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VLAD SAVICH

Advance Praise for *Go, Contex, Go!*

Vlad Savich's stories seem to be a reaction to encounters in early life—some real, some perceived, some imagined—with the forces of limitation: parental, political, religious and cultural. And so, he fights, against unfairness, injustice, and unkindness... but above all, against boredom. When he is strident, Savich thrills. When he is ironic, he delights. His prose style is filtered through Russian, Ukrainian, and Canadian French, resulting in a pungent, inimitable and almost unplaceable accent. It is our good fortune that he is so prolific; this is exciting, entertaining writing we are better off for having more of. Call him the rock-and-roll New Realist Turgenev of Kiev, or the tragicomic punk Chekhov of Montreal. Whatever you call him, read him (and ignore the OTHER Vlad altogether). Пугін-хуйло!

—Zachary Bos, *New England Review of Books*

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Go, Contex, Go!

A Storybook

by Vlad Savich

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Line

This story must have happened one April, around 30 years ago. Spring was running through the streets and alleys of a large old city. Waiting for *aventures incroyables*, it stirred up my 17-year-old soul that lived for the sensation of big events.

Everything was betokening a miracle: the wind rushing into the classroom, trees just about to explode into sticky young leaves, and the immature April moon dropping into my romantic dreams with its calligraphically written “C.”

An unknown, mysterious world lifted its veil in them. Rosy winds were blowing, one could hear the noise of a light-blue sea, and I longed for stunning women to reveal to me their secrets. I already knew what “winds” meant by living in a quarter romantically named “Seven Winds.” I conjectured about what a stunning woman could feel like. My guesswork demanded proof (theory without practice is dead, I was taught in school). And thus I gazed avidly into female faces, trying to find the one among them who would become my first revelation. But, for some reason, they paid no attention to me. Whether my glance was too expressive, or perhaps my young appearance aroused a certain level of anxiety in them. But what else could my foolish fringe and my crumpled jacket, chock-full of the complexes of a timid, knee high to a grasshopper, inspire? I should drink bromide and read Freud, not lock myself up in a dark closet—named the mother-in-law room by my father—and scribble on a virgin-pure-chalky paper with a coarse iron feather, making verses, dedicated to Her, forever the first one.

Nowadays, I would act exactly this way, after having long ago gotten the hang of various versions of women’s secrets. Then I wrote, picking up voluptuous chords of future pleasures in the music of the scratchy feather. Oh, if only had I known what verses I would have to scribble, I would have never eaten oranges with olives that winter!

“What have oranges got to do with it?” someone asked.

There is a connection.

In the winter before my 17th spring, they delivered thick-skinned Moroccan oranges, oily and saturated like cat’s eyes and Greek olives to a greengrocer. To be honest, did I like them? No. But my mother did. Aw, moms! God bless them!

“Vitamin B, Vitamin C. Epidermis, Immunity, Somatotropin.” What didn’t she come up with to stuff me with? I love my mother, and even nowadays I keep on obediently gulping prodigious diets and other clean-up procedures.

Now, multiply my 17 years by this rich spectrum of vitamins, contributing to the increase of my sexual energy, and you will take in the horny twinkle that's appeared in my eye, poetry-making and erotic dreams, and I will tell you what turned out a short time later.

Sheets rustled and feathers scribbled not only in my corner, the feather curved under the fingers of one of the grand playwrights of human lives, finishing a play with the working title "The First Sexual Revelation of a Spring Chicken." But final instructions were being given also to dressers, makeup artists, lighting operators, and a final hammer blow of a stage worker, preparing the theatrical boards; harmonically coincided with the demanding alarm shake. *Le jour X arrive.*

The curtains were lifted, and the storyline, unrolling with a freakish spiral, carried the protagonist (i.e. me) into the vortex of fast-changing scenes, undemanding monologues and intricate dialogues. Though it's difficult to say who was a protagonist, who had a supporting role and who was simply a passerby. Was it scripted at all or was it just a big chaotic misunderstanding?

After all, the events of that day moved quite unusually from the very start.

Right after "la cloche a sonne au premier cours" (the bell rang—in my case it was a French lesson), a fire alarm stunned the brightened silence of the early morning. Anxious teachers quickly pushed joyful students out to the school yard. My class, 9B, deployed by the massive school gates, after obeying the emergency evacuation plan (which was approved by authorities).

A short time later the loud mirth reignited. Someone had smoked, throwing fag-ends into the basement windows' wells, from which a yellow stinking smoke of a smolder, as an unhappy love-story, rose up. Someone bet on when school would close and someone simply yawned, lying on the fresh grass painted perimeter of the school yard. Our mistress, the French language teacher, mercilessly trampled down the shadows of twigs, sprawled out on the ground, yet to be protected by leaves.

"Mes amis, mes amis," shouted Anna Samuilovna, trying by all means to get class 9B under control. *Des efforts vaine*—but her efforts were useless. After 30 minutes the class, formed two groups—the first being "the Proles", and the second being "the Intellectuals." Each disappeared from the school-yard. "The Proles" were devoured by a reclamation plant and "the Intellectuals" took their seats on the nearby ruin of an old Polish church.

The stories in the first group were mostly about numerous unloaded wagons, and in the second group, about guitar chords and female classmates they had had sexual relationships with. All but two shame-faced boys talked. The second boy of them was A. Oleynik, the straight-A student, who was also a follower of the cult of Pentecostalism, and what about the first person? It was me, Mr. Narrator. Between these groups, there was a narrow line of trees, planted along railway lines a long time ago, or simply "lines" as normal people call them. This line would later become our stage, where a climactic part of my further tragicomedy was played, some sort of "surreal dream on an April day."

I had encountered a lot of lines like this, not only here, but also on different parts of the earth. I believe they were supposed to serve both as barriers for snow and as a wind protection for the ground. I don't know whether they fulfil this function in countries that are far away from Russia, but in Russia that line

has been used as a shelter for alcoholics and homeless lovers, since the beginning of time (and especially in warm seasons).

Let's go back to our stage play. So, one part of the group worked and another part argued. Just like in life and theatre. There was a mediator between them (as always), an outsider, Sebastian Satanovsky.

"He is hopeless. Oh, remember my words, he will come to no good too soon." These were the words of Vanda Francevna Satanovskaya, five years after her son's first time in prison.

About every 15 minutes, S. Satanovsky appeared here and there. But starting at 2 p.m. no one saw him at the church ruins anymore.

The groups stayed talking and drinking until nightfall. When "the Intellectuals" had already forgotten about the other group, "the Proles," S. Satanovsky appeared by the church's creaky gates, with a mysterious smile on his drunken face. You could feel the same excitement both in his harsh movements and in his hasty speech. Judging from interjections in his speech, which were not even full words, one would make a conclusion, that there are some mystic and fateful events, happening on the line.

"So, guys, want to get some pussy?" Sebastian snapped out finally. After Mikhasya heard this question, the sixth cord had broken and its thrilling lasting sound was vibrating a long time in the silence of church's ruins, or dead silence, as normal people call it.

"Come on guys?!" Sebastian broke the silence, throwing the dogged end of an expensive Opal cigarette. Other boys pulled long faces; they looked anxious, almost crazy. For sure, the boys couldn't concentrate their emotions; they were so excited they couldn't think. Everybody looked at me inquiringly (as if it was me and not them, who were boasting about sexual adventures), even the follower of cult of Pentecostalism, A. Oleynik, stared at me with his naughty gaze. Honestly speaking, I was flattered.

Trying to seem nonchalant, I asked, whether it was far from here. As if I had another choice, something nearer.

"No, it isn't that far, in the bushes on the line," Sebastian Satanovsky clarified.

Kicking up the dust from the road, that was winding between cooperative garages and private barns, we moved forward in dizzy obscurity. The distance between the "groups" started to shrink.

On our way, S. Satanovsky told us about the events which occurred on the line. As it turned out, starting from 3 p.m Moscow time, the skilled director included new heroes into this piece. To speak exactly, two men and a woman, a classic triangle, which is easy to solve, even in campaign conditions of railway afforestation. When "the Proles" of class 9B stepped into the bushes, "the triangle" was already being indulged in sexual pleasures and alcohol. "The Proles" were loaded with "Cahors" wine and "Zhiguli" beer. The pupils were drinking.

Becoming tipsy, they were furtively watching the love triangle, hiding themselves in hawthorn bushes, which had recently turned light green. After the third glass, unrest took hold, followed by a riot. They left their hiding places and, revealed themselves, ready for the (sex) revolution. Looking at the resolute faces of lewd young men, the male owners of the female body offered them an exchange. Two bottles of "Cahors" wine—and the body, calmly snoring, moved to "The Proletariates." The reader can only guess

what they were doing with it until “the Intellectuals” came. I won’t dare to describe it. Although, I know all the details already.

The pale red light lay on the green burgeons of Canadian maples and the prankish forelocks of young people were blown by a playful spring wind. The boys were indecisively lingering at the edge. There were so many people crowded there that it was difficult to count them. The common people, from whose social sphere I come, usually call it “the black swarm.” The main figure, who taught us “Introduction into elementary sexology”, was a short thickset boy, Ivan Korobka. Vanya was a bright example; the surname describes his features.

Ivan Korobka standing resembled a shoebox with his body and the intellectual emptiness of his head. But God knows, how circumstances change people! In these minutes before sunset, the sedentary lump Korobka resembled a magnate of the sex-industry with his efficient moves and confident commands. Actively elbowing his way forward, S. Satanovsky approached to meet the manager of ceremony.

“Look, I’ve got new ones,” and he pointed at the boys who had just come in. Shuffling like a jockey, Ivan advanced to meet the group and asked hastily: “*Voulez-vous la femme?*” “The Intellectuals” glanced at me. They had scared faces of kids who worry about sleeping through New Year’s Eve. Because of feelings that overflowed my mind, my tongue swelled and became fuzzy, producing whistling sounds. At last, I said “*Pour quoi pas.*”

“Come with me,” Vanya smiled, and with his thick square-looking body, led us to the bushes.

“Stop,” our sex-manager yelled at us. We were stilled and, stretching out our necks, looked behind the way-side bushes that seemed gloomy in the night’s silence. There, in my view, was something I had dreamed about for so long. The chief offender, Alexander Skvortsov, came out to meet us, lumbering and clumsy like a bear.

“Listen to me, square-looking boy,” said Skvortsov to Vanya Korobka. “Who were you banging?”

“What do you mean who?” asked Korobka surprised. Then he answered with confidence: “a pussy.”

“But the pussy is... dead. You have been fucking a corpse,” Korobka informed A. Skvortsov calmly.

“Are you pulling my leg?” objected Vanya in a trembling voice. The Crooked Man was fucking her for about twenty minutes. He said she was even snoring from sexual excitement.

“You’re a noodle and your Crooked Man is also an asshole. The pussy croaked, and you, suckers, thought she was carried away. Well, that’s all, man. The Criminal Code of Russian Federation, chapter 115, Part one.”

After those words, and, after mentioning the first part of The Criminal Code, 115, my spine trembled and crumbled into the lower extremities. The curtain fell. The play was performed with brilliance. The cold female corpse stayed lying in night alleys till morning.

What happened later, I don’t remember clearly. My moves resembled some chaotic Brownian movements through a suburb in a hope to find a solution to the scourge that suddenly fell on my weak shoulders. I could sense a boy seized with fear at his sexual awakening. There were two circumstances, which reassured me:

1. I went into action, when the object of our sexual desire was already cold (to our erotic delights).
2. A criminal case for the murder of the woman (whose name I never learned) was initiated, and that gave me a chance not to take part in the hated May Day demonstration, which was coming.

The next day, after the first lesson was over, a group of police burst into the classroom. They were looking for Principal Ivan Filimonovich Shvirok who was staggering andante.

Those who participated in the night's orgy were led outside. I was no exception. So I stood up calmly as the policeman pointed to my side with a stump of chewed pencil.

It was stuffy and dark in the big GAZ police van. Silently and tightly, shoulder to shoulder, we were sitting there on its hard benches. There was the obscurity and inevitability of the damned Criminal Code Art. 115, Part One, that waited for us. And there, behind the window, the spring was going wild. "The spring of our discontent" with its warm sunshine was breaking full blast into the barred windows of the police van. Spring is always triumphing, and at the same time, the spring didn't care at all either about the Art. 115, or about the Part One (not about the Part Two either), or about our future, or about the dead female body moved from the line to the morgue.

In a short while, I was sitting in a dim room, where the same spring was blossoming a birch twig in a pickle jar. I gave evidence to an extremely curious and inquisitive man, the police investigator Khmyrev. Trying to trick his lust for knowledge, I often used the saying "I can't remember." Then, the "inquisitive man" corrected his tie, colored like the birch leaves, and went on refreshing my memories with violence, using a blotting paper from his desk.

"You're free," said the investigator finally.

The next day was the funeral of the woman. Hidden behind my window's curtain, I curiously watched the crowd wailing plaintively and the dull sky of the big gray city shedding tears of rain. There was something symbolic in that. Something that is very Russian. Yesterday she was just an immense trucker slut, who would have given up her life this way sooner or later, and now she is a saint. Oh, this indelible passion of Russians for turning the fallen into saints!

A few days later it was the May Day worker's demonstration. My hope for getting free from it did not come true. On the contrary, all the guilty boys marched up front with gore-velvet banners. Vanya Korobka was shouting "Hurray" his loudest way, towards greetings coming from the government's tribune, and I was allowed to carry the banner, which required someone's freedom.

"May the Soviet youth live a long life!"—tribunes exclaimed.

"Hurraaaay!" replied Vanya drawling sounds with the mighty range of his voice.

Korobkin's enthusiasm seemed to have been noticed, during the court hearing and just a month later Vanya received only a two-year suspended sentence. The two good men, who had passed their "beloved one" into the hands of young sex "revolutionaries," earned ten years each. Some of my classmates escaped with a reprimand. For some of them, the process shattered the family budget. As for me, I was reprimanded according to the Komsomol and got a real kick in the pants from my parents. The story was soon forgotten. I was rehabilitated.

A few years later, I went to a funeral, which took place in an unassuming graveyard.

“Look,” said the mother to a woman who came with her and pointed to a shabby grave and a slanting little table. Heat and coldness, snow and rain had done their insidious work, having effaced the inscription and the photo of the one who rested under the bleached five-point-star; the one who had almost become my first sexual revelation. The one who ran a kind of symbolic line over my whole life; the line, which separated me from one of the brightest periods in my life—my childhood.

Go, Contex, Go!

One ordinary bright spring day, Norman Benson, a short, well-built middle-aged chap, round and springy as a head of cabbage, stepped out on to the balcony of his Brooklyn apartment, only to find his neighbor from the adjoining ladder, Dmitri Popenyakius, a political refugee from a post-Communist region, engaged in a totally bizarre not to say dangerous piece of work.

“What are you up to there?” Mr. Benson shouted, not without alarm, seeing Dmitri Popenyakius, dark-skinned, bearded and with a frown that made him look like a member of Al-Qaeda, tossing condoms full of water down on the power lines below the windows.

“Stop it at once!” Benson ordered in no uncertain terms. “If those things fall on the wires, there'll be a short-circuit and it'll be a blackout. Dozens of people, hundreds, even thousands, will be without electricity!”

“Don't go overboard,” Popenyakius's girlfriend told him. She was also taking part in the sabotage, which was what the law-abiding Benson took the act to be. She was a shapely, red-cheeked lady with quick eyes, exactly the type of the bootlegger-comrade-in-arms who runs the whole house in the song “I'm a Gypsy Baron”.

“Fat chance,” added her sombre partner. “And thanks to this happy coincidence,” he continued, “allow me to assure you, Mr. Benson, that me and Talya”—he pointed to his girlfriend— “are seeing our dreams of gaining legal status actually come true. You see, at last we'll be getting our green cards.”

“That's a load of guff,” Benson declared. “You wanna get your legal status sorted out, you find yourself a good lawyer, you don't go throwing who knows what onto a power line.”

“Ha! A lawyer! Don't make me laugh!” Talya sniggered.

“What's so funny?” Mr. Benson said indignantly. “Getting oneself a lawyer is the civilized way of going about the business of obtaining the documents you need, and yet there you go acting like cavemen.”

“Talya's right,” Mr. Popenyakius jumped back into the discussion. “You can go get yourself a thousand lawyers but you've still got zero guarantee. Condoms might seem silly—by the way, I recommend Durex—but I'm telling you that if we make a successful landing, our chances of achieving status will be nothing less than 100%. Look here and draw your own conclusion.” Popenyakius switched to a whisper: “The Berlin Wall came down the day I managed to hang an elastic on a power line.”

“Yes. It's true. Cross my heart,” his girlfriend insisted.

“By the way, that was mine and Talya's hallowed dream.”

“Yes, yes. Don't take me away from this place,” Mrs. Popenyakius declared.

Mr. Popenyakius stomped around on the rickety wooden balcony. “On the day we hooked a second condom on the power lines we were able to get into the hold of next boat here. I’m telling you, landing here was our number one priority ever since the day democracy took over from post-communism.”

“That’s right. Beyond the shadow of a doubt. We—”

“Pardon me, Talya, please,” Mr. Popenyakius interrupted sharply. “It’s been almost ten years now we’ve been going after our citizenship papers.”

“This is all nothing but stupidity. It’s barbaric. I’m warning you, if you don’t cut out this vandalism right away, I’m going to call the police,” Mr. Benson threatened.

After they’d gone inside, Mr. Benson acted like the law-abiding and patriotic citizen he was, and reached for the phone to call the police. But then he had second thoughts. By all appearances, this strange couple are terrorists. They’d planned an electrical disaster. I’ve got to keep my eye on them. Could be they’re following orders. He justly estimated that were he to unmask a terrorist group the credit he’d receive would be significantly higher than if he’d simply report a case of vandalism.

Mr. Benson never managed to inform the police. Not a month after his run-in with the Popenyakiuses, they obtained their legal status and moved out of the apartment. As if in confirmation of their prophecy, the Durex condom hangs on the power line to this very day.

Suddenly, it dawned on Mr. Benson that he had figured out a sure-fire and easy way to defeat world terrorism, the blight of the civilized world. The penny dropped and—Mr. Benson started rubbing the palms of his hands—and! And if they can give 25 million bucks for the capture of Bin Laden, how much would Benson get for finding a solution to the whole problem! He took out his calculator and started fiddling with it, but soon he tossed it aside, resolving to get going at once with his plan to eradicate terrorism from the face of the earth.

The very next day he quit his job. He moved into an apartment with better access to power lines and for the sake of saving the world and achieving a six-figure reward started tossing Context condoms on the power lines. After a series of practice throws, as it were, Mr. Benson decided to stick to this brand.

He bought the condoms using his own capital. Remembering an old superstition from his student days of not washing before his exams, Mr. Benson stopped taking showers the day before his drops, and since he was doing this daily, he started trying to seduce terrified good women with perfume from insect polymers.

Figuring he needed to conduct himself like Mr. Popenyakius, Mr. Benson sought a girlfriend, but eventually he changed his mind and found himself a black cat named Charlie, having read somewhere that black was the color of success. This animal was the size of a child’s bike. He spent the whole year tossing condoms, squandering a pile of money, the equivalent of a small island republic’s budget. Not only did he blow his money but also his time, as he worked on accounts, supplies, graphics. He drew up parabolas

and divided weights. Dosages and atmospheric resistance. He worked on complex philosophical conceptualizations, making sure his personal worth rose daily.

But the days went by and Mr. Benton's bank account dwindled down to the catastrophic point of no return while even squirrels found him too smelly to approach. He lost so much weight and started to look so pinched he looked less like a head of cabbage than a deflated tennis ball. It's now or never, he announced to Charlie the cat as he stepped onto the balcony one hot August day. "Purrrrr-me-ow-mpurrr," the cat replied, mixing up all the feline vocabulary.

Mr. Benson failed to understand the cat's import so he drew his own conclusions. "Why now, you ask? Well, today's Thursday, and just last night we got a little rain. And I distinctly remember from the days I was keeping watch on the Popenyakiuses that when I asked him how he managed to hang his condoms on the power line he replied straightaway with some clever post-communist saying, from which I was able to deduce that one's wishes come true every time it rains a bit just before Thursday."

"Purrrrr-me-ow-mpurrr," Charlie the black cat answered contentedly.

"Wonderful. Now we can start." Mr. Benson expertly squeezed the rubber from its packet. He blew into it and filled it with water until it resembled a papaya.

"Go Contex Go!" he let out his customary victory cry. Today though, as we have seen, Norman Benson counted more than ever on success. "Go!" he cried out one last time before tossing his Contex toward the power line. The rubber flew just next to the hydro line and exploded noisily on the concrete road. Thirst-crazed ravens swooped down to the newly formed puddle.

"Shit!" fumed Mr. Benson, hastily preparing another Contex. Getting it out of the package and cradling it between his cupped palms, he blew into it and filled it half-full of water until it was the shape of a cow's udder.

"Just testing the wind conditions and heat," Mr. Benson explained to Charlie the cat, who was carefully observing his master's actions. With gentleness and love, almost flying out after the rubber, Mr. Benson dropped the Contex onto the power line.

Alas, he missed again. It hit with the concrete with such a slap it sent the flock of ravens into panicked flight. "Fuck!" Benson shouted, immediately preparing for what he thought would be his very last Contex. He swung his arms and threw it down toward the power line with all his might. It was poorly aimed, a cinch to fail, proof that there are never two without three. With this toss, Mr. Benson called a halt to his project of eradicating world terrorism and decided the next day he'd return to the orderly life of a lawful citizen.

He didn't even bother to watch its flight, instead sharply turning to his room to start cramming for his first job interview. But at the very moment he stepped into his apartment, the black cat Charlie who was supposed to bring him luck swatted his tail in a manner pregnant with meaning. A miracle had happened! The rubber did a double somersault and clung to the power line right next to Popenyaki's Durex. A shaft of electric sparks of various colors lit up the burning August sky.

“Charlie! We did it! We’re winners, my friend!” Mr. Benson let out a roar of joy that everyone around could hear. The last time he’d give such a cry must have gone back to when his beloved team Panthers walloped the hated Gorillas. Yet come to think of it, Mr. Benson had never cried out quite like this time. For never had he seen the specter of striking it so rich.

“Mriii-yarriii,” Charlie roared like a Bengal tiger and victoriously raised his thin black tail, the tail of a dyed-in-the-wool cynic. In this instant the television screen went blank, right in the middle of a Tampax commercial that nothing had been able to turn off, and with no seeming connection the air conditioner stammered and died, and with a loud clunk the refrigerator fell silent. Soon, a hush fell over the whole big city, as in the alleyways of a small provincial cemetery. Tic-toc-tic-toc rattled the clock on the wall, its thin black hands indicating four p.m.

Exactly an hour later the broadcasters at various radio stations were announcing panic at Wall Street, a catastrophic rise in prices and of the apocalypse that soon became known as Black Thursday.

“Charlie, they’re a bunch of asses!” Mr. Benson cried out to his cat. “They’re idiots! My God, they can’t see beyond the tip of their noses. The stock-exchange. Oil. The Dow Jones. Black Thursday. Bla-bla-bla! But no way we’re going to get up tomorrow and tell it like it is. Share prices! Black Thursday! The apocalypse! What’s with all these business people anyway? Terrorism has been defeated! The world has been saved! Thanks to us! We’re better off just getting ready to receive our reward. That’s what’s coming, Charlie old boy! That’s our number, Charlie!” Mr. Benson exclaimed as he took a sip of beer in honor of the salvation of the world and his inestimable reward.

The next day, however, Mr. Benson was unable to get into either the government building or the council chambers. For one thing, they were closed on account of the power outage, and for another, because of lack of running water he couldn’t take a shower. With his bodily odor he would never be admitted even into a homeless animal shelter, let alone cross the threshold of a state building.

A number of days passed. Power was restored. The course of falling prices came to an end. The trouble was linked to terrorists.

“Charlie, I’m ruined! I’m a loser, Charlie!” Mr. Benson moaned as he ran about in his room clutching his greasy hair. “I’ve thrown it all away, Charlie! I staked all my money on the wrong horse and now I’ve blown it all! In the state I’m in, Charlie, there’s only one option left, and it’s to go throw myself onto the hydro lines. And that’s what I’m going to do, this minute.” Mr. Benson strode over to the door to the balcony.

“Purrrr-me-ow-mpurrr.” Charlie stood blocking his way.

“You really think so, Charlie?” Mr. Benson gave it some thought. “Damned if you’re not right, old boy. We’ve gotta be positive about this. Let’s just say I’m wrong. Let’s imagine that it’s all my fault if millions of people had to live in darkness or got stuck underground or in elevators. But you won’t deny it, will you, Charlie, that thanks to me they got extra time off work? Thanks to me they fed on free ice cream and didn’t waste their money on restaurants. And the main thing, Charlie, the key—for once they could see the starry sky over their heads. Stars twinkled for them, Charlie. Do you understand, old boy? For their

sakes! For them in the sky, billions of kilowatts of energy are being burned, and yet they prefer to look at flickering artificial advertisements! So, Charlie, what's this about terrorism? What terrorism! So what if we didn't lick it today. We'll beat it tomorrow. Success smiles upon those who never give up!" Mr. Benson pushed the cat out of his way as he went out for a new pack of Context condoms.

Wisson's Amendment

At hearing the word “Wall” our mind tends to picture something massive, strong and unassailable, like: “The Great Wall of China,” “The Berlin Wall,” “The Western Wall”.

Apart from that, it reminds us of such idioms as:

To beat one's head against the wall.

To push someone up against a wall.

To run into a stone wall.

To be bouncing off the walls.

In the name, Karl, one can also hear something grand and majestic. Our imagination pictures a giant man with a square face. His forehead is wide, eyes burn with fire, rumbling voice has a deafening power and his strong jaw is hidden under a shaggy beard.

In other words, a person capable of conquering cities, countries and continents! A true commander-in-chief!

We mention all this because the main character of our story, Karl Wall, regardless of his resonant name, was a feeble and inconspicuous creature with beady eyes, a narrow forehead, a weak voice and a flaccid chin. He had no beard at all, and moreover, because of his rather scarce facial hair, shaved at best once a month.

Of course, he hadn't conquered any cities, let alone continents. He wasn't a commander-in-chief either but worked as a low rank employee at the Department of Public Utilities. His position was so small that it even didn't have a title.

In Suntown, men are traditionally addressed as “Mister” but we want to assure you that nobody ever thought to call Karl this way. His colleagues at work called him: “Hey Karl” whilst people on the street would use “Hey man!” if they wanted to get his attention.

When it comes to statistics, people of Karl's type are usually ranked as “average,” and in Great Russian Literature, they are referred to as “small people.”

As with the majority of the “average people” Karl liked hamburgers, cola and French fries. The definition “small” not only perfectly suited his social status but also his physical height. Probably because of such peculiarities as being short, hunched, and his tendency to walk with a slight limp, Karl by his age hadn't managed to get married and hadn't become the father of a few small “Wallies.”

Karl, nevertheless, considered himself neither a loner nor a loser. He almost always won the minimum ten-dollar prize when he played his favorite lottery which he invariably spent on a new pornographic DVD. After all, everybody needs to relax somehow! Among the porn actresses he had his favorite—busty blonde Jessica. At times Karl was even jealous of Jessica as though she were his real wife and he would complain about her to his friend—an aquarium-dwelling fish of unknown breed. He had given the fish the name Paulo and he had his special reason for that. He would explain it to his guests this way: “If I happen to find out that it’s a male, I’ll cut off the last letter and it will become Paul. If it turns out to be a female, I’ll replace the letter “o” with “a” and it will turn into Paula.”

Paulo, who lived in a small glass can, resembled its owner in many aspects. For example, it had similar bulging eyes and puffy lips and it would flap them—repeating Karl’s manner.

It was probably because of this similarity that Karl had swallowed the bait reading a small public-appealing announcement in Friday’s issue of *The Morning Star*, Suntown’s newspaper.

Here is the text of the announcement: “On Sunday, October 10, you are all invited to a meeting conducted by Senator Wisson! The purpose: Let’s defeat terrorism together!”

I’m going! Karl decided, after considering all the possible ways of spending this weekend.

On Saturday night he went to bed a bit earlier than usual. He even put aside his traditional couple of pints and virtual rendezvous with Jessica.

That night Karl saw himself in his dreams as a fearless muscular hero, very much like the Terminator so remarkably played by Arnold Schwarzenegger. He was knocking about droves of terrorists and even got a hold of Terrorist Number One by his beard, but at that very moment he was deceitfully awoken by his alarm clock.

On the day of the meeting, the weather was great. Actually it was unlikely to have been any other way, for October in Suntown is known as paradise time. During this season the place perfectly matches its name. In October, looking for more new colors lavishly spilled over the lakes and rivers and scattered over the hill slopes, crowds of artists from all over the world arrive and not only artists. We are not patriots of Suntown (although we have lived here quite a significant part of our lives) but nevertheless extremely suggest that our readers visit this fantastic place if they find a week or two in October.

I want to assure you that you won’t regret spending the money, or time or anything else.

At 8:30 a.m., having eaten a Big Mac, with French fries and washed it all down with cold cola, Karl headed for the square where the meeting was to take place.

The road to the square led through the Central City Park. The sun shone and a light morning breeze rustled the leaves on the trees touched by the golden wand of the fall. All this lyrical majesty of nature highly affected Karl’s political excitement, persistently pushing it to a feverish point.

Karl could feel that he was approaching the square when he was about a couple of hundred meters away from it. At first, his ear caught a faint rumbling noise, very much like the sound of the rolling sea waves. In a short while he was able to make out a drum roll mingled with whining of bagpipes, howling

of horns, and shouts of the crowd. However, it was impossible for him to make out the meaning of the appeals that broke out here and there.

Karl Wall stepped into the square and skillfully slaloming in the gaps between clusters of people, started making his way towards the stand. He was full of intention to get as close as possible to the Senator, who was supposed to become the next President, as the media asserted.

Stepping on the people's feet, Karl apologetically smiled and mumbled a curt "Sorry." In response he was getting friendly slaps on his shoulder with reassuring "No problem, man!"

Karl had reached the metal fence separating the leader's stand from the others at the very moment when Senator Tom Wisson hoisted himself up onto the stand like an eagle onto a high rock.

"Dear friends!" The Senator fired his glance over the crowd. "We're here to..."

"Oh, what a hero! Broad shoulders! Eyes burning as hot coals! Such a superman is capable of putting an end to all our misfortunes, not only terrorism!" Karl thought to himself, astounded by the Senator's appearance. "We're lucky there are such people on the planet! It's hard to imagine what it would be like if the world was inhabited only by the species of my kind – small and feeble. That's why such heroes are sent to the Earth—to protect those like me!"

"... Give me one week and once it's over, you will see the results!" These were the last words of the Senator's speech.

The crowd burst out chanting: "We give!!!! We give!!!!"

People started to pass around the Senator's petition. Karl signed the paper without actually reading it and darted to the stand with a shout: "Senator! Let me shake your strong hand!"

Cheered by shaking hands with his electorate and the indulgence he was given, Senator Wisson ran down the stairs, hopped into his bullet-proof Cadillac and set off for lunch.

Karl Wall moved towards the exit but the crowd was so dense that getting through an impenetrable jungle would be a walk in the park in comparison. He wasn't the only one concerned about terror!

Because of the high midday sun, thunder of drums, blares of horns, whining of bagpipes and Senator's baritone, Karl's head started aching. By the time he had made it to the relatively empty sidewalk, his head wasn't just aching but popping in pain.

Staggering and leaning with his unsteady hand against the walls of the city buildings, he shuffled to the nearest drugstore.

"What would you like, Sir?" Inquired the pharmacist.

"Something for a headache. Like, Achenol."

"You know I can offer you something more effective than this outdated remedy."

"What is it?"

"Sulfil!" shouted the pharmacist, as in a TV ad. "A brand new remedy for headache treatment! Sulfil is based on..." Then there was a long list of some chemical terms Karl wasn't familiar with. To tell you the truth, Karl was as far away from the natural sciences, as one could only imagine.

“Then I’ll have a pack of this...What did you call it? Oh, yes.... Sulfil... and a small can of Cola.”

Believe us or not, but his headache was gone in a matter of minutes! With his head clear and fresh, Karl headed for a subway station but when he had already been on the escalator, he suddenly remembered that he needed to buy drain cleaner, for the apartment he was renting—it was so old and shabby that his toilet almost always was clogged.

Karl spun around on heels of his fancy boots he’d put on for the occasion of the meeting and went back to the surface.

Facing the daylight, Karl for some reason thought of the drugstore where he’d just bought the miraculous pills.

What if they have drain cleaner? If they do, it just might be as effective as Sulfil!

In response to his wild supposition, another, more sensible thought, came across his mind: Why on Earth should drain cleaner be sold in a drugstore?! But why not?! – His subconscious pressed on.

He pulled the door of the drugstore open and timidly asked the salesman: “Excuse me, but I was wondering.... if you have some sort of a drain cleaner?” During the small pause that seemed to Karl an eternity, he had already imagined the salesman smile and say: “No”—but he was wrong.

“Sure we have!” Cheerfully answered the salesman. “And it’s a brand new radical product, at that! Easyway!”

After that Karl again had to listen to a long list of chemical ingredients composing the product. At last the salesman finished juggling the formulas and reached out his hand with a plastic bottle in it:

“That’s 12.50”

Karl paid for the bottle and left.

On his way home he stopped by at McDonalds and grabbed his favorite set. At a store marked as XXX, he bought a new DVD with Jessica and a fresh pack of crispy chips.

At home, not anything off for later, Karl opened the bottle of pipe cleaner and poured its contents into the toilet bowl. There was hissing and gurgling and in about five minutes’ time the toilet was functioning like new.

Happy with the result, Karl inserted the new disk into his player and, crisping his chips, plunged into his virtual intimacy with Jessica. Twenty minutes later or so he let out a wild roar (that could hardly suit his feeble nature) meaning: “Satisfaction!” and went to bed. That night he was falling asleep feeling happy. At least he could feel that he had lived the day not for nothing.

On Monday, the 11th of October, after work, Karl stopped by the drugstore (what if the prices went up?) and bought ten more packs of Sulfil as well as a huge box of the magic drain cleaner. Apart from that he dropped in at the DVD store and this time, instead of buying a film with Jessica, picked a disk titled *Spider Web of Fear* describing all of the known terrors and phobias of the world.

The film made a horrific impression on Karl. Here and there on the screen were flickering dead bodies, cut off heads, blown up buildings, airplanes, buses and trains.

Good thing that I went to the meeting and signed the petition about cracking down on the International Evil—Karl was drifting away with such thoughts on his mind—but it's not enough! Tomorrow I'll go and join a Kung-Fu coalition and a Gun Club! If I'm a good citizen, I must stand up to Evil, fully armed!

Having this positive intention on his mind, our small man from the Department of Public Utilities fell asleep.

That night, Karl had a dream that a feeble creature like him was unable to explain. If, however, he had known Great Russian Literature, it wouldn't have been so challenging to understand. In Russian folklore it's called: "Epic-historical telling". Probably I'm mistaken about this term, but that does matter here, it is not the form but the substance.

Karl Wall saw himself sitting on a huge battle horse. His eyes were burning like those of Senator Wisson. His beard was so dense and curly that any member of Hell's Angels would envy it.

"Who is the person I so perfectly resemble?" Karl wondered looking at himself in his dream. But he was unable to place this man.

If Karl had known history better than chemistry and physics, he would have instantly recognized Karl the Great.

Well, maybe I am mistaken again and Karl the Great looked nothing like him, but what matters is not his appearance but the sensations of our hero...

Here is Senator Wisson's speech he gave at the Conference on fighting terrorism that was held on October 11th.

Dear colleagues! At the beginning of our Conference I would like to fill you in on the details of my research in the field of terrorist organizations activities. (Here Senator takes out the petition that was signed at the civil meeting on the 10th of October.)

Analysis of the situation in this field shows that fighting against terrorism today should become the primary course of our policy. Crime against person, drugs and psychotropic substances trafficking—all this is receding into the background now. According to my data, I can say and assume that authorities in this very important area are incompetent at best and criminal at worst.

In this regard, I propose the following actions to be taken:

To create an independent federal agency that would be able to infinitely control activities of all the citizens of our country.

To abolish the Federal service that monitors activities of the Intelligence, transferring its material and technical base along with its staff to the newly organized anti-terrorism body.

To pass all the functions for detection, prevention and suppression of terrorist offenses to the Federal anti-terrorism service.

To abolish the Federal Agency for the Government Communications and Information under the President and distribute its functions between the CIA and the Department of Defense.

To form the Ministry of Interior State Committee and entrust it with the rights to track and punish the perpetrators.

The main prerogative of our State should become the slogan: "Control, monitoring and again control!"

In other words, I want to say—We should go to safety through total control. We must check all and sundry! Punish perpetrators as severely as possible! I would even say, in a cruel manner.

Senator Levinson: “Dear colleagues! Senator Wisson’s offer is nothing less than a proposition to legalize lawlessness and totalitarianism!”

Member of the Presidential Council Thompson: “Dear colleague, Senator Levinson! The Senator’s offer isn’t totalitarianism you scare us with, but common sense and courageous opposition to the Global Evil.”

Senator Wisson: “Dear colleagues. What I hold in my hand is a petition from yesterday’s meeting. Citizens are demanding to tighten control. You know it’s not Senator Wisson’s whim but the demand of ordinary citizens! For example, here is the signature of a citizen by the name of Karl Wall. He is an ordinary citizen asking for protection. Can we turn him down? Sure, we cannot! As Chairman of the commission, I put this issue for a vote.”

According to the results of voting, the amendment to the law on terrorism was passed. The amendment was given the name “Wisson’s Amendment”.

The next day Karl, as he had planned the night before, joined a Kung-Fu coalition and became a member of the local gun club. His once vain and empty life started finding its meaning. Karl became more confident and, at last, managed to catch the drive he had never known before.

About one week later, on his way back home after Kung-Fu training, he stopped in at McDonalds, where he met a lady. He didn’t find her very beautiful (at least she wasn’t as attractive as Jessica in any respect) but at the same time she wasn’t ugly either. There was something Asian in her appearance and her name was Zita.

The next day Karl invited Zita over to his place...

In the morning, after Zita had left, he crushed and threw away all the DVDs with Jessica.

“How could I think that there is no happiness in the world!” Thought Karl to himself.

One month had passed or so and Karl’s happiness started to become hazy and acquired some disturbing shades.

Oh no, he hadn’t fallen ill, his fish Paulo hadn’t died, and Zita hadn’t disappointed him either. No, no and no!

He just had started feeling some inexplicable anxiety that was eating away at him. But maybe the reason for all that was the Suntown weather?

We, those who live here, don't hate our city but we want to assure you that no one should visit Suntown in November or December! No way! During this season it's hard to find worse weather anywhere on Earth! Trust us – we've travelled around the world quite a bit!

It's cold, dark and unpleasant. Change its name to Gloomytown for these months and you'll be right.

Whatever it was, Karl started to feel like it on his way to work and back home, he was followed by some suspicious people wearing long cloaks and wide-brimmed hats. Before the first intersection he was followed by some brown-haired man and further on, by some blonde. On his way home after work he had a tall lady on his tail which was later replaced by a bald chunky man who had shadowed him down to his house.

One morning, when Karl had left for work (as usual being followed by the brown-haired man), he spotted a car with a logotype of some satellite dish installation company parked near his house. The next minute he saw the workers get out of the car and start drilling the brick wall below his window which immediately disappeared in a red cloud of dust. Karl wanted to come back and inquire what was going on, but even if a meteorite shower started (let alone some brick dust), he wouldn't have returned for he had never in his life allowed himself to be late for work.

He spent the next night with Zita in his apartment and all night long he had a feeling that he was being watched by someone.

When morning came, Karl made a decision: "It's time to go to the doctor!"

During his lunch break, he called up the doctor and made an appointment for five o'clock in the afternoon. At 4:30 p.m., he left his office, crossed the busy intersection in front of it and touched the door knob when he heard: "Hey man!" Karl turned around and saw a policeman. In Suntown (trust me) policemen are very polite and address citizens: "Excuse me, Sir!" or "Would you please, Sir!"

But as it was aforementioned, nobody addressed Karl as "Mister", let alone "Sir".

"Hey man, you're breaking the rules!"

"What rules?"

"Street traffic rules! You've crossed the street on the red light!"

"Well, you see, Sir... When I was a kid I was hit by a car. Ever since I've been limping." Karl pointed to his leg. "That's why I never cross a street in the absence of a crosswalk and, of course, I never cross a street on a red light."

"You're going to the police station!" Continued the officer without listening to Karl's excuses.

"I'm not going anywhere!"

"Sure you are!" And the cop skillfully wrenched Karl's hand behind his back.

Karl wanted to use some Kung-Fu move he'd recently learnt, but three other cops hurtled up and he let go of his far-fetched idea. He still hadn't been taught how to take down four law enforcement officers alone.

"You will be detained for 48 hours until all is clarified," said the cop on duty and slammed the metal door shut behind Karl.

48 hours had passed... and then 50, then 70. It seemed to Karl that his life would end in this damp concrete cell.

But all of a sudden he heard the door lock clang and a policeman showed up in the doorway.

“Hey man! You’re free. I mean, for now.”

Karl got out into the cold December air. It was early morning and he, pale, haggard and red-eyed, moved to his office. People dashed aside as he passed by. He looked so horrible.

“You know... It happened so ...” Karl began his explanation as he walked into his boss’ study.

“Hey Karl, I don’t need your excuses,” the boss sarcastically twisted his lip. “You’re fired!”

“But why?”

“Because we don’t need negligent employees like you!”

“I am negligent?!” From such injustice, Karl staggered and held onto a chair trying to stay on his feet.

“I am negligent?!”

“Well, what should I call a person who’s been out of work almost for a week?”

“I was detained by the police.”

“Police?! Brilliant! And what should I call you after that?!”

“But it was confusion! A mistake!”

“But tell me why I have never been mistakenly detained by the police and why my person, unlike yours, has never been in the sphere of the National Security Service’s interest?! They have never made inquiries about me and never asked for my records! And our office, by the way, is not a private stall, but a State Department organization!”

“What are you talking about? What inquiries? What records?”

“Go to the cash desk and get your lay-off check!” Karl’s boss cut the conversation short.

“I’ll submit a complaint! This is illegal!”

“All is legal! International crisis... Reduction in force... Whatever...”

Looking like someone in a horror movie, Karl went home. Pedestrians not only dashed aside when they saw him but darted to the other side of the street.

On reaching his apartment, the ex-Municipal employee first of all rushed to feed his fish Paulo but there was no one to feed, for Paulo lay motionless belly up on the bottom of the can.

Apart from that, all his stuff - his clothes, furniture, books, DVDs, everything, just like his fish in the can, was turned upside down.

Karl Wall put his “friend” in a polythene bag, filled it with water, and, dripping with tears, buried him in the small yard behind his house.

From this place you’ll be able to see the window and the can where you lived, said Karl and went to the landlord to find out who had broken into his apartment and rummaged through his stuff.

“Hey man! It was done by those who needed it!” The Landlord answered ambiguously, and gave Karl a sealed paper. “I want to inform you that I’m going to repair some of the apartments... Yours is on the list as well.”

Karl looked through the text but could see no other names but his own.

“And it says here that I have only two hours! It’s such a short time. Give me at least one day.”

“I would give you even three days, but nobody knows in which asshole you’ve been hanging about,” sneered the landlord. “So you have only two hours, and if I find you in here once they are over, I’ll call the police!”

“I’m not going anywhere—” Karl started decisively but, remembering the 48 hours he’d spent in the cell, abruptly changed his mind and started tucking his simple belongings into a shabby suitcase.

Having packed his suitcase, Karl decided to call Zita hoping she would let him in and allow him to stay with her until he found a new apartment to rent.

But when he dialed her number he heard the answering machine informing him that this phone number didn’t exist anymore. “For any enquiries get in touch with our company by the phone number 343...” – the robot’s voice continued.

Karl tried to call the operator but got lost in the digits he was requested to press:

#1 would redirect him to the financial department;

#2 was offering the repair service;

#3 invited him over to the security service;

#4 was welcoming him to the advertising department.

Karl gave up calling and decided to go to Zita’s place. It sounds good: “To go somewhere.” If you know where to go, but what if you don’t?

Karl pointlessly roamed around town peeking into yards and windows hoping to see Zita. It had already started getting dark but he was unable to find her house. Closer to the night a cold wind started blowing and thick clouds covered the sky. It had started drizzling. The drizzle soon turned into ice-cold prickly snow and Karl chilled to his bones.

He found shelter in some grubby alley and trying to get warm, gathered some wooden chips and set up a small fire. But the chips and twigs weren’t enough to keep the flame going and Karl opened his suitcase and started throwing his belongings into the fire. He couldn’t let himself die having not really been born yet.

Thus his Merit Diploma “20 years of distinguished service in the Department of Public Utilities” flew into the fire. Then it was the old newspaper with an article titled: “Employees of Our Department” where Karl Wall’s name was also mentioned. When the newspaper was burnt, the shirt he had bought with his first salary met the fire too. The shirt was followed by a suit that our humble employee of the Department of Public Utilities was planning to don on his wedding day but still hadn’t had an occasion for using. Then the flame devoured Karl’s boots that had cost him half of his monthly wage and which he only used on very significant occasions.

And how many of such occasions had he had in his life? Only his birthday, christening and the meeting in support of the fight against terror.

The fire was kept though and it gave Karl precious warmth instead.

Karl started nodding and, as he was drifting away, he thought: “Tomorrow I’ll go straight to Senator Tom Wisson. To the hero that was sent by Heavens to protect people like me! He’s gonna help... He’s gonna treat me kind... He won’t let me down...”

Cherishing these hopes, he fell asleep and in his dream Karl saw himself not as a small and weak creature but as a tall, stately hero who had defeated terror, disease, poverty, lawlessness and injustice. He saw a huge square full of people. The crowd undulated as a ruffled sea. It was roaring and blowing horns.

“Here he comes! Hero of the heroes! The one we’ve been waiting for!” Senator Tom Wisson was ranting facing the crowd. “Please welcome Mister Karl Wall!”

Thus Karl for the first time in his life was addressed as “Mister”.

“Go ahead, Mister Wall...” And Karl, like a shining Angel, flitted onto the stand ...

Meanwhile, Senator Tom Wisson (who had eaten a large fat turkey for dinner and washed it down with his favorite red Bordeaux) was watching another dream. In this dream he was running over a vast field being chased by a crowd of people, but this wasn’t a crowd of terrorists. No. It was a crowd of the people who had signed the petition dated the 10th of October.

“Beat the Senator!” – Appeals of the crowd hounded Senator’s ears.

“Beat him!” – A voice familiar to Senator was definitely distinguished among many others.

“Where have I heard that voice?” He desperately tried to remember losing his last spite. “Where?”

“Beat him!” Someone violently hit Senator on his head.

Tom Wisson staggered, turned around and recognized the voice. In front of him stood the man whose hand he shook at the end of the previous meeting.

Senator woke, got up from his bed, scolded himself for the too fat dinner and the hotel manager for the heat in his suite, took a pill for insomnia and got back into bed. But as hard as he he tried to fall asleep, he didn’t manage any rest that night.

In the morning briefing, the usually smart and talkative Senator was silent and couldn’t help nodding.

To the head of the Internal Affairs Department:

Herewith I bring to your attention that according to the Wisson’s amendment to the Resolution on strengthening the fight against terrorism dated October, 11, of this year, as well as by internal Instruction # 19567, Mr. Karl Wall was taken under surveillance.

The reasons for that were as follows:

Purchased by the suspect of a large amount of the medicine Sulfil as well as the cleaning agent Easyway, the combination of which can be used for the manufacturing of explosives.

Interest of the suspect in the movies containing information on the methods of waging terrorist wars.

Membership of the suspect in a Kung Fu coalition as well as in a gun club.

Close relationships of the suspect with Mrs. Zita who is currently under investigation on suspicion of being involved in the activities of the terrorist group "Brothers of the World"

The surveillance program with respect to Mr. Karl Wall was terminated because of the suspect's death caused by hypothermia in the open air. His profile was sent to the archive.

Agent Jack Staten. 12.12....

Autumn Story

The spring that year came late. In April, there was snow in the city park, dirty and uncared for, like that old stray dog that lived under the sightseeing platform there, which looked grumpily at the timid green grass in its thaw holes. In spite of all the efforts of the spring wind to throw down a heavy cover of gray clouds from the sky, the best that it managed were just some insignificant gaps in the cobweb of clouds. Through these gaps rushed jumbling the fearless sunny intruders, and during these short moments everything came to life in the dark park alleys, forgotten by the spring. Restless singing brooks ran down the steep slopes of the park dike, towards a weak city river mumbling with once-melted snow. Rooks were bawling fussily about something very important and the pigeons agreed, while munching on bread crumbs; and old trees, ashamed of their bareness, greeted the sun with branches longing for clothes. But no matter how angry the winter was, or how agonizing the snow was in the dark alleys of the park, the icy powers came to an end one night. The spring quietly came into the old park, like a prudish virgin throwing off her robe. In the morning, the only remnants of the once frigid reign were shimmering puddles.

The earth hurried like a sprinter to catch up on stolen days. The soft green carpet of grass, with patches of dandelions, covered the park's meadow. Fleets of migrating birds appeared in the spring air and a hubbub of construction work filled the branches of trees, standing still in a spring daze. The vociferous noise of a huge orchestra tuning in was hovering from morning until dawn around the park, sometimes becoming quiet but never silent even during the short spring night.

Oh, this miracle of spring, bright as the smile of a lover and fast like life itself! How intoxicating it is in places where the winter is very long! No matter how many springs I have experienced it never failed to be a surprise—how much it could make us forget about shabbiness of our lives. How many times I turned my empty head up and looked at spring clouds—the weightless mirages sailing above the earth waking up. Here is an enchanted castle, or a long-forgotten face, and here, they suddenly condense, frown and spill raindrops, fast as a child's tears, or pass by, showing just for a minute the sun disc, giving me hope for an eternal and beautiful life.

Everything lived and blossomed just so this spring, as if something very important depended on this noisy hubbub and multicolored mosaic in this old park, forgotten by God and people. Perhaps, only an old, wide-branching maple tree, who has greeted the spring for so many years already, was quite indifferent to the birth of a new world. But even to this tree, an old grumbler, genealogy was lost, deep in the awakened earth, caught up in the spring dizziness, which all living creatures are attuned to, no matter

your age or how deep the roots you lay. Today, it was just an old tree waiting impatiently for the birth of new leaves.

The April morning had just been washed. With a theatrically pink horizon, the well-rested sun was just rubbing its eyes and without breaking the sweet slumber of the old park, it prepared itself for a long and busy day. A sparrow, troubled by the subject line of its dream cried suddenly. A maple bud awoke on an old branch. Sunny fingers, wandering over the crown of the sleeping tree, finally touched the bud and with the confidence of an experienced chevalier started to unbutton its tight blouse. The bud was confused, while looking at its reflection in the puddle under the tree, to see a pale-green velvet jacket.

“What kind of a wonderful life must be waiting for me ahead?” The first leaf of the year thought, looking at its magical transformation.

Spring days, which were filled with hope and discoveries, finally broke into a run. Soon the whole tree got dressed with young leaves, each of whom also believed in their exceptionalism. Carefree and happy, as it always happens with the youth, a new crown grew and together with it the leaves grew older. The sun gave them warmth and barked gross branches covered with sweet nectar.

Hang there and tremble of delight from the life overfilling you!

“But it can’t be true that I was born just for hanging on a strong stem and talking to little birdies, living under your crown?” Said a leaf to itself.

Where is that thrilling fate, which you dreamt about during your first sunrise? And where is all the happiness and the love after all, those dim substances of any living creature? Asking these questions, the maple dreamer wiggled desperately on its stem, trying to find among the brides of its family what is called love. There were some forms, lines, curves, hovering around, but all all it found were just enough for romantic aspirations, not for the overwhelming feeling, for the sake of which one is ready to step forward against a hurricane wind or bear a deadly heat.

Then the sad meditator looked at the neighboring tree. There is always a grin of almighty fate in any awkward being at the first meeting. A leaf from a strange tree, nothing special—no form, no color, but the feeling, that sparked in the soul of our main character, the feeling was true—love, that must make life the way the leaf dreamt about it during that sunrise.

You, silly dreamer, head over heels in love, who decided to mess with pitiless laws of nature and judgmental glances of the “well-wishing crowd!” What are you daring, you, naive fool? You are guessing at genes and codes!! What would you have condemned yourself to, you silly thing? To the sweet but short sufferings of love.

But when you love, are there any doubts or considerations of “worthy” proof of your delusions? No, no, and once more, no! Nature does not accept hesitations in our choices. If it had been the other way, the world would have long become an empty desert the size of the planet.

Days flew fast, but their careless atmosphere were spoilt by strange events for the young leaves. Just yesterday, the yellow dandelion heads were fresh and tender, but today, they turned into fluffy gray hats

and the wind blew them away to the park alleys. The leaves saw the petals of narcissuses and tulips fall and that lilac died standing, like a hero.

“What is happening, why are they drying out and losing their wonderful petals?” The young leaves naively asked the old branch they were growing on.

“Oh, you little silly leaves. You should know that everything withers, turning into nothing, and that is called death,” said the branch, who has seen so much in its life, groaning.

“So, we will die too,” whispered the leaves worriedly. “But how can that be?! We are so young and beautiful; we give shade to the earth and the air to the sky! Will we also die? No, you silly branch, that can’t be, you’ve lost your mind!” And shaking with laughter, they made fun of the old “silly” branch.

“Is it the truth that you are telling?” The leaf asked the prophet secretly.

“Yes, my dear little green silly, the time will come and you will turn into a dead yellow leaf, and useless, you end up in someone’s dusty herbarium, as a reminder of elusive youth.”

“But that is such happiness—to die!” Said the leaf to a surprised branch. “Then, being torn away from the tree, I would be able to finally meet my love... She would also die and fall the ground?” Asked the leaf with hope.

“She will die, of course she will. There is nothing eternal in this world, unfortunately, since there is no life in immortality,” the wise tutor said philosophically and sadly.

The leaf hurried to tell about what he has heard to his beloved. Oh, so much joy and hope seemed to be in that sad and dramatic discovery! Sad? Not for our main characters. Now they knew for sure that in spite of dividing and overwhelming distances and incompatibility of their gene codes, they would certainly meet, overcoming the invincible laws of universe. Beginning with this day their life received a sense of purpose. Existence was filled with unapproved cries of the “well-wishing” leafy crowd.

“Oh, what a handsome, but silly leaf,” said the rejected brides of the maple family. “Just look at who he’s chosen for a beloved, some blank leaf, good only for a public sauna whisk maybe.”

“You silly,” said the benevolent neighbors laughing. “Why do you believe in these schizophrenic fairy tales of this crazy fool?”

The trees sank in the summer bliss and in the reverie blaze the leaves didn’t notice the days flying quickly by. Something bitter and sobering happened on a hot day, when the July wind, drowning in the green crown, suddenly woke up, as if it remembered something important, lazily slipped down the wrinkled branch and...

“Oh, what’s going on?!” Exclaimed the first doomed leaf of the year, and slowly spinning, he flew into the abyss beneath. At once everyone grasped the bitter truth, bitter as the empty place of the fallen. Each new day the cruel laws of the universe proved this truth. Having realized their bitter finale, the leaves plunged into all life’s temptations which are only possible in the leafy world, building strong walls of philosophical constructions and ideas. But unfortunately, there is no power over death, which easily demolishes either concrete or ideas. As evidence to this, soon the whole park was enveloped in the unbelievable beauty of withering leaves.

The leaves in love also got a new look. The artistic autumn decorated his green vest with golden-yellow epaulettes and a pale-yellow simple tunic.

The cold days were slowly passing, long ago has the autumn thief gone too—wind has cleared our main characters of the purple galloons and yellowness of chintz. It's been long since many of their relatives withered in numerous piles, here and there along the alleys of the park, while the leaves in love were still hanging, swaying in the whiffs of autumn's nasty weather.

And again, as many days before, it was morning. The sun was rising, cold, shrinking like people do in winter, in the pale sky. Everything was dozing in the old park. The autumn wind woke up—a merciless master of the park alleys and, howling, it crashed down the branches of the trees. By habit it grabbed another party of the doomed and hurled them to the sleep in vague twilight of earth. When the sun, entangled in the bare branches of the old tree, woke the old man up, everything was finished. The park-keeper who came to his morning shift raked off the fallen leaves, and there went the love of our leaf into one big pile. The leaf was sad, watching the gray-haired humped old man lingering with dampened matches. Acrid smoke of the solemn fire crawled close to the ground and then slowly rose to the joyless gray sky.

Either because of smoke from the fallen illusions burning, or because of pity for himself, the leaf cried. Rebellious thoughts swarmed in his head. He grumbled at fate, for being so cruel to him. He asked the relentless doom to dispose of him faster and take him to where his love was quietly lying. Everything froze in the park—the trees, the bushes, the dry grass and even the unfeeling executioner. The wind went silent, hidden in the far paths of the park. The trunk of an old tree squeaked sympathetically, and the knobbly old branch, where the leaf was born, consoled him. But the categories of good and evil are inherent in people, leaves and branches. Nature has no use of those, her mission is not in compassion and sympathy, but in brutality and espionage on our presence in this world.

The wind, which pretended to be humane, sprung with a new force and attacked the branches. Easily, painlessly, it broke the stem, which once seemed so solid and trustworthy. The leaf spun and spun in some gloomy fantastic dance until he fell into the stinking smoldering pile. And oh, what a miracle—he fell right next to the one about whom he'd dreamt about all this life. Off flew the rebellious thoughts about fate and the one, who lived higher than the highest trees.

It's unknown how long this leafy crematorium would have fumed, if it wasn't for an old park-keeper, hurrying to finish his work, adding some gasoline to the pile.

The fire growled like an awakened beast, shaggy, like the park-keeper's beard. The blaze flung all the way up to the tops of the nearby trees, carrying the multicolored sparks of leafy hearts to heights they had never known.

Who are you, Mr. Blake?

Two friends, software designers Michael and Alex, sat in front of a television set waiting for a hockey game to begin.

"I'll go get some beer," said Michael, as he shuffled over to the kitchen. The door of the fridge creaked and bottles jingled. Alex, who was sitting alone in the room, threw a potato chip into his mouth and started switching TV channels at random.

"Look!" He shouted to Michael. "Jason's on TV."

"Which Jason?" Alex's voice came floating from the kitchen.

"Jason Blake, the guy that recently left our firm."

"And what's he doing on TV?"

"He seems to be a guest on some talk show."

"Well, well..." murmured Michael, placing an array of bottles and a pack of chips onto the table. "Let's see what he's going to talk about..."

"Oh, fuck this Jason! I've had enough of this chatterbox in the office! Heh... Such a chirpy optimist! You know? And the game is about to start," said Alex, looking at his watch.

"C'mon! We still have some time," Michael cut him off. "Let's watch the show a little. Maybe he's going to talk about our firm. Our boss has long needed some thrashing!"

"Well... Up to you buddy. Anyway, it's your apartment, after all..."

Both friends plumped onto the couch, opened the bottles, cut open the pack of chips, threw its contents into their mouths, washed it down with a big gulp of beer, and got round to watching the talk show.

Pretty soon, they were so captivated by the program that not only did they forget about the hockey game but about everything else in the world.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen!" Said the host of the show, a man with a rough bulldog-like face and sly foxy eyes, looking into the camera. "Tonight on the show, I've got a man with an extraordinary story... Everybody, welcome Mister Blake!"

Music burst out loud and a nice-looking, maybe even handsome, tall, brown-haired young man with broad shoulders came onto the stage. When the loudest applause of the female part of the studio had died away (women did like him for sure!) Jason said in a smooth baritone voice:

"I wouldn't call myself Mister Blake... However, that's what is still stated on my ID card."

"Then, if you don't mind, I'll be addressing you according to your ID card."

“OK, go ahead then.”

“So, Mister Blake. Please tell our guests and TV audience your story.”

Mister Blake cleared his throat and started:

“A few months ago my parents passed away. They were very nice people who loved each other. I’ll tell you—they were such a wonderful couple; one can hardly come across such a couple these days. The wife passed away first and after her—her husband.”

Some lady in the audience raised her hand. The host of the show turned his bulldog-like face to her and in a hoarse voice barked: “We are listening, Madam!”

“Mister Blake, please tell us why you are referring to your parents as husband and wife. Not mother and father.”

“Madam,” the host of the show cut her off. “You’re rushing things. Mister Blake is going to explain everything to us and anyway, I would like to ask everyone not to interrupt him during his speech. You’ll be able to ask your questions after the story is over. OK?”

So would you please continue, Mister Blake?”

“Well, right after Sarah Blake’s husband had died, I was invited to the notary’s office where I was allowed to read the last will and testament. I signed some papers and headed towards the door. ‘Wait!’ — The lawyer held me back. ‘Shortly before his death, Mr. Blake left me this letter.’ The lawyer took a yellow envelope out of the drawer. ‘...and asked he me to hand it over to you along with the legacy act. Here it is.’ I took the envelope, written in a black soft-tipped pen: ‘To my beloved son Jason. To be opened after my death’ and went home.

“At home I made a gin and tonic, drank it, and looked at the envelope. Dozens of thoughts and suppositions were swarming in my head. I’ll be honest to say that I wanted to find a code from some secret bank account in it. When my glass and head were finally empty, I cut the envelope open.”

Jason Blake pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and started reading:

“It was spring. I, William Blake, a truck driver, went to the garage and asked our dispatcher: ‘Listen James; can you have someone cover for me today?’ ‘Are you unwell or something?’ ‘Oh no! Thank God I’ve no reason to complain about my health!’ ‘Really? I see you’ve long been married but still don’t have any kids. Do you?’ — Probably this thought crossed his mind and he was right. Although neither I, nor my wife Sarah, had any health problems, we couldn’t have any kids. We’d tried everything — the best doctors and mediums but nothing worked! So what? I demanded. ‘I wonder what might have forced you to stay away from the wheel. One would need a very sound reason for that. Do you have any?’

‘You know, yesterday a mirror got broken in my bedroom’ — I started my explanation, ‘it just burst into pieces and what is more important - for no reason. I even didn’t touch it! It was hanging on the wall and all of a sudden — crack! And into pieces!’ ‘And what?’

‘Don’t you know, really? It’s a superstition. A broken mirror means seven years of misfortune!’ ‘Do you mean you’re going to stay away from the wheel for seven years? Stop fooling around, man! Get your papers and hit the road!’ ‘But the superstition...’ ‘Fuck the superstitions, William! You’re a grown up man! Stop fucking with me!’ ‘You’re right, man.’

I grabbed the papers and went to my truck. Pretty soon I was driving southward down highway 666. What if I can save time? – I thought – Why not! And right away I swung to a local road that was a good deal of a shortcut.

It was springtime and the road looked like a postcard picture. Apple trees were blooming white and rose along both sides of the road. Just like in Paradise! I was exclaiming to myself catching the beautiful views that opened behind each new bend of the road. Pretty soon, I noticed a road sign saying that I was approaching a sharp corner and released the accelerator pedal and started turning in smoothly.

All of a sudden, I saw an oncoming car skidding off the road. Probably, the driver had noticed my truck too late and slammed on the brakes in fright. The car skidded sideward and making several barrel rolls fell into the ditch.

‘Oh my God!’ I yelled in a fright, pulled over and ran to the site of the accident. In the front seats of the car I saw a man and a woman. One glimpse was enough to understand that they didn’t need any help but rather, a funeral. I looked over and saw a small child sitting in the back seat. He was a three- or so year-old boy, a little angel. His shirt was torn and his elbow was bleeding. On seeing me he broke out crying and reached his small puffy arms out to me.

‘Come here, my dear. Come.’ I picked the boy up and ran to my truck. When I was running I took his shirt off and threw it into the ditch. In my truck I put a bandage on his wound. At the first small town that was on my way I called my wife and told her where we would meet...

‘You’re crazy!’ Were her first words. ‘You’re committing a crime and involving me into it! Call the police right away!’

Let’s meet first and then we’ll decide together what to do – was my offer, because I knew that she would stop objecting once she saw this beautiful boy. In about two weeks’ time after the incident I went back to work and said:

‘You know, James... I’m afraid you’ll have to look for a new driver.’

‘What’s up? You broke a mirror again?’ – smiled the dispatcher.

‘No. I got a new job.’

‘Why aren’t you happy with this one?’

‘They pay more and it promises to be more interesting...’

‘More interesting? You’re going to become a movie star? Aren’t you? I hear their life is full of joy!’

No, I’m going to Southland. A big company is about to start mining nickel over there and they’re hard up for truck drivers.’

‘And for how long?’

‘The contract is for two years with a possibility of extension.’

‘Well... Then good luck to you!’ – James shook my hand.

‘And we moved to Southland. I turned to some drug dealers and they helped me with carrying the boy over there too. In Southland, for a decent bribe, I was able to get a new birth certificate in the name of Jason Blake as my son...

Dear Jason! My beloved son! I should have told you this earlier. We wanted to do it but could not. Forgive us if you can. Forgive us our dear, beloved son!

Sincerely yours,

William and Sarah Blake

Mister Blake folded the paper, put it into his pocket and said:

“That’s my story, ladies and gentlemen.”

The whole audience fell dead silent.

“And what are you going to do now, with regard to the newly-discovered circumstances, Mister Blake?”

Host of the show broke the silence.

Without thinking (it was obvious that he had already decided everything for himself), Jason replied:

“As a lawful citizen of my country, I refuse Sarah and William Blake and give my inheritance to an orphanage house.”

“I can see the studio full of raised hands!” Exclaimed the host. “Please Mister... Excuse me for not knowing your name. Please introduce yourself.”

At these words, a decent looking old man rose from his chair and introduced himself, a silver-voiced preacher:

“Pastor Henry Miller.”

“Go ahead, Mister Miller. You have our attention.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I want to tell you that I knew the Blake family very well. I knew William Blake when he was that small.” Pastor slightly raised his palm above the floor.

“I always used their family as a model for my parishioners. Even though they were neither famous scientists, nor genius artists, even though they were not religious practitioners, gardeners or literary people! They even didn’t keep books in their house!”

“Then why do you call their family a model?”

“Because, as a family that makes our society look like a true society, they were a pure model! You will hardly find a writer, a photographer, a movie director or an artist that would realistically depict this family. Why? Because it’s too deep to be perceived by us modern—brought up by a single parent or in an orphanage house—people. For such people, something big and important will always be missing in the Blakes’, whereas something small and insignificant will be inevitably perching.

“Oh what a son! I would say to my parishioners about the mourning Jason. Alas, these days you will hardly find such children. Oh how attentive towards his parents he was when they were alive! How much he loved them and how sincerely he is mourning over their death now! Have you ever seen any modern children mourn over the loss of their parents that much? All they do is wait for their parents to die sooner in order to come into their fortune as quickly as possible!

“God bless those who honor and respect their parents! Follow the example of Jason Blake! Take care of your loved ones the way this holy man did!

“And after all this I hear that this man is refusing his parents! How come! Jason! It’s a great sin! Please change your mind, my son! Oh God...” Unable to finish the phrase, Pastor sat down again.

The host waited for the crowd to calm down and turned to Jason:

“How will you respond to this, Mister Blake? Maybe you really shouldn’t make such radical claims? I mean, to give up your idea of refusing your parents.”

“Well, you see... I’m not refusing my parents. I’m refusing my kidnappers. Do you see the difference? These people deprived me of my own life that had been given to me by God. Freedom of choice, if you wish. They deprived me of my family and my name. How can I call them parents after all this? But even if we set aside the moral aspects and look at the matter from the point of view of the law, what do you think? Is it at all legal?”

The host of the show cunningly smiled and asked the audience:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, is there anyone who wants to answer this question? It would be very interesting to hear a professional opinion. Are there any lawyers around here?”

“Sure there are!” An attractive 30-something blonde lady got up from her chair

“Great!” Exclaimed the host. “And what have you got to tell us as a lawyer?”

The lady fixed her hair and replied:

“From the point of view of the law, the Blake family not only violated the law but committed a very serious crime. Failure to provide first aid. How could have Mr. Blake known that people in the car had died? He wasn’t a doctor to make such a conclusion. Probably, if had he called an ambulance they could have been saved. It’s even safe to suppose that Mr. Blake’s parents are still alive! We didn’t see their death certificate, after all.”

“It’s a very interesting idea and we’ll get round to it a bit later.” The host of the show interrupted the lady for a second. “Please, go on.”

“If we set aside the law and turn to morality,” the blonde lady spoke again, “can any of you imagine the sufferings Mr. Blake doomed them to? I don’t think we need explanations of the degree of punishment provided by the law for such things? That’s why as a lawyer, daughter and mother, I totally take Mr. Blake Junior’s side.” The blonde sat down back onto her chair.

“Anybody else want to have a word?” The host addressed the audience.

“I do!”

An obese man (probably a passionate lover of beer, chips and hockey) got up from his chair.

“You lawyers (he pointed his finger to the blonde lady) are always ready to sue anyone! You have nothing sacred in your hearts but your law, that in fact you can manipulate however you like. I’m a truck driver myself and I know that any of my colleagues can spot very well whether someone is dead or alive. If he had called the police or an ambulance, the child would have been taken to an orphanage, and Mr. Blake to prison, for they always leave truck drivers responsible for everything. I think that Mr. Blake was right. He saved his and the boy’s lives. And maybe it was a God-given gift to him as he couldn’t have his own children. What will you say, pastor?”

Pastor Miller slowly rose from his chair and in his silver voice said: “God works in mysterious ways.”

“Anybody else wanna have a word?” Inquired the host but there was no reason for that as the crowd was seething as a hot tar in a boiling tank.

“Yes, please,” the host pointed at a man looking like an experienced computer hand.

“Refusing your step parents is disgusting!” Started the man, as though he was clicking on the PC keyboard.

“One minute, Mister! Would you please introduce yourself?” The host interrupted him.

“Michael Bar, an analyst of Norzfolk Company.”

“Please, Mister Bar. Go on.”

“So I mean to say (“clicked” the analyst) that our society, built on philanthropy, should not take Mr. Blake Junior’s side. His stepfather didn’t kill anyone. He saved a child. Mr. Blake Junior was supposed to spend his childhood in orphanages but lived a life full of his new parents’ love and care. And what about the law? I think, in this particular case, it’s not worth being taken into account. That’s why, Mr. Blake, your refusal is disgusting and any society (especially ours) will accuse you but not your stepparents. You are a skunk! Rascal! You were fed, watered and brought up in love, but you, bitch...Why did you come to this show? Really?”

Jason got up and motioned for silence.

“I will explain a little bit later why I came here, but before accusing me, Mr. Bar, would you please try and put yourself in the place of my real parents?”

“They are dead!” Yelled Michael Bar.

“It’s not a fact!” Objected the blonde lawyer.

“And I think that my parents’ death is not a fact but only Mr. Blake’s words. I reiterate: Blake’s family deprived me of my real parents. They deprived me of my family name. And now I want to answer your question, Mr. Bar. I have come to this show in order to get help in finding out who I really am. This program is being watched by millions of viewers after all. Maybe my true parents are among them.”

“You are a scoundrel! You are hurting your real parents!” A man’s voice came flying from the audience.

“You are a true citizen of your country! A country where the law must stand above everything else!” A lady’s voice supported Jason.

“Bitch!” A shout came from the first row.

“Sacred! Sacred!” Chanted the rear row.

“Hold on, gentlemen! Calm down!” The host of the show tried to pacify the audience. “We haven’t finished yet! Let us finish the topic!”

But nobody was listening to him anymore. The hall was full of commotion. Someone spat in the face of his neighbor. Some lady started tearing the blonde lawyer’s hair. The blonde lady turned out to be a brunette. Someone from the eighth row grabbed a National flag from the arms of someone from the second row and started trampling it with his feet. A spectator in the front row shouted angrily in the bulldog-like face of the show host: “Bitch!!!”

In order to bring everything to order, the TV security staff were called but it wasn’t enough. That’s why a police squad was called in, and when they failed to make any effect, the Special Forces were drawn in order to appease the talk-show mess.

It's true that time heals all wounds. Everything is meant to be forgotten at some point, and thus the TV show mess was forgotten too as well as its guest, Jason Blake. When it seemed that even the talk show host had forgotten about the mess, a red Volkswagen beetle pulled into a parking lot in front of the office owned by a very famous lawyer who represented interests of some late famous actor's family. Two men got out of the car. Jason Blake and his lawyer Tom Nord. They ran up the stairs leading to the Victorian-style building and rang the copper bell hanging by a massive door.

"You have my full attention, gentlemen," started the actor's family lawyer, Harry Levi, once the visitors had set down into the armchairs.

"Have you looked through our papers, Mr. Levi?" Inquired Tom Nord.

"Sure I have, gentlemen," responded Mr. Levi taking a file out of the drawer. "But I'm not quite sure why your client (he pointed at Mr. Blake) has decided he is the son of Mr.... There's not a single word about it in his father's letter."

"The matter is that," Nord responded, "when Mr. Blake turned to me asking to find his real parents, I remembered about some recently published memoirs of a famous actor where the name of another actor, whose family interests you are representing now, was mentioned.

"It's known that the boy's body – the actor's son – wasn't found after that car accident. This fact plus the similarity in appearance of Mr. Blake and the late Mr. gave me the idea to proceed in this direction....Are you satisfied with my answer?"

"Very much satisfied."

"Great! Then you've nothing left but to recognize Mr. Blake as a legitimate son of Mr. ... and take into consideration our claims. Here are the DNA test results that convincingly prove genetic relationship between Mr. Blake and Mr. ... And here are the memoirs of the celebrity's friend." Tom Nord took out a book titled *Memoirs*.

"Let's open it to the page 228 and read. No. Let's better have Mr. Blake do it for he is very good at it." Mr. Blake took the book and started reading it in his expressive manner but omitting the characters' names:

Two year-old playful pranker Michael (the movie star's son) dashed a small plastic ball. The movie star's wife, on hearing the bang of glass, hung up the phone and darted to her son's room.

'Oh Gosh!' Her yelp came from the room.

'What is it!?' Her husband ran into the room scared to death.

'Mike broke the mirror!'

'Come on! It's just a mirror! One might have thought an atomic bomb had fallen onto our house! But it's a trifle. Glass breaks for luck!'

'No, my darling! Broken mirror is a bad luck! Seven years of misfortune! Moreover, this mirror was in possession of the proud and foolish Austrian Queen Antoinette! Do you remember how she ended her days?'

'And what? You're afraid of finishing your life on a guillotine? Don't worry! It's out of fashion!'

'So calm down! We'll buy you another mirror. Tomorrow I have a day off. So we'll go to Benson's antique shop and buy you a mirror like Queen Victoria's!'

The next day the Actor who usually didn't stick to his promises, unexpectedly and eagerly had his family seated in his car and set off to the shop. At first they drove down a featureless highway but after they had driven about 30 kilometers they swung onto a local road taking a short cut. The road was lined up with blooming apple trees throwing their petals. These pinky petals were covering the whole road and looked like snow.

'You can lose your head from this beauty!' Exclaimed the actor...

'You'd better not lose your head but slow down and watch the road. It's narrow and winding. The petals, by the way, can be very dangerous when it comes to braking!'

'You amaze me darling! Where did you learn all this?'

'Don't you remember that I was taking driving lessons?'

'But why don't you have a driver's license?'

'I passed only the theory exam and I flunked my driving test, you know.'

She gave him her charming smile. 'Hold onto the wheel, Sir!'

'Yes ma'am!' Her husband saluted her and theatrically squeezed the wheel so hard that his fingertips turned pale. Next he threw the car into a sharp corner...

As this road was rarely used, the bodies of the celebrity and his wife were discovered only twelve hours later. In the dead of night their cold bodies caught in the beams of the police cars headlight sooner resembled mummies than human beings.

Their son Michael wasn't found in the car. Only the next morning the police found his torn shirt with stains of blood on it in a ditch, and it was believed that his body was dragged away by the coyotes wandering about in droves in this area.

"That's enough," said Mr. Nord. "I guess now all is clear for Mr. Levi and we can proceed to the matter."

Mr. Levi stood up and opened a small cupboard with a mini-bar full of perfectly selected drinks.

"Please, gentlemen. It's a perfect brandy. An exclusive batch, you know. So help yourselves and meanwhile try to explain to me what you mean to say for I can hardly understand anything."

Mr. Nord gave it a try:

"Well, this brandy is really something! And what we want is acknowledgement of Mr. Blake as a son of late Mr. ... and therefore his inheritance..."

"Hold on Mr. Nord." Mr. Levi interrupted him. "What inheritance are you talking about? You know that Mr. ... died in an accident and couldn't have left any papers regarding his will. But even if he had, your client wouldn't have inherited anything but huge debts."

"Why?!" Mr. Nord asked with surprise. "If so, then whose interests are you representing? Isn't it Mr. ...?"

Mr. Levi offered his guests some cigars:

"Help yourselves, gentlemen and listen to me attentively. The point is that all that's left from Mr. ... is the family name and it is in possession of his daughter. By the way, have you met your sister, Mr. ...? I

don't even know by which name I should call you." Mr. Levi gave him a sly wink. "Not yet? It's not a problem. I'll make up for it. She is a famous producer in the cinema industry and she has a lot of capital, but I wouldn't suggest that you try to bite anything from it. It may be fatal. You'll be convicted of extortion and go to prison. Mr. Nord, do you agree with me?"

Tom Nord nervously snapped his cigar and threw it onto the polished desktop:

"No, we disagree. We shall file a claim to the Supreme Court."

"Based on what?" Inquired Mr. Levi crumbing the table with his palm.

"Based on the fact that your client used my client's father's family name without permission of Mr. Blake and thus violated the law."

Mr. Levi stood up and pointed at the door:

"Gentlemen! To start, your client had better come to terms and answer the question: 'Who are you?' before going to Supreme Court."

About twelve hours after this conversation, a lonely car drove down a deserted night road and caught in its headlights a red Volkswagen Beetle, stuck in a ditch.

The car pulled over.

"Darling, I'm scared. Go there and find out what's happened," said the lady sitting next to the man behind the wheel.

"Sure, sweetie, I'll go and see. You stay here," the man comforted her.

Shortly, the driver came back to his car:

"Yes Sir," he spoke on the cell phone. "Two of them... yes... the elder one that's behind the wheel and a young man next to him. Sure, I'll wait."

They didn't keep him waiting for too long. The man hadn't finished his cigarette when a dozen police cars came driving from different directions. Their headlight beams caught the cold bodies of the two men in the crashed car and in this pale light they sooner resembled mummies than human beings.

Music burst out loud, spotlights and sparklers went on and the host of the show—a man with a rough bulldog-like face and sly foxy eyes came onto the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" He started, once the music had died away and the last fire sparks had fallen down. "Today we are here to continue the story of Mr. Blake that has already been forgotten. We can call it today as: 'Accident or the hand of God.' Today we will talk about a serious incident..." And he told the audience about the tragic death of Mr. Blake.

"Who wants to have the first word?"

The host of the show scanned the studio with his eyes.

"Please, pastor..."

"I would like to say that everything in this world..."

"You've already fucked our brain with your religion!" A scrawny atheist cut him off.

“Shut up! You bastard!” Answered a tough religious man sitting in the second row.

“Don’t tell him to shut him! Asshole! We live in a free country!” Shrilled a lady from the rear.

“Shut up bitch!” Hissed a man wearing a *Hell’s Angels* jacket, giving even the host the creeps.

“You’ll go right to hell now for those words!” The lady sank her red fingernails deep into the biker’s square face.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Calm down! We still haven’t finished our show! We have to continue!”

“Shut up asshole!” Some lady shouted in the bulldog-like face of the host and hit him on the head with a book titled, *Constitution*.

The TV security team was involved again. They were backed up by the police who were supported by the Special Forces but the enraged crowd swept all of them away, including the National Guard.

The unrest spilled out into the street and soon acquired a political-economic nature.

“Bring to justice those who are responsible for the global economic crisis! To the court! To the court!” Shouted the crowd at the gate of the Senate.

“Hawks, away from the hotspots of the planet!” Demanded the audience at the walls of the military ministry.

“Save the planet from ecological collapse!” Representatives of the Green Party were screaming in the windows of the heavy industry minister.

Only a month later, the military troops, with great difficulties and numerous victims, had managed to extinguish the last sparks of the social rebellion.

The host of the show was fired. The talk show was taken off air.

The Yellow Rock

A young and promising financier named Tom Franklin made up his mind to try his fortune in a new country. He consulted several competent people and, eventually, chose and later on moved to the pastorally admirable and charming land of Belle Provence. Having settled down, he established a credit union with a small, yet stable fund. He purchased a house. Then, he acquired a posh car and began casting meaningful glances at the local beauties, aiming at future marriage.

It has not been clear until now, whether or not this very circumstance is to blame, or the lyrical moods, which, according to some, swarm in the local air.

To make a long story short, the young financier made a U-turn in his life.

First, Mr. Franklin grew long wavy hair, a pointed beard and painted (in a Pierrot's manner) his cornflower sky blue eyes with black paint.

Second, he traded his business suit, a tie and a derby hat for a pair of suede pants, a velour jacket and a felt hat.

Third, he threw his newfangled, upstart golden Parker pen to hell. He bought (for quite a bulky sum of money, by the way) an old-fashioned quill, well-gnawed by some prominent poet, as the antique shop owner claimed.

Fourth, he changed his noble name for "Edward White" and started to write verse.

Less than a year later, a Belle Provence publishing house issued Edward White's first collection of poetry, entitled *The Rose of Love*.

A verse which contained the following words "...I am a tiny boat on the azure waves of the unknown sea", touched a young milliner named Susan Depeltrie's heart with its tenderness and passion. The sweet creature, having violated the taboo that had been reigning in Belle Provence, was the first one to write the ecstatic letter of praise to Edward White.

Her epistolary style, combined with immense feelings, thoroughly affected the young poet's soul. He replied with a romantic sonnet and suggested that Susan and he meet in the municipal park.

Her dreamy figure, her angelic face, perfect demeanor, her intellect, voluptuousness, modesty, as well as the girl's numerous hobbies (such as growing rare species of roses) could not help but touch the tremulous bosom of Edward White.

On the third date, the poet arrived, holding a rose of rare beauty, and, having knelt down in front of her, exclaimed, "I love you Susan, and want you to become my wife."

“Oh!” – uttered the girl, as though she had pierced herself with a rose thorn. – “I must give it a thought.”

“Please think it over, but as soon as possible. Because I shall simply go nuts, if I have to await your answer for a long time!”

“All right, I promise that it won’t last long.” Susan produced one of her cutest smiles and, like some exotic butterfly she immediately took off from the bench.

“So, I will be waiting for you here tomorrow, at the same place!” The poet shouted to her.

“Waaaait”

In premonition of unearthly happiness, the poet’s soul would either rumble as a mountain creek, or freeze as a quiet forest lake.

The next day, Susan did not show up. Nor would she come the following day. A week passed. Edward would wander along the park alleys from the morning until late at night. At first, janitors would kick him away, but later on they just got used to his presence, as if he were some park attraction.

After a whole month of suspense, Edward broke the taboo and went to the studio where Susan was working.

“Don’t you know?” The surprised landlady burst into tears and started to sob. “The poor thing...accidentally... pierced... herself with.... some rose thorn... and poisoned her blood. It... has been... one week... today since she...was buried... God rest her soul...”

“What?! How come? Did she die?”

“Yes, all of a sudden. In the twinkling of an eye! What a charming girl she was! What an industrious employee! You might hardly ever find such a laborious maid these days.”

“No it can’t be possible! It is too much sorrow!” Edward propped against the light pink wall and slid down onto the batten floor, having fainted...

Everybody was positive that Edward would commit suicide.

“I bet one to one hundred that he will hang himself!”

“I bet one to one thousand that he’ll take poison.”

But he did not.

Edward sold his house, his car, his credit union, and with all that cash, he built a splendid former lunatic asylum called ‘The Yellow Rock,’ in the old park greenery, overlooking the breathtaking marine bay. Above the steep slope the poet had ordered a chapel erected, which he turned into his dwelling. Here, in complete and utter silence, far from the noisy world, he began writing his poems, which resembled King David’s Psalms. Below is a fragment of one of Edward White’s then verses:

Oh, Lord, enter my verse. Recognize me in the midst of the street mob. My God! My King! Oh, my loveliest and dearest Susan!

A caretaker would fetch him some meager Lenten food once a month. He left it by the door and disappeared without exchanging a word with the hermit.

Thus Edward White spent a few years in total solitude. His garments were worse for wear. His hair grew passed his shoulders. His grey beard reached his belly, sunken due to scant nourishment. He plumb forgot about the world and its beauty, until one day, when the wind brought a wonderfully brightened maple leaf and gently put it on his desk.

“It must be autumn now. Mother Nature has put on her motley clothes. The sun is shining and caressing. What a beautiful season! I love you for this reason,” rhymed Edward and decided to step outside (for the first time within his lengthy years of seclusion).

“Why are your patients roaming around unattended?” The doctor pounced at the orderly on duty.

“Where exactly?”

“Here,” the doctor pointed at the plodding and radiantly smiling Edward White. “Get him away now!”

“Excuse me, Doc, but I’ve never seen this man before. He must have been just delivered here and I have not been notified. Hold on... don’t worry, I’ll take this vagabond to the proper place!”

That is how Edward White found himself in fenced metal paddock, from where he was later that day transferred to ward number 13.

The poet was about to explain that he was not one of the asylum inmates, however, after an unpleasant medical procedure a sweet smile appeared on his lips and he pondered,

“What is the difference where a poet writes his verses?”

The orderly showed him his bed and a bedside table. He also gave Edward his pajamas, a towel and a pair of slippers. Edward would still wear those slippers ten years later, when he was driven downstairs with a label “E.W.” tied around his foot (into the morgue, meant for homeless beggars and unidentified persons) and then to the urban churchyard cemetery.

A few years had passed ever since then, and Edward White’s name was completely forgotten. The only reminder of him was a mossy tombstone. Only workers of the cemetery archives (not all of them, though) knew who had been buried underneath...

The asylum grew shabby over the years. Its paint peeled. The then delicately shaped cast-iron fence got rusty and even fell apart in some places. The alleys became overgrown with greenery. Numerous flowerbeds, once boasting fragrant daffodils, roses, phloxes, were now invaded by plantain, burdock and agrimony. There was no money to pay for the renovations. The municipality decided to demolish ‘The Yellow Rock.’

*

A senior accountant of some big metropolitan motor depot retired.

“What shall we do?” A fat and disheveled Motor Depot Manager, similar to the Scarecrow from the famous fairy-tale, lighting his cheap cigarette, asked a refined and elegant Chief Engineer, who resembled a graceful figurine. “Who shall we hire now? Should it be one of ours or an outsider?”

The Chief Engineer, playing with the nose of his neat foreign shoe, answered in his delicate voice:
“Well, sir, you never know who this outsider might be. God knows who they might delegate down on us. In my humble opinion, the best choice is the one who has proven that he is loyal and trustworthy.”

“Who are you getting at?”

“Well, sir, we have one young, smart and promising expert... He is fluent in five European languages... David Goldenberg”.

The Chief Engineer managed to depict the young nominee so brightly and lusciously that the Manager thought for a moment.

“Maybe the depot rumors are true, as though the Chief Engineer shares his bed with this youngster book-keeper?” But instead he pronounced aloud: “Nope, his last name ... it rather suits an immigrant than a senior accountant. He won’t match.”

“It’s a pity. I’m going to tell you something. We are totally unable to value our young and fledging personnel, dearest Mr. Manager. Oh boy! Had he been born somewhere out there abroad, not over here, he would have definitely become another Rockefeller!”

“Well, let him get his ass there,” the Manager extinguished the cigarette butt, thus implying that the conversation was over. “Good riddance! And you, my dear Genrich Yanovich, unless you are eager to jeopardize your position... please think about your own behavior. You know, there are certain rumors around the depot, which is my beloved baby, which I am more than positive that you wouldn’t like to be the truth...”

Half a year later the accountant David Goldenberg immigrated.

At the transshipment check point he chose the quiet and peripheral Belle Provence out of the countries offered.

Less than a year had passed and then Goldenberg set up a tiny fiscal credit fellowship, and soon afterwards dollars started to stream into his bank accounts.

A mansion was bought. Then a car that was in vogue. And in the harbor there was a yacht, swinging (to spite the competitors) in quick motion, called ‘Bella Dona’.

But all of a sudden the Belle Provence air, saturated with poetic vibes interfered with Goldenberg's financial success... Therefore, one breathtaking and gorgeous autumn day, which this country can boast, the financial tycoon made up his mind to switch his business, like a tux to extravagant tatters. He picked a nickname, Apollon Berg, and commenced to weave and pen verses! One verse after another, and here we go – a poetry collection *The Clouds* had been compiled!

Apollon inserted his poetic endeavor into a spacious yellow envelope. He signed it in his intricate copperplate handwriting:

N-city, L-street, Poetic Miscellany Almanac “Choree.”

At the closest crossroads a hungry red mailbox eagerly swallowed the letter. The envelope was received. It was unsealed. The content was attentively read through. The reply was sent back.

The target most hit was the criticized poem was "The Clouds."

Given below is an excerpt from this poem:

...It seems to me that the clouds are the restless souls which irrigate the earth with tears shed...

...Epos and tragedy, and in addition, comedy, dithyramb poetry and most of Aulos (or Tibia - wind instruments) and Cithara (Lyre), are all just mere imitation. They differ from one another only according to the three major traits, namely: they are expressed via diverse means or various objects; through various methods and techniques, and by no means the same ones. Similar to the way artists render much, while creating their images by means of paints and shapes, some of them due to theory, whereas the others owing to their skill, yet others, thanks to their inborn natural talents, the same might take place in the above arts. In all of them the rendering is done at the expense of rhythm, word and harmony, either altogether or separately...

The bottom line is as such: absence of school syntax and more serious lack of logic. Impressionism, whose roots I, by the way, comprehend quite well, despite the fact that this is a little bit far from what I usually deal with.

Alfred Brumer, Almanac Editor-in-Chief. Date. Signature.

Although the review was signed in Brumer's name, it was nothing else, but an excerpt from Aristotle's opus "On Poetry," as well as a quotation from Marina Tsvetaeva's article, "Poet's Viewpoint on Critique."

The failure somehow unhinged Berg the poet; however, not to such an extent that he would quit versification. Furthermore, this was next to impossible due to Belle Provence omnipresent poetic vibes, which succeeded in nestling deeply in the former book-keeper's mind.

Then Apollon Berg, being a high flown poetic personality, was forced to turn to the occult practices.

"I must ask for the classics' support. I heard that once you left a note with a request to help at the pedestal of some famous poet, your chances of success will grow tenfold! One hundred times as much! One thousand percent!"

Well, no doubt that Goldenberg the accountant was still alive inside Berg the poet!

After some contemplation and hesitation, Apollon made his final choice of the monument to the prominent Belle Provence poet Gilles Villeneuve. In reality, Gilles Villeneuve had been a short, puny and morbid man, but being cast in a monument, he seemed a broad-shouldered and sturdy bronze-cheeked giant. Apollon looked around and was stunned. The monument itself together with the adjacent square were all littered with notes, swamped with teddy-bears and other plush toys, filled with poetry collections.

"One had better erect a recycling factory in this very place! A bad business couldn't have come out of this idea, I admit," thought Goldenberg the financial analyst who had not been completely erased off Apollon's bosom.

Apollon (out of sheer curiosity) picked up one note and quickly read through it.

"Dear Gilles, I am the only hope of Belle Provence poetry. Please do a favor to the genius! Daniel Vertun".

The note that lay in the vicinity would drastically refute and overturn the content of what had been scribbled by D. Vertun.

“Dear Gilles! This Vertun is as poet as a jackass is a Porsche AG! Yours forever! The sole hope and cornerstone of the Belle Provence poetry, Alfred Benoit”.

Apollon had nothing to do here with his note, therefore he switched to less known men of letters. He found out that at the olden, quiet and abandoned cemetery nearby his house had been resting the poet’s Edward White’s body.

“Give me a tenner and I shall try my best to find it,” a not-quite sober cemetery janitor promised to him.

“Here you are,” Apollon gave him a crispy, brand new bill.

“Here’s your tombstone,” uttered the custodian of those who had joined the silent majority and pointed with his knotty index finger at the grey mossy rock...

Apollon Berg washed the entombment.

He renewed the dim letters with gold paint.

He planted flowers: a carnation, a rose and a nasturtium.

Then he bought a poetry collection “The Rose of Love” in a bookstore. All of a sudden he found himself literally absorbed in the verses and the poet Edward White’s life story. There, in the graveyard. In complete and utter silence. Faraway from the brisk and noisy speedways and human ado, Berg the poet wrote up an essay dedicated to the creative activities of the forgotten poet Edward White.

For his restoration works, Apollon got a good dressing down from the municipal cemetery council: “With your actions you alter the general view of burials. For the first time, we are just reproaching you. If it occurs again, you will have to pay a monetary fine...”

However, the shrilling and romantic article by Berg the poet stirred, both literally and figuratively, the poetic world of Belle Provence!

“Undoubtedly, due to the article by a foreign poet Berg, we have disclosed for ourselves the poet, who has been undeservedly forgotten by us, and who might be referred to as to Shakespeare of Belle Provence, I am not afraid of this comparison at all!”

(The above was published in the editorial of “Belle Provence Book Review.”)

Apollon Berg’s article was carefully studied by the intellectual elite of Belle Provence. Berg’s style and soul cast a glamor over a young and fledgling fashion designer Pierre Courtin. The couturier wrote a rapturous letter of praise to the poet and came up with the proposal, “to have a stroll in the municipal park.”

Apollon, touched by fervidity and impetuosity of the invitation, replied to the fashion designer with a romantic elegy and agreed to meet him.

The two young men met two days later.

His interlocutor's noble face, subtle and neat figure, highly polished manners, grand generosity of soul, numerous hobbies (one of which was collecting rare cacti) could not help but leave colds the passionate and longing for love Apollon Berg's heart.

For the next date he showed up with a rare cactus specimen "Lophophora williamsii". The poet knelt down in front of the couturier and, having lent him the cactus, uttered, "I love you, Pierre. Let's live together!"

"I must think it over," coquettishly answered the couturier.

"But, please, I beg you, do it faster. Otherwise I shall go nuts due to lengthy suspense".

"All right, my darling, my sweet Apollon, I promise to return you my answer until tomorrow... At the same time and in the same place".

The couturier took off the bench like some exotic bird and headed for the park gate.

"I am awaiting you!" Berg called after him.

"Wa-a-a-ait".

The poet's pending heart was either rattling like some fearsome volcano, or freezing like a pastoral hill in the ferocious July heat.

The next day (even though he waited until the city tower clock chimed midnight) Pierre Courtin never showed. Nor did he arrive the following day.

Apollon was wandering along the park alleys for the whole week, waiting for his love. He was twice examined by the park janitor (as a possible terrorist). And it was the janitor who shared with him the latest news:

"Imagine yourself, some couturier, who was fond of collecting cacti, received a gift from one of his allegedly hostile competitor and ill-wisher. The plant was ejecting poison, as it were. The couturier placed the present at his bedhead and... fell asleep like a baby. While sleeping he inhaled lots of poison. The following morning only a cold scab was found in bed instead of the poor kid".

He must have meant the dead body when he pronounced "scab." These locals (most likely, owing to this specific air of Belle Provencel) are fond of expressing themselves in rhymes. The park janitor was no exclusion...

Apollon Berg became depressed (none of the so-called "happy pills," which a doctor prescribed, did any good). All the local residents started betting on him, exactly the way their ancestors had done with the late Edward White.

The ones who bet against, won.

The poet sold his house, yacht and the company...

He invested the cash earned in renovations of "The Yellow Rock" and he himself became a tenant of the same chapel, where Edward White once resided, long before.

After a few years of solitude, as you have probably guessed, Berg the poet found himself in ward number 13.

“Doesn’t matter at all, where to write,” thought Apollon, falling asleep after a painful injection the male nurse had given him.

Two years or so later the former accountant Goldenberg (with a tag “A.P.” attached to his pale skinny foot) was shoved inside a square plywood coffin, and without a tear or groan on the part of his non-existent near and dear, was buried.

Ten years have passed ever since then. Some occasional circumstances have brought the author of this story to the town of Belle Provence. Let us not expatiate on what the author deals with. Who he fell in love with and to whom he made love himself. Let us just point out that by sheer chance he was forced to attend the mental hospital “The Yellow Rock.”

“Hey you! Come on in, buddie,” an orderly stopped him the hallway.

“Me?”

“You, you, who else?”

The author came up. The orderly grabbed him by the collar and thrust him inside the cage, encased in metal mesh.

The storyteller kicked up a row and demanded point blank:

“Release me from here as soon as possible!”

Yet no one was willing to listen to his claims.

Then he resorted to intimidation:

“I will do my best to expose you all!”

After a painful injection of a sedative the author whispered smiling sweetly:

“Well, it doesn’t actually matter where to write. It is even better in here. Quiet atmosphere plus reasonable food”.

“That’s right,” the orderly reinforced his words, escorting the author into ward number 13. “What should you do in your daily life? Here everything is designated for people like you. Here is your bed, nightstand, your pen, paper and felt slippers... It is chilly in the evenings”.

The author lives in ward number 13 of “The Yellow Rock” to this very day.

One day, he will undoubtedly be carried out of here with a tag on his thin blue leg. Afterwards, he will be delivered to one of the picturesque (which Belle Provence is famous for) city cemeteries.

Tapestry

(A true story)

Mrs. Elizabeth Weber, a woman in her prime, got sick.

In the evening she went to sleep healthy and vivacious, but in the morning she couldn't get out of bed.

After breakfast, which Elizabeth didn't touch, Mr. Weber, a middle-aged, impressive gray-haired man with the looks of a Hollywood actor took his wife to the clinic.

"Please, come in, madam!" Said John Clark, a famous diagnostician in the neighborhood, inviting her to the office. He stethoscoped, knocked, felt.

"You may go home."

He went into the hall with Mrs. Weber.

"Well, doctor?" Mr. Weber jumped at him. "How—"

"I am definite on just one thing," Dr. Clark interrupted him. "Mrs. Weber needs a change of climate and circumstances."

"I don't understand."

"Mrs. Weber needs the fresh air of the mountains," explained the doctor. "I would recommend you buy a small chalet in highlands somewhere in the south."

They got home late in the afternoon. Mrs. Weber was so weak, she couldn't get out of the car without her husband and a maid's help.

"There you have it! She was hopping, jumping, taking care of her health. Everybody was like 'Ah, Mrs. Weber! Oh, sweetie! You look so wonderful!' And now look at her—what does she look like!" said the neighbor to Mr. Weber.

"She looks just fine," said Mr. Weber, looking at the window.

"Fine!" The neighbor clasped her hands. "The dead in their coffins look better." And she was right. Mrs. Weber indeed looked like hell.

A couple of days after visiting the doctor, Mrs. Weber was sitting in the garden. It was quiet. Suddenly, a wind arose (it's not unusual for this area) and swirled round some scattered trash in the air. A glossy piece of paper fell right to her feet. "House for sale... southern district, the sun, mountains, ocean... Call Mr. Ben Dias"

"Michael, it's fate!"

Mrs. Weber handed the paper to her husband.

“It seems to me if we move to this house, there might be some hope for me to get well. Let’s buy it! I want to feel better.”

“You know, dear, that your wish is my command.”

Mr. Weber began dialing Mr. Ben Dias’ number.

Soon, the family has moved to a new place. Mrs. Weber looked around the house.

“I will live here,” she said, taking her husband to a single bedroom on the second floor.

A small room. Antique wooden furniture. The walls were a soft blue color. The ceiling was painted with stars and the moon. The curtains had a smiling sun in the pattern. On the wall, a sophisticated tapestry depicting a small house. A gnome looking out a window. A rose bush with a snail. A shepherd girl. A sheep. A field. A river. Mountains.

“How come, dear?” Mr. Weber was surprised. “What about me? I won’t close my eyes without you!”

“Don’t worry, you will get used to it,” Mrs. Weber gave a frail smile. “I don’t want to disturb you; you are working so much, getting tired a lot and there would be me, whining... at least until I get well, which seems like less and less of a possibility...”

“And who was saying that this house is ours because of fate!? Who was so certain to get better in this house?”

Mr. Weber flung his arms up. “You will certainly get well, Elizabeth. I don’t even think that you won’t. I just won’t let you!”

“Ok, ok, dear, I will get well,” Mrs. Weber agreed. “But until that time I will live here... I think there is something in this room.”

“What is that?” her husband asked baffled.

“Something mystical. It’s hard for me to explain this to you, in order to understand you have to be sick...”

“Well, I am quite capable of understanding this.” Mr. Weber hugged his wife tenderly. “You are a romantic, I know that. Besides, a medical superstar in living in the area and we are going to visit him right away.”

Soon the Webers were on their way to the local hospital.

The doctor indeed appeared to be a bright one, that is his face was shining like a well-scrubbed copper pan.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here. Aha!” The doctor started looking through the papers, images and the history of illness of Mrs. Weber.

“Well, it’s all clear. Everything is perfectly clear. You will give her this before sleep.” The doctor handed Mr. Weber a phial with a bright red mixture. “In about two days, Mrs. Weber, I am looking forward to seeing you again. But improved in health and full of strength.”

Before going to bed Mr. Weber went to his wife.

“May be we should take out this ugly carpet?” Mr. Weber pointed to the tapestry. “There is no aesthetic value, just dust.”

“No, no, no,” Mrs. Weber refused firmly. “Let’s keep it—it’s a bad idea to throw away stuff from the room of a sick person.”

“Whatever you say, dear,” Mr. Weber touched her head with his lips. “And now take this.”

He squeezed several red drops into a glass of juice. Mrs. Weber obediently took the glass.

“And now, off to bed and sleep. You better be sound as a bell tomorrow! Got it?”

Mr. Weber kissed his wife goodnight and closed the door. As soon as the sound of his footsteps faded, Mrs. Weber cautiously slipped out of the bed and headed to the window on her shaky legs. There she saw a lovely view in soft shades of the parting day. A fruit garden, fenced with a living hedge. A flowering field. A wavy line of the river. Snowy mountain tops.

“Ah, what beauty,” Elizabeth was amazed. “Oh my, when I wasn’t sick, I didn’t notice the beauty of the surrounding world at all. It was enclosed in a completely different place.”

Mrs. Weber sighed heavily. She returned to bed. She turned off the lamp and fell asleep.

“She is so weak, this Madam Weber, who has moved in near us,” said a stitched elf from the tapestry. “I bet a hundred-to-one, she doesn’t make it a month. I, of all men, know a lot about illnesses. Just don’t think of helping her the way you did with the ill girl, who was laying under our tapestry... I can’t remember how many years ago. Do you remember? You helped her and her mother claimed that all the illnesses in the house were caused by our dusty tapestry filled with bugs! The husband of this new Miss has also mentioned this... Do you remember where we were about to go then? But, thank God, we got out of that... So remember, I personally won’t move a finger!”

“That’s your right, but I will help!” Said a cloud hanging over the river.

“And me!” A rose bush called. “Snail will collect the healing balm from the flowers and rub it into the ill spots of Mrs. Weber.”

The elf looked at the rose bush, bewildered.

“Ok, the cloud can’t get it, but you should understand that she will die if not today, then tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then in a year. Humans are so weak... not like us... stitched.”

“But if we can help, we have no right to not do it. Even if we are fools a thousand times!” Objected the rose bush.

“Alright! Let’s speak about consciousness too. Alright!? Show me where these rights are stitched? You have a right to hang on the wall and mind your own business.”

“Enough talking!” Yelled the bush at the elf. “You don’t want to help— no need to... C'mon snail, get to work faster. You are so slow and time flies...”

“Mrs. Weber is not doing well... I agree with elf here...”

“Don’t listen to him!” The wicked elf shouted at the snail. “They will catch and eat you!”

“That’s not true! They don’t eat us!” The snail returned.

“Once they didn’t, but now they lap you up! Burgundy snails in wine sauce. Have you heard of such a dish? No? I can recommend the recipe!”

The elf started naming the ingredients.

“20 snails. A glass of red wine. Butter. Parsley, dill, onion, garlic, tomatoes concasse... Champignon hats are filled with snails, add finely chopped greens...”

The snail stopped. It was easy to see that her spherical shell had turned white with fear.

“Don’t listen to him. Nobody can eat a drawn snail!” The rose bush comforted her.

The snail eyeballed him contemptuously.

“First of all, you won’t scare me. Secondly... Secondly, I am not at all a grapevine snail!” And with these words she descended from the tapestry.

At that very same time Mrs. Weber had a dream. She is a little girl. She is sleeping in a flowering meadow. *I guess it’s some ant crawling on the tummy*, she thinks in her dream. Oh, just let me wake up and I’ll swat you! But she doesn’t really want to swat it, she wants to sleep.

“Wake up, sleepy head. Wake up. Try to swat me!” the ant called to her.

“Ah, you are teasing me!” Elizabeth boils over and wakes up and...

There is no ant, while in fact it’s her long-gone grandma sitting next to her and tickling her tummy with a dry grass blade.

“Granny! Granny!” She exclaims. Elizabeth hugs her tight, opens her eyes and sees maid Mary in front of her.

“What’s wrong with you? Mrs. Weber? You were calling someone. Screaming. A bad dream? How are you feeling?”

“Quite the opposite, I had a wonderful dream,” Mrs. Weber smiled. “So wonderful, I wish it never ended. How do I feel? (Mrs. Weber listened to her illness) “You know, Mary, I feel nothing. Nothing. But that may be right after sleep. I guess, the illness hasn’t quite woken up yet, just like me.”

The illness hadn’t woken up yet by lunch, nor by dinner. Only after dinner did it come creeping back.

“Do take the medicine,” Mr. Weber just like yesterday added some ruby drops into the juice. “The illness will vanish as if by magic. Believe me! Today you did feel yourself much better than yesterday. Right?”

Mr. Weber kissed his wife and left the room.

When left alone, Mrs. Weber set by the window. The sun was setting behind the snowy mountain tops. An invisible bird was singing nocturne in the garden.

“Ah, so charming. What a beauty, and there, where I am about to go, it’s dark and cold. God, I don’t want this...”

Mrs. Weber sighed heavily and turned off the lamp.

“One against a hundred. One against a hundred,” the rosebush mocked the elf. And Mrs. Weber, in spite of herself, felt much better today than yesterday.

“Tonight we will rub her one more time...”

“No, no and no!” The shepherd girl declared firmly. “Today we will give Mrs. Weber the magic milk of my goat.”

“Bahhh... yes, yes, baaahh...” The goat agreed with the girl. “She will drink my milk and will get better at once!”

“Bahh-mehh ... Stop your foolish charity!” The elf shouted angrily from his house. “She will ruin us. I’ll be damned! I will never leave this place if she ruins us!”

“You won’t leave this place even if you want to! You are chained to it with your anger!” The rose bush hushed him. “And you stick to your wicked tune. I’m scared to think of what you would do, if you could move! You should know, wicked elf— good deeds have never yet destroyed anyone!”

“Eh, really!? Isn’t the road to one very well-known destination paved with good intentions?”

“Wherever it leads, I won’t leave this road,” the stitched cloud said firmly.

“You’d better shut up; you’ve got only romantic fog in your head.” The elf brought him down a peg.

“That’s not true!” The cloud disagreed. “I have the same threads in my head, just like you do, my dear elf.”

Elf smiled wickedly.

“Which have holed long ago! You will see, thanks to your stupidity we all will be recycled!”

“That’s enough! Shut up! Quiet!” The shepherd girl raised her voice at the elf. “Or you will wake up Mrs. Weber and I won’t be able to give her the milk.”

Everybody kept quiet, even the wicked elf shut his mouth.

The girl from the tapestry has descended from it. At this very moment Mrs. Weber sees a dream. As if she smelled her favorite apple pie and fresh milk from the kitchen in her childhood home.

“Wake up, sleepy head. Get up, baby, or you will miss your favorite dishes.”

Little Elizabeth opens her eyes and sees her mother, who died recently, in front of her. She is handing Elizabeth a glass of cold milk and a slice of warm apple pie.

“Mom! Mom!” Elizabeth screamed.

“What is it, Mrs. Weber!?” Maid Mary asks Mrs. Weber. “You were screaming so loudly! You were calling someone. A bad dream? How do you feel?”

“No, on the contrary, it was a wonderful dream! How do I feel? You know, Mary, it would be great to have a piece of warm apple pie with a glass of cold milk.”

“I will bring them right away!”

Mary ran out from the bedroom.

“What happened, Mary? Something is wrong with Mrs. Weber?” Mr. Weber stopped her.

“Yes, she wants some pie with milk!” Mary replied merrily. “It seems to me she is getting better.”

After lunch, which Mrs. Weber ate with a wolfish appetite (pardon my comparison) the couple went to the doctor again.

“Do come in, Mrs. Weber.” Said the local medical luminary, inviting her to the cabinet.

He listened. He knocked. He listened.

“So, doctor, how is she?” Mr. Weber raised from his chair.

“We need to check something, run some tests, but in general Mrs. Weber is quite healthy. Quite healthy. I want her to take this medicine for a couple of days.” The doctor handed a glass bottle with a yellowish liquid. “And I will see you after that.”

“Now then, you are doing so well!” Said Mr. Weber to his wife before going to bed. “Take this new medicine and, I’m sure, tomorrow you will forget about the illness.”

“Michael, I’m so grateful to you.”

“What for?”

“For buying this house. Only this house, not the medicine, is saving me.”

Mr. Weber smiled indulgently.

“No, no, no... you shouldn’t laugh. I know that. I feel it! I believe!” said Mrs. Weber enthusiastically.

“Ok, ok, dear. I also believe. Maybe even more than you do.”

Mr. Weber kissed his wife and left the room.

Mrs. Weber went to bed. Her eyes stopped on the tapestry thoughtfully.

“What a happy life they must have! This shepherd girl, and the snail, and the goat. They have threads instead of nerves, which, as it is well known, generate all human illnesses. Sit there in your little house, stitched elf, and enjoy a wonderful view. Although, they also fade, get older, dusty. I should definitely have it cleaned, after I get well, and have it repaired...”

And with these good intentions she fell asleep.

“So you see now, the wicked elf, where the good intentions lead. We won’t be burnt, as you are trying to assure us, but instead get cleaned and fixed,” said the rose bush, “from good always comes good—axiom!”

“I look at you, dear bush, and can’t stop feeling surprised. You’ve lived for so long already, but instead of brains you’ve got just threads! Ah! Oh! Fix! Clean! Don’t you know that sick people tend to be sentimental? Or you don’t know that the longest day has an end..”

“Blah, blah, blah.. There you go again. Don’t listen to him!” The cloud exclaimed. “Today I will manage the business. I will blow out what’s left of the illness and will fill her room with the healing breeze of our mountain river. You don’t mind?” She asked the river. “Or you are on the elf’s side?”

“Me? On the side of this wicked elf?” The river was outraged. “How could you think so!?”

“Well, you have been very quiet all these days. So I guessed,” the cloud replied. “Do forgive me, be so great hearted, if I’ve offended you, dear river...”

The cloud spread her stitched sides and the curtains swayed in Mrs. Weber's room. At that very time Mrs. Weber had a dream. As if she were sailing together with Mr. Weber on their family yacht. The wind is blowing. The sea breeze is cooling the skin pleasantly. Mr. Weber is holding the steering wheel commandingly.

"Where are we going, Michael?" She asks her husband.

"To a new life, Elizabeth," he answers.

"Ah! Is it true!?" Mrs. Weber exclaims and opens her eyes.

A dull hospital room was lit by soft sunset light.

Mrs. Weber has tilted her head a bit. Next to the bed on a folding chair there was unshaved, unshorn, wrinkled Mr. Weber.

"How are you feeling dear?" Mr. Weber squeezed lightly by his wife's dry, yellowed, old parchment paper, hand.

"Not bad, Michael, thank you... not bad... you know, dear, I had such a wonderful dream! So..."

And Mrs. Weber told him the story above. At the end she sighed heavily.

"I think you should have bought that house back then... Do you remember, I found an announcement about the sale?"

"Elizabeth! Dear! Don't start again! You know well, that all the money we spent on your therapy."

"Yes, yes..." Elizabeth agreed. "But that way we would have had at least a bit of hope for a cure..."

"You will get well anyway." Mr. Weber touched his wife's hot forehead. "And the doctor is assuring me. Once again, you were sleeping well today and you are feeling noticeably better..."

"I know why I am feeling that way."

"Why, Elizabeth?"

"You will soon find that out..." She said quietly. And turned to the wall.

Heartfelt Relations

Prologue

The reason for writing this story is an ad published in the local newspaper. I quote it in the epilogue. Therefore, if you are an impatient reader you can skip the story and go to the epilogue right away. You will find the explanation there. It's like the answers to mathematical equations that can be found at the back of the book, so you can look at them right away if you wish. For those who have high moral standards, if there are any among you, I would suggest reading this preamble only and skip the whole story. Those who are interested and curious, I invite you to follow me further.

I.

It's a nice, bright, and chilly January day today. Burr...! Airplanes are sliding on the blue satin of the sky. A dog is barking happily while playing in sparkling snow. The snow crust reminds me of a top quality Cuban sugar. Mother Nature is celebrating her happy moments. Exults nature, every single living soul is having fun, but me! I am gloomy and sad, like the mound. I feel blue and grumpy. How could this happen to me? I am completely on the ball in life. I am the lucky one who has a two-story house with four bedrooms. Well, it looks like a dog house, but it's a big house, damn it. I am the lucky one who can eat well and watch his favorite show, *Animal Planet*.

I am the lucky one who has a private French Chief, Monsieur Jean; a lovely chatter and vagabond. He is brilliant; he knows how to cook steak to perfection. Me, leggy and thoroughbred, just doing nothing but squeezing the five-thousand buck leather couch, feeling nasty... Despite this comfy life, I am crappy...

So...Mister, what's the matter with you? Why are you so sad and moody? Why do you have a lump in your throat? Maybe you are worried about the 80% of people who live from hand to mouth, work as slaves in factories, and who have no time to even think about entertainment? This idea can appear amongst readers with a high moral approach, those who have, regardless of the author's warning, continued to read the story anyway.

Are these questions really worrisome for me? Yes, usually, they are; but not now. I can't think of anything else now but my current break-up with Lou Lou. It's been a week since we saw each other

last. You may ask me; who is Lou Lou? Is she the President of Moral Purity Campaigns? Or maybe she is the President of Greenpeace? Neither one nor the other. Lou Lou is simply my close friend. Close friends are not always friends with benefits. But in my case, we are. So, here you go, I am sad because I broke up with her. And, damn, our argument isn't just a joke. We broke up because she caught me cheating on her!

"You're a cheat, unfaithful male!" Lou Lou said contemptuously, while looking at the red-headed neighbor who was disappearing into thin air. Me and this girl, we barely touched each other. That's it, that's all.

"Macho! Playboy!" Lou Lou continued. "I wonder what you will look like when I throw you out into the street! *Espèce de sale porc!*" she swore at the end. That was more than enough. Well, first of all, there is no way that I can be ranked as an animal. Second of all, I am taking care of myself. And really, if I am thrown out onto the street, what would I look like? Even without the predictions of Tarot cards, I know exactly what I would look like, an abandoned dog. Such dogs are often pictured on posters of Animal Rights groups.

I have no idea what attracted me to this red-headed girl. What one can do with the basic instinct? Well, I want to have offspring, and at this rate it doesn't really matter with whom. I don't mind having kids with this red-headed girl. Well, ideally, I would love to have kids with Lou Lou. But she doesn't want to.

"I am too busy. I have lots of business trips and projects," she says. I think that she doesn't want to take our relationship to the next level. And, clearly, I know why... We may be misunderstood by society!

But if she would have said yes, I would have been the happiest man in the Universe. Mon Dieu! All is possible nowadays, in times of great technology and advancement in microbiology and genetics...., even Minotaurs! Centaurs!...Icaruses!

"You are a liar and a hypocrite!" she pushed me away roughly when I tried to fight an already lost battle. "I thought you loved me. But you..." she buried her face in the pillow and started crying.

Why did she do that? Why did she call me a hypocrite? I am committed to her entirely. I love her, and that is the truth. I love her despite her skinny legs and her ears that stick out. She is not young and pretty; but I love her, despite her disheveled grey bangs that make her look like a Chinese crested dog. Of course I love her, despite people calling her an old whore, a pervert, slut.... I care less what other people say. But if she even looks at another guy, I am ready to destroy him as easily as the wind destroys a spider's web.

“Scumbag! Mangy, scrounging old tomcat among pigeons!” she shouted. Then she walked to her Cadillac, slammed the driver’s side door, and headed downtown. She really went too far! She perfectly knows that I hate cats.

II.

It’s been a week now; she is giving me a hard time. I am falling apart. She is moody and lonely; this hurts me a lot. And lately, I howl at the Moon like a wolf. Crazy isn’t it? The red-headed girl stays away from me. Anyway, why I am talking about her? She doesn’t interest me at all. I need only Lou Lou. My dear Lou Lou... My heart is hurt. There are beautiful winter days out, but I feel sad and gloomy. I feel down like a rainy dark autumn day.

Lou Lou, I am sorry. Please come back. Winter’s cold winds whistle down the chimney. But something is telling me that she will return today. I know that woman’s heart is generous and kind by nature. Meanwhile, I overheard Monsieur de Rex whispering on the phone “*Madame, s’ilvous plait. Je vous en pris.*” He started to vacuum. Our vacuum’s name is “devil of dirt”. I don’t understand why he decided to irritate me with this horrible noise? Why did he decide to clean the house, the dishes and the pans? We are not expecting anybody.

I smelled lamb cutlets cooked in white wine. That was the best smell food can provide. I heard the noise of Lou Lou’s Cadillac passing on the highway near my bungalow. She rang the bell. I rushed to the door right away. I was faster than Monsieur Jean; who is usually the one who opens the door. I hugged her so tightly.

“Calm the hell down,” she reacted. I felt killed by her ignorance. I decided to vanish in the basement right away.

“Okay, okay,” she stopped me and started caressing my hair. “Let’s say that I forgive you, Casanova,” she had stopped, thinking of the proper words to describe Casanova. Not having found anything interesting, she exclaimed “Let’s go for a walk Jimmy! It’s a perfect day today!”

I was on cloud nine. I was so happy that we were together again. I felt alive and a bit distracted. I was so distracted by her presence that I was barely able to slip my arms in the sleeves of my suede jacket and put on my dandy Indian moccasins. Finally, I dressed up, zipped my jacket, and we went to a local park. Before, this park was a dark forest covering a high rocky mountain. The forest was home to many wild animals. But everything changed when white men came to the mountain. These people were full of vague ideas. The harmony of nature was destroyed. The once virgin forest became a dog park. Nowadays, this

place smells of dog urine and bird excrements instead of flowers and pine. What a change! That keeps me thinking about human evolution. Is the human race evolving or devolving?

Walking in the outside air gave me such energy and sexual desire. I started fussing and whining. I started showing my desire to her.

“Calm down, there are people everywhere. They have already bad thoughts about us,” she whispered. “I don’t give a fuck what other people think about us. I will appreciate it if they would just stop talking. Human language makes too much noise. Too much talk has no value. The world would benefit without it.”

Soon my lust was so great that we rushed towards my house.

“Calm down, you idiot.... let me take off my clothes,” she pushed me away tenderly. I am impatient. I missed her so much.

“Wait a moment please,” she whispered, dropping her overcoat to the floor. “You are so impatient.”

“I can’t. I don’t want to wait,” I was pushing her gently towards my beloved couch. “Please let me take off my clothes,” she striped down her ivory blouse.

I salivated like one of Pavlov’s dogs. I helped Lou Lou undress. Finally, all her clothes were stripped down and spread on the white fluffy carpet. She pushed the start button on the music player. We laid down on the cool leather of the couch.

Honestly, I am not the one who can describe sex scenes vividly and hot. Having sex with her is a guilty pleasure for me. Her lips move swiftly...touch of her hot breath...gentle touch of her fingers...her tongue is the key of heaven. No words can describe all my feelings at this moment. Therefore, you can use your imagination. I give up.

“Jimmy! Come to me!” she calls me from the bath tub. Her voice lovely brings me back to reality; from my world of fantasies to such a rough reality. “Let’s have a bath, Jimmy.”

She probably forgot that I prefer to swim in lakes rather than sit in bath tubs. She would never forget this if she lived with me. But she is hiding her emotions. Why? We are not living in a barbarian place...

“Bye, Jimmy, See you later. I will be missing you, my baby! Loosey goosey!” She kisses my cold wet nose and vanishes in the chilly January night. She returns back to her life. Her life that is unknown to me.

I am looking through the window; I observe how her car is departing from my parking lot. The back lights are slowly disappearing into the night. Yet, I am able to hear the noise of her car's motor until it vanishes on the highway.

III.

I could only give a sad sigh and sit on my couch. I turned on the TV. It was a dog special on *Animal Planet*. Bichons are twisting their bodies around, sausage dogs are dragging behind. Greyhounds are marching graciously on the stage. The show's host is a big solid man with flabby cheeks and a twisted hairdo. He looks like a Saint-Bernard himself. A red-headed dog is happily running on a stage. I saw Lou Lou there, I think.

There were so many faces on TV that it made me tired. Tonight's nice memories made me fall asleep, and I dreamt only sweet dreams. It was getting dark outside. It seems like hockey player hit the moon into the night sky. The moon was moving slowly among the dark clouds.

"I need finally to legalize our relationship with Jimmy. I can't continue like this anymore. Today he chooses a red-headed girl over me! Who knows who will appear in his life tomorrow? Anyway, I agree with him. Why are we hiding? From whom are we hiding? We are not criminals. So, there is no need to hide our touchy relationship from people," Lou Lou was thinking aloud while entering the Metropolis. She lives in the stone jungle of the city. Despite being surrounded by many people, she felt lonely. "We are not maniac- cannibals or in a sect," she continued "And finally, we live in a free country: not in a Gulag," she concluded.

Epilogue

After few days, a following advertisement appeared in the city newspaper:

"Looking to rent a four-bedroom bungalow downtown for me and my dog. The dog is a greyhound named Jimmy. Call # Ask for Madame Lou Lou."

Dreamy White Valley

Mati Blimp, in her forties, did not believe (it was said that this contributed to the mistakes of her youth), in love, nor did she believe in the laws of nature, which she nevertheless referred to in her numerous scientific works. Among her colleagues she earned the nickname “Edison in a skirt” for her dry-as-dust and gnarly personality. The only thing that she really loved was her ‘country home,’ which was handed down to her from her parents: an old Victorian mansion.

First, it was there she spent her happy childhood. Second, it was located in a picturesque place. Third, it was here that she has got inspired with her interesting scientific ideas. An oil magnate, a film star, a famous sportsman all offered very good money for the house; even once the popular magician and illusionist—the owner of the visual effects corporation actually made such an offer which, in the words of the famous hero of the film, was impossible to refuse. Nevertheless, Mati answered unhesitatingly as always - No! Detractors commented on this fact as follows:

“As soon as she sells the house, her scientific achievements and success will end immediately!”

And perhaps this was the truth.

Bob Norton had lived on his own, but still he was a good-looking man. For three decades, he scuttled the literary ridge, with his crime fiction novels. Blood flowed rivers in Norton’s books. Entrails and brains ran like waterfalls. Norton chose the Canadian loggers axe as a weapon of choice for the massacre of undesirable characters. Depending on the circumstances, the writer gave it various forms and modifications. The novels of Bob Norton were impossible to read without arriving at pure terror. So, girls and housewives went miles out of their way to avoid an encounter with him. Maybe that’s why at fifty-something he lived a lonely life not having even achieved literary recognition.

But after many months of creative impotence Bob Norton was visited by a muse and the muse told him this story:

... And in the final chapter the superman hero of the novel suddenly falls ill. Doctors give him a few months to live. He does not have time to fight the anti-hero. Then the hero urgently invents a machine, which can erase physical memory of the disease. Hero recovers, fights, wins!

Quickly he finished the overture, images of the main events of the novel. Then Bob started the final scene. However, soon he realized that without consultation with a specialist he could not go on.

“Refer to the ‘Edison in a skirt,’” Bob was advised by a fantasy-writer friend of his.

“Who is this ‘Edison in a skirt’, Scottish or what?”

“It’s not him, it’s a her...”

“Milkso!p!? Yes, they have the same chicken brains!”

“This milkso!p is the science head of the White House, plus she runs two analytical department of the C.I.A. Besides, she is working on such projects which make your murder-novels look like childish pranks!”

“Ok, what’s her phone number?” The writer couldn’t resist the arguments.

The fellow dictated. Norton drove it into memory of his cell phone marking number initials “EinS.”

That same evening, he called. A secretary made an appointment on Monday from two to four in the afternoon. At two-thirty on Monday, Bob Norton entered the office of Ms. Mati Blimp. The idea made a deep impression on her.

“You know, I’ve been already thinking about this problem,” she said to Bob. “And you said something that even prompted...”

They talked for a long time. It took some time and...

“Do you believe in love, Ms. Blimp?” The journalists of the scientific journal asked Mati.

“Until I met Bobby, I did not. But now ... I do without a doubt. Love exists and makes human life fruitful and happy.”

To the same reporter’s question of the same magazine, but addressed to Norton:

“And what feelings you experienced when you first saw Ms. Blimp, Mr. Norton?”

“As if I was hit on the head by a Canadian lumberjack!” Answered the writer.

From the very day Mati met Bob, she began changing markedly. Turning from a dry, pedantic individual to a dazzling charming lady. After a year the former Mati was absolutely gone. Soft, kind, friendly— she did not only start to believe in the laws of nature, but she was even seen in a church!

It had been five years of marriage. All these five years, lying in bed, Mati awaited the morning when she would see her, Bobby after the long night!

“Get up, darling,” she woke her husband. “Your favorite, French toast, is waiting for you!” All this, despite the fact that a couple years ago Mati Blimp could not even cook scrambled eggs.

“Your espresso is ready, honey!”

Mati gently put the cup on her husband’s desk.

“And what in the world is not considered a disease?” Cried the hero of B. Norton’s next novel *The Love Storm*.

God is the disease. Genius is the disease. Love is sickness. Existence is also turns to be a form of the disease.

Since being married his novels no longer contained gushing blood and spewing entrails. His stories became more peaceful and philosophical. However, the leading publishing houses, such as 'Word Writer', 'New Leroy', and 'Jeff Publish' did not sign with Bob Norton, and he essentially lived at the expense of his wife. Still, Bob and Mati thought themselves happy. Once in the fall, on a quiet sunny morning the following occasion took place...

"Sweetie, your coffee is ready. Will you drink it in the living room or in the office?" Mati asked from the kitchen.

"Bring it to the office, dear; I do not want to be distracted," he shouted from his office.

"No problem, my valentine."

Mati set the coffee in front of her spouse. Bob kissed his wife's hand and sipped the scalding drink. He put the cup down and looked at the text of the novel. His attention was attracted by little black point. Strange, thought Bob. The dot rapidly grew, sucking the writer inside. Bob did not even have time to be really scared, as he had already become a part of the silent desert blackness.

Two days flew away. Bob Norton opened his eyes and saw his wife.

"Where am I, Mati?"

"In the hospital, sweetie," answered Mati, sighing mournfully. A little later she added: "the best one."

"Well, since it's the best, that means I am doing poorly." Bob forced a smile, "Well, it's fair. Not only do I send my heroes to a better world. It's now my turn now to follow them! Literary gods got angry with me and decided to revoke my time here..." Bob laughed weakly again.

"What are you saying, Bobby," rebelled Mati. "I'll not let you go anywhere, no matter how much your gods want it! Not for them have I been looking after you for so long!" Mati put her head on his chest and cried.

"Calm down, honey," Bob patted his wife on the head.

"You will be examined by the best specialists," firmly declared Mati, wiping tears from her face. "This is the first, and secondly, you better tell me what you would like most of all now: juice, fruit, your favorite French toast with yogurt?"

A few weeks later, as Mati had promised, the best doctors were invited to fight Bob's disease. But for all their regalia and knowledge, they predicted Bob Norton had two months to live.

"How do you feel, Bobby?" Asked Mati after another treatment session.

"Not bad, my dear, not bad," replied Bob weakly.

"Well, well! Maybe you wish for something, darling? Some fruit, juice or your favorite French toast?"

"No, thank you, honey!"

“Nothing at all, really?”

“What I really want is, alas, not possible to fulfill...” Sighed the writer sadly.

“What do you wish for, sweetie?”

“I’d love to make it to Christmas and go to White Valley.”

“But, it looks like I will not endure till Christmas.”

“Don’t say that! Better tell me where this White Valley is.”

“I don’t know, honey, I heard about it from my mother when I was a kid. She told me that Santa Claus lives there, and if you get to White Valley on Christmas, any wish will come true.”

“So, what do you wish for, Bobby?”

“Not lose you so fast, my sunshine!”

“I promise you, Bobby,” Mati knelt by her husband’s bed. “You will never lose me. And you certainly will get White Valley!”

“Perhaps, it does not exist...White Valley,” Bobby smiled. “And it was just my mother’s little story!”

“No, Bobby, it sure does, if you believe in it. And you certainly will get there!” Bob squeezed his wife’s hand.

“But I want to get there with you, my sweet valentine.”

“I do not mind,” Mati smiled.

The last ray of sunlight slid across the face of Norton the writer. Bobby wiggled his nose comically, wrinkled it and sneezed. He opened his eyes. Dusk fell over the city.

“Mati.”

“Have you already awoken,” Mati asked upon entering the room. “Get up, quickly or else you’ll sleep through your meeting with Santa Claus.”

“What Santa Claus?” Bob Norton raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“Christmas Santa!”

“Is it already Christmas?!”

“Yes, it is, yesterday you were told: ‘Bobby, you seem drunk...’ But you said: ‘no, no, I can control myself!’”

“Here’s the result!”

“Why would I suddenly be drunk yesterday? I don’t remember...”

“What a trick!? Have you forgotten that yesterday you signed a contract with the publishing house ‘Word Writer’ for your new novel?”

Bobby’s eyes widened.

“What contract, Mati?! Are you kidding?”

Mati handed the paper to her spouse. It was a black on white printed agreement. At the bottom there was the signature of well-known publisher, Charlie Warner, and the recognizable scribble of Bob Norton.

There was a Christmas show. The next channel was running Christmas greetings, too, and the third one, and the fourth, and all the foreign channels. The entire world was celebrating Christmas. It was impossible to discredit the whole world.

On one of the TV channels, the director of the Word Writer Publishers was speaking, and Bob Norton's name was mentioned among the year's best reads.

*

Then Mati came back, looking just "wow!" with her new hairdo. Both of them changed their clothes and walked out into the street. The sun has already set, and the sky was blazing with the glow of northern lights. The stars, so bright and hanging so close, seemed like baubles that one could take off a huge Christmas Tree. Soon, the two had reached the main square of White Valley. There, sitting on a tall throne made of ice, a huge Santa was towering above the crowd.

Mati and Bob joined the extremely long queue.

"Oh dear," a lady whom Bob has never seen before suddenly exclaimed, "isn't this Bob Norton, the writer?! Gentlemen, please, make room for Mr. Norton!"

"Bob Norton. The Bob Norton," the crowd started to buzz. "Can it be him? Of course, Mr. Norton, please go to the front. Make room for Mr. Norton!"

"Please, ladies and gentlemen," Bobbie mumbled confusedly, "there is no need to... no, no. Please, don't worry."

"No, no, you should not balk, please, you don't have to wait."

Gently but insistently, the men and women in the queue were pushing Bob Norton towards Santa.

"Thank you very much! Many thanks for your appreciation..."

Smiling, shaking strangers' hands and giving autographs, Bobby approached Santa Claus.

"I'm listening."

Bobby looked up. This Santa was not like those traditional Santas who look at you from the show-windows, Coca Cola bottles or the "season's greetings" postcards. His reddish face and feline eyes betrayed him as a Native Northerner, or an Inuit.

It's got to be some spoof, Bobby thought, something isn't right here.

"My dear," Santa interrupted his reflection, "spoofs happen at the circus, and here we have a job to do, so please be short and quick... seeing how many people are queuing to talk to me. Speak your wish, or pass. Don't make them wait too long."

"Pardon me," Bobby coughed constrainedly, "but as a writer... I'd rather... do it in written form, OK?"

"Of course."

Bob quickly scribbled his wish on a sheet of paper and handed it to Santa. Santa threw a quick glance at B. Norton's scrawl and said:

"Got it. Come closer, please."

Bob obeyed. As he did, Santa started to move his hand in front of Bob's face, much like a schoolboy wiping an exercise from the blackboard. The same instant, Bob was immersed in viscous mist. His whole life, but in inverse order, flew past him; then everything reverted—just as swiftly—to the present day. Bob was shaking his head like a wet dog.

“What was it?”

“Go back to your wife,” Santa smiled.

“How are you, sweetie?” Mati inquired.

“It feels like there were some parts cut out of my life, honey... some disagreeable parts.”

“Sounds good,” she said, “and worthy of being celebrated with a glass of champagne, I believe.”

Mati caught Bobby's arm, and they got going to a restaurant.

The waiter, short and chubby like a penguin, poured champagne into their glasses.

“To your health, Bobby.”

“I'd rather drink to you, Mati.”

“To us, then, sweetheart.”

The spouses drank and kissed each other.

“I beg your pardon for interfering such an intimate moment,” a man's voice addressed Bob, “but it is a business that permits no delay.”

Bob turned to look. The gentleman in front of him was sporting a nice set of threads. His face seemed to be familiar.

“Please, go on.”

“I am the owner of New Leroy Publishers, Lawrence Roust.”

That's why he seems familiar, Bob Norton thought. The man has rejected several of Bob's novels.

“You see, my flight to the mainland is tonight, that is why I cannot put our talk off till tomorrow. I have read your latest novel, and would like to make you a proposal to work with our publishing house.”

“I'd love to,” Bob Norton said embarrassedly, “but I've already signed an exclusive contract with the Word Writer Publishers to print my future novels.”

“Oh! What a pity!” The disappointed publisher shook his head. “We could have offered you much better terms. But should you ever change your mind, please call me at any time, day or night—this is my direct phone number.” He pulled out a business card from his jacket pocket.

It all was like some unbelievable dream. Bob Norton even pinched himself, and then his cellphone started ringing.

“Hello?”

“Mister Norton?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“This is the director of the Word Writer Publishers speaking. I can see you talking to that stinker Lawrence Roust. Don’t trust a single word from him! He’d buy you and sell you twice. As for us, we’re an honest publishing house. The only one who was able to offer you a fee that matches your talent. I shall double it if you confirm that our accords remain in force. Do you confirm that?”

“I do,” Bob answered quickly.

“Then see you in our office next year...”

*

Just as Bob and Mati were leaving the restaurant, an army of excited admirers and pushy reporters besieged him. In the blink of an eye, Bob found himself giving an improvised press conference right there on the street.

Hardly known to be a great orator before, that night Bob was full of sparkling wit and eloquence.

Later, already in his bed, Bob told himself: “It shall all be over when I wake up tomorrow.”

It wasn’t. Next day, the “Honorary Citizen of White Valley” medal was awarded to the writer. The Bob Norton Prize in Literature was instituted, and he presented it to a local novice writer. Bob was pricking himself with pins and needles. He pinched himself in every suitable and unsuitable part of his body. He gave himself numerous slaps in the face. Nevertheless, the fascinating reality never disappeared—though, frankly speaking, Bob didn’t really want it to disappear.

A week has passed. On January 2nd, Bob and his wife flew back home on a plane provided by White Valley Mayor’s Office. It landed not far from Mati’s estate.

Bob walked down the boarding ramp. Mild frost and light snow welcomed him, his favorite kind of weather.

After two months, it was the end of February. The smell of spring was already in the air. At midday, snow was melting on the pathways under the warm rays of sun. Gleefully shouting sparrows were bathing in the year’s first puddles. Bob was feeling perfect! He craved creation! For writing something that would shake the world!

“Yeah, shake the world, that’s what I’ll do!” Bob exclaimed and rushed to his writing desk...

*

One evening, when Bob was finishing the first chapter of his new novel, there was a quiet tap at his door. Bob listened up. It seemed to him like there were Christmas bells ringing softly outdoors, and a child’s voice singing. The writer waved the delusion away and went back to his interrupted work.

After some time, somebody tapped his door again. Bob opened the door. On his threshold there stood an angel, curly-haired, wearing Santa's red coat and holding a Christmas bell.

"Who are you?" Bob inquired with a puzzled look.

"My name is Ray Castley," the little boy replied. "You see, my Dad has bought this house, and I would like to go around and see it..."

"Bought this house?" Bob was dumbfounded.

"Why yes... and we are moving in right after Christmas, that's what Dad told me".

"After Christmas! What are you talking about, kid? Christmas was two months ago! Look, are you all right? Where do you live, anyway?"

"My Dad and I live in a hotel nearby, but why does that matter? So can I see the house, please?"

"Of course, come in." Bob let the boy indoors. "I'll prove you that you're wrong." They passed into the living room. "Here, look at this."

Bob pointed to the calendar—and lost his tongue. The number on the calendar was 24, the month—December.

Bob flung himself to the TV set. All the channels were greeting their audience with Christmas. The ads were inviting people to Boxing Day sales.

Bob was petrified.

"Are you all right, sir?" the 'angel' inquired. "Excuse me, I don't know your name?"

"Neither do I," the writer replied...

*

On January 2nd Bob and Mati moved off the estate: such was the price of the "delightful fraud." Be as it may, the fraud was a success. The disease has abated. There was not a hint left of it. By "real spring," Bob had completed his new novel, entitled *The Dreamy White Valley*.

The novel wasn't too compelling, but somehow—or maybe some echoes of the delightful fraud were still in power?—the critics praised it as "the book of the year," and then that "of the century." The number of copies sold was fantastic. A leading motion-picture company bought the screen rights.

Next summer, Bob began negotiations to buy back his wife's former estate.

At first, the new owner was somewhat obstinate, but in the end he could not resist the price that Bob Norton was offering—the money was just incredible. By next Christmas, Bob and Mati were to move back home.

Providence

One day, a small hairy man with a microphone in one hand walked up to Paul Reef on the street. (Paul Reef, little more than 40 years of age, defies this author's description.)

"I am the host of a talk show," the little fellow said. "It's called Work Days in the City, see. Please answer, my dear sir. What is your life like? What don't you like about it?"

"Fuck you!" Reef pushed him rudely away. Then he ducked into a shop that sold wine and vodka.

This whole scene in fact never took place. It's merely the fruit of the author's imagination. But it's the sort of thing that could easily have occurred. This taciturn fellow, still gloomier when in the throes of a hangover, would be apt to strike out and smash everything in sight, microphone, recorder, the whole kit and caboodle. Since Mr. Reef is no stranger to me, allow me to answer questions in his stead.

In this life, Mr. Reef loves only his young daughter. She is living with her mother now. Moreover, he likes to drink alcohol. He doesn't like work and he's a xenophobe. In short, rather your average man in today's society.

Once upon a nasty cold windy night, Paul's daughter fell sick. At first glance, the illness was nothing serious, a bit of fever, runny nose, a cough. The next day the doctor had terrible news. "Only Providence can to save your daughter. She needs surgery. This kind of operation is done in only one place, Doctor Wax's private clinic. It costs \$50,000, minimum."

"50,000?!"

Paul Reef, a lifelong recipient of social welfare, didn't have fifty cents to his name. Soaked in the rain and in his tears, he left the clinic. Though he was certainly no Russian, he asked himself the famous Russian question — *What is to be done?* He reviewed the options. He spat yellow tobacco saliva. He looked up to the gloomy rainy sky and began to pray. *I will not drink*, he vowed. *I will work hard. I will work for charities. I'll even go to church on Sunday.*

The clouds parted in a heartbeat and a beam of sunlight shone through.

*

It is true, a family name is bound up with a man's whole existence. In any case, immigrant Petr Riskun has never done anything in life but take risks in searching for jobs. In the morning he'd work as a forklift

driver at a flour factory, even though he was too frail to change gears. And in the afternoon, he'd carry bags of promotional materials, despite being flat-footed, which freed him up from military duty.

Evenings, Petr cleaned lobbies. At one point, he even delivered pizza, regardless of his poor vision. God only knows when and where he slept.

Petr despises empty words. In this life there's not much he does love. He likes alcoholic beverages, of which there's always a good supply in his small apartment. He doesn't love work or native people.

On the other hand, Petr loves his wife Raisa. She doesn't go through his pockets looking for money. She doesn't read women's novels or detective mysteries, or newspapers, magazines and other nonsense. Instead, she cooks delicious soup, and sews clothes, washes up, cleans rooms. He'd surely love to have a child with her. Unfortunately, God never granted them a baby.

Raisa's reaction to all this love is to growl and curse at her husband. "What do you have? What do you have? Is it money? What is it, a house? Is it a house?" The Zinkin house happens to be a fine house. "Everyone takes two hours to clean their house. I can clean ours in one hour. Other women have good men. But all I have is a devil of a husband. I can't look after you."

My friend, a defrocked priest, has always insisted God loves those He punishes. Is it possible He loves the ones he curses? The thing is, Raisa loved her husband in her own way. Why? Because after her husband's sudden death, at the civic funeral she wept and cried with an authentic feeling of misery.

"Here's Baba come along. My wife also tells me she loves me, but when I die, she won't cry one hundredth what you have," Petr's friend, Anatoly Ivanovich Wiwalov said.

"What happened? How did he die?" A stranger who'd been invited to the funeral asked.

"Why do people die?" Anatoly muttered. "One knows full well why. Their time has come."

"What's he doing in a closed casket?"

"Because it was a bad accident. He was badly burned."

"Well, there's such a thing as cosmetics," said the stubborn stranger. "Everyone knows nowadays what miracles can be done. Schlick-schlack, you've got yourself someone who looks better than he did when he was alive."

"Can't shake you, can we?" Wiwalov said. "Can't stop you from going on. Go ask the widow why she hasn't had it done."

"That would be awkward," said the unknown citizen.

"So, if so, drop it and keep quiet."

I can assure my reader that Anatoly Ivanovich, being a genuine gossip who loves to give his views on current events, would love to tell what caused Petr Riskun's death, but in this matter he found himself completely in the dark. Was this why he acted so untoward with the strangers? For this reason, the author will take it upon himself to tell the real circumstances leading to this ceremony of mourning.

The last days of the life of Petr Riskun were successful to a degree anyone seldom reaches. One could say that life sold Petr out at the very moment of his glory. He woke up earlier than usual, sparing him Raisa's morning scold. There wasn't much to load and unload at his warehouse job: the advertisement bags were light. Things came up easily and without forcing from all the lower floors. He was being paid overtime. He was less lucky with pizza delivery. Sure, there were lots of orders that night, but tips were pathetic—not a penny. Only at midnight, when the tote board lit up saying it was three a.m. on the nose, the night-time priestess of love held out a two-dollar coin and told Riskun, "Take it, sweetheart."

Riskun still hadn't managed to get down the stairs when his cellphone started vibrating in his pocket.

"You can go home now. There won't be any more orders," the pizzeria manager told him.

I've been dying for this, our pizza man told himself as he drove off. *I've been slaving away forever*. Despite never having gambled in his life, he stopped alongside an open-all-night store and went inside. He handed over his two dollars to the clerk and told her, "One ticket for the 6-49."

"Fill out the card," the vendor said.

"The computer can do it."

"Extra?"

"Just the regular."

"OK." The vendor pushed some buttons. The machine played a strange electronic melody and spewed out the ticket. Petr put it in the chest pocket of his good English wool suit. Of course, little did Riskun know that this was the last day of his life, and it was just a fluke that he had put on his best suit.

He drove home thinking how well he was going to sleep. He fell asleep at the wheel. It slipped from the tired palms of his hands. The car swerved sharply and the bumper struck a bridge abutment. The vehicle flipped over onto the pavement of the adjacent highway.

"Luckily, it wasn't rush hour and there were no cars coming, otherwise the number of casualties would have been much higher," said the chief of police regarding the accident. "There's another interesting detail, but it shouldn't go public." The reporter turned off his microphone. "Yeah, the victim had third degree burns all over his body, but his suit wasn't damaged at all. It's pretty mystical, don't you think?"

Forty days passed after his death. According to Russian tradition, that's when the soul gets to ascend to heaven. Raisa decided to give away her husband's stuff.

"I can't bear to look at them," she told her friend Lucia. "My soul is torn. I'm still washing his shirts, his socks, his pants. It's like he's still alive and on his way home. The Orthodox priest told me it's not good for his soul. I should give his clothes to a hand-me-down shop. Maybe someone else can use them. I can't do it. Lucia, you do it. Maybe they'll offer you something in exchange."

Lucia agreed without hesitation.

"Sorry, we don't give money," the receptionist told her. "We only accept donations."

“What do you mean, donations? I paid good money for these clothes, Look at the quality of this suit! Real English wool. Worth a whole house. And you expect me to donate it. Are you out of your mind? Come on, make an offer.”

“I'm sorry, we're under specific instructions,” the receptionist said with a sigh.

Lucia went on asking for a good quarter of an hour before leaving, empty-handed.

“Just take them,” she cried. “Just a bunch of parasites, that's what you are!” She threw down her bag and went out the door. But then she came back in.

“At least give me the money for a bus ticket. I thought I had enough to get back. How am I supposed to get home otherwise? I don't live nearby.”

“Here, you can have mine,” the vendor said, reaching into her purse.

“Great,” Lucia grumbled as she left with the ticket stub. “All I get out of it is a tuft of shabby wool.”

*

Mr. Reef, as I said earlier, was mulling over ways of saving his daughter. Deciding not to wait on Providence, he opted to beseech the mayor for mercy.

What? Mr. Reef reasoned. My whole family, going back five generations, was born and died in this town, paid their taxes, sacrificed themselves for its glory. Besides, I voted for the guy. I might have made the difference. He owes me one. Ah, if I just had a nicer suit... He began going through his modest closet. Not finding anything that would do, he made up his mind to go to the Salvation Army and trade in his ragamuffin outfit for something showier.

Half an hour later in the store he took from a stand a dark-blue English wool suit. He went to a changing room and tried it on, along with a bow-tie he had found on the way. He ran a comb through his hair and looked at himself in the mirror. Who could refuse to help such a fellow? he asked himself. Answer: nobody. He got back into his old spats, which smelled of hops, and left with his purchase.

Out on the street, he shifted his documents to another place and slid his comb into his breast pocket. He felt something already there. He pulled it out. It was a lottery ticket. If the author had been in Mr. Reef's place, he'd no doubt have tossed it into the garbage can, for the date had expired by a month, but the author is one person and Mr. Reef another.

He didn't throw it away but instead went into the nearest shop and gruffly told the man behind the counter to check it.

What did the trick? It was the lottery ticket. In a flash, lazy old Reef was a fabulously rich man. Sure, a measly five million is not the end of the world. But still.

In the lottery office he was asked what made him hide his ticket for so long. He wanted to say “Fuck you”, but he got a hold of himself and looking at the floor with a demur sigh, said:

“I couldn’t believe my luck,” he said. “For the past thirty years it’s had me by the balls.” He looked up and asked in an aggressive tone, “Well? What are we waiting for?”

*

Not long thereafter, Mr. Reef’s daughter had her operation, and by God’s mercy she soon felt a whole lot better. She was discharged from the hospital and was soon running about, skipping and smiling, singing and joining in all the games children like to play. Anyone looking at her would never have known her life had recently been in danger. Mr. Reef bought himself a big beautiful house and a silver Mercedes and so many new suits (which he constantly riffled through in hopes of finding a new winning 6-49 ticket) that even the fastest computer would take an hour to count them up. As he promised, he gave up drinking and started attending church on Sundays and getting involved in charities. He even went so far as to run an ad in the paper. The owner of a blue-striped suit which was given to the Salvation Army, it read, and he gave the address, asking the person to contact him by phone.

But no one called. For you see, Raisa didn’t read anything, as I said earlier: no books, no magazines, no papers, especially not in a foreign language. If she had had the habit of reading, she’d have been familiar with Mikhail Veller’s story “Crematorium” in his *Legends of Nevskiy Prospekt* and known not to sell her husband’s suit without going through its pockets carefully. On the other hand, even if Raisa wasn’t a reader, she did have the God-given intelligence not to scrounge around in strangers’ pockets. And after all, Petr Riskun had never gone in for gambling. So it goes.

Mr. Reef lived like a king for a year. Then he embarked on financial projects that soon ended in grief. In short, he gave up the church for the casino and said goodbye to his savings. Pretty soon, he had to declare bankruptcy. To pay his debts he sold his house and suits, and now he’s back in his dingy little apartment where he lived before the 6-49 ticket came along. He doesn’t have a job and he spends his time drinking hard liquor. His daughter grew up, though, and got accepted into the economics department of a prestigious university. Her teachers all predict great things from her.

About the Author:



Vlad Savich was only a child, growing up in the Soviet Union, when he began to dream of freedom. After completing his education at Belarus State University and seeing through the birth of his daughter, he and his wife escaped the USSR. The family now lives in Montreal, Canada, where they breathe the air of freedom.

Vlad's prose and plays belong to a literary school he calls Prerealism. His writing has appeared in publications including *Volga*, *New Youth*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *Berfrois*, *Clarion*, *New Review*, *Day and Night*, *Slovo/Word*, *Vologda Literature*, *Darial* and *Khreshchatyk*. In addition to his writing, he is also a director and actor with the Montreal Russian Theater.

He prefers to be called "Vlad" rather than "Vladimir", so as not to be associated with the disreputable activity of a certain barnardine Russian leader.

His personal website is www.savich.lit.com.ua.

