three stone steps could be seen leading up to a house with a terrace; the middle step seemed to have been leveled fairly well with cement. Over the years, this old stone house had acquired the deceptively orphan-like façade of a barn or warehouse, as do many houses here from British Mandate times.

Inside these stone steamer-trunks, spacious halls opened up unexpectedly with thick bleached walls and high vaulted ceilings; in winter they marvelously retained heat, and coolness in summer. To make his happiness complete, all Cordovin needed was for Nachman, from whom he'd been renting for roughly 10 years now, finally to decide to sell it to him. But Nachman's two grandsons were growing up, and the old fogey had dug in his heels, planning to leave the hovel as an inheritance for the kids.

Not a single soul other than Nachman knew that this sanctuary was part of his life. For that matter, Nachman knew nothing about Dr. Cordovin.

Nothing except the Russian word “dacha,” which *Zakkariya* you son of a bitch taught him 10 years ago at the signing of the lease.

Dr. Cordovin received friends, guests, colleagues, collectors, and women at his address in a humble yet elegant two-room apartment in Jerusalem's San Simon neighborhood.

Oh damn, when enumerating the garden's fauna, we forgot about the tall bald cypress around the entire perimeter of the fence—the layer of dry needles made the ground in the courtyard all spongy, and most important: two pomegranate trees right beside the terrace. One of them hid in its branches three variegated pieces of fruit forgotten since fall: two were ash-purple with hollow cheeks, and one was the color of saturated red lacquer. Should prune the branches, Cordovin thought, preoccupied as he went up the terrace steps. Okay, that's for after, after...

For a minute he cocked an ear to the quiet inside the house, finally uncorking another equally remarkable old Arab lock, this time in the form of a half-donkey half-panther (the sly innuendo of the East)—a lock whose construction was more complex than the one on the gate: a long dagger had been inserted into the donkey-panther's maw and was held in place—oh, how difficult to explain to one's fingers—with the help of a locked and moveable tail in the donkey-panther's backside.

After entering, he bolted the door with a simple bar, a medieval iron dowel forged in one of the Old City's workshops where cunning craftsmen smelted and soldered ancient coins from the Second Temple period, mounted splinters from *the original Holy cross* into silver settings and aged shreds of *the original shroud of Turin*.

Ah, splendid now.

A few hours of the quietest possible profound solitude lay ahead.

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The home's interior appeared rather strange to the European eye; but here, it was an ordinary space: a rectangular room of about 30 square meters with, opposite the front door, three high arched windows covered by grates whose purpose was unclear given that the central window turned out to be a door to an adjoining room, large and well-lit—a greenish light splashed throughout, from the wooded slope beyond the ensuing exterior windows.

Nothing here indicated human habitation apart from a single cot and bamboo rocking chair and, of matching bamboo, a table supporting a pile of books topped with an apple core. Rather, the room was a storehouse for goods of indefinable manufacture. One of those larders where they'd been hauling and heaping a wide assortment of objects for years.

Here stood old frames in stacks, stretchers, wooden stays and moldings, rolls of canvas and paper, small unlabeled boxes, crates of various shapes and sizes, bins holding all manner of nails. Assorted drums and plastic canisters stretched along the walls; right on the floor towered mounds of auction catalogues going back several years and a heap of directories for Kramer Paints.

In the corner a large wicker basket sprawled with onions and garlic, which added a dryish astringent component to the insistent smell of turpentine, glue, varnishes, old wood and old canvases...Completing the picture, a pot-bellied paper sack of cat food crowned a pyramid of two wooden crates packed with ordinary cobblestones.

A mountain of fabrics filled the arm chair, whose attribution as a pseudo-antique (there's a trade in such furniture in the alleys of Shúka Pishpishím, Jaffa's flea market),

necessitated only flicks of the fine spiral knife that was coquettishly peering from beneath a fold in the brown rug.

There was also a gas stove in the corner and something akin to a kitchen cabinet, on whose side hung an entire collection of various sized Turkish coffee ewers, or, as they say here, *dzezvas*, for whatever company, although in this house company consisted of only one person—himself; not even Nachman could enter his own house, but he didn't really nose around: *you son of a bitch Zakkariya* always paid a year in advance and never answered a knock at the gate.

But it was worth approaching the glass door to the neighboring room and taking a look through the grate: a glance revealed an entirely other space.

Three steps below (the slope of the mountain took this counter-sunk part of the house with it) extended a great wide hall with an arcade of huge, semi-circular windows on every wall, all looking out at the wooded valley. And there, beyond the nearest mountain peak, other ridges showed through the water-color mist with the red tile roofs of surrounding kibbutzes and settlements, like Shores, scattered about.

And there in that hall—and the door into it was protected better than the entrance to a harem: one had to bend down and grope, as necessary, through the basket of onions and garlic, to find, with clutching fingers, at the very bottom amid dry and brittle peels, the key for the grate—in that hall an exquisite order reigned, except for the arbitrary placement (around a wide, five square meter table with a top of polished local stone) of:

a joiner's bench with a set of carpenter tools;

a solid easel with a spiral hoist;

an open sketchbook with a palette scraped to an eggy luster;  
and strange trestles sided by two mobile soffit reflectors as long-legged as storks.

Three cabinets of varying sizes were positioned along the walls.

Behind the laboratory-like glass doors of the first one, were arranged a countless quantity of jars, distillation vessels, bottles and phials, as well as boxes of various sizes.

Inside the second cabinet—as tall and spacious as a wardrobe—assorted instruments stood in special stands: brushes, knives, palette knives, scalpels, tweezers, small hammers and scissors, pliers, iron rulers, palettes and two dozen other objects of inexplicable purpose. Shelves in that cabinet held: cast-iron and electric flat irons, an electric atomizer with a compressor for spraying varnish, a magnifying lamp, a microscope, expensive cameras with several lenses. Finally, a portable x-ray machine and vacuum cleaner.

The depth of the third cabinet reminded more of a huge shelfless pantry in which several canvases on stretchers stood side by side.

The windows in this hall didn't need grates; hardly anyone would be able to climb up here from below: the house even hung slightly over the precipice, creating the illusion of an old Spanish caravel sailing off into the valley. One could stand in front of those windows for hours...

Neither of the mountainsides—not the one opposite nor this one where the house, on the very peak, rested upon two wide supports—was planted with boring pines like all the surroundings. On these slopes' ancient terraces, leveled and propped up by rows of

stones, the tops of restless olive trees lived in constant motion. And when a sudden squall of wind blew, these silvery crowns hummed Bach partitas.

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There was still enough time before the flight; in any case, at least enough for those few matters that absolutely had to be accomplished.

To start with, he turned on the air conditioner, changed into an old track suit, pulled a waiter's sort of apron from a cabinet and slipped into it, removed a picture from the easel and placed it face-up onto the trestles.

He got cotton wool from the glass-doored cabinet, a jar of varnish, a phial of thinner, a bottle of turpentine and the compressor with the atomizer. He set all this beside him on the table. Then he spent about five minutes preparing the job: he diluted the varnish with the thinner, fiddled with the compressor, checking the area of spray on a sheet of paper.

In olden times, icon painters varnished icons, grinding by hand and lightly spreading a small quantity of drying oil across the wood: a master would use the heat of his hand so the varnish would retain its fluidity. Sometimes weeks and months would pass between the first and final coatings, even years. So, the first varnish film had to be as thin as possible; that way there'd be sufficient capacity to "build up" the varnish gradually, assuring that the various tints on the surface didn't differ from those of the underlying painting itself.

The picture's first layer of varnish had been drying for several days now, in the cool quiet of the house. Well, and now...now we'll add to the beauty one more covering of weightless muslin...

Having finished the spraying, he stood over the canvas for a few moments in a half-hunched posture, straining—opposite the light—peering at every centimeter of the canvas' surface, examining whether there were any gaps in the coating.

Not bad, not bad... We'll just let it breathe for half an hour in its transparent cocoon, then it will cool down, harden... and suddenly will discover itself forevermore swaddled in the most delicate of layers.

Finally he straightened up, and with the cotton wool liberally soaked in turpentine, he began thoroughly wiping his hands.

The painting depicted a seashore, one of those many serene little resort towns lying on the Riviera near Nice or Antibes.

In the foreground, in the pale, transparent blue shade of an awning whose dark blue hem peeped into the painting from the left, stood a beat-up wooden table strewn with some apples. In a simple glass vase, a bouquet of little wildflowers were wilting in the heat. The background strips of beach and sea shone beneath the midday sun, two bathers were lifting their hands amid the waves. The azure of the sea and the yellow clotted sand comprised the painting's primary color contrast; this pictorial chord closely echoed the yellow sides of the apples and muted specks of light on the table's shaded surface where, in the pale bluish shade of the foreground—a white dove's beak and round eye were questioning above a freshly cut half apple.

A light rendered by numerous transparent layers permeated the entire painting; everything on the canvas—both objects and people, spots both lit and shaded—

everything was bathed in the weightless airy haze that hovers over any seashore on a summer's midday.

And if the hypothetical viewer were to look closely, he could without any particular difficulty detect in the lower right corner of the canvas the painter's signature: "M. Larionov"—in the small wobbly letters so characteristic of the famous artist's signature.

The painting was finished, and had now even been coated with a layer of varnish...but *it wasn't ready*. That is, it could adorn any exhibition or the wall of any museum...but was not ready to begin living the actual life *of an original*: he had not yet concocted, had not yet designed *the history of its finding*, had not selected its *adoptive parents*, had not nominated a buyer. Three-four years would pass while the paint layer *sat still*...Three-four years during which to weave skillful patterns of chance meetings and curious acquaintanceships, for the conducting of correspondence with owners-to-be, for fulfillment of strategic moves on the chessboard of circumstance. A flowing pavane, his favorite period of creating the myth, like a microscopic chip off *the creation of the world*: maturation of the situation, the painting's coming to fruition from the flesh and blood *of fate*.

Yes-yes: "and He blew the air of life into her nostrils...." And ahead of her, that airy beauty, still lay...

He recalled today's success with the Falk. Goodness, it's rarely so simple, *so marvelously simple*, to compose a painting's biography. He'd lucked out there right off: he'd barely glimpsed the dilettantish landscape over the bed of the old lawyer's widow (a



chance stop in Ramat Gan, Irina having asked to look in on *the sweet old lady* from whom she'd rented an apartment during her first years here)—the instant he beheld that pathetic attempt by some unknown amateur—but the year, the canvas!—he immediately *launched a scheme*.

Now that Ramat Gan apartment arose before his eyes; the stuffy old-person's smell had gotten to bothering him by the end of those *visits*. And the widow, with her endless requests and demands—in those last weeks before *the taking of her leg*, she even made him run to the store for potatoes—prompted a burning desire to unscrew her little gray head. So as to impress the painting's title into that little head, he had to repeat it in endless conversations about 800 times.

“You've got such an en-charm-ing smile, Zakharik...”

It took dozens of multi-directional actions, resembling the most minute movements of five-fingered marionetting with a string attached to each finger, thanks to which a harlequin simultaneously stamps his little foot, turns his head, strums the strings of a guitar and opens his mouth wide: he had to finagle the painting in such a way that the lawyer's widow didn't cling to it like a cuttle-fish; now and then to call Morris, indicating *the unknown Falk* that Cordovin had discovered was just about to fall into his hands so Morris could start looking for a client...Finally, the long, torturously sweet work on the painting itself when you're not so much immersed in the artist's style, not so much living with it as you are simply becoming him, this singular master with his singular style, his vision of light and the objects through which that light is refracted, with his method of holding a brush or palette knife, with his habit of working only during morning or midday hours...—in a word, when you, like the Almighty in the Kabbalah's

cosmogonic theory, contract and shrink into yourself as if freeing space for the birth of a *new essence*...

A double feline wail reached in from the yard.

Ahah, Chico's shown up—how is it that he infallibly scents his master's arrivals, while not denying himself along the way the amusement of scuffling with some passing gentleman.

Running up the steps to the front room, he removed the bar and glanced around outside.

A splendid battle was taking place in the yard: his Chico, a venerable big black cat, was standing nose to nose with a red-headed upstart; both furiously curling their tails and meowing—with a husky tenor and coloratura soprano—a minor third, climbing higher and higher in unison, compressing a hysterical tension that burst forth in a screech. Both opponents trembled with hatred, but neither one made up his mind to attack.

The first to join in was the world-class expert. “Mix it up!!” he cried stridently, squatting and propping hands on knees. “Mix it up, you road kill!!!”

Both cats, as if at a referee's whistle, let out howls, leapt up, scrambled in the air, tumbled together to the ground.

And for another five minutes or so, they flew up, crashing into one another, letting loose hideous screeches under the heated cries of “Give it to him!!! Tear him apart, the vermin!!!” until they all grew tired...

Finally, the red-head trotted off for home, grumbling and dragging its shredded tail. Chico, unsteady, crept to his satisfied master.

“So—what?” the man asked. “What’s up, you little scamp puss? You understand how to achieve victory?”

He opened the door and let the cat into the house.

Apparently, the cat was thoroughly familiar with the room that could justifiably be called a storage shed. In any case, he infallibly found an empty bowl in the corner, and took to dragging it with his snout across the stone floor until his master got pellets of dry cat food from the big paper sack and poured water into another bowl.

Then Chico attended the food—but not gulping convulsively or greedily because, after all, there were many lush rubbish heaps in the neighborhood, and Chico, it seemed, collected tribute from the neighborhood cats; that is, he was the local gypsy baron.

Meanwhile, the master boiled himself some coffee on the stove.

He discovered a pleasant surprise in the refrigerator—a forgotten, unopened package of cold cuts; and both cats—the one sitting in the rocking chair and the other sprawled below, swatting dangerously beneath the rhythmically creaking bamboo rocker—snacked pretty darn well considering that airline grub, the older one reasoned aloud, was what lay ahead...

He grew relaxed from the coffee and without even noticing, dozed off, squeaking the chair more sharply and not even feeling Chico jump softly onto his lap, curl up on the apron and fade off too...

Somewhere in the yards below, a peacock screamed in alarm, dogs replied in friendly support, clawing paws through fences...A car passed by, and again all became still—street noise didn’t reach here.

About five minutes later, the room's light started to dim and fade...and fade away, the drowsy twilight thickened, the pale stream of departing day barely flowed in through the large windows of the workshop, the lower hall.

...Then Mama came in, wrapped in that cheerful jacket thrown over her shoulders—green with little yellow flowers around the collar and hem—she stepped out of the twilight, came very very close, blew lightly on her son's forehead, as always when rousing him, and called, laughing softly: “Mister Forgetful...For-get-ful...”

He awoke but didn't open his eyes, unsuccessfully trying to hold onto the warm breath with the light fragrance of her beloved pumpkin seeds and rowdy laughter...

There was never an instance when she failed to remind him *of a date*, if he forgot. Clever Mama...

(What does it matter if the girl has a head of gold, Uncle Sema used to repeat with bitterness. If she's a whore, then a whore she is!)

Today was the anniversary of her death.

He shooed Chico from his lap, got up and poked around the small cabinet for matches and a thick memorial candle. He slowly kindled it in the thick twilight: how quickly it grows dark here in the mountains...The flame blazed and rose, bouncing almost cheerily, ready to keep watch for an entire 24 hours.

*And as always, a tranquil flicker grew into the indomitable flame of the funeral pyre in the corner of the yard where, after Mama's death, he and Uncle Sema burned her death bed: all those bloodied sheets, pillows, the covers...and flying feathers burned in*

*hellish flame in the capricious, twisting whirlwind of the fire, leapt and flew upwards...Like your life, Mama...*

*“Like her entire life, that whore, whore!” cried Uncle Sema, and then Cordovin, a boy, hurled himself at his dear uncle, knocked him down, and they rolled on the ground and pounded one another as if rivals, as if fighting over the living...*

He set the candle on a flat copper plate—that way it could burn itself out peacefully in the stillness of the left home.

There you have it, Mama...

The final task remained.

He lit the desk lamp, turned on his laptop notebook, opened the email program... He brooded for a minute, mechanically listening to the predatory rustle with which Chico was inspecting all the storage room’s corners.

Then he shook his head to chase away the sleepiness, and quickly began clicking on the keyboard:

“Dear Luke, I’m so glad, old fellow, that you responded and remember me—after all, a helluva bunch of years have passed since I waited on you in that glorious helluva port pub—remember that *pest*, *Adele*? I’d love to know how you’re doing, whether you’re still collecting coins. I can’t forget our splendid deal—the burning gleam in your eyes as you asked me for any Soviet coins. Two five-kopek pieces for the subway were just taking up space in my pocket. And when I pulled out a coin—huge and new,

yellow—you simply fell into a stupor. You offered 20 dollars for it. I freely admit that was the most profitable (in percentage terms) deal of my entire life. If we meet, I promise to bring Roman money from Emperor Titus—it's a rarity if you don't happen to know.

“I'm trying to imagine how you look now, and mentally see a hardened sea wolf although Stevie wrote me that you no longer have anything to do with the sea, but to the contrary, keep your feet on dry land like an old boot, and moreover...”—he set his hand down, drifted into thought...He recalled the long dark room of the port pub, his apron—simply a wide, khaki-colored towel tucked around his waist—a heap of porno magazines, which it was also his responsibility to replenish. He pensively played his fingers on his lips as if on the keyboard...some Swedish curses...then he came back to himself and continued: “and moreover: you're heading up some kind of detective agency.”

He'd chosen to write not in English, which Luke, of course, read and wrote fluently, but in Spanish, the Latin butterball's native tongue. There was a certain logic to that rascal Luke running a private detective agency in the States: about 13 years back, this strange fellow knew all the ports in the world, all the girls living in those neighborhoods, all the court vacancies, exchange rates, the weather, the dispositions and idiosyncrasies of each captain...Some would pal around with him, others considered him an informant and preferred to keep a distance. In the pub he usually ordered one whisky that he diluted endlessly with soda and nursed the whole evening. Sometimes, if you looked closely, you could notice that he was completely sober, and that he'd give attentive glances to this group of folks or that, listening in on their conversations.

So maybe back then he was already collaborating, let's say, with...Interpol? or with some other police or intelligence service? Is it now worth turning to him indiscreetly, revealing oneself, and for a paltry trifle, at that?

He thought for just a minute, then continued with indistinct clacks:

“I've resolved to turn to you with a request—my sense is it'll be child's play for you. I've been searching unsuccessfully for someone for years—it's possible I've been searching sloppily or maybe it's because he really doesn't wish to be found. In any case, I've lost hope handling it alone. I've recently begun to suspect—for right now I'll refrain from going into details—that he resides somewhere in Florida. He's Russian, a doctor by profession, a sex pathologist, a prominent collector of paintings and antiques, his name is Arkady Victorovich Bosóta—if, of course, he likes his name the same as before. Year of birth—I hope my memory doesn't deceive me—'37. I never actually had any photographs of him, and I won't even begin to describe him: first of all, many years have passed since we parted; second, he's one of those who could, for various reasons, re-shape his own profile. However, there's this: he's extraordinarily tall (assuming he hasn't hacked off his own legs). During my youth he came across as awfully lanky—somewhere around 6'2” if not taller. Although, once again, he could have shriveled up over the years. His aversion to celebrity comes from the necessity of hiding his wealthy collection. I only need his address, just this gentleman's address—about 15 years ago, we disagreed over a certain devilish question of interest to us both—let's say, about the authorship of a Dürer print...”

He thought that Spanish, as opposed to English, could bear a romantic flourish about *the blood of a murdered friend crying out from the earth*, and in Spanish it

wouldn't even be in poor taste. It may be that he wanted, very much wanted to write the sentence—*'La voz de la sangre de mi hermano clama a mi desde la tierra'*—possibly because, for the first time in many years, he was on his tracks, for the first time there arose hope that soon he wouldn't feel ashamed to look dead Andryusha in the face.

No-no, he decided. No sharp movements. Who'd have thought today would wear you out? Your deceased ones are exhausting you. What's the point of that?

He deleted the last two sentences and in their place composed: "I just need Mr. Bosóta's mailing address because..." but his hand hovered, then removed even that attempt at explanation. No explanations at all.

"I don't think I need emphasize that your (or your guys') work, together with all expenses in this matter, will be immediately reimbursed. Simply name the sum for your advance, which I'm prepared to forward wherever you say. With a hug, Luke, your Holy Zacarías, former bartender of that shabby bar in Stockholm's Free Port, 'Frikhamnen.'

"P.S. Do you remember how you and I broke up a fight between Stevie and that stocky grey Canadian, they seemed to call him Nick (one day I heard from him: 'Howdy, Potato Head'—that Ukrainian phrase made me realize he wasn't any Nick at all, but rather some Mykola, and in the past he'd been one of Bandera's nationalist resistance fighters or a Ukrainian cop), and then they took Stevie, whom he'd done in pretty badly, to the hospital, and in the waiting room a male nurse came out to us: a very dark fellow in a very white robe, with a very red enema bag hanging around his neck?"

Now it really was time to get hurrying.



He went down to the workshop, and carefully, using just his palms, lifted the painting from the trestle and returned it to the easel. Once again he slowed, nevertheless—three steps back—and took it all in with a single gaze the way, at some fancy reception, you take in, all surprised and proud, your beloved, kissed by heart from head to toe, so unexpected now and blinding, displaying the full splendor of numerous hours of effort by dressmaker, hairdresser, and cosmetician.

‘He could have spent the entire night before her just so!’ Ah yes, Pushkin; ah yes, you son of a bitch...

No, now it was high time to spread one’s wings and race down the runway.

Passport, ticket, tasteless European money comfortably tucked in the wallet. Oh, yes! My lazy beauty...

The unwithdrawn Glock was, in usual speedy fashion, disassembled with the help of a small screwdriver and scattered among tools in the cabinet.

He changed clothes in two minutes, one-and-a-half of which went to knotting his tie. Already on the go, he thrust his hand into the sack of cat food and filled the bowl with its usual hillock. He topped off the other bowl with water, brought both out to the terrace. So: suitcase, jacket...*you’ll sit down on the way.*

“Well, you old bandit? Dropped in for a visit and will again. Go in peace.”

With dignity, Chico trotted from the house and, in a single easy leap, sprang up to his favorite crook in one of the orange trees.

“There’s no way I can take you with me,” the master explained, “even though you’re a dog in your passport.”

That was the holy truth; Chico had an international dog passport: at the veterinarian's, the one who, about three years ago, had sewn up his belly torn in another battle, they couldn't find any other form.

The cat sat quietly among the branches, twinkling his yellow Egyptian eyes from among the dark and streetlamp-glossy treetops, observing the master take great pains fastening the old Arab locks: first on the doors of the house, then on the ancient gate. *The ancient gate* itself was made entirely of metal, but had been skillfully painted by the master's hand to look like a wooden one with serpentine cracks in boards, and eyes from sawn-off knots.

One just like that had shut the latrine in their yard long ago in Vinnitsa.

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Just a few hours later, he was choosing a fan for his aunt in one of downtown Madrid's souvenir shops—at that intersection where, the instant the light turns green, ever-new waves of tourists stream onto the crosswalk toward the Prado ticket booths.

The young, dark-haired salesgirl, a southerner by appearances, opened one fan after another for him over her own full breast—with a flamenco dancer's movements—and each failed to suit him—tastelessly done, as were *her movements* themselves. By the way, Zhuka had fairly good taste, so the selection of a gift for her always required considerable time and attention.

“There are others,” the girl finally said. “Very skillful work. But they're much more expensive.”

“Show me, *cariño*,” he declared with a sigh. “It’s a gift for my aunt, and she’s allergic to misers.”

The girl looked at him doubtfully. She moved more slowly... “They’re significantly more expensive,” she repeated with a certain pressure. Apparently, she’d have to stretch in order to reach the more expensive ones, or bend low, or even go look for them among cartons in the storeroom. “Maybe, for...um...your aunt, you’d still do better to take one of these?”

“You don’t know my aunt!” he said reproachfully, leaning his elbows on the glass counter, nearly touching his beard to her breast. A moving composition, “Madonna and Child.” He repeated more gently, switching to the familiar form of address, “You don’t know my aunt, *cielo*. She’s 80 years old. She drives a car, composes poems in Spanish and still performs “the swallow.”

The girl looked at him for a moment, parted her lips, suddenly burst into loud laughter that continued for a long time, modulating, and she breathlessly repeated, “Ai, I can’t...*Hijo*, what a joker you are!”, so that the salesgirls in other departments turned to look at them, and one even leaned over her counter so as not to miss out on details of the flirtation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 1

By the way, all this was the absolute truth.

Throughout her 80 years, Fanny Zakharovna, or as the family called her ever since childhood—Zhuka—was infantile, vivacious, and incomparably egotistical.

Her father, the distinguished Bolshevik Litvak-Cordovin, Party member since 1917, Senior Major of State Security in the NKVD and, as Zhuka repeated at this point: *and so forth*—shot himself in 1939 in his office at the secret police Big House on Liteiny Street.

Part of the *and so forth* follows:

A cut-up and life of the party, a black-haired hulk with deep-set restless gray eyes, Litvak-Cordovin contrived to cram numerous early century events into his short life as compactly as his grandson would cram things into his olive suitcase: *up to the very I can't...but, hey presto! the second shoe just squeezed in.*

Into his stormy life he *squeezed*: a stint in the Bund, a year-and-a-half of bitter skirmishes with Central Asian anti-Soviet *basmach* forces in the pink-and-blue Fergana Valley, three non-serious bullet wounds and two serious saber ones, an entire year of study in the Upper Level State Artistic-Technical Workshops with the highly laborious task of sketching nude models rattling their teeth from the cold beside the weak *burzhuika* stove heaters.

(A photograph of the first-year class dates to that period: more than half the participants are in fur coats. Dank winter cold blowing through every chink, and art professor Konstantin Nikolaevich Istomin, with a checked shawl over his shoulders, wandering all stooped between easels: “Depict mass and weight! Mold, build structure! Depict form, form!”)

Acquaintanceships with young artists would remain from that time, endless arguments about the lofty destiny of proletarian art...and heaps of blank canvases of various sizes, already pulled on stretchers and readied for work, but which he simply hadn't had occasion to paint upon.

The reason for such a sudden change of paths remained secret to all: an impetuous flight into the NKVD—at first the title of Deputy Director of the Department of the Economy, then a transfer to Leningrad and service in the INO—the NKVD's international department, with special trips now to France, now to Spain.

His *Spanish* years were crammed chockfull—to the absolute limit: an operation in Toledo with the siege of the Alcazar in September of '36, the defense of Madrid in November of the very same year, victory over the Italian corps outside Guadalajara, and Brunetta's bloody slaughterhouse in July of '37. (As a consequence, Zhuka asserted—although it was long impossible to prove—her father had direct involvement in the secret operation transporting “Spanish gold” via Soviet cargo ship from Cartagena to Odessa, managing in the process to remain among the living *then*, although all other participants in the operation, including the ambassador of the USSR to Spain, Marcel Rosenberg, were liquidated. Well, never mind, his turn would have come without fail, assured Zhuka, if he hadn't turned out smarter than everyone else. It would have come without fail—after all, he didn't know how to keep quiet, and wrote that not all the gold and precious jewels had been sent out, that part of it had been squandered by Spaniards and the local NKVD residency—supposedly for “operational needs.”

*“What are you raising your eyebrows for, estúpido?!”* she’d scream at her disbelieving nephew—*“I’m telling you that I myself accidentally saw on his desk the letter he was planning to send off!”*

She was certain her father was writing a specifically personal letter, not an official report:

*“He put in the kind of words you don’t write in an official report.”*

*“What kind of words are those, Zhuka?”*

*“Leave me alone!”*

*“No, come on—the truth!”*

*“He wrote the words: ‘ripped the fuck off.’”*

The family album still has a photograph by an unknown taker—possibly Litvak-Cordovin himself: half-naked soldiers in boats are crossing the Ebro River, someone in a weather-beaten uniform jacket, someone else stripped to the waist. And in the boat closest to the lens, sitting at the oars is a figure totally out of place in a military setting: a fellow in black shirt, but without pants. The tail flaps of his shirt cover his privates, but his sculpture-white haunch is distinctly visible.

*“Papa, why is this Spaniard sitting with a naked backside?”*

*“I don’t remember. Maybe he was drying out his pants, maybe he just didn’t want to wear out a new pair.”*

*“Papa, do Spaniards always go into battle with naked backsides?”*

*“What’s with you, girl—you a fool?”*

By 1937, he had the title of Senior Major in the NKVD, which corresponded to the standard army designation of General, and immediately upon his return from Spain—the Order of the Red Banner.

A chauffeur drove little Zhuka to school, and when she expressed a desire to learn Spanish—to *be like Papa* and to make friends in their native language with Spanish children recently brought to the Soviet Union—a cabinet of red wood quickly showed up at home together with books, all in Spanish, lots of tattered antique ones with engravings and even hand-drawings: leaf-bird designs, teeth-baring lions on their hind paws.

Zhuka remembered from that cabinet—*Diccionario de Lengua Castellana*, *Dictionary of the Castilian Language* published in 1783 in Madrid, and *Ordenanzas Reales de Castilla*, *Royal Decrees of Castile*, 1518, Burgos.

Litvak-Cordovin paged through them and merely whistled. One should say that he was no simpleton, and when the desire for *a genuine education* arose, university professors would visit him at home. (Upon returning from the evacuation, 17-year-old Zhuka discovered, slipped beneath an old oil-cloth in a back corner of the kitchen pantry (already a communal one by then), her father's worn-out report card booklet—with cockroach droppings spotting the innumerable “excellents” delicately traced in violent ink.)

The origin of the red wood cabinet, packed with Spanish second-hand-bookshop goods that burned up, needless to say, in a *burzhuika* stove heater during the Blockade, was something Zhuka could not later explain; on the other hand, her cheerful nephew, resembling his grandfather *to a horrifying extent*, explained it thus: “confiscated goods,

Zhuka,” he said gently, “what’s so hard to understand—from the storerooms of *that* organization of *his*.”

Zhuka idolized her father. She seemed to remember his study, two tables forming the letter T beyond the scope of a child’s gaze, his high-collared military jacket on the back of his chair, the huge window flung open to May foliage, and the half-open door of the safe where his monogrammed chromium TT pistol flickered darkly. She also remembered her father in the kitchen at home before shootings, wincing in pain, blackening the area of a beauty spot over a candle.

“Papa...” she’d ask suppressing a breath, “You won’t kill me, will you?”

He’d lift his head, open his gray eyes comically wide and say, “What’s with you, you little fool?”

*Many years later, receiving a letter from Sema, an antediluvian distant relative from Vinnitsa—that tearful letter about a certain, showing-up-all-of-a-sudden nephew, that her so-called sister had fattened up—she faint-heartedly agreed to take part in the “marvelous boy’s” fate...And when, one fine morning, the bell rang in the apartment on Mokhovaya, and she opened the door and saw on the threshold a black-haired hulk with a charming smile and restless gray eyes—she turned deathly pale and prattled, “Papa...?!”*

*“What’s with you, you little fool?” he cheerfully inquired.*

After the shooting of Meir Trilisser, one of the founders and leaders of INO, Litvak-Cordovin *cleaned up his act*. Taking a five-day leave and grabbing both daughter



and a solid leatherette portfolio case stuffed with canvas (one so huge as to justify reservation of its own berth on the train), went to Vinnitsa, to relatives—the Litvaks.

Little Zhuka was puzzled by such a quantity of fussing relations bursting forth, for any reason whatsoever—whether children or adults—not with arguments, but with frenzied elucidations of their relationships. Everyone spoke incorrect Russian, with a soft “t” and a sing-song intonation, and throat-clearing “kh” sounds. Or else they completely switched to some foreign, but not Spanish, language: suddenly, at a conversation’s highest pitch, it was as if a switch flipped, and everyone took to screwing up his eyes and yelling at one another, “*Vos? Vos ost du gezocht?!?*”

And strangest of all was that Papa, like that werewolf from the fairy tale, momentarily turned into one of them, also yelled boisterously, made throat-clearing “kh” sounds, and switched to that garland-curling guttural language that was called, he explained to his daughter, “Yiddish.”

Zhuka also recalled a visit to the hair salon in the Savoy Hotel. She and her father went in the main entrance of the pale-blue-and-white building on the corner of Kositsky and Lenin, with a rotunda tower on its roof; they turned right toward high flung-open doors, and all at once an entire crowd of Pops-and-daughters reflected in the magnificent hall’s high mirrors.

Father took off his leather jacket and sat in a chair. The barber shook a sheet with a toreador gesture, and turning his neck toward Father, leaned to his ear and whispered something. Father shook his head in refusal... Zhuka sat in a chair beneath a thin-leafed fanning palm and paged through the satirical magazine, *Crocodile*. The pages stuck to her fingers. It was still the April issue, with caricatures of Hitler and some Poles...

Later, at the tram stop, Zhuka asked her father what the barber had said into his ear. Father remained silent for a long while. “He asked whether there would be pogroms,” her father finally said.

“What are pogroms, Papa?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

And suddenly he became animated and started, leaning down to her and smelling sweetly of cologne, to tell about some strange and scary “*mene mene tekel upharsin*”...

They returned to Peter (what everybody called Leningrad that used to be St. Petersburg) without the gray portfolio case, but as a trio: father brought from Vinnitsa a distant relative from the Litvak line: a black-eyed maiden with firm buttocks and cast-iron calves, which prompted him to keep trying to watch her from behind, to keep twisting around, acting all restless, stretching and not taking his eyes off her.

“She’s Nyusya,” he told his wife. “She’s clever, and well...so forth. She’ll help with the housework.”

And he winked at them both.

He brought Nyusya in time—he’d sensed that his spouse, Elena Arnoldovna, would soon be in need of support, well and...in general. The daughter of a famous Petersburg lawyer, a ballerina at the former Mariinsky, now Kirov, Theater, Elena Arnoldovna, “Lenusya,” was completely unsuited for the shocks of everyday life.

Short, she seemed taller than her five feet two inches thanks to that classical bearing, the splendid erect torso for which ballerinas of the Petersburg school were

renowned. A student of the celebrated Elena Lukom, she failed to reach particular heights only because of a trauma to her spine (during a run-through of *Giselle* in her youth, her partner dropped her), but she danced coryphée numbers with success—amid a trio, quartet, or sextet of dancers; she even had solo ballet numbers—in the operas *Carmen* and *La Traviata*; she stood out in *Paquita*, in *Esmeralda* and in *The Corsairs*.

Elena Arnoldovna was able to talk and think only about ballet, so that even nine-year-old Zhuka took to explaining passionately to her girlfriends the difference between the non-narrative choreographic structures that Fyodor Vasilyevich Lopukhov strove for and “the Vaganova method.” She demonstrated “arm plasticity”: she’d stand straight, head lifted level on neck, and her arms would ripple in waves, one to the other, one to the other—from the fingertips of her right to the fingertips of her left... “Arm wings!” she’d declare to her enchanted girlfriends, satisfied with the produced effect. “From *Swan Lake*. The brilliant godsend Agrippina Yakovlevna.”

But, to her mother’s great distress, Zhuka offered no particular hopes despite the fact that her very first gift was a pair of miniature ballet slippers brought at her birth by the good fairy, Agrippina Yakovlevna Vaganova, who sincerely loved “Lenusya” and felt regret over that tragic incident at rehearsal.

Zhuka, of course, took classes at the ballet studio, but the entirety of her physical being—her frame, her manner of sitting—were so unsuitable—sturdy and solid—that her mother just sighed and averted her eyes when the daughter worked through at the barre the simplest *battement tendu* or *rond de jamb par terre*.

*However, the health benefits of these childhood practices were, per Zhuka's conviction, invaluable. Even in old age, she checked her general state with an every morning arabesque, which ordinary folk call "the swallow."*

*Her nephew first discovered this the day after he settled into his grandfather's study, which Zhuka occupied in the communal apartment on Mokhovaya. Returning that morning from the bathroom with a tube of toothpaste and toothbrush in his hand, with a towel thrown over his shoulder, he nearly dropped it all in the doorway: his aunt—in curlers and half-open robe—was standing on one leg by the window, lifting her head high and balancing with both arms, bowing-to-horizontal her torso and pale naked leg.*

*"What are you...doing?" asked the stunned nephew, not yet familiar with his new aunt's morning exercises.*

*"'The swallow,' you blockhead!" she replied without turning her head, and while vibrating her extended leg.*

At the end of '39, his buddies warned Litvak-Cordovin that he was "on his way out"—to give him time to get himself together.

Being a decisive person, he *got himself together*: he put a bullet into his forehead right in his office, leaving a coolly composed letter about everlasting devotion to the Party.

They didn't touch his family, left the apartment on Mokhovaya to the widow, and not a single hair fell from Zhuka's little tar head. The only thing was that she now took the tram to school and ballet, together with Nyusya the housekeeper.

By the way, after the funeral it became clear that Nyusya was pregnant. The details—by whom, when and where she'd managed to get that way—Elena Arnoldovna refrained from even beginning to elicit; nor did she resolve to dispatch Nyusya back to Vinnitsa: after all, giving her a fair—as her late husband would say—“shake,” she was good at keeping house, she concocted delicious stuff and possessed the smarts for daily living, which were lacking in Lenusya, all distracted and stupefied by her sudden widowhood.

The real scandal broke out about six months later when Nyusya gave birth to a girl. That one turned out to be of typical Cordovin stock: black-haired and curly-headed like Zhuka, and so very frisky and *vivacious*. So that one of their acquaintances uttered the not-too-loud suggestion that, abandoning *the scene* with such sudden decisiveness, the Senior Major of INO of the NKVD, with his characteristic good sense, had managed *to kill two rabbits with one stone*.

Nyusya confessed in a wail: really now—we carried the same flesh and blood, so we'll be sisters...Fat, big-breasted, with a swollen nose and trusting cow eyes—the total opposite of Elena Arnoldovna—she feared returning to Vinnitsa. “She feared the shame:” the girl's origins and likeness would be clear not only to the kinfolk, but to every passerby who'd ever bumped into the swarthy, black-haired hulk. She pushed to name her daughter *Riorita* after the popular old foxtrot—who knew what really went on between her and Litvin-Cordovin during that little dance of theirs—but Elena Arnoldovna, praise the heavens, wouldn't permit it. They simply stopped at *Rita*. Graceful, unpretentious and *international*...In any case, that's how they registered her; but how her mother addressed her, that's really her own private business.

And so they lived as a foursome up until the war: a female family.

Now here's something interesting: Nyusya, the fool, fearful of going to Vinnitsa in peacetime, picked up and made her way there with her little girl once the war began. More precisely, three days before it started. Apparently, she had residence permits to stay with her third cousin, Sema Litvak, a sensible and trustworthy fellow, and—she believed—humane. About three years back, she and Sema had exchanged flirty glances, but then Zakhar showed up, stunned her, poured the boiling water of his endearments... and everything went to hell under the gaze of his gray eyes. Well, Zakhar is no more, after all, thought Nyusya, but Sema's right there. And with such a profession: a hairdresser, a master men's barber and women's stylist—not hands, but “the flight of the bumblebee.” He'd understand everything, she'd just need to weep a bit, confess from the bottom of her heart, pour the kid into his arms—Riorita was so plump, juicy and soft—unfortunately, replicating Zakhar in everything, except maybe not *his tool*...

But Sema, first of all, never favored Zakhar, called him *a crook*, and asserted that he'd shot himself so as to mock everyone. “Kakh-do-vin!” he exclaimed. “Wanted to become Khussian, Khussian!” (Although neither Sema himself nor Zakhar burred his “r's” that way.) “How beautifully he Russified his family name, eh?! What kind of Cordovin was he?! He was a Cordober, and still is a Cordober, like his scoundrel of a grandpa, that ‘Spaniard.’”

“Why—that Spaniard?” Nyusya asked in distress, the nickname striking her as offensive. And Sema replied in a fit, “Who the hell knows!”

(Cordovin's grandpa, it's true, had been a new arrival to Vinnitsa, a jaunty and secretive person with a genuinely slippery name—he named himself however was convenient. They said he'd come from Odessa where he'd wound up from strange and distant lands; well, that's ancient history.)

“No,” Sema said with suppressed irritation, “the fact that for his family's sake he put a bullet through his forehead, he's—an admirable fellow, I respect him. But I *assure* you...he had a good laugh, nevertheless!”

In the second place, Sema voluntarily showed up at the military enlistment office the very first day of the war. He was, by the way, a soccer player, and he'd parachute-jumped a whole eight times, so it goes without saying that he immediately ended up at the front, in a landing party, at that.

But Nyusya got stuck in Vinnitsa, in delirium and horror. And when the Germans arrived on July 19 and began the round-up, she and Grandpa Ruvim's big family hid in the cellar of his house, the one Grandpa Ruvim had built in his life's flowering years when he was still a famous shoemaker and designer, had three master artisans under him and carved individual boot-lasts himself. (They even came from Kiev for him to fashion footwear.) It was a private residence, a foundation of granite stone, the brickwork—durable. And there was an ice house: in winters they'd bring ice on carts from the Bug River.

So they hid there in that cellar. Slept in niches where they'd previously kept potatoes and carrots. Nyusya feared horribly for her little girl, *Riorita*: second cousin Sonya kept insisting that the kid would give them all away with a scream, and that they had *to make themselves safe*. So, Nyusya didn't sleep at all: she feared that while she

nodded off, Sonya would smother the little girl with those strong laundress hands of hers. However, in her drowsiness, she watched her wring the infant's neck—the very same way one wrings water from a duvet—and Nyusya began twittering in her sleep more loudly than the infant. But the little girl turned out to be extraordinary, frighteningly intelligent—throughout all the days they sat it out in the cellar, she didn't produce a peep, and although by that time she'd already begun to speak, she lapsed into total silence for a long time. Nearly until the end of the war.

So when Klava sprang up—she fed herself by taking Jews at night across to Romanian territory: she led them to a bridge and transferred them there to a priest who led them farther, and she took only what was fair, never overreached—Nyusya eagerly packed up her things.

The whole family set off on the journey, a small crowd of beggars—*once again a nighttime exodus from the Land of Egypt, again a flight from a new pharaoh*...However, in the middle of the journey, almost at the bridge itself, Grandpa Ruvim was seized by asthma, which he'd contracted long ago, torturing his lungs with the stench of rotting body tissue. Gasping for breath, he coughed out, “That's it, I can't anymore, I'm going back...Go on without me.”

Sonya replied, “What's with you, Papa, have you gone nuts? Nobody's going anywhere anymore, gosh, we'll *all* go back, but we won't abandon you.”

*All*, Nyusya told her, but without me. She tightened the wool shawl holding *Riorita* against her thick belly and took a step toward the bridge.



But *all* the others went back, that large family: Sonya with boys aged ten and six; Grandma Rakhil'; Uncle Petya, an invalid since childhood; his wife Riva... Well, and Grandpa Ruvim, needless to say.

They all returned to the cellar, to the pitch darkness, to the candle with its weakly wavering flame, to the barrel of sauerkraut topped with some large and heavy cover that felt in the dark like canvas, that had been left there for some reason by that *commissar-crook Zakharka*.

At first they sold to the neighbors their remaining silver; once the silver was gone, the neighbors turned them in to the police.

That's—it. In the sense—and so forth.

At this point a digression is called for, about the heroic death of Grandpa Ruvim. On one of the few remaining nights he had, he climbed from the cellar—to grab a smoke. And he heard a woman's cries for help. The Germans were dragging off somewhere—it's well-known where—a woman they'd caught. And Grandpa Ruvim, the fearless shoemaker and designer, ran toward the cries. After all, if a woman prays for help, a man can't loaf about around grabbing a smoke.

They gunned him down instantly, with the first bullet, and 30 years later, old Glazer showed the next little *Zakharka-the-crook* that manhole cover on which Grandpa Ruvim lay a full 24 hours.

But Nyusya and her little girl *Riorita* escaped to the Transnistria Ghetto. They survived there not per the example of other such *health resorts*: from '42, the prisoners there began receiving provisions from international Jewish organizations, and cottage

industries got underway in the ghetto, to boot. Nyusya was handy—she knit and also wove baskets, and didn't avoid the Tarzanish endearments of the secret policeman Aleksyan—she simply had to survive and save her daughter, and Nysuya firmly decided to survive...

2

...as opposed to Elena Arnoldovna, who threw up her hands and resigned herself right away to the mercy of fate: for example, she was immobilized for neurological reasons those very first days of the war—it told on her old spinal trauma to such an extent, that she couldn't evacuate with the Kirov Theater. The theater left for Molotov where it had a difficult, but safe time surviving the burdens of evacuation, but Elena Arnoldovna senselessly waited for Nyusya, hoping she'd soon return, and that, for all her *unquestionable blockheadedness*, she'd nevertheless somehow arrange and organize a normal existence.

At first, until they bombed and burned the Badayev food warehouses, she and her daughter hung on, although it became immediately clear that hunger and a ballet diet were two different things. As strange as it seems, Lenusya simply didn't know how to go hungry.

Initially she and Zhuka stretched as much as possible two packets of worm-eaten rice discovered in the bottom drawer of the kitchen pantry, and which in her distractedness Elena Arnoldovna had forgotten to throw out in timely fashion. Zhuka herself learned to sort through it and boil it without salt (the salt had been used up), but with pepper, cumin, and barberry, whose various aroma combinations were

inexhaustible: back in Fergana times, Litvak-Cordovin knew how to prepare pilaf, and as it happened, to spoil family and guests with the genuine Uzbek version, with lamb.

Those first weeks Zhuka suddenly stood more erect, grew somewhat taller and conducted herself much more sensibly than her mother. She taught her mother which side of the street was less dangerous to walk on and how to huddle against a wall when the air-raid alarm blew; she was able to barter at the swap meet for something edible, learned things fairly well, and was generally busy with something or other all the time. She joined some “cell” of five classmates who made the rounds of apartments collecting warm things for the soldiers, or searched in the neighborhood for non-ferrous metals—for shells—or now they were collecting bottles...

“Zhuka, but bottles—” timidly asked Elena Arnoldovna, who was barely getting up anymore, but was aiming to lie down or sit at every opportunity. “Bottles for what?”

“Come on, Mama,” she protested, “How you fail to understand: it’s for setting tanks on fire! The enemy’s on our doorstep!”

She even maintained watch with upperclassmen in the attic—from there they could see the surrounding villages burning in firey rings—and twice she extinguished incendiary bombs. “We’re Leningrad’s rooftop sentries!” she said, repeating someone’s recent pithy phrase, and her mother, with timid and humble astonishment discovered in her spoiled daughter the father’s obstinacy, *vitality*, and consistency of activity.

Then it got a little easier because Mama’s friend, Aunt Ksana, and her son Volodya who was three years older than Zhuka, and Grandma Aleksandra Gavrilovna, moved in with them. Aunt Ksana also danced at the Kirov, but in an obscure corps de

ballet without any particular pretensions, which is why before the war, she'd completed tour guide training. She was energetic and *uplifting*: noticing something funny everywhere, she'd hilariously describe the foreigners on her excursions: "But can't we take dat dere Revolving Highway?"—"My God, I thought, scandalous: I've lived my entire life in Leningrad, but I've never heard of a revolving highway. It turns out he was talking about Revolution Highway!" And she'd laugh and repeat: "The Revolving Highway, eh?!" "Revolution Highway!"

They hadn't left with the evacuation because of Aleksandra Gavrilovna—for some reason old people were not accepted. And then a shell hit their top-floor apartment. The ceiling, as Aleksandra Gavrilovna repeated in bewilderment, "was knocked clean off"—they were lucky they'd been sitting out the raid in a bomb shelter—the building manager's office.

Living together turned out way more convenient, especially because, as they were settling in, the lodgers hauled over some—as Aunt Ksana put it—"payola": Volodya showed up in the doorway loaded down with a leftover sack of their dacha's heavenly potatoes, discovered in the cellar. A little frost-bitten—but so what?—a tremendous stroke of luck. They also brought a *burzhuika* on a sled, also from their dacha. Aunt Ksana knew how to light it and taught Zhuka: first kindle newspaper, then put in something of greater substance that would burn longer. Sheds throughout the neighborhood's courtyards had already been broken up and cut into pieces for firewood, so Volodya and Zhuka went to glean splinters and chips. They all settled into the living

room—a single *burzhuika* couldn't heat the whole apartment, not completely, although steam shot from its mouth.

And they “squeezed every drop” out of the potatoes: fried, boiled, and in the living room they dried peels on the cabinet piano, which Volodya slept under. They ground the dried peels and again fried pancakes on the electric hot plate in American fat called “lyard.” The electricity was often turned off; at those times, Zhuka and Volodya would sit in the dark and eat half-cooked pancakes right from the cooling skillet.

Aunt Ksana was working—those who remained continued to dance despite the fact that a bomb had fallen on the Kirov. Going into the auditorium was frightening: fragments of balcony dangled from the walls: armature with pieces of gilded plaster moldings...The performers changed clothes and put on makeup in the royal box, then stepped out to the audience in the foyer, and gave the performance there.

In general, Aunt Ksana was never dejected. Petite and sinewy like Lenusya with a silky part in her black hair tied back in a knot, she took charge of the whole family first thing in the morning—parsing out responsibilities, demanding that Lenusya get up, fix her hair, tidy up a bit: “Get moving! The important thing is to get moving!”...And during the second half of the day, Aunt Ksana worked at the exhibition of captured weapons—on Solyanyi Lane. She learned all the exhibits by heart—what they were and were called, how they were disassembled, what they were made of. She led excursions for those being dispatched to the front, and asserted that there was “a plainclothesman” in each group who was attentively listening both to the group's questions and the guide's explanations.

On Sundays she went to the swap meet—to exchange stuff for something edible, and carried it all out deftly. For her grandfather’s gold pocket watch, Lenusya’s diamond ring, and cuff-links in the form of a treble clef with rubies, Aunt Ksana, as she put it, “won” a half-kilo of millet, a half-kilo of sugar and 200 grams of butter. A soup kitchen supported them a little bit—the one opened at the Bolshoi Dramatic Theater; they gave out meals for coupons there—*zatirokha* flour-mush soup, millet burgers...And then, of course, bread per ration cards. Incredibly long lines in the morning darkness; Zhuka and Volodya took turns so as not to keel over from the cold. The only odd thing was that, despite the heroic efforts of all those around *to support and carry her*, Lenusya grew weaker with each passing day and fell into a state of apathy. As if she’d only now grasped that Zakhar would never return.

Then the Germans took Tikhvin....

And the cold spells that bore down were so awful, it was as if nature and the earth itself had been seized by a particular frenzy for everything people had done to it, tearing deep troughs into its body, plowing up its crust, dropping thousands of corpses into pits, devouring every living thing—from cats to rats.

That’s the moment when...the main “and so forth” started playing itself out, the events that subsequently always froze Zhuka into pressing lips together. And never during the entire rest of her life could her nephew extract from her the most important thing: the details. What he prized more than anything in life: in people, in art.

“Zhuka, listen,” he’d start off patiently, “it was like a hundred years ago, it’s time to get used to it. So just do the human thing and tell me how Lenusya died.”

He just couldn’t understand why she kept herself all locked up.

“She died, and that’s all there is to it,” Auntie replied. “She faded from hunger. And so forth...”

For her, details were precisely the most frightening things in life. Here’s what she would, with pleasure, rid from her childhood memory: that day when Lenusya dragged herself alone to the swap meet: Aunt Ksana was busy at a “*matinée*,” and Zhuka was ill with tonsillitis. From the moment the front door slammed shut after her mother, Zhuka stood by the criss-cross-taped kitchen window, staring down Mokhovaya, and she began to wait. It seemed to her that as long as she stood and waited, nothing nasty could happen to Lenusya, and that she’d succeed in bartering for something *to eat*, the egg which the family called by the name Fabergé. The egg from Lenusya’s dowry was, of course, a copy, but an excellent one: red enamel, topped by a gold onion-dome-shaped crown with a cross, all interwoven with some twisted gold cords; it stood—a paunch on three lion paws—on an onyx stand in a glass cupboard that her father had for some reason named “a barrister’s cabinet.” A lot of things stood there in that cabinet—also inherited—before the war. Most of all, Zhuka had liked the dark blue cups and saucers trimmed with gold scales (bartered in September for buckwheat), a music box tinkling the crystal-clear song, “*Ach! du lieber Agustin*” (their neighbor, a collector, had given up a sheepskin coat for it and a brick of margarine), and funny little gilded silver spoons—each with a different breed of parrot and color scheme.

Papa had called all this brik-a-brak. “Remember,” he once told Zhuka, who back then never planned on remembering any such thing, but somehow remembered it nevertheless, the way so many of her father’s words and observations made an impression. “Remember, the most valuable and antique thing here is—” and he tapped the nail of his middle finger against the glass behind which, almost blending with the gray velvet of the cabinet’s back wall, stood a heavy goblet with a spiral stem on a domed skirt base. On the cup’s side, an engraved three-masted ship with raised sails floated atop three waves, and on the silver skirt base, leaves twisted among letters in an unknown language such that it really wasn’t very easy to distinguish letters from leaves.

“The most expensive?” Zhuka checked, feeling surprise at the unprepossessing nature of things.

“The most valuable for you,” her father corrected and, lowering his voice a bit, explained, “Lenusya plays no part in this; it’s our destiny, yours and mine.”

The heavy cast-iron word *destiny* really struck the little girl, so she asked, “Why?”

“Just because. You’ll grow up, you’ll bear me a grandson, and then I’ll tell you.”

“And what’s written on here?” Zhuka asked, intrigued. She’d just finished reading Gaidar’s *Ruins of the Count* and was overflowing with adventures, secrets, and spies.

“If only I knew,” father said with a sigh. “It’s not Yiddish, but a completely different language...”



She stood by the kitchen window overlooking Mokhovaya, and sought out her mother's slight figure which, even emaciated, even muffled up in rags, still hadn't lost its ballerina silhouette, although she'd long been moving more slowly, as if asleep, and one wouldn't think it was Lenusya, with her strong legs and swift sinewy body taking 10 minutes to drag her body from dining room to kitchen. Zhuka was upset at having sent Mother on such a complex errand. True, she'd given Lenusya clear-cut instructions: don't barter for meat products, don't take either aspic or pierogies because they might palm off human flesh—it happened. All sorts of thing happened at the swap meet. Like the time Aunt Ksana got caught up in a raid. And everyone the police raked in was sent to Piskarevsky Cemetery—to throw sacks of corpses into mass grave trenches. But Aunt Ksana, as she explained, *got lucky*: *her sack* turned out to hold two children, not so heavy to drag and throw....

Just as Zhuka began worrying seriously about her mother, she finally emerged on the corner of Pestel Street with a half-liter jar filled almost half-way...and Zhuka nearly gasped from happiness: it was probably vegetable oil! Riches! A priceless acquisition! What could be tastier: gently lifting the jar, pouring onto a saucer a teaspoonful of the viscous golden liquid and dipping a piece of bread into it! To dip, but not to soak completely through, no way! Little-by-little, bringing to your mouth one small piece at a time, and not swallowing right away, but letting your whole mouth become saturated with the feeling, the recognition, the *appreciation of food*...To dip, to dip—an entire daily ration of bread. No!—Zhuka's mouth was oozing hunger saliva, which she swallowed, and it seemed to her that her mouth was already filing with the divine *sunny*

sunflowery taste. –No, not an entire ration, no! Divide it into three parts: breakfast, lunch, supper...and celebrate that way for several long days.

And here a boy with a sled came up to Lenusya. He approached her so slowly, closer and closer...and suddenly fell and remained lying there, but the sled skated onwards right for Lenusya's feet; she stood rooted to the spot, but then she staggered, stumbled from one foot to the other...and...!

The jar's flight to the asphalt and the fountain of oil spray—more glaring and torturesome than a landmine explosion—has always, ever since, arisen in Zhuka's memory at moments of unbearable stress. The snow beneath Lenusya's feet swelled with hot amber light, and in the icy hollow from the sled's runners, a little puddle formed. As if chopped down, she crashed to her knees and took to lapping up oil from the little puddle—quickly and greedily, like the dog Polkan at their pre-war dacha.

Subsequently, for Zhuka, nothing ever surpassed this horrifying scene: not Volodya's death—from a shell falling smack into their courtyard; not the corpses on the street covered with frost and fallen snow; not even the stiff, sheet-wrapped ballerina body of Lenusya herself like an Egyptian mummy resolutely and stolidly gliding off on a sled to the kingdom of the dead.

A nearby explosion in January knocked out the windows of father's cabinet, and in the kitchen a small fire ignited, one which Zhuka and Aunt Ksana doused with a bucket, so that afterwards blocks of ice formed all over the floor. Also in January, Aleksandra Gavrilovna, the grandmother, faded away from emaciation and hunger, and for an entire week she continued to sit in the rocking chair in the nursery where they'd

dragged both her and the chair—cold and stiff—neither Zhuka nor Aunt Ksana, by that time fairly emaciated themselves, having the strength to haul the heavy, bony body to Piskarevsky Cemetery. Finally, for 200 grams of bread, the janitor's wife agreed to take the corpse away. Did she really take it the whole distance? Maybe she tossed it somewhere on the road, tearlessly grieved Aunt Ksana, who knew her.

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On a night in February, they finally took Zhuka and Aunt Ksana out of Leningrad on a truck across the ice of Lake Ladoga. Zhuka was ordered to pack a small knapsack: a few warm things. She packed a small bundle with underwear, a jacket and woolen skirt. She thought for a moment, took two photographs from the family album—of her father and Lenusya's wedding, and another, a Spanish one where her father was standing with a rifle against the background of Toledo's Alcazar wall sticking up like a gigantic tooth.

As Aunt Ksana was already locking the front door, Zhuka suddenly exclaimed, "Oh my!", shoved her aside, and rushed back into the apartment.

"What's with you!" Aunt Ksana called out weakly. "We'll be late, they'll leave."

The girl returned in a minute with some metal wine glass in her hands.

"Have you lost your mind?" Aunt Ksana asked in a fit of temper.

"It's...a valuable thing," Zhuka muttered with frozen lips. "Papa said—it's our *destiny*."

Her whole life long she remembered the sharp frosty air; the red signal flags on the snow denoting the road; the distant hollow wail of sirens; snowflakes seething in the

beam of searchlights; the group of women and children, bundled up in whatever they'd gotten their hands on, silently gathering by the truck with a tarpaulin-covered carriage.

And when, after lowering the wooden side, they gave the order to climb into the truck one at a time, Zhuka seized the hand of the man standing on the platform, and he jerked her gently aloft. At this point she felt something fall out of her bundle onto the ice with a muffled thud. Instantly the girl slid back, crashed to the snow, banged her knees painfully, and like that, on all fours, took to groping in the dark beneath an enormous wheel, howling spasmodically. From above, from the truck's platform, Aunt Ksana called to her unsuccessfully.

"What are you doing?" asked an auntie leaning over and holding a lantern. "Did you lose something, my girl? Here you go, look..."

And she lit up the area below. In the light of the lantern, the dark goblet seemed a sparkling New Year's gift on the snow. It lay there, having found shelter against the purplish side of the enormous wheel: the strange, incomprehensible *destiny whose* abandonment was, for some reason, impossible.

They drove slowly, under the incessant wail of sirens and explosions of shells.

And the entire way, that kind auntie stood on the footboard along the truck driver's open door, lighting up the road with her lantern.

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The girl recalled the city of Perm, stretching along the Kama River, in a patchy fog from which a rat escaped and darted about the floor of the cellar where they'd moved her and Aunt Ksana, a cellar so deep that the legs of passersby could be seen in the little

window only up to their ankles. Aunt Ksana, who feared rats more than Germans, fried fish on the paraffin stove while standing on a low stool.

And one other “Perm” recollection forever stuck in teenage memory. The sweaty pearl-pink bodies in the stuffy steam of the baths. The clang of aluminum basins, the hiss of boiling water from the faucet... *Papa, but why did Don Quixote wear a little basin on his head? Was he a little fool?* Fourteen-year-old Zhuka washed Aunt Ksana’s thin narrow back with a slippery chunk of soap. If one didn’t see her black hair without a spot of gray (which was wrapped up, anyway, in a towel turban), one might imagine her to be Lenusya, their identical ballerina-molded torsos and tumor-like bulging buttocks resembled one another so. She scrubbed with a loofah that *almost-Lenusya* back, accidentally casting a glance at the window, and she screamed: there, through the steamy smoking air—a tense motionless male face with glassy eyes.

Zhuka cried out in fright—that face was so terrifying. At first Aunt Ksana only waved it away—what kind of old uncle—come on, they were on the second floor! Then others screamed nearby, more... and a prolonged woman’s screech peeled out: Then the door flung open, and the bath-house attendant flew into the room: apparently, this wasn’t the first time that had happened here. She adroitly rushed about with a bucket, ran over to the window, and yanking the frame open toward herself, splashed boiling water onto the stranger’s face. Invisible grunts out in the freezing cold; and something tumbled down with a muffled thud, under the women’s collective approval. She dreamed about it for a long time: a man’s unmoving, bulging brick-red face, white eyes groping among scattered bodies in a pearly hell, as if those eyes could drain their nudity and grow sated.

And the absolute, universal approval of the naked women in answer to the sound of the terrifying dead thump against the ground.

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Nyusya's disappointment with her fate consisted of Sema's return from the front alive, as if through the eye of a needle—nearly through the eye of a needle: the fact that his instep got twisted from a mine fragment—that just doesn't even count. True, a crutch became a necessary essential—the lifeless foot somehow dangled in ballet fashion as if Sema would now twist his other leg like a pretzel and take to twirling on the battered one—the way Elena Arnoldovna still did before the war. In short, Sema returned, not alone however, but with sister-from-the-front Lida, who'd dragged him from combat and taken him away. And now she explained right off to the flushed Nusya, that she had rights and claims.

Well, what can one do...these things happen. Sema didn't turn Nyusya and the girl out, God forbid, especially since there was now enough room in the house. Yes and that Lida, other motives aside, was a perfectly normal gal. And she had a tolerant attitude toward Jewish men. It was only Jewish women she didn't care for, seeing a potential danger in them, sensing a striving for Sema's heart and guts.

Sema was standing behind his barber chair nearly right away, went to clacking his scissors and giving a shave...An acquaintance built a foot stool for his crippled foot. Thus, Sema actually stood all day long, *in ballet position*, leaning on the stool with his instep bent as if on point, his scissors chirping about his client's pates.

Ugh, if only they hadn't killed Poppy, he'd have constructed a boot-last in the shape of his son's crippled foot; after all, the old man had such hands, such a feel for

form. After all, before taking measurements of a woman's foot, he'd spend 10 minutes or so caressing her with fingers of love, would squeeze, and stroke, and align the toes... Yes, Sema'd now be dancing the tango in those Poppy boots!

*A little later on, one of the remaining senior artisan masters carved a boot-last for him, and throughout his life, Sema ordered for himself a heavy thick-sided orthopedic shoe modeled on that boot-last. He clomped around in it fairly well. With a cane, but nevertheless without a crutch. He worked, however, with the footstool—until his very death.*

Nyusya didn't grumble against fate; she could live this way, too. The girl grew, long outstripped her mother in terms of her quick-wittedness, was bright beyond her years. She taught herself to read, at four years old spoke coherently, extensively, and disingenuously. She mimicked her neighbors, took her own approach to everything. Always got her way. Well—Zakhar through-and-through, as if come to life.

Two or three times Nyusya sent short letters to Leningrad; in one she even included a photograph of *Riorita*—in a checked little dress, with a white bow in her curls, she really resembled Zhuka, her sister. But Elena Arnoldovna didn't reply. Maybe she'd moved?

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Zhuka and Aunt Ksana returned from Perm to Leningrad immediately after the war, and through the theater, energetic Aunt Ksana obtained housing in one of the rooms of the Cordovins' former apartment on Mokhovaya.

It was the father's study—a large spacious room with two tall windows. And a high ceiling, about five square meters, and a mezzanine....It was impossible to believe that at one time the *entire* apartment had belonged to their family. Now this room alone seemed to constitute unheard of wealth.

“We've got to get a ladder,” said Aunt Ksana, taking a worried look up. “You don't remember what's up there? On that mezzanine?”

“Nothing worthwhile,” said Zhuka. “Or else they'd have taken it away long ago. Like Papa's paints, good-for-nothing already. And those blank canvases...which...you know...he never actually painted on...”

[Translator's note: Chapter 3 returns us to the current moment, to Zakhar's schemes/antics in Spain.]