

TheFinal CircleOfParadise

Arkady And Boris Strugatsky

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"Hishnye veshi veka" (in Russian)

"Tidselderns rovgiriga ting" (in Sweden)

("Hischnye Veschi Veka", "Century's Ravenous Pleasures")

There is but one problem --
the only one in the world --
to restore to men a spiritual
content, spiritual concerns....

-- A de St. Exupery

Chapter ONE

The customs inspector had a round smooth face which registered the most benevolent of attitudes. He was respectfully cordial and solicitous.

"Welcome," he murmured. "How do you like our sunshine?" He glanced at the passport in my hand. "Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

I proffered him my passport and stood the suitcase on the white counter. The inspector rapidly leafed through it with his long careful fingers. He was dressed in a white uniform with silver buttons and silver braid on the shoulders. He laid the passport aside and touched the suitcase with the tips of his fingers.

"Curious," he said. "The case has not yet dried. It is difficult to imagine that somewhere the weather can be bad."

"Yes," I said with a sigh, "we are already well into the autumn," and opened the suitcase.

The inspector smiled sympathetically and glanced at it absent-mindedly. "It's impossible amid our sunshine to visualize an autumn. Thank you, that will be quite all right.... Rain, wet roofs, wind...

"And what if I have something hidden under the linen?" I asked -- I don't appreciate conversations about the weather. He laughed heartily.

"Just an empty formality," he said. "Tradition. A conditioned reflex of all customs inspectors, if you will." He handed me a sheet of heavy paper. "And here is another conditioned reflex. Please read it -- it's rather unusual. And sign it if you don't mind."

I read. It was a law concerning immigration, printed in elegant type on heavy paper and in four languages. Immigration was absolutely forbidden. The customs man regarded me steadily.

"Curious, isn't it?" he asked.

"In any case it's intriguing," I replied, drawing my fountain pen. "Where do I sign?"

"Where and how you please," said the customs man. "Just across will do."

I signed under the Russian text over the line "I have been informed on the immigration laws."

"Thank you," said the customs man, filing the paper away in his desk, "Now you know practically all our laws. And during your entire stay -- How long will you be staying with us?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"It's difficult to say in advance. Depends on how the work will go."

"Shall we say a month?"

"That would be about it. Let's say a month."

"And during this whole month," he bent over the passport making some notation, "during this entire month you won't need

any other laws." He handed me my passport. "I shouldn't even have to mention that you can prolong your stay with us to any reasonable extent. But in the meantime, let it be thirty days. If you find it desirable to stay longer, visit the police station on the 16th of May and pay one dollar... You have dollars?"

"Yes."

"That's fine. By the way, it is not at all necessary to have exclusively a dollar. We accept any currency. Rubles, pounds, cruzeiros."

"I don't have cruzeiros," I said. "I have only dollars, rubles, and some English pounds. Will that suit you?"

"Undoubtedly. By the way, so as not to forget, would you please deposit ninety dollars and seventy-two cents."

"With pleasure," I said, "but why?"

"It's customary. To guarantee the minimum needs. We have never had anyone with us who did not have some needs."

I counted out ninety-one dollars, and without sitting down, he proceeded to write out a receipt. His neck grew red from the awkward position. I looked around. The white counter stretched along the entire pavilion. On the other side of the barrier, customs inspectors in white smiled cordially, laughed, explained things in a confidential manner. On this side, brightly clad tourists shuffled impatiently, snapped suitcase locks, and gaped excitedly. While they waited they feverishly thumbed through advertising brochures, loudly devised all kinds

of plans, secretly and openly anticipated happy days ahead, and now thirsted to surmount the white counter as quickly as possible. Sedate London clerks and their athletic-looking brides, pushy Oklahoma farmers in bright shirts hanging outside Bermuda shorts and sandals over bare feet, Turin workers with their well-rouged wives and numerous children, small-time Catholic bosses from Spain, Finnish lumbermen with their pipes considerately banked, Hungarian basketball players, Iranian students, union organizers from Zambia ...

The customs man gave me my receipt and counted out twenty-eight cents change.

"Well -- there is all the formality. I hope I haven't detained you too long. May I wish you a pleasant stay!"

"Thank you," I said and took my suitcase.

He regarded me with his head slightly bent sideways, smiling out of his bland, smooth face.

"Through this turnstile, please. Au revoir. May I once more wish you the best."

I went out on the plaza following an Italian pair with four kids and two robot redcaps.

The sun stood high over mauve mountains. Everything in the plaza was bright and shiny and colorful. A bit too bright and colorful, as it usually is in resort towns. Gleaming orange-and-red buses surrounded by tourist crowds, shiny and polished green of the vegetation in the squares with white,

blue, yellow, and gold pavilions, kiosks, and tents. Mirrorlike surfaces, vertical, horizontal, and inclined, which flared with sunbursts. Smooth matte hexagons underfoot and under the wheels -- red, black, and gray, just slightly springy and smothering the sound of footsteps. I put down the suitcase and donned sunglasses.

Out of all the sunny towns it has been my luck to visit, this was without a doubt the sunniest. And that was all wrong. It would have been much easier if the day had been gray, if there had been dirt and mud, if the pavilion had also been gray with concrete walls, and if on that wet concrete was scratched something obscene, tired, and pointless, born of boredom. Then I would probably feel like working at once. I am positive of this because such things are irritating and demand action. It's still hard to get used to the idea that poverty can be wealthy. And so the urge is lacking and there is no desire to begin immediately, but rather to take one of these buses, like the red-and-blue one, and take off to the beach, do a little scuba diving, get a tan, play some ball, or find Peck, stretch out on the floor in some cool room and reminisce on all the good stuff so that he could ask about Bykov, about the Trans-Pluto expedition, about the new ships on which I too am behind the times, but still know better than he, and so that he could recollect the uprising and boast of his scars and his high social position.... It would be most convenient if Peck did have a high social position. It would be well if he were, for

example, a mayor....

A small darkish rotund individual in a white suit and a round white hat set at a rakish angle approached deliberately, wiping his lips with a dainty handkerchief. The hat was equipped with a transparent green shade and a green ribbon on which was stamped "Welcome." On his right earlobe glistened a pendant radio.

"Welcome aboard," said the man.

"Hello," said I.

"A pleasure to have you with us. My name is Ahmad."

"And my name is Ivan," said I. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

We nodded to each other and regarded the tourists entering the buses. They were happily noisy and the warm wind rolled their discarded butts and crumpled candy wrappers along the square. Ahmad's face bore a green tint from the light filtering through his cap visor.

"Vacationers," he said. "Carefree and loud. Now they will be taken to their hotels and will immediately rush off to the beaches."

"I wouldn't mind a run on water skis," I observed.

"Really? I never would have guessed. There's nothing you look less like than a vacationer."

"So be it," I said. "In fact I did come to work"

"To work? Well, that happens too, some do come to work

here. Two years back Jonathan Kreis came here to paint a picture." He laughed. "Later there was an assault-and-battery case in Rome, some papal nuncio was involved, can't remember his name."

"Because of the picture?"

"No, hardly. He didn't paint a thing here. The casino was where you could find him day or night. Shall we go have a drink?"

"Let's. You can give me a few pointers."

"It's my pleasurable duty -- to give advice," said Ahmad.

We bent down simultaneously and both of us took hold of the suitcase handle.

"It's okay -- I'll manage."

"No," countered Ahmad, "you are the guest and I the host. Let's go to yonder bar. It's quiet there at this time."

We went in under a blue awning. Ahmad seated me at a table, put my suitcase on a vacant chair, and went to the counter. It was cool and an air conditioner sighed in the background. Ahmad returned with a tray. There were tall glasses and flat plates with butter-gold tidbits.

"Not very strong," said Ahmad, "but really cold to make up for that."

"I don't like it strong in the morning either," I said.

I quaffed the glass. The stuff was good.

"A swallow -- a bite," counseled Ahmad, "Like this: a swallow, a bite."

The tidbits crunched and melted in the mouth. In my view, they were unnecessary. We were silent for some time, watching the square from under the marquee. Gently purring, the buses pulled out one after another into their respective tree-lined avenues. They looked ponderous yet strangely elegant in their clumsiness.

"It would be too noisy there," said Ahmad. "Fine cottages, lots of women -- to suit any taste -- and right on the water, but no privacy. I don't think it's for you."

"Yes," I agreed. "The noise would bother me. Anyway, I don't like vacationers, Ahmad. Can't stand it when people work at having fun."

Ahmad nodded and carefully placed the next tidbit in his mouth. I watched him chew. There was something professional and concentrated in the movement of his lower jaw. Having swallowed, he said, "No, the synthetic will never compare with the natural product. Not the same bouquet." He flexed his lips, smacked them gently, and continued, "There are two excellent hotels in the center of town, but, in my view..."

"Yes, that won't do either," I said. "A hotel places certain obligations on you. I never heard that anything worthwhile has ever been written in a hotel."

"Well, that's not quite true," retorted Ahmad, critically studying the last tidbit. "I read one book and in it they said that it was in fact written in a hotel -- the Hotel Florida."

"Aah," I said, "you are correct. But then your city is not being shelled by cannons."

"Cannons? Of course not. Not as a rule, anyway."

"Just as I thought. But, as a matter of fact, it has been noted that something worthwhile can be written only in a hotel which is under bombardment."

Ahmad took the last tidbit after all.

"That would be difficult to arrange," he said. "In our times it's hard to obtain a cannon. Besides, it's very expensive; the hotel could lose its clientele."

"Hotel Florida also lost its clients in its time. Hemingway lived in it alone."

"Who?"

"Hemingway."

"Ah... but that was so long ago, in the fascist times. But times have changed, Ivan."

"Yes," said I, "and therefore in our times there is no point in writing in hotels."

"To blazes with hotels then," said Ahmad. "I know what you need. You need a boarding house." He took out a notebook.

"State your requirements and we'll try to match them up."

"Boarding house," I said. "I don't know. I don't think so, Ahmad. Do understand that I don't want to meet people whom I don't want to know. That's to begin with. And in the second place, who lives in private boarding houses? These same vacationers who don't have enough money for a cottage. They too

work hard at having fun. They concoct picnics, meets, and song fests. At night they play the banjo. On top of which they grab anyone they can get hold of and make them participate in contests for the longest uninterrupted kiss. Most important of all, they are all transients. But I am interested in your country, Ahmad. In your townspeople. I'll tell you what I need: I need a quiet house with a garden. Not too far from downtown. A relaxed family, with a respectable housewife. An attractive young daughter. You get the picture, Ahmad?"

Ahmad took the empty glasses, went over to the counter, and returned with full ones. Now they contained a colorless transparent liquid and the small plates were stacked with tiny multistoried sandwiches.

"I know of such a cozy house," declared Ahmad. "The widow is forty-five and the daughter twenty. The son is eleven. Let's finish the drinks and we'll be on our way. I think you'll like it. The rent is standard, but of course it's more than in a hoarding house. You have come to stay for a long time?"

"For a month."

"Good Lord! Just a month?"

"I don't know how my affairs will go. Perhaps I may tarry awhile."

"By all means, you will," said Ahmad. "I can see that you have totally failed to grasp just where you have arrived. You simply don't understand what a good time you can have here and

how you don't have to think about a thing."

We finished our drinks, got up, and went across the square under the hot sun to the parking area. Ahmad walked with a rapid, slightly rolling gait, with the green visor of his cap set low over his eyes, swinging the suitcase in a debonair manner. The next batch of tourists was being discharged broadcast from the customs house.

"Would you like me to... Frankly?" said Ahmad suddenly.

"Yes, I would like you to," said I. What else could I say? Forty years I have lived in this world and have yet to learn to deflect this unpleasant question.

"You won't write a thing here," said Ahmad. "It's mighty hard to write in our town."

"It's always hard to write anything. However, fortunately I am not a writer."

"I accept this gladly. But in that case, it is slightly impossible here. At least for a transient."

"You frighten me."

"It's not a case of being frightened. You simply won't want to work. You won't be able to stay at the typewriter. You'll feel annoyed by the typewriter. Do you know what the joy of living is?"

"How shall I say?"

"You don't know anything, Ivan. So far you still don't know anything about it. You are bound to traverse the twelve circles of paradise. It's funny, of course, but I envy you."

We stopped by a long open car. Ahmad threw the suitcase into the back seat and flung the door open for me.

"Please," he said.

"Presumably you have already passed through them?" I asked, sliding into the seat.

He got in behind the wheel and started the engine.

"What exactly do you mean?"

"The twelve circles of paradise."

"As for me, Ivan, a long time ago I selected my favorite circle," said Ahmad. The car began to roll noiselessly through the square. "The others haven't existed for me for quite a while. Unfortunately. It's like old age, with all its privileges and deficiencies."

The car rushed through a park and sped along a shaded, straight thoroughfare. I kept looking around with great interest but couldn't recognize a thing. It was stupid to expect to. We had been landed at night, in a torrential rain; seven thousand exhausted tourists stood on the pier looking at the burning liner. We hadn't seen the city -- in its place was a black, wet emptiness dotted with red flashes. It had rattled, boomed, and screeched as though being rent asunder. "We'll be slaughtered in the dark, like rabbits," Robert had said, and I immediately had sent him back to the barge to unload the armored car. The gangway had collapsed and the car had fallen into the water, and when Peck had pulled Robert out, all blue

from the cold, he had come over to me and said through chattering teeth, "Didn't I tell you it was dark?"

Ahmad said suddenly, "When I was a boy, we lived near the port and we used to come out here to beat up the factory kids. Many of them had brass knuckles, and that got me a broken nose. Half of my life I put up with a crooked nose until I had it fixed last year. I sure loved to scrap when I was young. I used to have a hunk of lead pipe, and once I had to sit in jail for six months, but that didn't help."

He stopped, grinning. I waited awhile, then said, "You can't find a good lead pipe these days. Now rubber truncheons are in fashion: you buy them used from the police."

"Exactly," said Ahmad. "Or else you buy a dumbbell, cut off one ball and there you are, ready to go. But the guys are not what they used to be. Now you get deported for such stuff."

"Yes. And what else did you occupy yourself with in your youth?"

"And you?"

"I planned on joining the interplanetary force and trained to withstand overstress. We also played at who could dive the deepest."

"We too," said Ahmad. "We went down ten meters for automatics and whiskey. Over by the piers they lay on the seabed by the case. I used to get nosebleeds. But when the fire fights started, we began to find corpses with weights around their necks, so we quit that game."

"It's a very unpleasant sight, a corpse under water -- especially if there is a current," said I.

Ahmad chuckled "I've seen worse. I had occasion to work with the police."

"This was after the fracas?"

"Much later. When the anti-gangster laws were passed."

"They were called gangsters here too?"

"What else would you call them? Not brigands, certainly.

'A group of brigands, armed with flame throwers and gas bombs, have laid siege to the municipal buildings,' " he pronounced expressively. "It doesn't sound right, you can feel that. A brigand is an ax, a bludgeon, a mustache up to the ears, a cleaver --"

"A lead pipe," I offered.

Ahmad gurgled.

"What are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"Going for a walk."

"You have friends here?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Well... then it's different."

"How come?"

"Well, I was going to suggest something to you, but since you have friends..."

"By the way, " I said, "who is your mayor?"

"Mayor? The devil knows, I don't remember. Somebody was

elected."

"Not Peck Xenai, by any chance?"

"I don't know." He sounded regretful. "I wouldn't want to mislead you."

"Would you know the man anyway?"

"Xenai... Peck Xenai... No, I don't knew him; haven't heard of him. What is he to you -- a friend?"

"Yes, an old friend. I have some others here, but they are all visitors."

"Well," said Ahmad, "if you should get bored and all kinds of thoughts begin to enter your head, come on over for a visit.

Every single day from seven o'clock on I am at the Chez Gourmet. Do you like good eating?"

"Quite," said I.

"Stomach in good shape?"

"Like an ostrich's."

"Well, then, why don't you come by? We'll have a fine time, and it won't be necessary to think about a thing."

Ahmad braked and turned cautiously into a driveway with an iron gate, which silently swung open before us. The car rolled into the yard.

"We have arrived," announced Ahmad. "Here is your home."

The house was two-storied, white with blue trim. The windows were draped on the inside. A clean, deserted patio with multi-colored flagstones was surrounded by a fruit-tree garden, with apple branches touching the walls.

"And where is the widow?" I said.

"Let's go inside," said Ahmad.

He went up the steps, leafing through his notebook I was following him while looking around. I liked the mini-orchard. Ahmad found the right page and set up the combination on the small disc by the doorbell. The door opened. Cool, fresh air flowed out of the house. It was dark inside, but as soon as we stepped into the hall, it lit up with concealed illumination. Putting away his notebook, Ahmad said, "To the right is the landlord's half, to the left is yours. Please come in. Here is the living room, and there is the bar. In a minute we'll have a drink. And now here is your study. Do you have a phonor?"

"No."

"It's just as well. You have everything you need right here. Come on over here. This is the bedroom. There is the control board for acoustic defense. You know how to use it?"

"I'll figure it out."

"Good. The defense is triple, you can have it quiet as a tomb or turn the place into a bordello, whatever you like... Here's the air-conditioning control, which, incidentally, is not too convenient, as you can only operate it from the bedroom."

"I'll manage," I said.

"What? Well, okay. Here is the bathroom and powder room."

"I am interested in the widow," I said, "and the

daughter."

"All in good time. Shall I open the drapes?"

"What for?"

"Right you are, for no reason. Let's go have a drink."

We returned to the living room and Ahmad disappeared up to his waist in the bar.

"You want it on the strong side?" he asked.

"You have it backwards."

"Would you like an omelette? Sandwiches?"

"How about nothing?"

"No," said Ahmad, "an omelette it shall be -- with tomatoes." He rummaged in the bar. "I don't know what does it, but this autocooker makes an altogether astonishingly good omelette with tomatoes. While we are at it, I will also have a bite."

He extracted a tray from the bar and placed it on a low table by a semicircular couch. We sat down.

"Now about the widow," I reminded him. "I would like to present myself."

"You like the rooms?"

"They'll do."

"Well, the widow is quite all right, too. And the daughter is not bad either."

He extracted a flat case from an inside pocket. Like a cartridge clip it was stacked with a row of ampoules filled with colored liquids. Ahmad ran his index finger over them,

smelled the omelette, hesitated, and finally selected one with a green fluid, broke it carefully, and dripped a few drops on the tomatoes. An aroma pervaded the room. The smell was not unpleasant, but, to my taste, bore no particular relation to the food.

"Right now," continued Ahmad, "they are still asleep." His gaze turned abstracted. "They sleep and see dreams."

I looked at my watch.

"Well, well!"

Ahmad was enjoying his food.

"Ten-thirty!" I said.

Ahmad was enjoying his food. His cap was pushed back on his head, and the green visor stuck up vertically like the crest of an aroused mimicrodon. His eyes were half-closed. I regarded him with interest.

Having swallowed the last bit of tomato, he broke off a piece of the crust of white bread and carefully wiped the pan with it. His gaze cleared.

"What were you saying?" he asked. "Ten-thirty? Tomorrow you too will get up at ten-thirty or maybe even at twelve. I, for one, will get up at twelve."

He got up and stretched luxuriously, cracking his joints.

"Well," he said, "it's time to go home, finally. Here's my card, Ivan. Put it in your desk, and don't throw it out until your very last day here." He went over to the flat box and

inserted another card into its slot. There was a loud click.

"Now this one," he said, examining the card against the light. "Please pass on to the widow with my very best compliments."

"And then what will happen?" said I.

"Money will happen. I trust you are not a devotee of haggling, Ivan? The widow will name a figure, Ivan, and you shouldn't haggle over it. It's not done."

"I will try not to haggle," I said, "although it would be amusing to try it."

Ahmad raised his eyebrows.

"Well, if you really want to so much, then why not try it? Always do what you want to do. Then you will have excellent digestion. I will get your suitcase now."

"I need prospects," I said. "I need guidebooks. I am a writer, Ahmad. I will require brochures on the economic situation of the masses, statistical references. Where can I get all that? And when?"

"I will give you a guidebook," said Ahmad. "It has statistics, addresses, telephone numbers, and so on. As far as the masses are concerned, I don't think we publish any such nonsense. Of course, you can send an inquiry to UNESCO, but what would you want with it? You'll see everything for yourself. Just hold on a minute. I'll get the suitcase and the guidebook."

He went out and quickly returned with my suitcase in one

hand and a fat bluish-looking little tome in the other.

I stood up.

"Judging by the look on your face," he announced, smiling, "you are debating whether it's proper to tip me or not."

"I confess," I said.

"Well then, would you like to do it or not?"

"No, I must admit."

"You have a healthy, strong character," Ahmad approved.

"Don't do it. Don't tip anybody. You could collect one in the face, especially from the girls. But, on the other hand, don't haggle either. You could walk into one that way too. Anyway, that's all a lot of rot. For all I know you may like to have your face slapped, like that Jonathan Kreis. Farewell, Ivan, have fun, and come to Chez Gourmet. Any evening at seven. But most important of all, don't think about a thing."

He waved his hand and left. I picked up the mixture in the dewy glass and sat down with the guidebook.

Chapter TWO

The guidebook was printed on bond paper with a gilt edge. Interspersed with gorgeous photographs, it contained some curious information. In the city there were fifty thousand people, fifteen hundred cats, twenty thousand pigeons, and two thousand dogs (including seven hundred winners of medals). The

city had fifteen thousand passenger cars, five thousand helis, a thousand taxis (with and without chauffeurs), nine hundred automatic garbage collectors, four hundred permanent bars, cafes, and snack bars, eleven restaurants, and four first-class hotels, and was a tourist establishment which served over one hundred thousand visitors every year. The city had sixty thousand TV sets, fifty movie theaters, eight amusement parks, two Happy Mood salons, sixteen beauty parlors, forty libraries, and one hundred and eighty automated barber shops. Eighty percent of the population were engaged in services, and the rest worked in two syntho-bakeries and one government shipyard. There were six schools and one university housed in an old castle once the home of crusader Ulrich da Casa. In the city there were also eight active civilian societies, among them the Society of Diligent Tasters, the Society of Connoisseurs and Appraisers, and the Society for the Good Old Country Against Evil Influences. In addition, fifteen hundred citizens were members of seven hundred and one groups where they sang, learned to act, to arrange furniture, to breast-feed, and to medicate cats. As to per-capita consumption of alcoholic beverages, natural meat, and liquid oxygen, the city was sixth, twelfth, and thirteenth highest in Europe respectively. The city had seven men's clubs and five women's clubs, as well as sport clubs named the Bulls and Rhinos. By a majority of forty-six votes, someone by the name of Flim Gao had been elected mayor. Peck was not among the municipal officials.

I put the guidebook aside, took off my jacket, and made a thorough examination of my domain. I approved of the living room. It was done in blue, and I like that color. The bar was full of bottled and refrigerated victuals so that I could at a moment's notice entertain a dozen starving guests.

I went into the study. There was a large table in front of the window and a comfortable chair. The walls were lined with shelves tightly filled with collected works. The clean bright bindings were arranged with great skill so that they formed a colorful and appealing layout. The top shelf was occupied by the fifty-volume encyclopedia of UNESCO. Lower shelves were kaleidoscopic with the shiny wrappers of detective novels.

As soon as I saw the telephone on the table, I dialed Rimeyer's number, perching on the chair arm. The receiver sounded with prolonged honkings and I waited, twirling a small dictaphone which someone had left on the table. Rimeyer did not answer. I hung up and inspected the dictaphone. The tape was half-used-up, and after rewinding, I punched the playback button.

"Greetings and more greetings," said a merry male voice. "I clasp your hand heartily or kiss you on the cheek, depending on your sex and age. I have lived here two months and bear witness that it was most enjoyable. Allow me a few points of advice. The best institution in town is the Hoity Toity in the Park of Dreams. The best girl in town is Basi in the House of

Models. The best guy in town is me, but I have already left. On television just watch Program Nine; everything else is chaff. Don't get involved with Intels, and give the Rhinos a wide berth. Don't buy anything on credit -- there'll be no end to the runaround. The widow is a good woman but loves to talk and in general... As for Vousi, I didn't get to meet her, as she had left the country to visit her grandmother. In my opinion she is sweet, and there was a photograph of her in the widow's album, but I took it. There's more: I expect to come back next March, so be a pal, if you decide to return, pick another time. Have a --"

Music followed abruptly. I listened awhile and turned off the machine.

There wasn't a single tome I could extract from the shelves, so well were they stuck in, or maybe even glued on, and as there was nothing else of interest in the study, I went into the bedroom.

Here it was especially cool and cozy. I have always wanted just such a bedroom, but somehow never had the time to get around to setting one up. The bed was big and low. On the night table stood an elegant phonor and a tiny remote-control box for the TV. The screen stood at the foot of the bed, while at the head the widow had hung a very natural-looking picture of field flowers in a crystal vase. The picture was painted with luminous paints and the dewdrops glistened in the darkened room.

I punched the TV control at random and stretched out on the bed. It was soft yet somehow firm. The TV roared loudly. An inebriated-looking man launched himself out of the screen, crashed through some sort of railing, and fell from a great height into a colossal fuming vat. There was a loud splash and the phonor exuded a smell. The man disappeared in the bubbling liquid and then reappeared, holding in his teeth something reminiscent of a well-boiled boot. The unseen audience broke out in a storm of horse laughs. Fade out... soft lyrical music.

A white horse pulling a phaeton appeared out of green woods and advanced toward me. A pretty girl in a bathing suit sat in the carriage. I turned off the TV, got up, and went to look at the bathroom.

There was a piny smell and flickering of germicidal lamps. I undressed, threw the underwear into the hopper, and climbed into the shower. Taking my time, I dressed in front of the mirror, combed my hair, and shaved. The shelves were loaded with rows of vials, hygienic devices, antiseptics, and tubes with pastes and greases. At the edge of one shelf there was a pile of flat colorful boxes with the logo "Devon." I switched off the razor and took one of the boxes. A germicidal lamp flickered in the mirror, just as it did that day in Vienna, when I stood just like this studiously regarding just such a little box, because I did not want to go out to the bedroom, where Raffy Reisman loudly argued about something with the

doctor; while the green oily liquid still oscillated in the bath, over which hung the steamy vapor and a screeching radio receiver, attached to a porcelain hook for towels, howled, hooted, and snorted until Raffy turned it off in irritation.

That was in Vienna, and just as here, it was very strange to see in a bathroom a box of Devon -- a popular repellent which did an excellent job of chasing mosquitoes, chiggers, gnats, and other bloodsucking insects which were long forgotten in Vienna and here in a seaside resort town. Only in Vienna there had been an overlay of fear.

The box which I held in my hand was almost empty, with only one tablet remaining. The rest of the boxes were still sealed. I finished shaving and returned to the bedroom. I felt like calling Rimeyer again, but abruptly the house came to life. The pleated drapes flew open with a soft whine, the windowpanes slid away in their frames, and the bedroom was flooded with warm air, laden with the scent of apples. Someone was talking somewhere, light footsteps sounded overhead, and a severe-sounding female voice said, "Vousi -- at least eat some cake, do you hear?"

Thereupon I imparted a certain air of disorder to my clothes (in accordance with the current style), smoothed my temples, and went into the hall, taking one of Ahmad's cards from the living room.

The widow turned out to be a youthful plump woman, somewhat languid, with a pleasant fresh face.

"How nice!" she said, seeing me. "You are up already?"

Hello, my name is Vaina Tuur, but you can call me Vaina."

"My pleasure," I said, shuddering fashionably. "My name is Ivan."

"How nice," said Aunt Vaina. "What an original soft-sounding name! Have you had breakfast, Ivan?"

"With your permission, I intended to have breakfast in town," I said, and proffered her the card.

"Ah," said Aunt Vaina, looking through the card at the light. "That nice Ahmad, if you only knew what a nice responsible fellow he is. But I see you did not have breakfast. Lunch you can have in town, but now I will treat you to some of my croutons. The major general always said that nowhere else in the world could you have such wonderful croutons."

"With pleasure," said I, shuddering for the second time.

The door behind Aunt Vaina was flung open and a very pretty young girl in a short blue skirt and an open white blouse flew in on clicking high heels. In her hand she held a piece of cake, which she munched while humming a currently popular song. Seeing me, she stopped, flung her pocketbook on its long strap over her shoulder with a show of abandon, and swallowed, bending down her head.

"Vousi!" said Aunt Vaina, compressing her lips. "Vousi, this is Ivan."

"Not bad!" said Vousi. "Greetings."

"Vousi," reproached Aunt Vaina.

"You came with your wife?" said Vousi, extending her hand.

"No," said I. Her fingers were soft and cool. "I am alone."

In that case, I'll show you all there is to see," she said. "Till tonight. I must run now, but we'll go out this evening."

"Vousi!" reproached Aunt Vaina.

Vousi pushed the rest of the cake into her mouth, kissed her mother on the cheek, and ran toward the door. She had smooth sunburned legs, long and slender, and a close-cropped back of the head.

"Ach, Ivan," said Aunt Vaina, who was also looking at the retreating girl, "in our times it is so difficult to deal with young girls. They develop so early and leave us so soon. Ever since she started working in that salon..."

"She is a dressmaker?" I inquired.

"Oh no! She works in the Happy Mood Salon, in the old ladies' department. And do you know, they value her highly. But last year she was late once and now she has to be very careful. As you can see she could not even have a decent conversation with you, but it's possible that a client is even now waiting for her. You might not believe this, but she already has a permanent clientele. Anyway, why are we standing here? The croutons will get cold."

We entered the landlord's side. I tried with all my might

to conduct myself correctly, although I was a bit foggy as to what exactly was correct. Aunt Vaina sat me down at a table, excused herself, and left. I looked around. The room was an exact copy of mine, except that the walls were rose instead of blue, and beyond the window, in place of the sea was a small yard with a low fence dividing it from the street. Aunt Vaina came back with a tray bearing boiled cream and a plate of croutons..

"You know," she said, "I think I will have some breakfast too. My doctor does not recommend breakfast, especially with boiled cream. But we became so accustomed... it was the general's favorite breakfast. Do you know, I try to have only men boarders. That nice Ahmad understands me very well. He understands how much I need to sit just like this, now and then, just as we are sitting, and have a cup of boiled cream."

"Your cream is wonderfully good," said I, not insincerely.

"Ach, Ivan." Aunt Vaina put down her cup and fluttered her hands. "But you said that almost exactly like the major general... Strange, you even look like him. Except that his face was a bit narrower and he always had breakfast in his uniform."

"Yes," I said with regret, "I don't have a uniform."

"But there was one once," said she coyly, shaking a finger at me. "Of course! I can see it. It's so senseless! People nowadays have to be ashamed of their military past. Isn't that

silly? But they are always betrayed by their bearing, that very special manly carriage. You cannot hide it, Ivan!"

I made a very elaborate non-committal gesture, said, "Mm -- yes," and took another crouton.

"It's all so out of place, isn't that right?" continued Aunt Vaina with great animation. "How can you confuse such two opposite concepts -- war and the army? We all detest war. War is awful. My mother described it to me, she was only a girl, but she remembers everything. Suddenly, without warning, there they are -- the soldiers, crude, alien, speaking a foreign tongue, belching; and the officers, without any manners, laughing loudly, annoying the chambermaids, and smelling -- forgive me; and that senseless commander's meeting hour... that is war and it deserves every condemnation! But the army! That's an altogether different affair! Surely you remember, Ivan, the troops lined up by battalion, the perfection of the line, the manliness of the faces under the helmets, shiny arms, sparkling decorations, and then the commanding officer riding in a special staff car and addressing the battalions, which respond willingly and briefly like one man."

"No doubt," said I, "this has impressed many people."

"Yes! Very much indeed. We have always said that it is necessary to disarm, but did we really need to destroy the army? It is the last refuge of manhood in our time of widespread moral collapse. It's weird and ridiculous -- a government without an army...."

"It is funny," I agreed. "You may not believe it, but I have been smiling ever since they signed the Pact."

"Yes, I can understand that," said Aunt Vaina. "There was nothing else for us to do, but to smile sarcastically. The Major General Tuur" -- she extricated a handkerchief -- "passed away with just such a sarcastic smile on his face." She applied the handkerchief to her eyes. "He said to us: 'My friends, I still hope to live to the day when everything will fall apart.' A broken man, who has lost the meaning of life... he could not stand the emptiness in his heart." Suddenly she perked up.

"Here, let me show you, Ivan."

She bustled into the next room and returned with a heavy old-fashioned photo album.

I looked at my watch at once, but Aunt Vaina did not take any notice, and sitting herself down at my side, opened the album at the very first page.

"Here is the major general."

The major general looked quite the eagle. He had a narrow bony face and translucent eyes. His long body was spangled with medals. The biggest, a multi-pointed starburst framed in a laurel wreath, sparkled in the region of the appendix. In his left hand the general tightly pressed a pair of gloves, and his right hand rested on the hilt of a ceremonial poniard. A high collar with gold embroidery propped up his lower jaw.

"And here is the major general on maneuvers."

Here again the general looked the eagle. He was issuing instructions to his officers, who were bent over a map spread on the frontal armor of a gigantic tank. By the shape of the treads and the streamlined appearance of the turret, I recognized it as one of the Mammoth heavy storm vehicles, which were designed for pushing through nuclear strike zones and now are successfully employed by deep-sea exploration teams.

"And here is the general on his fiftieth birthday."

Here too, the general looked the eagle. He stood by a well-set table with a wineglass in his hand, listening to a toast in his honor. The lower left corner was occupied by a halo of light from a shiny pate; and to his side, gazing up at him with admiration, sat a very young and very pretty Aunt Vaina. I tried surreptitiously to gauge the thickness of the album by feel.

"Ah, here is the general on vacation."

Even on vacation, the general remained an eagle. With his feet planted well apart, he stood on the beach sporting tiger-stripe trunks, as he scanned the misty horizon through a pair of binoculars. At his feet a child of three or four was digging in the sand. The general was wiry and muscular. Croutons and cream did not spoil his figure. I started to wind my watch noisily.

"And here..." began Aunt Vaina, turning the page, but at this point, a short portly man entered the room without knocking. His face and in particular his dress seemed strangely

familiar.

"Good morning," he enunciated, bending his smooth smiling face slightly sideways.

It was my erstwhile customs man, still in the same white uniform with the silver buttons and the silver braid on the shoulders.

"Ah! Pete!" said Aunt Vaina. "Here you are already. Please, let me introduce you. Ivan, this is Pete, a friend of the family."

The customs man turned toward me without recognition, briefly inclined his head, and clicked his heels. Aunt Vaina laid the album in my lap and got up.

"Have a seat, Pete," she said. "I will bring some cream."

Pete clicked his heels once more and sat down by me.

"This should interest you," I said, transferring the album to his lap. "Here is Major General Tuur. In mufti." A strange expression appeared on the face of the customs man. "And here is the major general on maneuvers. You see? And here --"

"Thank you," said the customs man raggedly. "Don't exert yourself, because --"

Aunt Vaina returned with cream and croutons. From as far back as the doorway, she said, "How nice to see a man in uniform! Isn't that right, Ivan?"

The cream for Pete was in a special cup with the monogram "T" surrounded by four stars.

"It rained last night, so it must have been cloudy. I know, because I woke up, and now there is not a cloud in the sky. Another cup, Ivan?"

I got up.

"Thank you, I'm quite full. If you'll excuse me, I must take my leave. I have a business appointment,"

Carefully closing the door behind me, I heard the widow say, "Don't you find an extraordinary resemblance between him and Staff Major Polom?"

In the bedroom, I unpacked the suitcase and transferred the clothing to the wall closet, and again rang Rimeyer. Again no one answered. So I sat down at the desk and set to exploring the drawers. One contained a portable typewriter, another a set of writing paper and an empty bottle of grease for arrhythmic motors. The rest was empty, if you didn't count bundles of crumpled receipts, a broken fountain pen, and a carelessly folded sheet of paper, decorated with doodled faces. I unfolded the sheet. Apparently it was the draft of a telegram.

"Green died while with the Fishers receive body Sunday with condolences Hugger Martha boys." I read the writing twice, turned the sheet over and studied the faces, and read for the third time. Obviously Hugger and Martha were not informed that normal people notifying of death first of all tell how and why a person died and not whom he was with when he died. I would have written, "Green drowned while fishing." Probably in a drunken stupor. By the way, what address did I have now?

I returned to the hall. A small boy in short pants squatted in the doorway to the landlord's half. Clamping a long silvery tube under an armpit, he was panting and wheezing and hurriedly unwinding a tangle of string. I went up to him and said, "Hi."

My reflexes are not what they used to be, but still I managed to duck a long black stream which whizzed by my ear and splashed against the wall. I regarded the boy with astonishment while he stared at me, lying on his side and holding the tube in front of him. His face was damp and his mouth twisted and open. I turned to look at the wall. The stuff was oozing down. I looked at the boy again. He was getting up slowly, without lowering the tube.

"Well, well, brother, you are nervous!" said I.

"Stand where you are," said the boy in a hoarse voice. "I did not say your name."

"To say the least," said I. "You did not even mention yours, and you fire at me like I was a dummy."

"Stand where you are," repeated the boy, "and don't move." He backed and suddenly blurted in rapid fire, "Hence from my hair, hence from my bones, hence from my flesh."

"I cannot," I said. I was still trying to understand whether he was playing or was really afraid of me.

"Why not?" said the boy. "I am saying everything right."

"I can't go without moving," I said. "I am standing where

I am."

His mouth fell open again.

"Hugger: I say to you -- Hugger -- begone!" he said
uncertainly.

"Why Hugger?" I said. "My name is Ivan; you confuse me
with somebody else."

The boy closed his eyes and advanced upon me, holding the
tube in front of him.

"I surrender," I warned. "Be careful not to fire."

When the tube dented my midriff he stopped and, dropping
it, suddenly went limp, letting his hands fall. I bent over and
looked him in the face. Now he was brick-red. I picked up the
tube. It was something like a toy rifle, with a convenient
checkered grip and a flat rectangular flask which was inserted
from below, like a clip.

"What kind of gadget is this?" I asked.

"A splotcher," he said gloomily. "Give it back."

I gave him back the toy.

"A splotcher," I said, "with which you splotch. And what
if you had hit me?" I looked at the wall. "Fine thing. Now you
won't get it off inside of a year. You'll have to get the wall
changed."

The boy looked up at me suspiciously. "But it's Splotchy,"
he said.

"Really -- and I thought it was lemonade."

His face finally acquired a normal hue and demonstrated an

obvious resemblance to the manly features of Major General

Tuur.

"No, no, it's Splotchy."

"So?"

"It will dry up."

"And then it's really hopeless?"

"Of course not. There will simply be nothing left."

"Hmm," said I, with reservation. "However, you know best.

Let us hope so. But I am still glad that there will be nothing

left on the wall instead of on my face. What's your name?"

"Siegfried."

"And after you give it some thought?"

He gave me a long look.

"Lucifer."

"What?"

"Lucifer."

"Lucifer," said I. "Belial, Ahriman, Beelzebub, and Azrael. How about something a little shorter? It's very inconvenient to call for help to someone with a name like Lucifer."

"But the doors are closed," he said and backed one step.

His face paled again.

"So what?"

He did not respond but continued to back until he reached the wall and began to sidle along it without taking his eyes

off me. It finally dawned on me that he took me for a murderer or a thief and that he wanted to escape. But for some reason he did not call for help and went by his mother's door, continuing toward the house exit.

"Siegfried," said I, "Siegfried, Lucifer, you are a terrible coward. Who do you think I am?" I didn't move but only turned to keep facing him. "I am your new boarder; your mother has just fed me croutons and cream and you go and fire at me and almost splashed me, and now you are afraid of me. It is I who should be afraid of you."

All this was very much reminiscent of a scene in the boarding school in Anyudinsk, when they brought me a boy just like this one, the son of a sect member. Hell's bells, do I really look so much the gangster?

"You remind me of Chuchundra the Muskrat," I said, "who spent his life crying because he could not come out into the middle of the room. Your nose is blue from fear, your ears are freezing, and your pants are wet so that you are trailing a small stream...."

In such cases it makes absolutely no difference what is said. It is important to speak calmly and not to make sudden movements. The expression on his face did not change, but when I spoke about the stream, he moved his eyes momentarily to take a look. But only for a second. Then he jumped toward the door, fluttering for a second at the latch, and flew outside, dirty bottoms of his sandals flying. I went out after him.

He stood in the lilac bush, so that all I could see was his pale face. Like a fleeing cat looking momentarily over its shoulder.

"Okay, okay," said I. "Would you please explain to me what I must do? I have to send home my new address. The address of this house where I am now living." He regarded me in silence.

"I don't feel right going to your mother -- in the first place, she has guests, and in the second--"

"Seventy-eight, Second Waterway," he said.

Slowly I sat down on the steps. There was a distance of some ten meters between us.

"That's quite a voice you have," I said confidentially.

"Just like my friend the barman's at Mirza-Charles."

"When did you arrive?" said he.

"Well, let's see." I looked at my watch, "About an hour and a half ago."

"Before you there was another one," he said, looking sideways. "He was a rat-fink. He gave me striped swimming trunks, and when I went in the water, they melted away."

"Ouch!" I said. "That is really a monster of some sort and not a human -- he should have been drowned in Splotchy."

"Didn't have time -- I was going to, but he went away."

"Was it that same Hugger with Martha and the boys?"

"No -- where did you get that idea? Hugger came later."

"Also a rat-fink?"

He didn't answer. I leaned back against the wall and contemplated the street. A car jerkily backed out of the opposite driveway, back and forthed, and roared off. Immediately it was followed by another just such a car. There was the pungent smell of gasoline. Then cars followed one after another, until my eyes blurred. Several helis appeared in the sky. They were the so-called silent helis, but they flew relatively low, and while they flew, it was difficult to talk. In any case, the boy was apparently not going to talk. But he wasn't going to leave, either. He was doing something with his splotcher in the bushes and was glancing at me now and then. I was hoping he wasn't going to splotch me again. The helis kept going and going, and the cars kept swishing and swishing, as though all the fifteen thousand cars were speeding by on Second Waterway, and all the five hundred helis were hung over Number 78. The whole thing lasted about ten minutes, and the boy seemed to cease paying attention to me while I sat and wondered what questions I should ask of Rimeyer. Then everything returned to its previous state, the smell of exhaust was gone, the sky was cleared.

"Where are they all going -- all at once?" I asked.

"Don't you know?"

"How would I know?"

"I don't know either, but somehow you knew about Hugger."

"About Hugger," I said. "I know about Hugger quite accidentally. And about you I know nothing at all... how you

live and what you do. For instance, what are you doing now?"

"The safeguard is broken."

"Well then, give it to me, I'll fix it. Why are you afraid of me? Do I look like a rat-fink?"

"They all drove off to work," he said.

"You sure go to work late. It's practically dinnertime already. Do you know the Hotel Olympic?"

"Of course I know."

"Would you walk me there?"

He hesitated.

"No."

"Why not?" I asked.

"School is about to end -- I must be going home."

"Aha! So that's the way of it," said I. "You are playing hookey, or ditching it, as we used to say. What grade are you in?"

"Third."

"I used to be in third grade, too," I said.

He came a bit out of the bushes.

"And then?"

"Then I was in the fourth." I got up. "Well, okay. Talk you won't, go for a walk you won't, and your pants are wet, so I am going back in. You won't even tell me your name."

He looked at me in silence and breathed heavily through his mouth. I went back to my quarters. The cream-colored hall

was irreparably disfigured, it seemed to me. The huge black clot was not drying. Somebody is going to get it today, I thought. A ball of string was underfoot. I picked it up. The end of the string was tied to the landlady's half-doorknob. So, I thought, this too is clear. I untied the string and put the ball in my pocket.

In the study, I got a clean sheet of paper from the desk and composed a telegram to Matia. "Arrived safely, 78 Second Waterway. Kisses. Ivan." I telephoned it to the local PT&T and again dialed Rimeyer's number. Again there was no answer. I put on my jacket, looked in the mirror, counted my money, and was about to set out when I saw that the door to the living room was open and an eye was visible through the crack. Naturally, I gave no sign. I carefully completed the inspection of my clothing, returned to the bathroom, and vacuumed myself for a while, whistling away merrily. When I returned to the study, the mouse-eared head sticking through the half-open door immediately vanished. Only the silvery tube of the splotcher continued to protrude. Sitting down in the chair, I opened and closed all the twelve drawers, including the secret one, and only then looked at the door. The boy stood framed in it.

"My name is Len," he announced.

"Greetings, Len," I said absent-mindedly. "I am called Ivan. Come on in -- although I was going out to have dinner. You haven't had dinner yet?"

"No."

"That's good. Go ask your mother's permission and we'll be off"

"It's too early," he said.

"What's too early? To have dinner?"

"No, to go. School doesn't end for another twenty minutes." He was silent again. "Besides, there's that fat fink with the braid."

"He's a bad one?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Len. "Are you really leaving now?"

"Yes, I am," I said, and took the ball of string from my pocket. "Here, take it. And what if Mother comes out first?"

He shrugged.

"If you are really leaving," he said, "would it be all right if I stayed in your place?"

"Go ahead, stay."

"There's nobody else here?"

"Nobody."

He still didn't come to me to take the string, but let me come to him, and even allowed me to take his ear. It was indeed cold. I ruffled his head lightly and pushed him toward the table.

"Go sit all you want. I won't be back soon."

"I'll take a snooze," said Len.

Chapter THREE

The Hotel Olympic was a fifteen-story red-and-black structure. Half the plaza in front of it was covered with cars, and in its center stood a monument surrounded by a small flowerbed. It represented a man with a proudly raised head. Detouring the monument, I suddenly realized that I knew the man. In puzzlement I stopped and examined it more thoroughly. There was no doubt about it. There in front of Hotel Olympic, in a funny old-fashioned suit with his hand resting on an incomprehensible apparatus which I almost took for the extension of the abstract-styled base, and with his eyes staring at infinity through contemptuously squinting lids, was none other than Vladimir Sergeyeitch Yurkovsky. Carved in gold letters on the base was the legend "Vladimir Yurkovsky, December 5, Year of the Scales."

I couldn't believe it, because they do not raise monuments to Yurkovskys. While they live, they are appointed to more or less responsible positions, they are honored at jubilees, they are elected to membership in academies. They are rewarded with medals and are honored with international prizes, and when they die or perish; they are the subjects of books, quotations, references, but always less and less often as time passes, and finally they are forgotten altogether. They depart the halls of memory and linger on only in books. Vladimir Sergeyeitch was a general of the sciences and a remarkable man. But it is not possible to erect monuments to all generals and all remarkable

men, especially in countries to which they had no direct relationship and in cities where if they did visit, it was only temporarily. In any case, in that Year of the Scales, which is of significance only to them, he was not even a general. In March he was, jointly with Dauge, completing the investigation of the Amorphous Spot on Uranus. That was when the sounding probe blew up and we all got a dose in the work section -- and when we got back to the Planet in September, he was all spotted with lilac blotches, mad at the world, promising himself that he would take time out to swim and get sunburned and then get right back to the design of a new probe because the old one was trash.... I looked at the hotel again to reassure myself. The only out was to assume that the life of the town was in some mysterious and potent manner highly dependent on the Amorphous Spot on Uranus. Yurkovsky continued to smile with snobbish superiority. Generally, the sculpture was quite good, but I could not figure out what it was he was leaning on. The apparatus didn't look like the probe.

Something hissed by my ear. I turned and involuntarily sprang back. Beside me, staring dully at the monument base, was a tall gaunt individual closely encased from head to foot in some sort of gray scaly material and with a bulky cubical helmet around his head. The face was obscured behind a glass plate with holes, from which smoke issued in synchronism with his breathing. The wasted visage behind the plate was covered

with perspiration and the cheeks twitched in frantic tempo. At first I took him for a Wanderer, then I thought that he was a tourist executing a curative routine, and only finally did I realize that I was looking at an Arter.

"Excuse me," I said "Could you please tell me what sort of monument this is?"

The damp face contorted more desperately. "What?" came the dull response from inside the helmet.

I bent down.

"I am inquiring: what is this monument?"

The man glared at the statue. The smoke came thicker out of the holes. There was more powerful hissing.

"Vladimir Yurkovsky," he read, "Fifth of December, Year of the Scales... aha... December... so -- it must be some German."

"And who put up the monument?"

"I don't know," said the man. "But it's written down right there. What's it to you?"

"I was an acquaintance of his," I explained.

"Well then, why do you ask? Ask the man himself."

"He is dead."

"Aah... Maybe they buried him here?"

"No," I said, "he is buried far away."

"Where?"

"Far away. What's that thing he is holding?"

"What thing? It's an eroula."

"What?"

"I said, an eroula. An electronic roulette."-

My eyes popped.

"What's a roulette doing here?"

"Where?"

"Here, on the statue."

"I don't know," said the man after some thought. "Maybe your friend invented it?"

"Hardly," said I. "He worked in a different field."

"What was that?"

"He was a planetologist and an interplanetary pilot."

"Aah... well, if he invented it, that was bully for him.

It's a useful thing. I should remember it: Yurkovsky, Vladimir.

He must have been a brainy German."

"I doubt he invented it," I said. "I repeat -- he was an interplanetary pilot."

The man stared at me.

"Well, if he didn't invent it, then why is he standing with it?"

"That's the point," I said. "I am amazed myself."

"You are a damn liar," said the man suddenly. "You lie and you don't even know why you are lying. It's early morning, and he is stoned already.... Alcoholic!"

He turned away and shuffled off, dragging his thin legs and hissing loudly. I shrugged my shoulders, took a last look at Vladimir Sergeyevitch, and set off toward the hotel, across

the huge plaza.

The gigantic doorman swung the door open for me and sounded an energetic welcome.

I stopped.

"Would you be so kind," said I. "Do you know what that monument is?"

The doorman looked toward the plaza over my head. His face registered confusion.

"Isn't that written on it?"

"There is a legend," I said. "But who put it up and why?"

The doorman shuffled his feet.

"I beg your pardon," he said guiltily, "I just can't answer

your question. The monument has been there a long time, while I came here very recently. I don't wish to misinform you. Maybe the porter..."

I sighed.

"Well, don't worry about it. Where is a telephone?"

"To your right, if you please," he said looking delighted.

A porter started out in my direction, but I shook my head and picked up the receiver and dialed Rimeyer's number. This time I got a busy signal. I went to the elevator and up to the ninth floor.

Rimeyer, looking untypically fleshy, met me in a dressing gown, out of which stuck legs in pants and with shoes on. The room stank of cigarette smoke and the ashtray was full of

butts. There was a general air of chaos in the whole suite. One of the armchairs was knocked over, a woman's slip was lying crumpled on the couch, and a whole battery of empty bottles glinted under the table.

"What can I do for you?" asked Rimeyer with a touch of hostility, looking at my chin. Apparently he was recently out of his bathroom, and his sparse colorless hair was wet against his long skull. I handed him my card in silence. Rimeyer read it slowly and attentively, shoved it in his pocket, and continuing to look at my chin, said, "Sit down."

I sat.

"It is most unfortunate. I am devilishly busy and don't have a minute's time."

"I called you several times today," said I.

"I just got back. What's your name?"

"Ivan."

"And your last name?"

"Zhilin."

"You see, Zhilin, to make it short, I have to get dressed and leave again." He was silent awhile, rubbing his flabby cheeks. "Anyway there's not much to talk about.... However, if you wish, you can sit here and wait for me. If I don't return in an hour, come back tomorrow at twelve. And leave your telephone number and address, write it down right on the table there...."

He threw off the bathrobe, and dragging it along, walked off into the adjoining room.

"In the meantime," he continued, "you can see the town, and a miserable little town it is.... But you'll have to do it in any case. As for me, I am sick to my stomach of it."

He returned adjusting his tie. His hands were trembling, and the skin on his face looked gray and wilted. Suddenly I felt that I did not trust him -- the sight of him was repellent, like that of a neglected sick man.

"You look poorly," I said. "You have changed a great deal."

For the first time he looked me in the eyes.

"And how would you know what I was like before?"

"I saw you at Matia's. You smoke a lot, Rimeyer, and tobacco is saturated regularly with all kinds of trash nowadays."

"Tobacco -- that's a lot of nonsense," he said with sudden irritation. "Here everything is saturated with all kinds of tripe.... But perhaps you may be right, probably I should quit." He pulled on his jacket slowly; "Time to quit, and in any case, I shouldn't have started."

"How is the work coming along?"

"It could be worse. And unusually absorbing work it is." He smiled in a peculiar unpleasant way. "I am going now, as they are waiting for me and I am late. So, till an hour from now, or until tomorrow at twelve."

He nodded to me and left.

I wrote my address and telephone number on the table, and as my foot plowed into the mass of bottles underneath, I couldn't help but think that the work was indeed absorbing. I called room service and requested a chambermaid to clean up the room. The most polite of voices replied that the occupant of the suite categorically forbade service personnel to enter his room during his absence and had repeated the prohibition just now on leaving the hotel. "Aha," I said, and hung up. This didn't sit well with me. For myself, I never issue such directions and have never hidden even my notebooks, not from anyone. It's stupid to work at deception and much better to drink less. I picked up the overturned armchair, sat down, and prepared for a long wait, trying to overcome a sense of displeasure and disappointment.

I didn't have to wait for long. After some ten minutes, the door opened a crack and a pretty face protruded into the room.

"Hey there," it pronounced huskily. "Is Rimeyer in?"

"Rimeyer is not in, but you can come in anyway."

She hesitated, examining me. Apparently she had no intention of coming in, but was just saying hello, in passing.

"Come in, come in," said I. "I have nothing to do."

She entered with a light dancing gait, and putting her arms akimbo, stood in front of me. She had a short turned-up

nose and a disheveled boyish hairdo. The hair was red, the shorts crimson, and the blouse a bright yolk yellow. A colorful woman and quite attractive. She must have been about twenty-five.

"You wait -- right?"

Her eyes were unnaturally bright and she smelled of wine, tobacco, and perfume.

She collapsed on the hassock and flung her legs up on the telephone table.

"Throw a cigarette to a working girl," she said. "It's five hours since I had one."

"I don't smoke. Shall I ring for some?"

"Good Lord, another sad sack! Never mind the phone .. or that dame will show up again. Rummage around in the ashtray and find me a good long butt."

The ashtray did have a lot of long butts.

"They all have lipstick on them," said I.

"That's all right; it's my lipstick. What's your name?"

"Ivan."

She snapped a lighter and lit up.

"And mine is Ilina. Are you a foreigner, too? All you foreigners seem so wide. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Rimeyer."

"I don't mean that! What brought you here, are you escaping from your wife?"

"I am not married," I said quietly. "I came to write a

book."

"A book? Some friends this Rimeyer has. He came to write a book. Sex Problems of Impotent Sportsmen. How's your situation with the sex problem?"

"It is not a problem to me," I said mildly. "And how about you?"

She lowered her legs from the table.

"That's a no-no. Take it slow. This isn't Paris, you know. All in good time. Anyway, you should have your locks cut -- sitting there like a perch."

"Like a who?" I was very patient as I had another forty-five minutes to wait.

"Like a perch. You know the type." She made vague motions around her ears.

"I don't know about that," I said. "I don't know anything yet as I have just arrived. Tell me about it, it sounds interesting."

"Oh no! Not I! We don't chatter. Our bit is a small one -- serve, clean up, flash your teeth, and keep quiet. Professional secret. Have you heard of such an animal?"

"I've heard," I said. "But who's 'we' -- an association of doctors?"

For some reason, she thought this was hilarious.

"Doctors! Imagine that." She laughed. "Well, wise guy, you're all right -- quite a tongue. We have one in the once

like you. One word, and we're all rolling in the aisles.

Whenever we cater to the Fishers, he always gets the job, they like a good laugh."

"Who doesn't?" said I.

"Well, you are wrong. The Intels, for instance, chased him out. 'Take the fool away,' they said. Or also recently those pregnant males."

"Who?"

"The sad ones. Well, I can see you don't understand a thing. Where in heaven's name did you come from?"

"From Vienna."

"So -- don't you have the sad ones in Vienna?"

"You couldn't imagine what we don't have in Vienna."

"Could be you don't even have irregular meetings?"

"No, we don't have them. All our meetings are regular, like a bus schedule."

She was having a good time.

"Perhaps you don't have waitresses either?"

"Waitresses we do have, and you can find some excellent examples. Are you a waitress then?"

She jumped up abruptly.

"That won't do at all," she cried. "I've had enough sad ones for today. Now you're going to have a loving cup with me like a good fellow...." She began to search furiously among the bottles by the window. "Damn him, they're all empty! Could be you're a teetotaler? Aha, here's a little vermouth. You drink

that, or shall we order whiskey?"

"Let's begin with the vermouth," said I.

She banged the bottle on the table and took two glasses from the window sill.

"Have to wash them. Hold on a minute, everything's full of garbage." She went into the bathroom and continued to speak from there. "If you turned out to be a teetotaler on top of everything else. I don't know what I would do with you.... What a pigsty he's got in his bathroom -- I love it! Where are you staying? Here too?"

"No, in town," I replied. "On Second Waterway."

She came back with the glasses.

"Straight or with water?"

"Straight, I guess."

"All foreigners take it straight. But we have it with water for some reason." She sat on my armchair and put her arms around my shoulders. We drank and kissed without any feeling. Her lips were heavily lipsticked, and her eyelids were heavy from lack of sleep and fatigue. She put down her glass, searched out another butt in the ashtray, and returned to the hassock.

"Where is that Rimeyer?" she said. "After all, how long can you wait for him? Have you known him a long time?"

"No, not very."

"I think maybe he is a louse," she said with sudden ire.

"He's dug everything out of me, and now he plays hard to get.

He doesn't open his door, the animal, and you can't get through to him by phone. Say, he wouldn't be a spy, would he?"

"What do you mean, a spy?"

"Oh, there's loads of them.... From the Association for Sobriety and Morality.... The Connoisseurs and Appraisers are also a bad lot...."

"No, Rimeyer is a decent sort," I said with some effort.

"Decent... you are all decent. In the beginning, Rimeyer too was decent, so good-natured and full of fun... and now he looks at you like a croc."

"Poor fellow," I said. "He must have remembered his family and become ashamed of himself."

"He doesn't have a family. Anyway, the heck with him! Have another drink?"

We had another drink. She lay down and put her hands over her head. Finally she spoke.

"Don't let it get to you. Spit on it! Wine we have enough of, we'll dance, go to the shivers. Tomorrow there's a football game, we'll bet on the Bulls."

"I am not letting it get to me. If you want to bet on the Bulls, we'd bet on the Bulls."

"Oh those Bulls! They are some boys! I could watch them forever, arms like iron, snuggling up against them is just like snuggling against a tree trunk, really!"

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in!" yelled Ilina.

A man entered and stopped at once. He was tall and bony, of middle age, with a brush mustache and light protruding eyes.

"I beg your pardon, I was looking for Rimeyer," he said.

"Everyone here wants to see Rimeyer," said Ilina. "Have a chair and we'll all wait together."

The stranger bowed his head and sat down by the table, crossing his legs.

Apparently he had been here before. He did not look around, but stared at the wall directly in front of him.

However, perhaps he just was not a curious type. In any case, it was clear that neither I nor Ilina was of any interest to him. This seemed unnatural to me, since I felt that such a pair as myself and Ilina should arouse interest in any normal person. Ilina raised up on her elbow and scrutinized him in detail.

"I have seen you somewhere," she said.

"Really?" said the stranger coldly.

"What's your name?"

"Oscar. I am Rimeyer's friend."

"That's fine," said Ilina. She was obviously irritated by the stranger's indifference, but she kept herself in check.

"He's also a friend of Rimeyer." She stuck her finger at me.

"You know each other?"

"No," said Oscar, continuing to look at the wall.

"My name is Ivan," said I. "And this is Rimeyer's friend, Ilina. We just drank to our fraternal friendship."

Oscar glanced indifferently in Ilina's direction and nodded his head politely. Ilina picked up the bottle without taking her eyes off him.

"There's still a little left here," she said. "Would you like a drink, Oscar?"

"No, thank you," he said, coldly.

"To fraternal friendship!" said Ilina. "No? You don't want to? Too bad!"

She splashed some wine in my glass, poured the rest in hers, and downed it at once.

"Never in my life would I have thought that Rimeyer could have friends who refuse a drink. Still, I have seen you somewhere before."

Oscar shrugged his shoulders.

"I doubt it," he said.

Ilina was visibly becoming enraged.

"Some sort of a fink," she said to me loudly. "Say there, Oscar, you wouldn't be an Intel?"

"No."

"What do you mean, no?" said Ilina. "You're the one who had a set-to with that baldy Leiz at the Weasel, broke a mirror, and had your face slapped by Mody."

The stone visage of Oscar grew a shade pinker.

"I assure you," he said courteously, "I am not an Intel

and have never in my life been in the Weasel."

"Are you saying that I'm a liar?" said Ilina

At this point I took the bottle off the table and put it under my armchair, just in case.

"I am a visitor," said Oscar. "A tourist."

"When did you arrive?" I said to discharge the tension.

"Very recently," replied Oscar. He continued to gaze at the wall. Obviously here was a man with iron discipline.

"Oh, oh!" said Ilina suddenly. "Now I remember! I got it all mixed up."

She burst out laughing, "Of course you're no Intel! You were at our office the day before last. You're the salesman who offered our manager some junk like... 'Dugong' or 'Dupont...'"

"Devon," I prompted. "There is a repellent called Devon."

Oscar smiled for the first time.

"You are quite right, of course," he said. "But I am not a salesman. I was only doing a favor for a relative."

"That's different," said Ilina and jumped up. "You should have said so. Ivan, we all need to drink to a pledge of friendship. I'll call... no, I'll go get it myself. You two can have a talk, I'll be right back."

She ran out of the room, banging the door.

"A fun girl," said I.

"Yes, extremely. You live here?"

"No, I'm a traveler, too.... What a strange idea your

relative had!"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Who needs Devon in a resort town?"

Oscar shrugged.

"It's hard for me to judge; I'm no chemist. But you will agree that it's hard for us to comprehend the actions of our fellow men, much less their fancies.... So Devon turns out to be - What did you call it, a res...?"

"Repellent," I said.

"That would be for mosquitoes?"

"Not so much for as against."

"I can see you are quite well up on it," said Oscar.

"I had occasion to use it."

"Well, well."

What the devil, thought I. What is he getting at? He was no longer staring at the wall He was looking me straight in the eyes and smiling. But if he was going to say something, it was already said.

He got up.

"I don't think I'll wait any longer," he pronounced. "It looks like I'll have to drink another pledge. But I didn't come here to drink, I came here to get well. Please tell Rimeyer that I will call him again tonight. You won't forget?"

"No," I said, "I won't forget. If I tell him that Oscar was in to see him, he will know whom I am talking about?"

"Yes, of course. It's my real name."

He bowed, and walked out at a deliberate pace, ramrod-straight and somehow unnatural-looking. I dipped my hand in the ashtray, found a butt without lipstick, and inhaled several times. I didn't like the taste and put out the stub. I didn't like Oscar, either. Nor Ilina. And especially Rimeyer -- I didn't like him at all. I pawed through the bottles, but they were all empty.

Chapter FOUR

In the end I didn't wait long enough to see Rimeyer. Ilina never came back. Finally I got tired of sitting in the smoky, stale atmosphere of the room and went down to the lobby. I intended to have dinner and stopped to look around for a restaurant. A porter immediately materialized at my side.

"At your service," he murmured discreetly. "An auto? Bar? Restaurant? Salon?"

"What kind of salon?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"A hair-styling salon." He looked at my hairdo with delicate concern. "Master Gaoway is receiving today. I recommend him most strenuously."

I recollected that Ilina had called me a disheveled perch and said, "Well, all right."

"Please follow me," said the porter.

Crossing the lobby, he opened a wide low door and said

into the spacious interior, "Excuse me, Master, you have a client."

"Come in," replied a quiet voice.

I entered. The salon was light and airy and smelled pleasantly. Everything in it shone -- the chrome, the mirrors, the antique parquet floor. Shiny half-domes hung from the ceiling on glistening rods. In the center stood a huge white barber chair. The Master was advancing to meet me. He had penetrating immobile eyes, a hooked nose, and a gray Van Dyke. More than anything else he reminded me of a mature, experienced surgeon. I greeted him with some timidity, He nodded and, surveying me from head to foot, began to circle around me. I began to feel uncomfortable.

"I would like you to bring me up to the current fashion," said I, trying not to let him out of my field of view.

But he restrained me gently by my sleeve and stood breathing softly behind my back for a few seconds. "No doubt! No doubt at all", he murmured, then touched me lightly on my shoulder. "Please," he said sternly, "take a few steps forward -- five or six -- then turn abruptly to face me."

I obeyed. He regarded me pensively, pulling on his beard. I thought he was hesitating.

"On the other hand," he said, "sit down."

"Where?" I said.

"In the chair, in the chair."

I lowered myself into its softness and watched him

approach me slowly. His intelligent face was suddenly suffused with a look of profound chagrin.

"But how is such a thing possible?" he said. "It's absolutely awful."

I couldn't find anything to say.

"Gross disharmony," he muttered. "Repulsive... repulsive."

"Is it really that bad?" I asked.

"I don't understand why you came to me," he said, "since you obviously don't place any value at all on your appearance."

"I am beginning to, from this day on," I said.

He waved his hand.

"Never mind... I will work on you, but..." He shook his head, turned impulsively, and went to a high table covered with shiny devices. The back of the chair depressed smoothly, and I found myself in a half-reclining position. A big hemisphere descended toward me from above, radiating warmth, while hundreds of tiny needles seemed to sink into the nape of my neck, eliciting a strange combination of simultaneous pain and pleasure.

"Is it gone yet?" he asked.

The sensation abated.

"It's gone," I said.

"Your skin is good," growled the Master with a certain satisfaction.

He returned with an assortment of the most unlikely

instruments and proceeded to palpate my cheeks.

"And still Mirosa married him," he said suddenly. "I expected anything and everything, except that. After all that Levant had done for her. Do you remember that moment when they were both weeping over the dying Pina? You could have bet anything that they would be together forever. And now, imagine, she is being wed to that literary fellow."

I have a rule: to pick up and sustain any conversation that comes along. When you don't know what it's all about, this can even be interesting.

"Not for long," I said with assurance. "Literary types are very inconstant, I can assure you, being one myself."

For a moment his hands paused on my temples.

"That didn't enter my head," he admitted. "Still, it's wedlock, even though only a civil one.... I must remember to call my wife. She was very upset."

"I can sympathize with her," I said. "But it did always seem to me that Levant was in love with that... Pina."

"In love?" exclaimed the Master, coming around from my other side. "Of course he loved her! Madly! As only a lonely, rejected-by-all man can love."

"And so it was quite natural that after the death of Pina, he sought consolation with her best friend."

"Her bosom friend, yes," said the Master approvingly, while tickling me behind the ear. "Mirosa adored Pina! It's a very accurate term -- bosom friend! One senses a literary man

in you at once! And Pina, too, adored Mirosa."

"But, you notice," I picked up, "that, right from the beginning Pina suspected that Mirosa was infatuated with Levant."

"Well, of course! They are extremely sensitive about such things. This was clear to everyone -- my wife noticed it at once. I recollect that she would nudge me with her elbow each time Pina alighted on Mirosa's tousled head, and so coyly and expectantly looked at Levant."

This time I kept my peace.

"In general, I am profoundly convinced," he continued, "that birds feel no less sensitively than people."

Aha, thought I, and said, "I don't know about birds in general, but Pina was a lot more sensitive than let's say even you or I."

Something bummed briefly over my head, and there was a soft clink of metal.

"You speak like my wife, word for word," observed the Master, "so you most probably must like Dan. I was overcome when he was able to construct a bunkin for that Japanese noblewoman... can't think of her name. After all, not one person believed Dan. The Japanese king, himself..."

"I beg your pardon," I said. "A bunkin?"

"Yes, of course, you are not a specialist.... You remember that moment when the Japanese noblewoman comes out of prison.

Her hair, in a high roller of blond hair, is ornamented with precious combs..."

"Aah," I guessed. "It's a coiffure."

"Yes, it even became fashionable for a time last year.

Although a true bunkin could be made by a very few... even as a real chignon, by the way. And, of course, no one could believe that Dan, with his burned hands and half-blind .. Do you remember how he was blinded?"

"It was overpowering," I said.

"Oh yes, Dan was a true Master. To make a bunkin without electro-preparation, without biodevelopment... You know, I just had a thought," he continued, and there was a note of excitement in his voice. "It just struck me that Mirosa, after she parts with that literary guy, should marry Dan and not Levant. She will be wheeling him out on the veranda in his chair, and they will be listening to the singing nightingales in the moonlight -- the two of them together."

"And crying quietly out of sheer happiness," I said.

"Yes," the voice of the Master broke, "that would be only right. Otherwise I just don't know, I just don't understand, what all our struggles are for. No... we must insist. I'll go to the union this very day...."

I kept quiet, again. The Master was breathing uneasily by my ear.

"Let them go and shave at the automates," he said suddenly in a vengeful tone, "let them look like plucked geese. We let

them have a taste once before of what it's like; now we'll see how they appreciate it."

"I am afraid it won't be simple," I said cautiously, not -- having the vaguest idea of what this was about.

"We Masters are used to the complicated. It's not all that simple -- when a fat and sweaty stuffed shirt comes to you, and you have to make a human being out of him, or at the very best, something which under normal circumstances does not differ too much from a human being... is that simple? Remember what Dan said: 'Woman gives birth to a human being once in nine months, but we Masters have to do it every day.' Aren't those magnificent words?"

"Dan was talking about barbers?" I said, just in case.

"Dan was talking about Masters. 'The beauty of the world rests on our shoulders,' he would say. And again, do you remember: 'In order to make a man out of an ape, Darwin had to be an excellent Master.'"

I decided to capitulate and confess.

"This I don't remember."

"How long have you been watching 'Rose of the Salon'?"

"Well, I have arrived just recently."

"Aah, then you have missed a lot. My wife and I have been watching the program for seven years, every Tuesday. We missed only one show; I had an attack and lost consciousness. But in the whole town there is only one man who hasn't missed even one

show -- Master Mille at the Central Salon."

He moved off a few paces, turned various colored lights on and off, and resumed his work.

"The seventh year," he repeated. "And now -- can you imagine -- the year before last they kill off Miroso and throw Levant into a Japanese prison for life, while Dan is burned at the stake. Can you visualize that?"

"It's impossible," I said. "Dan? At the stake? Although it's true that they burned Bruno at the stake, too."

"It's possible," he said with impatience. "In any case, it became clear to us that they want to fold up the program fast. But we didn't put up with that. We declared a strike and struggled for three weeks. Mille and I picketed the barber automates. And let me tell you that quite a lot of the townspeople sympathized with us."

"I should think so," I said. "And what happened? Did you win?"

"As you see. They grasped very well what was involved, and now the TV center knows with whom they are dealing. We didn't give one step, and if need be, we won't. Anyway we can rest on Tuesdays now just like in the old days -- for real."

"And the other days?"

"The other days we wait for Tuesday and try to guess what is awaiting us and what you literary fellows will do for us. We guess and make bets -- although we Masters don't have much leisure."

"You have a large clientele?"

"No, that's not it. I mean homework. It's not difficult to become a Master, it's difficult to remain one. There is a mass of literature, lots of new methods, new applications, and you have to keep up with it all and constantly experiment, investigate and keep track of allied fields -- bionics, plastic medicine, organic medicine. And with time, you accumulate experience, and you get the urge to share your knowledge. So Mille and I are writing our second book, and practically every month, we have to update the manuscript. Everything becomes obsolete right before your eyes. I am now completing a treatise on a little-known characteristic of the naturally straight nonplastic hair; and do you know I have practically no chance of being the first? In our country alone, I know of three Masters who are occupied with the same subject. It's only to be expected -- the naturally straight nonplastic hair is a real problem. It's considered to be absolutely nonaestheticizable.... However, this may not be of interest to you? You are a writer?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, you know, during the strike, I had a chance to run through a novel. That would not be yours, by any chance?"

"I don't know," I said, "What was it about?"

"Well, I couldn't say exactly.... Son quarrels with father. He has a friend, an unpleasant fellow with a strange

name. He occupies himself by cutting up frogs."

"Can't remember," I lied -- poor Ivan Sergeyevitch.

"I can't remember either. It was some sort of nonsense. I have a son, but he never quarrels with me, and he never tortures animals -- except perhaps when he was a child"

He backed away again and made a slow circuit around me. His eyes were burning; he seemed to be very pleased.

"It looks as though we can stop here," he said.

I got out of the chair. "Not bad. Not bad at all," murmured the Master. I approached the mirror. He turned on spotlights, which illuminated me from all sides so that there were no shadows on my face.

In the first instant I did not notice anything unusual about myself. It was my usual self. Then I felt that it was not I at all. That it was something much better than I. A whole lot better. Better looking than I. More benevolent than I. Appreciably more significant than I. I experienced a sense of shame, as though I were deliberately passing myself off as a man to whom I couldn't hold a candle.

"How did you do this thing?" I said in a strangled tone.

"It's nothing," said the Master, smiling in a very special way. "You turned out to be a fairly easy client, albeit quite neglected."

I stood before the mirror like Narcissus and couldn't tear myself away. Suddenly, I felt awed. The Master was a magician, and an evil one at that, although he probably didn't realize it

himself. The mirror reflected an extremely attractive lie. An intelligent, good-looking, monumental vapidness. Well, perhaps not a total vacuum, for after all I didn't have that low an opinion of myself. But the contrast was too great. All of my inner world, everything I valued in myself -- all that could just as well have not existed. It was no longer needed. I looked at the Master. He was smiling.

"You have many clients?" I asked.

He did not grasp my meaning, but after all, I didn't really want him to understand me.

"Don't worry," he replied, "I'll always work on you with pleasure. The rawest material is the most intriguing."

"Thank you," said I, lowering my eyes so as not to see his smile. "Thank you. Goodbye."

"Just don't forget to pay," he said placidly. "We Masters value our work very highly."

"Yes, of course," I caught myself. "Naturally. How much do I owe you?"

He stated how much I owed.

"What?" said I regaining my equilibrium.

He repeated with satisfaction.

"Madness", I said forthrightly.

"Such is the price of beauty," he explained. "You came here as an ordinary tourist, and you are leaving a king of this domain."

"An impersonator is what I am leaving as," I muttered, extracting the money.

"No, no, not that bad!" he said confidentially. "Even I don't know that for sure. And even you are not convinced of it entirely.... Two more dollars, please. Thank you. Here is 50 pfennigs change. You don't mind pfennigs?"

I had nothing against pfennigs. I wanted to leave as fast as possible.

I stood in the lobby for a while, becoming myself again, and gazing at the metallic figure of Vladimir Sergejevitch. After all, all this is not new. After all, millions of people are not what they pass themselves for. But the damnable barber had made me over into an empiriocritic. Reality was masked with gorgeous hieroglyphics. I no longer believed what I saw in this city. The plaza covered with stereo-plastic was probably in reality not beautiful at all. Under the elegant contours of the autos lurked ominous and ugly shapes. And that beautiful charming woman is no doubt in fact a repulsive malodorous hyena, a promiscuous dull-witted sow. I closed my eyes and shook my head. The old devil!

Two meticulously groomed oldsters stopped nearby and began to debate heatedly the relative merits of baked pheasant compared with pheasant broiled with feathers. They argued, drooling saliva, smacking their lips and choking, snapping their bony fingers under each other's noses. No Master could help these two. They were Masters themselves and they made no

bones about it. At any rate, they restored my materialist viewpoint. I went to a porter and inquired about a restaurant.

"Right in front of you," said he and smiled at the arguing oldsters. "Any cuisine in the world."

I could have mistaken the entrance to the restaurant for the gates to a botanical garden. I entered, parting the branches of exotic trees, stepping alternately on soft grass and coral flagstones. Unseen birds twittered in the luxuriant greenery, and the discreet clatter of utensils was mixed with the sound of conversation and laughter. A golden bird flew right in front of my nose, barely able to carry the load of a caviar tartine in its beak.

"I am at your service," said the deep velvety voice.

An imposing giant of a man with epaulettes stepped toward me cut of a thicket.

"Dinner," I said curtly. I don't like maitres-d'hotel.

"Dinner," he said significantly. "In company? Separate table?"

"Separate table. On second thought..."

A notebook instantaneously appeared in his hand.

"A man of your age would be welcome at the table of Mrs. and Miss Hamilton-Rey."

"Go on," I said.

"Father Geoffrois..."

"I would prefer an aborigine."

He turned the page.

"Opir, doctor of philosophy, just now has sat down at his table."

"That's a possibility," said I.

He put away the book and led me along a path paved with limestone slabs. Somewhere around us there were people eating, talking, swishing seltzer. Hummingbirds darted like multicolored bees in the leaves. The maitre-d'hotel inquired respectfully, "How would you like to be introduced?"

"Ivan. Tourist and litterateur."

Doctor Opir was about fifty. I liked him at once because he immediately and without any ceremony sent the maitre-d'hotel packing after a waiter. He was pink and plump, and moved and talked incessantly.

"Don't trouble yourself," he said when I reached for the menu. "It's all set already. Vodka, anchovies under egg -- we call them pacifunties -- potato soup..."

"With sour cream," I interjected.

"Of course!... steamed sturgeon a la Astrakhan... a patty of veal..."

"I would prefer pheasant baked in feathers."

"No -- don't; it's not the season... a slice of beef, eel in sweet marinade."

"Coffee," I said.

"Cognac," he retorted.

"Coffee with cognac."

"All right, cognac and coffee with cognac. Some pale wine with the fish and a good natural cigar."

Dinner with Doctor Opir turned out to be most congenial. It was possible to eat, drink, and listen. Or not to listen. Doctor Opir did not need a conversation. He required a listener. I did not have to participate in the talking, I didn't even supply any commentaries, while he orated with enthusiastic delight, almost without interruption, waving his fork, while plates and dishes nonetheless became empty in front of him with mystifying speed. Never in my life have I met a man who was so skilled in conversation while his mouth was so fully packed and so busy masticating.

"Science! Her Majesty!" he exclaimed. "She matured long and painfully, but her fruits turned out to be abundant and sweet. Stop, Moment, you are beautiful! Hundreds of generations were born, suffered, and died, and not one was impelled to pronounce this incantation. We are singularly fortunate. We were born in the greatest of epochs, the Epoch of the Satisfaction of Desires. It may be that not everybody understands this as yet, but ninety-nine percent of my fellow citizens are already living in a world where, for all practical purposes, a man can have all he can think of. O, Science! You have finally freed mankind. You have given us and will henceforth provide for us everything -- food -- wonderful food -- clothing of the best quality and in any quantity, and to

suit any taste! -- shelter -- magnificent shelter. Love, joy, satisfaction, and for those desiring it, for those who are fatigued by happiness -- tears, sweet tears, little saving sorrows, pleasant consoling worries which lend us significance in our own eyes.... Yes, we philosophers have maligned science long and angrily. We called forth Luddites, to break up machines, we cursed Einstein, who changed our whole universe, we vilified Wiener, who impugned our godlike essence. Well, so we really lost that godlike substance. Science robbed us of it. But in return! In return, it launched men to the feasting tables of Olympus. Aha! Here is the potato soup, that heavenly porridge. No, no, do as I do... take this spoon, a touch of vinegar... a dash of pepper... with the other spoon, this one here, dip some sour cream and... no, no... gently, gently mix it.... This too is a science, one of the most ancient, older in any cue than the ubiquitous synthetic.... By the way, don't fail to visit our synthesizers, Amalthea's Horn, Inc. You wouldn't be a chemist? Oh yes, you are a litterateur! You should write about it, the greatest mystery of our times, beefsteaks out of thin air, asparagus from clay, truffles from sawdust.... What a pity that Malthus is dead!! The whole world would be laughing at him! Of course, he had certain reasons for his pessimism. I am prepared to agree with those who consider him a genius. But he was too ill-informed, he completely missed the possibilities in the natural sciences. He was one of those unlucky geniuses who discover laws of social development

precisely at that moment when these laws cease to operate. I am genuinely sorry for him. The whole of humanity was but billions of hungrily gaping mouths to him. He must have lost sleep from the sheer horror of it. It is a truly monstrous nightmare -- a billion gaping maws and not one head. I turned back and see with bitterness how blind they were, the shakers of souls and the masters of the minds of the recent past. Their awareness was dimmed by unbroken horror. Social Darwinists! They saw only the press of the struggle for survival: mobs of hunger-crazed people, tearing each other to pieces for a place in the sun, as though there was only that one single place, as though the sun wasn't sufficient for all! And Nietzsche... maybe he was suitable for the hungry slaves of the Pharaohs' times, with his ominous sermons about the master race, with his supermen beyond good and evil... who needs to be beyond now? It's not so bad on this side, don't you suppose? There were, of course, Marx and Freud. Marx, for example, was the first to understand that it all depended on economics. He understood that to rip the economics out of the hands of greedy nincompoops and fetishists, to make it part of the state, to develop it limitlessly, was the very way to lay the foundations of a Golden Age. And Freud showed us for what, after all, we needed this Golden Age. Recollect the source of all human misery. Unsatisfied instincts, unrequited love, and unsated hunger -- isn't that right? But here comes Her Majesty, Science, and

presents us with satisfactions. And how rapidly all this has come to pass! The names of gloomy prognosticators are not yet forgotten, and already... How do you like the sturgeon? I am under the impression that the sauce is synthetic. Do you see the pinkish tint? Yes, it is synthetic. In a restaurant we should be able to expect natural sauce. Waiter! On second thought -- the devil take it, let's not be so finicky. Go on, go on... Now what was I saying? Yes! Love and hunger. Satisfy love and hunger, and you'll see a happy man. On condition, of course, that your man is secure about the next day. All the utopias of all times are based on this simplest of considerations. Free a man of the worry about his daily bread and about the morrow, and he will become truly free and happy. I am deeply convinced that children, yes, precisely the children, are man's ideal. I see the most profound meaning in the remarkable similarity between a child and the carefree man who is the object of utopia. Carefree means happy -- and we are so close to that ideal! Another few decades, or maybe just a few more years, and we will attain the automated plenty, we will discard science as a healed man discards his crutches, and the whole of mankind will become one huge happy family of children. The adults will be distinguished from the children only by their ability to love, and this ability will, again with the help of science, become the source of new and unheard-of joys and pleasures.... Excuse me, what is your name? Ivan? So, you must be from Russia. Communist? Aha... well,

everything is different there I know.... And here is the coffee! Mm, not bad. But where is the cognac? Well, thank you!

By the way, I hear that the Great Wine Taster has retired. The most grandiose scandal befell at the Brussels contest of cognacs, which was suppressed only with the greatest of difficulties. The Grand Prix is awarded to the White Centaur brand. The jury is delighted! It is something totally unprecedented! Such a phenomenal extravaganza of sensations!

The declaratory packet is opened, and, oh horrors, it's a synthetic! The Great Wine Taster turned as white as a sheet of paper and was physically ill. By the way, I had an opportunity to try this cognac, and it's really superb, but they run it from crude and it doesn't even have a proper name. H ex eighteen naphtha fraction and it's cheaper than hydrolyzed alcohol.... Have a cigar. Nonsense, what do you mean you don't smoke? It's not right not to have a cigar after a dinner like this.... I love this restaurant. Every time I come here to lecture at the university, I dine at the Olympic. And before returning, I invariably visit the Tavern. True, they don't have the greenery, nor the tropical birds, and it's a bit stuffy and warm and smells of smoke, but they have a genuine, inimitable cuisine. The Assiduous Tasters gather nowhere but there -- at the Gourmet. In that place you do nothing but eat. You can't talk, you can't laugh, it's totally nonsensical to go there with a woman -- you only eat there! Slowly, thoughtfully..."

Doctor Opir finally ran down, leaned back in his chair, and inhaled deeply with total enjoyment. I sucked on the mighty cigar and contemplated the man. I had him well pegged, this doctor of philosophy. Always and in all times there have been such men, absolutely pleased with their situation in society and therefore absolutely satisfied with the condition of that society. A marvelously well-gearred tongue and a lively pen, magnificent teeth and faultless innards, and a well-employed sexual apparatus.

"And so the world is beautiful, Doctor?"

"Yes," said the doctor with feeling, "it is finally beautiful."

"You are a gigantic optimist," said I.

"Our time is the time of optimists. Pessimists go to the Good Mood Salon, void the gall from their subconscious, and become optimists. The time of pessimists has passed, just as the time of tuberculars, of sexual maniacs, and of the military has passed. Pessimism, as an intellectual emotion, is being extirpated by that self-same science. And that not indirectly through the creation of affluence, but concretely by way of invasion of the dark world of the subcortex. Let's take the dream generator, currently the most popular diversion of the masses. It is completely harmless, unusually well adopted to general use, and is structurally simple. Or consider the neurostimulators...."

I attempted to steer him into the desired channel.

"Doesn't it seem to you that right there in the pharmaceutical field science is overdoing it a bit sometimes?"

Doctor Opir smiled condescendingly and sniffed at his cigar.

"Science has always moved by trial and error," he said weightily. "And I am inclined to believe that the so-called errors are always the result of criminal application. We haven't yet entered the Golden Age, we are just in the process of doing so, and all kinds of throwbacks, mobsters, and just plain dirt are under foot. So all kinds of drugs are put out which are health-destroying, but which are created, as you know, from the best of motives; all kinds of aromatics ... or this... well, that doesn't suit a dinner conversation." He cackled suddenly and obscenely "You can guess my meaning -- we are mature people! What was I saying? Oh yes, all this shouldn't disturb you. It will pass just like the atom bombs."

"I only wanted to emphasize," I remarked, "that there is still the problem of alcoholism, and the problem of narcotics."

Doctor Opir's interest in the conversation was visibly ebbing. Apparently he imagined that I challenged his thesis that science is a boon. To conduct an argument on this basis naturally bored him, as though, for instance, he had been affirming the salubriousness of ocean swimming and I was contradicting him on the basis that I had almost drowned last year.

"Well, of course..." he mumbled, studying his watch, "we can't have it all at once.... You must admit, after all, that it is the basic trend which is the most important.... Waiter!"

Doctor Opir had eaten well, had a good conversation -- professing progressive philosophy -- felt well-satisfied, and I decided not to press the matter, especially as I really didn't give a hang about his progressive philosophy, while in the matters which interested me the most, he probably would not be concretely informed at all in the final analysis.

We paid up and went out of the restaurant. I inquired, "Do you know, Doctor, whose monument that is? Over there on the plaza."

Doctor Opir gazed absent-mindedly. "Sure enough, it's a monument," he said. "Somehow I overlooked it before.... Shall I drop you somewhere?"

"Thank you, I prefer to walk."

"In that case, goodbye. It was a pleasure to meet you.... Of course it's hard to expect to convince you." He grimaced, shifting a toothpick around his mouth. "But it would be interesting to try. Perhaps you will attend my lecture? I begin tomorrow at ten."

"Thank you," I said. "What is your topic?"

"Neo-optimist Philosophy. I will be sure to touch upon a series of questions which we have so pithily discussed today."

"Thank you," I said again. "Most assuredly."

I watched as he went to his long automobile, collapsed in

the seat, pattered with the auto-driver control, fell back against the seat back, and apparently dozed off instantly. The car began to roll cautiously across the plaza and disappeared in the shade and greenery of a side street.

Neo-optimism... Neo-hedonism... Neo-cretinism... Neo-capitalism... "No evil without good," said the fox. So, I have landed in the Country of the Boobs. It should be recorded that the ratio of congenital fools does not vary as a function of time. It should be interesting to determine what is happening to the percentage of fools by conviction. Curious -- who assigned the title of Doctor to him? He is not the only one! There must have been a whole flock of doctors who ceremoniously granted that title to Neo-optimist Opir. However, this occurs not only among philosophers.

I saw Rimeyer come into the hall and forgot Doctor Opir at once. The suit hung on Rimeyer like a sack. Rimeyer stooped, and his face was flabby. I thought he wavered in his walk. He approached the elevator and I caught him by the sleeve there.

He jumped violently and turned on me.

"What in hell?" he said. He was clearly unhappy to see me.

"Why are you still here?"

"I waited for you."

"Didn't I tell you to come tomorrow at noon?"

"What's the difference?" I said. "Why waste time?"

He looked at me, breathing laboriously.

"I am expected. A man is waiting for me in my room, and he must not see you with me. Do you understand?"

"Don't shout," I said. "People are noticing."

Rimeyer glanced sideways with watery eyes.

"Go in the elevator," he said.

We entered and he pressed the button for the fifteenth floor.

"Get on with your business quickly," he said.

The order was startlingly stupid, so that I was momentarily disoriented.

"You mean to say that you don't know why I am here?"

He rubbed his forehead, and then said, "Hell, everything's mixed up.... Listen, I forgot, what is your name?"

"Zhilin."

"Listen, Zhilin, I have nothing new for you. I didn't have time to attend to that business. It's all a dream, do you understand? Matia's inventions. They sit there, writing papers, and invent. They should all be pitched the hell out."

We arrived at the fifteenth floor and he pressed the button for the first.

"Devil take it," he said. "Five more minutes and he'll leave.... In general I am convinced of one thing, there is nothing to it. Not in this town, in any case." He looked at me surreptitiously, and turned his eyes away. "Here is something I can tell you. Look in at the Fishers. Just like that, to clear your conscience."

"The Fishers? What Fishers?"

"You'll find out for yourself," he said impatiently. "But don't get tricky with them. Do everything they ask." Then, as though defending himself, he added, "I don't want any preconceptions, you understand."

The elevator stopped at the first floor and he signaled for the ninth.

"That's it," he said. "Then we'll meet and talk in detail. Let's say tomorrow at noon."

"All right," I said slowly. He obviously did not want to talk to me. Maybe he didn't trust me. Well, it happens!

"By the way," I said, "you have been visited by a certain Oscar."

It seemed to me that he started.

"Did he see you?"

"Naturally. He asked me to tell you that he will be calling tonight."

"That's bad, devil take it, bad...." muttered Rimeyer.

"Listen... damn, what is your name?"

"Zhilin."

The elevator stopped.

"Listen, Zhilin, it's very bad that he has seen you...."

However, what the hell is the difference. I must go now." Re opened the elevator door, "Tomorrow we'll have a real good talk, okay? Tomorrow... and you look in on the Fishers. Is that

a deal?"

He slammed the door with all his strength.

"Where will I look for them?" I asked.

I stood awhile, looking after him. He was almost running, receding down the corridor with erratic steps.

Chapter FIVE

I walked slowly, keeping to the shade of the trees. Now and then a car rolled by. One of these stopped and the driver threw open the door, leaned out, and vomited on the pavement. He cursed weakly, wiped his mouth with his palm, slammed the door, and drove off. He was on the elderly side, red-faced, wearing a loud shirt with nothing under it.

Rimeyer apparently had turned into a drunkard. This happens fairly often: a man tries hard, works hard, is considered a valuable contributor, he is listened to and made out as a model, but just when he is needed for a concrete task, it suddenly turns out that he has grown puffy and flabby, that wenches are running in and out of his place, and that he smells of vodka from early morning.... Your business does not interest him, while at the same time, he is frightfully busy, is constantly meeting someone, talks confusingly and murkily, and is of no help whatsoever. And then he turns up in the alcoholic ward, or a mental clinic, or is involved in a legal process. Or he gets married unexpectedly -- strangely and ineptly -- and

this marriage smells strongly of blackmail. ... One can only comment: "Physician, heal thyself."

It would still be nice to hunt up Peck. Peck is hard as flint, honest, and he always knows everything. You haven't even finished the rundown on the tech control, and haven't had a chance to get off the ship, before he is buddy-buddy with the cook, is already fully informed and involved in the investigation of the dispute between the Commander of the Pathfinders and the chief engineer, who didn't settle the matter of some prize; the technicians are already planning an evening in his honor, and the deputy director is listening to his advice in a quiet corner... Priceless Peck! He was born in this city and has spent a third of his life here.

I found a telephone booth, and rang information for Peck Xenai's number and address. I was asked to wait. As usual, the booth smelled of cats. The plastic shelf was covered with telephone numbers and obscene images. Someone had carved quite deeply, as with a knife, the strange word "SLUG." I opened the door, to lighten the string atmosphere, and watched the opposite shady side of the street, where a barman stood in front of his establishment in a white jacket with rolled-up sleeves, smoking a cigarette. Then I was told that according to the data at the beginning of the year, Peck resided at No. 31 Liberty Street, number 11-331. I thanked the operator and dialed the number at once. A strange voice told me that I had a

wrong number. Yes, the number was correct, and so was the address, but no Peck lived there, and if he had, they didn't know when he left or where he had gone. I hung up, left the booth, and crossed the street to the shady side.

Catching my eye, the barman came to life and said from afar, "Come in, why don't you?"

"Don't know that I'd like to," I said.

"So you won't be friendly, eh?" he said. "Come in anyway. We'll have a talk. I feel bored."

I stopped.

"Tomorrow morning," I said, "at ten o'clock, at the university, there will be a philosophy lecture on Neo-optimism. It will be given by the renowned Doctor Opir from the capital.

The barman listened with avid interest -- he even stopped inhaling.

"How do you like that!" he said. "So they have come to that! The day before yesterday, they chased all the girls out of a night club, and now they'll be having lectures. We'll show them lectures!"

"It's about time," I said.

"I don't let them in," he continued, getting more animated. "I have a sharp eye for them. A guy could be just approaching the door, when I can spot him for an Intel 'Fellows,' I say, 'an Intel is coming.' And the boys are all well picked; Dodd himself is here every night after training. So, he gets up and meets this Intel at the door, and I don't

even know what goes on between them, but he passes him on elsewhere. Although it's true that sometimes they travel in bunches. In that case, so there wouldn't be a to-do, we lock the door -- let them knock. That's the right way, isn't it?"

"That's okay by me," I said. I had had enough of him.

There are people who pail unusually quickly. "Let them."

"What do you mean -- let them?"

"Let them knock. In other words, knock on any door."

The barman looked at me with growing alertness.

"What say you move on," he said.

"How about a quick one," I offered.

"Move along, move along," he said. "You won't get served here."

We looked at each other awhile,, then he growled something, backed up, and slid the glass door in front of him.

"I am no Intel," I said. "I am a poor tourist. A rich one."

He looked at me with his nose flattened against the glass.

I made a motion as though knocking a drink back. He mumbled something and went back into the darkness of the place -- I could see him wandering aimlessly among empty tables. The place was called the Smile. I smiled and went on.

Around the corner was a wide main thoroughfare. A huge van, plastered with advertisements, was parked by the curb. Its back was swung down for a counter, on which were piled

mountains of cans, bottles, toys, and stacks of cellophane-wrapped clothing and underwear. Two teenage girls twittered some sort of nonsense while selecting blouses.

"Pho-o-ny," squeaked one. The other, turning the blouse this way and that, replied, "Spangles, spangles and not phony."

"Here by the neck it phonies." "Spangles." "Even the star doesn't glimmer."

The driver of the van, a gaunt man with huge, horn-rimmed dark glasses, sat on the step of the advertising rotunda. His eyes were not visible, but, judging by his relaxed mouth and sweat-beaded nose, he was asleep. I approached the counter. The girls stopped talking and stared at me with parted mouths. They must have been about sixteen, and their eyes were vacant and blue, like those of young kittens.

"Spangles," I said. "No phonying and lots of sparkle."

"And around the neck?" asked the one who was trying on the blouse.

"Around the neck it's practically a masterpiece."

"Spangles," said the other uncertainly.

"OK, let's look at another one," offered the first peacefully. "This one here."

"This one is better, the silvery one with the frame."

I saw books. They were magnificent books. There was a Strogoff with such illustrations as I had never even heard of. There was Change of Dream with an introduction by Saroyan. There was a Walter Mintz in three volumes. There was

almost an entire Faulkner, The New Politics by Weber,
Poles of Magnificence by Ignatova, The Unpublished
Sian She-Cuey, History of Fascism in the "Memory of
Mankind" edition. There were current magazines, and almanacs,
pocket Louvres, Hermitage, and Vatican. There was everything!
"It phonies too but it has a frame." "Spangles." I grabbed the
Mintz. Holding the two volumes under my arm, I opened the
third. Never have I seen such a complete Mintz. There were even
the jमित्ज letters.

"How much will that be?" I called.

The girls gaped again; the driver sucked in his lips and
sat up.

"What?" he said huskily.

"Who is the owner here?" I said.

He got up and came to me.

"What would you like?"

"I want this Mintz. How much is it?"

The girls giggled. He stared at me in silence, then
removed his glasses.

"You are a foreigner?"

"Yes, I am a tourist."

"It's the most complete Mintz."

"Of course, I can see that. I was stunned when I saw it."

"Me too," he said, "when I saw what you were after."

"He is a tourist," twittered one of the girls. "He doesn't

understand."

"It's all free," said the driver. "Personal needs fund. To take care of personal needs."

I looked back at the bookshelf.

"Did you see Change of Dream?" asked the driver.

"Yes, thank you, I have it."

"About Strogoff I will not even inquire."

"How about the History of Fascism?"

"An excellent edition."

The girls giggled again. The driver's eyes popped in sudden wrath.

"Scram, snot faces," he barked.

The girls jumped. One of them thievishly grabbed several blouse packages. They ran across the street, where they stopped and continued to gaze at us.

"With frames!" said the driver. His thin lips twitched. "I should drop this whole idea. Where do you live?"

"On Second Waterway."

"Aha, in the thick of the mire.... Let's go -- I will drop you off. I have a complete Schedrin in the van, which I don't even exhibit; I have the entire classics library; the whole Golden Library, the complete Treasures of Philosophic Thought."

"Including Doctor Opir's?"

"Bitch tripe," said the driver. "Salacious bum! Amoeba! Rut do you know Sliy?"

"Not much," I said. "I don't like him. Neo-individualism,

as Doctor Opir would say."

"Doctor Opir stinks," said the driver. "While Sliy is a real man. Of course, there is the individualism. But at least he says what he thinks and does what he says. I'll get some Sliy for you.... Listen, did you see this? And this!"

He dug himself up to his elbows in books. He stroked them tenderly and his face shone with rapture.

"And this," he kept on. "And how about this Cervantes?"

An oldish lady of imposing bearing approached and started to pick over the canned goods.

"You still don't have Danish pickles... didn't I ask you to get some?"

"Go to hell," said the driver absent-mindedly.

The woman was stunned. Her face slowly turned crimson.

"How dare you!" she hissed.

The driver looked at her bullishly.

"You heard what I said. Get out of here!"

"Don't you dare!" said the woman. "What is your number?"

"My number is ninety-three," said the driver,

"Ninety-three -- is that clear enough? And I spit on all of you. Is that clear? Any other questions?"

"What a hooliganism!" said the woman with dignity. She took two cans of delicacies, scanned the counter, and with great precision, ripped the cover off the Cosmic Man magazine. "I'll remember you, number ninety-three! These aren't

the old times for you." She wrapped the two cans in the cover.

"We'll see each other in the municipal court."

I took a firm hold on the driver's arm. His rigid muscles gradually relaxed.

"The nerve!" said she majestically and departed.

She stepped along the sidewalk, proudly carrying her handsome head, which was topped with a high cylindrical coiffure. She stopped at the corner, opened one of the cans, and proceeded to pick out chunks with elegant fingers.

I released the driver's arm.

"They ought to be shot," he said suddenly. "We ought to strangle them instead of dispensing pretty books to them." He turned toward me, and I could see his eyes were tortured.

"Shall I deliver your books?"

"Well, no," I said. "Where will I put them?"

"In that case, shove off," said the driver. "Did you take your Mintz? Then go and wrap your dirty pantaloons in it."

He climbed up into the cab. Something clicked and the back door began to rise. You could hear everything crashing and rolling inside the van. Several books and some shiny packets, boxes, and cans fell on the pavement. The rear panel had not yet closed completely when the driver shut his door and the van took off with a jerk.

The girls had already disappeared. I stood alone on the empty street and watched the wind lazily turn the pages of History of Fascism at my feet. Later a gang of kids in striped

shorts came around the corner. They walked by silently, hands stuck in their pockets. One jumped down on the pavement and began to kick a can of pineapple, with a slick pretty cover, like a football down the street.

Chapter SIX

On the way home, I was overtaken by the change of shifts. The streets filled up with cars. Controller copters appeared over the intersections, and sweaty police cleared constantly threatening jams with roaring bull horns. The cars moved slowly, and the drivers stuck heads out of windows to light up from each other, to yell, to talk and joke while furiously blowing their horns. There was a instant screech of clashing bumpers. Everyone was happy, everyone was good-natured, and everyone glowed with savage glee. It seemed as though a heavy load had just fallen from the soul of the city, as though everyone was seized with an enviable anticipation. Fingers were pointed at me and the other pedestrians. Several times I was prodded with bumpers while crossing -- the girls doing it with the utmost good nature. One of them drove alongside me for quite a while, and we got acquainted. Then a line of demonstrators with sober faces walked by on the median, carrying signs. The signs appealed to people to join the amateur club ensemble Songs of the Fatherland, to enter the

municipal Culinary Art groups, and to sign up for condensed courses in motherhood and childhood. The people with signs were nudged by bumpers with special enthusiasm. The drivers threw cigarette butts, apple cores, and paper wads at them. They yelled such things as "I'll subscribe at once, just wait till I put my galoshes on," or "Me, I'm sterile," or "Say, buddy, teach me motherhood." The sign carriers continued to march slowly in between the two solid streams of cars, unperturbed and sacrificial, looking straight ahead with the sad dignity of camels.

Not far from my house, I was set upon by a flock of girls, and when I finally struggled through to Second Waterway, I had a white aster in my lapel and drying kisses on my cheeks, and it seemed I had met half the girls in town. What a barber! What a Master!

Vousi, in a flaming orange blouse, was sitting in the chair in my study. Her long legs in pointy shoes rested on the table, while her slender fingers held a long slim cigarette. With her head thrown back, she was blowing thick streams of smoke at the ceiling, through her nose.

"At long last!" she cried, seeing me. "Where have you been all this time? As you can see, I've been waiting for you."

"I've been delayed," I said, trying to recollect if I had indeed promised to meet her.

"Wipe off the lipstick," she demanded. "You look silly! What's this? Books? What do you need books for?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You are really quite a problem! Comes back late, hangs around with books. Or are those pornos?"

"It's Mintz," I said.

"Let me have them!" She jumped up and snatched the books out of my grasp. "Good God! What nonsense -- all three are alike. What is it? History of Fascism... are you a Fascist?"

"How can you say that, Vousi!"

"Then, what do you need them for? Are you really going to read them?"

"Reread them."

"I just don't understand," she said peevishly. "I liked you from the first. Mother says you're a writer, and I went and bragged to everyone, like a fool, and then you turn out to be the next thing to an Intel."

"How could you, Vousi!" I said with reproach. By now I had realized that it was impermissible to be taken for an Intel.

"These bookos were simply needed in my literary business, that's all."

"Bookos!" she laughed. "Bookos! Look at what I can do."

She threw back her head and blew two thick streams of smoke out of her nostrils. "I got it on the second try. Pretty good, right?"

"Remarkable aptitude," I remarked.

"Instead of laughing at me, you should try it yourself.

... A lady taugth me at the salon today. Slobbered all over me, the fat cow... Will you try it?"

"How come she did that?"

"Who?"

"The cow."

"Not normal. Or maybe a sad sack.... What's your name? I forgot."

"Ivan."

"An amusing name! You'll have to remind me again. Are you a Tungus?"

"I don't think so."

"So-o... and I went and told everyone that you are a Tungus. Too bad.... Say, why not have a drink?"

"Let's."

"Today I should have a strong drink to forget that slobbering cow."

She ran out into the living room and came back with a tray. We had some brandy and looked at each other, not having anything to say. I felt ill at ease. I couldn't say why, but I liked her. I sensed something, something I couldn't put my finger on; something which distinguished her from the long-legged, smooth-skinned pin-up beauties, good only for the bed. I had the impression that she sensed something in me, too.

"Beautiful day, today," she said, looking away.

"A bit hot," I observed.

She sipped some brandy; I did too. The silence stretched.

"What do you like to do the most?" she asked.

"It depends. And you?"

"Same with me. In general, I like to have fun and not have to think about anything."

"So do I," I said. "At least I do right now."

She seemed to perk up a little. I understood suddenly what was the matter: during the whole day, I had not met a single truly pleasant person, and I simply had gotten tired of it.

There was nothing to her, after all.

"Let's go somewhere," she said.

"We could," I said. I really didn't want to go anywhere, I wanted to sit and relax in the cool room for a while.

"I can see you're not too eager," she said.

"To be honest, I would prefer to sit around here for a bit."

"Well then, amuse me."

I considered the problem, and recounted the story of the traveling salesman in the upper bunk. She liked it, but I think she missed the point. I made a correction in my aim, and told her the one about the president and the old maid. She laughed a long time, kicking her wonderfully long legs. Then, taking courage from another shot of brandy, I told about the widow with the mushrooms growing on the wall. She slid down to the floor and almost knocked over the tray. I picked her up under

the armpits, hoisted her back up in the chair, and delivered the story of the drunk spaceman and the college girl, at which point Aunt Vaina came rushing in and inquired fearfully what was going on with Vousi, and whether I was tickling her unmercifully. I poured Aunt Vaina a glass, and addressing myself to her personally, recounted the one about the Irishman who wanted to be a gardener. Vousi was completely shattered, but Aunt Vaina smiled sorrowfully and confided that Major General Tuur liked to tell the same story, when he was in a good mood. But in it there was, she thought, a Negro instead of the Irishman, and he aspired to the duties of a piano tuner and not a gardener. "And you know, Ivan, the story ended somehow differently," she added after some thought. At this point I noticed Len standing in the doorway, looking at us. I waved and smiled at him. He seemed not to notice, so I winked at him and beckoned for him to come in.

"Whom are you winking at?" asked Vousi, through lingering laughter.

"It's Len," I said. It was really a pleasure to watch her, as I love to see people laugh, especially such a one as Vousi, beautiful and almost a child.

"Where's Len?" she wondered.

There was no Len in the doorway.

"Len isn't here," said Aunt Vaina, who was sniffing the brandy with approval, and did not notice a thing. "The boy went to the Ziroks' birthday party today. If you only knew, Ivan..."

"But why does he say it was Len?" asked Vousi, glancing at the door again.

"Len was here," I said. "I waved at him, and he ran away. You know, he looked a bit wild to me."

"Ach, we have a highly nervous boy there," said Aunt Vaina. "He was born in a very difficult time, and they just don't know how to deal with a nervous child in these modern schools. Today I let him go visit."

"We'll go, too, now," said Vousi. "You'll walk with me. I'll just fix myself up, because on account of you everything got smeared. In the meantime, you can put on something more decent."

Aunt Vaina wouldn't have minded staying behind to tell me a few more things and maybe show me a photo album of Len, but Vousi dragged her off and I heard her ask her mother behind the door, "What's his name? I just can't remember it. He is a jolly fellow, isn't he?"

"Vousi!" admonished Aunt Vaina.

I laid out my entire wardrobe on the bed and tried to imagine what Vousi would consider a decently dressed man. Until now, I had thought I was dressed quite satisfactorily. Vousi's heels were already beating an impatient rat-a-tat on the study floor. Not having come up with anything, I called her in.

"That's all you have?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

"It really isn't good enough?"

"Well, it will pass. Take off the jacket and put on this Hawaiian shirt... or better yet, this one here. They sure have dressing problems in your Tungusia! Hurry up. No, no, take off the shirt you have on."

"You mean, without an undershirt?"

"You know, you really are a Tungus. Where do you think you are going -- to the pole or to Mars? What's this under your shoulder blade?"

"A bee stung me," I said, hurriedly pulling on my shirt.

"Let's go!"

The street was already dark. The fluorescents shone palely through dark foliage.

"Which way are we bound?" I asked.

"Downtown, of course.... Don't grab my arm, it's hot! At least you know how to fight, I hope?"

"I know how."

"That's good. I like to watch."

"To watch, I like, too," I said.

There were a lot more people out in the streets than in the daytime. Under the trees, in the bushes, and in the driveways there were groups of unsettled-looking individuals. They furiously smoked crackling synthetic cigars, guffawed, spat negligently and often, and spoke in loud rough voices. Over each group hung the racket of radio receivers. Under one streetlight a banjo twanged, and two youngsters, twisting in weird contortions and yelling out wildly, were performing

fling, a currently fashionable dance, a dance of great beauty when properly executed. The youngsters knew how. Around them stood a small crowd, also yelling lustily and clapping their hands in rhythm.

"Shall we have a dance?" I offered.

"But no, no..." hissed Vousi, taking me by the hand and increasing her pace.

"And why not? You do fling?"

"I'd sooner hop with alligators than this crowd."

"Too bad," I said, "They look like regular fellows."

"Yes, each one by himself," said Vousi, "and in the daytime."

They hung around on the corners, huddled around streetlights, gauche, smoked to the gills, leaving the sidewalks behind them strewn with bits of candy paper, cigarette butts, and spittle. They were nervous and showy melancholic, yearning, constantly looking around, stooped. They were awfully anxious not to look like others, and at the same time, assiduously imitated each other and two or three popular movie stars. There were really not that many, but they stood out like sore thumbs, and it always seemed to me that every town and the whole world was filled with them -- perhaps because every city and the whole world belonged to them by night. And to me, they seemed full of some dark mystery, But I too used to stand around of evenings in the company of friends,

until some real people turned up and took us off the streets, and many a time I have seen the same groups in all the cities of the world, where there was a lack of capable men to get rid of them. But I never did understand to the very end what force it is that turns these fellows away from good books, of which there are so many, from sport establishments, of which this town had plenty, and even from ordinary television sets, and drives them out in the night streets with cigarettes in their teeth and transistor sets in their ears, to stand and spit as far as possible, to guffaw as offensively as possible, and to do nothing. Apparently at fifteen, the most attractive of all the treasures in the world is the feeling of your own importance and ability to excite everyone's admiration, or at least attract attention. Everything else seems unbearably dull and dreary, including, perhaps above all, those avenues of achieving the desirable which are offered by the tired world of adults.

"This is where old Rouen lives," said Vousi. "He has a new one with him every night. The old turnip has managed it so that they all come to him of their own will. During the fracas, his leg was blown off.... You see there is no light in his place, they are listening to the hi-fi. On top of which, he's ugly as mortal sin."

"He lives well who has but one leg," I said absent-mindedly.

Of course she had to giggle at this, and continued.

"And here lives Seus. He is a Fisher. Now there's a man for you!"

"Fisher," I said. "And what does he do, this Seus-Fisher?"

"He Fishers. That's what Fishers do -- they Fisher. Or are you asking where he works?"

"No, I mean to ask where does he Fisher?"

"In the Subway." Suddenly she stopped. "Say, you wouldn't be a Fisher?"

"Me? Why, does it show?"

"There is something about you, I noticed at once. We know about these bees that sting you in the back."

"Is that right?" I said.

She slipped her arm through mine.

"Tell me a story," she said, cajoling. "I never had a Fisher among my friends. Will you tell me a story?"

"Well now... shall I tell you about the pilot and the cow?"

She tweaked my elbow.

"No, really..."

"What a hot evening," I said. "It's a good thing you had me take off my jacket!"

"Anyway, everybody knows. Seus talks about it, and so do others."

"Ah, so," I said with interest. "And what does Seus tell?"

She let go of my arm at once.

"I didn't hear it myself. The girls told me."

"And what did they tell?"

"Well, this and that.... Maybe they put it all on. Maybe, you know. Seus had nothing to do with it."

"Hmmm," I said.

"Don't think anything about Seus, he's a good guy and he keeps his mouth closed."

"Why should I be thinking about Seus?" I said to quiet her. "I have never even laid eyes on him."

She took my arm again and enthusiastically announced that we were going to have a drink now.

"Now's the very time for us to have a drink."

She was already using the familiar address with me. We turned a corner and came out on a wide thoroughfare. Here it was lighter than day. The lamps shone, the walls glowed, the display windows were lambent with multicolored fires. This was, apparently, one of Ahmad's circles of paradise. But I imagined it differently. I expected roaring bands, grimacing couples, half-naked and naked people. But here it was relatively quiet. There were lots of people, and it seemed to me that most were drunk, but they were all very well and differently dressed and all were gay. And almost all smoked. There was no wind, and waves of bluish smoke undulated around the lights and lanterns. Vousi dragged me into some establishment, found a couple of acquaintances, and disappeared after promising to find me

later. The crowd was dense, and I found myself pressed against the bar. Before I could gather my wits, I found myself downing a shot. A brown middle-aged man with yellow whites of the eye was booming into my face.

"Kiven hurt his leg -- right? Brush became an antique and is now quite useless. That makes three -- right? And on the right they haven't got nobody. Phinney is on the right, and that's worse than nobody. A waiter, that's what he is."

"What are you drinking?" I asked.

"I don't drink at all," replied the brown one with dignity, breathing strong fumes at me. "I have jaundice. Ever hear of it?"

Behind me, someone fell off a stool. The noise modulated up and down. The brown one, sitting down next to me, was shouting out some story about some character who almost died of fresh air after breaking some pipe at work. It was hard to understand any part of it, as various stories were being shouted from all sides.

"... Like a fool, he quieted down and left, and she called a taxi truck, loaded up his stuff, and had it dumped outside the town..."

"... I wouldn't have your TV in my outhouse. You can't think of one improvement on the Omega, my neighbor is an engineer, and that's just what he says -- you can't think up an improvement on the Omega..."

"... That's the way their honeymoon ended. When they returned home, his father enticed him in the garage -- and his father is a boxer -- and trounced him until he lost consciousness. They called a doctor later..."

"... So, all right, we took enough for three... and their rule is, you know, take as much as you wish, but you get to swallow all of it... and they are watching us by now, and he is carried away -- and says -- let's take more... well, I says to myself, enough of this, time to break knuckles..."

"... Dear child, with your bust, I wouldn't know any grief, such a bosom is one in a thousand, but don't think I'm flattering you, that's not my style..."

A scrawny girl with bangs down to the tip of her nose climbed up on the vacant stool next to me and began to pound with puny fists on the bar, yelling, "Barman, barman, a drink."

The din died down again, and I could hear behind me a tragic whisper -- "Where did he get it?" "From Buba, you know him, he is an engineer." "Was it real?" "It's scary, you could croak." "Then you need some kind of pill --" "Quiet, will you?"

"Oh, all right, who would be listening to us? You got one?"

"Buba gave me one package, he says any drugstore has them by the ton... here, look." "De... Devon -- what is it?" "Some sort of medicine, how would I know?" I turned around. One was red-faced with a shirt unbuttoned down to his navel, and with a hairy chest. The other was strangely haggard-looking with a large-pored nose. Both were looking at me.

"Shall we have a drink?" I said.

"Alcoholic," said the pore-nose.

"Don't, Pete. Don't start up, please," said the red-faced one.

"If you need some Devon, I've got it," I said loudly.

They jumped back. Pore-nose began to look around cautiously. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see several faces turn toward us and grow still.

"Let's go, Pat," said red-face. "Let's go! The hell with him."

Someone put a hand on my shoulder. I turned around and saw a handsome sunburned man with powerful muscles.

"Yes?" I said.

"Friend," he said benevolently, "drop this business. Drop it while it's not too late. Are you a Rhinoceros?"

"I am a hippopotamus," I joked.

"No, don't. I'm serious. Did you get beat up, maybe?"

"Black and blue."

"All right, don't feel bad about it. Today it's you, tomorrow it's them.... As for Devon and all that -- that's crap, believe me. There's lots of crap in the world, but that is the crap of all crap."

The girl with the bangs advised me, "Crack him in the teeth... what's he sticking his nose in for... lousy dick."

"Lapping it up, and doing it up brown, aren't you?" said

the sunburned one coolly, and turned his back on us. His back was huge, and studded with bulging muscles under a tight half-transparent shirt.

"None of your business," said the girl at his back. Then she said to me, "Listen, friend, call the barman for me -- I can't seem to get through to him."

I gave her my glass and asked, "What's to do?"

"In a minute, we'll all go," replied the girl. Having swallowed the alcohol, she went limp all at once. "As to what to do -- that's up to luck. Without luck, you can't make out. Or you need money if you deal with promoters. You're probably a visitor? Nobody here drinks that dry vodka. How is it your way, you should tell me about it.... I'm not going anywhere today, I'll go to the salon instead. I feel terrible and nothing seems to help.... Mother says -- have a child. But that's dull too, what do I need one for?"

She closed her eyes and lowered her chin on her entwined fingers. She looked brazen, but at the same time crestfallen. I attempted to rouse her but she stopped paying attention to me, and suddenly started shouting again, "Barman, barman, a drink!"

I looked for Vousi. She was nowhere to be seen. The cafe began to empty. Everyone was in a hurry to get somewhere. I got off my stool, too, and left the cafe. Streams of people flowed down the street. They were all going in the same direction, and in about five minutes, I was swept out onto a big square. It was huge and poorly lighted, a wide gloomy space bordered by a

ring of streetlights and store windows. It was full of people.

They stood pressed against each other, men, women, and youngsters, boys and girls, shifting from foot to foot, waiting for I knew not what. There was almost no talking. Here and there cigarette tips flared, lighting hollow cheeks and compressed lips. Then a clock began to strike the hour, and over the square, gigantic luminous panels sprang into flaming light. There were three of them -- red, blue, and green, irregularly shaped rounded triangles. The crowd surged and stood still. Around me, cigarettes were put out with subdued movements. The panels went out momentarily and then started to flash in rotation: red-blue-green, red-blue-green... I felt a wave of hot air on my face, and was suddenly dizzy. They were astir around me. I got up on tiptoes. In the center of the square, the people stood motionless; I had the impression that they were seized rigid and did not fall only because they were pressed in by the crowd. Red-blue-green, red-blue-green. Wooden, upturned faces, blackly gaping mouths, staring, bulging eyes. They weren't even winking there, under the panels. A total quiet fell, so that I jumped when a piercing woman's voice nearby yelled: "Shivers!" All at once, tens of voices responded: "Shivers! Shivers!" People on the sidewalk on the square's perimeter began to clap hands in rhythm with the flashes, and to chant in even voices, "Shi-vers! Shi-vers! Shi-vers!" Somebody prodded me in the back with a sharp elbow.

I was pressed forward to the center, toward the panels. I took a step and another and started through the crowd, pushing the stiffened bodies aside. Two youngsters, rigid as icicles, suddenly started thrashing wildly, grabbing at each other, scratching and pounding with all their strength, but their faces remained frozen in the direction of the flashing sky... red-blue-green, red-blue-green. And just as suddenly as they started, they grew still again.

At this point, finally, I understood that all this was extraordinarily amusing. Everyone laughed. There was lots of room around me and music thundered forth. I swept up a charming girl and we began to dance, as they used to dance, as dancing should be done and was done a long, long time ago, as it was done always with abandon, so that your head swam, and so that everyone admired you. We stepped out of the way, and I held on to her hands, and there was no need to talk about anything, and she agreed that the van driver was a strange man. Can't stand alcoholics, said Rimeyer, and pore-nose is the most genuine alcoholic, and what about Devon I said, how could you be without Devon when we have an excellent zoo, the buffaloes love to wallow in the mud, and bugs are constantly swarming out of it. Rim, I said, there are some fools who said that you are fifty years old -- such nonsense when I wouldn't give you over twenty-five -- and this is Vousi, I told her about you, but I am intruding on you, said Rimeyer; no one can intrude on us, said Vousi, as for Seus he's the best of Fishers, he grabbed

the splotcher and got the ray right in the eye, and Hugger slipped and fell in the water and said -- wouldn't it be something for you to drown -- look your gear are melting away, aren't you funny, said Len, there is such a game of boy and gangster, you know, you remember we played with Maris... Isn't it wonderful, I have never felt so good in my life, what a pity, when it could be like this every day. Vousi, I said, aren't we great fellows, Vousi, people have never had such an important problem before, and we solved it and there remained only one problem, Vousi, the sole problem in the world, to return to people a spiritual content, and spiritual concerns, no, Seus, said Vousi, I love you very much, Oscar, you are very nice, but forgive me, would you, I want it to be Ivan, I embraced her and felt that it was right to kiss her and I said I love you...

Boom! Boom! Boom! Something exploded in the dark night sky and tinkling sharp shards began to fall on us, and at once I felt cold and uncomfortable. There were machine guns firing! Again the guns rattled. "Down, Vousi," I yelled, although I could not yet understand what was going on, and threw her down on the ground and covered her with my body against the bullets, whereupon blows began to rain on my face.

Bang, bang, rat-tat-tat-tat... around me people stood like wooden pickets. Some were coming to and rolling their eyeballs inanely. I was half reclining on a man's chest, which was as

hard as a bench, and right in front of my eyes was his open mouth and chin glistening with saliva... Blue-green, blue-green, blue-green... Something was missing.

There were piercing screams, cursing, someone thrashed and screeched hysterically. A mechanical roar grew louder over the square. I raised my head with difficulty. The panels were right overhead, the blue and green flashing regularly, while the red was extinguished and raining glass rubble. Rat-tat-tat-tat and the green panel broke and darkened. In the blue remaining light unhurried wings floated by, spewing the reddish lightning of a fusillade.

Again I attempted to throw myself on the ground, but it was impossible, as they all stood around me like pillars. Something made an ugly snap quite near me, and a yellow-green plume rose skyward from which puffed a repulsive stench. Pow! Pow! Another two plumes hung over the square. The crowd howled and stirred. The yellow vapor was caustic like mustard, my eyes and mouth filled, and I began to cry and cough, and around me, everyone began to cry and cough and yell hoarsely: "Lousy bums! Scoundrels! Sock the Intels!" Again the roar of the engine could be heard, coming in louder and louder. The airplane was returning. "Down, you idiots," I yelled. Everyone around me flopped down all over each other. Rat-tat-tat-tat! This time the machine gunner missed and the string apparently got the building opposite us. To make up for the miss, the gas bombs fell again right on target. The lights around the square went

out, and with them the blue panel, as a free-for-all started in the pitch-black dark.

Chapter SEVEN

I'll never know how I arrived at that fountain. It must be that I have good instincts and ordinary cold water was exactly what I needed. I crawled into the water without taking off my clothes, and lay down, feeling better immediately. I was lying on my back, drops rained on my face, and this was unbelievably pleasant. It was quite dark here, and dim stars shone through the branches and the water. It was very quiet. For several minutes I was watching a brighter star, for some reason unknown to me, which was slowly moving across the sky, until I realized that I was watching the relay satellite Europa. How far from all this, I thought, how degrading and senseless to remember the revolting mess on the square, the disgusting foul mouthings and screechings, the wet phrumping of the gas bombs, and the putrid stench which turned your stomach and lungs inside out. Understanding freedom as the rapid satisfaction and multiplication of needs and desires, I recollected, people distort their natures as they engender within themselves many senseless and stupid desires, habits and the most unlikely inventions....

Priceless Peck, he loved to quote old pundit Zosima as he

circled around a well-laid table, rubbing his hands. We were snot-nosed undergrads then and ingenuously believed that such pronouncements, in our time, were meant only to show off flashes of humor and erudition.... At this point in my reflections, someone noisily plunged into the water some ten paces from me.

At first he coughed hoarsely, spat and blew his nose, so that I hurried to leave the water, then he started to splash, finally became quiet, and suddenly discharged himself of a string of curses:

"Shameless lice," he growled. "Whores, swine... on live people! Stinking hyenas, rotten scum... learned prostitutes, filthy snakes." He hawked furiously again. "It bothers them that people are having a good time! Stepped on my face, the crud!" He groaned nasally and painfully, "The hell with this shiver business. That will be the day when I'll go again."

He moaned again and rose. I could hear the water running from his clothes. I could dimly perceive his swaying figure. He saw me too.

"Hey, friend, have a smoke on you?"

"I did," I replied.

"Low-lifers! I didn't think to take them out. Just fell in with everything on." He splashed over to me and sat down alongside. "Some moron stepped on my cheek," he informed me.

"They marched over me, too," I said. "The people went ape."

"But, you tell me, where do they get the tear gas?" he said. "And machine guns?"

"And airplanes," I added.

"An airplane means nothing," he contradicted. "I have one myself. I bought it cheap for seven hundred crowns.... What do they want, that's what I don't understand."

"Hoodlums," I said. "They should have their faces pulped properly, and that would be the end of that argument."

He laughed bitterly.

"Someone did! For that you get worked over good.... You think they didn't get beat up? And how they got beat up! But apparently that isn't enough.... We should have driven them right into the ground, together with their excrement, but we passed up the chance.... And now they are giving us the business! The people got soft, that's what, I tell you. Nobody gives a damn. They put their four hours in, have a drink and off to the shivers! And you can pot them like clay pigeons." He slapped his sides in desperation. "Those were the times," he cried. "They didn't dare open their mouths! Should one of them even whisper, guys in black shirts or maybe white hoods would pay a night visit, crunch him in the teeth, and off to the camp he went, so there wouldn't be a peep out of him again.... In the schools, my son says, everyone bad-mouths fascism: Oh dear, they hurt the Negroes' feelings; oh dear, the scientists were witch-hunted; oh dear, the camps; oh dear, the dictatorship!

Well, it wasn't witch-hunting that was needed, but to hammer them into the ground, so there wouldn't be any left for breeding!" He drew his hand under his nose, slurping long and loud.

"Tomorrow morning, I have to go to work with my face all out of shape.... Let's go have a drink, or we'll both catch cold."

We crawled through the bushes and came out on the street.

"The Weasel is just around the corner," he informed me.

The Weasel was full of wet-haired half-naked people. They seemed depressed, somehow embarrassed, and gloomily bragging about their contusions and abrasions. Several young women, clad only in panties, clustered around the electric fireplace, drying their skirts. The men patted them platonically on their bare flesh. My companion immediately penetrated into the thick of the crowd, and swinging his arms and blowing his nose with his fingers, began to call for "hammering the bastards into the ground." He was getting some weak support.

I asked for Russian vodka, and when the girls left, I took off my sport shirt and sat by the fireplace. The barman delivered my glass and returned at once to his crossword in the fat magazine. The public continued its conversation.

"So, what's the shooting for? Haven't we had enough of shooting? Just like little boys, by God... just spoiling some good fun."

"Bandits, they're worse than gangsters, but like it or not

that shiver business is no good, too."

"That's right. The other day mine says to me, 'Papa, I saw you; you were all blue like a corpse and very scary' -- and she's only ten. So how can I look her in the eyes? Eh?"

"Hey anybody! What's an entertainment with four letters?" asked the barman without raising his head.

"So, all right, but who dreamed all this up -- the shiver and the aromatics? Eh and also..."

"If you got drenched, brandy is best."

"We were waiting for him on the bridge, and along he comes with his eyeglasses and some kind of pipe with lenses in it. So up he goes over the rail with his eyeglasses and his pipe, and he kicked his legs once and that was that. And then old Snoot comes running, after having been revived, and he looks at the guy blowing bubbles. "Fellows," he says, "What the hell is the matter with you, are you drunk or something, that's not the guy -- I am seeing him for the first time..."

"I think there ought to be a law -- if you are married, you can't go to the shiver."

"Hey somebody," again the bartender, "What's a literary work with seven letters -- a booklet, maybe?"

"So, I myself had four Intels in my squad, machine gunners they were. It's quite true that they fought like devils. I remember we were retreating from the warehouse, you know they're still building a factory there, and two stayed behind

to cover us. By the way, nobody asked them, they volunteered entirely by themselves. Later we came back and found them hanging side by side from the rail crane, naked, with all their appurtenances ripped off with hot pincers. You understand? And now, I'm thinking, where were the other two today? Maybe they were the very same guys to treat me to some tear gas, those are the types that can do such things."

"So who didn't get hung? We got hung by various places, too!"

"Hammer them into the ground right up to their noses, and that'll be the end of that!"

"I'm going. There is no point in hanging around here, I'm getting heartburn. They must have fixed everything up by now, back there."

"Hey, barman, girls, let's have one last one."

My shirt had dried, and as the cafe emptied, I pulled it on and went over to sit at a table and to watch. Two meticulously dressed gentlemen in the corner were sipping their drinks through straws. They called attention to themselves immediately -- both were in severe black suits and black ties, despite the very warm night. They weren't talking, and one of them constantly referred to his watch. After a while, I grew tired of observing them. Well, Doctor Opir, how do you like the shivers? Were you at the square? But of course you were not. Too bad. It would have been interesting to know what you thought of it. On the other hand, to the devil with you. What

do I care what Doctor Opir thinks? What do I think about it myself? Well, high-grade barber's raw material, what do you think? It's important to get acclimatized quickly

and not stuff the brain with induction, deduction, and technical procedures. The most important thing is to get acclimatized as rapidly as possible. To get to feel like one of them.... There, they all went back to the square. Despite everything that happened, they still went back to the square again. As for me, I don't have the slightest desire to go back there. I would, with the greatest of pleasure at this point, go back to my room and check out my new bed. But when would I go to the Fishers? Intels, Devon, and Fishers. Intels -- maybe they are the local version of the Golden Youth? Devon... Devon must be kept in mind, together with Oscar. But now the Fishers.

"The Fishers; that's a little bit vulgar," said one of the black suits, not whispering, but very quietly.

"It all depends on temperament," said the other. "As for me, personally I don't condemn Karagan in the slightest."

"You see, I don't condemn him either. It's a little shocking that he picked up his options. A gentleman would not have behaved that way."

"Forgive me, but Karagan is no gentleman. He is only a general manager. Hence the small-mindedness and the mercantilism and a certain what I might call commonness..."

"Let's not be so hard on him. The Fishers -- that's

something intriguing. And to be honest, I don't see any reason why we should not involve ourselves. The old Subway -- that's quite respectable. Wild is much more elegant than Nivele, but we don't reject Nivele on that account."

"You really are seriously considering?"

"Right now, if you wish.... It's five to two, by the way.

Shall we go?"

They got up, said a friendly and polite goodbye to the bartender, and proceeded toward the exit. They looked elegant, calm, and condescendingly remote. This was astounding luck. I yawned loudly, and muttering, "Off to the square," followed them, pushing stools out of my way. The street was poorly illuminated, but I saw them immediately. They were in no hurry. The one on the right was the shorter, and when they passed under the street lights, you could see his safe, sparse hair. As near as I could tell, they were no longer conversing.

They detoured the square, turned into a dark alley, avoided a drunk who tried to strike up a conversation, and suddenly, without one backward glance, turned abruptly into a garden in front of a large gloomy house. I heard a heavy door thud shut. It was a minute before two.

I pushed off the drunk, entered the garden, and sat down on a silver-painted bench under a lilac bush. The wooden bench was situated on a sandy path which ran through the garden. A blue lamp illuminated the entrance of the house, and I discerned two caryatids supporting the balcony over the door.

This didn't look like the entrance to the old subway, but as yet, I couldn't tell for sure, so I decided to wait.

I didn't have to wait long. There was a rustle of steps and a dark figure in a cloak appeared on the path. It was a woman. I did not grasp immediately why her proudly raised head with a high cylindrical coiffure, in which large stones glistened in the starlight, seemed familiar. I arose to meet her, and said, trying to sound both respectful and mocking, "You are late, madam, it's after two."

She was not in the least startled.

"You don't say!" she exclaimed. "Can it be my watch is so slow?"

It was the very same woman who had the altercation with the van driver, but of course she did not recognize me. Women with such disdainful-looking lower lips never remember chance meetings. I took her by the arm, and we mounted the wide stone steps. The door turned out to be as heavy as a reactor-well cover. There was no one in the entrance hall. The woman, without turning, flung the cloak on my arm and went ahead, and I paused for a second to look at myself in the huge mirror. Good man, Master Gaoway, but it still behooved me to stay in the shadows. We entered the ballroom.

No, this was anything but a subway. The room was enormous and incredibly old-fashioned. The walls were lined with dark wood, and fifteen feet up, there was a gallery with a railing.

Pink blond-curved angels smiled down with only their blue lips from a far-flung ceiling. Almost the entire floor of the room was covered with rows of soft massive chairs covered with embossed leather. Elegantly dressed people, mostly middle-aged men, sat in them in relaxed and negligent poses. They were looking at the far end of the room, where a brightly lit picture blazed against a background of black velvet.

No one turned to look at us. The woman glided toward the front rows, and I sat down near the door. By now, I was almost sure that I had come here for nothing. There was silence and some coughs, and lazy streams of smoke curled upward from the fat cigars; many bald pates glistened under the chandeliers. My attention turned to the picture. I am an indifferent connoisseur of paintings, but it looked like a Raphael, and if it was not genuine, it was certainly a perfect copy.

There was a deep brassy gong, and simultaneously a tall, thin man in a black mask appeared by the side of the picture. A black leotard covered his body from head to toe. He was followed by a limping, hunchbacked dwarf in a red smock. In his short, extended pawlike arms, he held a dully glinting sword of a most wicked appearance. He went to the right of the picture and stood still, while the masked individual stepped forward and spoke in a measured tone: "In accordance with the bylaws and directives of the Honorable Society of Patrons, and in the name of Art, which is holy and irreproducible, and the power granted me by you, I have examined the history and worth of

this painting and now --"

"Request a halt," sounded a curt voice behind me.

Everyone turned around. I also turned around and saw that three young, obviously very powerful, and immaculately dressed men were looking at me full in the face. One had a monocle in his right eye. We studied each other for a few seconds, and the man with the monocle twitched his cheek and let it drop. I got up at once. They moved toward me together, stepping softly and soundlessly. I tried the chair, but it was too massive. They jumped me. I met them as best I could and at first everything went well, but very quickly it became evident that they wore brass knuckles, and I barely managed to evade them. I pressed my back against the wall and looked at them while they, breathing heavily, looked at me. There were still two of them left. There was the usual coughing in the auditorium. Four more were coming down the gallery steps, which squeaked and groaned loudly enough to reverberate in the hall. Bad business, thought I, and launched myself to force a breach.

It was hard going, just like the time in Manila, but then there were two of us. It would have been better if they were armed, as I would have had a chance to expropriate a gun.

But all six of them met me with knuckles and truncheons. Luckily for me it was very crowded. My left arm went out of commission, and then the four suddenly jumped back, while the fifth drenched me with a clammy liquid from a flat container.

Simultaneously, the lights were extinguished.

These tricks were well known to me: now they could see me, but I could not see them. In all probability that would have been the end of me, were it not that some idiot threw open the door and announced in a greasy basso, "I beg forgiveness, I am terribly late and so sorry..." I charged toward the light, over some bodies, mowed down the latecomer, flew across the entrance hall, threw open the front door, and pelted down the sandy path holding my left arm with my right hand. No one was pursuing me, but I traversed two blocks before it dawned on me to stop.

I flung myself down on a lawn and lay for a long time in the short grass, grabbing lungfuls of the warm moist air. In no time, the curious gathered around me. They stood in a semicircle and ogled me avidly, not saying a word. "Take off," I said, getting up finally. Hurriedly, they scooted away. I stood awhile, figuring out where I was, and began a stumbling journey homeward. I had had enough for today. I still didn't get it, but I had had quite enough. Whoever they were, these members of the Honorable Society of Art Patrons -- secret art worshippers, extant aristocrat-conspirators or whoever else -- they fought cruelly and without quarter, and the biggest fool in that hall of theirs was still apparently none other than I.

I passed by the square, where again the color panels pulsed rhythmically, and hundreds of hysterical voices screamed, "Shi-vers! Shi-vers!" Of this too I had had enough. Pleasant dreams are, of course, more attractive than unpleasant

ones, but after all, we do not live in a dream. In the establishment where Vousi had taken me, I had a bottle of ice-cold soda water, observed with curiosity a squad of police peacefully camped by the bar, and went out, turning into Second Waterway.

A lump the size of a tennis ball was rising behind my left ear. I weaved badly and walked slowly, keeping close to the fences. Later, I heard the tap of heels behind me and voices:

"... Your place is in the museum, not in a cabaret."

"Nothing of the sort, I am not drunk. Can't you und-derstand, only one measly bottle of wine..."

"How disgusting! Soused and picking up a wench."

"What's the girl got to do with it? She is a m-model!"

"Fighting over a wench. Making us fight over her."

"Why in hell d-do you believe them and don't believe me?"

"Just because you're drunk! You're a bum, just like they all are, maybe worse...."

"That's all right. I'll remember that scoundrel with the bracelet quite well.... Don't hold me! I'll walk by myself!"

"You'll remember nothing, friend. Your glasses were knocked off in the first instant, and without them, you aren't even a man, but a blind sausage.... Stop kicking, or it will be the fountain for you...."

"I'm warning you, one more stunt like that, and we'll throw you out. A drunken kulturfuhrer -- it's enough to

make you sick."

"Stop preaching at him, give a man a chance to sleep it off."

"Fellows! There he is, the l-louse!"

The street was empty, and the louse was clearly me. I could bend my left arm already, but it hurt like the devil, and I stepped back to let them pass. There were three of them. They were young, in identical caps, pushed over their eyes. One, thickset and low-slung, was obviously amused and held the other one, a tall, open-faced, loose-jointed fellow, with a powerful grip, restraining his violent and sporadic movements. The third, long and skinny, with a narrow and darkish face, was following at some distance with his hands behind his back. As he got alongside me, the loose-jointed one braked determinedly. The short one attempted to nudge him off the spot, but in vain.

The long one passed by and then stopped, looking back impatiently over his shoulder.

"Thought you were gonna get away, pig!" he yelled drunkenly, attempting to seize me by the chest with his free hand.

I retreated to the fence and said, addressing myself to the short fellow, "I had no business with you."

"Stop being a rowdy," said the distant one sharply.

"I remember you very well indeed," yelled the drunk.

"You're not going to get away from me! I'll get even with you!"

He advanced upon me in surges, dragging the short one,

who hung on with bulldog grimness, behind him.

"It's not him," cajoled the low-slung one, who was still very merry. "That guy went off to the shivers and this one is sober."

"You won't fool me."

"I'm warning you for the last time. We are going to expel you."

"Got scared, the bum! Took off his bracelet."

"You can't even see him. You're worthless without your glasses."

"I can see everything pe-erfectly!... And even if he isn't the one..."

"Stop it! Enough is enough!"

The long one finally came back and grasped the drunk from the other side.

"Will you move on!" he said to me with irritation, "Why the devil are you stopping here! Haven't you ever seen a drunk?"

"Oh, no! You aren't going to get away from me."

I continued on my way. I had not far to go by now. The trio dragged along behind me noisily.

"I can see right through him, if you please. King of Nature! Drunk enough to retch, and to beat up whoever comes along. Got beat up himself, and that's all he needs.... Let go of me, I'll hang a few good ones on his mug...."

"What have you come to, we have to walk you along like a hood."

"So don't walk me!... I loathe them.... Shivers, wenches, whiskey... brainless jelly..."

"Sure, sure, take it easy, just don't fall."

"Enough of your reproofs... I am sick of your hypocrisy, your puritanism. We should blow them up, shoot them! Raze everything off the face of the earth!"

"Drunk as a coot, and I thought he was sobered up!"

"I am sober. I remember everything... the twenty-eighth, right?"

"Shut up, you fool."

"Shh! Right you are! The enemy is on the alert.... Fellows, there was a spy here somewhere.... Didn't I talk to him?... The son of a bitch took off his bracelet... but I'll get that dick before the twenty-eighth!"

"Will you be quiet!"

"Shh! And not another word. That's it! And don't worry, the grenade launchers are my baby."

"I am going to kill him right now, the bum!"

"Lay it on the enemies of civilization.... Fifteen hundred meters of tear gas -- personally... six sectors... awk!"

I was already by the gate to my house. When I turned around to look, the burly man was lying face down, the short one was squatting alongside, while the long fellow stood rubbing the edge of his right hand.

"Why did you do that?" said the short man. "You must have maimed him."

"Enough prattle," said the long one furiously. "We can't seem to learn to stop prattling. We can't learn to stop boozing. Enough!"

Let us be as children, Doctor Opir, thought I, slipping into the yard as quietly as possible. I held the latch to keep it from clicking into place.

"Where did he go?" said the long one, lowering his voice.

"Who?"

"The guy who went ahead of us."

"Turned off somewhere."

"Where? Did you notice?"

"Listen, I wasn't concerned about him."

"Too bad. But all right, pick him up, and let's go."

Stepping into the shadow of the apple trees, I watched them drag the drunk by the gate. He was wheezing horribly.

The house was quiet. I went to my quarters, undressed, and took a hot shower. My shirt and shorts smelled of tear gas and were covered with the greasy spots of the luminous liquid. I threw them into the hamper. Next, I inspected myself in the mirror and marveled once more at how lightly I had gotten away: a bump behind the ear, a sizable contusion on the left shoulder, and some scraped ribs. Also skinned knuckles.

On the night table, I discovered a notice which

respectfully suggested that I deposit a sum to cover the rent for the apartment for the first thirty days. The sum was quite considerable, but tolerable. I counted out a few credits and stuffed them into the thoughtfully provided envelope, and then lay down on the bed with my hands behind my head. The sheets were cool and crisp, and a salty sea breeze blew in through the open window. The phonor susurrated cozily behind my ear. I intended to think awhile before falling asleep, but was too exhausted and quickly dozed off.

Later, some noise in the background awakened me, and I grew alert and listened with eyes wide open.

Somewhere nearby, someone either cried or sang in a thin childish voice. I got up cautiously and leaned out the open window. The thin halting voice was intoning: "... having stayed in the grave but a short time, they come out and live among the living as though alive." There was the sound of sobs. From far away like the keening of a mosquito came the chant "Shi-vers! Shi-vers!" The pitiable little voice went on -- "Blood and earth mixed together they can't eat." I thought that it was Vousi, drunk and lamenting upstairs in her room, and called out softly, "Vousi!" No one replied, The thin voice cried out: "Hence from my hair, hence from my flesh, hence from my bones," and I knew who it was. I climbed over the window sill, jumped onto the lawn, and went to the apple grove, listening to the sobbing. Light appeared through the trees, and soon I came to a garage. The doors were cracked open and I looked in. Inside was

a huge shiny Opel. Two candles were burning on the workbench.

There was a smell of gasoline and hot wax.

Under the candles, seated on a work stool, was Len, dressed in a full-length white gown, in bare feet, with a thick, well-worn book on his knees. He regarded me with wide-open eyes, his face completely white and frozen with terror.

"What are you doing here?" I said loudly and entered.

He continued to look at me in silence and started to tremble. I could hear his teeth chattering.

"Len, old friend," I said, "I guess you didn't recognize me. It's me -- Ivan."

He dropped the book and hid his hands in his armpits. As earlier today, in the morning, his face beaded with cold sweat. I sat down alongside of him and put my arm around his shoulders. He collapsed against me weakly. He shook all over. I looked at the book. A certain Doctor Neuf had blessed the human race with An Introduction to the Science of Necrological Phenomena. I kicked the book under the bench.

"Whose ear is that?" I asked loudly.

"Mo... Mama's..."

"A very nice Ford."

"It's not a Ford. It's an Opel."

"You're right -- it is an Opel... a couple of hundred miles per hour I would guess..."

"Yes."

"Where did you get the candles?"

"I bought them."

"Is that right! I didn't know that they sold candles in our time. Is your bulb burned out? I went out in the garden, you know, to get an apple off a tree, and then I saw the light in the garage."

He moved closer to me and said, "Don't leave for a while yet, will you?"

"OK. What do you say we blow out the lights and go to my place?"

"No, I can't go there."

"Where can't you go?"

"In the house and to your place." He was talking with tremendous conviction. "For quite a while yet. Until they fall asleep."

"Who?"

"They."

"Who are -- they?"

"They -- you hear?"

I listened. There was only the rustle of branches in the wind and somewhere very far away the cry of: "Shi-vers! Shi-vers!"

"I don't hear anything special," I said.

"That's because you don't know. You are new here and they don't bother the new ones."

"But who are they, after all?"

"All of them. You've seen the fink with the buttons?"

"Pete? Yes, I saw him. But why is he a fink? In my opinion, he's an entirely respectable man."

Len jumped up.

"Come on," he said in a whisper, "I'll show you. But be quiet."

We came out of the garage, crept up to the house, and turned a corner. Len held my hand all the time; his palm was cold and wet..

"There -- look," he said.

Sure enough, the sight was frightening. My customs friend was lying on the porch with his head stuck at an unnatural angle through the railing. The mercury vapor light from the street fell on his face, which looked blue and swollen, and covered with dark welts. Through half-open lids, the eyes could be seen, crossed toward the bridge of the nose.

"They walk among the living, like living people in the daytime," murmured Len, holding on to me with both hands. "They bow and smile, but at night their faces are white, and blood seeps through their skin." I approached the veranda. The customs man was dressed in pajamas. He breathed noisily and exuded a smell of cognac. There was blood on his face, as though he'd fallen on his face into some broken glass.

"He's just drunk," I said loudly. "Simply drunk and

snoring. Very disgusting."

Len shook his head.

"You are a newcomer," he whispered. "You see nothing. But I saw." He shook again. "Many of them came. She brought them... and they carried her in... there was a moon... they sawed off the top of her head... and she screamed and screamed... and then they started to eat with spoons. She ate, too, and they all laughed when she screamed and flopped around..."

"Who? Who was it?"

"And then they piled on wood and burned it and danced around the fire... and then they buried everything in the garden... she went out to get the shovel in the car... I saw it all... do you want to see where they buried her?"

"You know what, friend?" I said. "Let's go to my place."

"What for?"

"To get some sleep, that's what for. Everyone is sleeping -- only you and I are palavering here."

"Nobody is sleeping. You really are new. Right now no one is sleeping. You must not sleep now."

"Let's go, let's go," said I, "over to my place."

"I won't go," he said. "Don't touch me. I didn't say your name."

"I am going to take a belt," I said menacingly, "and I will strap your behind."

Apparently this calmed him. He clutched my hand again and became silent.

"Let's go, old pal, let's go," I said. "You're going to sleep and I will sit alongside you. And if anything at all happens, I will awaken you at once."

We climbed into my room through the window (he absolutely refused to enter the house by the front door), and I put him to bed. I intended to tell him a tale, but he fell asleep immediately. His face looked tortured, and every few minutes he quivered in his sleep. I pushed the chair by the window, wrapped myself in a bathrobe, and smoked a cigarette to calm my nerves. I attempted to think about Rimeyer and about the Fishers, with whom I had not met up after all; about what must happen on the twenty-eighth; and about the Art Patrons, but nothing came of it and this irritated me. It was annoying that I was unable to think about my business as something of importance. The thoughts scattered and jumbled emotions intruded, and I did not think so much as I felt. I felt that I hadn't come for nothing, but at the same time, I sensed that I had come for altogether the wrong reason.

But Len slept. He did not even awake when an engine snorted at the gate, car doors were slammed, there were shouts, chokes, and howls in different voices, so that I almost decided that a crime was being committed in front of the house, when it became clear that it was just Vousi coming back. Happily humming, she began to undress while still in the garden, negligently draping her blouse, skirt, and other garments over

the apple branches. She didn't notice me, came into the house, shuffled around upstairs for a while, dropped something heavy, and finally settled down. It was close to five o'clock. The glow of dawn was kindling over the sea.

Chapter EIGHT

When I woke up, Len was already gone. My shoulder ached so badly that the pain pounded in my head, and I promised myself to take it easy the whole day. Grunting and feeling sick and forlorn, I executed a feeble attempt at set-ting-up exercises, approximated a wash-up, took the envelope with the money, and set out for Aunt Vaina, moving edge-wise through the doorway. In the hall, I stopped in indecision: it was quiet in the house, and I wasn't sure that my landlady was up. But at this point the door to her side of the house opened, and Pete, the customs man, came out into the hall. Well, well, thought I. At night he had looked like a drowned drunk. Now in the light of day, he resembled a victim of a hooligan attack. The lower part of his face was dark with blood. Fresh blood glistened on his chin, and he held a handkerchief under his jaw to keep his snow-white braided uniform clean. His face was strained and his eyes tended to cross, but in general, he held himself remarkably calm, as though falling face-down into broken glass was a most ordinary event for him. A slight misadventure, you know, can happen to anybody; please don't pay it any attention;

every-thing will be all right.

"Good morning," I mumbled.

"Good morning," he responded, politely dabbing his chin cautiously and sounding a bit nasal.

"Anything the matter? Can I help?"

"A trifle," he said. ' The chair fell."

He bowed courteously, and passing by me, unhurriedly left the house. I observed his departure with a thoroughly unpleasant feeling, and when I turned back toward the door, I found Aunt Vaina standing in front of me. She stood in the doorway, gracefully leaning on the jamb, all clean, rosy, and perfumed, and looking at me as though I was Major General Tuur or, at least, Staff Major Polom.

"Good morning, early bird," she cooed. "I was puzzled -- who would be talking at this hour?"

"I couldn't bring myself to disturb you," I said, shuddering fashionably and mentally howling at the pain in my shoulder. "Good morning, and may I take the }liberty to hand you --"

"How nice! You can tell a real gentleman right away. Major General Tuur used to say that a true gentleman never makes anyone wait. Never. Nobody..."

I became aware that slowly but very persistently, she was herding me away from her door. The living room was darkened, with the drapes apparently drawn, and some strange sweet smell

was wafting out of it into the hall.

"But you did not have to be in such a rush, really..."

She was finally in a convenient position to close the door with a smooth negligent gesture. "However, you can be sure that I will value your promptness appropriately. Vousi is still asleep, and it's time for me to get Len off to school. So if you will excuse me... By the way, we have the newspapers on the veranda."

"Thank you," I said, retreating.

"If you'll have the patience, I would like to ask you to join me for breakfast and a cup of cream."

"Unfortunately, I will have to be going," I said, bowing out.

As to newspapers, there were six. Two local, illustrated, fat as almanacs; one from the capital; two luxurious weeklies; and, for some reason, the Arab El Gunia. The last I put aside, and sifted through the others, accompanying the news with sandwiches and hot cocoa.

In Bolivia, government troops, after stubborn fighting, had occupied the town of Reyes. The rebels were pushed across the River Beni. In Moscow, at the international meeting of nuclear physicists, Haggerton and Soloviev announced a project for a commercial installation to produce anti-matter. The Tretiakoff Gallery had arrived in Leopoldville, official opening being scheduled for tomorrow. The scheduled series of pilotless craft had been launched from the Staryi Vostok base

on Pluto into the totally free flight zone; communications with two of the craft were temporarily disrupted. The General Secretary of the UN had directed an official message to Orolianos, in which he warned that in the event of a repetition of the use of atomic grenades by the extremists, UN police forces would be introduced into Eldorado. In Central Angola, at the sources of the River Kwando, an archaeological expedition of the Academy of Sciences of the UAR had uncovered the remains of a cyclopean construction, apparently dating from well before the ice age. A group of specialists of the United Center for the Investigation of Subelectronic (Ritrinitive) Structures had evaluated the energy reserves available to mankind as sufficient for three billion years. The cosmic branch of Unesco had announced that the relative population growth of extraterrestrial centers and bases now approached the population growth on Earth. The head of the British delegation to the UN had put forth a proposal, in the name of the great powers, for the total demilitarization, by force if need be, of the remaining militarized regions on the globe.

Information about how many kilos were pressed by whom and about who drove how many balls through whose goal posts I did not bother to read. Of the local announcements, I was intrigued by three. The local paper, Joy of Life, reported: "Last night a group of evil-minded men again carried out a private plane raid on Star Square, which was full of citizens taking their

leisure. The hooligans fired several machine-gun bursts and dropped eleven gas bombs. As a result of the ensuing panic, several men and women suffered severe injuries. The normal recreation of hundreds of respectable people was disrupted by a small group of bandit (excuse the term) intelligentsia with the obvious connivance of the police. The president of the Society for the Good Old Country Against Evil Influences informed our correspondent that the Society intended to take into its own hands the matter of the protection of the well-earned rest of fellow citizens. In no equivocal manner, the president let it be known whom specifically the people regarded as the source of the harmful infection, banditism, and militarized hooliganism..."

On page twelve, the paper devoted a column to an article by "the outstanding proponent of the latest philosophy, the laureate of many literary prizes, Doctor Opir." The treatise was titled "World Without Worry." With beautiful words and most convincingly indeed, Doctor Opir established the omnipotence of science, called for optimism, derided gloomy skeptics and denigrators, and invited all "to be as children." He assigned a specially important role in the formation of contemporary (i.e., anxiety-free) psychology to electric wave psychotechnics. "Recollect what a wonderful charge of vigor and good feeling is imparted by a bright, happy, and joyful dream!" exclaimed this representative of the latest philosophy. "It is no wonder that sleep has been known for over a hundred years to

be a curative agent for many psychic disturbances. But we are all a touch ill: we are sick with our worries, we are overcome by the trivia of daily routine, we are irritated by the rare but still remaining few malfunctions, the inevitable frictions among individuals, the normal healthy sexual unsatisfiedness, the dissatisfaction with self which is so common in the makeup of each person. ... As fragrant bath salts wash away the dust of travel from our tired bodies, so does a joyful dream wash away and purify a tired psyche. So now, we no longer have to fear any anxieties or malfunctions. We well know that at the appointed hour, the invisible radiation of the dream generator, which together with the public I tend to call by the familiar name of 'the shivers,' will heal us, fill us with optimism, and return to us the wonderful feeling of the joy of being alive."

Further, Doctor Opir expounded that the shivers were absolutely harmless physically and psychologically, and that the attacks of detractors who wished to see in the shivers a resemblance to narcotics and who demagogically ranted about a "doped mankind," could not but arouse in us a painful incomprehension, and, conceivably, some stronger public-spirited emotions that could be dangerous to the malevolently inclined citizens. In conclusion, Doctor Opir pronounced a happy dream to be the best kind of rest, vaguely hinted that the shivers constituted the best antidote to alcoholism and drug addiction, and insistently warned that the shivers should not be confused with other (not

medically approved) methods of electric wave application.

The weekly Golden Days informed the public that a valuable canvas, ascribed in the opinion of experts to the gifted band of Raphael, had been stolen from the National Art Galleries. The weekly called the attention of the authorities to the fact that this criminal act was the third during the past four months of this year, and that neither of the previously stolen works of art had ever been found.

All in all, there was really nothing to read in the weeklies. I glanced through them quickly, and they left me with the most depressing impression.

All were filled with desolate witticisms, artless caricatures, among which the "captionless" series stood out with particular imbecility, with biographies of dim personalities, slobbering sketches of life in various layers of society, nightmarish series of photos with such titles as "Your husband at work and at home," endless amounts of useful advice on how to occupy your time without, God forbid, burdening your head, passionately idiotic sallies against alcoholism, hooliganism, and debauchery, and calls to join clubs and choruses with which I was already familiar. There were also memoirs of participants in the "fracas" and in the struggle against organized crime, which were served up in the literary style of jackasses totally lacking in taste or conscience. These were obviously exercises of addicts of literary sensationalism, loaded with suffering and tears, magnificent

feats and saccharine futures. There were endless crosswords, chainwords, rebuses, and puzzle pictures.

I flung the pile of papers into the corner. What a dreary place they had here! The boob was coddled, the boob was lovingly nurtured, and the boob was cultivated; the boob had become the norm; a little more and he would become the ideal, while jubilant doctors of philosophy would exultantly dance attendance upon him. But the papers were in full choreographic swing even now. Oh, what a wonderful boob we have! Such an optimistic boob, and such an intelligent boob, such a healthy alert boob, and with such a fine sense of humor; and oh boob, how well and adroitly you can solve crossword puzzles! But most important of all, boob, don't you worry about a thing, everything is quite all right, everything is just dandy, everything is in your service, the science and the literature, just so you can be amused and don't have to think about a thing.... As for those seditious skeptics and hoodlums, boob, we'll take care of them! With your help, we can't help but take care of them! What are they complaining about, anyway? Do they have more needs than other people?

Dreariness and desolation! There had to be some curse upon these people, some awful predilection for dangers and disasters. Imperialism, fascism, tens of millions of people killed and lives destroyed, including millions of these same boobs, guilty and innocent, good and bad. The last skirmishes,

the last putsches, especially pitiless because they were the last. Criminals, the military driven berserk by prolonged uselessness, all kinds of leftover trash from intelligence and counterintelligence, bored by the sameness of commercial espionage, all slaving for power. Again we were forced to return from space, to come out of our laboratories and factories, to call back our soldiers. And we managed it again. The zephyr was gently turning the pages of History of Fascism by my feet. But hardly had we had the time to savor the cloudless horizons, when out of these same sewers of history crept the scum with submachine guns, homemade quantum pistols, gangsters, syndicates, gangster corporations, gangster empires. "Minor malfunctions are still encountered here and there," soothed and calmed Doctor Opir, while napalm bottles flew through university windows, cities were seized by bands of outlaws, and museums burned like candles.... All right. Brushing aside Doctor Opir and his kind, once again we came out of space, out of the labs and factories, recalled the soldiers, and once again managed the problem. And again the skies were clear. Once more the Opirs were out, the weeklies were purring, and once more filth was flowing out of the same sewers. Tons of heroin, cisterns of opium, and oceans of alcohol, and beyond all that something new, something for which we had no name.... Again everything was hanging by a thread for them, and boobs were solving crosswords, dancing the fling, and desired but one thing: to have fun. But somewhere idiot children were being

born, people were going insane, some were dying strangely in bathtubs, some were dying no less strangely with some group called the Fishers, while art patrons defended their passion for art with brass knuckles. And the weeklies were attempting to cover this foul-smelling bog with a crust, fragile as a meringue, of cloyingly sweet prattle, and this or that diplomaed fool glorified sweet dreams, and thousands of idiots surrendered with relish to dreams in lieu of drunkenness (so that they need not think)... and again the boobs were persuaded that all was well, that space was being developed at an unprecedented pace (which was true), and that sources of energy would last for billions of years (which was also true), that life was becoming unquestionably more interesting and varied (which was also undoubtedly true, but not for boobs), while demagogue-denigrators (real-thinking men who considered that in our times any drop of pus could infect the whole of mankind, as once upon a time a beer putsch turned into a world menace) were foreign to the people's interests and deserved of universal condemnation. Boobs and criminals, criminals and boobs.

"Have to work at it," I said aloud. "To hell with melancholy! We'd show you skeptics!"

It was time to go see Rimeyer. Although there were the Fishers. But all right, the Fishers could be attended to later. I was tired of poking around in the dark. I went out in the yard. I could hear Aunt Vaina feeding Len.

"But, Mom, I don't want any!"

"Eat, son, you must eat. You are so pale."

"I don't want to. Disgusting lumps!"

"What lumps? Here, let me have some myself! Mm! Delicious!

Just try some and you'll see it's very tasty."

"But I don't want any! I'm ill, I'm not going to school."

"Len, what are you saying? You've skipped a lot of days as it is."

"So what?"

"What do you mean, so what? The director has already called me twice. We'll be fined."

"Let them fine us!"

"Eat, son, eat. Maybe you didn't get enough sleep?"

"I didn't. And my stomach hurts... and my head... and my tooth, this one here, you see?"

Len's voice sounded peevish, and I immediately visualized his pouting lips and his swinging stockinged foot.

I went out the gate. The day was again clear and sunny, full of bird twitter. It was still too early, so that on my way to the Olympic, I met only two people. They walked together by the curb, monstrosly out of place in the joyful world of green branch and clear blue sky. One was painted vermilion and the other bright blue. Sweat beaded through the paint on their bodies. Their breaths heaved through open mouths and the protruding eyes were bloodshot. Unconsciously I unbuttoned all the buttons of my shirt and breathed with relief when this

strange pair passed me.

At the hotel I went right up to the ninth floor. I was in a very determined mood. Whether Rimeyer wanted to or not, he would have to tell me everything I wanted to know. As a matter of fact, I needed him now for other things as well. I needed a listener, and in this sunny bedlam I could talk openly only to him, so far. True, this was not the Rimeyer I had counted on, but this too had to be talked out in the end....

The red-headed Oscar stood by the door to Rimeyer's suite, and, seeing him, I slowed my steps. He was adjusting his tie, gazing pensively at the ceiling. He looked worried.

"Greetings," I said -- I had to start somehow.

He wiggled his eyebrows and looked me over, and I was aware that he remembered me. He said slowly, "How do you do."

"You want to see Rimeyer, too?" I asked.

"Rimeyer is not feeling well," he said. He stood hard by the door and apparently had no intention of letting me by.

"A pity," I said, moving up on him. "And what is his problem?"

"He is feeling very bad."

"Oh, oh!" I said. "Someone should have a look."

I was now right up against Oscar. It was obvious he was not about to give way. My shoulder responded at once with a flare of pain.

"I am not sure it's all that necessary," he said.

"What do you mean? Is it really that bad?"

"Exactly. Very bad. And you shouldn't bother him. Not today, or any other day!"

It seems I arrived in time, I thought, and hopefully not too late.

"Are you a relative of his?" I asked. My attitude was most peaceable.

He grinned.

"I am his friend. His closest friend in this town. A childhood friend, you might say."

"This is most touching," I said. "But I am his relative. Same as a brother. Let's go in together and see what his friend and brother can do for poor Rimeyer."

"Maybe his brother has already done enough for Rimeyer."

"Really now... I only arrived yesterday."

"You wouldn't, by any chance, have other brothers around here?"

"I don't think there are any among your friends, with the exception of Rimeyer."

While we were carrying on with this nonsense, I was studying him most carefully. He didn't look too nimble a type -- even considering my defective shoulder. But he kept his hands in his pockets all the time, and although I didn't think he would risk shooting in the hotel, I was not of a mind to chance it. Especially as I had heard of quantum dischargers with limited range.

I have been told critically many times that my intentions are always clearly readable on my face. And Oscar was apparently an adequately keen observer. I was coming to the conclusion that he obviously did not have anything there at all, that the hands-in-the-pocket act was a bluff. He moved aside and said, "Go on in."

We entered. Rimeyer was indeed in a bad way. He lay on the couch covered with a torn drape, mumbling in delirium. The table was overturned, a broken bottle stained the middle of the floor, and wet clothes were strewn all over the room. I approached Rimeyer and sat down by him so as not to lose sight of Oscar, who stood by the window, half-sitting on the sill. Rimeyer's eyes were open. I bent over him.

"Rimeyer," I called. "It's Ivan. Do you recognize me?"

He regarded me dully. There was a fresh cut on his chin under the stubble.

"So you got there already..." he muttered. "Don't prolong the Fishers... doesn't happen... don't take it so hard ... bothered me a lot... I can't stand..."

It was pure delirium. I looked at Oscar. He listened with interest, his neck stretched out.

"Bad when you wake up..." mumbled Rimeyer. "Nobody... wake up... they start... then they don't wake up..."

I disliked Oscar more and more. I was annoyed that he should be hearing Rimeyer's ravings. I didn't like his being

here ahead of me. And again, I didn't like that cut on Rimeyer's chin -- it was quite fresh. How can I be rid of you, red-haired mug, I wondered.

"We should call a doctor," I said. "Why didn't you call a doctor, Oscar? I think it's delirium tremens."

I regretted the words immediately. To my considerable surprise, Rimeyer did not smell of alcohol at all, and Oscar apparently knew it. He grinned and said, "Delirium tremens? Are you sure?"

"We have to call a doctor at once," I said. "Also, get a nurse."

I put my hand on the phone. He jumped up instantly and put his hand on mine.

"Why should you do it?" he said. "Better let me call a doctor. You are new here and I know an excellent doctor."

"Well, what kind of a doctor is he?" I objected, studying the cut on his knuckles -- which was also quite new.

"An exemplary doctor. Just happens to be a specialist on the DT's."

Rimeyer said suddenly, "So I commanded... also sprach Rimeyer... alone with the world..."

We turned to look at him. He spoke haughtily, but his eyes were closed, and his face, draped in loose, gray skin, seemed pathetic. That swine Oscar, I thought, where does he get the gall to linger here? A sudden wild thought flashed through my head -- it seemed at that moment exceedingly well conceived: to

disable Oscar with a blow to the solar plexus, tie him up, and force him then and there to expose everything he knew. He probably knew quite a lot. Possibly everything. He looked at me, and in his pale eyes was a blend of fear and hatred.

"All right," I said. "Let the hotel call the doctor."

He removed his hand and I called service. While waiting for the doctor, I sat by Rimeyer, and Oscar walked from corner to corner, stepping over the liquor puddle. I followed him out of the corner of my eye. Suddenly he stooped and picked up something off the floor. Something small and multicolored.

"What have you got there?" I inquired indifferently.

He hesitated a bit and then threw a small flat box with a polychrome sticker on my knees.

"Ah!" I said, and looked at Oscar. "Devon."

"Devon," he responded. "Strange that it's here rather than in the bathroom."

The devil, I thought. Maybe I was still too green to challenge him openly. I still knew but very little of this whole mess.

"Nothing strange about that," I said at random. "I believe you distribute that repellent. It's probably a sample which fell out of your pocket."

"Out of my pocket?" He was astonished. "Oh, you think that I... But I finished my assignments a long time ago, and now I'm just taking it easy. But if you're interested, I can be of some

help."

That s very interesting, I said. "I will consult --"

Unfortunately, the door flew open at this point, and a doctor accompanied by two nurses entered the room.

The doctor turned out to be a decisive individual. He gestured me off the couch and flung the drape off Rimeyer. He was completely naked.

"Well, of course," said the doctor. "Again..."

He raised Rimeyer's eyelid, pulled down his lower lip, and felt his pulse. "Nurse - cordeine! And call some chambermaids and have them clean out these stables till they shine." He stood up and looked at me. "A relative?"

"Yes," I said, while Oscar kept still.

"You found him unconscious?"

"He was delirious," said Oscar.

"You carried him out here?"

Oscar hesitated.

"I only covered him with the drape," he said. "When I arrived, he was lying as he is now. I was afraid he would catch cold."

The doctor regarded him for a while, and then said, "In any case, it is immaterial. Both of you can go. A nurse will stay with him. You can call this evening. Goodbye."

"What is the matter with him, Doctor?" I asked.

"Nothing special. Overtired, nervous exhaustion... besides which he apparently smokes too much. Tomorrow he can be moved,

and you can take him home with you. It would be unhealthy for him to stay here with us. There are too many amusements here.

Goodbye."

We went out into the corridor.

"Let's go have a drink," I said.

"You forgot that I don't drink," corrected Oscar.

"Too bad. This whole episode has upset me. I'd like a snort. Rimeyer always was such a healthy specimen."

"Well, lately he has slipped a lot," said Oscar carefully.

"Yes, I hardly recognized him when I saw him yesterday."

"Same here," said Oscar. He didn't believe a word of it, and neither did I.

"Where are you staying?" I asked.

"Right here," said Oscar. "On the floor below, number 817."

"Too bad that you don't drink. We could go to your room and have a good talk."

"Yes, that wouldn't be a bad idea. But, regretfully, I am in a great rush." He was silent awhile. "Let me have your address. Tomorrow morning, I'll be back and drop in to see you. About ten -- will that suit you? Or you can ring me up."

"Why not?" I said and gave him my address. "To be honest with you, I am quite interested in Devon."

"I think we'll be able to come to an understanding," said Oscar. "Till tomorrow!"

He ran down the stairs. Apparently he really was in a hurry. I went down in the elevator and sent off a telegram to Matia: "Brother very ill, feeling very lonesome, but keeping up spirits, Ivan." I truly did feel very much alone. Rimeyer was out of the game again, at least for a day. The only hint he had given me was the advice about the Fishers. I had nothing more definite. There were the Fishers, who were located somewhere in the old subway; there was Devon, which in some peripheral way could have something to do with my business, but also could just as well have no connection with it at all; there was Oscar, clearly connected with Devon and Rimeyer, a player sufficiently ominous and repulsive, but undoubtedly only one of many such unpleasant types on the local cloudless horizons; then again there was a certain "Buba," who supplied pore-nose with Devon.... After all, I have been here just twenty-four hours, I thought. There is time. Also, I could still count on Rimeyer in the final analysis, and there was the possibility of finding Peck. Suddenly I remembered the events of the night before and sent a wire to Sigmund: "Amateur concert on the twenty-eighth, details unknown, Ivan." Then I beckoned to a porter and inquired as to the shortest way to the old subway.

Chapter NINE

"You would do better to come at night. It's too early now."

"I prefer now."

"Can't wait, eh? Perhaps you've got the wrong address?"

"Oh no, I haven't got it wrong."

"You must have it now, you are sure?"

"Yes, now and not later."

He clicked his tongue and pulled on his lower lip. He was short, well knit, with a round shaved head. He spoke hardly moving his tongue and rolling his eyes languidly under the lids. I thought he had not had enough sleep. His companion, sitting behind the railing in an easy chair, apparently also had missed some. But he did not utter a word and didn't even look in my direction. It was a gloomy place, with stale air and warped panels which had sprung away from the walls. A bulb, dimmed with dust, hung shadeless from the ceiling on a dirty cable.

"Why not come later?" said the round-head. "When everybody comes."

"I just got the urge," I said diffidently.

"Got the urge..." He searched in his table drawer. "I don't even have a form left. Eli, do you have some?"

The latter, without breaking his silence, bent over and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper from somewhere near the railing.

The round-head said, yawning, "Guys that come at break of day... nobody here... no girls... they're still in bed." He

proffered the form. "Fill it out and sign. Eli and I will sign as witnesses. Turn in your money. Don't worry, we keep it honest. Do you have any documents?"

"None."

"That's good, too."

I scanned the form. "In open deposition and of my own free will, I, the undersigned, in the presence of witnesses, earnestly request to be subjected to the initiation trials toward the mutual quest of membership in the Society of VAL." There were blank spaces for signature of applicant and signatures of witnesses.

"What is VAL?" I asked.

"That's the way we are registered," answered round-head.

He was counting my money.

"But how do you decipher it?"

"Who knows? That was before my time. It's VAL, that's all there is to it. Maybe you know, Eli?" Eli shook his head lazily. "Well, really, what do you care?"

"You are absolutely right." I inserted my name and signed.

Round-head looked it over, signed it, and passed the form to Eli.

"You look like a foreigner," he said.

"Right."

"In that case, add your home address. Do you have relatives?"

"No."

"Well then, you don't have to. All set, Eli? Put it in the folder. Shall we go?"

He lifted up the gate in the railway and walked me over to a massive square door, probably left over from the days when the subway had been fitted out as an atomic shelter.

"There is no choice," he said as though in self-defense. He pulled the slides and turned a rusty handle with considerable effort. "Go straight down the corridor and then you'll see for yourself."

I thought that I heard Eli snickering behind him. I turned around. A small screen was fitted in the railing in front of Eli. Something was moving on the screen, but I could not see what it was. Round-bead put all his weight on the handle and swung back the door. A dusty passage became visible. For a few seconds he listened and then said, "Straight down this corridor."

"What will I find there?" I said.

"You'll get what you were looking for. Or have you changed your mind?"

All of which was clearly not what I was looking for, but as is well known, nobody knows anything until he has tried it himself I stepped over the high sill and the door shut behind me with a clang. I could hear the latches screeching home.

The corridor was lit by a few surviving lamps. It was damp, and mold grew on the cement walls. I stood still awhile,

listening, but there was nothing to be heard but the infrequent tap of water drops. I moved forward cautiously. Cement rubble crunched underfoot. Soon the corridor came to an end, and I found myself in a vaulted, poorly lit concrete tunnel. When my eyes accommodated to the darkness, I discerned a set of tracks. The rails were badly rusted and puddles of dark water gleamed motionless along their length. Sagging cables hung from the ceiling. The dampness seeped to the marrow of my bones. A repulsive stench of sewer and carrion filled my nostrils. No, this was not what I was looking for. I was not of a mind to fritter away my time and thought of going back and telling them that I would be back some other time. But first, simply out of curiosity, I decided to take a short walk along the tunnel. I went to the right toward the light of distant bulbs. I jumped puddles, stumbled over the rotting ties, and got entangled in loose wires. Reaching a lamp, I stopped again.

The rails had been removed. Ties were strewn along the walls, and holes filled with water gaped along the right of way. Then I saw the rails. I have never seen rails in such a condition. Some were twisted into corkscrews. They were polished to a high shine and reminded me of gigantic drill bits. Others were driven with titanic force into the floor and walls of the tunnel. A third group were tied into knots. My skin crawled at this sight. Some were simple knots, some with a single bow, some with a double bow like shoelaces. They were mauve and brown.

I looked ahead into the depths of the tunnel. The smell of rotting carrion wafted out of it, and the dim yellow lights winked rhythmically as though something swayed in the draft, covering and uncovering them periodically. My nerves gave way. I felt that this was nothing more than a stupid joke, but I couldn't control myself. I squatted down and looked around. I soon found what I was looking for -- a yard-long piece of reinforcing rod. I stuck it under my arm and went ahead. The iron was wet and cold and rough with rust.

The reflection of the winking lights glinted on slippery wet walls. I had noticed some time back the round, strange-looking marks on them, but at first did not pay them any attention. Then I became interested and examined them more closely. As far as the eye could reach, there were two sets of round prints on the walls at one-meter intervals. It looked as though an elephant had run along the wall -- and not too long ago at that. On the edge of one of the prints, the remains of a crushed centipede still struggled feebly. Enough, I thought, time to go back. I looked along the tunnel. Now I could plainly see the swaying curves of black cables under the lamps. I took a better grip on the rod and went ahead, holding close to the wall.

The whole thing was getting through to me. The cables sagged under the arch of the tunnel, and on them, tied by their tails into hairy clusters, hung hundreds upon hundred of dead

rats, swaying in the draft. Tiny teeth glinted horribly in the semi-dark, and rigid little legs stuck out in all directions. The clusters stretched in long obscene garlands into the distance. A thick, nauseating stench oozed from under the arch and flowed along the tunnel, as palpable as glutinous jelly.

There was a piercing screech and a huge rat scurried between my feet. And then another and another. I backed up. They were fleeing from there, from the dark where there was not a single lamp. Suddenly, warm air came pulsing from the same direction. I felt a hollow space with my elbow and pressed myself into the niche. Something live squirmed and squeaked under my heel; I swung my iron rod without looking. I had no time for rats, because I could hear something running heavily but softly along the tunnel, splashing in the puddles. It was a mistake to get involved in this business, thought I. The iron rod seemed very light and insignificant in comparison with the bow-tied rails. This was no flying leech, nor a dinosaur from the Kongo... don't let it be a *giganto-pithek*, I thought, anything but a *giganto-pithek*. These donkeys would have the wit to catch one and let it loose in the tunnel. I was thinking very poorly in those few seconds. And suddenly for no reason at all I thought of Rimeyer. Why had he sent me here? Had he gone out of his mind? If only it was not a *giganto-pithek*!

It raced by me so fast that I couldn't discern what it was.

The tunnel boomed from its gallop. Then there was the

despairing scream of a caught rat right close by and...

silence. Cautiously I peeked out. He stood about ten paces away directly under one of the lamps, and my legs suddenly went limp from relief.

"Smart-alec entrepreneurs," I said aloud, almost crying.

"They would dream up something like this."

He heard my voice and raising his stern legs, pronounced:

"Our temperature is two meters, twelve inches, there is no humidity, and what there isn't is not there."

"Repeat your orders," I said, approaching him.

He let the air out of his suction cups with a loud whistle, twitched his legs mindlessly, and ran up on the ceiling.

"Come down," I said sternly, "and answer my question."

He hung over my head, this poor long-obsolete cyber, intended for work on the asteroids, pitiable and out of place, covered with flakes of corrosion and blobs of black underground dirt.

"Get down," I barked.

He flung the dead rat at me and sped off into the dark.

"Basalts! Granites!" he yelled in different voices.

"Pseudo-metamorphic types! I am over Berlin! Do you copy! Time to get to bed!"

I threw away the rod and followed him. He ran as far as the next lamp, came down, and began to dig the concrete

rapidly, like a dog, with his heavy work manipulators. Poor chap, even in better times his brain was capable of performing properly only in less than one one-hundredth of a G, and now he was altogether out of his mind. I bent over him and began to search for the control center under his armor. "The rotters," I said aloud. The controls were peened over as though battered with a sledge. He stopped digging and grabbed me by the leg.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Desist!"

He desisted, lay down on his side, and informed me in a basso voice, "I am deathly tired of him, Eli. Now would be the time for a shot of brandy."

Contacts clicked inside him and music poured forth.

Hissing and whistling, he gave a rendition of the "Hunters' March." I was looking at him and thinking how stupid and repulsive it all was, how ridiculous and at the same time frightening. If I had not been a spaceman, if I had been frightened and run, he would almost certainly have killed me. But nobody here knew I had been in space. Nobody. Not one person. Even Rimeyer didn't know.

"Get up," I said.

He buzzed and started to dig the wall, and I turned around and went back. All the time while I was returning to my turn-off I could hear him rattling and clanging in the pile of contorted rails, hissing with the electrowelder and ranting nonsense in two voices.

The anti-atomic door was already open, and I stepped over

the sill, swinging it shut behind me.

"Well, how was it?" asked round-head.

"Dumb," I replied.

"I had no idea you were a spaceman. You have worked out on the planets?"

"I have. But it's still dumb. For fools. For illiterate keyed-up boobs."

"What kind?"

"Keyed-up."

"Well -- there you got it wrong. Lots of people like it. Anyway, I told you to come at night. We don't have much amusement for singles." He poured some whiskey and added some soda from the siphon. "Would you like some?"

I took the glass and leaned on the railing. Eli gloomily regarded the screen, a cigarette sticking to his lip. On the screen careened shifting views of the glistening tunnel walls, twisted rails, black puddles, and flying sparks from the welder.

"That's not for me," I announced. "Let barbers and accountants enjoy it. Of course, I have nothing against them, but what I need is something the likes of which I have not seen in my entire life."

"So you don't know yourself what you want," said roundhead. "It's a hard case. Excuse me, you aren't an Intel?"

"Why?"

"Well, don't take offense -- we are all equal before the grim reaper, you understand. What am I trying to say? That Intels are the most difficult clients, that's all. Isn't that right, Eli? If one of your barbers or bookkeepers comes here, he knows very well what it is he needs. He needs to get his blood going, to show off and be proud of himself, to get the girls squealing, and exhibit the punctures in his side. These fellows are simple, each one wants to consider himself a man. After all, who is he -- our client? He has no particular capabilities, and he doesn't need any. In earlier times, I read in a book, people used to be envious of each other -- the neighbor is rolling in luxury and I can't save up for a refrigerator -- how could you put up with that? They hung on like bulldogs to all kinds of trash, to money, to cushy jobs -- they laid down their lives for such things. The guy with a foxier head or a stronger fist would wind up on top. But now life has become affluent and dull and there is a plenty of everything. What shall a man apply himself to? A man is not a fish, for all that, he is still a man and gets bored, but can't dream up something to do for himself. To do that you need special talents, you need to read a mountain of books, and how can he do that when they make him throw up. To become world-famous or to invent some new machine, that's something that wouldn't pop into his head, but even if it did, of what use would it be? Nobody really needs you, not even your own wife and children if you examine it honestly. Right, Eli? And

you don't need anybody either. Nowadays, it seems, clever people think things up for you, something new like these aerosols, or the shivers, or a new dance. There is that new drink -- it's called a polecat. Wanna me knock one together for you? So he downs some of this polecat, his eyes crawl out of their sockets, and he's happy. But as long as his eyes are in their sockets, life is just as dull as rainwater for him. There is an Intel that comes here to us, and every time he complains: Life, he says, is dull, my friends... but I leave here a new man; after, say, 'bullets' or 'twelve to one,' I see myself in a completely new light. Right, Eli? Everything becomes sweet all over again, food, drink, women."

"Yes," I said sympathetically. "I understand you very well. But for me it's all too stale."

"Slug is what he needs," said Eli in his bass voice.

"What's that again?"

"Slug is what I said."

Round-head puckered in distaste.

"Aw, come on, Eli. What's with you today?"

"I don't give a hoot for the likes of him," said Eli. "I just don't like these guys. Everything is insipid for him, nothing suits him."

"Don't listen to him," said round-head. "He hasn't slept all night and is very tired."

"Well, why not," I contradicted. "I am quite interested."

What is this slug?"

Round-head puckered his face again.

"It's not decent, you understand?" he said. "Don't listen to Eli, he is a good enough guy, a simple fellow, but it's nothing for him to lambaste a man. It's a bad term. Certain types have taken to writing it all over the walls. Hooligans, that's what they are, right? The snot-noses hardly know what it's about, but they write anyway. See how we had to plane off the railing? Some son of a bitch carved into it, and if I catch him, I'll turn his hide inside out. We do have women coming here too."

"Tell him," pronounced Eli, addressing himself to roundhead, "that he should get hold of a slug and quiet down. Let him find Buba..."

"Will you shut up, Eli?" said round-head, now angry.

"Don't pay any attention to him."

Having heard the name Buba, I helped myself to another drink and settled more comfortably on the railing.

"What's it all about?" I said. "Some kind of secret vice?"

"Secret!" boomed Eli, and let out an obscene horselaugh.

Round-head laughed, too.

"Nothing can be a secret here," he said. "What had of secrets can there be when people are living it up at the age of fifteen? The dopes, the Intels, manufacture secrets. They'd like to get a fracas going on the twenty-eighth, they are all in a huddle, took some mine launchers out of town recently to

hide them, like kids, honest to God! Right, Eli?"

"Tell him," the good simple fellow Eli was persisting.

"Tell him to be off to Hell and gone. And don't go protecting him. Just tell him to go to Buba at the Oasis and that's that."

He threw my wallet and form on the railing. I finished the whiskey. Round-head said soberly, "Of course, it's entirely up to you, but my advice is to stay away from that stuff. Maybe we'll all come to it someday, but the later, the better. I can't even explain it to you, I only feel that it is like the grave: never too late and always too soon."

"Thank you," I said.

"He even thanks you." Eli let loose another horselaugh.

"Have you seen anything like it! He thanks you!"

"We kept three dollars," said round-head. "You can tear up the blank. Or let me tear it up. God forbid something should happen to you, the police will come looking to us."

"To be honest with you," I said, putting the wallet away, "I don't understand how they haven't closed your office already."

"Everything is on the up and up with us," said round-head. "If you don't want any, no one is forcing you. But if something should happen, it's your own fault."

"No one is forcing the drug addicts either," I retorted.

"That's some comparison! Drugs are a profiteering corrupt business!"

"Well, okay, I'll be seeing you," I said. "Thanks, fellows. Where did you say to look for Buba?"

"At the Oasis," boomed Eli. "It's a cafe. Beat it."

"What a polite fellow you are, my friend," I said. "It gets me right in my heart."

"Go on, beat it," repeated Eli. "Stinking Intel."

"Don't get so excited, pal," I said, "or you'll earn yourself an ulcer. Save your stomach, it's your most valuable possession."

Eli started to move slowly out from behind the railing, and I left. My shoulder had started to ache again.

A warm, heavy rain was falling outside. The leaves on the trees shone wetly and joyfully, there was a smell of ozone, freshness and thunderstorm. I stopped a taxi and named the Oasis. The street ran with fresh streams, and the city was so pretty and comfortable that it seemed improper to think of the moldy and abandoned Subway.

The rain was pelting in full swing when I jumped out of the car, ran across the sidewalk, and burst into the Oasis. There were quite a few people, most of them were eating, including the bartender, who was spooning some soup out of a dish placed among drinking glasses. Those who had finished eating sat smoking and abstractedly staring out of the streaming window at the street. I approached the bar and inquired in a low voice whether Buba was there. The bartender put down his spoon and surveyed the room.

"Naah," he said. "Why don't you have something to eat now, and he'll be along soon enough."

"How soon?"

"Twenty minutes, half an hour maybe."

"So!" I said. "In that case I'll have dinner, and then I'll come over and you can point him out to me."

"Uhuh," said the bartender, returning to his soup.

I picked up a tray, collected some sort of a meal, and sat down by the window away from the rest of the patrons. I wanted to think. I sensed that there was enough data to ponder the problem effectively. Some sort of pattern seemed to be forming. Boxes of Devon in the bathroom. Pore-nose spoke about Buba and Devon (in whispers). Eli talked of Buba and "slug." A clear chain of links -- bath, Devon, Buba, slug. Further: the sunburned fellow with the muscles cautioned that Devon was the worst of junk, while the roundhead saw no difference between slug and the grave. It all had to fit together. It seemed to be what we were looking for. If so, then Rimeyer had done the right thing to send me to the Fishers. Rimeyer, I said to myself, why did you send me to the Fishers? And even order me to do as I was told and not to fuss about it? And you didn't know, after all, that I was a spaceman, Rimeyer. If you did know, there were still the other games with bullets and "one against twelve," besides the demented cyber. You really took a dislike to me for something or other, Rimeyer. Somehow I have

crossed you. But no, said I, this cannot be. It is simply that you did not trust me, Rimeyer. It is simply that there is something that I do not know yet. For example, I do not know just who this Oscar is who trades in Devon in this resort city and who is connected with you, Rimeyer. Most likely you have been meeting with Oscar before our conversation in the elevator ... I don't want to think about that.

There he was lying like a dead man and here I was thinking such things about him when he could not defend himself. Suddenly I felt a repulsive cold crawling feeling inside. All right, suppose we trapped this gang. What would change? The shivers would remain, lop-eared Len would be up all night as before, Vousi would be coming home disgustingly drunk, while customs inspector Pete would be smashing his face into broken glass. And all would be concerned about the "good of the people." Some would be irrigated with tear gas, some would be driven into the ground up to their ears, others would be converted from apenhood into something which passes muster as human.... And then the shivers would go out of style and the people would be presented with the super-shivers, while in lieu of the extirpated slug a super-slug would surface. Everything would be for the good of the people. Have fun, Boobland, and don't think about a thing!

Two men in cloaks sat down at the next table with their trays. One of them seemed to me in some way familiar. He had a haughty thoroughbred face, and were it not for a thick white

bandage on the left side of his jaw, I was sure I would recognize him. The other was a ruddy man with a bald pate and fussy movements. They were speaking quietly, but not so as to be inaudible, and I could hear them quite well where I was sitting.

"Understand me correctly," the ruddy one said with conviction while hurriedly consuming his schnitzel, "I am not at all against theaters and museums. But the allocation for the municipal theater for the past year has not been expended fully, while only tourists visit the museums."

"Also picture thieves," inserted the man with the bandage.

"Drop that, please, we don't have pictures that are worth the theft. Thank God, they have learned how to synthesize Sistine Madonnas out of sawdust. I wish to call your attention to the point that dissemination of culture in our time must occur in an entirely different manner. Culture must not be inculcated into the people, rather it must emanate from the people. Public chorister, do-it-yourself groups, mass games -- that is what our public needs."

"What our public needs is a good army of occupation," said the man with the bandage.

"Please stop talking that way, when you actually don't believe what you are saying. Our coverage by the various associations is really at an unacceptably poor level. For instance, Boella complained to me last night that only one man

attends her readings, and he apparently only does so out of matrimonial intentions. But we need to distract the people from the shivers, from alcohol, from sexual pastimes. We need to raise the tone --"

The other interrupted, "What do you want from me? That I should defend your project against that ass, our honorable mayor, today? Be my guest! It is absolutely all the same to me. But if you would like to hear my opinion about tone and spirit, let me tell you it does not exist, my dear Senator; it is long dead! It has been smothered in belly fat! And if I were in your place I would take that into account and only that!"

The ruddy man seemed to be crushed. He was silent for a while and then groaned suddenly, "Dear God, dear God, to think of what we have been driven to concern ourselves with! But I ask you -- is not someone flying to the stars? Somewhere meson reactors are being built, new learning systems are being devised! Dear God, I just recently grasped that we are not even a backwater, we are a preserve! In the eyes of the whole world we are a sanctuary of stupidity, ignorance, and pornocracy. Imagine, Professor Rubenstein has a chair in our city for the second year. A sociopsychologist of world renown. He is studying us like animals. Instinctive Sociology of Decaying Economic Structures -- that's the name of his work. He is interested in people as bearers of primeval instincts, and he complained to me that it was very difficult for him to gather data in countries where instinctive activity is distorted and

suppressed by pedagogical systems! But with us he is in seventh heaven! In his own words, we don't have any activity other than instinctive! I was insulted, I was ashamed, but, good Lord, what could I say to contradict him? You must understand me! You are an intelligent man, my friend, I know you are a cold man, but I can't really believe that you are indifferent to such a degree."

The man with the bandage looked at him haughtily and then, abruptly, his cheek twitched. I recognized him at once: he was the character with the monocle who had thrown the luminous slop all over me so deftly yesterday at the Art Patrons' hall.

Why, you vulture, thought I. You thief. So you need an army of occupation! Spirit smothered in lard indeed!

"Forgive me, Senator," he said. "I do understand it all, and that's precisely why it is perfectly clear to me that everything surrounding you is in a state of dementia. The final spasm! Euphoria!"

I got up and approached their table.

"May I join you?" I asked.

He stared at me in astonishment. I sat down.

"Please excuse me," I said. "I am, to be specific, a tourist and just a short time here; while you seem to be natives and even to have some connection with the municipal government. So I decided to inflict myself on you. I keep hearing about Art Patrons, Art Patrons. But what it's all about

no one seems to know."

The man with the bandage experienced another tie in his cheek. His eyes grew wide -- he too recognized me.

"Art Patrons?" said the ruddy one. "Yes, there is such a barbarous organization with us here. It is very sad that such is the case, but it's so."

I nodded, studying the bandage. My acquaintance had already regained his composure and was eating his jelly with his accustomed haughty look.

"In essence they are simply modern-age vandals. I simply couldn't find a more appropriate word. They pool their resources and buy up stolen paintings, statues, manuscripts, unpublished literary works, patents, and destroy them. Can you imagine how revolting that is? They And some pathological delight in the destruction of examples of world culture. They gather in a large, well-dressed crowd and slowly, deliberately, orgiastically destroy them!"

"Oh my, my, my!" I said, not taking my eyes off the bandage. "Such people should be hung by their legs."

"And we are after them," said the ruddy one. "We are in pursuit of them on the legal level. We are unfortunately unable to get after the Artiques and the Perchers, who are not breaking any laws, but as far as the Art Patrons are concerned --"

"Are you finished yet, Senator?" inquired the bandaged one, ignoring me.

The ruddy one caught himself.

"Yes, yes. It's time for us to go. You will excuse us, please," he said, turning to me. "We have a meeting of the municipal council."

"Bartender!" called the bandaged one in a metallic voice.

"Would you call us a taxi."

"Have you been here long?" asked the ruddy man.

"Second day," I replied.

"Do you like it?"

"A beautiful city."

"Mm -- yes," he mumbled.

We were silent. The man with the bandage impudently inserted his monocle and pulled out a cigar.

"Does it hurt?" I asked sympathetically.

"What, exactly?"

"The jaw," I said. "And the liver should hurt, too."

"Nothing ever hurts me," he replied, monocle glinting. "Are you two acquainted?" the ruddy one asked in astonishment.

"Slightly," I said. "We had an argument about art."

The bartender called out that the taxi had arrived. The man with the bandage immediately got up.

"Let's go, Senator," he said.

The ruddy one smiled at me abstractedly and also got up.

They set off for the exit. I followed them with my eyes and went to the bar.

"Brandy?" asked the bartender.

"Quite," I said. I shuddered with rage. "Who are those people I just spoke to?"

"The baldy is a municipal counselor, his field are cultural affairs. The one with the monocle is the city comptroller."

"Comptroller," I said. "A scoundrel is what he is."

"Really?" said the barman with interest.

"That's right, really," I said. "Is Buba here?"

"Not yet. And how about the comptroller, what is he up to?"

"A scoundrel, an embezzler, that's what he is," I said.

The bartender thought awhile.

"It could well be," he said. "In fact he's a baron -- that is, he used to be, of course. His ways, sure enough, are unsavory. Too bad I didn't go vote or I would have voted against him. What's he done to you?"

"It's you he's done. And I've given him some back. And I'll give him some more in due time. Such is the situation."

The bartender, not understanding anything, nodded and said, "Hit it again?"

"Do," I said.

He poured me more brandy and said,

"And here is Buba, coming in."

I turned around and barely managed to keep the glass in my grip. I recognized Buba.

Chapter TEN

He stood by the door looking about him as though trying to remember where he had come and what he was to do there. His appearance was very unlike his old one, but I recognized him at once anyway, because for four years we sat next to each other in the lecture halls of the school, and then there were several years when we met almost daily.

"Say," I addressed the bartender. "They call him Buba?"

"Uhuh," said the bartender.

"What is it -- a nickname?"

"How should I know? Buba is Buba, that's what they all call him."

"Peck," I cried.

Everyone looked at me. He too slowly turned his head and his eyes searched for the caller. But he paid no attention to me. As though remembering something, he suddenly started to shake the water out of his cape with convulsive motions, and then, dragging his heels, hobbled over to the bar and climbed with difficulty on the stool next to mine.

"The usual," he said to the bartender. His voice was dull and strangled, as though someone held him by the throat.

"Someone has been waiting for you," said the barman, placing before him a glass of neat alcohol and a deep dish

filled with granulated sugar.

Slowly he turned his head and looked at me, saying, "Well, what is it you want?"

His drooping eyelids were inflamed red, with accumulated slime in the corners. He breathed through his mouth as though suffering with adenoids.

"Peck Xenai," I said quietly. "Undergraduate Peck Xenai, please return from earth to heaven."

He continued to regard me without a change in his manner. Then he licked his lips and said, "A classmate, perhaps?"

I felt numb and terrified. He turned around, picked up his glass, drank it down, gagging in revulsion, and began to eat the sugar with a large soup spoon. The bartender poured him another glass.

"Peck," I said, "old friend, don't you remember me?"

He looked me over again.

"I wouldn't say that. I probably did see you somewhere."

"Saw me somewhere!" I said in desperation. "I am Ivan Zhilin. Could it be you have completely forgotten me?"

His hand holding the glass quivered almost imperceptibly, and that was all.

"No, friend," he said, "forgive me, please, but I don't remember you."

"And you don't remember the 'Tahmasib' or Iowa Smith?"

"This heartburn has really got to me today," he informed the bartender. "Let me have some soda, Con."

The bartender, who had listened with curiosity, poured him a soda.

"Bad day, today, Con," he said. "Can you imagine, two automates failed on me today."

The bartender shook his head and sighed.

"The manager is bitching," continued Buba, "called me on the carpet and bawled me out. I am going to quit that place. I told him to go to hell and he fired me."

"Complain to the union," the bartender advised.

"To hell with them." He drank his soda and wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand. He did not look at me.

I sat as though spat upon, forgetting completely what it was I wanted Buba for. I needed Buba, not Peck -- that is, I needed Peck too. But not this one. This was not Peck, this was some strange and repulsive Buba, and I watched in horror as he sucked up the second glass of alcohol and again set to shoveling spoonfuls of sugar into himself. His face effloresced with red spots, and he kept gagging and listening to the bartender as he animatedly recounted the latest football exploits. I wanted to cry out, "Peck, what has happened to you? Peck, you used to hate all this!" I put my hand on his shoulder and said imploringly, "Peck, dear friend, hear me out, please."

He shied away.

"What's the matter, friend?" His eyes were now completely unseeing. "I am not Peck, I am Buba, do you understand? You are

confusing me with someone else, there isn't any Peck here....

So what did the Rhinos do then, Con?"

I reminded myself where I was, and forced myself to understand that there was no more Peck, and that there was a Buba, here, an agent of a criminal organization, and this was the only reality, while Peck Xenai was a mirage -- a memory which must be quickly extirpated if I intended to press on with my work.

"Hold on, Buba," I said. "I want to talk business to you."

He was quite drunk by now.

"I don't talk business at the bar," he announced. "And anyway I am through with work. Done. I have no more business of any kind. You can apply to the city hall, friend. They'll help you out."

"I am applying to you, not the city hall," I said. "Will you listen to me!"

"You I hear all the time, as it is. To the detriment of my health."

"My business is quite simple," I said. "I need a slug."

He shuddered violently.

"Are you out of your mind, pal?"

"You should be ashamed," said the bartender. "Right out in front of people... you have lost all sense of decency."

"Shut up," I told him.

"You be quiet," the barman said menacingly. "It must be some time since you've been busted? Watch your step or you'll

get exported."

"I don't give a damn about the exportation," I said insolently. "Don't stick your snoot in other people's business."

"Lousy sluggard," said the bartender.

He was visibly incensed, but spoke in a low voice. "A slug he wants. I'll call an officer right now and he'll give you a slug."

Buba slid off the stool and hurriedly hobbled toward the door.

I left off with the bartender and hurried after him. He shot out into the rain, and forgetting to cover himself with his cape, started to look around in search of a taxi. I caught up with him and grasped him by the sleeve.

"What in God's name do you want from me?" he said miserably. "I'll call the police."

"Peck," I said. "Come out of it, Peck. I am Ivan Zhilin, and you must remember me."

He kept looking around and wiping the streaming water from his face with the palm of his hand. He looked pitiful and run down, and I, trying to suppress my irritation, kept insisting to myself that this was my Peck, priceless Peck, irreplaceable Peck, good, intelligent, joyful Peck, kept trying to remember him as he was in front of the Gladiator's control console, and I couldn't because I couldn't imagine him anywhere except at

the bar over a glass of alcohol.

"Taxi," he screeched, but the car flew by, full of people.

"Peck," I said, "come with me. I'll tell you all about it."

"Leave me alone," he said, his teeth chattering. "I won't go anywhere with you. Leave off! I didn't bother you, I didn't do anything to you, leave me be, for God's sake."

"All right," I said, "I'll let you alone. But you must give me a slug and also your address."

"I don't know of any slugs," he moaned. "God, what kind of a day is this!"

Favoring his left leg, he wandered off and suddenly dove into a basement under an elegant and restrained sign. I followed. We sat down at a table and a waiter immediately brought us hot meat and beer, although we hadn't ordered anything. Buba was shivering and his wet face turned blue. He pushed the plate away with revulsion and began to swallow the beer, both hands around the mug. The basement was quiet and empty. Over the sparkling counter hung a white sign with gold letters reading, "Paid Service Only."

Buba raised his head from the beer and said pleadingly, "Can I go, Ivan? I can't... What's the point of all this talk? Let me go, please."

I put my hand on his.

"What's happening to you, Peck? I searched for you. There is no address listed anywhere. I met you quite by accident, and

I don't understand anything. How did you get involved in this mess? Can I help you possibly, with anything? Maybe we could --"

Suddenly he jerked his hand away in a rage.

"What an executioner," he hissed. "The devil lured me to that Oasis.... Stupid chatter, drivel. I have no slug, do you understand? I have one, but I won't give it to you. What'll I do then -- like Archimedes? Don't you have any conscience? Then don't torture me, let me go."

"I can't let you go," I said, "until I get the slug. And your address. We must talk."

"I don't want to talk to you, can't you understand? I don't want to talk to anyone about anything. I want to go home. I won't give you my slug. What am I -- a factory? Give it to you and then chase all over town?"

I kept silent. It was clear that he hated me now. That if he thought he had the strength he would kill me and leave. But he knew that he did not have the strength.

"Scum," he said in a fury. "Why can't you buy one yourself? Don't you have the money? Here! Here!" he began to search convulsively in his pockets, throwing coppers and crumpled bills on the table. "Take it, there's plenty."

"Buy what? Where?"

"There's a damned jackass! It's... what is it? Hmm... how do you call it... Oh hell!" he cried. "May you drop straight to

hell!"

He stuck his fingers into his shirt pocket and pulled out a flat plastic case. Inside it was a shiny metal tube, similar to a pocket radio local oscillator-mixer subassembly. "Here -- get fat!" He proffered me the tube. It was quite small, less than an inch long and a millimeter thick.

"Thank you," I said. "And how do I use it?"

Peck's eyes opened wide. I think he even smiled.

"Good God!" he said almost tenderly. "Can it be you really don't know?"

"I know nothing," I said.

"Well then, you should have said so from the start. And I thought you were tormenting me like a torturer. You have a radio? Insert it in place of the mixer, hang it, stand it somewhere in the bath, and go to!"

"In the tub?"

"Yes."

"It must be in the bath?"

"But yes! It is absolutely necessary that your body be immersed in water. In hot water. What an ass you are!"

"And how about Devon?"

"The Devon goes in the water. About five tablets in the water and one orally. The taste is awful, but you won't regret it later. And one more thing, be sure to add bath salts to the water. And before you start, have a couple of glasses of something strong. This is required so that... how shall I say?

-- so you can loosen up, sort of."

"So," I said. "I got it. Now I've got everything." I wrapped the slug in a paper napkin and put it in my pocket. "So it's electric wave psychotechnics?"

"Good Lord, now what do you care about that?"

He was up already, pulling the hood over his head.

"No matter," I said. "How much do I owe you?"

"A trifle, nonsense! Let's go quickly... what the hell are we losing time for?"

We went up into the street.

"You made the right decision," said Peck. What kind of world is this? Are we men in it? Trash is what it is and not a world. Taxi!" he yelled. "Hey, taxi!"

He shook in sudden excitement. "What possessed me to go to that Oasis... Oh no... from now on I'll go nowhere ... nowhere."

"Let me have your address," I said.

"What do you want with my address?"

A taxi drew up and Buba tore at the door.

"Address," I said, grabbing him by the shoulder.

"What a dumbhead," said Buba.. "Sunshine Street, number eleven... Dumbhead!" he repeated, seating himself.

"I'll come to see you tomorrow."

He paid no more attention to me.

"Sunshine," he threw at the driver. "Through downtown, and

hurry, for God's sake."

How simple, I thought, looking after his car. How simple everything turned out to be. And everything fits. The bath and Devon. Also the screaming radios, which irritated us so, and to which we never paid any attention. We simply turned them off. I took a taxi and set out for home.

But what if he deceived me, I thought. Simply wanted to be rid of me sooner. But I would determine that soon enough. He doesn't look like a runner, an agent, at all, I thought. After all, he is Peck. However, no, he is no longer Peck. Poor Peck. You are no agent, you are simply a victim. You know where to buy this filth, but you are only a victim. I don't want to interrogate Peck, I don't want to shake him down like some punk. True, he is no longer Peck. Nonsense, what does that mean, that he is not Peck. He is Peck, and still I'll have to... Electric wave psychotechnics... But the shivers they're wave psychotechnics too.... Somehow, it's a bit too simple. I haven't passed two days here yet, while Rimeyer has been living here since the uprising. We left him behind, and he had gone native and everyone was pleased with him, although in his latest reports he wrote that nothing like what we were looking for existed here. True, he has nervous exhaustion... and Devon on the floor. Also there is Oscar. Further, he did not beg me to leave him be, but simply pointed me in the direction of the Fishers.

I didn't meet anyone either in the front yard or in the

hall.. It was almost five. I went to my rooms and called Rimeyer. A quiet female voice answered.

"How is the patient?" I asked.

"He is asleep. He shouldn't be disturbed."

"I won't do that. Is he better?"

"I told you he fell asleep. And don't call too often, please. The phone disturbs him."

"You will be with him all the time?"

"Till morning, at least. If you call again, I'll have the phone disconnected."

"Thank you," I said. "Just, please, don't leave him till morning, I'll not trouble you again."

I hung up and sat awhile in the big comfortable chair in front of the huge absolutely bare table. Then I took the slug out of my pocket and laid it in front of me. A small shiny tube, inconspicuous and completely harmless to all outward appearances, an ordinary electronic component. Such can be made by the millions. They should cost pennies.

"What's that you got there?" asked Len, right next to my

He stood alongside and regarded the slug.

"Don't you know?" I asked.

"It's from a radio. I have one like it in my radio and it's breaking all the time."

I pulled my radio out of my pocket and extracted its mixer and laid it alongside the slug. The mixer looked like the slug,

but it was not a slug.

"They are not the same," said Len. "But I have seen one of those gadgets, too."

"What gadget?"

"Like the one you have."

All at once, his face clouded over and he looked grim.

"Did you remember?"

"No, I didn't," he said. "I didn't remember anything."

"All right, then." I picked up the slug and inserted it in place of the mixer in the radio. Len grabbed me by the hand.

"Don't," he said.

"Why not?"

He didn't reply, eyeing the radio warily.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked.

"I'm not afraid of anything. Where did you get that idea?"

"Look in the mirror," I said. "You look as though you are afraid for me." I put the radio in my pocket.

"For you?" he said in astonishment.

"Obviously for me. Not for yourself, of course, though you are still scared of those... necrotic phenomena."

He looked sideways.

"Where did you get that idea," he said. "We're just playing."

I snorted in disdain.

"I am well acquainted with these games. Rut one thing I don't know: where in our time do necrotic phenomena come

from?"

He glanced around and began backing up.

"I'm going," he said.

"O no," I said decisively. "Let's finish what we started.

Man to man. Don't think that I am altogether an ignoramus."

"What do you know?" He was already near the door and talking very quietly.

"More than you," I said severely. "But I don't want to shout it all over the house. If you want to talk, come on over here. Climb up on the desk and have yourself a seat. Believe me, I'm not a necrotic phenomenon."

He hesitated for a whole minute, and everything for which he hoped and everything of which he was afraid appeared and disappeared on his face. At last, he said, "Just let me close the door."

He ran into the living room, closed the door to the hallway, returned to close the study door tight, and approached me. His hands were in his pockets, the face white, contrasting with the protruding ears, which were red but cold.

"In the first place, you are a dope," I pronounced, dragging him toward me and standing him between my knees. "Once there was a boy who lived in such a fear that his pants never dried out, not even when he was on a beach, and his ears were as cold as though they had been left in a refrigerator overnight. This boy trembled constantly and so well that when

he grew up his legs were all wiggly, and his skin became like that of a plucked goose."

I was hoping that he would smile just once, but he listened very intently and very seriously inquired, "And what was he afraid of?"

"He had an elder brother, who was a nice fellow, but a great one for drinking. And, as often happens, the tipsy brother was not at all like the sober brother. He got to look very wild indeed. And when he really drank a lot, he got to look like a dead man. So this boy..."

A contemptuous smile appeared on Len's face.

"He sure found something to be scared of. When they are drunk is when they turn good."

"Who are they?" I asked immediately. "Mother? Vousi?"

"That's it. Mother is just the opposite -- in the morning when she gets up, she's always nasty, and then she drinks vermouth once, then twice, and that's it. Toward evening she is altogether nice because night is near."

"And at night?"

"At night that creep comes around," Len said reluctantly.

"We are not concerned with the creep," I said in a businesslike manner. "It's not from him that you run to the garage."

"I don't run," he said stubbornly. "It's a game."

"I don't know, I don't know," I said. "There are, of course, certain things in this world of which even I am afraid."

For instance when a boy is crying and trembling. I can't look at such things, and it just turns me over inside. Or when your teeth hurt and it is required by circumstances that you keep on smiling -- that's pretty bad and there is no way of ignoring it. But there are also just plain stupidities. When, for example, some idiots help themselves, out of sheer boredom and surfeit, to the brain of a living monkey. That's no longer frightening, it's just plain disgusting. Especially as they didn't think it up by themselves. It was a thousand years ago when they thought of it first, and also out of excessive affluence, the fat tyrants of the Far East. And contemporary idiots heard and rejoiced. But they should be pitied, not feared."

"Pity them?" said Len. "But they don't pity anybody. They do whatever they like. It's all the same to them, don't you see? If they are bored, then they don't care whose head they saw apart. Idiots... Maybe in the daytime they are idiots, but you don't seem to understand that at night they are not idiots, they are all accursed."

"How can that be?"

"They are cursed by the whole world They can have no peace, and they won't ever have it. You don't know anything. What's it to you? As you arrived, so you will leave... but they are alive at night, and in the daytime they are dead, corpselike."

I went to the living room and brought him some water. He drank down the glass and said, "Will you leave soon?"

"Of course not, how can you think that? I just got here,"

I said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Could I sleep with you?"

"Of course."

"At first I had a padlock, but she took it away for some reason. But why she took it she won't say."

"OK," I said. "You will sleep in my living room. Do you want to?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead and lock yourself in and sleep to your heart's content. And I will climb into the bedroom through the window."

He raised his head and gazed at me intently.

"You think your doors lock? I know all about this place.

Yours don't lock either."

"It's for you they don't lock," I said as negligently as possible. "But for me they'll lock. It's only a half-hour's work."

He laughed unpleasantly, like an adult.

"You are afraid, too. All right, I was only joking. Don't be afraid, your locks do work"

"You dope," I said. "Didn't I tell you I wasn't afraid of anything of that sort?" He looked at me questioningly. "I wanted to make the lock work for you in the living room, so you could sleep in peace, as long as you are so afraid. As for me,

I always sleep with the window open."

"I told you, I was joking."

We were silent for a bit.

"Len," I said, "what will you be when you grow up?" "What do you mean?" he said. He was quite astonished. "What do I care?"

"Now, now -- what do you care. It's all the same to you whether you will be a chemist or a bartender?"

"I told you -- we are all under a curse. You can't get away from it, why can't you understand that? When everybody knows it?"

"So what?" I said. "There were accursed peoples before. And then children were born who grew up and removed the curse."

"How?"

"That would take a long time to explain, old friend." I got up. "I'll be sure to tell you all about it. For now, go on out and play. You do play in the daytime? Okay then, run along. When the sun sets, come on over, I'll make your bed."

He stuck his hands in his pockets and went to the door.

There he stopped and said over his shoulder, "That gadget you'd better take it out of the radio. What do you think it is?"

"A local oscillator-mixer," I said.

"It's not a mixer at all. Take it out or it will be bad for you." "Why will it be bad for me?" I said.

"Take it out," he said. "You'll hate everybody. Right now

you are not cursed, but you will become cursed. Who gave it to you? Vousi?"

"No."

He looked at me imploringly.

"Ivan, take it out!"

"So be it," I said. "I'll take it out. Run along and play.

And never be afraid of me. Do you hear?"

He didn't say anything and went out, leaving me sitting in my chair, with my hands on the desk. Soon I heard him pattering about in the lilacs under the windows. He rustled, stamped about, muttering something under his breath, and softly exclaimed, talking to himself, "Bring the flags and put them here and here... that's it... that's it... and then I got on a plane and flew away into the mountains." I wondered when he went to bed. It would be all right if it were eight o'clock or even nine; maybe it was a mistake to start all this business with him. I could have locked myself in the bathroom and in two hours I would know everything. But no, I couldn't refuse him -- just imagine I was in his place, I thought. But this is not the way; I am catering to his fears, when I should think of something more clever. But try to come up with it -- this is no Anyudinsk boarding school.

A boarding school this certainly is not, I thought. How different everything is, and what lies ahead of me now, which circle of paradise, I wonder? But if it tickles, I won't be able to stand it! Interesting -- the Fishers -- they too are a

circle of paradise, for sure. The Art Patrons are for the aristocrats of the mind, and the old Subway is for the simpler types, although the Intels are also aristocrats of the mind and they get intoxicated like swine and become totally useless, even they are useless. There is too much hate, not enough love -- it's easy to teach hate, but love is hard to teach. But then, love has been too well overdone and slobbered over so it has become passive. How is it that love is always passive and hate always active and is thus always attractive? And then it is said that hate is natural, while love is of the mind and springs from deep thought.

It should be worthwhile to have a talk with the Intels, I thought. They can't all be hysterical fools, and what if I should succeed in finding a Man. What in fact is good in man that comes from nature -- a pound of gray matter. But this too is not always good, so that he always must start from a naked nothing; maybe it would be good if man could inherit social advances, but then again, Len would now be a small-scale major general. No, better not -- better to start from zero. True he would not now be afraid of anything, but instead he would be frightening others -- those who weren't major generals.

I was startled to suddenly see Len perched in the branches of the apple tree regarding me fixedly. The next moment he was gone, leaving only the crash of branches and falling apples as an aftermath. He doesn't believe me in the slightest, I

thought. He believes nobody. And whom do I believe in this town? I went over everyone I could recall. No, I didn't trust anyone. I picked up the telephone, dialed the Olympic and asked for number 817.

"Hello! Yes?" said Oscar's voice.

I kept quiet, covering the radio with my hand.

"Hello, I'm listening," repeated Oscar irritably. "That's the second time," he said to someone aside. "Hello!... Of course not, what sort of women could I be carrying on with here?" He hung up.

I picked up the Mintz volume, lay down on the couch, and read until twilight. I dearly love Mintz, but I couldn't remember a word I read that day. The evening shift roared by noisily. Aunt Vaina fed Len his supper, stuffing him with hot milk and crackers. Len whimpered and was fretful while she cajoled him gently and patiently. Customs inspector Pete propounded in a commanding yet benevolent tone, "You have to eat, you have to eat, if Mother says eat, you must comply."

Two men of loose character, if one could judge by their voices, came around looking for Vousi and made a play for Aunt Vaina. I thought they were drunk. It was growing dark rapidly. At eight o'clock the phone in the study rang. I ran barefooted and grabbed the receiver, but no one spoke. As you holler, so it echoes. At eight-ten, there was a knock on the door. I was delighted, expecting Len, but it turned out to be Vousi.

"Why don't you ever come around?" she asked indignantly

from the doorway. She was wearing shorts decorated with suggestively winking faces, a tight-fitting sleeveless shirt exposing her navel, and a huge translucent scarf: she was fresh and firm as a ripe apple. To a surfeit.

"I sit and wait for him all day, and all the time he is sacked out here. Does something hurt?"

I got up and stuck my feet into my shoes.

"Have a chair, Vousi." I patted the couch alongside me.

"I am not going to sit by you. Imagine -- he is reading. You could at least offer me a drink."

"In the bar," I said, "How is your sloppy cow?"

"Thank God she was not around today," said Vousi, disappearing in the bar. "Today I drew the mayor's wife. What a moron. Why, she wants to know, doesn't anyone love her?... You want yours with water? Eyes white, face red, and a rear end as wide as a sofa, just like a frog, honest to God. Listen, let's make a polecat, nowadays everybody makes polecats."

"I don't go for doing like everybody."

"I can see that for myself. Everyone is out for a good time, and he is here -- sacked out. And reading to boot."

"He -- is tired," I said.

"Oh, so? Well then, I can leave!"

"But I won't let you," I said, catching her by the scarf and pulling her down beside me. "Vousi, dear girl, are you a specialist only for ladies' good humor or in general? You

wouldn't be able to put a lonely man whom nobody loves into a good humor?"

"What's to love?" She looked me over. "Red eyes and a potato for a nose."

"Like an alligator's."

"Like a dog's. Don't go putting your arm about me, I won't allow it. Why didn't you come over?"

"And why did you abandon me yesterday?"

"How do you like that -- abandoned him!"

"All alone in a strange town."

"I abandoned him! Why, I looked for you all over. I told everyone that you are a Tungus, and you got lost -- that was a poor thing for you to do. No -- I won't permit that! Where were you last night? Fishing, no doubt. And the same thing today, you won't tell any stories."

"Why shouldn't I tell?" I said. And I told her about the old Subway. I sensed at once that the truth would be inadequate, and so I spoke of men in metallic masks, of a terrible oath, of a wall wet with blood, of a sobbing skeleton, and I let her feel the bump behind my ear. She liked everything very well.

"Let's go right now," she said.

"Not for anything," I said and lay down.

"What kind of manners is that? Get up at once and we'd go. Of course, no one will believe me. But you will show your bump, and everything will be just perfect."

"And then we'll go to the shivers?" I wanted to know.

"But yes! You know that turns out to be even good for your health."

"And we'll drink brandy?"

"Brandy and vermouth and a polecat and whiskey."

"Enough, enough... and no doubt we'll also squeeze into cars and drive at a hundred and fifty miles per hour?..."

Listen, Vousi, why should you go there?"

She finally understood and smiled in discomfort.

"And what's wrong with it? The Fishers also go."

"There is nothing bad," I said. "But what's good about it?"

"I don't know. Everybody does it. Sometimes it's a lot of fun... and the shivers. There everything -- all your wishes come true."

"And that's it? That's all there is?"

"Well, not everything, of course. But whatever you think about, whatever you would like to happen, often happens. Just like in a dream."

"Well then maybe it would be better to go to bed?"

"What's the matter with you?" she said sulkily. "In a real dream all kinds of things happen... as though you don't know! But with the shivers, only what you like!"

"And what do you like?"

"We-e-ll! Lots of things."

"Still... imagine I am a magician. And I say to you, have three wishes. Anything at all, whatever you wish. The most impossible. And I will make them come true. Well?"

She thought very hard so that even her shoulders sagged. Then her face lit up.

"Let me never grow old," she said.

"Excellent," I said. "That's one."

"Let me..." she began inspiredly and stopped.

I used to enjoy tremendously asking my friends this very question and used to ask it at every available opportunity.

Several times I even assigned compositions to my youngsters on the theme of three wishes. And it was always most amusing that out of a thousand men and women, oldsters and children, only two or three dozen figured that it is possible to wish not only for themselves personally, or their immediate close ones, but also for the world at large, for mankind as a whole. No, this was not witness to the ineradicable human egotism; the wishes were not invariably strictly selfish, and the majority in subsequent discussions, when reminded of missed opportunities and the large problems of all mankind, did a double take and in honest anger reproached me that I hadn't explained at the beginning. But one way or another they all began their reply along the lines of "Let me..." This was a manifestation of some kind of ancient subconscious conviction that your own personal wishes cannot change anything in the wide world, and it makes no difference whether you do or do not have a magic wand.

"Let me..." began Vousi once more, and again was silent. I was watching her surreptitiously. She noticed this, and dissolving into a broad smile, said with a wave of her hand, "So that's your game. Some card you are!"

"No -- no -- no," I said. "You should always be prepared to answer this question. Because I knew a man once who always asked it of everyone, and then was inconsolable -- 'Oh what an opportunity I missed, how could I not have figured it out?' So you see it's entirely in earnest. Your first wish is never to grow old. And then?"

"Let's see -- what else? Of course, it would be nice to have a handsome fellow, whom they would all chase, but who would be with me only. Always."

"Wonderful," I said. "That's two. And what else?"

Her face showed that the game had already palled on her, and that any second she'd drop a bomb. And she did. All I could do was blink my eyes.

"Yes," I said, "of course that, too. But that happens even without any magic."

"Yes and no," she argued and began to develop the idea, based on the misfortunes of her clients. All of which was very gay and amusing to her, while I, in ignominious confusion, gulped brandy with lemon and tittered in embarrassment, feeling like a virgin wall flower. Well, if all this went on in a night club, I could handle it. Well, well, well... some fine

activities go on in those salons of the Good Mood. How do you like these elderly ladies...

"Enough," I said. "Vousi, you embarrass me, and anyway I understand it all very well now. I can see that it's really impossible to do without magic. It's a good thing that I am not a magician."

"I really stung you well," she said happily. "And what would you wish for yourself, now?"

I decided I'd reciprocate in kind.

"I don't need anything of that sort," I said. "Anyway, I am not good at things like that. I'd like a good solid slug."

She smiled gaily.

"I don't need three wishes," I explained, "I can do with one."

She was still smiling, but the smile became empty, then crooked, and then disappeared altogether.

"What?" she said in a small voice.

"Vousi!" I said, getting up. "Vousi!"

She didn't seem to know what to do. She jumped up and then sat down and then jumped up again. The coffee table fell over with all the bottles. There were tears in her eyes, and her face looked pitiable, like that of a child who has been brutally, insolently, cruelly, tauntingly deceived. Suddenly she bit her lip and with all her strength slapped my face.

While I was blinking, she, now in full tears, kicked away the overturned table and ran out of the room. I sat, with my mouth

open. An engine roared into life and lights sprang up in the dark garden, followed by the sound of the motor traversing the yard and disappearing in the distance.

I felt my face. Some joke. Never in my life have I joked so effectively. What an old fool I was! How do you like that for a slug?

"May we?" asked Len. He stood in the door, and he was not alone. With him was a gloomy, freckle-faced boy with a cleanly shaved head.

"This is Reg," said Len. "Could he sleep here too?"

"Reg," I said, pensively smoothing my eyelids. "Of course -- even two Regs would be okay. Listen, Len, why didn't you come ten minutes earlier!"

"But she was here," said Len. "We were looking in the window, waiting for her to leave."

"Really?" I said. "Very interesting. Reg, old chum, how about what your parents will say?"

Reg didn't reply. Len said, "He doesn't have parents."

"Well, all right," I said, feeling a bit tired. "You're not going to have a pillow fight?"

"No," said Len, not smiling, "we are going to sleep."

"Fair enough," I said. "I'll make your beds and you can give all this a quick clean-up."

I made their beds on the couch and the big chair and they took off their clothes at once and went to bed. I locked the

door to the hall, turned out their lights, and went into my bedroom, where I sat awhile listening to them whispering, moving furniture, and settling down. Then they were quiet. About eleven o'clock there was the sound of broken glass somewhere in the house. Aunt Vaina's voice could be heard singing some sort of marching song, followed by more breaking glass. Apparently the tireless Pete again was falling down face first. From the center of town came the cry of "Shivers, shivers." Someone was loudly sick on the street.

I locked the window and lowered the shades. I also locked the door to the study. Then I went to the bathroom and turned on the hot water. I did everything per instructions. The radio went on the soap shelf, I threw several Devon tablets in the water, together with some salt crystals, and was about to swallow the tablet when I remembered that it was propitious to "loosen up." I didn't want to disturb the boys, but it wasn't necessary -- an open bottle of brandy stood in the medicine chest. I took a few swallows right out of the bottle, stripped down to the skin, climbed into the bath, and turned on the radio.

Chapter ELEVEN

I intentionally did not set the thermo-regulator, so that when the water cooled off, I returned to consciousness. The radio was still shrieking and the sparkle of white light on the

walls hurt my eyes. I was thoroughly chilled and covered with goose bumps. Switching off the radio, I turned on the hot water and remained in the bath, basking in the flooding warmth and a very strange, very novel sensation of total, cosmically enormous emptiness. I expected a hangover, but there wasn't any. I simply felt good. And there were very many memories. Also my thoughts flowed inordinately well, as though after a long rest in the mountains.

In the middle of the last century, Olds and Miller had conducted experiments on brain stimulation. They inserted electrodes into the brains of white rats. They employed a primitive technology and a barbarous methodology, but having located pleasure centers in the rats' brains, they succeeded in having the animals press the lever which closed the contacts to the electrodes, hour after hour, producing up to eight thousand auto-excitations per hour. These rats did not need anything in the real world. They weren't in the slightest interested in anything but the lever. They ignored food, water, danger, females; they were indifferent to everything except the stimulation lever. Later, these experiments were tried on monkeys and produced the same results. Rumors were about that someone carried out similar experiments on criminals condemned to death....

That was a difficult time for mankind: a time of struggle against atomic destruction, a time of increasing limited wars

over the entire face of the planet, a time when the majority of mankind was starving, but even so, the contemporary English writer and critic Kingsley Amis, having learned of the experiments with rats, wrote: "I cannot be sure that this frightens me more than a Berlin or a Taiwan crisis, but it should, I believe, frighten me more." He feared much about the future, this brilliant and venomous author of *New Maps of Hell*, and: in particular, he foresaw the possibilities of brain stimulation for the creation of an illusory existence, just as intense as the actual, or more intense.

By the end of the century, when the first triumphs of wave psychotechnology were realized, and when psychiatric wards began to empty, amid the chorus of exulting cries of science commentators, the little brochure by Krinitsky and Milanovitch had sounded like an irritating dissonance. In its concluding section the Soviet educators wrote approximately as follows: In the overwhelming majority of countries, the education of the young exists on the level of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This ancient system of education always did and continues to posit as its objective, first of all and above all, the preparation for society of qualified but stupefied contributors to the production process. This system is not interested in all the other potentialities of the human mind, and for this reason, outside of the production process, man, en masse, remains psychologically a cave dweller, Man the Uneducated. The disuse of these potentialities causes the

individuals' inability to comprehend our complex world in all its contradictions, to correlate psychologically incompatible concepts and phenomena, to obtain pleasure from the examination of connections and laws when these do not pertain directly to the satisfaction of the most primitive social instincts. In other words, this system of education for all practical purposes does not develop in man pure imagination, untrammelled vision, and as an immediate consequence, the sense of humor. The Uneducated Man perceives the world as some sort of essentially trivial, routine, and traditionally simple process, a world from which it is possible only by dint of great effort to extract pleasures which are, in the end, also compulsively routine and traditional. But even the unutilized potentialities remain, apparently, a hidden reality of the human brain. The problem for scientific education consists precisely in initiating the action of these possibilities, in teaching man to dream, in bringing the multiordinality and variety of psychic associations into quantitative and qualitative coordination with the multiordinality and variety of interrelationships in the world of reality. This problem is the one which, as is well known, must become the fundamental one for mankind in the coming proximate epoch. But until this problem is resolved, there remains some basis to fear that the successes of psychotechnics will lead to such methods of electrical stimulation as will endow man with an illusory

existence which can exceed the real existence in intensity and variety by a considerable margin. And if one remembers that imagination allows man to be both a rational being and a sensual animal, and if one adds to that the fact that the psychic subject matter evoked by the Uneducated Man for his illusory life of splendor derives from the darkest, most primitive reflexes, then it is not hard to perceive the awful temptation hidden in such possibilities.

And therefore -- slug.

It is now understandable, I thought, why they write the word "slug" on fences.

Everything is now understandable. It's odious, that I understand.... Better if I understood nothing, better if, upon regaining consciousness, I shrugged my shoulders and climbed out of the bath. Would it have been understandable to Strogoff and Einstein and Petrarch? Imagination is a priceless gift, but it must not be given an inward direction. Only outward, only outward... What a tasty worm some corrupter has dropped from his rod into this stagnant pool! And how accurately timed! Yes indeed, if I were commander of Wells' Martians, I would not have bothered with fighter tripods, heat rays, and other such nonsense. Illusory existence ... no, this is not a narcotic, a narcotic has a long way to go to approach it. In a way this is exactly appropriate. Here. Now. To each time its own. Poppy seeds and hemp, the kingdom of sweet blurred shadows and peace -- for the beggar, the worn-out, the downtrodden... But here no

one wants peace, here no one is dying of hunger, here is simply a bore. A well-fed, well-heated, drunken bore. It's not that the world is bad, it's just plain dreary. World without prospects, world without promise. But in the end man is not a carp, he still remains a man. Yes, it is no kingdom of shades, it is indeed the real existence, without detraction, without dreary confusion. Slug is moving on the world and the world will not mind subjecting itself to it.

Suddenly, for a fraction of a moment, I felt that I was lost. And it was cozy to be destroyed. Fortunately I grew angry. Splashing out water, I climbed out of the bath, cursing and stoking my ire, pulled my shorts and shirt over my wet body, and grabbed my watch. It was three o'clock, and it could have been three in the afternoon or three the following morning or three o'clock after a hundred years. Idiot, I thought, pulling on my trousers. Softened up and let Buba go when he was ready to give me the address of the gangsters' den. The operatives could have been there by now and we could have nabbed the whole accursed nest, the vile nest. The vermin nest. The repulsive cloaca... And at this instant against the very depth of my consciousness, like a dancing spot of light, flicked a very calm thought. But I could not fasten upon it.

I located some Potomac in the medicine cabinet, the strongest stimulant which I could find in it. I started into the living room, but the youngsters were snoring away there, so

I climbed out the window. The city was resting, of course.

Guffawing louts hung around under the street lamp on Waterway, bawling crowds surged on the brightly lit avenues. Somewhere songs were shouted, somewhere they were yelling "Shivers!" Somewhere glass was being broken. I picked out a chauffeurless taxi, found the index for Sunshine Street, and dialed it on the control console. The car took off across town. The cab smelled sour and bottles rolled underfoot. At one intersection it almost plowed into a daisy chain of howling humanity, and at another there was the rhythmic flashing of colored lights -- apparently it was possible to set up the shivers elsewhere than the plaza. They were resting, resting with all their might, these benevolent patrons from the Happy Mood Salons, these polite customs inspectors, clever barbers, tender mothers and manly fathers, innocent youths and maidens -- they all exchanged their diurnal aspects for the nocturnal, they all worked hard to have fun and so that it wouldn't be necessary to think about a thing....

The taxi braked. It was the very same place. It even seemed as though there was that same burning smell...

... Peck registered a hit on the armored carrier with the Fulminator. It spun on a single tread, hopping in the piles of broken bricks, and two fascists immediately jumped out in their unbuttoned camouflage shirts, flung a grenade apiece in our direction, and sped off into the darkness. They moved knowingly and adeptly, and it was obvious that these were not youngsters

from the Royal Academy or lifers from the Golden Brigade, but genuine full-blown tank corps officers. Robert cut them down point-blank with a burst from his machine gun. The carrier was bulging with cases of beer. It struck us that we had been constantly thirsty for the last two days. Iowa Smith clambered into the carrier and began handing out the cans. Peck opened them with a knife. Robert, putting the machine gun against the carrier, punched holes into the cans with a sharp point on the armor. And the Teacher, adjusting his pince-nez, tripped on the Fulminator straps and muttered, "Wait a minute, Smith; can't you see I've got my hands full?" A five-story building burned briskly at the end of the street, there was a thick smell of smoke and hot metal, and we avidly downed the warm beer, and were drenched through and through, and it was very hot and the dead officers lay on the broken and crushed bricks, with their legs identically flung out in their black pants, and the camouflage shirts bunched at their necks, and the skin still glistening with perspiration on their backs.

"They are officers," said the Teacher. "Thank God. I can't bear the sight of any more dead kids. Accursed politics! People forget God on account of it."

"What god is that?" inquired Iowa Smith out of the carrier. "I've never heard of him."

"Don't jest about that, Smith," said the Teacher. "This will all end soon, and from then on no one nowhere will be

permitted to poison the souls of men with vanity."

"And how then shall they multiply?" asked Iowa Smith. He bent over the beer again, and we could see the burn holes in his pants.

"I am talking about politics," said the Teacher modestly.

"The fascists must be destroyed. They are beasts. But that is not enough. There are many other political parties, and there is no place for them and all their propaganda in our land." The Teacher came from this town and lived within two blocks of our post. "Social anarchists, technocrats, communists, are of course -- "

"I am a communist," announced Iowa Smith, "at least by conviction. I am for the commune."

The Teacher looked at him in bewilderment.

"Also I am a godless man," added Iowa Smith. "There is no god, Teacher, and there's nothing you can do about it."

At which point we all began to say that we were all atheists, and Peck said that on top of that he was for technocracy, while Robert announced that his father was a social anarchist and his grandfather was a social anarchist and he, Robert, probably could not escape being a social anarchist, although he didn't know what it was all about.

"Well now, if the beer would get ice-cold, said Peck pensively, "I would at once believe in God with great delight."

Teacher smiled embarrassedly and kept wiping his glasses. He was a good man and we always kidded him, but he never took

offense. From the very first night I observed that his courage was not great, but he never retreated without being commanded. We were still chattering and joking when there was a thunderous crash, the burning building wall collapsed, and straight out of the swirling flames and clouds of smoke and sparks swam a Mammoth attack tank, floating a yard above the pavement. This was a new horror, the likes of which we hadn't seen yet. Floating out in the middle of the street, it rotated its thrower as though looking around, and then, hovering on its air cushion, began to move in our direction, screeching and clanking metallically. I regained my wits only by the time I was behind a gate post. The tank was now considerably closer, and at first I couldn't see anyone at all, but then Iowa Smith stood up in full view out of the carrier, and propping the butt of the Fulminator against his stomach, took aim. I could see the recoil double him up. I saw a bright flash against the black brow of the tank. And then the street was filled with roar and flame, and when I raised my burned eyelids with great effort, the street was empty and contained only the tank. There was no carrier, no mounds of broken brick, no leaning kiosk by the neighboring house -- there was only the tank. It was as though the monster had come awake and was spewing waterfalls of flame and the street ceased being a street and became a square. Peck slapped me hard on the neck and I could see his glassy eyes right in front of my face, but there was no time to run

toward the trench and break out the launcher.

We both picked up the mine and started running toward the tank, and all I remember is looking continually at the back of his head, and gasping for breath and counting steps, when the helmet flew off Peck's head, and he fell, so I almost dropped the mine and fell on top of him. The tank was blown up by Robert and Teacher. I still don't know how they did it or when; it must be they were running behind us with another mine. I sat until morning in the middle of the street holding Peck's bandaged head on my knees and staring at the awesome treads of the tank sticking out of the asphalt lake. That same morning the whole bloody thing came to an end all at once. Zun Padana surrendered with all his staff and was shot in the street by some crazed woman when already a prisoner....

This was the very same place. I even thought I smelled smoke and burned metal. Even the kiosk stood on the corner, and it too was a bit crooked in the latest style of architecture. The part of the street which the tank turned into a plaza remained a plaza, and on the site of the asphalt lake there was a small square in which someone was being beaten. Iowa Smith was an urban planner from Iowa, U.S.A., Robert Sventisky was a movie director from Krakow, Poland. The Teacher was a schoolteacher from this town. No one ever saw them again, even dead. And Peck was Peck, who had now become Buba

Buba lived in the same sort of cottage as I, and its front door was open. I knocked, but no one responded and no one -

came out to meet me. I entered the dark hall. The lights did not go on. The door to the right was locked, and I looked into the one on the left. In the living room a bearded man, in a jacket, but without pants, was sleeping on a tattered couch. Someone's feet stuck out from under the overturned table. There was a smell of brandy, tobacco smoke, and of something else, cloyingly sweet, like in Aunt Vaina's room the other day. In the door to the study, I bumped into a handsome florid woman, who was not in the slightest surprised to see me.

"Good evening," I said. Please excuse me, but does Buba live here?"

"Here," she said, examining me out of glistening oily-looking eyes.

"Can I see him?"

"And why not -- all you want."

"Where is he?"

"Funny man. Where would he be?" she laughed.

I could guess where, but said, "In the bedroom?"

"You are warm," she said.

"What do you mean -- warm?"

"What a dunce, and sober yet! Would you like a drink?"

"No," I said, angry. "Where is he? I need him right away."

"Your prospects are poor," she said gaily. "But search on, search on. As for me, I must go."

She patted me on the cheek and went out.

The study was empty. There was a large crystal vase on the table with some kind of reddish fluid in it. Everything smelled of that nauseatingly sweet odor. The bedroom was also empty; crumpled sheets and pillows were scattered about. I approached the bathroom door. The door was full of holes, obviously made by bullets shot from the inside, judging by their shape. I hesitated, then took hold of the handle. The door was locked.

I opened it with considerable difficulty. Buba lay in the bath up to his neck in greenish water; steam rose from its surface. The radio howled and wheezed on the edge of the tub. I stood and looked at Buba. At the erstwhile cosmonaut experimenter, Peck Xenai. At the once-upon-a-time supple and well-muscled fellow, who at eighteen left his warm city by the warm sea, and went into space for the glory of man, and who at thirty returned to his country to fight the last of the fascists and to remain here forever. I was repelled to think that only an hour ago, I had looked like him. I touched his face and pulled his thin hair. He did not stir. Then I bent over him to let him sniff some Potomac, and suddenly saw that he was dead.

I knocked the radio off the edge of the tub and crushed it under heel. There was a pistol on the floor. But Peck had not shot himself; it must have been simply that someone interfered with him and he shot through the door in order to be left alone. I stuck my arms in the hot water, picked him up, and carried him to the bed. He lay there all limp and terrible,

with eyes sunken under his brows. If only he were not my friend... if only he were not such a wonderful guy... if only he were not such an outstanding worker...

I called emergency aid on the phone and sat down beside Peck. I tried not to think of him. I tried to think about the business at hand. And I tried to be cold and harsh, because at the very bottom of my conscious mind, that flick of warm feeling, like a speck of light, flashed again, and this time I understood what the thought was.

By the time the doctor came, I knew what I was going to do. I would find Eli. I would pay any sum. Maybe I would beat him. If necessary, I would torture him. And he would tell me, whence this plague flows out upon the world. He would name names and addresses. He would tell me all. And we would find these men. We would locate and burn their secret laboratories, and as for themselves, we would ship them out so far that they would never return. Whoever they might be. We would catch them all, we would catch all who ever tried slug and isolate them, too. Whoever they were. Then I would demand that I, too, be isolated because I knew what slug was. Because I grasped what sort of thought I had, because I was socially dangerous, just as they all are. And all that would be only the beginning. The beginning of all beginnings, and ahead would remain that which was most important: to make it so that people would never, never, wish to know what slug was. Probably that would be

outlandish. Probably many would say that it was too outlandish, too harsh, too stupid -- but we would still have to do it if we wanted mankind not to stop....

The doctor, an old gray man, put down his white case, leaned over Buba, looked him over, and said indifferently, "Hopeless."

"Call the police," I said.

Slowly he put away his instruments.

"There is no need of that whatsoever," he said. "There's no criminal content, here. It is a neurostimulator...."

"Yes, I know."

"There you are -- the second case this night. They just don't know when to stop."

"When did it start?"

"Not very long ago... a few months."

"Then why in hell do you keep it quiet?"

"Keep it quiet? I don't understand. This is my sixth call tonight, young man. The second case of nervous exhaustion and four cases of brain fever. Are you a relative?"

"No."

"Well, all right, I'll send some men." He stood awhile, looking at Peck. "Join some choruses," he said. "Enter the League of Reformed Sluts..."

He was mumbling something else as he left, an old, bent, uncaring man. I covered Peck with a sheet, pulled the drape, and went out into the living room. The drunks were snoring

obscenely, filling the air with alcoholic fumes, and I took them both by the heels and dragged them out in the yard, leaving them in the puddle by the fountain.

Dawn was breaking once more and the stars were dimming in the paling sky. I got into the taxi and dialed the old Subway on the console.

It was full of people. It was impossible to get through to the railing, although it seemed to me that only two or three men were filling out the forms, while the rest were just looking, stretching their necks eagerly. Neither the round-headed man nor Eli were to be seen behind the barrier, and no one knew where they could be found. Below, in the cross-passages and tunnels, drunken, shouting, half-crazed men and hysterical women were milling about. There were shots, distant and muffled and some loud and close, the concrete underfoot shook with the detonations, and a mixture of smells -- gunpowder, sweat, smoke, gasoline, perfume, and whiskey -- coated in the air.

Squealing and arm-waving teenagers surrounded a big fellow who dripped blood and whose pale face shone with a look of triumph. Somewhere wild beasts roared menacingly. In the halls, the audience was going wild in front of huge screens showing somebody blindfolded, firing a spray of bullets from a machine gun held against his belly, and someone else sat up to his chest in some black and heavy liquid, blue from the cold and

smoking a crackling cigar, and another one with a tension-twisted face, suspended as though cast in stone in some sort of web of taut cords...

Then I found out where Eli was. I saw round-head by a dirty room full of old sandbags. He stood in the doorway, his face covered with soot, smelling of burnt gunpowder, the pupils of his eyes fully distended. Every few seconds he bent down and brushed his knees, not hearing me at all, so that I had to shake him to make him take notice of me.

"There is no Eli," he barked. "Gone, do you understand? Nothing but smoke -- get it? Twenty kilovolts, one hundred amperes, see? He didn't leap far enough!"

He pushed me away vigorously and took off into the dirty room, jumping over the sandbags. Elbowing the curious out of the way, he got to a low metal door.

"Let me through," he howled. "Let me at it once more. God favors a third time!"

The door shut heavily and the mob surged away, stumbling and falling over the bags. I didn't wait for him to come out. Or not to come out. He was no longer of any use to me. There was only Rimeyer left. There was also Vousi, but I couldn't count on her. So there was really only Rimeyer. I was not going to wake him. I'd wait outside his room.

The sun was already up and the filthied streets were empty.

The auto-streetcleaners were coming out of their

underground garages to do their job. All they knew was work; they had no potentialities to be developed, but they also had no primitive reflexes. Near the Olympic, I had to stop for a long chain of red and green men followed by a string of people enclosed in some sort of scales, who dragged their shuffling feet from one street into the next, leaving behind a stench of sweat and paint. I stood and waited for them to pass, while the sun had already lit up the huge mass of the hotel and shone gaily in the metallic face of Yurkovsky, who, as he had while alive, looked out over the heads of all men. After they passed, I went into the hotel. The clerk was dozing behind his counter. Awaking, he smiled professionally and asked in a cheery voice, "Would you like a room?"

"No," I replied, "I am visiting Rimeyer."

' Rimeyer? Excuse me -- room 902?"

I stopped.

"I believe so. What's the matter?"

"I beg your pardon, but he is not in."

"What do you mean, not in?"

"He checked out."

"Can't be, he has been ill. You are not mistaken? Room 902?"

"Exactly right, 902, Rimeyer. Our perpetual client. It's an hour and a half since he left. More accurately, flew away. His friends helped him down and aboard a copter."

"What friends?" I asked hopelessly.

"Friends, as I said, but, excuse me, they were acquaintances. There were three of them, two of whom I really don't know. Just young athletic-looking men. But I do know Mr. Pebblebridge, he was our permanent guest. But he signed out -- today."

"Pebblebridge?"

"Exactly. Lately he has been meeting Rimeyer quite often, so I concluded that they were quite well acquainted. He stayed in room 817. A fairly imposing gentleman, middle-aged, red-headed..."

"Oscar!"

"Exactly, Oscar Pebblebridge.

"That makes sense," I said, trying to keep a hold on myself. "You say they helped him?"

"That's right. He has been very sick and they even sent a doctor up: to him yesterday. He was still very weak and the young men held him up by his elbows, and almost carried him."

"And the nurse? He had an attendant nurse with him?"

"Yes, there was one. But she left right after them -- they let her go."

"And what is your name?"

"Val, at your service."

"Listen, Val," I said. "You are sure it didn't look like they were taking him away forcibly?"

I looked hard at him. He blinked in confusion.

"No," he said. "Although, now that you have mentioned it..."

"All right," I said. "Give me the key to his room and come with me."

Clerks are, as a rule, quite savvy types. Their sense of smell, at least for certain things, is quite impressive. It was perfectly obvious that he had guessed who I was. And maybe even where I came from. He called a porter, whispered something to him, and we went up to the ninth floor.

"What currency did he pay in?" I asked.

"Who? Pebblebridge?"

"Yes."

"I think... ah yes, marks, German marks."

"And when did he arrive here?"

"One minute... it will come to me... sixteen marks ... precisely four days ago."

"Did he know that Rimeyer stayed with you?"

"Excuse me, but I can't say. But the day before yesterday, they had dinner together. And yesterday, they had a long talk in the foyer. Early in the morning while everybody was still up."

It was unusually clean and tidy in Rimeyer's room. I walked about looking over the place. Suitcases stood in the closet. The bed was rumples, but I could see no signs of struggle. The bathroom also was clean and tidy. Boxes of Devon

were stacked on the shelf.

"What do you think -- should I call the police?" asked the clerk.

"I don't know," I replied. "Check with your administration."

"You understand that I am in doubt again. True, he didn't say goodbye. But it all looked completely innocent. He could have given me a sign, and I would have understood him -- we have known each other a long time. He was pleading Mr. Pebblebridge: 'The radio, please don't forget the radio.'"

The radio lay under the mirror, hidden by a negligently thrown towel.

"Yes?" I said. "And what did Mr. Pebblebridge say to that?"

Mr. Pebblebridge was soothing him, saying, "Of course, of course, don't worry..."

I took the radio, and leaving the bathroom, sat down at the desk. The clerk looked back and forth from the radio to me.

So, I thought, now he knows why I came here. I turned it an. It moaned and howled. They all know about slug. No need for Eli, nor Rimeyer; you can take anyone at random. This clerk, for instance. Right now, for instance. I turned it off and said, "Please be good enough to turn on the combo."

He ran over to it with mincing steps, turned it on, and eyed me questioningly.

"Leave it on that station. A little softer. Thank you."

"So you don't advise me to call the police?"

"As you wish."

"It seemed you had something quite definite in mind when you questioned me."

"It only seemed so," I said coldly. "It's just that I dislike Mr. Pebblebridge. But that does not concern you."

The clerk bowed.

"I'll stay here for a while, Val," I said. "I have a notion that this Mr. Pebblebridge will be back. It won't be necessary to announce that I am here. In the meantime, you are free to go."

"Yes, sir," he said.

When he left, I rang up the service bureau and dictated a telegram; "Have found the meaning of life but am lonely brother departed unexpectedly come at once Ivan." Then I turned on the radio again, and again it howled and screeched. I took off the back and pulled out the local oscillator-mixer. It was no mixer. It was a slug. A beautiful precision subassembly, of obviously mass-produced derivation, and the more I looked at it, the more it seemed that somewhere, sometime, long before my arrival here, and more than once, I had already seen these components in some very familiar device. I attempted to recollect where I had seen them, but instead, I remembered the room clerk and his face with a weak smile and his understanding, commiserating eyes. They are all infected. No,

they hadn't tried slug -- heaven forbid! They hadn't even seen one! It is so indecent! It is the worst of the worst! Not so loud, my dear, how can you say that in front of the boy... but I've been told it's something out of this world.... Me?... How can you think that, you must have a low opinion of me after all.... I don't know, they say over at the Oasis, Buba has it, but as for myself -- I don't know.... And why not? I am a moderate man -- if I feel something is not right, I'll stop....

Let me have five packets of Devon, we have made up a fishing party (hee, hee!). Fifty thousand people. And their friends in other towns. And a hundred thousand tourists every year. The problem is not with the gang. That's the least of our worries, for what does it take to scatter them? The problem is that they are all ready, all eager, and there is not the slightest prospect of the possibility to prove to them that it is terribly frightening, that it is the end, that it is the last debasement.

I clasped the slug in my fist, propped up my head on it, and stared at Rimeyer's dress jacket with the ribbon bar on it, hanging on the back of the chair. Just like me, he must have sat in this chair a few months ago, and also held the slug and radio for the second time, and the same warm flick of desire wandered through the depths of his consciousness: there is nothing to worry about, because now there is light in any darkness, sweetness in any grief, joy in any pain....

...There, there, said Rimeyer. Now you have got it. You

just have to be honest with yourself. It is a little shameful at first, and then you begin to understand how much time you have lost for nothing.... ...Rimeyer, I said, I wasted time not for myself. This cannot be done, it simply cannot, it is destruction for everyone, you can't replace life with dreams.... ...Zhilin, said Rimeyer, when man does something, it is always for himself. There may be absolute egotists in this world, but perfect altruists are just impossible. If you are thinking of death in a bathtub, then, in the first place, we are all mortal, and in the second place, if science gave us slug, it will see to it that it will be rendered harmless. And in the meantime, all that is required is moderation. And don't talk to me of the substitution of reality with dreams. You are no novice, you know perfectly well that these dreams are also part of reality. They constitute an entire world. Why do you then call this acquisition ruin?... ...Rimeyer, I said, because this world is still illusory, it's all within you, not outside of you, and everything you do in it remains in yourself. It is the opposite of the real world, it is antagonistic to it. People who escape into this illusory world cease to exist in the real world. They become as dead. And when everyone enters the illusory world -- and you know it could end thus -- the history of man will terminate.... ...Zhilin, said Rimeyer, history is the history of people. Every man wants to live a life which has not been in vain, and slug gives you such a

life.... Yes, I know that you consider your life as not having been in vain without slug, but, admit it, you have never lived so luminously, so fully as you have today in the tub. You are a bit ashamed to recollect it, and you wouldn't risk recounting it to others. Don't. They have their life, you have yours....

...Rimeyer, I said, all that is true. But the past! Space, schools, the struggle with fascists, gangsters -- is all that for naught? Forty years for nothing? And the others -- they did it all for nothing, too?... ...Zhilin, said Rimeyer, nothing is for nothing in history. Some fought and did not live long enough to have slug. You fought and lived long enough....

...Rimeyer, I said, I fear for mankind. This is really the end. It's the end of man interacting with nature, the end of the interplay of man with society, the end of liaisons among individuals, the end of progress, Rimeyer. AU these billions of people submerged in. hot water and in themselves... only in themselves.... ... Zhilin, said Rimeyer, it's frightening because it's unfamiliar. And as for progress -- it will come to an end only for the real society, only for the real progress. But each separate man will lose nothing, he will only gain, since his world will become infinitely brighter, his ties with nature, illusory though they may be, will become more multifaceted; and ties with society, also illusory but not so known to him, will become more powerful and fruitful. And you don't have to mourn the end of progress. You do know that everything comes to an end. So now comes the end of progress in

the objective world. Heretofore, we didn't know how it, would end, But we know now. We hadn't had time to realize all the potential intensity of objective existence, it could be that we would have reached such knowledge in a few hundred years, but now it has been put in our grasp. Slug brings a gift of understanding of our remotest ancestors which you cannot ever have in real life. You are simply the prisoner of an obsolete ideal, but be logical, the ideal which slug offers you is just as beautiful. Hadn't you always dreamed of man with the greatest scope of fantasy and gigantic imagination....

...Rimeyer, I replied, if you only knew how tired I am of arguing. All my life I have argued with myself and with others. I have always loved to argue, because otherwise life is not worth living. But I am tired right now and don't wish to argue over slug, of all things.... ...Then go on, Ivan, said Rimeyer....

I inserted the slug into the radio. As he had then, I got up. As he did then, I was past thought, past belonging in this world, but I still heard him say: don't forget to lock the door tight so that you won't be disturbed.

And then I sat down. ...So that's the way of it, Rimeyer! said I. So that's how it went. You surrendered. You closed the door tight. And then you sent lying reports to your friends that there wasn't any slug. And then again, after hesitating but a moment, you sent me to my death so that I wouldn't

disturb you. Your ideal, Rimeyer, is offal. If man has to perform what is base in the name of an ideal, then the worth of such ideal is -- less than dross....

I glanced at the watch and shoved the radio in my pocket. I was past waiting for Oscar. I was hungry. And beyond that I had the feeling that for once I had done something useful in this town. I left my phone number with the room clerk -- in case Oscar or Rimeyer should return -- and went out onto the plaza. I did not believe that Rimeyer would come back or even that I would ever see him again, but Oscar could hold to his promise, though more likely, I would have to seek him out. And probably not alone. And probably not here.

Chapter TWELVE

There was but one visitor in the automated cafe. Barricaded behind bottles and hors d'oeuvres at a corner table sat a dark man of oriental cast, magnificently but outlandishly dressed. I took some yogurt and blintzes with sour cream and set to, glancing at him now and then. He ate and drank much and avidly, his face shiny with sweat, hot inside his ridiculous formal clothes. He sighed, leaning back in his chair and loosening his belt. The motion exposed a long yellow holster glistening in the sunlight under the clothing.

I was on my way into the last of the blintzes when he hailed me: "Hello," he said. "Are you a native here?"

"No," I said. "A tourist."

"So that means you don't understand anything either."

I went to the bar, threw a juice cocktail together, and approached him.

"Why is it empty here?" he continued. He had a lively spare face and a bold gaze. "Where are the inhabitants? Why is everything closed up? Everyone is asleep, you can't get any service."

"You just arrived?"

"Yes."

He pushed an empty plate away, moved up a full one, and gulped some light beer.

"Where are you from?" I asked. He glared at me menacingly, and I added quickly, "If it's not a secret, of course."

"No," he said, "it's not a secret," and went back to his eating.

I finished the juice and got ready to leave. Then he said, "They live well, the dogs. Such food and as much as you want, and all for free."

"Well, not quite for free," I contradicted.

"Ninety dollars! Pennies! I'll show them how to eat ninety dollars within three days!" His eyes stopped roving momentarily, "D-dogs!" he muttered and fell to again.

I was quite familiar with such types. They came from minuscule, totally milked kingdoms and prefectdoms, reduced to

utter poverty, and greedily ate and drank, mindful of the hot dusty streets of their home towns, where in the niggardly ribbons of shade, moribund men and women lay dying and immobile, while children with distended bellies rummaged in the garbage piles of foreign consulates. They were surcharged with hatred and needed only two things -- food and weapons. Food for their own gang, which was the opposition, and weapons to fight the other gang, which was in power. They were the most flaming patriots, who spoke hotly and effusively of their love for the people, but resolutely refused all help from without, because they loved nothing but their power and no one but themselves, and were ready in the name of the people and the victory of high principles to mortify the same people, right down to the last man, if necessary, with hunger and machine gun.

Microhitlers!

"Weapons? Food?" I asked.

He grew wary.

"Yes," he said. "Food and weapons. Only without any silly conditions. And as free as possible. Or on credit. True patriots never have any money. While the ruling clique drowns in luxury...."

"Famine?" I asked.

"Anything you want. While you here swim in luxury." He gazed at me with hatred. "The whole world is drowning in wealth and we alone are starving. But your hopes are in vain! The revolution cannot be stopped!"

"Yes," I said. "And whom is the revolution against?"

"We are fighting the blood leeches of Boadshah! We are against corruption and debauchery of the ruling top layer, we are for freedom and true democracy. The people are with us, but they have to be fed. And you tell us that you'll give us food only after we disarm. And even threaten intervention.... What filthy, lying demagogy! What deception of the revolutionary masses! To disarm in the face of those bloodsuckers -- that means to throw a hangman's noose over the heads of all the true freedom fighters! We answer you -- no! You will not deceive the people. Let Boadshah and his brutes disarm! Then we shall see what needs doing!"

"Yes," I said. "But Boadshah also, in all probability, does not wish a noose thrown over his neck."

He put the beer down savagely, and his hand moved toward the holster in a habitual gesture. But then he quickly caught himself.

"I should have known you don't understand a damn thing," he said. "You who are well fed have grown drowsy from a full stomach, you are too conceited to understand us. You wouldn't have dared to talk to me like that in the jungle."

In the jungle, I would have talked differently to you, bandit, I thought, and said:

"I really don't understand many things. For instance, I don't understand what will happen when you gain the upper hand.

Let us imagine that you have won, Boadshah has been hanged, if be, in his turn, hasn't fled to seek food and weapons --"

"He won't get away. He'll get his just deserts. The revolutionary people will tear him to shreds. That's when we'll go to work. We will regain the territory seized from us by affluent neighbors, we will carry out the entire program which the lying Boadshah constantly shouts about to deceive the people.... I'll show them how to strike! They'll learn about strikes with me on top -- there'll be no strikes! They'll all go under arms and forward march! We will win and then..."

He shut his eyes and moaned a bit, shaking his head.

"And then you will be well fed, you will swim in luxury and sleep till noon?"

He laughed.

"I deserve that. The people deserve it. No one will dare reproach us. We will eat and drink as much as we wish, we will live in real houses, we will say to the people: now you are free -- divert yourselves!"

"And don't think about a thing," I added. "But don't you think that all that could come out badly for you?"

"Forget it," he said. "That's sheer demagoguery. You are a demagogue. Also a dogmatist. We too have all kinds of dogmatists similar to yourself. Man, they say, will lose the meaning of life. No, we reply, man will lose nothing. Man will acquire and not lose. You have to feel the people. You have to be from the people yourself. The people don't like sophists.

What the hell for do I let myself be fed on by wood leeches and feed on worms myself?" Suddenly he smiled amiably. "You must have taken offense at me a bit, for calling you well fed and other things. Please don't. Affluence is bad when you don't have it, but your neighbor does. But achieved affluence -- that's a great thing! It's worth fighting for. Everybody fought for it. It must be obtained with weapons in hand, and not traded for freedom and democracy."

"So your final goal is still abundance? Just abundance?"

"Obviously! The final objective always is abundance. The difference is that we are choosy about the means to get it."

"I have already grasped that. But what about man?"

"What do you mean, man?"

I did understand that it was futile to argue.

"You have never been here before?" I asked.

"Why?"

"Look into it, I said. This town gives excellent practical lessons in abundance."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"So far, I like it here." Again he pushed away an empty plate and replaced it with a full one. "These hors d'oeuvres are strange to me.... Everything is tasty and cheap.... It's enviable." He swallowed a few forkfuls of salad and growled.

"We know that all great revolutionaries fought for abundance. We don't have time to theorize, but there is no need for it,

anyway. There are enough theories without us. Furthermore, abundance is in no way threatening us. It won't threaten us for quite a while yet. We have much more pressing problems."

"To hang Boadshah," I said.

"Yes -- to begin with. Next we will need to do away with the dogmatists. I can perceive that even now. Next comes the realization of our legitimate claims. After that, something else will come up. And only then, and after many other things, will abundance arrive. I am an optimist, but I don't believe I will live to see it. Don't you worry -- we'll manage somehow. If we can stand hunger then we can take abundance for sure.... The dogmatists prattle that abundance is not an end, but a means. We reply that every means was once an goal. Today, abundance is a goal. Tomorrow, perhaps it may become a means."

I got up.

"Tomorrow may be too late," I said. "It is incorrect of you to fall back on great revolutionaries. They would not have accepted your shibboleth: now you are free -- enjoy yourselves. They spoke otherwise: now that you are free -- work. After all, they never fought for abundance for the belly, they were interested in abundance for the soul and the mind."

His hand twitched toward the holster again, and again he caught himself.

"A Marxist!" he said with astonishment. "But then again, you are a visitor. We have almost no Marxists, we take them and..."

I kept control of myself.

Passing by the window, I took another look at him. He sat with his back to the street and ate and ate, his elbows stuck out.

When I got home, the living room was already vacant. The youngsters had piled the bedsheets and pillows in the corner. There was a note under the telephone on the desk. Written in a childish scrawl, it read: "Take care. She has plotted something. She was fussing in the bedroom." I sighed and sat down in the armchair.

There was still an hour until the meeting with Oscar, assuming he came. There was no sense in going to sleep, but in addition, it might not be safe -- Oscar could bring company, and come earlier than expected, possibly not through the door. I got the pistol out of the suitcase, put in a clip, and dropped it in my side pocket. Next I climbed into the bar, brewed myself some coffee, and went back to the study.

I took the slug out of my radio and the one out of Rimeyer's, lay them down in front of me on the table, and attempted again to recollect where indeed I had seen just such components and why I thought that I had seen them before and more than once. And then it came to me. I went into the bedroom and brought in the phonor. I didn't even need a screwdriver. I took the case off the phonor, stuck my index finger under the odorizer horn, and, catching it with my finger nail, extracted

a vacuum tubusoid FX-92-U, four outputs, static field, capacity equals two. Sold in consumer electronic stores at fifty cents each. In local patois -- a slug.

It had to be, I thought. We are disoriented by conversations about a new drug. We are constantly derailed by talk about horrific new inventions. We have already made several similar blunders.

There was the time when Alhagana and Burris served up a complaint in the U.N. that the separatists were using a new type of weapon -- freeze bombs. We threw ourselves furiously into a search for underground laboratories and even arrested two genuine underground inventors (sixteen and ninety-six years old, respectively). And then it turned out that the inventors were in no way connected, and the awful freeze bombs were acquired by the separatists in Munich from a refrigerator warehouse -- and were in fact reject super-freezers. True, the effect of these super-freezers was indeed horrible. Used in conjunction with molecular detonators (widely used by undersea archaeologists in the Amazon for dispersing crocs and piranhas), the super-freezers were capable of instantaneous temperature depression of one hundred and fifty degrees centigrade over a radius of twenty meters. Afterward, we spent much effort indoctrinating ourselves with the concept that we should keep in mind that in our times, literally every month, masses of new inventions appear with the most peaceful of applications, but with the most unexpected side effects. These

characteristics are often such that lawbreaking in the area of weapons manufacture and stockpiling becomes meaningless. We became extremely cautious about new types of armament, employed by various extremists, and only a year later got caught by another twist, when we went looking for a mysterious apparatus with which poachers lured pterodactyls from the Uganda Preserve at a great distance. We found a clever do-it-yourself adaptation of the "Up-down" toy in combination with a fairly generally available medical device.

And now we had caught slug -- a combination of a standard radio with a standard tubusoid and a standard chemical and very common plumbing-supplied hot water.

To make a long story short, there would be no need to search for secret factories. We'd have to look for some very adroit and unprincipled speculators who sensed very delicately indeed that they found themselves in the Country of the Boob.... They'd be like trichinae in a ham. Five or six enterprising self-seekers. An innocent cottage somewhere in the suburbs. Just go to a department store, buy the vacuum tubusoid for fifty cents, peel off the plastic wrapping, and place in an elegant box with a glassite cover. And then sell it for fifty marks -- "only to you and only through friends." True, there was still the inventor. Probably he was not alone, and most certainly he was not the only one.... But probably they had not survived; for this was nothing like a lure for pterodactyls.

Anyway, was the matter really one of speculators? Let them sell another forty slugs, or a hundred. Even in the City of Boobs, people had to figure out in the end what it was all about. And when that happened, slug would spread like wildfire.

The first ones to see to that would be the moralists from the Joy of Living. They would be followed by Dr. Opir, who would sally forth and announce that according to scientific endings, slug was conducive to clarity of thought and was unsurpassed in the treatment of alcoholism and depression. In general, the future ideal was a vast trough filled with hot water. Then they would stop writing the word "slug" on the fences.

That's who should be taken by the throat, I thought, if anybody. The trouble is not the profiteers. The trouble is that there exists this Country of the Boob, this filthy misconstruction. It has taken the shivers under its wing and can't wait to legalize slug....

There was a knock on the door. Oscar came into the study, and he was not alone. With him was Matia himself, stocky, gray, with dark glasses and thick cane, as always, looking like a veteran who has lost his sight. Oscar was smirking self-satisfiedly.

"Hello, Ivan," said Matia. "Meet your back-up, Oscar Pebblebridge, from the southwest section."

We shook hands. What I have always disliked about our Security Council is the plethora of mossy traditions, and

especially infuriating is the idiotic system of cross-investigation, due to which we are constantly tripping over each other's sleuthing, busting each other's mugs, and not uncommonly shooting each other with fair accuracy. I can hardly see that as serious work -- more like adolescents playing at detectives. Let them go soak their heads in a swamp.

"I was going to take you in today," confided Oscar. "Never in my life have I seen such a suspicious character."

Without saying a word, I took the pistol out of my pocket, unloaded it, and threw it in the desk drawer. Oscar followed my actions with approval. I said, addressing Matia, "I guess that the investigation would simply collapse, without getting started, had I known about Oscar. But I must inform you that I almost maimed him yesterday."

"I read you right," said Oscar smugly.

Grunting, Matia lowered himself into the armchair.

"I can't ever remember a situation," he said, "when Ivan was pleased with everything. But conspiracy is the foundation of our business.... Take a chair and sit down, both of you. You, Oscar, had no right to be maimed, and you, Ivan, had no right to be arrested. That's how you should regard it. And what have you got here?" he said, taking off his dark glasses to look at the slugs, "Taking up radio as a hobby in between your work? Laudable, laudable!"

It was evident that they didn't know a thing. Oscar was

leafing through his notebook, where everything was encrypted in his own personal code, and was apparently preparing himself to make a report, while Matia scanned over the slugs with his fleshy nose, holding the glasses aloft in his hand. There was something symbolic in this spectacle.

"And so, agent Zhilin is enriching his leisure with radio technology," continued Matia, restoring his glasses and leaning back in his chair. "He has lots of free time, he has switched to a four-hour day.... And how do you stand on the question of the meaning of life, agent Zhilin? It appears you may have found it. I hope it won't be necessary to take you away like agent Rimeyer?"

"It won't be required," I said. "I had not enough time to become addicted. Did Rimeyer tell you anything?"

"But of course not," he said with vast sarcasm. "Why should he do that? He was ordered to find the drug, and he did, and he used it, and now he apparently considers his duty discharged. He became an addict himself, don't you see. He is silent. He is loaded with this brew up to his ears, and it's useless to talk to him! He raves that he has murdered you and constantly asks for his radio." Matia stopped short and gazed at the radios. "Strange," he said and looked at me. "However, I like orderliness. Oscar got here first, and he has certain deductions both about the goodies and the conduct of the operation. Let's begin with him."

I looked at Oscar.

"About what operation?"

"The devil knows," said Matia.

"The raiding of the center. You haven't located the center yet?"

The hunt is on, I thought, and said, "No, I didn't. A center I haven't latched on to. But --"

"All in good order, in proper order," said Matia severely and banged the table with the flat of his hand. "Oscar, you may begin, and as for you, Ivan, you listen attentively and make your deductions. If you are still capable, that is."

Oscar began. Obviously he was a good worker. He moved fast, energetically, and purposefully. True, Rimeyer had twisted him around his finger as well as he had me. Nevertheless, Oscar had been able to grasp much in spite of it. He understood that the sought-for "goodies" were known locally as "slug." Very rapidly he had grasped the connection between slug and Devon. He divined that neither the Fishers, nor the Perches, nor the Sorrowers had any relation to our problem. He had deduced with superb insight that in this town it was practically impossible to hide any secret. He had even been able to insinuate himself into the confidence of the Intels, and had established beyond any doubt that there were only two truly secret societies -- the Art Patrons and the Intels. Since the Art Patrons could be eliminated, that left only the Intels....

"It was not contrary to the conviction which I had formed," said Oscar, "that the only people with access to laboratories and capable of conducting scientific or quasi-scientific research were the students and professors in the university. It's true that the factories in the city also have laboratories. There are only four of them, and I have investigated them all. These laboratories are stringently specialized and are loaded to the limit with ongoing work. As the factories work around the clock, there is no basis whatsoever to postulate that the industrial labs could become centers of slug manufacture. On the other hand, out of the seven university labs, two are obviously surrounded with an atmosphere of mystery. I was unable to determine what goes on in them, but I spotted three students, who, I believe, should know for sure...."

I listened to him intently, amazed at how much he had been able to accomplish here, but it was already all too clear to me where his main error lay. I could see he was following a false trail, and alongside of that, there grew within me a vague feeling of an even more significant error, of a most important error, the error in the underlying premises of the Council.

"I arrived at the visualization," he continued, "of a gangsterlike organization of the vertical type with rigorously separated functions in decentralized sections. The production section is involved in the manufacture and perfection of the slug.... I should inform you that slug, whatever it may be, is

being perfected: I was able to establish that in the beginning.

Devon was not employed at all.... Next, the marketing section is concerned with expanding the slug distribution, while the strong-arm section terrorizes the population and interdicts all debate on that topic.... The intimidation of the people..."

Now I understood it all.

"Just a minute, Oscar," I said. "Can you guarantee that in the entire city there are only two secret organizations?"

"Yes," he said. "Only the Art Patrons and the Intels."

"Please continue, Oscar," said Matia with displeasure. "I would ask you not to interrupt, Ivan."

"Sorry," I said. Oscar continued to talk, but I was no longer listening. Something flared in my mind. The traditional initial model for all our undertakings, with its invariant axiom predicating the existence of a ramified organization of evildoers, had been shattered into dust, and I was only amazed that I had failed heretofore to recognize its inane complexity in the context of this simple-minded country. There were no secret shops guarded by gloomy persons with brass knuckles, there were no wary, unprincipled businessmen, there were no traveling salesmen with double-walled shirt collars stuffed with contraband, and it was quite for nothing that Oscar was drafting the elegant chart of squares and circles, connected by a confusion of lines, and inscribed with the words "center," "staff," and numerous question marks. There was nothing to

demolish and be and no one to send off to Baffin Land.... But there was modern industry involved in everyday trade, there were state stores where slugs were sold for fifty cents apiece, and there were -- but only in the beginning one or two individuals not devoid of inventiveness and dying of inactivity and thirsting for new sensations. And there was the medium-sized country where, once upon a time, abundance and affluence were the end to be attained, and they never did become the means to another end. And that was all that was needed.

Someone inserted a slug into a radio by mistake and lay down in the bath to relax and maybe listen to some good music or to hear the latest news -- and it started. The news oozed and remnants of phonors found their way into the garbage ducts, then someone figured out that slugs could be obtained not only from phonors, but could simply be bought in stores. Someone was inspired to use aromatic salts and someone employed Devon. People started to die in their baths from nervous exhaustion, and the statistical department of the Security Council submitted a top secret report to the Presidium. It became apparent at once that all such deaths occurred with people who had come here as tourists. And furthermore, that there were far more such deaths in this country than anywhere else on the planet. As so often happens, a false theory was constructed on well-verified facts, and we, one after another, well schooled in conspiracy, were sent here to uncover the secret gang of

dealers in a new and unknown drug, and we arrived here and did stupid things. But, as always, no labor goes for naught, and if you must look for the guilty, then all were guilty, from the mayor to Rimeyer, and if so, then no one was guilty, and now we have to --

"Ivan," said Matia irritably, "are you asleep?"

They were both looking at me. Oscar was extending me his notebook with the diagrams. I took the notebook and threw it on the table.

"Listen," I said. "Oscar has done wonders, of course, but we have come a cropper again! Oscar, you have seen such a lot, but you understood nothing. If there are any people in this land who hate slug, it's the Intels. The Intels are not gangsters, they are desperate men and patriots. They have but one aim -- to stir this bog. By any means. To give this city some kind of purpose, to force it away from the trough They are sacrificing themselves, do you understand? They invite fire upon themselves, they are attempting to arouse the town to come sort of common emotion, even if it has to be hatred. Can it be you haven't heard of the tear gas, the shooting up of the shivers? They are not making slug in the laboratories, they are building bombs and cooking tear gas ... and generally breaking the laws on weapons technology. They are preparing a putsch for the twenty-eighth, but as for slug -- here it is!"

I shoved one at each of them, and simultaneously expounded

everything I thought on the subject.

At first, they listened to me in disbelief. Then they stared at the slugs, not taking their eyes off them until I'd finished, and when I did, they were quiet for quite a while.

Matia held his slug as though it were a buzzing wasp. There was displeasure written on his face.

"Vacuum tubusoid... Hmmm... In fact... and radios ... there is something to it."

Matia stuck the slug in his shirt pocket and announced decisively, "There is nothing in it. That is, of course, I am very pleased with you, Ivan, since you have apparently found that which was needed, but your work is in the Council and not with the Commission of World Problems. They adore philosophy there, and haven't done a single useful thing to date. As for you, you have been working with us for ten years now, but you still haven't grasped the simple truth: if there is a crime, there must be a criminal."

"That's not true," I said.

"That is true!" said Matia. "Don't start a debate with me! You are eternally debating!... Be quiet, Oscar. It's my turn to talk. I am asking you, Ivan, what is the worth of your version? What do you propose to do? But be concrete, please! Be concrete!"

"Concretely..." I faltered.

True enough, my version did not suit them.

They probably didn't even consider it a version.

For them it was just philosophizing. They were men, so to say, of resolute action, knights of immediate decisive measures., They let nothing slide. They cut through knots and demounted Damocles' swords. They made rapid decisions, and having made them, they no longer doubted. They didn't know how to be otherwise. That was their world-view -- and I was the only one to consider that their time had passed. Patience, I thought. I am going to need an awful lot of patience. Suddenly, I understood that life's logic was again ripping me away from my best comrades, and that now it would be especially hard for me, since the resolution of this argument would take a long time, a very long time.... They were both looking at me.

"Concretely," I repeated. "Concretely I suggest a plan for the development and spread of a humanistic viewpoint in this country."

Oscar grimaced with distaste, and Matia said biliously:

"Nah! I am talking seriously."

"So am I. What we need is not detectives, nor squads armed with machine pistols."

"We need a decision!" said Matia, "not conversations, but decisions!"

"That's precisely what I am proposing -- a decision."

Matia reddened

"We have to save people," he said. "Souls we can save after we save the people.... Don't annoy me, Ivan!"

"While you are restructuring world-views," said Oscar,
"people will be dying or turning into idiots."

I didn't want to argue, but said anyway, "As long as
world-views are not restructured, people will be dying and
turning into idiots, and no squads will help. Remember
Rimeyer!"

"Rimeyer forgot his duty," raged Matia.

"Exactly," said I.

Matia slammed his mouth shut and, tearing off his glasses,
was silent for a while, his eyes rotating angrily. He was,
without a doubt, a man of iron; you could actually watch turn
drive his rage inward. In a minute he was entirely calm and
smiling placidly.

"Yes," he said. "It seems that I am forced to admit that
intelligence as a social institution has regressed to the
piteous end. Apparently we destroyed the last of the true
operatives in the time of the last putsches. "Knife" --
Dannziger; "Bamboo" -- Savada; "Doll" -- Grover; "Ram" --
Boas... True, they were bought and they were sold, they had no
country, they were scum, lumpens, but they worked! "Sirius" --
Haram... worked for four intelligences and was a scoundrel. He
was a filthy animal. But if he gave information, it was real
information, clear, precise, and timely. I can recollect
ordering him hung without the slightest pity, but when I look
at my current co-workers, I can understand what a loss
that was.... Granted, a man can fail in the end and become

a drug addict, as "Bamboo" Savada did finally. But why write lying reports? Rather resign, excuse yourself, don't write any reports at all.... I arrive in this town in the profound conviction that I know it through and through, because I have had here for ten years an experienced, proved, resident agent. And suddenly I determine that I know precisely nothing. Every local kid knows who the Fishers are. But I don't know. I know only that the KVS Society which occupied itself with about the same things as the Fishers was disbanded and outlawed three years ago. I know this from the reports of the resident. But at the local police I am informed that the VAL Society was formed two years ago, which I did not learn from the resident's reports. I am employing a simplified example, since I really don't give a damn about the Fishers, but this becomes transformed into a general style of work. Reports are delayed, reports lie, reports misinform... in the end reports are simply invented. One man openly resigns from the Council and doesn't consider it incumbent upon him to so inform his superior. He has enough, you see; he had intentions to communicate but somehow couldn't find the time.... Another, instead of fighting the drug problem, becomes an addict himself... And the third philosophizes."

He nodded at me with regretful bitterness.

"Understand me correctly, Ivan," he continued. "I am not opposed to philosophy. But philosophy is one thing and our work

altogether another. Judge for yourself, Ivan. If there is no secret headquarters, if we are faced with a deluge of do-it-yourself enterprise, then why all the secretiveness? All this conspiratorial atmosphere? Why is slug enveloped in such mystery? I allow that Rimeyer is silent because of pangs of conscience in general and specifically on your account, Ivan. But the rest? Slug is not illegal; everyone knows about it and yet everyone keeps it a secret. Oscar, here, doesn't philosophize; he postulates that the inhabitants are simply terrorized. I can understand that. And what do you postulate, Ivan?"

"In your pocket," I said, "there is a slug. Go in the bathroom. There's Devon on the shelf -- one tablet orally, four in the water. There's some whiskey in the medicine chest. Oscar and I will wait. And then you can tell us aloud, so we can hear, we your comrades in work and your underlings, about your sensations and experiences. And we -- better it should be Oscar -- should listen, but as for me, I think I'll leave."

Matia put on his glasses and stared at me.

"You are implying that I won't tell? You propose that I, too, will be derelict in my duty?"

"What you will learn will have no relation whatsoever to your duty. That you will renege on subsequently. As did Rimeyer. Comrades, this is slug. It's a cute device, which awakens fantasy and directs it where it will, particularly where you yourself subconsciously -- and I mean subconsciously

-- would like to direct it. The further you are removed from the animal, the more inoffensive would slug be, but the closer to the animal, the more you would be impelled to adhere to the conspiratorial way. The animals themselves are altogether silent. They just know how to press the lever."

"What lever?"

I explained about the rats to them.

"Did you try it yourself?" asked Matia.

"Yes."

"And?"

"As you can see, I tend to silence."

Matia sibilated for some time and then said, "Well, I am no nearer to the animal than you are. How do you put it in?"

I loaded the radio and handed it to him. Oscar was following all this with interest.

"God be with me," said Matia, "Where is your bath? I'll wash after my trip while I'm at it."

He locked himself in, and we could hear him dropping things.

"Strange affair," said Oscar.

"It's really not an affair," I contradicted. "It's a piece of history, Oscar, and you would like to fit it into a file and tie it with a ribbon. But this is no gangster business. It should be obvious to a hedgehog, as Yurkovsky used to say."

"Who?"

"Yurkovsky, Vladimir Sergeyevitch. There was such a renowned planetologist. I worked with him."

"Aah," said Oscar, "By the way, on the plaza by the Hotel Olympic there is a monument to a Yurkovsky."

"The very same man."

"Really?" said Oscar. "On the other hand, it's quite possible. However, the monument was not put up because he was a renowned planetologist. It's simply that for the first time in the history of the city, he broke the electronic roulette bank. It was decided to immortalize such a feat."

"I expected something of the sort," I murmured. I felt depressed.

The shower began to hiss in the bathroom, and there was a frightful roar from Matia. At first, I decided that he turned on ice water instead of warm, but he kept yelling and then began to curse in the most horrendous terms. Oscar and I exchanged glances. He was generally calm, interpreting this as the typical action of slug, and his face exhibited a compassionate expression. The latch rattled wildly, the door flew open with a crash. Bare heels slapped in the bedroom, and a naked Matia rolled into the study.

"Are you some kind of an idiot?" he bellowed at me. "What sort of filthy trick is this?"

I went numb. Matia resembled a grotesque zebra. His well-fed body was covered with poison-green vertical stripes. He reared and stamped his feet, spraying emerald drops. When we

regained our composure and investigated the site of the accident, we learned that the shower head had been stuffed with a sponge saturated with a green dye. I remembered Len's note and guessed that Vousi was the culprit. It took a long while to restore a normal atmosphere. Matia viewed the incident as a boorish joke and an inadmissible disregard of subordinate discipline and behavior. Oscar horse-laughed. I scrubbed Matia with a brush and explained. Then Matia announced that from now on he wouldn't trust anyone and would try out slug when he got home. He dressed and went into conference with Oscar on the plans for blockading the city.

I was cleaning up in the bath and thinking that with this, my work in the Council was coming to an end, and another kind of work was beginning -- which I did not know how to begin. I would have liked to include myself in the blockade planning, not because I considered it necessary, but because it was so simple, so much more simple than to return to people their souls which had been devoured by affluence, and to teach each one to think of world problems in the same way as his own personal ones.

"Isolate this pus bag from the rest of the world, isolate it totally, that's the total of our philosophy," orated Matia. That was aimed at me. But perhaps not even me. For Matia was a brilliant mind. He understood too well that isolation was always a defense, but here we had to attack. But he knew how to

advance only with squads, and this was embarrassing to him.

To rescue. For how long would you need rescuing? When would you learn to rescue yourselves? Why were you eternally harkening to priests, fascists, demagogues, and imbecile Opirs? Why didn't you want to exert your brains? Why did you resist thinking so? Why couldn't you understand that the world is vast, complex, and fascinating? Why was everything simple and boring to you? In what way did your mind differ from the mind of Rabelais, Swift, Lenin, Einstein, Makarenko, Hemingway, and Strogoff? Someday I would grow tired of all this. Someday when I had no more strength and conviction. For I was similar to you. But I wanted to help you, and you didn't want to help me....

Reg and Len came over after school, and Len said, "We have decided, Ivan. We will go to the Gobi Central." He had red fuzz on his lip and huge red hands, and I could see that it was he who had thought up the Gobi trip, and quite recently -- not more than ten minutes ago. Reg, as usual, was silent, chewing on a blade of grass and placidly studying me with his calm gray eyes. He has become altogether a square, I thought, and said, "Wonderful book, isn't it?" "Yes, indeed," said Len. "We understood at once where we should go." Reg was quiet. "Heat and stench are suspended in the shadow of these hard laboring dragons," I said from memory. "They devour everything under them -- the ancient Mongolian prayer gate, the bones of a two-humped beast fallen in some sand storm..." "Yes," said Len,

while Reg went on chewing his blade of grass. "Every time," I continued (now from Ichin-dagli), "that the sun arrives at a mathematically precise required position, a strange mirage blossoms out in the East -- of a strange city with white towers which no one has yet seen in reality. " "One should see that with his own eyes," said Len, and laughed. "Friend Len," I said, "it's too fascinating and therefore too simple. You will see that it's too simple yourself and it will become an unpleasant disappointment." No, I hadn't said it right. "Friend Len," I said, "what sort of a mirage is that? Here is one. Seven years ago, in your mother's house, I saw a truly marvelous mirage: both of you standing before me almost grown up..." No -- I was saying that for myself, not for them. It should be said differently. "Friend Len," I said, "seven years ago you explained to me that your people were accursed. We came here and removed the curse from you and Reg and from many other children who had no parents. And now it's your turn to remove, the curse, which..."

It will be very difficult, but I'll explain it to them.

One way or another, I'll get it across. We have known from childhood how to remove the curses on the barricades and on construction sites and in laboratories, and you will remove the last of the curses, you will be the future teachers and educators. In the last war -- the most bloodless and the most difficult for its soldiers.

Upstairs Vousi screeched and Len started to cry piteously. Oscar's voice boomed in the study. How well off he is, I thought. Simple: slug is bad, harmful, unnatural. Therefore, it must be destroyed, forbidden by law, and then you must watch closely that the law is strictly enforced. Only Matia is smarter than that, because he is older and more experienced. Matia can still be pulled over to my side. My word doesn't mean anything to him, but others will be found to whom he will listen.... How wonderful that I can now cry out to the whole world and be heard by millions of like-thinkers!

And then I thought that I would not leave this place. I had been here only three days. It could not be that there was no one here who would be with us. No one who hated all this with a deadly hatred, who wanted to blast this dull sated world out of its stasis. Such people always existed and always will. Perhaps that bibliophile driver or that tall, harsh one of the Intels... and who knew how many more. They stumbled about as though they were blind. We would do everything in our power to help them so that they would not waste their anger on trifles. It was our place to be here now. And my place, too.

What a labor lies ahead, I thought, what a task! For the time being, I didn't know where to begin in this Country of the Boob, caught unprepared in a flood of affluence, but I knew that I wouldn't leave here as long as the immigration laws permitted. And when they stopped permitting it, I would break them....

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