

## **PROLOGUE. LIKE A FISH**

*(the 2000s: a funeral)*

There's nothing more pathetic than an old lush.

*Hellblazer*

Lots of films begin with a funeral,  
After all, you have to begin with something  
And there's no better beginning than someone's death  
*Mara Malanova*

*Alexander Vasilievich Borisov, aka Moreukhov, born 1975*

*Nikita Vasilievich Melnikov, born 1968, Moreukhov's half-brother via their father*

*Elvira Alexandrovna Takhtagonova, aka Anya, born 1972, Nikita and Moreukhov's first cousin on their father's side*

*Rimma Leonidovna Takhtagonova, born 1982, Elvira's first cousin on her mother's side*

*Masha Melnikova, born 1968, Nikita's wife*

### **1. Always the way**

When my father died, says Moreukhov, I was absolutely sober. The first time that year.

Well that's good: two weeks earlier, and Alexander Melnikov's body would have been lost among the other corpses.

Blue and bloated, nibbled on by fish, lacerated by claws, mutilated by underwater snags. The swollen children's bodies are like monstrous dwarfs, tatters of flesh between the decomposing thighs of the men and women. They stare with their dead eyes – those of them who still have eyes. Surfacing one after another, rising up out of the murk at the bottom – and their hair waves in the current exactly like rotten waterweed.

They swim to him, reaching for him, surrounding him. Fingers with no nails grab hold of Moreukhov's arms, blackened tongues tickle his neck playfully.

Mould, slime, silt.

All these are only the retinue. The underwater gods follow them out: an old man with a long beard, scaly arms and large, bulging eyes. Another one, with a fish's tail, twisted horns and prehensile frog's fingers rises up halfway out of the dark water and slaps his webbed palms down on it, spraying darkness up into the air. And another one after him, straddling a catfish, holding its whiskers like reins. Then another, and another.

Slimy, smelling of the swamp and fish scales, they emerge from out of the darkness: fishes' mouths, toads' eyes, drooping whiskers ... they reach out their arms, enfold him, draw him down to the bottom, down to the blackness and the murk, the roots, the snags, the rotten tree stumps, the underwater monsters, the slime, the sticky embraces, the smell of fear, the smell of his own vomit.

He ought to buy them off – but he has nothing to offer.

All right, then. Corpses and water spirits. That's right at the end. What comes before that?

Before that is a blank. I can never remember it, except maybe by accident. Johnny Walker's Red Label, I think. Some blonde or other, I don't remember her name, it was something very funny. Everything was funny. Good times, fun times. After all, it was New Year, Christmas, the old New Year, holidays, everybody making merry. The office plankton frolicking, drinking champagne out in the street.

So it started with champagne?

No, no. I don't like champagne. It started, as always, with the cocktails, you know, the cheap kind, in little cans. Like "Screwdriver" or "Gin and Tonic". Sometimes a two-litre plastic bottle. I can go a long time like that – a week, two weeks, even a month. Until the money starts to run out.

And then what?

After that, the same as always. I walk up to the counter – there's this little shop, "Woodside" right next to my apartment block, I always buy my booze there – so, anyway, I walk up to the counter and instead of gin and tonic I ask for "the thirty-rouble vodka". And then the saleswoman gets this bottle out from somewhere, the label's different every time, but the price is always the same. And right there at the counter I take several large swigs, then after that I don't remember anything. Not until a few days later, sometimes a week later, hardly ever longer than that, and I surface in my own apartment. With my face all bloody and my knuckles battered, with Dimon sitting by my bed, and Tiger Darkovich – that's my substance abuse therapist, Leo Markovich – Dimon always calls him in. So it's the normal saline drip and lots of water. He leaves some tablets as well, but I don't take them anyway.

So in a couple of weeks you're back to normal then?

Well, what does back to normal mean? What could "normal" possibly be? Take a look at me, will you, girl – even now my hands are shaking. My face is all puffed up, one front tooth is missing. Some fucking normal all right. Anyway, yes, in two weeks I'm almost the same as I was before the binge. I can't even remember my nightmares. That is, I don't want to remember them.

But on February 4 you were sober?

Who the hell can say? It was only a week later. You could call me sober, nominally speaking.

All right. And how did you find out about your father's death?

What does "find out" mean? And why say my father? Maybe he wasn't my father. Maybe I made the whole thing up. My patronymic's Vasilievich, not Alexandrovich. Maybe my father really wasn't Alexander, but Vasilii Melnikov, his brother. And Uncle Sasha really is just that – an uncle.

All right then. But how did you find out about Uncle Sasha's death?

Will you stop hassling me, girl? I found out, who cares how ... Why are you interrogating me? And who are you anyway?

Yes, indeed – who am I?

I could answer "Anya", I could say "Elvira", I could simply say "a cousin of yours".

The word "cousin" doesn't really require any further definition: "first cousin", "third cousin, twice removed". Just your cousin – or perhaps your half-sister, the one you never saw as a child. A sister who didn't even know that you existed.

And even now I know next to nothing about you. I'm only just trying to picture you – a man who sometimes called my dead father *his* father. I'm trying to picture your life, your apartment, your binges and your monsters – ghoulish and ludicrous, like the monsters in Andrei's computer.

I'm trying to imagine Moreukhov lying on a sagging couch in the middle of a blitzed room, with his hand stuck into his dirty shorts, watching a black and white movie made so long ago that that by now probably not just the famous director and leading actors are dead, but literally everyone, right down to the last lighting man's assistant. And there's Moreukhov watching the pale shades of these people who are dead, and at that very moment at the other side of town Alexander Melnikov starts turning blue and gasping for breath, reaches for the phone, makes one last attempt to draw breath, opening and closing his mouth convulsively – like a fish caught on a hook and dragged out onto dry land, jerked out by the invisible line into the dry nonexistence of death.

Moreukhov will find out about this and say: *when my father died, I was absolutely sober*, although he's not really sure if he was sober and if Alexander Melnikov was even his father.

And Anya thinks spitefully: Yet another lie. That's always the way where my father's concerned.

## ***2. Mine can make do***

Alexander Melnikov's daughter officially became Anya at the age of sixteen. Before then, she was registered everywhere as Elvira – her granny insisted, she had this ineradicable eastern love of exotic names. But her mom always called her Anya anyway.

Anya still felt angry about it, even now: Why couldn't grandma Djamilya have picked some normal Tatar name? Called her Zemfira, Zarema or Alsu – then she wouldn't have changed it. Or given her a Russian name straight away; mom, for instance, had been Tatiana from the day she was born – and that was okay.

But then, what difference did it make – Anya, Elvira, Alsu? Whatever name she had, it was still obvious that she was a Tatar – with her broad cheekbones, slanting eyes, Asian style ...

Grandma Djamilya was famous in her own way, mom had told Anya that, by rights, she should have been made a Hero of the Soviet Union. A sniper who killed hundreds of German soldiers. It would have been good, of course, to remember the precise number, but probably it wasn't always clear if she had killed someone or just wounded him.

Had optical sights already been invented then? And if so, did the Soviet snipers – more specifically, her grandmother – have them?

Granny was short and thin. It was hard to imagine her at war, with a rifle in her hands.

Out on his walk that week, three-year-old Gosha had turned his hockey stick into a gun, laid down in a snowdrift and started shooting at people walking by. Her granny had probably laid the same way – through four years of war. In snow, in mud, in grass, in rubble ...

Granny had died two years ago – Anya couldn't ask her how it was anymore. Maybe mom knew? – and Anya smiled, imagining herself walking in the door and flooring her mum Tanya with the question: *Mom, do you remember how many Germans granny killed?*

Gosha would only be delighted, of course.

As always, Anya smiles as she remembers her son. Not with the convulsive smile she was taught in IKEA, no, just faintly, with the corners of her lips. Her sales partner Zinka happens to catch her glance.

“What are you smiling at? Going to see Andrei again?”

Anya nods. Zinka moves closer and whispers:

“I got Nastka to set aside this awesome lingerie set for me. They've got a sale on today, I persuaded her to stash my size away until Monday. I'll buy it out of this month's advance.

It's awesome. Black and red, all lacy. Brings my bust right out here!" Zinka enthusiastically held her hand out almost half a metre in front of her.

Anya giggles.

"Aw, come on," says Zinka, "mine really gets the hots for that lingerie! You should pop round to Nastka, she could pick something out for you."

Anya shrugs.

"Mine can make do without."

"Ooh, look out, now, Anka, you'll lose that man of yours! He'll get stolen! You need to hang on tight to one like that! Of course, you're such a beauty, the men are always giving you the eye, but even so ..."

Such a beauty – what a thing to say! It's just that she used to be an athlete. A good figure, and she's used to keeping in shape. Every morning – a cold shower and exercises. Twenty-five minutes. Squats, bends, push-ups. Abdominals, waist, ankles. Granny always used to quote that old pre-war jingle: "Make sure it all works with physical jerks". That's probably why no one ever thinks Anya is thirty-three, and it's probably why she still likes looking at herself in the mirror.

As for the men – to hell with them, the important thing is for her to like the way she looks.

To tell the truth, it would be better if the men paid a bit less attention.

Take Mark Borisovich, the general manager of their branch, he always watches her as she walks away. Anya knows all about that glance, thank God – and it never promises any good – especially if it's the boss doing the glancing. An open-air market or a cosy little shop in a big mall – it makes no difference. IKEA's probably the only place it doesn't happen – you know the Swedes: cold-blooded northern types, discipline, efficiency and all the rest of it. So Anya had a three year break from it there, and she was glad of it.

Mark Borisovich comes over, smiles greasily and asks:

"How are things going, Anechka?"

Zinka immediately retreats back to her side, with the men's footwear. As if to say: There's lots of work to do, you sort this out between yourselves.

She knows what's going on.

"Thank you. Mark Borisovich, things are just fine," Anya answers. "Only there aren't too many customers today, it's a bit strange for a Friday."

"Never mind, there'll be more coming in after they finish work." He chafes his small palms together, rubs his wedding ring mechanically with the middle finger of his left hand. "What are you doing today after the shift? Maybe we could shoot off somewhere? Have a cup of coffee, listen to some music. And whatever."

Anya smiles her full-frontal IKEA smile.

"I'd love to, Mark Borisovich, but there's no way. I have to collect my little boy from the crèche."

"Ah, the little boy ..." – he immediately looks peeved. "Maybe you could call your mom and she could collect him?"

Well, isn't he the observant one! Could he really have heard Anya on her cell phone, arranging with her mom to collect Gosha and take him back to her place?

"There's no way today, Mark Borisovich. Maybe some other time."

"Some other time's good," he says with another greasy smile. "Maybe next Friday? I see you grafting away all the time, you never get a decent rest."

That's true. Anya's always working. Fifteen years now she's been working as a salesclerk.

Fifteen years of continuous work, fifteen years of independent life – and during the most terrible years of all, after perestroika.

Anya remembers: those were hard times.

She remembers: empty shelves with no meat, those kiosks in the streets, those coupons for food and open-air markets and bureaux de change – roubles weren't any good – redenomination shaking the nation, then big wholesale centres and shopping malls too, ninety-eight brought a crisis, set everything spinning, the shelves emptied again, just like at the beginning.

Fifteen years as a salesclerk. But what else could she do? She couldn't be a hired killer. She didn't even know how to fire a gun.

Unlike her granny.

“Thanks, Mark Borisovich,” Anya says, “we'll definitely go for a coffee some time.”

And what else can she do? Sooner or later she'll have to agree to have a cup of coffee, listen to some music. And then things will move on to “whatever”, there's nothing she can do about it.

She doesn't want to lose her job, after all, it's six hundred dollars, plus bonuses. A fixed working day, proper employment records. A shoe department in a shopping mall.

A good job, every bit as good as IKEA. And they pay more.

The next day, on Saturday, Anya will arrive to collect Gosha from her mom and the boy will dash to meet her, Anya will hug her son and only after that look up.

Tatiana Takhtagonova stands there saying nothing, with her small hands clasped on her stomach. Her face looks stiff somehow.

“Has something happened?” Anya asks in a whisper, and her mom Tanya answers in a quiet voice too, afraid that Gosha might hear.

“Sasha died yesterday,” she says, and after a pause she adds: “Your father”.

And she freezes in silence again, and really, after all – what can she add? After the divorce, Anya only saw her father three or four times, and she didn't remember what came before that, she was too young then.

Uncle Sasha got divorced when I was seven, and after that he and my father never said a word to each other. I used to see Uncle Sasha at my grandfather's and grandmother's birthdays, that was when he told me I had a half-brother, my father's son by another woman, another Alexander, a Sasha, like him. I must have been twenty by then.

So I didn't see Uncle Sasha very often, only a couple of times a year – and I saw Anya-Elvira, his daughter, even less often. But somehow I like to imagine her standing in her shoe shop, chatting with the boss and then, in her mother's hallway, hugging her son and asking voicelessly: Has something happened, mom?

But Gosha doesn't hear anything, he skips around the hallway, waving the shoehorn and shouting:

“Mom, look at this pistol I've got! Look, look!”

And I, Nikita Melnikov, look out the window of the taxi, sigh and think: “I'd like a son like that too”.

### ***3. Isn't it awkward when you kiss?***

Nikita doesn't have any children.

Nikita has a small business, he has a good apartment, a Toyota automobile, a wife called Masha – but no children.

He doesn't seem bothered too much by the subject

Now he's sitting on the edge of a hotel bed, the sheet's so wet, you could wring it out, his shirt and trousers are lying on the floor somewhere, together with Dasha's dress. Dasha herself is beside him, lying on her back, turned slightly towards Nikita, with her plump arms behind her head in its covering of short-cropped hair – only a few millimetres long.

Drops of sweat glisten in her smoothly shaved armpits, and on her breasts too, and on her thighs, and on her stomach. Nikita thinks he can even see a little puddle in her navel.

Dasha smiles.

A smile, plump arms, a turn of the head.

Massive silver earrings in her ears. A pierced eyebrow and – Nikita knows this now – a pierced tongue.

That's her, Dasha. She's twenty-two years old.

In three years Nikita will be forty.

He thinks: *That went pretty well, eh?*

So Nikita has a young lover as well. Her name is Dasha.

Dasha and Masha – an obsessive kind of rhyme. Nikita doesn't like it. To be quite honest, Nikita's not at all sure that he likes sitting on the edge of a hotel bed, with a girl he hardly even knows lying on it. But what can he do about that now – it just happened somehow.

Three hours earlier Dasha had come to choose an aquarium for some small firm. She said she worked there as a secretary. Zoya was supposed to meet her, but Zoya was late (she either got stuck in a traffic jam or she overslept, he'd have to check that later), well, anyway, Zoya wasn't there, and Victor had disappeared with a customer as well, so there wasn't anyone apart from Nikita. It's a small firm, with only seven people in the office. And only three of them for dealing with customers.

So three hours earlier Nikita was sitting there, trying not to stare at Dasha's breasts in the neckline of her dark dress, examining her hair cropped *en brosse*, annoyed at having to waste time on nonsense – it's a paltry order, why couldn't Zoya deal with it? – answering questions, getting angrier and angrier. *Are these original Indian figurines? I mean from India, or local copies? I'm sorry, I don't know these, who are they? I think the canonical image of the dancing Shiva is a little bit different.*

Nikita's parents are certain that he breeds fish. In fact, he buys the fish in "Aquarium World" on Novinsky Boulevard and his company only decorates and services the aquariums. Other firms have the standard selection of decorative caravels and pirate treasure, but Nikita has ethnic aquariums with exotic drowned cities, Chinese and Japanese pavilions, Indian gods with multiple arms, Easter Island statues, even drowned Russian churches (there are attestations from experts: These churches are precise copies of the ones drowned on the bottom of the Rybinsk reservoir in April 1941). There are also Roman remain, Arabian minarets and Indian ruins. How Arabian minarets could come to be on the bottom of the sea, Nikita has no idea, but the customers take them. They probably saw it as a prophecy of Islam's defeat in the war of civilisations.

A surprisingly successful business. Nikita himself doesn't understand how it happened.

The girl was obviously in no hurry, she kept checking the prices over and over again, asking more and more questions. Eventually Nikita started feeling hungry and glancing at his watch, but Dasha didn't take the hint, Nikita sighed – the customer is always right, there's nothing to be done – and he suggested they could have lunch together and finish talking about things at the same time.

In the hallway Nikita handed the girl her rather worse-for-wear down jacket and she turned to say thank you. Their faces were very close and for the first time Nikita thought: *She's not bad at all, sexy. Only really young.*

Nikita had decided a long time ago that young girls were not for him. Stupid, inane. And money-hungry too. Why else would a lovely young girl come on to a forty-year-old man?

But then, who can tell with a twenty-year old – is she coming on to me or simply jabbering: *I think ethnic motifs are very trendy. Genuine New Age. You must like Castaneda, I suppose? People of your generation always like Castaneda.*

Business lunch was already over and they were the only customers in the cafe. *This is a glam spot you have*, Dasha said, glancing round the room. Nikita listened to the girl's chatter with half an ear as he carved up the river perch on his plate and only cast a glance at her every now and then. Slightly plump, with rounded, sloping shoulders, large breasts simply bursting out of her neckline. A ring in her left eyebrow – and he thought piercing had gone out of fashion, been left behind somewhere in the nineties

Just then a silver stud jangled against her spoon. Dasha laughed.

"I was still young when I had that done. In tenth grade."

In our ninth, Nikita calculated automatically. They studied eleven years now, not ten, like in his time.

"I was going to have it taken out, but I can't be bothered. Let it stay there."

She stuck her tongue out for a second, the stud caught a glint of the fluorescent light and flared up in silver fire.

"Isn't it awkward when you kiss?" Nikita asked.

"I'll show you," Dasha answered.

Nikita only hesitated for a second, he was going to move away, but he was too late; the girl bent over the table, put her plump arms round his neck and kissed him, forcing his lips apart with her tongue.

That was how it happened: the silvery taste of the first kiss, the warmth of a young body, a smile in the cloakroom, a room in the hotel across the road.

It was exactly like they said: He was so rich and successful, and she was so lovely and young.

A good enough reason to sleep with her – although Nikita couldn't even remember the last time he had been unfaithful to his wife. Five years ago, he thought. Or seven. Entirely by chance that time as well, that just happened too.

I ask myself: Why didn't Nikita stop after that kiss? He was probably curious – after all, he'd never had a girl fifteen years younger than him. Or maybe he wanted to check if a piercing really did do good things for fellatio, like they said in some movie.

(Nikita, of course, can't remember which movie it was, but I don't need to remember, I know anyway, thank God; Rosanna Arquette said it in *Pulp Fiction*.)

And so they get undressed hastily, either out of passion, or because both of them need to hurry, Dasha to get back to her office and Nikita to his. *I'll come quickly, and we'll split*, he thinks, caressing Dasha's breasts, sucking on the earring in her left eyebrow and thinking belatedly that he ought to have bought a condom.

And then Dasha reaches for her purse and fishes out a Durex.

Prudent, thinks Nikita. Dasha's hands slip over his body, over the bulge of his belly, the greying hairs on his chest, the silver stud slips over his skin, the wet tongue, the sharp talons.

Prudent, yes. And diligent too.

It really is interesting with a young girl. In our time girls were quite different.

Eventually they assume the traditional position. Nikita on top, Dasha, with her legs spread, underneath him. Heavy breathing, the creaking of the hotel bed.

After all, a hotel bed has to creak, doesn't it? I've never screwed in a hotel, only seen it in the movies and read about it in books. But then, I've screwed in places that Nikita can't even imagine.

Right then, heavy breathing, creaking, maybe feeble moans. Nikita thinks: I wonder what time it is? He simply can't come and even feels a bit angry, the same way he did a few hours earlier, in the office, while they were discussing aquariums. He thinks: Maybe I should change position? – but then Dasha shudders, throws her head back and starts trembling. Her eyes roll up, her mouth half opens, and a shudder runs right through her body.

Shuddering, quivering, rocking, trembling, jerking convulsively, all the pores of her body ooze moisture: a little lake of it on her stomach, streams of it in the channels of all her folds, wrinkles and crevices, drops of water stand out on her skin. Dasha slithers about underneath Nikita, he's not really sure if he likes that or not. And then, from out of the depths of her body, this mighty sound rises up – hollow, booming, non-human.

The same kind of bellow that Ray Bradbury's prehistoric beast makes, surfacing for its tryst with the wailing lighthouse.

The sound grows louder and louder, filling the hotel room, splashing out into the corridor, down the stairways, into the foyer. Nikita thinks: Where does she get the breath from? – Then it breaks off suddenly and the silence slams against his eardrums, Dasha's body is contorted into a knot by a final spasm, Nikita clutches at the plump shoulders slithering under his hands and he comes with a loud male growl.

He rolls over onto the other half of the bed and asks:

"I'm sorry, what was that you said?"

"What did you hear?"

"When we came, you shouted *love*. What's that about?"

He thinks he knows the answer. Young girls, foolish young girls can't come unless it's for love. If you screw someone, you have to say "I love you". There was a time, many years ago, when he used to have girlfriends like that – that was before Masha, of course.

But Dasha gives him a different answer.

"It's this kind of trance I fall into." She lies on her back, turned slightly towards him, with her plump arms above her head. "Sometimes I shout out a word. It's different every time. It doesn't always happen, but often. It's not something I choose, I don't even remember what I shout. I've tried booking the words in advance – it didn't work." Drops of sweat glisten in her smoothly shaved armpits. "I usually warn people beforehand, but today I forgot, I'm sorry if it freaked you out."

Dasha smiles.

A smile, plump arms, a turn of the head.

"No, no, it didn't freak me out," Nikita assures her, "it's quite amusing actually: to come to the word *love*."

"You can take it as a sexual oracle," says Dasha. "Sometimes it helps to ask questions first, before you begin. You don't even have to tell me what they are."

Nikita sits up. The sheet's so wet you could wring it out, his shirt and trousers are lying on the floor somewhere, together with Dasha's dress.

And then his cell phone rings. Dasha reaches out her hand, picks the phone up off the locker and hands it to Nikita, glancing at the screen out of the corner of her eye.

It says "dad".

Nikita says "hello" and straight away his father says: *You know, Sasha's dead.*

I imagine him: his voice is hollow, cracked. I want to believe he loved his brother. Even though he didn't speak to him for thirty years.



Dasha sits up and drags her dress over with her foot, Nikita asks the phone: *Which Sasha?— Your brother?* – and his father says yes, but he’s already thinking about his own brother: Nikita’s father thinks about Uncle Sasha and Nikita thinks about me, about Sasha Moreukhov. We only saw each other a few times, at first as children, and later at grandma’s and granddad’s funerals – why has he remembered me? Maybe it’s something to do with the February twilight outside the window, or maybe the drops of sweat on Dasha’s skin, or a burgeoning sense of guilt, or the thought: *That went pretty well, eh?* As if it’s a common thing for him to pick up some good-looking piece of ass, take her to a hotel and give her a really good screwing, as if there’s no fifteen years’ difference in age, as if there’s no wife whom he supposedly loves?

So he sits there on the edge of the hotel bed, as if he’s some kind of eternally-young-eternally-drunk, irresponsible individual, something like his own brother, like me, Sasha Moreukhov, the alcoholic artist.

So it’s really not at all surprising that when he hears his father’s cracked voice: *You know, Sasha’s dead* – Nikita doesn’t automatically think first of his uncle Alexander Melnikov, aged fifty-six, just as I myself can’t remember what film I was watching that day when Uncle Sasha died.

#### **4. One last time**

If you only knew, Alexander Mikhailovich, just how angry I’ve been with you for the last year. Everyone’s been paying fifteen or even twenty dollars a time for ages – and you kept paying ten. I tried hinting every possible way, I started coming to you only every second week – but you still pretended not to understand. You know I can’t simply leave you, just like that, I remember how after the Russian Default everyone abandoned me, but you carried on paying ten, the same as you always had. Although I knew you were left high and dry after you lost your job.

Well, by your standards, of course.

But I have a lot of respect for you since that Default. And because you always spoke to me politely from the very first time we met. Remember, I came from Donetsk in 1996? I left little Sergei with my parents and moved in with Irka in a rented room – the two of us slept on a fold-out divan. She worked as a nanny for some New Russians so, well, I wanted to be a nanny too. I thought I could send a hundred dollars a month home to mom in Donetsk. That seemed like big money. Sergei would have clothes and shoes, and it would make things easier for my parents.

Well, you know, they didn’t take me. Said I had a Ukrainian accent. Said I could try the Azeris maybe, they didn’t care, they couldn’t speak proper Russian anyway.

I refused, of course. I thought about going back home, but then Irka introduced me to you. Ten dollars for a day, once a week. Plus separate payment for washing the windows in the spring and the fall. Not huge money, but at least I could pay Irka back for the room.

I never said anything, but at first I felt ashamed of being a house cleaner: after all, I was kindergarten teacher, a trained professional. On the way to meet you, I told myself: if I don’t like him – I’ll refuse! Well, honestly, I really did like you. Such a cultured man, spectacles, beard, a moustache. Your hair was still black then, not like it is now. You introduced yourself so politely and said: Let me show you the apartment, Oksana.

You know, this apartment of yours – it was a lot dirtier then, of course. Do you think it’s easy washing the dust off all those corals and cleaning the crabs’ shells with a little cloth? And you used to sit in that armchair all the time. And, incidentally, I was embarrassed, my

housecoat billows open all the way out here. I was younger then, fresh and beautiful – maybe you remember that? – I felt very shy: what if you suddenly made a pass at me?

Although that's one thing that never happened, it's true. All you did was talk. About your trips to the Far East, about the Pacific Ocean, about the Valley of Geysers, how hot water splashes up from under the ground there and you don't need a boiler room, or a gas geyser. You showed me the photographs, really beautiful they were.

I remember, you were a geologist before perestroika, weren't you, Alexander Mikhailovich?

Sometimes I think you brought me good luck. In less than a year I was earning more than Irka already. True, I worked without any days off at all, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I did two apartments, but at least I didn't have to travel very far. But I always told them at home that I worked in a kindergarten.

I know I've probably told you all this before. Anyway, I'll just have another go, all right? I'll give the sponge a quick squeeze and run over the shelves again.

Remember, I asked you once why you weren't married? I said you weren't an old man yet, and you had money, and you told me that you had a love and you were staying faithful to it.

Well, when I heard that, I really respected you. My husband went off the rails almost the moment I headed for Moscow. Of course, even before that he drank so much, he was no good for anything ... except that he made my Sergei, that's one good thing.

I asked you once about that love of yours – what her name was, where she lived, why it didn't work out for you. Remember what you said? *I'm a fool, I ruined everything* – and that was all, never another word about it. Well, I didn't ask again, anyway.

I've been really furious with you all this last year, to be honest. After all, I was losing twenty dollars a month, maybe even forty. And this morning too – as I was walking along I thought: I have to leave him after all. Cleaning isn't like bread, you can live without it. If he hasn't got any money, he can do his own cleaning.

Forgive me for thinking like that, all right?

I didn't understand anything at first, I thought maybe you'd gone away somewhere, that was why you weren't answering. I open up with my own key, then I walk in and see the light's on in the room, even though it's already morning. Well, you often didn't turn the light out after yourself, and I was still angry, I thought: you'd do better to save electricity instead of paying me ten dollars.

I went straight to the bathroom, got changed, took the bucket and the cloth – and then I walked into the room.

And there you were, on the floor beside the armchair. I dashed over to you, took hold of your hand – but your hand was completely cold. I realised straight away it was already over, there was nothing I could do.

At first I got terribly angry. Now I'll have to call the police, Alexander Mikhailovich, and what am I going to tell them? The cops will come, they'll check my dodgy residence permit and blackmail me – and all because of you, by the way. I should have stopped ages ago, ten dollars is no kind of pay, I can tell you that straight now. I'd been meaning to for ages and now I've had to do it.

You've let me down now, let me down really badly.

When I saw you and ran to you, I knocked over the bucket, there, look at that lovely puddle – right in the middle of the room. And I was so reluctant to call the police that I took the cloth and started wiping it up. What else could I do? It's a habit. Nine years I've been cleaning your apartment. So many things have happened – my Sergei grew up and went into

the army. Mom died, Irka got married – and I've been here almost every week. And I'll never come here again, you know.

I mopped up all the water, squeezed out the cloth, got the sponge from the bathroom, started wiping the shelves with those corals of yours and all sorts of crabs on them. Just one last time, I thought, I'll clean everything properly, do a really good job.

You know, Alexander Mikhailovich, this was a really bad idea of yours, let me tell you honestly. You're only fifty-six, right? Only fifteen years older than me, by the way. You could have lived for a long, long time yet.

What I'm wondering is – how could you let it happen? You were probably sitting there, reading – and you felt bad, right? Probably your heart? They say with a heart attack, there's no air to breathe and everything goes dark? That's right, isn't it?

Why couldn't you reach the phone, eh? An intelligent, grown-up man, you know everything – but there was no phone you could reach. If you have a bad heart, there always has to be a phone you can reach. The ambulance would have come, they'd have brought you back, given you a jab.

It was probably painful. Maybe you even shouted – I can see your mouth's still open. Why didn't the neighbours hear, eh? Or didn't you have the strength to shout?

God, this is really terrible. You're so intelligent, so handsome, you had everything – how could you, at fifty-six, all alone at night in an empty apartment?

It's all because you didn't have a woman. Nobody should live alone, especially a man. If I'd been here, I'd have called the ambulance and given you drops, nitroglycerin or whatever it is.

That was a stupid business, with that love of yours. What does that mean, you ruined everything? Couldn't she see how much you loved her?

I actually feel sorry that you never made any advances to me now. Especially when I was young. Did you at least see what beautiful legs I had? Not like they are now. Nine years have gone by, after all.

Listen, I'll call the police now, I realise I have to call them. Just let me tidy up your hair and close your mouth.

No, it won't stay. I'd forgotten. That's the way it always is with dead people. They tie it up with a handkerchief.

It's a pity you can't see how well I've cleaned everything for you. Everything's just gleaming.

I'm sorry for crying, Alexander Mikhailovich. I'll stop right now.

Your hair hasn't turned completely grey, I can see. But the grey hairs suit you, even when you're dead, like this.

What a repulsive word. Dead. I don't even want to say it.

I won't call the police right now, all right? Or they'll come and take you away, and we'll never see each other again. Why don't I call one of your friends instead ... or one of your relatives?

The address book's on the little table, right? As usual, right? I'll go and look for it now.

You had a brother, didn't you? You talked about that once. Some simple name. Kolya, Vanya ... no, I don't remember.

What terrible handwriting you have, really, Alexander Mikhailovich, it's impossible to make out. I can't understand a thing.

Ah, there it is. Vasilii Melnikov, that's it. Vasya, not Vanya. I'll dial it now, and after that the cops.

I'll call just as soon as I stop crying.

I'll probably go back to Donetsk now. Sergei's grown up, he earns his own living. What would I do in Moscow?

I'll call now. Vasiliï Melnikov, so that's Vasiliï Mikhailovich **then**.

Hello? Vasiliï Mikhailovich? This is Oksana, your brother's cleaner. You know, Vasiliï Mikhailovich, he died today.

Yes, that's what I'll say. I'll calm down now and call. And then I'll call the police. But I won't go to the funeral, what would I do there? People would laugh. The cleaner's come to the funeral. And what would I wear? I left all my beautiful dresses in Donetsk.

You know, you shouldn't have done it. I tell you honestly; if only you hadn't died, I'd have done your cleaning for nothing.

We won't hear any more about Oksana from Donetsk. She really didn't go to the funeral, and in fact no one saw her, not even once. There was just the southern accent that Vasiliï Melnikov heard on the phone: *This is Oksana, your brother's cleaner. You know, Vasiliï Mikhailovich, he died today* – and that was all.

I had to make up all the rest myself.

It's stupid, of course, but I wanted at least someone to mourn for Alexander Mikhailovich Melnikov.

Even if it is an outsider, a stranger – let her weep with a pure heart, with no resentment, with no guilt.

They say a dead man left unmourned brings trouble.

### *An alternative wake*

Do you want me to tell you about myself? Let me tell you another story instead. About four people, two half-brothers and two female cousins, which is also the story of our families, because this is a story we all share in common, it's the way our families mingled together to bring us into the world.

Here are the four us: this is me, Sasha Moreukhov, this is my brother Nikita, and my first cousin, Anya, or my half-sister if Uncle Sasha was my father after all. And the fourth one is Anya's cousin Rimma. Grandma Djamilya wanted the girls to be friends, but the friendship didn't take – after all, there is a difference of ten years – but even so: the same generation, the same time, the same city. There she is, Rimma Takhtagonova, she knows nothing about the death of Alexander Melnikov, she probably knows nothing about either me or Nikita, but I'll try not to forget about her.

And you'll remind me if need be, all right?

Black figures dusted with snow, the black gap of the freshly dug grave, white flakes swirling down from the sky ...

The funeral that Oksana really didn't come to.

The Khovanskoe Cemetery. February 7, 2005.

There's Moreukhov, standing with his hands stuck in the pockets of his tattered jacket, he shudders in the wind and pulls his knitted woolly hat down more firmly. Anya is standing slightly to one side in her black Chinese down jacket, clutching the elbow of her mother, Tatiana Takhtagonova. Standing nearby in the same poses are Nikita and his father, Vasiliï Melnikov, the brother of the deceased.

A sculptural composition, thinks Moreukhov. Covered in snow, they're like marble. Two male figures and two female. They symbolise grief. Or perhaps not grief, but shame, repentance and guilt.

We have short memories. We even have difficulty remembering our own lives.

No memory is big enough for the lives of others.

For us a hundred years is an ungraspable period of time.

It's not possible to remember – I can only imagine it: on February 7, 1905, it was snowing too.

An old man stands by a millpond, leaning on a stick, looking up into the grey, snowy sky. The pond is iced over; down under the ice there are rotten logs lurking and fish slowly creeping through dark freezing murk and mute crayfish sleeping.

The old man is silent – or maybe he's muttering something under his breath, as if he's talking with the one who is there, under the ice, on the bottom of the weir.

A little boy lies in a cradle; lace and ribbons ... His father's cultured face leans down over him. *Mishenka, my son*, says the father. The lenses of his pince-nez glint.

Nikita, Moreukhov and Elvira will call this boy *Granddad Misha*.

We see them through a kind of snowy shroud, the faces and the figures can barely be made out: a lot of people, the parents of Granddad Makar, Granddad Grisha, Grandma Nastya, Grandma Olya, Grandma Djamilya ... scattered around the towns and villages of the Russian Empire, they know nothing about each other, about the future, about the grandchildren and great-grandchildren who will unite them.

The empire will pass away, Russia will pass away, and then the Soviet Union, and then, on February 7, 2005, we, their descendants, will congregate in a cemetery, and the snow will fall just as it did a hundred years earlier – except that maybe it will be a little bit browner from the smoke and fumes of the Moscow Orbital Highway, from the ingrained odour of Moscow's ring road, where the cars move round in a circle, like the molecules of water in a school textbook: water, steam, rain, snow; sublimation, evaporation, condensation, freezing; the eternal round cycle of water, the mill wheel, the wheel of births and deaths, funerals and christenings.

Let us raise our eyes to the sky; white flakes come flying down out of a white void, like the ending of an Edgar Allan Poe novel. Let us imagine that these flakes are the material embodiment of the dead man's gaze, a downward gaze from the sky above. Let Alexander Melnikov see the coffin swaying above the black hole in the mantle of snow. Let him glance one last time at the people with whom he lived his life; there's his daughter with her arm round the shoulders of the woman he divorced, there's his nephew with his arms round the shoulders of the man who betrayed him. There, hurrying along the path, is the woman he once betrayed. She says:

"I'm late."

The mascara is smudged on her face, of course. In snow like this. At a funeral like this.

Moreukhov puts his arm round her shoulder – now the composition is complete. Two men. Two women. A man and a woman.

Children and parents.

Don't look at us, Uncle Sasha: soon you'll meet God and the angels. This is me, Alexander Moreukhov, trying to see through your eyes. You believed in life after death – in the seventies it became fashionable to believe, so you believed. I hope it happens for you – heavenly angels, a kind God on a snowy-white cloud, the eternal bliss of heaven. You passed on many things to me, but you couldn't pass on this faith. Although I do consider myself Orthodox, of course.

I look up at the falling snow, in its twinkling I imagine snow-white angels' wings, but I think: Uncle Sasha isn't looking down from heaven, but up out of a coffin, out of a wooden box making its last few swings through the air above a frozen black hole.

The lid is transparent to the dead man's gaze. Through it he can see the snow flying down, the sky swaying in time to the movements of the gravediggers as they lower the coffin into the pit. He sees the earth, dark and frost-bound, flying into his face, together with the white, weightless flakes. He hears a thud, and then everything turns pitch black, night has fallen, the final night, the night of the lifeless dead, from which he can never rise, he can never tear his arm free of the ground in a gesture of greeting, a salute to the zombies of the world, never break through the lid like Uma Thurman, never see the winter sunlight.

I imagine Uncle Sasha, my father, in the coffin. The gravediggers level off the soil, my mother starts sobbing and clutches at my arm. I have never asked who was my real father. Is it really important? You can choose your own father – especially if the man who gave you your patronymic has never said a word to you in your entire life.

There he is, Vasili Melnikov, standing a short distance away, arm-in-arm with Nikita, my cousin or half-brother – it depends who I choose as my father.

Nikita's wearing a good coat. I don't know what that kind of coat's called. It's a bourgeois coat. If I still believed in revolution, I'd put Nikita on the list to be shot. But I haven't believed in revolution for many years. Neither red, nor black, nor orange.

Sometimes I like to imagine how Nikita lives. I know he has some kind of business. Some fishy way of parting people from their money. In fact I think he actually breeds fish.

We leave the cemetery, hardly having spoken to each other at all. At funerals you're really supposed to offer your condolences to those who were close to the deceased. But which of us was close to him? My mother, whom he used to love (all his life, I think)? His wife, who divorced him when I was born? The daughter she took from him?

I was the person closest to him, I was! They should all come up to me, shake my hand, look into my eyes and mutter something, consumed by a feeling of guilt, crushed by my suffering, my loneliness! But they crowd around Aunt Tanya, his ex-wife, a woman he never loved! They speak words of condolence to Elvira, who even disavowed her own name and became Anya!

I rejected my surname too, but that's a different matter altogether.

My mother tugs on my arm. Surely she doesn't want to express her condolences to them as well? No, thank God. We walk along the snowed-over pathway to the exit. I probably ought to say something. I don't know what.

Anya catches up with us right at the gates.

"Sasha," she says, "aren't you going to the wake? I know dad loved you."

I say nothing. She knows that dad really did love me – more than her. She knows and she's jealous, even today.

"No," I say, "I'll have an alternative wake."

I turn round and walk away. Anya's probably watching me go. The snow blanks out my footprints in a cinematic long shot.

I put mother in a taxi and wander off to the metro. Maybe I ought to have gone with her? No, it's best to be alone now. And mom probably wants some privacy too.

At the metro station I count the money that Dimon gave me. Yes, I saved a bit by buying cheap flowers. They only steal them from the cemetery anyway, what difference does it make to the dead?

And Moreukhov buys a two-litre plastic bottle of "Ochakovskoe" gin and tonic from the kiosk there at the metro station. He drinks in large gulps, his throat cramping up. The taxis go by – Elvira with Aunt Tanya, Uncle Sasha's colleagues, his friends, the bit-part and crowd-scene players. Nikita sits at the wheel of his Toyota, his father in the front seat asks him to take him home. Misha drives through the snow without speaking, remembering the cracked

voice in the receiver: *You know, Sasha's dead – your brother?– yes.* But each thinks about his own brother.

They drive through the snow without speaking, as if afraid to break the silence, the silence of guilt and shame, the belated echo of the silence that divided the brothers for so many years. They say nothing, and Nikita imagines a solitary Moreukhov at a trading kiosk, holding his alternative wake.

A taxi. Elvira with Aunt Tanya. That is, Anya with her mother. They're probably both crying. That's normal – crying on the way back from a funeral. Or maybe not: they just can't cry yet, they talk – how long it can take, buying food for a wake. Or maybe not – they're simply not saying anything.

The car drives through the wet Moscow snow. The taxi-driver listens to a song about Lyalya, who was done in, even though she was a gentle girl. *There ain't enough vodka in the world to stop the pain driving me mad.* Well, well.

The whole of Moscow listens to hip-hop now – or phoney hip-hop.

Yes, salads, not ballads, and shopping, and work without stopping, brothers never repent, now the last money's spent. There's Anya and Tanya, a photo to take, take a look, it's the wake, Tanya's place is packed tight, on the left and the right, they're sitting on chairs and divans everywhere, yes now, that's the shot, just hold it right there, now wind back to where, it's *bring it in here!* – forward now, not too far, right, now back to the car.

Anya looks out the window, squeezes her mom's hand, thinks: *Mom always said: your father never loved me.* Well then, I never loved him either. And we only saw each other three or four times. Ten years ago I phoned him myself, out of curiosity, we met and had a talk. But before that in twenty years he never even came to see me. What kind of father is that?

He also used to say his ex-wife wouldn't let them see each other. If he'd wanted to, he would have seen me!

They say nothing. Wet snow outside the window. The black earth on dad's grave is probably hidden already.

Anya takes hold of her mother's hand.

"Listen, there's something I wanted to ask you ..."

"What?" her mom answers.

Yes, really: What? Anya holds her breath like her grandmother the sniper before a shot, and finally asks the first thing that comes into her head.

"Did you love dad very much?"

She feels her mother's hand go tense in hers. Tatiana turns away to face the window and says:

"Yes."

That "yes" slips down my throat like a lump of ice. Because this is the most important question and the most important answer. Did you love him very much? Yes. And I loved him very much too. And today, February 7, 2005, standing in a snowdrift five steps away from a trading kiosk in an unfamiliar part of the city, where I can't find any *thirty-rouble water of life*, I finish off a second bottle of gin and tonic, no longer thinking about where I'll get the money for a third one, how I'm going to get home, whether I'll even get home at all. Snow tumbling from the sky, my father died two days ago.

Yes, I say to myself and toss the empty plastic bottle into a snowdrift, like I'm tossing a grenade under an enemy tank. Elvira and her mom have probably got home already, the wake has started. In two or three hours the guests will leave and Tatiana will finally burst into tears,

but I don't have to wait that long, I cry right now, standing in the falling snow that conceals my manly tears.

My wake is going to be a long one.



## **PART ONE. TWO BROTHERS**

*(the sixties to the eighties)*

Only brothers know that love and hate are sisters.

*Sergie Blacksmith*

*Vasilii Melnikov, born 1945, Nikita's father*

*Alexander Melnikov, born 1949, Vasilii's brother, Anya-Elvira's father*

*Elena Borisova, born 1950, aka Lyolya, Moreukhov's mother*

*Svetlana Melnikova, maiden name Tikhomirova, born 1945, Vasilii Melnikov's wife, Nikita's mother*

*Makar and Nastya Tikhomirov – Svetlana's parents, Nikita's grandparents*

*Tatyana Takhtagonova, born 1954, Alexander Melnikov's wife (1970-1975), Anya-Elvira's mother*

### **6. An ordinary kid from the outskirts of Moscow**

How did it happen? How did things turn out this way? How did I end up here?

With an empty bottle clutched in my hand, like a grenade, ready for tossing under a tank. Up to my knees in filthy Moscow snow, facing the icy gusts of February wind in a torn anorak, in this huge city, at almost thirty years old, with no teeth and no hat, with my face smashed to bloody pulp. How did I get here?

I used to be a little boy. My mother used to love me, my granddad used to love me, I didn't know my father.

I used to be a young artist, the critics loved me, the girls let me have it for nothing, I had friends, fame was waiting for me.

And now I'm a grovelling, drunken bum, plastered with snow, a dipso, an old soak – and I drop down into the snow when I see headlights: What if it's the cops?

I'm stinking carrion.

My father's dead.

My father's dead, and I'm so drunk I can't work out which way to go. Where am I? Which way's home?

And where is my home anyway?

Ten years ago everything was different. A review in the *Arts Journal*, exhibitions in progressive second-echelon galleries, the Venice Biennale and the Kassel Documenta looming on the horizon, and after that – television, the ministry of culture, a studio, fame and glory, one-man exhibitions.

As Don Corleone would have said – an offer you can't refuse.

And if Sasha Moreukhov really had been offered all that – the biennale, the ministry of culture, the one-man exhibitions and all that jazz, *all that shit* – he would have taken it. Because he really did dream of fame. And money and women.

And then Moreukhov took fright. The system was breathing down his neck, its foul breath a sated belch that stank of free nosh at private showings, the system tickled his throat with the fizzy kisses of Italian champagne and laughed in English, flashing its even, white, non-Russian teeth.

Sonya Spielman, Moreukhov's love of the time, was cruising through her final summer in Moscow before departing for her "historical homeland" in Israel – that is, they were both cruising through that summer together, and the two of them quickly realised what to do. Fail to show up on time for an exhibition once or twice. Get drunk and disorderly at a private showing. Eventually inform everyone that he was working on a new long-term project: "I'm an ordinary kid from the outskirts of Moscow".

The project had certainly turned out long-term all right. You could even say it had been successful.

More than successful.

As Malcolm McLaren said, failure is the best success.

Malcolm McLaren, the guru of punk, the creator of the Sex Pistols.

God save the queen!

Save the queen – and rescue your prodigal son in the filthy Moscow snow, caught in the headlights of an approaching patrol car.

Two ugly bruisers. In warm uniforms.

"Let's see your ID."

I thrust a trembling hand into my inside pocket. There, you bastards, a Moscow passport. I'm not just registered, I'm domiciled. Swallow that!

They leaf through it, check the photo against my face. Sure, I still had teeth then, so what. Teeth are like that – here today, gone tomorrow. Natural loss, shrinkage and wastage.

In the ragged tatters of light – a sign with a street name. Yes, I've really wandered a long way. Where is that – Mansurov Lane? Right in the centre, the golden mile.

Normal people don't live in places like that.

At least now I know which direction to walk in.

"Let's take a ride to the station."

Right, here we go. They'll give me a battering, take my money – ha, ha, no they won't, because I haven't got any! Well all right, they'll give me a battering, just for the fun of it, like Mr. Blonde in *Reservoir Dogs* – *because I like it!* And then Dimon, and Tiger Darkovich, the drip, coming down, sobriety.

Oh no.

"Guys," I mumble thickly, "why take me in to the station? I'll walk home, it's not far from here."

Not far! Ha, ha! I hope that now I know where I am, my "not far" sounds convincing.

"Come on, come on ..." – and they grab my elbows.

All in a split-second bright stroboscope flash: a swift right jab, grab the truncheon, smack the second one between the eyes. And run for it.

Oh, sure. Nineteen-seventies movies, the video parlours of my childhood, my forgotten home.

I don't know how do that.

"Come on, come on."

"Guys," I say, "listen. I'm drunk, that's true. But there's a reason for that. My father died. The funeral was yesterday. My father, you understand?"

"Aha," they say, "of course. Everybody's father's died, sure thing."

"No, listen, for real. I used to live with my mother, she said my father had left us. And she said he was just uncle Sasha ... well, he used to call round sometimes, and I went to see him too, he was a geologist, interesting to be with. I only guessed later, when I saw the photo, him in the maternity home with my mom. And me there in a bundle with a ribbon tied in a bow. You understand? Not my uncle at all, my father. He hid it for some reason, probably

because of his wife. Although he divorced her anyway, would you believe it! But he really loved my mom a lot, I always felt that. Children feel that sort of thing, don't they? And now he's dead, you understand? He's dead, and they've buried him already. Yesterday. And they didn't even invite me to the wake, as if I wasn't his son. How did things turn out this way, eh?"

While I've talking, they drag me towards the car, but the one on the left suddenly stops and says to the other one: Hang on, Kolya! – and we freeze like that in the middle of a snowdrift: two cops and me, crucified between them.

And at that moment time seems to stand still, I don't feel the cold, only the taste of my own words on my lips: *how did things turn out this way, eh?* My mom who didn't say anything, the uncle Sasha I loved, the "dad" Vasya I didn't know – how did things turn out this way?

My brother Nikita's probably already back at home with his wife, lying in the conjugal bed, holding his Masha's hand and he's thinking: How did things turn out this way? Dad, mom, uncle Sasha and that woman, what was her name – Lyolya? The one he saw today for the first time today. What happened to them then, thirty years ago?

## 7. *1975. Glittering gulfs*

Sveta sits by the dark window, swallowing her tears. A circle of yellow light from a streetlamp, solitary figures walking by. All those times she waited for Vasya to appear – and now she'll never wait again. Even if he stays after all, she won't do it. How can he stay? He doesn't love her any more. He loves someone else. Someone young and beautiful. They say she writes poetry. They say she has nomenklatura parents in Leningrad

Sveta swallows her tears. It's all in the past now – the translucent pages of samizdat, the conversations about the future of Russia, the smell of children's diapers, the basin of boiling water on the stove, the nappies on the washing line in the kitchen, little Nikita calling out in the night, it's all in the past. It's not possible to live with a man who doesn't love you any more. Better to be alone.

But Sveta isn't alone. She has a son, little Nikita. And now she walks over to the little bed, adjusts the blanket and ...

No, not like that, it's all wrong. How do I know what she was thinking, how everything was that year when I turned seven? Let's try again, without the false psychologism, without the melodrama, without names, in the cold, logical style of the 1970s.

Let's start, say, like this: she too had a family ...

She too had a family. With a Husband. The Husband was a champion of truth and justice. In the locked drawer of his writing desk, the Husband kept sheets of paper on which the truth was typed. Every evening in the kitchen the Husband denounced the local order of things at the top of his voice, after covering the phone with a pillow. We live in a country of lies, the Husband said, our entire life is permeated with lies. For instance, today in the Institute the Boss said this about a Colleague of mine: "He's such a talentless mediocrity, we have to give him a bonus". And he signed for it. And no one objected. Because we live in a country where very few people dare to speak the truth out loud. And the Husband pressed the pillow down more tightly over the phone, worried about the Secret Police.

She felt strange listening to him. Her Father and Mother had fled from collectivisation when they were still children, wandered around the country for many years, managed to obtain forged documents by hook or by crook and had children at the age of thirty-something – almost in their old age by village standards. And meanwhile they wrote in all the

questionnaires that they came from a family of poor peasants. They joined the Party. They spoke at meetings. They almost learned to believe in what they themselves said. They lived their whole lives in a lie. And they didn't even speak the truth at night, into the pillow. Because all the pillows her Mother and Father trusted had been left behind in their parents' dekulakised houses and life had taught them not to trust anyone they hadn't known since they were children.

Lies were all that was left to them.

If my Mother and Father were to follow my Husband's advice, she thought, they should have gone to the NKVD ages ago and written a report exposing themselves.

But she never said that to the Husband, because she loved him. And he enjoyed denouncing the TV news in the evening so much that she couldn't upset him. And what's more, rumours were doing the rounds in progressive circles that any moment now they would allow people to denounce lies openly, that is, without putting a pillow over the phone. When she told her Father about that, he said it was a sure sign that now they would put people away if they were found with a telephone and a pillow in the same room. When he heard that, the Husband laughed a lot and said that his father-in-law was a pessimist and a paranoiac, a chronic case. He forgot what colossal changes had taken place in the country over the last twenty years, and that was why he was always expecting the worst. On the contrary, replied the Father, I do remember what colossal changes have taken place in this country, and that's why I always expect the worst. That makes sense, said the Husband, if not for the Thaw, the worst would have happened long ago, and there'd be nothing more to expect. The worst happened a long time ago said the Father, but you didn't notice.

Her Father was right, as always: the worst had happened a long time ago, but she hadn't noticed it. The Husband was away at work from morning till night for days on end, he told her he was writing his dissertation, he even went to the Institute on Sunday sometimes. We see so little of each other, she said, and he replied: that's because I love you and our Son and I want to earn a bit more money so that you can have a decent life.

One evening, after putting her Son down to sleep, she sat at the window, waiting for her Husband to appear under the streetlamp lighting up the road from the metro station to their apartment block. We hardly ever see each other because he loves me so much, she explained to herself – and suddenly realised that she had come across that logic somewhere before. The people are growing more prosperous, that's why there's less and less food in the shops. He's such a talentless mediocrity, we have to give him a bonus.

Then she started finding long, blonde woman's hairs in her husband's things. And recognising the scent of someone else's perfume. Then she phoned the wife of the Friend with whom her Husband worked in the evenings and found out that the Friend went back to his family every evening at seven o'clock.

You told me you loved me, what is all this? – she asked.

I told you the truth, replied the Husband, I really do love you.

She looked at him and felt her absolute powerlessness against the world she had been given to live in. Her Father and Mother had lived their lives in a lie, but they had never lied to each other, because they were people of another world, the old world. Where black was black and white was white. Where if a man loved a woman, he wanted to be with her.

She herself and her Husband had been born in a different world. And it wasn't just a matter of the Secret Police. The Secret Police was nothing, she thought. Her Mother and father had pulled the wool over their eyes all their lives. For people of our generation, our worst enemies are ourselves. Ourselves and our nearest and dearest.

Let's get divorced, she said. I trusted you and you took advantage of me.

No, replied the Husband, it was you who took advantage of me. I trusted you, I didn't hide from you, and you spied on me.

I'd rather be on my own, she said. It's not easier, but it's more honest.

But you love me too, don't you? – said the Husband.

No, she said, shaking her head, I don't love you anymore.

So much the better, he replied. If you don't love me any more, there's nothing to stop us living under the same roof. And anyway, I've already left that woman. And I've decided not to complete my dissertation.

That makes no difference, she said. Now I'll never trust you again. I'll never feel at ease with you. It's as if the pillow I use to cover the phone has suddenly turned out to be a super-sensitive microphone. The best thing to do with a pillow like that is throw it out – and in any case, there's no way I can sleep in the same bed with it.

Let's stay together, if only for our Son's sake, said the Husband.

All right, she said, because she had suddenly realised how difficult it would be to arrange a swap for their two-room flat.

The Son grew up and when the right time came, he read the pages of typed text hidden in his father's desk, when the right time came, he left his parents' home and got married. Nikita respected his father and loved his mother, but somehow, when he tried to explain to himself why his parents didn't get divorced in 1975, he always came up with the phony paradoxes and absurd syllogisms of that time. If they promise to ease up, it means they're going to put everybody away. The more prosperous people are, the fewer goods there are in the shops. I love you so much that we almost never see each other. It was you who took advantage of me – I trusted you and you spied on me. If you don't love me anymore, there's nothing to stop us living under the same roof. Let's stay together, if only for our son's sake.

Nikita and Masha didn't have any children.

### ***8. There won't be any Thursday***

In the twilight of the winter morning, Nikita lay beside Masha for a long time, trying to get back to sleep. Then he got up and went to the kitchen to make breakfast.

Masha likes lying in in the morning. Masha likes having breakfast together. Nikita has to be in the office by ten. Eleven at the very latest. If he arrives any later, everything goes ass over tip, he can write the day off, it's down the tubes. That's how he explains things to Masha.

They eat breakfast together. She's wearing the nightshirt that Nikita gave her two years ago. Now it hangs loose on her shoulders, like on a clothes hanger. He's naked to the waist, in just his jeans,

"Come back as soon as you can," says Masha, "I miss you when you're gone."

Nikita nods and looks at the clock. Nine oh five.

"I think I've put on weight," says Masha. "I must weigh myself."

All women want to lose weight. Masha dreams of putting some on. She thinks her stomach is too flat and she has almost no breasts.

Dasha has big breasts and full hips. So of course she wants to lose weight.

Nikita hands his wife another slice of toast across the table, Masha put cheese on it and takes a gulp of coffee. Nine fourteen. If I take the car, I won't get there in time, thinks Nikita. What kind of city is this, if it's quicker by metro than by car? Maybe I should call and say I'm running late? No, I'll take the metro, it's quicker.

"You're not listening to me at all," Masha repeats.

Nine twenty-three.

“I’m off,” says Nikita.

Quickly pull on a shirt, sweater, winter coat. Damn, I hate wearing a coat in the metro. I can’t go in my anorak though – I’ve got a meeting this evening. Jeans with a sweater, that’s democratic. The people who matter can see the jeans and the sweater are expensive, not from some wholesale market. But an anorak is always the dregs, no matter what it’s like.

Nine twenty-eight.

“You’re not listening to me at all,” Masha repeats

Nikita looks at his wife as if he’s seeing her for the first time that morning.

“I’m late,” he says. “Sorry.”

He kisses her on the cheek and walks out.

On the way to the metro he dials Dasha’s number.

“Sorry, I’m delayed. Moscow’s one big traffic jam, take a look at the snow.”

He can’t say that he spent too long having breakfast with his wife. And it’s best not to mention the metro either – he’s a rich sugar daddy, he has to ride in a car.

Nikita doesn’t like riding in a car. But every day he tells himself: I’ll leave a bit earlier, I won’t take the metro. It’s disgusting in there, the smell’s appalling, I get back home all sweaty. Sure, there are traffic jams, it takes longer, but I know that’s not the point. Take Kostya, he’s been telling me for ages: if you don’t like driving a car, hire a driver, it’s not all that expensive, and you won’t get strung out all the time over parking. You earn plenty of money, what’s the problem?

No, thinks Nikita, somehow I don’t see myself in a car with a chauffeur. Chauffeur-driven cars are for serious men, the kind that glossy magazines do photo-sessions on, the kind that business journals do interviews with. A chauffeur-driven car suits Kostya. Kostya’s a Genuine Successful Man, when he was little his mom probably didn’t tell him over and over: *money is the root of all evil, we’re fine as we are, we don’t need any more.*

And that’s why I take the metro: to feel like a live human being, not some glossy character in a business supplement.

Dasha lives with her parents at the other side of the city. Nikita phoned again from the metro and checked the address for some reason.

He feels a bit nervous. Casual sex in a hotel is no big deal, but dragging himself over to the back of beyond, lying to Masha, lying to the guys at work, playing hooky for half the working day – that’s a completely different matter.

That’s a fine phrase, “playing hooky”, Nikita chuckles to himself, who’s going to come after me? I’m the big boss now, I’m in charge, I own the business!

But even so, Nikita feels nervous. Why had Dasha called him two days ago? She asked how the funeral had gone – well, yes he had told her his uncle had died, so what? The configuration of their relationship didn’t allow for her to go asking questions like that. Nikita had replied: *fine*. What should he have said?

Dasha had asked:

“What are you doing the day after tomorrow?”

Nikita had hesitated, he was on the point of muttering “I’m working, what else?” – but instead of that he said:

“I’m not doing anything in particular. I’m entirely free for the first half of the day.”

He didn’t know why he said that. He should have given her the cool brush off, then he wouldn’t have had to drag himself over to the back of beyond, he wouldn’t have had to plod through the wet February snow, wandering between the identical sixteen-story houses, feeling too awkward to ask passers-by the way to House 104, Block 3.

Dasha opens the door. Dasha's wearing an oriental robe, loosely closed, the matt whiteness of her body runs down from her neck almost all the way to the casually tied broad belt.

Nikita takes off his coat. Dasha hands him a hanger. She's right up close, just like ten days ago in the hallway of the office.

The hanger falls to the floor with a dull thud, the coat slips out of Nikita's fingers.

The second coffee of the morning. In Dasha's little kitchen or, rather, in Dasha's parents' kitchen. Five years ago Nikita had a kitchen pretty much the same. Now he's changed the fridge and bought a new microwave, and after that Masha put up new wallpaper – a different business altogether.

A joss stick smouldering. A pile of well-thumbed paperbacks standing on the edge of the table. Yoga, horoscopes, secrets of the mandala, that writer ... what's his name ... Paulo Coelho.

"You'd definitely like him," says Dasha, "he's my favourite writer! Would you like to take it to read?"

She sits there, completely naked, with drops of sweat glistening on her breasts. Nikita is naked to the waist, in just his jeans. The clock says eleven twenty-five.

"Why do you shave your head?" Nikita asks.

"To express my support for the National Bolshevik Party," Dasha replies, and Nikita nods, looking at her breasts. They tremble slightly in time to her words.

The breath of magic, aha. The girl breathing right beside his ear. A low moan, and then the same thing again: her eyes rolled up and back, her body tensed, shudders ran this way and that way, moisture sprang out of her pores and then, like the last time, that hollow booming sound filled the bedroom, the flat, the building and Nikita didn't even have time to think: won't that set Dasha's neighbours laughing! Because this time they came at the same time, clutching each other tightly, and when Nikita surfaced, he heard Dasha cry out: *resending*.

Well yes, she had explained that: it happened to her every time. Last time it was *love*, and this time it was *resending*.

Resending. Nikita goes out into the hallway, picks up his coat and pulls his mobile phone out of the pocket. Just as he thought, three unanswered calls, all from Masha. And a text: "Call me, I'm worried".

The Nokia bursts into a loud trill in his hands.

Masha.

"I'm sorry, I'm in a meeting, says Nikita. "I'll call you back later."

Dasha giggles quietly in the kitchen

Liittle bitch, Nikita thinks with sudden fury. Why did I come to see her?

Twelve thirty-nine.

"I'm off," says Nikita.

"Of course," replies Dasha, "you've got work to do."

Dasha has pulled on a t-shirt – and that makes her breast look even larger somehow.

Dasha smiles, and silver flashes momentarily between her teeth.

One fifteen, the office. *Hi. Hi. How's it going? Terrible traffic jams, the snow's really bad.* They're all on casual terms with each other and with him, young, not much older than Dasha. Nikita likes them: Natasha, Victor, Zoya, *his team*. They trust him, maybe even like him. Or respect him, or simply tolerate him – who can tell? A different generation, and his subordinates too. Employees

Nikita finds his employees through the internet – at aquarium forums as a rule. There are fifteen of them now, including the salesgirl Zoya and the managers, Victor and Natasha. Mostly, of course, they're young aquarium enthusiasts earning a bit of extra cash. For five hundred a month they go round the clients, clean the aquariums, wash the decorations on the bottom, check the condition of the fish and change the batteries in the automatic feeders.

One fifty-five. A snap briefing. A major corporate client has asked for a copy of their charter. Why do they need a copy of the charter when they're only buying two aquariums, even if they are the most *exclusive* and most expensive? Generally speaking, we don't do that, but for you ... I'll send a courier, he'll get everything to you today.

Everything's just perfect, Nikita tells himself, the business is going well. I have an excellent team. I'm going strong. The day has turned out well.

He's not angry anymore. He thinks: It's ages since I had a proper fuck! I'd forgotten just how great it is!

At that very moment – a call from Dasha. As if she has read his thoughts. He shouldn't answer it of course – but he can't stop himself.

"Hi," – a flat, hasty voice – "there's something important I have to tell you."

Not now, thinks Nikita. Don't say anything.

"I'll call you back," he replies. "I'm in a meeting."

Ah yes, he promised to call Masha back. He dials the number:

"Is it something urgent?"

"No, I just wanted to tell you I love you."

Wonderful.

"I love you too, my little girl."

Three unanswered calls to tell me that she loves me. A strange business.

He decided not to call Dasha back – he was pushed for time as it was, not a free moment. Early morning sex would be the kiss of death any business.

Maybe he should just let the business go hang?

Nikita smiles.

I'm obviously not going to get any lunch. It's a good thing I bought myself a kebab for forty roubles when I came out of the metro, and ate it straight from the bag, like a street bum. Actually, every time I buy a kebab near the office, I think: these people selling them, they've started to recognise me already, they nod and say hello. They probably think: there goes a poor office rat, *office plankton, martyred by the boss*. But I'm my own boss, I've martyred myself. I'm totally knackered, and where am I going to get any strength from? A middle-aged man who's not very healthy, fucked over by life. The other day I was walking through an underpass and I suddenly felt so weary and depressed, I could have sat down right there, leaned back against the tiled wall and started begging. Kind people, give me just a little bit of strength. And what if I did sit down and the militia picked me up and found twenty-two thousand American dollars in my bag – what would I have told them? Forgive, me good people for taking the fees for two contracts in cash? Yes, we would have had an interesting talk, all about my bookless accounting.

But that was two weeks ago, Uncle Sasha was still alive. And there was no sign of any Dasha yet either.

Now everything will probably be different, thinks Nikita. Never mind that I won't get any lunch. I'll have a glam dinner instead.

*Glam* – that's Dasha's word. As far as I can tell it means "sumptuous". Spectacular, as we would have said fifteen years ago.

So, a glam supper. Okay, I'll have to stop a car – going to the "Pushkin" by metro isn't really the done thing.



Nikita fastens his seatbelt – an old habit, from the time when he used to moonlight as a private taxi-driver. The driver’s electronic watch says six fifty two.

Dasha’s flat voice.

“Hi. You promised to call me back.”

“I was busy.”

His voice is deliberately cold, almost angry. He has to show this little kid that he’s a busy man, she can’t keep calling him all the time. He’s got things to deal with, a business. A wife, if it comes to that.

And now he’s had fifteen missed calls in one day – all from her.

“It’s very important,” says Dasha. “Come round right now.”

“I can’t, I’ve got a meeting.”

Throw in a bit of irritation, don’t say anything to give myself away, don’t let her feel my excitement rising with every word she speaks.

“It’s very important, I tell you.”

Maybe I should postpone the meeting?

No, I’ve got to pull myself together. It’s nothing but casual sex, not even an affair.

What idea has she got into her head?

“Dasha, let me explain. If I say I’m busy ...”

“I’m so glad you called back. Will you come?”

“Dasha, I told you: no.”

“I just don’t want to do this on the phone.”

*I don’t want to do it on the phone either, I want to do it for real, with you, again and again, over and over* – he takes a deep breath, after all he’s a mature grown man, and that’s what he should be loved for. He says coolly:

“Why don’t I come over on Thursday? You can tell me then.”

Suddenly a shrill cry, almost a shriek:

“Thursday will be too late! Come over, please. Please!”

A hysterical girl.

“Dasha, I’ve got a meeting, then I’m going home. What’s happened?”

Maybe that’s what’s happened? Maybe she just wants him the way he wants her?

No, that doesn’t happen. Why would a beautiful young girl want a balding forty-year-old man?

Well, it stands to reason, for lots of things. Money, presents, a rented flat. It’s probably not much fun living with her parents, out at the back of beyond, almost as far out as the orbital highway.

“Come over, please. Please, I beg you, it really is important.”

“Tell me on the phone.”

“You won’t believe me.”

The swift, silvery flash of an insidious thought: *surely she’s not pregnant?* But no, she took the condom out herself. She took it out? So perhaps ...

“I’ll believe you. Well, tell me.”

Dasha laughs – an unfamiliar, nervous laugh.

“Everything will end tonight.”

“How do you mean?” asks Nikita and sees Vladimir. He’s waving to Nikita as he walks down the stairs.

“Everything will end, absolutely everything. Not resending, but it’s ending. The end of the world, do you understand?”

“Uhu, I understand,” he says, marvelling at the absurdity of the scene: the cloakroom of the Pushkin restaurant, his partner hurrying over to greet him, and a crazy little chit of a girl playing at Maria Devi Christos, or whatever her name is.

Serve me right for cradle-snatching.

“No, really, I know we have to see each other, I’m afraid, you must understand, I don’t want to be alone, I don’t want to be with anyone else. Come over, don’t bring anything, you know tomorrow there won’t be anything anymore, I’m afraid, I’m afraid, I beg you, please, please, trust me, I know, I’ve never done this before, I’m not lying, I know, not on Thursday, there won’t be any Thursday, or any Wednesday either ...”

She gabbles rapidly, sobbing and choking. Is she really crying?

A hysterical girl. An infantile, hysterical little fool. Or even worse – a drug addict. Prophecies, incense, horoscopes, yoga and that ... what’s it called? ... holotropic breathing.

Nothing good can be expected from a girl whose favourite author is Paulo Coelho.

“I’ll call you back,” he says and holds his hand out to Vladimir.

They discuss the new project, a chain of restaurants around Moscow. The aquariums, Nikita impresses on him, must be focus of the composition, the assemblage point, as it were.

“Ethnic style,” he says, “each restaurant has its own. Instead of building huge stage sets, put an aquarium beside each table, with ruined temples and cities on the bottom. I can do precise copies of real ruins, nobody else has that. Plus texts under the glass on the table, historical information, so there’s something to read while they wait for their order. I’ll do the aquariums for cost. To be quite honest, it’s the maintenance that really interests me.

Yes, yes, at cost. But who knows what the cost price is, apart from Nikita himself?

Vladimir listens properly. He listens the right way. This is perhaps the first right moment in the entire day. Probably because Nikita has switched off the ringtone in his mobile.

Eight fifty-five. Another 54 unanswered calls. The first twenty-eight from Dasha. As well as the last twenty-four. Two calls from Masha.

Nikita hasn’t thought about Masha the whole day long, apart from their conversation in the afternoon. It can’t be helped: seven years of marriage.

“Hello, my darling,” he says. “I’m on my way.”

“I’m round at Olya’s place. Can you pick me up?”

Olya lives close to the office, on the way home Nikita sometimes calls round there for Masha.

He likes it when Masha goes to visit someone. Or round the shops. Or to a movie. Whenever she goes out at all. Because it sometimes seems to Nikita that the door closes behind him and Masha freezes, as if her battery has been disconnected. She freezes in the deep antique armchair, not even switching the light on in the evening, curled up into a tight ball, gazing into darkness.

Disturbing. A very depressing picture.

“I’m in the Pushkin,” says Nikita. “Better take a taxi.”

“Okay. Then I’ll stay for a little longer.”

Maybe he could go round to Dasha’s place? Better not though. He has to keep his distance. Has to show her that he’s a grown man, he has his own life, a business, a family. Fifty calls, Enough to drive a man crazy!

The taste of cheap silver in his mouth, damp shoulders slithering under his fingers. An ring in her left eyebrow, a feeble moan, a powerful shudder, a roar that comes bursting out ...

*I don’t want to be alone, I don’t want to be with anyone else, come round.*

I probably don’t want to be with anyone else either.

But I won’t go. Not today and not on Thursday. She said herself that there won’t be any Thursday.

So there won't be. It's time to put an end to this business.

Twelve forty-three a.m. Masha comes out of the bathroom, Nikita's in bed, looking through a coffee-table book with views of India.

"How did the day go?" she asks.

"I'm burnt out," Nikita replies, "totally drained."

They go to sleep. Just before he falls asleep Nikita remembers Dasha that morning, not fully awake yet, smelling of sleep and bed. One last time will be all right after all. To round things off, before it starts dragging on. She said Thursday, didn't she?

It was quite sweet, actually. I don't want to be with anyone else, come, come.

The end of the world, indeed.

As he falls asleep, Nikita reaches out and squeezes Masha's open hand.

If everything really is going to end tonight, let Masha know that he's there with her.

### ***9. An insecure refuge***

Nikita falls asleep, holding my hand.

He has a beautiful hand. Strong fingers, smooth oval nails, prominent tendons. Little light hairs, almost invisible, but coarse to the touch.

He sleeps, holding me by the hand, but I just can't get to sleep.

I'm afraid to fall asleep. It's like walking into cold water, slowly immersing myself in it, and diving head first without knowing what I'll see on the bottom.

That summer in the Crimea, I was the only one diving. Nikita watched from the beach. He only admitted later that he was afraid to swim.

I wasn't afraid of anything. I was twenty-nine years old. I'd never been as beautiful before as I was that summer.

And I never will be again.

Time has wrung me out, like washed laundry, flung me over the drying stand like a crumpled rag. I used to think: *time spares no one*, but now I know that's not true.

Time changes everyone, but men's receding hairlines and leisurely gait and substantial figures suit them. At least they suit Nikita. And to be honest, I haven't taken any interest in any other men for a long time.

His hands hardly change at all. Except for seven years ago, when a wedding ring appeared alongside his grandfather's old ring that Nikita never takes off.

My skin is turning dull and drying up, gradually being covered by the fine lines of a net in which the years of my life flounder like trapped fish. My hair is falling out and in the morning I look at the pillow, fighting the desire to count the hairs.

One day I couldn't resist it. Two hundred and fifty-three hairs – that's almost a handful.

I'm afraid of going bald. I'm afraid that in a few years my breasts will disappear, my stomach will glue itself to my backbones, my eyes will collapse into their sockets. Sometimes it feels like I'm a living corpse.

Nine years ago I wasn't afraid of anything. Now I'm too afraid to go to sleep.

But Nikita has learned to go scuba-diving. I don't think there's anything he's afraid of now. *Let's do a swap*, as we used to say in our nursery school.

I didn't want to go to nursery school. I thought that one day mom wouldn't come to collect me and leave me there forever. It was only later I realised where that fear came from – it was my infant days in the orphanage, the first months of my life.

Mom told me afterwards. *You see, sometimes by mistake children aren't born to their own parents. And the people who have them put them in a special place where the real parents find them, Like we found you.*

I was six years old, I didn't know where children came from. I probably thought about a stork, who could get his bundles mixed up, or a shop, where you could stand in a long to buy a child – and they could sell you the wrong one by mistake.

When I was ten, my dad explained: *the ancient Hindus believed in the rebirth of the soul. I believe you are the child that your mom wasn't able to have.*

I knew they took children out of their mom's stomach, but I didn't really understand how anyone could not be able to have a child.

I didn't believe it the stork any longer, or in the shop either, but I believed in the rebirth of souls straightaway. And I still believe in it now. I believe that one and the same soul travels/migrates from one body to another, paying no attention to historical time, sometimes being born many times over in the same century and miraculously avoiding meeting itself in a previous (subsequent?) guise.

I believe that. Or rather, I know it. And that's why I lie here without sleeping, clutching Nikita's hand. I'm afraid to go to sleep.

In the semitransparent, viscid space between waking and sleeping my former lives come back to me, insinuate themselves into me like tentacles, filling me right up to the brim.

Men, women, children.

There's no place left inside for me.

I huddle up into a tight ball, I try to shove the past out of myself – it was mine, it wasn't mine, maybe it never was at all.

It's not surprising that I'm losing weight: I think that when I dry up completely, the ghosts will probably go off to look for another receptacle.

But perhaps I'll get used to them before then. After all, they are my former lives. I can already recognise them: an old woman turning this way and that in front of the mirror, a man gazing at a river, a young women putting her arms round her pregnant stomach, a man setting a pistol to his temple, a soldier pulling out the pin of a grenade, a naked man cooking breakfast, a little girl looking at the Black Sea, a man going down on his knees in front of his male lover.

They shout, laugh, weep, moan, sigh ... Sometimes I want to fling myself open to welcome them, say to them: come in, here I am, your insecure refuge, your future, reincarnation, rebirth. Don't cry, everything has turned out well after all, look at me, I'm much happier than you: everything in my life is wonderful, a loving husband, a home, a car, lots of things, a full cup. I haven't been beaten at interrogations, my friends haven't been killed, my flesh hasn't been eroded by radiation, I haven't waited to be arrested. I don't think about money, I don't think about survival, I don't think about where I'm going to sleep tomorrow and what I'm going to eat. I can't even remember the last time I was hungry

But the incorporeal phantoms drift by in front of me, quivering in the currents of sleep, swirling in the shadowy corners of the huge flat. They have already lived their lives. They have already run out of time, fallen short, failed to drain the bitter water of earthly existence or finish up the wormwood bread of banishment to the afterlife. They are always hungry.

They eat me from the inside. My life is food for those whom I used to be. They gnaw into my flesh – and every month the blood pours out, testifying that the feast continues, the phantoms have not sated their hunger, they are still as unhappy as ever.

Every month according to the phases of the moon, plus or minus one day, I receive the same letter.

It says: *you won't have a child this time either.*

## *10. Reincarnation. Nina*

As we fall asleep, we hold each other by the hand. Kolya, my Kolya-Nikolai. I want to sleep with my face turned towards you, but its getting harder. We can probably say there are three of us sleeping together, right? Only two more months to go – and our bunny will be born. I wonder if it will be a boy or a girl. The old women in the village could always guess – from the walk, the shape of the stomach and other signs.

It's almost five years now, and I still can't get used to the idea that my Beryozovki is gone. Although old Georgich's grandnephew said when he wrote last month that they were intending to build a Soviet farm on the site of the village. I don't really know ... I suppose that's good. There'll be cows lowing again, and chickens running about, as if there never was any war. But when you think – what happened was so dreadful, how can people live there?

I told Kolya, and he said: so what, we live in the flat of a soldier who was killed – not bothered, are you? That's the way it should be, he says. New soldiers take the place of those who are dead.

Only there weren't any soldiers in our Beryozovki. Lushka the fool hid two partisans – and that was all.

Nina looks at the street – there are wooden houses out there, an invalid on a bench, talking to two women. She can hear the sound of a gramophone from a neighbour's window.

This is Moscow, capital of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the first workers' and peasants' state in the world. An out-of-the-way spot in the outskirts, Sokolniki.

Nina strokes her round belly, tries to persuade the little boy or girl to be patient for a little longer, not to kick out, to lie quietly. The doctor said she could already talk to him. Or her?

Nina's waiting for her husband. She stays at home for days at a time, afraid to go out. Even in the daytime they can attack you in the street, simply strip you naked. They can stick a knife in you, or shoot you. There are so many thieves about.

Kolya says it all started after the war. Moscow was different before. But now people have been taught to kill, they just won't stop.

Nina doesn't know how to kill. She only knows how not to die, how to hide.

She hid in the forest for two months, feeding herself on berries, sometimes she dug up potatoes in the burned vegetable plots of Beryozovki. At the sound of a motor, she dropped to the ground and froze.

Before then Nina loved to go walking in the forest. Her mom laughed and called her "my little forest girl".

Her mom was burnt up with all the rest of the village. Nina was left alive – that morning she'd gone mushroom-picking, and when the punitive detachment arrived, she buried herself in the forest and didn't come out until it was all over.

Until everyone was dead.

Kolya says he wouldn't have lasted a single day in the forest. I'm afraid of wolves, he says. He's probably laughing at her – he's not afraid of anything.

Nina's afraid for him.

Afraid they'll stab Kolya to take his pistol.

She's afraid Kolya will stop someone to check his documents – and he'll start shooting.

Afraid Kolya will go to capture a thieves' den – and he'll get killed in the shootout.

Afraid that Kolya will turn into an entrance and there'll be an ambush inside.

Nina says: take care of yourself, for God's sake. At least wait until the child's born!

But Kolya replies: I took an oath. If I don't stop them, they'll carry on killing. Not long since they butchered an entire family in Maryina Roshcha. Even a little baby. They got away with twenty-five thousand roubles.

Huge money. Kolya's pay was only 550 a month. How long did you have to work for thousands like that?

"How old was the child?" Nina asks.

"Still in the cradle, tiny," Kolya answers. "They killed it so it wouldn't yell."

Why is he telling her this? Nina wants to hear once again about how Kolya's going to take leave after the birth and not go to work every day. No, Kolya doesn't want to talk about leave, he tells Nina: Wait until we catch all of them – then we'll start living a good life, a happy life!

Nina doesn't believe it. She remembers how they used to say: Once we drive out the Fritzes, we'll live a good life, a happy life! Where's that happiness now? She sees her husband off to work every day as if he's leaving for the front line!

But then, she only has herself to blame: she knew who she married. From the very first minute. But it didn't matter, Kolya was so handsome in his new uniform, blue, with red piping. A peaked cap with a light-blue band. Boots. When she saw him at the dance, she fell in love at once. Kolya admitted to her later: the uniform was the reason he went into the militia, they gave it for free, and he didn't have anything to wear. There was a star on the cap too, with a soldier holding his rifle at the ready in the middle of it. Nina liked it a lot too.

Nina had only just arrived then, she was afraid of Moscow – it was terrifying! She edged her way round the streets, creeping along, but locals swaggered past her, spitting at their feet, not afraid of anything. She could spot them straightaway in the street: big eight-sided cap, box-calf boots, white muffler.

Kolya told her later: they're cronies. Thieves, that is.

"Why do they walk round the streets like that, and no one arrests them?" asked Nina.

"Well, we can't arrest a man for an eight-sided cap," Kolya laughed. "But don't you worry, they won't be walking around for much longer. It just a pity they've done away with the squad. Well, never mind, when we get the chance, we'll sort that out for ourselves ..." – and he winked. The squad meant execution by firing squad. The supreme measure it had been abolished a year earlier. Kolya says: there's no one to fell the timber in Siberia.

Nina thinks: The child will be born – and then how it's going to live? At least the war's over. But all the same, will it live in the city all its life? No forest, no real river. Of course, they could/ go to the Central Park of Culture and Leisure, people dived off the jetty there and swam – but Nina felt awkward somehow. She swam like a village girl, but she supposed in Moscow they probably had some kind of style.

Nina stays at home, waiting for her husband. She sits there, fretting, worrying, anxious and afraid. She's not really one for reading, they don't have a gramophone or even a radio speaker, it's an old building. I don't if televisions even existed then or not, but Nina and Kolya definitely didn't have one.

And I sit here at home too, I also wait for Nikita, I also about him too – although what is there for me to worry about? Nikita's business isn't violent, he drives carefully. But I worry just the same.

I'd like to say: *I don't know how worried I would be in Nina's place* – but I can't, she is me, and that means that I used to sit there, waiting for my husband to come back from work, feeling bored, missing him, gazing out the window, stroking my pregnant belly, afraid to go outside.

How strange to feel other people's lives inside myself! With knowledge that I don't want, fragments of other people's thoughts, suddenly flaring up in my memory. Which

berries are edible. Where's the best place to collect mushrooms. How to climb a tree and perch in it so as not to tumble out during the night.

And sometimes some tune or other will latch onto me and jingle away in my head hour after hour. I can even make out the words:

My father, the von Baron, fucks his gorgeous cunt,  
But I'm a filthy bastard and I fuck my own aunt  
From the midnight hour till dawn  
Always the same old thing,  
From evening to evening  
And right through to the morn.

My father, the von Baron, fucks all the richest bints,  
But I fuck dames with hunches and bandy legs and squints  
From the midnight hour till dawn  
Always the same old thing  
From evening to evening  
And right through to the morn.

I know the street urchins used to sing that, Nina used to walk through the yard and hear that song. And now it rings out in my head. *From the midnight hour till dawn, always the same old thing* – I don't know if this song amused Nina, frightened her or made her feel annoyed. It makes me feel depressed. *Always the same old thing* – that means that in this life and the ones before it, for entire days and nights, round the clock, I sit in an armchair, on a chair, on a stool – and wait for the one I love to come home. And feel afraid that something will happen to him.

When I'm Nina, I stroke my big, pregnant belly. When I'm Masha, I paint my toenails over and over again, even though I'm not planning to go anywhere. It reassures me.

Kolya comes home and tells Nina that the other day they captured Kazentsov's gang in a shootout right there in a train. They hid in the special children's carriage, the conductor spotted them and rang in to report. They turned out to have been stealing cars. Asking a driver to give them a ride out of town and then killing him. And now they've been killed, two of them at least.

Kolya says there are too many guns in Moscow. Trophy guns, brought back from the war, guns taken from militiamen or stolen from the "Hammer and Sickle" factory, where old junk is taken to be melted down.

So that no one can grab a militiaman's pistol, Kolya explained, it's attached to a special red cord. The cord runs up the flap of his jacket, round his neck and down the other flap. And there's a special eyehole in the handle of the pistol, that's what the cord's fastened to. Kolya explained and even showed me, but I still don't understand; it would be better if they could just take the pistol. This way, if some thief wants a pistol – he kill for it, won't he?

I'm really afraid for Kolya. Since I got pregnant, I'm even more afraid.

But at first I was so glad! I imagined the little child growing there inside me, went to doctor every month – the doctor told me when the little eyes appear, and the little hands. I just feel sorry the child will be born in Moscow, not in the countryside. What kind of life is it here? Why did I come here? Probably I knew I'd meet Kolya. But he's the only good thing there is, here in Moscow.

Thank goodness I didn't enrol in a college. Then I'd have had to study, but maybe when the baby's born, Kolya will come to his senses. And we'll go away together, just get out of here.

I've been living here for almost a year and I still can't understand what draws people here. In the queue for the doctor I met a woman near her time, like me, only older, Martha's her name, she's from the country too, but she's been in Moscow a long time, since before the war. She's kind, she comforts me, says giving birth's nothing terrible, it's living that's terrible, and dying's even more terrible. I told her then, I said, I know, my whole village was killed. And she stroked my hair so gently and said *you poor thing!* – and for a moment I felt as if my mom was with me again. Although, of course, it's not right to say that, I'll never have another mom. I'm a mom now myself. There's only two months to go.

In the queue for the doctor the women told me something terrible: they said you can get rid of the child for money. If you don't want to have it. In Beryozovki, too, they said girls drank all sorts of herbal brew, if they got caught out. I was only little, but I understood what they meant. Well, a brew of herbs – I can understand that. But supposedly here you can find a secret doctor and for fifteen hundred roubles he'll ... well ... he'll do everything.

Fifteen hundred! What sort of money's that! It's frightening to think who could even have that much! Every month I have to figure out how to live on 550. It's hard enough for two. But now there's a child as well to be fed.

Oh, let my little bunny be born soon. If it's a boy, let him be like Kolya. And if it's a girl, let her be like mom. Let her have the same eyebrows, and her ears too.

Let her be like mom. There's not even a photograph left of her, nothing. Everything was burned.

Mom would be happy for me now. Mom was probably happy when she died too. She knew I'd escaped.

Kolya laughs at me, but all the same I know: God does exist somewhere. And my mom's there with him now, on a cloud, she's watching me and she can see: I'm going to have my own little bunny, my own boy or my own girl – to make up for her, for dad, for aunty Katya and uncle Slava, for lame Mitrich and old granny Anfisa. For our whole village.

Be born soon, little bunny. That is, be born on time, but so I don't have to wait too long. I'm a bit afraid of having you, I have to go to the hospital here, I don't know the people there, what if they do something wrong? I'm afraid.

The other day I was walking down the street and I saw a little girl playing hopscotch. I looked at her and I thought: if it's a girl, in ten years' time, she'll be skipping about like that. And I felt so good inside – I can't even say how good.

There she sits day after day, the girl Nina from 1948, getting heavier and heavier, and my heart feels heavier and heavier too. Because *from the midnight hour till dawn, always the same old thing*, it's always the same old story, and I know what's going to happen next.

Two weeks before the birth Nina will put potatoes in their jackets on the stove to boil and realise there isn't any salt.

She'll go round to aunty Vera, her neighbour.

She'll knock, no one will answer, Nina will push the door open and call: Aunty Vera – she'll go in, and someone will hit her with a heavy smoothing iron, they'll aim for her head, but she'll manage to dodge, and then she'll hear a whisper: finish that bitch off! – she'll cover her unborn child with her arms and yell, but not loud enough. Only when the second bandit hits her in the belly will she yell so loud that her scream is heard right through the building, in the yard, even out in the street – and it will hurtle on over the nearby roofs, over Sokolniki park, over the embankments of the river Moscow, over the fairground rides at the Central



Park of Culture and Leisure, over the cobblestones of Red Square, over the pyramid of the Mausoleum, over the red stars of the Kremlin, over the empty foundation pit on the site of the demolished Cathedral, over the wooden houses of post-war Moscow, over the thieves' hangouts and hideouts, over the militia stations, over the prisons and penitentiaries, over the entrance halls of the metro, over the cinemas and houses of culture – over the whole of post-war Moscow, over this miserable victorious city, over the kids with no fathers, the women with no husbands, the men with no arms, with no legs, with no consciences, with no fear, with no families, with no memory, with no love ...

But Nina is still falling to the bloody floor, still screaming, screaming ...

One more blow – and she would have fallen silent forever. The bandits had killed aunty Vera – they could have killed Nina too. Smashed her head in, slit her throat, finished her off with anything that came to hand – but they ran away.

They'll be caught two days later. Perhaps one of them will be shot while being apprehended.

And Kolya ran along the street, clutching the tiny little body against himself, and the umbilical cord dangled like another piece of red piping, and Kolya's lovely uniform was covered in blood. Kolya ran, and swore, and wept, and he was too late.

It was a boy.

Two years later they left Moscow. The Soviet farm built on the site of the burned village of Beryozovki gave them a house: a sound man would always come in useful in the countryside. They lived like that until they died. Kolya trained to be a tractor driver, Nina worked as a milkmaid, and a poultry minder and a saleswoman in the village store. She was even a teacher in the nursery school at one time. But not for long.

They didn't have any children of their own. Kolya died in 1985, Nina a year later.

Sometimes I see her when she's really old already. Her hands are folded on her knees, she's sitting on a stool by the window, some senior schoolgirls are giggling on a bench with the boys. She can hear music from an open car.

Nina has no one to wait for, nothing to be afraid of. Her life is over.

Only it's there in her head, like a worn-out gramophone record, *always the same of thing, from evening to evening and right through to the morn* – like an obsession, an incantation, a promise: everything will be repeated, everything is still to come.