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Irkadura

a novel by Ksenia Anske

117,241 words

For Michael Gruber, who asked me to write this.

## Chapter 1. The Bed In The Woods

Irka Myshko woke up at a quarter to six in the morning next to a boar and a catfish, on a bed in the middle of the woods. She looked them over. Nothing changed since yesterday; on the contrary, they looked peaceful. Sun sent feeble rays through a ceiling of leaves. Light greased the boar with shine. Its snout wheezed, its beastly body heaved. Irka passed her eyes over the shape next to it. The bloated sot of a bottom feeder. Parasitic. Naked. It opened its suckermouth, wiggled. Bed springs whined. The boar snorted and turned, exposing its paunch. The kill zone area.

*It's good you have a fat dick. I'll have something to hold on to, while I gut you.* Thought Irka, forcibly immobile.

It was important not to wake the boar. Last night she failed to change into a mouse, to scurry out of her mind. Last night that swine had dined between her legs, the usual, only it didn't get satisfied with what it tasted, it went farther. It crunched on her spine, ripped her in half, from thigh to thigh, devoured her heart, sucked on her lungs, leaving her no air to scream, and stopped at her neck, buried in soaked sheets.

It fell asleep after, but Irka couldn't. She waited for two painful hours until all was still, then gathered her remains and washed them one by one in the narrow bathtub with cheap soap. She endured the sting, taking care to lather and rinse every fold, douched with pink water of potassium permanganate, then dried herself with a large sheet and returned to bed.

The boar's piggy eyes fluttered open for a moment, closed. Its breathing pattern quickened. It shed fur at an alarming rate. Clumps of it littered the camel blanket stuffed into a duvet cover with a diamond opening in the middle. Swine trotters morphed into callused hands and feet. The snout shrunk to a nose riddled with veins. The stink of a hog gave way to that of an unwashed body. The body of Lyosha Kabansky, her mother's drunkard boyfriend of one year.

Irka glanced up.

The ceiling acquired the density of plaster. The bed didn't stand in the woods anymore, it pressed on the creaky parquet, each leg snug in a hole from missing boards, either worn out by age or pissed through by dogs and cats. The catfish stirred. Fat arms and breasts sprouted on its girth, spilled unsightly over the blanket. Its whiskers shrunk, thinned to a mustache on a face of a sleeping woman, bloated from the alcohol consumed last night.

*I wish we weren't related. Thought Irka. Wish you weren't my mother. I wish I was never born.*

Gritting her teeth, she glanced at the window and retracted fourteen years back, to when she was two, to a sunny September morning. The catfish was Marina Somina, Irka's mother, the woman Irka, in her toddler naïveté, loved and feared above anyone else. She peed into an enameled pot with crimson peonies painted on it and waddled over to her mother, proud. She learned how to say her first word.

"Dua!" Said Irka brightly. She couldn't roll a proper Russian 'r' yet, so it came out wrong. She heard the word *dura* often, unaware that it meant 'female fool', at best, or 'retarded bitch', at worst, which is exactly how it was used in Irka's household, comprised of women: her mother, aunt Sonya Seledkina with daughter Lenchka, grandmother Valentina Tarakanova and great grandmother Nadezhda Koza, all crammed into a three-room flat on the last floor of a nine-story Brezhnevka.

"Dua, dua, dua!" Irka poked the snoring shape on the mattress.

Marina grunted, opened one eye, looked at her daughter, at the empty bottle of vodka on the floor, and turned away.

"Dua! Dua!" Irka chanted on repeat, clapping hands, her feet doing a little dance.

"Go away." Marina mumbled into the pillow.

"*Dua*." Said Irka uncertainly. She touched her mother's shoulder with a finger.

Marina flinched and sat up. "What do you need?"

"*Dua*." Irka repeated, taking a step back.

Comprehension dawned on Marina's face. "What?" She moved her feet to the floor. "Who taught you this, huh? Sonya? That bony bitch. You can't say it, you hear me?" Her words came out slurry. She rubbed her pasty face and yawned. In her twenties, she looked forty and beyond, signs of hard life etched into missing teeth, thin mustache, grooves of wrinkles, hair burned by bleaching, and an overweight body sagging like a sack of fish.

Irka's lips quivered. "*Dua*?"

Marina rose from the bed.

Irka shrunk in her shadow.

"What did I tell you, huh? What did I *just* tell you? Is this how you listen to your mother? Now you wait. I'll show you how to say *dura*." Her movements, swift and precise, indicated years of practice. She raised a hand and struck

Irka flew across the room, slammed into the pot, knocked it over. She bit on her tongue. Urine seeped into her shirt. A shape blocked the sunlight. Irka instinctively cowered.

Whatever towered above her, wasn't her mother. It was a giant fish, whiskers curled on either side of its wide leering

mouth. A catfish. It walloped the girl, rolled her over the floor, slammed her into a corner, breathed its stale stink in her face, until Irka peed herself from fear and passed out.

Later, she couldn't remember how she got beaten or for how long, but she did remember two things.

One of them she hid in, the alternate reality populated with beasts. Members of her family gradually morphed into it, one by one. At five Irka took on drawing penises with a pen on a mattress. Sonya discovered it while changing the sheets, fished her from under the bed for a dose of beating and turned into a herring, her hands oily as they slapped Irka's bare bottom. At six Irka started peeing the bed. Valentina changed into a roach, grabbed Irka with all of its thin arm-legs and put her in a corner for punishment, catching scurrying cockroaches off the wallpaper and squashing them under her nose, to teach her what happened to disobedient girls. At seven Irka stopped eating. Nadezhda bleated her frustration and punched Irka's forehead with knuckles like a goat with horns. When Irka was eight, Sonya came home from the hospital with Lenchka. Irka looked inside the carriage and saw a hedgehog, prickly, squirming, and nasty.

The other thing etched in Irka's memory were the orange curtains, the way the threads hung off their frayed edges, the way they flapped in rhythm to her mother's fists like sand

sediment on the bottom of a river, suffocating her, stuffing her nose and throat. They filled her lungs and lodged in there.

That day she became mute. Mute and sneaky like a mouse, always on a lookout for a suitable crack to slink in and wait for thunder to be over.

Women in her family stopped bothering her. They thought her an idiot, nicknamed her *Irkadura* and largely left her alone. And men...men got bored of her faster. *Grubby bastards who like to stick their cocks in the first hole they see.* That's how Irka thought of them. She couldn't hurt them, so she turned the hate on herself, gave herself bruises, detested her appearance, the mousy hair, the midget height, the sizeable bust and butt. School uniforms never fit her. Boys constantly attempted to lift her skirt to see what size panties she wore. She ignored them with stubborn silence, picturing them as annoying woodpeckers whose calls "Stupid *dura!*" and "Fat ass!" and "Chunky monkey!" blurred into meaningless drumming.

It was nothing compared to what she endured at home.

She decided to run. Somewhere. Anywhere. Away from this filth and grime and slum where even the wallpaper hated her, crawling greenish maggots any time she looked at it.

Irka lifted herself inch by inch, sat up and dared to let out her breath.



Lyosha's snoring bulk gurgled something and stopped breathing. His eyes opened, glassy.

Irka's heart stopped. She froze, legs halfway swung over the mattress, not quite touching the floor. The smell of alcohol and stale smoke sharpened in her throat. A sneeze crawled up to her lips. She gulped it down.

"Where you going?" Lyosha blurted.

*Where pigs like you get quartered.* Thought Irka.

He mumbled something and cuddled over to Marina.

After another eternity, Irka dared to touch the floor. Old wood creaked. Petrified, she balanced on one leg, eyes on Lyosha. *I'm going to where swine like you, before they get quartered, they get skinned alive, she thought. Where their ribcages get crushed with steel-plated boots. Where their pricks get yanked out. Where they die in agony over days. There, I will burrow into your flesh, the little harmless mouse, and eat your guts.*

She held back the urge to spit in his face.

Suddenly she wanted to spit in all of their faces, the stray dogs, boyfriends her mother brought home, the filthiest, the smelliest, the hairiest kind. None of them lasted long, kicked out by Nadezhda's sharp glares and colorful words, in one case by a broom. With years her health deteriorated. Lately she spent her days knitting doormats from torn nylon stockings or

drying bread cubes into biscuits to soak in tea. Valentina turned a blind eye to her daughter's antics, camping out in the largest room of the apartment together with Sonya, Lenchka, three cats, two dogs, a rat, and a hedgehog. This left the balcony room for Irka to share with her mother and with any man she brought home. Most of them used Irka as a convenient mutie pet, until they tired of both women, stole whatever was worth stealing and disappeared, leaving Marina drunk and wailing.

All except Lyosha Kabansky. He showed up one September evening, when fall had already shed its last glorious color, rendering Moscow grim. Irka just turned fifteen. Her bust burst out of an ill-fitting cotton bra that has gone yellow with use, her body showed through Marina's hand-me-down housecoat. A ding-dong of the bell trilled across the flat. Kesha and Kasha, spotted mutts, burst into barking. Vas'ka the cat hissed, jumped down from the wardrobe, and landed on Irka's head. She swat at him, sending him flying. He screeched. Nadezhda yelled for him to shut up. Marina snored, slumped in the corner of the kitchen.

Irka opened the door.

Wilting red carnations in one hand, vodka in another, there stood a burly unshaved middle-aged man, a butcher who spent three years in prison for larceny and was recently discharged, Marina's glorious achievement in finding the lowest Moscow scum, stupider and more menacing than any stray dog. A stray boar.

Lyosha appraised Irka's body in seconds. His eyes glinted.

To ascertain his fatherly position, on the very first night he pumped Marina with bootleg until she passed out, then pressed Irka into a corner and fondled her with a revolting grin. He did it in their room, but with time grew bold, handing her in the kitchen. Nadezhda, the only woman who would've given him a piece of mind, barely showed her face. Valentina came home late and left early for her nursing job. Sonya took Lenchka with her on a search to qualify young men for a potential marriage.

The only positive change Lyosha brought was forcing the women to stop walking around the house in underwear or plain naked. Unchallenged, he stayed for a year, spending his days watching the small black and white TV in the kitchen, drinking vodka, singing post-war songs and fondling Marina while she cooked, winking at Irka every time she happened to glance. It signified the oncoming of her nightly regimen. Marina served as an appetizer. Irka's body was what interested Lyosha most, her ripe thighs and the lack of virginity between them, taken long ago by one of Marina's boyfriends. When and by whom exactly, Irka couldn't remember. They blurred into one. She only remembered dogs eating her soft parts.

After, she crouched over the toilet bowl and emptied her stomach, then gave herself bruises. None of the episodes lasted long. The potency of her mother's boyfriends fluctuated between

a few jerks to a couple minutes, that is, if they could get it up after drinking for hours.

Not Lyosha. He maintained both a boar's stamina and looks, or perhaps his job of slaughtering pigs rubbed off on him.

Irka twisted her nipple to punish herself for an unnecessary trip into the past. *You dull-witted moron. Go!*

Why couldn't she just leave? She didn't have to go to school today like the rest of them peckers. She graduated in June at sixteen, being sent to school by Marina a year earlier than her peers. She didn't have to go to an Institute or a University like her classmates with proper families who got accepted and were studying engineering or economics while Irka spent her days cleaning the apartment.

She was done with eight-year-old Lenchka turning over plates of food on her, to the exploding laughter of the whole family. Pinning her cousin to the floor didn't give her the same satisfaction like it used to. She was sick of the wandering hedgehog that bit her once, sick of the smelly rat, the cats peeing everywhere, the dogs having sex under the kitchen table, Valentina drowning newborn puppies in the bucket and throwing them down the garbage chute, sick of the chaos, the filth, the constant scratching of cockroaches, the mites in beds, the dirty clothes on the floor, the piles of dishes, the shouts over who'd

be washing them, the yelling, the screaming, the fighting, the pulling of the hair.

Irka sobbed. She wiped her face, staring at sleeping Lyosha. More than anything, she was sick of his breath on her face, his hands on her skin, sick of him roughing her up to the point where everything between her legs burned.

*Not anymore, Lyosha, you vile piece of shit.*

She wobbled. The soles of her feet prickled, asleep. The nightgown clung to her back from sweat. She breathed deep, bit her lip. If she waited for them to wake up, she'd plunge back into submissiveness and stay. If she moved now, she'd bump into the bed or the corner of the dresser chewed off by dogs, or step on the wrong floorboard. An alarm clock quietly ticked next to Marina's snoring head, its gilded hands crawled toward number six. Irka had no other choice.

She stared at the parquet, a mosaic of six-inch-thick planks. Beads of perspiration prickled her forehead.

*I can do this.*

She focused on the grain pattern, lines of spalting caused by fungi, the twirls, the coils, the knots. She forced them to blend, cloud her vision with floor squares floating in mid-air. Her pulse quickened. The boards sprouted into trees, shot up and past her with a quiet rustle. Greenish wallpaper shed squirming maggots and grew leaves. Woods surrounded Irka. She shrunk, grew

a long pink tail. Her arms and legs shriveled into tiny appendages. Her head narrowed. Seconds later a grey mouse, the common variety that nested behind stoves or sinks, sat on top of the crumpled nightgown, light-footed and ready to flee.

It scurried under the bed, leaving dotted tracks in the dust, and emerged at the other end, by Marina's hand. It climbed onto the corner of the blanket, trotted to the headboard, and hopped on the dresser. An empty vodka bottle pinned rubles underneath it. The mouse hoicked a couple out, carefully retraced back, and scampered to the old wardrobe, its once polished surface scratched, one door hanging ajar, most of it shredded by borer bugs.

The mouse placed the rubles and on the ground and climbed up a pile of clothes. It clasped its teeth on the edge of a backpack and pulled. It thumped down. The mouse froze. Uninterrupted snoring reached its ears. It picked up the money, stashed it into a pocket, and squeaked.

Two probing antennae appeared, then a small brown head and a flattened body. A cockroach skittered out on spiny legs and paused, uncertain. The mouse chivvied at it to move. A horde of them followed, trod around the backpack and hoisted it on their backs. The mouse bolted between pines. The cockroaches followed.

A goat bleated ahead. The mouse dodged it. A couple dogs bounded between birches, barking, wagging their tails. The mouse shot across the glade, to the gap between the trees.

The doorway.

Irka clicked the door shut, gulped air.

"Irka! Where you off to? First day of school?" Said Matvey, the building bum who lived in a nest of rags under the roof staircase on the landing.

She skidded down the stairs.

"Hey, you forgot the flowers! Who goes to the first day of school without flowers? The flowers!" He yelled from above.

She ignored him, reached the first floor, bumped into the entrance door and kicked it open.

Chapter 2. Lenin, Woodpeckers, And Tapeworms

*I'm out. I'm out. I'm out.* Irka panted, peering around. *Good. Calm down. Breathe, Irina Myshko. Now what?* She sucked on her lip. She hadn't the slightest idea of where to go. Aunty Prasha? No, she'd give her away. Inna Igorevna, the elementary school teacher? She lived with her thirty-something bully of a son, so that was a pass. Maybe Olya's blind grandmother would allow her to stay at their summerhouse in exchange for gathering cow pies for their garden? Irka dismissed the idea. Last time they kicked her out for stealing a fried chicken from the fridge. That left the school. She could hide in the boiling room. Warder Klim was old and didn't care, but the caretaker Oksana Lisichkina, she'd call militia in a flash.

The door pushed into Irka's back.

She sprung to the sidewalk.

"Dammit! Irka! You scared me." Praskovya Aleksandrovna, aunty Prasha for short, a retired librarian who lived across the landing from them in a one-room apartment, who nannied Irka as a baby and whom Irka lately detested for her religious piety, hobbled out with an empty string bag in a veined hand, grey



downy kerchief on her shaking head. A rat whose teeth have rotted.

"Irkadura!" Valentina's voice called from above. "Dumb half-wit. Look at me! Where you going? It's seven in the morning! You stupid girl, you don't need to go to school anymore!" She cackled, retracted.

Sonya's head appeared. "Idiot! Get back. Better take the dogs out. What are we going to do with you, you mental imbecile?"

Lenochka, her hair half-braided, squeezed in below, grinned and began chanting. "Irkadura lost her mind! Irkadura lost her mind! Irkadura—"

"Quiet." Sonya slapped her. "People are looking."

Lenochka wailed.

Irka snapped out of it. She forgot that Lenochka was getting ready for the first day school and all of them woke up early. *You're an imbecile all right.* Thought Irka. *It was by sheer luck that you managed not to bump into anyone on your way out, got it? Now, move!* Head low, she darted along the street.

"Hey! Wait!" Trailed on the wind, but she paid it no heed. Before their demands took hold of her, she had to disappear.

Irka ran without looking up. She cried out as she bumped into a bright-eyed boy in a dark-blue uniform, a little Octobrist star on his lapel, a bouquet of mixed asters held high

in one hand, another clutching his mother's sleeve, both on their way to school, early.

"Young lady! Watch where you're going!" Said the woman, shaking her head. "Young people nowadays."

"Mama, she hit me." The boy pursed his lips.

"Yes, I saw that, Sasha." His mother, a stately dame with gaudy make-up, podgy legs stuffed into pumps, began inflating with fury. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, running around like this. Bumping into people." She told Irka. "What if you knocked him down? What then? What if he split his lip?" She continued conjuring up various what-if scenarios, each more dismal than the other.

Irka stared.

The woman morphed into a moose in front of her very eyes, her elaborate hairdo expanded into antlers and poised at Irka. The moose bared its teeth and brayed. "You could at least apologize, you know!"

Irka bolted.

*Who is crazy here, me or the talking moose?* She thought. Her feet bounded along familiar route, past carrel-like porches of the haggish block she no longer wanted to call home, between mulberry bushes obscuring the pathway, up the street, by the peeling from age grocery store where she liked to buy a ten kopeek milk shake and potato chips with stolen money, the ice

cream kiosk that also sold coffee gum, Irka's favorite, the sports store with coveted bicycles on display that nobody in her household could afford, the bottle recycling unit, all of them still closed, to the small square adorned with chestnut trees and begonia flower beds around a life-size statue of Lenin, one stone arm pointing at the bright proletariat future, another clutching his coat's lapel, dead eyes poised at nothing, head crown covered with splotches of bird poop.

Irka stopped to catch her breath, leaned on the side of the wooden bench painted some unrecognizable color, and finally slid into it. She kicked at spiny shells, some of them already cracked, shiny kernels sitting inside.

*See, even chestnuts have homes.* Thought Irka bitterly, picked up one and threw it at the flock of pigeons. They scattered with an indignant cry. She picked up a couple more and tried to score a pigeon mid-flight, but kept missing.

The first of September ripened by the minute. It filled with festive children, boys in navy jackets and pants, girls in white lacy aprons over brown dresses, braids tied with gauze ribbons, flushed knees above knee-socks. Most of them were led by their parents. Mothers, fathers.

Ignoring the stubbing pain from the thorns, Irka picked up one husk, shelled it and folded several chestnuts into her palm. *Too bad these aren't stones, not heavy enough to take out your*

*stupid smiling eyes.* She gazed at one girl in particular, of similar build Irka was at eight, a cheery mother at her side, pinched a chestnut between a forefinger and a thumb, aimed, then lowered her hand without throwing it.

Marina never took her to school, it was always Valentina with her constant attempts to drill into Irka's head ideas on men's superiority and women's obedience. A couple times Nadezhda walked Irka. She fed her lectures on revolutionary spirit and stories about the partisan girl Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya who died for Russian people, whose belief in her country and in communism never wavered. She demanded Irka study well to be accepted into The Communist Party. Eight at the time, Irka felt a discrepancy she couldn't explain. Something rubbed her fake about this ideology for the sake of ideology. Kristina's dad was in the party. They sat at the same desk in class. She liked to whisper in Irka's ear how her dad had a special pass so they could go to special stores where Irka couldn't, how her dad bought her two bicycles, one for Moscow, one for dacha, how they spent their summer vacation at a special holiday resort in Krym. It didn't sound fair to Irka, and she hated Kristina's guts. How could she believe in equality propagated on every corner when the goal of its messengers was to become elite enough to dine on fat sturgeon and caviar while frying their fat bellies in the hot Krymsky sun on the finest Black Sea beaches accessible only to

selected few? Being only eight, Irka couldn't explain her feelings, but she decided to stubbornly oppose anything that concerned communism, like Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya opposed the Germans, which went diametrically opposite to what Nadezhda intended.

"Citizen Myshko!" Said a voice. "Come closer, please. Look at me. I have an important question to ask you. What is the goal of your life, citizen Myshko?"

Irka started, glancing up.

The statue of Lenin was talking to her. "No need to be afraid, citizen Myshko. If you don't know the answer, I will give you the answer. The goal of your life, Myshko, is to devote it to the Soviet state. The goal of your life from this day on will to become a Bolshevik." Lenin coughed, clearing his throat.

*Um, so who is the alcoholic in the family again?* Thought Irka, gaping.

Lenin's stone head inclined. He shook an admonitory finger at Irka and she involuntarily let go of the chestnuts. They rolled out of her hand and skittered on the asphalt. As many times as she passed this square on her way to school, the statue never talked to her before.

"I see I got your attention now. Excellent. Listen to my words, citizen Myshko, listen carefully. Who is a Bolshevik, you might want to ask? Very well, it's a legitimate questions and I

will answer. A Bolshevik is the one who leads our revolutionary work. You do know of what work I'm speaking, Myshko?" The statue took a thundering step and walked off the pedestal, smashing begonias with its stone boots.

Irka's palms turned clammy, and yet she didn't flee. Curiosity took hold of her and wouldn't let go.

"No, I see that you do not. That's a shame, really. All these years in school, wasted! Ah, Myshko, you're a disappointment to the Soviet power. Let me explain to you why. It is because you're of the Menshevik faction." The statue took another step that shook the entire square. "I know who you are. You're a mouse. A pitiful rodent that worries about its own pitiful self. You're a descendant of a capitalistic vermin." Lenin dug his boot out of the soft flowerbed and stepped over the parapet.

Mortified, Irka tried to move and couldn't. She racked her brain. Nadezhda came from a line of peasants, she knew that, but she knew nothing about her father, his whereabouts, whether he was alive or not, and why he left pregnant Marina right after they married. She only knew his name, Gerasim Myshko, which she found out recently when getting her passport, as Marina referred to him as damned hairy Jew. Why she called him this, Irka couldn't fathom, because she with her bleak mousy hair certainly didn't look Jewish.

"You, citizen Myshko, plan to exploit the labor of others." Lenin suddenly said, rolling a broken 'r'. "You plan to desert your family, Lyosha Kabansky especially. Did you know that he labors for you? He, the member of hard-working proletariat, is bringing money home to feed you! You, the offspring of a capitalist, of an oppressor, of an exploiter! You were conceived by the wrong father! You must clear your name! Your crime, citizen Myshko, is in that you do not understand the essence of Soviet power!"

Irka's mind reeled from Lenin's gibberish. Her heart dropped. She noticed how a few pioneers, girl and boys in red neckerchiefs, detached from the mass of marching children that accumulated in the soccer field on the right of the school for the Knowledge Day opening ceremony and hiked toward Lenin and her.

"Ah, my dear pioneers! Come, come. Grandpa Lenin has been waiting for you. Are you ready to teach citizen Myshko a lesson?" He asked them brightly.

"Always ready!" They answered in chorus and within seconds changed into gigantic woodpeckers, clad in black, white, and red. They turned heads at Irka. Their eyes glittered.

"You forgot your neckerchief again, Myshko!" Cried the one that looked suspiciously like Kristina.

"And yesterday you didn't iron it! It was so crumpled like you chewed on it all night!" Cried another that resembled Olya.

More of them filled the square.

Irka grabbed the straps of her backpack and stood up from the bench.

"Do you know what happens to pioneers who didn't get accepted into Komsomol? Those pioneers whose minds are too stagnant to join the communist revolution?"

The woodpeckers issued a scornful laugh, mocking Irka. Pairs of malicious eyes ogled her from reinforced skulls, long tongues lashed out as if to impale her like a juicy larvae. They reached the bench and started hammering a rhythm of a pioneer song. Wood chips and paint flakes rained on Irka.

"Fat *dura!*" A woodpecker yelled.

"Muffin puffin!" Cried another.

"Chunky monkey!"

The calls reverberated around Irka. She boiled. The insults hit home.

"You never answered my question, Myshko. Answer me!" Demanded Lenin. His face colored crimson, his coat flapped in the wind two steps away from her.

And Irka exploded. *They turn into you, that's what happens to them! I hate you!* She shouted inside her head. *You're a deranged maniac, you broke my country! Your so-called*



*revolutionary theories screwed with people's minds, okay? They're fake! You're fake! I want to puke at your every portrait, every statue, every head in Moscow! Hell, in all Russia for that matter! You're an inanimate pervert! You spy on people in public and in private along with that bearded Marx guy, and Engels, and that crucified Jesus dude that Prasha always shoves in my face trying to make me pray! I've had enough of you men, I'm fine on my own!* Irka breathed hard, her face red.

"That's not very nice of you, citizen Myshko, ignoring your political leaders like that. *The leader*, I might add." Said Lenin calmly. "Very well. I will show you. They get persecuted like chickens for soup." He swiped one woodpecker by the neck from the drumming flock and flipped it around his hand. There was a bone crunch. The bird's wings flapped spasmodically for a few seconds, then it hung limp. Lenin threw it at her feet. "Well, how do you like my work? I'm a professional executioner. Would you like another demonstration?"

*Leave me alone! I don't believe in you, you hear me? I don't believe in any of you!* Irka balled her hands into fists. Of course he couldn't hear her, nobody could. She was mute. Irka punched her stomach, hard.

Lenin babbled on. "This is what happens to those who doubt the Soviet power. The Soviet power will triumph all over the

world." He picked out another woodpecker and snapped its neck in a blur, it happened so fast. "Necessarily." He killed another. "Inevitably." He killed two more. "Permanently."

Oblivious to the butchery, the peckers clustered tighter around the bench and drummed on it.

*I believe in myself!* Irka wished she could shout this. *Your government is shit! It never helped me, it doesn't know how to help me. It doesn't want to. It doesn't care! All I want is to have a normal home, and I can't even have that! Well, you watch me, I don't need you or anyone else. I'll be perfectly fine on my own.*

Irka reached between the nearest woodpecker feet, grabbed a handful of chestnuts and began pelting the birds. They fluttered up, swirling leaves in their wake.

Lenin reached for Irka.

She slid off her backpack and slapped him with it across the face. The statue toppled and crashed to the side. Clouds of dust rose in the air.

Irka used the moment and ran. She didn't look behind her to see if anybody chased her, darted into the arch between two buildings, dodged startled pedestrians, hopped across a broken playground, and emerged on the main avenue packed with buses and trolley buses that ferried people to and from the Belyaev metro station.

It was only after Irka disappeared in the underground tunnel packed with commuters that she allowed herself to take a deep breath and look back. There was no sign of pursuit.

*Good. She thought. Whatever this was, it was bizarre, really bizarre. Irina Myshko, you most certainly aren't feeling well.* As she crept along the smelly crowd to the flapping glass doors. Nausea welled up in her gut. Sighing, she pushed the door open, squeezed in and felt her pockets for the required token to drop into the turnstyle slot. She had none wasn't about to exchange her rubles for a bunch of plastic. Irka watched the booth operator that admitted people with passes, a bored lady with lipstick too bright for her age. Presently, she yelled at a pensioner that his permit was outdated and she would call militia if he didn't stop blocking people.

Irka bobbed behind a woman in a wool coat, pressed thumbs into the barrier slots and passed without paying. The barriers slammed into her fingers, hard, but Irka was used to it.

"Hey! Hey, young lady! What do you think you're doing!" Screamed the booth operator.

Irka bounded for the platform flooded with rush hour. Belyaev was the last station of the orange line, the color Irka hated. At least the station itself wasn't orange, albeit the white marble its columns were faced acquired a hopeless tattered appearance. Embossed steel panels featured fairy tale characters

that came alive to scare Irka since she was two. She halted by edge of the platform and watched the train emerge from the bowels of the tunnel. It crawled along the tracks, a slow tapeworm with five round eyes shining from its squarish head, three on top, two on the bottom, its mossy body segmented into cars and lined with rows of hooks and suckers.

Irka suppressed a gag, suddenly queasy.

The train pulled to a stop, its sliding doors flung open and Irka cannoned forward together with the mass of bodies that poured inside until it was packed, and still some unfortunate souls attempted to push themselves in. A squabble broke out. Over the intercom the machinist asked the passengers to let go of the doors.

Irka hung over the bench and gripped the handrail, in case the train lurched, which happened often, resulting in her being thrown into somebody's smelly armpit or, worse, into laps of sitting people who would immediately scold her for either poor balance, or bad manners, or both.

The bland recorded female voice announced the next station, the doors slammed shut, and a measured staccato indicated accelerating movement. Riders shifted in one direction like canned sardines, their morning breath, their unwashed or overly perfumed stink mixing with the greyness of their faces, fit for a funeral.

"What right do they have, coming here. It's them, the Chechens. They're the ones who are ravaging our Moscow. Dirty scum." Grumbled an elderly voice behind Irka.

"I tell you. Did you watch the news the other night. The crime is up thirty eight percent. Thirty eight percent! Imagine that." Squeaked another.

"Lady. Move your arm out of my face." Snapped the third.

*This is almost comfortable in its familiarity. Home sweet home.* Thought Irka, and dared to relax.

A hand landed on her buttock and squeezed.

Irka momentarily stiffened, familiar numbness spreading over her like a blanket. *Again? Oh, you nasty ghastly pervert.* Men occasionally groped her in public transport. She dressed in bulky hand-me-downs, chopped off her bangs to cover half her face, slouched and walked as unobtrusively as possible. Still she held an irresistible attraction to most males whose path she crossed, their loins starved for sex by the general atmosphere of indecency and taboo around the subject that bred a bouquet of sexual pathologies since people didn't know how to talk about it.

"Watch it!" Shouted a grubby female voice.

In her yearning to inch away from the guy, Irka leaned too close to a seated matron stuffed in a warm coat, her sweaty face peering from under a fur hat despite it being only September.

Dots swarmed Irka's vision. *I wonder what noise your eyeballs will make when I press them deep into your skull with my thumbs.* Suddenly she couldn't breathe. The nausea did its job. Irka's ferocity drowned in a bloated stomach. She gulped down saliva that tasted like acid. Instead of kicking back at the palpating freak, she struggled to maintain a grip on the handrail.

Irka's vision swam. Yellow walls of the cabin attained a sickly shade of a rotten yolk. Windows fused with the walls into a pulsing hull of dermis. Lights dimmed. The train slowed, jolted, and came to a stop. Same voice announced the station and a wave of people streamed out, half-digested sardines encased in slime. Another stream filed in, but the hand stayed, squeezing, now joined by a reeking breath into Irka's neck.

A trickle of sweat ran down her back. Mute and firmly jammed between people, she had no choice but to face the perpetrator to stop him, but she could hardly stand upright, her palm slipping. The walls wrinkled and folded like a squeezebox of an accordion, then stretched with a series of chewing noises. The matron in front of her grew sallow and elongated into a canned fish, as did her neighbors. Within seconds Irka shrunk to a mouse and plopped on top of a squirming slithering pile of sprats. They sloshed around the innards of a throbbing, hungry, and immense tapeworm.

Something sucked on the mouse's tail and it squeaked, agitated, rolled on its back and plunged into the soggy mass of yellowish grey, aiming for the floor. The unhappy sardines spit the mouse out, sending it flying deeper into the worm. It was dark here. Something thin and pallid uncoiled from the floor and screeched. The mouse peeped and aimlessly scratched with its paws on the mucus. She saw what was about to attack it. A suckling tapeworm with a razor-sharp hook on top of its head. Before the mouse could understand what happened, the tapeworm slid between its teeth and lodged in its belly, fastening its mouth on the walls of its stomach and starting to nurse on the blood. The mouse shrieked in a high-pitched squeal and frantically waded to the where it thought was the exit from this nasty thing. The gigantic tapeworm bounced, accelerated, and the mouse swayed, feeling the torrent of sprats pick it up and carry it out, and then it didn't feel anything anymore, only cold darkness.

A slap on her face brought Irka around. She blinked.

Bright light and stale warmth of a metro station hit her in the face. Her ears buzzed with the general hum of commuters and trains coming and going. Two women hunched over her, that same matron in the fur hat who resembled a portly weasel and a shrunken biddy as dry as a vobla, dressed in the orange vest of

the Metro janitor uniform. Irka couldn't look at the color without gagging. They muttered between themselves.

The matron nodded and slapped Irka again.

Irka coughed.

"Lookee! She's coming around. Ay-ay-ay, damsel. You scared me silly, did you know that? You fainted right in my lap. I must say it's your lucky day because I'm a doctor. Open your mouth and say 'A-a-a-a'."

Confused, Irka strained to remember what happened. She opened the mouth automatically, but no sound came out.

"I said, 'A-a-a-a-a'!"

"Listen to this." Said the janitor conspiratorially. "So Lyuba, our neighbor, her daughter, what's her name... can't remember. Anyway. She sat on a cold stone for three whole hours, can you imagine? Was waiting for her suitor. *Dura*. Who in their right mind would do that, ah?"

"Are you listening?" The doctor addressed Irka.

"Ruined her kidneys, silly goose, sitting on cold stone like that." Continued the janitor. "That's what will happen to you, missy, if you don't get up."

"Pyelonephritis. Upper urinary tracks infection." Said the doctor without a pause and slapped her thighs. She fired off more medical terms, showing off her knowledge, but Irka tuned her out, staring ahead. She suddenly remembered. Dread spread



through her at the thought of what might be in her gut this very second, might've been there for weeks. *When was my last period?*

"All right, my damsel. If you don't want to talk, it's your own damn business. I'm late for work as it is. Let's call the ambulance."

The word *ambulance* jolted Irka. She had no desire to end up in the hospital and, subsequently, in callused hands of Lyosha Kabansky. They'd have no trouble locating her mother's phone number from the address in Irka's passport. She grunted, and, swaying from weakness, sat up. Fainting didn't fit into her escape plans. Fainting wasn't something she experienced in her life often, refusing to taste alcohol every time her mother offered.

"Can you tell me your name?" The doctor asked, arms akimbo. "Do you have your documents on you? Give me your passport."

Irka held on to the marble column and slowly lifted herself up, only to double down under another wave of queasiness, and this time she vomited in a sudden gush of hot smelly liquid with no food in it. She wiped her lips, wheezing.

The women cursed and jumped aside.

"Poor girl! I'll go fetch the broom." Said the janitor and shuffled off.

"Are you pregnant by chance?" Wondered the doctor.

Irka lost all feeling in her body. *Oh no, oh no, please, no! I stuffed in a lemon wedge after each time like Prasha said, right? I douched with potassium permanganate like Nadezhda taught me.* Fright cut her. Having been subjected to forceful intercourse for most of her life, she learned the various ways of avoiding pregnancy since none of her mother's boyfriends wore a condom, too cowardly to buy them at the pharmacy. Marina wanted another baby and never got any, hoping to tie some man to herself for good. Irka had to gather her knowledge primarily from older women in her life. While girls at school giggled when botany teacher explained how birds mated, Irka hardly paid attention. She experienced it first-hand and firmly believed she was a pro at avoiding pregnancy. So far she remained miraculously barren and free of gonorrhea and syphilis.

*What if I am pregnant?* She thought. *By Lyosha. Oh no, no-no-no. Not him. No, please, no.* The idea of a living thing in her stomach, an ugly tapeworm that sucked on her juices to develop into an equally ugly boar bent her once more and she threw up again.

"Watch it!" The doctor screamed, jumping. "Oh, look what you did. You ruined my shoes!"

"What is happening here?" Called a new voice. A militant was approaching them with a bouncy gate.

"This young lady here fainted on me." The doctor began explaining.

Irka swayed, wiped her mouth and stumbled into the crowd that was bordering the train.

"Hey! Stop!" A voice shouted behind her.

Irka was already inside. The sliding doors slammed, and the train lunged forward. She saw the gesticulating militant grow smaller and smaller, and then disappearing from her view. She smiled.

The cabin wasn't as packed as earlier in the morning. Irka walked to end of the compartment. Here, holding on to the handrail, she composed herself and for the next several stops studied the subway map, trying to decide where to go, but in the end her feet decided for her.

At thirteen Irka went on a trip with her school to a small chamber theater to see Chekhov's play *Three Sisters*. The literature teacher took them through the backdoor entrance where only actors were allowed. Irka forgot all about the misery of her everyday life, the double-reality populated with beasts, and plunged into drama onstage, the show of emotions, costumes, lights, colors, decorations, props, sets. By the end of the play she was in love with the theater. She abandoned her childish wish to be like Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and dreamed of becoming an actress, like those beautiful women who cried and laughed, their

bodies sheathed in magnificent dresses, their hair braided into impossible concoctions. Irka spent hours in front of the only surviving mirror at home, the chipped rectangle on the back of the bathroom door, imitating them.

On a whim, she stepped out at Teatralnaya station and, nervously gripping the revolving belt of the escalator, hurried up the worn metal steps into the city.

## Chapter 3. The Turtle Guards The Theater

Irka halted on the top stair of the underground exit and squinted across the avenue congested with traffic. Hysterical quaking reverberated through the sky. It rose from the middle of the Theatre Square where two hundred tons of Karl Marx condemned the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie with a worn granite gaze and an inscription on his belly, "Workers of the world - unite!". Only those weren't workers swarming Marx, those were roosters. Spurred on by a shouting cock on top of a hastily erected platform, they waved red flags, shook combs and wattles, crowed outrage. The clamor boomed and bounced off the building walls, then scattered into single cries. Irka could discern only parts of them. 'We demand!' and 'Our party!' and 'Hold dear the fate of Russia!' and 'For motherland!' and 'For Stalin!'.

*Hey, she thought, it's a nice September day. Why not go proclaim our love to the dead son of a cobbler who tortured and killed some twenty million people? That's one nice fellow, he sure will fix my life. Let's see if we can have a cockfight in his honor.* Irka ventured along the sidewalk filled with onlookers of two types, those who briefly glanced at the commotion and hurried on their way, and those who gawked and

pointed, speculating. She stopped by the street zebra waiting for the light to turn green.

"What's this for now?" A woman's voice said behind her.

"No idea. I just came up myself. Looks like another demonstration." Answered a low drawl.

"Well, obviously, I can see that. All I'm saying is, it's a waste of time." Said the first. "Do they think they'll get their money back by shouting in the streets? Ha! I'd like to see that happen. I'd go shout myself."

"That's right. They need to work instead of protesting." Said a bald man who came up to Irka's left and wiped his already shiny head with a kerchief.

"Work? What work? Are you out of your mind?" The woman seethed, arms akimbo. "How can they work, look at them! These are war veterans and pensioners!"

A cry made them turn their heads.

A wave of feathered bodies roared, chortled, and swarmed on top of another, to unabashed hollers of witnesses. A militia car screamed not two steps away from Irka, startling her. The doors were slammed, two militants ran into the midst of the congregation, truncheons raised high, prepared to get some feathers flying. The old cock on the pedestal, as if spurred by future bloodshed, kept quaking slogans into a megaphone, his cap as red as the flags flapping around him.

The light turned green. Irka ran to the other side of the street and turned a corner. It was quieter here, in front of storefronts barely awoken from the overnight slumber. Irka took her time to walk to the tiny chamber theater folded into the bowels of the old city, situated on a quiet boulevard, ironically, behind one of the typical Stalinist buildings. She stopped several times and held on to the wall, breathing, but the nausea didn't return, and Irka forced thoughts of pregnancy out of her head, too terrified to entertain the possibility of it being true. The uproar in the square dimmed to an unidentifiable whirr and soon ceased.

Irka passed a row of dismal ten-story facades glued together and nearly stumbled on a pothole in front of a tall arch at the end of the lane, a vaulted opening into an inner court shaded by overgrown alders and poplars. A noise of motor reached her and she jumped aside. A patched sedan hurtled out. Its right tires splashed the dirty water out of the puddle, its taillights flashed, and it was gone.

*This is it.* Thought Irka, cautiously peeking in.

A two-story ochre mansion hid in a shadow of tall trees. A peeling colonnade disguised two heavy doors with gilded handles and a row of windows plastered over with posters and actor portraits. A low wrought-iron fence separated the theater from the rest of the yard, its asphalt edges flush against the back

entrances of apartment buildings that formed a complete stone enclosure.

Irka entered the arch, walked up to the porch, turned left, rounded the corner, passed a row of reeking trash bins, and, following a worn path beaten into the ground, arrived at the back of the theater. The small courtyard in front of the entrance was hedged off by snowberry bushes. Three benches clustered around a broken fountain bowl filled with decaying poplar leaves. Irka picked a cluster of berries and let them scatter on the ground, popping the lot one by one with the sole of her shoe. They left shiny smears.

She looked around, absentmindedly picking more berries. The courtyard was deserted. It was too early for the artists to show up for work, too early to come out here for a smoke and a word or two, or to rehearse. It's on these benches that Irka's classmates sat and waited to be allowed inside for the premiere of Chekhov's Three Sisters, coincidentally, about three years ago. The place didn't change one bit. Maybe the fountain cracked some more, but that was it.

A car drove up and parked. Two doors banged shut, and a couple young men, one tall, with a long blond mane, another shorter, squatter, dark-haired and rosy-lipped, both in fine trench coats, ran by Irka, and, laughing, ran up the stairs and disappeared inside the theater.



Irka's heart thumped so loud, she thought her head would explode. *Actors*, she thought. *These must have been actors. Real actors.* A kind of reverie filled her to the brim of her eyes. The theater signified to Irka a glorious life inaccessible to ordinary people. You had to be extraordinary to become an actress. You had to be smart, beautiful, talented. Irka scowled, looking down at herself. She was neither of those things, a podgy teenager with a forgettable face and a bust that was suited for breaking walls as opposed to spilling out of a costume cleavage.

*All right, you cowardly mouse.* Irka thought. *You're here for a reason. Either suck it up and get in, or go back to your beloved Lyosha. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you and to commemorate the occasion of your return with a shiner or two. Your choice.* She took a deep breath, fixed her backpack, and ascended the steps. The door creaked. Irka closed it slowly. Her eyes adjusted to the relative gloom of the foyer.

A worn marble staircase ran up and down from the landing where she stood. To the right on the wall hung a bulletin board filled with posters and announcements, some yellowing and so old, they must've been pinned here when the theater was built, some time after the revolution. To the left, behind a glass partition, a middle-aged woman hunched over a desk, a green shawl printed with kitschy flowers draped around her shoulders.

A pair of over-sized tortoiseshell glasses sat on her nose. Her face wore a pained expression of someone who has been beaten by life and didn't expect it to turn around. The withered skin, the neck folds, the rounded back stiff as a carapace, all gave her a chelonian appearance.

The phone rang. The woman picked up the receiver and squeezed it between her cheek and shoulder, still writing.

"Chamber theater. Yes." She said. "Yes, yes. Who? Ah, Tanechka! Listen. No, he's not here yet, but you better not be late again, you hear me?"

She passed the receiver to another shoulder. "Hold on a minute. Say it again? Aha... aha... Yes, it's today. No, he didn't say when. What did you, fall from the moon or something?"

She shook her head, exasperated. "Tanechka, I have no idea, you hear? You know Sim. He never says the time. U-huh." She nodded, listening. "Pavlik and Kostik just came in, so I suggest you show up soon."

The woman noticed Irka and raised questioning eyes, listening to the receiver.

Irka stepped closer.

A piece of paper torn from a graph notebook was taped to the glass from the inside. 'Cleaning lady needed' was scribbled on it in blue pen.

Irka smirked, thinking. *If it isn't my day after all.*

Cleaning was her refuge. She cleaned their apartment for as long as she could remember herself. Tired of the bickering, she silently washed every plate, scrubbed every pot, scooped up dog poop and cat droppings, swept and mopped the floors, dusted the shelves, scrubbed the toilet and the bathtub, typically deep into the night when exhaustion took her, exhaustion and bitter tears. She was never able to clean the whole place to her satisfaction. There was too much dirt and only one her.

The woman slammed down the receiver and peered at Irka through thick lenses.

Irka tapped on the sign.

"Yes?"

Irka tapped again.

"Are you here for the rehearsal?" Said the woman impatiently.

Irka sighed, and decided for a different approach. She took off her backpack, rummaged in the pocket, and slid her passport into the narrow gap in the window.

The woman's face turned grey. "What's this for? Why are you giving this to me? I don't need your passport. Put it away." Her jaws moved like that of a turtle. "Do you have an identification card?"

Irka shook her head 'no'.

"Are you an actress?" The woman pressed on, suddenly suspicious. "I don't remember seeing you before."

Irka tapped on the sign again, then on herself.

"What do you need?"

*A nice apartment in the center of Moscow, a job, a salary, and, oh, would be nice to have a pair of new parents too, please. The ones that don't drink and don't beat the shit out of me. Preferably with a level of intelligence exceeding high school.* Irka thought and smiled innocently.

The woman puffed air through pursed lips, slowly inflating. "Miss? What is this, some kind of a game to you? Why aren't you answering my questions? Did you swallow your tongue or something?"

Irka smiled bitterly. *I bit it off, metaphorically speaking.*

Comprehension downed on the woman's face. "Ah! You're one of those... I got you now." She shooed at Irka with a wrinkly hand. "Well, I have nothing for you. Can you hear me?" She started yelling. "Go away. I don't need your trinkets. This is a theater, not a market. Vladimir Kuzmich!" The woman screamed into the window gap. She passed out air in a low hiss and addressed Irka again. "You're deaf too?"

Irka shook her head 'no'.

"That's good. Listen, you better leave soon. I'm calling the house manager. He'll show you to the door, you know what I mean? We don't allow for trade of any sort on the premises. Go to the station, try your luck there." The woman heaved her bulk back into the seat, picked up the receiver, stuck a finger into a round fingerplate and dialed a short three-digit internal number.

"Hello? Vladimir Kuzmich? Yes, it's Faina. No-no. I have a solicitor here who needs to be escorted out. Yes. Right away. Thank you."

She put the receiver down and began writing something in a thick ledger on her desk, pretending to be busy. But something in the way her shoulders drooped told Irka she felt guilty.

Irka quickly slid a hand into the opening, snatched the bottom of the paper and peeled it off the glass.

"Oy!" Faina exclaimed. "I forgot! I forgot all about it. Put it up last night and forgot. Wouldn't you know, my memory is awful." She slapped her forehead. "You're here for the job then? Is that it? Why didn't you say so right away?"

Irka smirked, *Yeah, why didn't I?* and made a pleading face, the one that threw her mother into rage, but one with which she got out of being caught for shoplifting, primarily by male guards who often let her go. Harmless, innocent, and round, like

that of a blinking mouse that didn't know that stealing cheese was a crime.

Faina squinted at her, and something in her eyes changed. "Oy. What am I saying, really..." She shook her head. "I'm out of my mind, that's for sure. You can't talk, is that right?"

Irka nodded.

Faina clapped her hands. "And here I was thinking you were one of those thugs from the railway station." She stood, disappeared behind the door and opened it.

"Please pardon me. Come in then."

*Time to act, Irina Myshko*, thought Irka and, while Faina ushered her in, she scrunched up her face and began sobbing, forcefully at first, then sensing real tears prickle her eyes. She peeked at the effect from between her fingers.

Faina's expression softened like butter. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Irka added a few wails.

Faina frowned in a stern motherly way. "Well, whatever it is, it's no good crying, mark my words. I lost my daughter last year, my Allochka. Cried out my soul, that I did, and you know what? Did it do me any good? Not one bit. It didn't bring my darling back, did it now? Only broke me more. You're a big girl, not some cry baby. Stop it, you hear me? Stop right this second. Sit. Let's have some tea." She led Irka to a tiny table in the

corner of the room, a wall calendar with joyless flowers hanging above it. On top of a checkered oilcloth stood a big portable teakettle, a smaller china kettle, a metal tin of loose Indian tea, a couple chipped cups, and an opened pack of shortbread cookies. A rusty spoon stuck out of an empty jam jar filled with sugar.

Irka sat on a soiled upholstered chair and sniffled.

"There you go." The woman produced a napkin and gave it to Irka.

"I must say, now that I look at you, you're just like my Allochka. Same blue eyes, same nose. Oy." The woman brushed Irka's bangs aside. "If not for that son of a whore." And quite suddenly she burst into tears herself. She pushed up her huge glasses, grabbed another napkin and covered her eyes. "I told her, I said, don't mingle with that bastard. I told her, didn't? But she wouldn't listen to me? No, of course not. Stubborn girl. Always had to have her way." She blew her nose loudly, making a fuss of cleaning it.

Irka sat still, afraid to break the spell. Yes, she couldn't talk and suffered because of it, but she also had a knack for opening up people so that they exposed their entire lives to her, perhaps because she never interrupted them, perhaps because they simply needed to vent and Irka was better than the wall. It saved her in school. Girls in class told her

their secrets. She lived through their stories, their tales of first kisses, first break-ups, first sex, something Irka thought she'd never have.

"...rode it right into tree, the drunkard. Allochka died instantly. When they called me, I thought I heard it wrong. It couldn't possibly be my Allochka, it simply couldn't be! Oh, it's such a grief for a mother to outlive her child. I'd never wish it upon anyone, you hear me? Never. Look at you. You're so young. One day you'll be a mother. By God, I hope you never outlive your child. You don't know what it's like... oh, it's tearing me, it's ripping at my soul!" She buried her face in an already wet napkin.

Irka hoped she looked attentive enough.

"And that Sashka of hers? He walked! Can you imagine? The bastard walked! During Brezhnev times they'd send him right to jail!" Faina snapped her fingers, leering fiercely, and Irka flinched. "And now? Now what? They don't care anymore. The whole of militia is corrupt. It's chaos, pure chaos, you hear me?"

*Oh, please, not another government devotee.* Thought Irka.

"This country has gotten out of hand, that's my opinion." Faina slapped the oilcloth, her eyes on fire. "Look what's happening. Every day I watch the news, and every day someone is killed. It's an outrage! The crime rates are up. The prices are up. I can't go buy a loaf of bread for twenty kopeek like I used



to, but my salary is still the same. How do you propose I live on it, huh? What do you propose I do? Starve?"

Irka took a cookie and shrugged.

The door creaked. Heels clacked on the marble floor. "Good morning, Ilinichna!" A bright female voice called from behind the window partition. A beautiful young woman flashed her card in front of the glass.

"Tanechka! You came. Good morning, good morning." Ilinichna answered.

"Sim here yet?" Tanechka raised thinly plucked eyebrows.

"No, no, not yet."

"Good." Tanechka bounded down the stairs. The staccato of her heels quickly faded.

Ilinichna slapped her forehead. "Oy, I completely forgot! The tea!" She took the teaspoon from the sugar, measured out black leaves from tin, put them into the china pot and turned on the electrical kettle. "So you're here for the job? How did you find out about it? I only put it up last night. You see, Lida left for maternity leave..."

Irka nodded. It was the perfect gesture that prompted people to continue talking.

"Wait. Are you a Muscovite? Because we can't hire you if you're not from Moscow. You're not one of *those* girls who come here on a train from God knows where for easy money, are you?"

She plopped two cups on the sticky oilcloth, studying Irka through her enormous glasses.

*No, I'm not here to prostitute myself, though I do have experience in screwing.* Thought Irka and offered her passport.

"All right, let's see here." Ilinichna took off her glasses, cleaned them on the green shawl, and put them back on. "Irina Myshko, aha... date of birth... born in the city of..." She mumbled, scanning the paper up and down. "You're only sixteen?"

Irka lowered her eyes in acknowledgement.

"But you look all twenty! Well, that changes things. I thought you might be one of *them*. Come to Moscow in hordes. Prostitutes is what they are. Trash. I'm so glad you're not one of them. I like you. You remind me of my Allochka." She leaned over the table and whispered conspiratorially. "I hope Vladimir Kuzmich hires you. Be nice to him, you hear me? Where is he, by the way? I wonder." She frowned, pouring tea into cups. "Here, have another cookie. Faina is my name. Faina Ilinichna. Eat more, I said. No good looking at them cookies. Eat them."

She pushed the plate across the table.

*You're actually nice to me.* Irka thought and picked up the cup. Hot tea scalded her lips but made her stomach feel better, and cookies soothed it even more. She didn't notice how she ate half a pack, listening to Faina recount horrible details of her daughter's death, militia's late arrival, the funeral costs, how

she'd never hear the laughter of a baby, never have a grandchild and what a misery it is to never become a grandmother, how she wished to hold a baby in her arms, and on and on it went, until a knock interrupted them.

The door opened. A sharp nose, a belly buttoned up in a grey jacket, and then the rest of a wiry man in his forties bounded in. "Sorry, Ilinichna. Couldn't come right away, got intercepted." He said and openly ogled Irka, rubbing his hands. His narrow sniffing face made her think of a jackal. He brought with him a sour smell of beer and authority. A chill spread under Irka's stomach while she held his gaze.

"Oy! Vladimir Kuzmich." Ilinichna exclaimed.

"Well, now. Is that your solicitor then?" He said.

*If you bent that nose of yours down to your stomach, I bet it'd make a hole and you'd deflate like a balloon.* Thought Irka, suddenly on edge. There was something oily in the man's gaze, something unsettling and heartless.

"Oh, never mind that. I'm so sorry for bothering you. She's not a solicitor. She's here for the job." Ilinichna pulled out from the table with difficulty. Her elbow caught on the edge of the cup and almost spilled the tea. Her excessive talking didn't match her awkward slow gestures.

*I wonder if turtles talk slow or fast,* thought Irka.

"What's this about. What job?" Said Shakalov.

"The janitor. To replace Lida. You said so yourself."

Ilinichna threw Irka sidelong glances.

"Ah yes! That's right, that's right. Well, that's good news, I suppose. Vladimir Kuzmich Shakalov, the house manager, pleased to meet you. And you are...?" Shakalov stretched out his hand.

Irka hesitated before taking it. The skin felt dry like whispering bones, and it gripped her hand so hard, she thought the pressure would break her fingers.

Shakalov raised his brows, looking from Irka to Ilinichna.

"Get up. Get up." She hissed. "Vladimir Kuzmich, this is Irina Myshko. She doesn't talk, unfortunately. Don't ask me why, I don't know. But she can hear all right. Strange, isn't it?" Ilinichna smiled apologetically, fussing about. "Would you maybe like to join us for a cup of tea?" Her question hung in the air, unanswered.

Eager to please the potential employer, Irka jumped up a bit too fast. Her breasts jiggled. A familiar slimy stare passed over her body. She cringed. Shakalov measured her for ripeness.

"The janitor, you say?" He clicked his tongue. "Where did you find her, Ilinichna?"

"No-no, it wasn't me. She just walked in here herself, oh, I don't know, maybe about an hour ago?"

"Ah. I see. Mute, you say? But can hear? Hmm, that might actually work out really well. No whining, no complaining. I like that. How old is she?" His lips bared to yellow teeth.

"Sixteen." Ilinichna thrust Irka's passport into Shakalov's expecting hand. "She has experience."

Irka gave a start.

"Experience? At sixteen? What kind of experience?" Shakalov picked out a fleck of dirt from under a nail and gave the passport back to Irka. She snatched it and darted a desperate look at Ilinichna, who adjusted her shawl nervously. "She said she cleaned a school, didn't you?" Ilinichna gave Irka a meaningful look.

Irka's jaw dropped.

"I thought you said she doesn't talk?" Shakalov mused.

"She... uh, she wrote it for me, on a napkin." Ilinichna added hastily, a servile smile plastered on her face.

"Oh, did she? Where is the napkin then? Let me see."

"Oy, Vladimir Kuzmich, I threw it away already." Ilinichna kneaded her shawl.

"What's the number then?" Shakalov sneered.

"What was it. Hold on, give me a minute. What would you do, I forgot. Forgot already. Twenty... twenty something?" Ilinichna shoved a napkin and a pen to Irka.

*Wow, lady, you're quite a liar.* Irka thought and wrote the first number that popped in her head, 213.

"Two hundred thirteen! That's it. Not twenty three, two hundred thirteen."

"No offense, Ilinichna, but your memory is terrible."

"You're right, you're right." She sighed.

Shakalov sneered. "Two hundred and thirteen it is. I'll call them tomorrow." His eyes fixed on Irka. "So you can write but you can't talk? How interesting, how very interesting." He rubbed his hands again. "My father used to say, silence is a virtue. Let's see how you do this week, then we'll talk about payment. Is that clear?"

Irka nodded. *As clear as the fact that I want to break your nose for some mysterious reason.*

"Can you start today? We have a big performance tonight. *Big* performance." He thrust out his belly. "Important people will be here. The stage and the entire auditorium has to be swept and mopped. Think you can manage it?"

Irka nodded, aware of a growing unrest in her gut. Shaggy fur popped over Shakalov's ears in place of hair. His nose elongated into a snout, but only for a moment.

"Excellent. I'll show you around. Nice work, Ilinichna. That was fast. Do you mind getting me some beer? They're out in the cafeteria."

"Right away, Vladimir Kuzmich, right away." Ilinichna stepped out of her slippers and into low-heeled pumps, laboriously turned around, took an olive coat from the hook by the door, and with huffs and puffs put it on. The process of her exit took another several minutes.

After she was gone, Shakalov stepped closer to Irka, too close. "Experience, you say? I must warn you. This job requires all kinds of experience, if you want to keep it. Sixteen. I'm sure your mama is looking for you, isn't she? I'm sure you don't want me to report you to militia as a runaway, do you?"

Irka breathed hard.

Shakalov's ears sharpened and shot up. He sprouted fur on his chin and cheeks, from where it crept to forehead. His hands grew long, his fingers blunted, his nails blackened into crooked claws. He snatched her arm and dragged her out of the booth and down the steps, into the theater underground.

## Chapter 4. The Jackal's Job

Irka slipped on the steps that rapidly crumbled to dirt. An angry hold jerked her upward. Her feet slid and skidded in the cloud of rusty dust. Sickness gripped her, from stomach to diaphragm to acid saliva in her mouth. She coughed. Several flights of stairs and turns, each darker and beastlier, they came to a narrow cavern and sped along, Shakalov with a haste of a predator, Irka behind him like an animal poised for slaughter. They entered a stuffy den, its borders marked by rancid piss and feces, and dropped into a narrow vertical burrow in the center.

Irka fell in after Shakalov. Roots caught her hair, sand filled her eyes and mouth, crunched on her teeth. Abruptly, with a loud thump, they tumbled on the ground and rolled to a corner of some dank enclosure. There was no light here, only a harried dimness seeping at once from everywhere and nowhere. Chill gripped Irka's heart. The face of Vladimir Kuzmich pulsed in her vision from jackal to human and back.

*No. She thought. Stop it. I'm sick of it. Enough! I ran away from this madness. You hear me? I won't give in anymore. I refuse!* Irka thrashed, to stay present, to fight, but a debilitating numbness seized her. Reality blinked in and out of



deception. Irka grabbed on to a twisted root that protruded from the wall and stood, dizzy.

Shakalov slapped her butt.

She cried out in surprise, not knowing anymore what constituted actual events and what was exaggerated by her inflamed phrenetic mind.

"Nice ass." Shakalov cracked up, studying Irka's reaction.

She lunged at this face with a grunt.

Shakalov avoided her, and Irka fell to the ground.

He squatted next to her. "Hey, hey, easy. There is no use to struggle. I'm trying to be nice to you. I'm giving you a job." He whispered hotly into her ear. "It's simple. All you have to do is please me once in a while. That's all I'm asking. Is that so hard then? I don't think so. Please me and keep quiet. And I mean, *quiet*. Thankfully, you don't talk, the validity of which remains to be seen. In my humble opinion, you might be fooling people for your own personal advantage. My respect if you do, that's a smart survival tactic for a girl. But what I mean by keeping quiet is, no written stories either, do you understand me? Besides, even if you did write something, no one would believe you. So here is my advice to you. Listen carefully." He bent so close, his lips touched Irka's ear. "To keep your job, you have to make me happy. Do you know how to make a man happy?"

Irka's eyes adjusted to the dimness. She tensed and kicked the dark silhouette above her, but arms betrayed her and she merely brushed Shakalov's jacket. Her stomach bloated with pain. Her strength evaporated, overpowered by the surprise attack from an unknown entity that typically sent her into a paralysis and a subsequent panic attack that she ended as a mouse stuck in some drainpipe out of her mind from terror.

It took Irka hours to recover. With time, accumulated experience trumped anxiety and allowed her to return faster. She knew Lyosha's mannerisms; his mistreatment was familiar enough that an escape into the double-reality and the subsequent restoration happened within minutes. Yet it was a lie, and Irka knew it. She thought by fleeing the place where the lie was born she'd flee the lie itself, yet she was gravely mistaken. The lie had roots inside her flesh. She had to sever its very origin to make it die and let her live the way she wanted.

She had to claim her voice.

Sharp pain ripped Irka's abdomen.

"You look like a girl who knows how to keep a man happy." Shakalov droned on in a disgustingly sycophantic manner. "Keep quiet, do as I say, and we'll both be satisfied. I like how it jiggles, by the way." A tongue darted over his lips, his eyes drilled into Irka's ass. "Let's see how it jiggles from this."

Standing on his knees, he groped and rubbed against her thighs, panting.

Waves of buzzing washed over Irka's ears.

"Confess. You like it, don't you? *Dura*. Mute *dura*." A clammy palm traveled up her shirt, down her pants, another grabbed her throat. Irka began to suffocate and gave up her struggle. She shrunk into a mouse.

The jackal howled, flipped the mouse in the air, caught it on the jaws, let go, bit its tail, let go again. Playfully, it tossed the mouse around in the dirt. The mouse peeped and squeaked and choked. And every time it tried to scurry away, a heavy paw would slap it and nudge it back to jackal's snout. At last, tired of the game, the jackal made its predatory move. Sharp teeth sunk into the mouse, and it squealed in fright, but it didn't get eaten. It was sucked around in saliva, in and out of the jackal's mouth. The mouse peed itself, the jackal swallowed the resulting mess, licked up the rest and burped, satisfied. And just like that, it was all over.

Irka found herself leaning on a beige tiled wall of a small utility room next to a tangle of pipes dusted with spider webs and a pile of what looked like broken theater seats, old aluminum buckets, soiled rags, broomsticks, and ladders carelessly thrown over one another. It smelled of wet sackcloth and chlorine. She sneezed.

Shakalov offered her a hand. "There you go. I was starting to get worried. One minute we're standing here talking, and another, bam! You fainted on me. You okay then? Let me help you up." He sneered in an unpleasant way.

Irka pressed her right temple to the cool wall and stared around. *What the hell happened?* She slowly brushed the litter from her pants and jacket. Confused thoughts attacked her mind. *Did something transpire or not?* She was fully dressed, unruffled. *Could I have fallen victim to my own horror in the face of a stranger who might have decided to taste my goods?* Nice start to a job. Irka flushed. She badly wished to talk, to ask, to apologize, to explain herself, to cement a good impression on her new employer. Words wouldn't come. Nothing except a weak moan. She found a spot of naked skin between the shirt and the pant line and pinched it, hard.

Shakalov rubbed his hands, peering at Irka interestedly. "You're one smart girl, I must say. Aren't you?"

Irka narrowed her eyes.

"Good, good. Intelligence in women is always appreciated. I equate intelligence with silence, you understand this, right?"

He paused, his face unnaturally narrow in the darkness.

"Excellent. We'll talk more, of course. Later. I expect you to report to me at the end of each day. We can do it... in my office, for the sake of convenience. You understand." He chuckled.

A cold shiver passed Irka's back. *No, I didn't imagine it. You slimy little prick. Did you ejaculate right in your pants?* She thought his crotch was darker not simply because of a shadow.

"In the future, if all is well between the two of us, I might find other uses for you. Other *little* jobs." Shakalov slapped his belly. "All right! It's time to get back to work. I want both the stage and the seating area done by five, not a minute later. Do you understand?"

Irka slowly nodded. There was a very pleased expression on Shakalov's face that she came to associate with sexual release of her mother's boyfriends, that abject stupor that stole over their eyes, risible and ludicrous at the same time.

"Well, don't just stand there, get on with it. Remember, five o'clock. If you need me for anything," his eyebrows wiggled, *"anything* at all, ask Ilinichna, she'll show you to my office. And don't make trouble." On this Shakalov spun on his heels and exited the room, leaving Irka in semi-darkness.

*From a boar to a jackal. Nice exchange. She thought, seething. Nonetheless, to the business. Survival is your priority number one. If you're not burning with desire to land back in the lair of that alcoholic, I suggest you move your sorry ass and get to work like boss just said.*

Just to be sure, Irka unzipped her jacket, lifted the shirt and checked her bra. The old cotton contraption hugged two boobs like before. She slipped down her pants. Everything looked and felt good, except that her underwear needed to be washed. Irka shifted from foot to foot. Nothing burned or chafed or itched.

*Stinking humper.* She thought, walked up to jumble of broken furniture by the large ceramic vat and yanked out a broom to the clatter and crashing of the entire pile. It shifted but remained in place, glued together by age and moisture. The broom had long straw-colored bristles and a bent wooden handle.

*How did this Lida clean the place, I wonder? Maybe her job was sucking on Shakalov's dick, because it doesn't look like anyone touched the place in years.* Containing the urge to start organizing this closet full of junk, Irka beat the broom against the floor to dislodge old sweepings and peeked out the door.

Cream-colored walls lined a long corridor interrupted by brown doors, an occasional wooden chair, an announcement board, or a poster. The linoleum floor warbled according to its own reasoning, settled and resettled by numerous summers and winters. The theater's structural wood expanded and shrunk so many times, it caused cracks some as wide as fissures from ceiling to floor, clumsily patched with grey putty.

Irka stepped out and shut the door. She wondered what direction the stage was, afraid to get lost on her first day.

There was no recollection in her mind as to how she got here, except that rusty dirty passage turgid with rank animal stink. She took a lungful of air and began walking forward. The theater smelled like, well, like a theater. There was something special about it, the paper of the tickets, the velvet of the drapes, the actor's makeup, the paint, the glue and the wooden shavings of the props, and that cool odor, an odor of the camphor moth repellent that was supposed to stop annoying pests from dining on the costumes.

The corridor turned to the right, Irka turned with it. Bright voices issued from stairs. Someone approached from above. Irka froze, her eye fixed on the stairs at the end of the corridor. She saw two pairs of feet. They stopped.

"Listen, I... Um. I know you don't usually like it, but... I'm feeling a bit uncertain about my part. And, well... Do you maybe want to practice together?" Asked a voice of a young man.

Irka's stomach dropped. There was something in this voice that made her tremble. She desperately tried to open the nearest door, but it wouldn't budge, so she hid behind the wheeled rack of costumes that stood nearby.

The feet moved. Two young men surfaced, the same ones that passed Irka in the courtyard.

"Oh, come on." Said the blond one and flipped a sheet of hair out of his well-proportioned face. "You'll do great. I'm

sorry, but you know me. I need to be alone to gather my thoughts and get ready, like Sim says, to delve into my inner artiste and extract the essence—" He spread his arms.

"—of art and love." Finished his dark-haired companion.

Irka's heart beat louder.

The friends made slow progress to the place she hid.

"Pavlik. Please, it's nothing personal, really." Said the blond one.

"Kostya, be honest. Is it...because of yesterday—"

"Shh. No, it has nothing to do with that." Kostya placed a finger across his lips and spread them a dazzling smile.

"Ah, well, if you say so, I believe you." Replied Pavlik.

They were now about five steps from her. Irka's heart hammered so loud, she was afraid they'd hear. She closed her eyes to clam down. The friends whispered something, fell silent for a moment, and quietly parted. A pair of keys jingled, another one, doors were unlocked and shut in rapid succession.

Irka opened her eyes, afraid to move. Art and love, the essence of the artiste. The enchanted words of the theater bounded across her vision. Words and Pavlik's face, a boy with charcoal eyes, as he was certainly a boy, not much older than herself. Irka shook her head. Falling in love with an actor didn't fit into her survival plans, it would only complicate the matters. Ever since she got rejected by Yurka Tikhomirov in



third grade after writing him a love letter, Nadezhda always told her, 'Better to be slapped with the truth than kissed with a lie.' A mute girl stood no chance with an actor, did she? But Irka was unable to think clearly or to contain her curiosity any longer. She waded out and stared at the door behind which Pavlik disappeared until her eyes watered.

*Okay, so what. Like you haven't seen actors before? Stop being silly and get out of here. Get to work.* But Irka's feet carried her nose all the way to the names printed on rectangular pieces of paper and stuck inside plastic slots on each door. 'Konstantin Livchev' said one. 'Pavel Boim' said the other.

*Pavel.* Irka rolled the name in her head. It had a nice feel to it. *Pavlik, like Ilinichna said. Pavlik and Kostik.* Irka's face burned. What little she saw of Pavlik reminded her of a stately cadet from old movies. He had that air around him, that proud poise, polite and unhurried manner of speaking. With the full intent on leaving, Irka pressed her ear to the door and listened. A voice hummed a pleasant tune. Feet swished on the floor in what might've been a waltz. Irka's pulse raced and the broom began sliding out of her sweaty fingers. There he was, inside, a real actor! Oh, how she wanted to see him, to talk to him, to ask him what it was like, to stand onstage flooded with lights, to say beautiful words, to make people laugh or cry on a whim. It must've been magic. Maybe he could teach her this

magic, teach her how to speak again, how to enchant the audience, how to...

Footsteps approached.

A young woman with a stack of paper balanced precariously in her hands came down the stairs.

Irka darted in the opposite direction.

She ran through hallway after hallway, the broom in one hand, mad like a witch. People gasped in surprise, yelled at her to slow down, or, in the case of one elderly gentleman, asked if she was lost. Quite suddenly Irka stumbled into a large dark space filled with rows of chairs and stopped.

Particles of dust danced in the light beams that fell from the cupola of the dark concave ceiling. In the middle of it hung a gigantic crystal chandelier, turned off at the moment. An echo filled with mechanical clangs bounced off the walls, amplified by excellent acoustics.

"Artyom! What the hell are you doing? Get her over here, yeah, just like that. Screw her tight." A raspy voice shouted from the stage. It belonged to a squat beaver of a man with large protruding teeth and a felt cap cocked to one side. He stood at the edge of the stage and shouted at the man on the scaffolds.

Irka crept forward, row by row.

Bald, greenish, a frog in dirty overalls, Artyom dropped the crossbar he held with a loud clatter and threw up his hands. "For fuck's sake. If you're so smart, why don't you do it yourself? The bitch won't fit, and I'd be damned if I knew how to fix this."

"Moron. It's cause you don't listen!" Exclaimed the beaver. "I said, screw her in, I said."

"Go to devil, Vova." Artyom spat and made to leave.

"Cut the bullshit, man, we gotta get her done by noon!"

Vova pointed to gilded beams and gleaming metal rods interlocked in a human size birdcage, an elaborate structure reminiscent of avant-garde constructivist concoctions, geometry designed to take your breath away. The men broke into a heated argument over how to fit this one beam into the other, where it was supposed to go, and how they were they going to complete it in time for the final rehearsal, with lunch break in one hour and bastards Egor and Misha taking too long to get the beer.

"What damn idiot makes changes last minute!" Mumbled Artyom under his breath, on his way down to fetch the rod he dropped.

Irka crept up the stairs to the very back of the auditorium's inverted bowl and started sweeping from top to bottom, row after row, her eyes onstage where from behind the heavy curtain tall Egor and burly Misha sauntered up with a bag bursting from bottles. They jeered, greeted Vova and Artyom,

threw caps into the dark maw of the orchestra pit and chugged the beer, belching loudly. Irka saw them and didn't. Her mind kept returning to Pavlik, her heart jumped in somersaults. His dark hair, velvet eyes, and sharp chin made her think of a certain butterfly, with black sooty wings and prominent white stripes.

*Black admiral.* Thought Irka. *He looks like a black admiral.* She stopped, the broom above the floor, eyes fixed on some distant point in the middle of nothing. She wanted to touch his hair, curious if it would feel as soft as butterfly's wings. Irka shook her head. *Cut this foolishness, right now, I said, cut it! No use dreaming. He's an actor, and who are you? Look at you. You're ugly. Remember your place. Be grateful you even got a job.*

She stepped down another row, into the pool of light.

Beer chugging stopped.

"Guys. Look who came to entertain us. Hey, miss!" Called Vova.

"Beautiful miss!" Picked up Artyom, and whistled.

"Hey, what's that you're sweeping, huh? Aren't we more interesting to look at than the floor?" Boomed Misha.

They burst into laughter.

Irka threw them a venomous look.

"Uh-oh. Don't look at me like that, I'm scared." Sneered Vova.

"Feisty, that one." Said Egor.

They tried a few more times, but soon stopped and went on building the rest of the set. A drill buzzed to life, joined by rhythmic hammering. Irka finished sweeping and gazed at a pile of debris, admiring her work and utterly perplexed. She has completely forgotten about the dustpan. She leaned the broom on the wall and waded out of the doorway she stumbled into earlier.

"Wait! Why are you leaving us so soon?"

"Come back, come back! Forgive us, filthy sinners!"

Voices called behind her.

Irka turned a corner and crashed right into a young man who approached in a light-hearted amble. Irka's breath got knocked out of her. She jumped and frosted over.

Pavel Boim stood right in front of her. His face wore full stage makeup, his expression severe due to sharp contrast of chalky foundation and dark eye shadow, his body hugged by a black leotard more suitable for a circus acrobat. He held a beaked mask in his hand. Irka involuntarily glanced below his waist and wished she didn't.

He touched his chest, smiled and said. "Oh! Excuse me, please. My bad. I failed to see you."

Irka stared. She knew that if she'd stare any longer, she'd be a lost cause. It was the eyes, the endless depth in them.

"I'm sorry if I scared you. You look startled." Pavlik tilted his head. A lock fell on his face.

This was as much as Irka could bear. Frantic, she bent her head and lashed around him.

"Where are you going?" He called.

Irka staggered along the hallway, dodged decked out actors on their way to the rehearsal, passed a group of thin painted women in azure slips, almost naked, giggling at something by the door of an open dressing room, a faint smell of perfume around them.

Irka's legs carried her to the utility closet. She slammed the door and leaned on it, her lungs on fire. Pavlik's face burned under her eyelids. It hung in the darkness like the afterimage of a very bright light. It made her ache. She'd never get this boy. *It's like trying to catch a butterfly*, she thought bitterly. *You spot it, you marvel at it for a moment, and, wham, that's it. The cruel beastie pierced your guts. You're hooked. You want it, you don't care how. So you start chasing it like an idiot with these pathetic swipes, the inept hunter that you are. You squat and wait for it to mount some daisy, you spring and scare it, and it's gone. But it's a tease, a vexing despot. It flutters to a sprig of grass, a leaf, a twig, a fence post, or a*

*spotted birch. But no matter how vigilant you are, how meticulous or rapacious or swift, it flies away. And if you do succeed in catching it, you crash its wings and kill it. End of story.*

Irka swatted at her eyes. A deeply hidden harbored hope, the desperate hope of a girl who thought herself ugly, who secretly wished a boy like Pavlik to like her one day, to fall in love with her, has reared its head and wouldn't budge to leave.

She took a deep breath, picked out the dustpan from the shaking pile, and strolled back. She took her time to wade through the labyrinth of the corridors to figure out the location of the auditorium. It turned out, the theater was nothing more than a large mansion with a square floor plan, a stage in its central colonnaded hall encircled by two chains of dressing rooms on either side of a wide carpeted hallway that ran along the perimeter of the building. A few rooms have been knocked down to create passages for easy access to the stage. Same blueprint repeated itself on the ground level, except all kinds of machinery slept understage through which Irka thought Shakalov must have dragged her to the utility closet at the back of a dead end.

Irka walked into the auditorium.

The scaffolding was gone. The cage has been finished, a skeletal concoction of steel and gold that Kostya and Pavlik climbed to the hooting of a dozen of actors in leotards in the first row, purple, emerald, red, lavender, gold, and turquoise. Misgruntled construction guys still nailed something to the very bottom and shouted for the actors to stop.

Kostya hung from a bar, swung, jumped down. His blond hair played in the floodlights, his lithe frame clad in violet, a blue bird mask on his face.

*A parrot. Some sort of a blue parrot.* Thought Irka.

"Come on, do it!" Kostya egged on his friend.

Pavlik roosted on the very top of the dome, ten feet above the floor, his mask adorned by a curved black beak and golden cheeks. "Hold on," he called, "I'm sprouting feathers."

Irka busied herself with scooping up the garbage pile and carrying it to the plastic bin out in the hallway. When done, she stealthily made her way onstage and began sweeping wood shavings and stray nails at the back of the cage.

"Ah! Look boys, there is our new janitor." Said Vova, straightening. "What's your name, beautiful?"

"Where's Lida?" Called a short actor in a golden tricot, with a yellow beak and red hair.

"On maternity leave, you moron." Said a girl in green.



"Tanechka. You're mistaking me for someone who knows how babies are made. I thought they're brought by storks?" He made smooching noises. Tanechka slapped him.

Irka stubbornly did her job, with no reaction to Vova's attempt to find out her name, age, types of flowers and candy she liked, what kind of vodka she preferred, or was it beer, or some girly liquor. She held up the broom as an excuse and meandered around him.

Actors cried out verses from the play. Tanechka chased the actor in red. Their arms flapped like wings, they made obscene crowing noises. Vova nailed something, cursing under his breath. Lulled by the general din of preparation, Irka hasn't noticed at first a hand on her shoulder.

She flinched and looked up. It was a touch unlike she ever experienced, without filth, just simple gentle interest. She instantly wanted more.

"I'm sorry." Pavlik tore his hand away. "Sorry to interrupt you. I merely wanted to apologize for our encounter in the hallway earlier. I hope I didn't hurt you in any way, did I?"

Irka shook her head, mesmerized. Masked, he looked like a magnificent black bird with a mohawk.

"Oh, okay, good. I was worried. I kept thinking about you after you left so abruptly. Thought maybe I hurt you and you

didn't want to talk to me anymore." He took off his mask, smiled and intercepted Irka's gaze.

"I know." He touched the feathers. "It's silly looking, isn't it. It's for Paradise Birds. We premiere tonight. I'm Cadoo, the black cockatoo. Are you staying to watch?"

Irka gaped.

Pavlik misinterpreted her silence. "Oh joy. But I'm displaying the absolute height of indecency and lack of manners. You're absolutely right in treating me this way. If I were you, I'd do the same. Forgive me. Let me introduce myself. Pavel Baboch." He stretched out his hand.

Irka placed the broom on the floor and barely touched his fingers. They shook hands. She tore her hand away.

"Did I do something wrong?" Said Pavlik quickly.

Kostya sauntered up and whispered in his ear, two green eyes on Irka, his nose and cheeks brushed with iridescent blue. He motioned with his chin, chewing. "Who's this?"

"Our new cleaning lady, I think. That's what the guys are saying, anyway. Am I correct?" Pavlik waited.

Irka wanted to explode. This was the moment when she needed to introduce herself and say something extremely original, or funny, or sarcastic. Like, *Hello esteemed gentlemen, my name is Irina Myshko. I'm very pleased to meet you. Allow me to explain the purpose of my job. I've been entrusted with the magnificent*

*task of cleaning the floor so that your precious talented feet might not be offended by an abominable apple core or a filthy scrap of paper, or, worse, an abandoned handkerchief full of snot produced by the unforgettable performance of your collective genius.* Here she would smile innocently and bat her eyelashes for an added effect. But not only zero intelligent thoughts visited Irka's besotted brain at the moment, she couldn't talk. Hopelessness, impatience, and anger twisted her gut so mercilessly, she nearly cried out.

"Are you okay?" Asked Pavlik, concerned.

"What's your name?" Kostya inquired. He stopped chewing, puckered his lips, blew a pink bubble and popped it.

Irka touched her mouth and shook her head.

"Ah. What? You mean, you don't talk?" Kostya chewed energetically. "Well, that's a pity. Can you hear me, though? Or are you also deaf?"

"Kostya." Said Pavlik, throwing a horrified glance at his friend.

"What? I'm simply calling things by their name. Actors have no social filters. Therein, my dear Pavel, lies our genius and supremacy over ordinary peasants." He blew another bubble and it plastered over his plump lips in a resiny film.

*I'd love to see you choke on it to death,* thought Irka.  
*Peasants.* She smirked and lifted the broom.

"Kostya, I think she can hear us very well." Said Pavlik.

"Well, okay. Big deal. Come on, we have to practice before Sim gets here." Kostya flipped his hair and blew another bubble.

"Don't say it like this. Be nice. Draw on your inner gentleman, I know you have it in you." Pavlik peered at Irka.

"Is that true? That... That you don't talk?"

She nodded.

A handclap gave them a start. Even Vova stopped hammering.

"Good morning, my children! How did you sleep? Well, well? I can't hear you. Say it again, louder! Louder!" A throaty voice barked from the back of the stage, and out sauntered a man whom Irka saw multiple times on television and read about in newspapers, the legendary theater director Simeon Kotik, a turgid seal with shrewd round eyes, glossy pampered face, sparse harlequin pelage, thick-necked, fin-footed, ringed hands stuck into pockets of an expensive silk suit, a flamboyant scarf wrapped under his chin and flung over his shoulder.

Calls answered him. "Good morning, Sim!" "Morning!"

"Why, thanks for asking. We slept like the dead after that bitch of a run you put us through yesterday." Kostik flipped his hair. He was the first to approach the director and give him a loud smooch on each cheek. The rest of the actors followed, kissing, hugging, squeezing. Sim singled out Pavlik, holding on to him a bit longer.

Irka gaped. She failed to connect Sim to Simeon. It must've been his nickname among actors. Simeon Kotik. Right there, two steps away. Her heart hammered.

"All eyes on me!" He clapped three times.

The buzz of the greetings died down. The actors huddled around him, silent.

Sim raised his head. "You're here, and I assume that means that you're ready to act. Banish your ego, foment the loins of muse, abandon misery. Take off these sour faces! You look like flies pumped with cheap vodka. What is this? You disgust me. Wake up!"

The actors murmured.

"Pavlik, you start. Kostya, you're next. Tanechka, my dear, whatever happened to your face? Why is it bloated?"

"What? What about my face?" Tanechka began.

"Wash it with cold water. Ice compress for fifteen minutes. Go!" He snapped his fingers, and Tanechka was off. "What's this?" Sim addressed the prop builders. "What are these people doing here? All theater personnel off the stage, now!"

"Personal offstage, beautiful." Vova's hand pressed into the small of Irka's back. She jumped.

"And who are you?" Sim stared directly at Irka. "Who is this child? Someone tell me, she seems to have swallowed her tongue."

"Sim." Pavlik said something quietly.

"Well, that's unfortunate. My apologies, I didn't know. However, I do need you to vacate." He held his gaze a little longer, before turning away, and something tore at Irka's heart. Confused, she fled the stage and staggered out of the auditorium. Her last glimpse was that of Pavlik climbing the birdcage in fast expert strides.

*I'm sneaking in tonight. She thought. He wants me to watch him play, so I'm sneaking in.*

## Chapter 5. Paradise Birds

Irka suppressed a sneeze. She spent half of her cash on two portions of Olivier salad in the cafeteria, cleaned out the utility closet, mopped the auditorium after actors and builders departed, and stood for the last hour behind a drape by a side entrance, hoping there were enough folds to conceal her. The final rehearsal drone died long ago. Lines snaked around the theater. Rain pounded on a medley of umbrellas underneath which art connoisseurs speculated on the content of the new Kotik play. Irka glimpsed them from the window before hiding.

A hushed conundrum reached her ears. Heavy front doors slammed open. Uproar broke the pregnant silence. Voices ululated and guffawed across the din that filled the foyer. The musicians arrived in the orchestra pit. They greeted each other, moved chairs, seated, tuned their cellos, violins, and basses. A trill ran through a piano. Someone coughed, someone shouted, someone struck the cymbals and Irka cringed, a thin line of sweat dropped off her nose. She risked losing her job if discovered, she faced an explanatory meeting with Shakalov after the premiere, and she worried about the night.

*I'll just find some corner in the building, she thought, maybe some dressing room and sleep there.*

Footsteps approached. "Not all at once! Please, be considerate!" Exclaimed a shaky female voice right by her ear. "Tickets! I need to see your tickets!"

Excited glamour took over the usher's cries. Public streamed into the stalls with a rustle of peeved insects. Ten minutes, and the place was packed to the bursting point. Spectators sat on plush seats and on each other's knees, stood on the carpeted steps between row sections, filled the loges to twice their capacity, leaned over the banisters, shouted to those below. Irka began to suffocate in the dusty darkness. A throng of bodies pressed on her, an elbow kicked her.

"Oops. There is someone there." Said a thin voice.

Irka groped at the drape and squeezed out into the crowd. She felt like being stuffed in a metro car, minus the motion and the garish electrical lightning. The crystal chandelier in the middle of the cupola refracted gold. The auditorium brimmed with faces, whispers, coughs, hands, and flapping playbills. They made a chirping noise of crickets. The curtain was drawn, the conductor flipped through the notes on the podium, and gave last minute instructions to a cluster of violinists who nodded their heads.



Irka got jammed between a pair of bespectacled intellectuals, a loudly breathing middle-aged woman, and a grasshopper of a man. He hung his eyes on her, grinning. "Wow, that's clever. Wish I'd thought of that. How did you get in?"

*Got projectile vomited out of a catfish.* Thought Irka.

"Shhh!" Shushed the woman from behind.

"What? The show hasn't started yet. Some people." Piped the grasshopper. "Did you say something?"

Irka turned away from him.

The pair of intellectuals argued.

"I'm telling you, it's a farce on gender reversal." Said the woman and shook her segmented head. She looked like a flea. "A prank, a jest, whatever you want to call it. I can guarantee you it will be vulgar. He's famous for it."

"Pardon me. But what exactly do you mean by farce?" Replied the man, fat as an engorged tick. "I don't understand. Its very definition suggests slapstick. Kotik has yet to degrade to that level. Paradise Birds is a satire, from what I heard. Yes, I know, critics called it scandalous, but I prefer to reserve my own judgment until I've seen it for myself. Although, if it's vulgar indeed, as you claim, I'd like to see how he'll get away with it, once the bird is out of the cage, so to speak."

"That's what I'm saying." Nodded the flea.

"I bet it'll be shut down, if such is the case. There is one more thing, you see," the tick leaned so close, his mustache antennas touched the flea's ear, "I heard there will be nudity, and, ahem, a portrayal of homosexual love."

Irka stopped breathing.

"You don't say." The flea covered her mouthparts.

"And crossdressing. And transvestites. I have an informed source." Added the grasshopper.

"Can you be quiet down there?" Yelled some bug from the loge.

Just then darkness hushed everyone. The chandelier dimmed. The lights on the edge of the stage and above it whizzed to life. Pillars of green, red, azure and gold fell on the velvet curtains. A moment of awed stillness gripped the theater, broken only by a few shy coughs. The tension mounted for another few seconds and then it tore, by some unspoken signal, and the audience bursts into applause. It rose, crested, and scattered into nothing. Silence fell again. Another pause, and the conductor lifted his baton. At once music burst from the orchestra pit, some kind of vaudeville. The curtains parted with a soft rustle. Lights swiveled to illuminate an immense gilded birdcage decorated with plumes of dazzling colors.

Irka held her breath, mesmerized. It was her second time in the theater. For the last ten minutes she stood on tippy toes to

see the stage between the swaying heads. Her calves cried out in pain, and she had to lower herself. It was impossible to glimpse anything but the curtain valance from her height.

*You pack of preposterous insects,* she thought, *I'm not missing this performance even if it means demise at Shakalov's claws. Kindly part.* She ducked and elbowed her way through the mass of bodies. Hissing faces bombarded her with "Watch it!" and "Mind the foot!" and "Young lady, easy on the elbows!" and more in the same manner. Irka persevered and scored a standing spot in the front row not three steps away from the orchestra pit with excellent visibility.

The pianist struck a series of chords, and, in tune with the melody, Kostya emerged onstage. His dazzlingly blue leotard shone like a sapphire in the light, the beak of his bird mask sharp and curved, clusters of feathers on his back and arms thick with color, aflutter. He pranced around the birdcage, now swiveling arms, now cocking his head, now rapping with his bill. A female voice giggled in the parterre joined by another and another. Kostya's every gesture was comical and obscene. He jiggled his buttocks like the tail of a bird, jutted out his crotch, held on to it and hopped to the very edge of the stage, where he abruptly stopped, just when Irka thought he might fall into the pit.

He balanced on one leg, spread his arms and fired off a verse. "Allow me to say," he put his leg down and listed forward, "that everything you'll see today," his voice dropped, "is true." He nodded. "Yes, yes, don't turn your noses." A few people sniggered. "My name is Oses. I'm a macaw." He chirped.

Pavlik leapt onstage, body clad in black, feathered arms apart, head thrust up, black mask adorned with a large bill, two yellow cheeks, and a mohawk.

"This," Kostya gestured, "is my fiancé. Cadoo."

Pavlik bent and crowed.

"A black cockatoo." Added Kostya. They embraced and danced, one body under, another over, then in reverse, a fluid movement that suggested more than affection.

"He left his wife for me!" Cried Kostya through a tangle of arms. "Gatora. She was mad!"

Tanechka in green, a petite parakeet, ran out from behind the birdcage and climbed it, crying. "Pauper! Pauper!"

"Oh, but she cheated on me, Oses!" Pavlik wailed and swung his arms apart in mocking grief. "My witnesses. They're here."

Spotlight tore out figures of the rest of the troupe dressed as cockatiels, popinjays, parrots, lovebirds, lories. They scattered out, restless, jabbering.

"She screwed Reno," Pavlik pointed to a girl in red who pronged the stage with sharp steps, "that lovebird slut. No, two! Both Reno and Dina! Three? Oh, I've lost count!"

"You fool!" Cried Gatora. "You fool, you fool! It was but one affair. How many have you gifted me, you flaccid lover? Let this be your lesson."

Two red lovebirds, Reno and Dina, ascended the cage where they joined Gatora. The three of them locked in a lascivious embrace. They wiggled, swiveled, arched, tossed their heads, and issued screams of infatuation.

"You see?" Pavlik shook his head.

"An outrage, my love!" Cried Kostya. "Behold. Unheard of. Girl on girl?"

"Chick on chick, more like it."

The frozen audience tittered with uneasy laughter.

Irka smirked.

"Alas!" Continued Pavlik, his hands on Kostya's. "If that is her revenge, she failed. Your beak has pierced my heart."

There was laughter at this. The spectators, stunned by the open blatancy of the play and its apparent lack of tact, began to catch on the message underneath.

*Gay birds in paradise. Stupendous. Thought Irka. Eat that, communism, you fetid pigsty, you breeding ground for moronic swine like Lyosha who'd stomp a gay to death because in his*

*pitiful brain he thinks it's a genetic disease. Bravo, Sim Kotik, bravo.* Unexplainable joy flooded Irka's heart. She lost herself in the words, the whirl and swirl of costumes, the acrobatic moves that bordered on obvious lovemaking, albeit in a jerky comical fashion of birds and without promised nudity, but with plenty of bodies intertwined, twisted, fluid, caressing.

Irka gobbled up the story.

Hurt by their unreliable natures, Oses and Cadoo decided to forever abandon females, flimsy entities not worthy of their attention. Males were better lovers, they declared. Insulted, the women protested this decision with a scandalous display of Sapphic love, which finally won the men over. They consented that women were, indeed, a better sex, and proposed gender reversal to test the validity of this theory. Women agreed. The audience shivered with excitement.

Actors tore the tops off their leotards and slipped on glittery bras with sharp jutting nipples to the hooting of the public. Actresses strapped sequined dildos to their waists, garishly pink and so narrow, they looked like beaks. The theater exploded in ululating, whistling, and calls of encouragement. The birds obliged. One moment they flew apart, another they flung themselves on top of one another. The music swelled, the cymbals clashed. The pulsing throng of feathered bodies rushed

into the cage and there commenced a visual orgy, one shifting crying cooing chanting mob.

Irka lost the last thread of reality. She saw an actual cage instead of the gilded prop. It was crammed with curved beaks, clawed feet, and feathered wings. The black cockatoo vanished. In place of it a sooty butterfly thrashed hysterically. The birds attacked it. They hammered their bills, they flapped their wings, they gloated their hunger.

Irka almost cried out. She wanted to save the butterfly. She swatted at the air, unable to reach it. Nothing existed for her except an overwhelming premonition that it would be her fault if the butterfly got crashed, got pinned and swallowed by a parakeet, or a popinjay, or a macaw. She was on the verge of running onstage, when Pavlik threw the cage door open and strutted out, victorious, Kostya on his one arm, Tanechka on another.

He led them to the edge of the stage, knelt, studied the stunned public for a moment, and said. "We made peace. As you have heard. It was... explosive." He waited for snickering to stop. "We will cement our peace with marriage. Allow me to introduce. Reno, my future husband," he gestured at Tanechka, who stuck out her sequined dildo, "and my future wife, Oses." Kostik jiggled his prominent shiny bra.

"Cadoo! Our love!" Both Kostik and Tanechka exclaimed and fell on Pavlik. A jumble of birds swooped on the trio and lay still.

For a few moments silence rung so loud, Irka could hear people next to her breathing, then at once the audience exploded in applause.

"Bravo!" Cried a husky voice.

"Encore!" A scream rose from a loge.

"More! More! We want more!" Voices reverberated across the audience.

Irka filled her lungs and produced a squeal that got lost in the general clamor. She clapped with everyone else, ecstatic. The actors rose and bowed, then they retracted and bowed again. Kostya called Sim, Pavlik and Tanechka joined him, as did the rest of the actors. Soon the entire theater chanted, "Kotik! Kotik!"

A new silk suit, a bright red bird mask, arms open in greeting, Sim strolled from backstage, joined his actors and paused, deafened by the hubbub, the stomping of the feet, the jeering and the thrumming and the hooting. The public burned with gratitude, individual shouts ascertained that Paradise Birds were bound to be Kotik's biggest success yet. He nodded, bowed, bowed again, and on, and on, and on it went.



After bowing for the fifth time, Sim waved to the troupe and the curtain swallowed them. The energy produced by the play fizzed out. The musicians mopped foreheads and folded instruments into cases. The crowd shuffled out of the auditorium, eager to get to the cafeteria first, or to the wardrobe, or to the restrooms.

Irka walked up to the orchestra pit, her eyes onstage, her fingers buried in the plush of the balustrade. She breathed hard. The last of the spectators filed out, the conductor left, the builders haven't showed up yet to disassemble the birdcage and store it backstage, and all thought of Shakalov deserted Irka's mind.

She was alone. She was tempted. She yearned to get onstage, to transform into anyone or anything she wanted.

*Mouse. That's all you can do, you puny despondent creature. You stink of rodent droppings, Irina Myshko, I'm disgusted with you. Irka thought to herself. You spent your life hiding in a hole. You weakling. You coward. You importunate imbecile. Why, may I ask? Why? Because you're stupid? As if. On the contrary. You're smart, but you prefer to play a half-wit, to avoid the conflict. What a way to live. Good job. Irka hit her side. Keep marinating in your fear, be my guest. She hit herself again. How does this feel? Do you like it? Come on, you filth, tell me, do you like it, you craven piece of shit?*

Irka found an old yellowing bruise, pinched the skin and twisted. It hurt. She twisted more, thinking about years and years of escapades into the world of insects, fish, reptiles, mammals, birds, and anything in between that crawled, crept, bounded, flew, but never walked on two legs. The world where there were no people. People caused pain.

*Perhaps it's time you stopped playing a victim and played yourself.* Thought Irka.

The desire solidified into an irresistible pull that drew her like a magnet, it radiated from the stage. Before Irka could stop herself, she inched around the parapet and mounted the steps, dizzy. Her heart has traveled to her head and there it thundered like a storm. Her feet have detached themselves and she no longer knew how to stand. A sweeping view of theater seats has caught her breath. Rows and rows teemed with ghosts of screaming, shouting, whooping, hooping beasts, one moment ants with long wobbly legs and antennas, another leeches, slimy, repulsive, yet another feral horses that thumped their hooves and bared their teeth in mockery.

*Go away, you're not there.* Irka turned her back on the audience, walked up to the cage and touched it with reverie. The gilded bars felt smooth. She grabbed one, another, and began climbing up, her eyes the size of saucers. She made it to the top, took a breath, another, rose and balanced, frozen.

Something changed. The air has shifted, it reeked of mold and dampness.

Irka wasn't alone anymore.

In the center of the front row, fat and lazy, sat a huge boar. Its fur bristled and it snorted loudly. Next to it reclined a bloated catfish, its mustache stuck to the velvet of the seat. Two pairs of eyes studied her, two revolting maws yawned. A giant cockroach trundled from the doorway, crept to the boar's feet and sat there like a dog. A herring slithered to the left of the catfish, a hedgehog and a goat after it. The goat bleated, chased the cockroach off its place and folded legs, its horns poised at Irka as if in warning.

"Hey! Whatcha looking at, *dura*? Go on then, don't just stand there like a doll. You didn't climb that cage for nothing. Show us what you can do." Said the boar. "What's your part again, a talking mouse? Ha! I'd like to see that with my own eyes." Its eyelids drooped, it grunted and seemed to have dropped off to sleep.

"Look at that! My daughter is onstage! Right there! Irka, you mute fool, what's that? What are sitting on that thing for?" Drawled the catfish, one eye open.

"She's going to perform." Grunted the boar and went back to snoozing.

"If she's going to perform, then she needs to perform. No use sitting on that thing with her eyes round like she's taking a dump or something." Said the catfish with a smirk. "How much longer? Irka! I need you to fetch me some beer, they were out in the cafeteria. Can you hurry?"

"This is a waste of time. A mouse can't talk and it certainly can't act. You've got to be joking me, right? At best, it peeps before it dies." Said the herring. "A mouse is good for one and one thing only, in my opinion."

"What's that?" Asked the hedgehog, curious.

"For food. To be fed to a jackal or a boar." Said the herring. "Or to be thrown into a river. It would drown and some catfish would swallow it without a second thought."

"That I would." Confirmed the catfish.

"You'd eat any junk, as long as it's free, you carnal vermin." Bleated the goat.

"Don't you start scolding me, you stagnant festering sack of bones! You ought to die already. We spend money on your medicine, on your food, and for what? To keep this scraggy body alive for another month? You're nothing but a burden." Puffed the catfish.

"And you're not?" The herring interjected.

"I'm not talking to you, so shut your mouth." Threw the catfish.

"Enough, both of you. Look! Our Irka is on top of a birdcage! What are you doing there, *dura*? You'll break your neck, get down this second. I said, get down!" The cockroach moved its mouthparts in agitation, its antennas swiveled.

"It has no neck to break!" Cried the hedgehog, pointing. "It's a mouse! Irkadura is a mouse! Irkadura is a mouse!" It jumped up and down in glee.

*Get out of my head.* Thought Irka.

They turned up their snouts, muzzles, noses, eyes, expectant.

*I want you out of here, out! Get out!* Irka cried, but no words left her mouth. Instead of a scream she produced a weak squeak. And they laughed at her. The boar, the catfish, the goat, the cockroach, the herring, and the hedgehog. They were joined by others. The woodpeckers, the statue of Lenin, the sardines poised comfortably inside the mouth of an enormous tapeworm, the roosters, the solid piece of granite Karl Marx, the turtle, parrots, popinjays, lories, parakeets, the blue macaw, the jackal, the seal, and, last to arrive, a butterfly with sooty wings and two white stripes. The black admiral.

Irka hyperventilated. She clung to the rods, sensing that in another moment she would tumble ten feet to the floor and break her neck. The laughter became solid. Everything went dark in Irka's eyes. She didn't see separate shapes anymore, only

parts of them. Whiskers jittered, eyes bled water, paws and hooves and fins flapped, wings spread, feathers flew, beaks hammered, stone voices mixed with deafening rumble that escalated and rung in Irka's ears. She thought it would pierce her skull and she'd burst and be no more.

They moved in on her. They hissed, and roared, and quaked, and chirped. They clacked and cackled and bellowed and snarled. They crowded the stage and crawled on it.

The butterfly dove down in an attempt to deter them. They slapped its wings, they beat at it, its wings shed black pollen and still it swooped and tried to beat them off.

Irka moaned. She had nowhere to escape. She looked at herself, at her pinkish tail, her tiny arms and legs, her fur of that dingy color that's not quite grey, not quite beige and not quite brown, but something in between, bland and boring. Her fingers shrunk to claws. She desperately tried to hold on to the slippery bars and failed. Her tail flipped aimlessly, her paws pedaled at the air. She slid and dropped onstage. Immediately, the mob lunged at her.

The mouse closed its eyes. It was being bitten, dragged and rolled around, sucked on, slapped, kneaded, prodded, poked. How long it continued, it couldn't tell, and it mentally prepared itself for death. But they suddenly released it, as if interrupted by a bigger predator who claimed the prey. The

squall hushed, and something hot washed over the mouse. A rancid sour breath.

The mouse opened its eyes.

A jackal grinned right over it.

Irka shut her eyes again. When she opened them a second time, Shakalov knelt by her side. "Get up." He said. "We're going to my office."

*Shit.* Thought Irka, trying to recall what happened. She pushed Shakalov's hand aside, lifted herself up, and leaned on the cage. *I either fell and passed out on the floor, or I passed on top of the cage and fell because of it.* Irka rubbed her temples. Her body didn't hurt, but her head alighted with a million of firecrackers that spontaneously went off in deafening bursts. White spots paraded in front of Irka's eyes. She trotted behind Shakalov in some kind of a delirious haze.

They left the stage and walked between two huge row sections, when Irka felt eyes on her back. She turned to look.

Sim Kotik, his arms crossed, his face contorted in utter loathing, drilled the back of Shakalov who didn't pay him any mind and marched on. Sim glanced at Irka, and for a second their eyes met. Irka flinched. Sim studied her for a few seconds, swiftly turned on his heels and vanished from the doorway.

A series of deserted hallways, one staircase down, another staircase up, they arrived in a corridor lined with

administrative offices and stopped in front of a shabby door at the very end. A plastic frame identical to those on the dressing rooms held a piece of paper. It said, Shakalov Vladimir Kuzmich, The House Manager.

Shakalov procured a set of keys, unlocked the door and motioned Irka in.

His office was a small room with a single window that faced the backyard where yellowing poplars shed leaves under the evening rain. Dusk colored the sky indigo and crept in through an open vent-pane. A hideous lampshade with interlocking facets illuminated a worn out rug, a peeling desk of undetermined wood, four battered armchairs, a coatrack, a filing cabinet, and a string of portraits on the wall, Lenin, Karl Marx, Engels, His Holiness Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus', and some stern man in a black beret whom Irka didn't recognize but who looked like he'd like to tear her apart just for the fun of it. Aside from the portraits, the walls were cream-colored and bare.

"Well, sit down. There is no truth in standing." Shakalov motioned to an armchair and sat behind the desk, so that now six pairs of eyes drilled into Irka, those of Shakalov and of five men above him, as if all of them whispering to her, *shame, shame, shame*.

Irka's blood boiled, her breath came out in rattles. She focused on studying the desk. Apart from a ledger, a stack of



papers, a rotary telephone, and an old mug full of pens, there stood a miniature red flag and a framed photograph, a picture of a young smiling man dressed in military uniform, in his early twenties, blond, with a narrow face reminiscent of Vladimir Kuzmich.

"That's my son, Roma. He just got back from the army. A handsome devil, smart like a fox. You don't want to cross paths with him." Said Shakalov. Something of a proud smile touched his thin lips. "At any rate, it's irrelevant to our conversation. Let's get to business. There are a few things I'd like to stress, before we continue with your trial and before I offer you the job of a theater janitor. You claim that you can't talk. Is this true?"

Irka blinked.

"I think it's an absolute lie," Shakalov's eyes flashed, "but it's not up to me to persuade you otherwise. If it serves you, great. However, that means that we can't have a normal conversation, which I think I like. I don't mind this in the least, as long as you listen well and do as you're told."

He interlaced his fingers and leaned over the desk.

Irka's eyes narrowed. *Do you know what I will buy with my first paycheck?* She thought. *I'll buy ten eggs and a syringe and I'll inject them all into the casing of your chair, so that*

*after a week it will stink between your legs so bad, you'd think your dick has rotted.* Irka smiled and immediately felt better.

"I want to make a few things clear." Continued Shakalov, ice in his eyes. "Number one, you failed to report to me tonight. For this, before I even hired you, you deserve to be fired. Number two, you lied to me. I called the school number two hundred thirteen, and they have never had a janitor by the name of Irina Myshko. I suspect Ilinichna tried to pull a trick on me to help you, she's gullible that way. Well, not to worry, I'll have a talk with her about this later, but back to you." A thin tongue darted over Shakalov's lips, an unsavory spark flashed in his eyes, and Irka wished she could reach under the desk and jab him in the balls.

"And then there is number three." Shakalov paused.

Irka's chest constricted.

Shakalov raised a finger up and shook it with importance. "I called militia. You've been reported as a runaway by Aleksey Kabansky. Is that your father or some other relative? Your last names don't match."

*I don't have a father!* Cried Irka in her head. *Lyosha, you philandering bastard. I hope your liver bursts of its own accord and you die face-first in mud like a pig that you are.*

Shakalov stood up, walked around the desk and sat on top of it, one leg dangling, jacket taut on his belly. "I hope you're

still listening. Here are the good news." His voice dropped an octave. "You're lucky, because I like you. And, because I like you, I want to help. I want to give you this job." He leaned to Irka. "You see, you now owe me a favor, Myshko. I didn't give you out to militia. I dropped the receiver, right before they asked me who I was. I did it for you. There is something irresistibly attractive about you, and then, of course, I appreciate your silence. It makes things so much easier, don't you think?"

He patted Irka's knee and left his hand there.

Irka hoped her stare would burn his eyes right out of their sockets, yet she didn't move. Her survival reasoning took over. It was close to eight in the evening, and she had nowhere else to go except back home.

"I must say, despite your short comings, I was impressed by the ferocity with which you attacked the job. The utility closet, why, I couldn't recognize it! And the stage gleamed. I don't remember the last time it was that clean, to be honest with you."

Despite herself, Irka flushed with pride.

"So, in light of this, I'll make you a deal. Since the last time we, um... *talked* about it, you were a little out of it, I'll repeat myself. It's very simple. You keep me happy, I keep you happy. You'll have food, a place to sleep, and a steady job.

Now, there are a few unbreakable rules. One, I must never see you onstage again, unless you are cleaning. And two, you're not to sneak in without a ticket anymore. If you want to watch that circus, you can pay like everyone else. Is that clear?"

Irka nodded. Her knee turned numb under Shakalov's clammy hand, and she slowly turned herself off, knowing what was coming.

"Good, good. That's a smart girl. I'll take your silence as an indication of our mutual agreement. Well then, that calls for a celebration." Shakalov felt her leg a little bolder. Seeing no resistance on Irka's part, he slid off the desk, crouched next to her and shifted his hand higher until it crept into her crotch. He immediately got hard, Irka could see the bulge under Shakalov's belt. He croaked, produced a strange little bark of hunger, seized Irka under arms, pulled her upright, led her across the room, squeezed her into the corner, and right there, under the approving stare of Lenin, Marx, Engels, His Holiness Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus', and the stern man in a black beret, he rubbed against her for a few minutes and ejaculated in his pants with a thin yelp.

Irka vanished. In her place a tiny mouse trembled on the dingy linoleum floor. The jackal picked it up, loped out of the office, and, a few turns, staircases, and corridors later, spit

it out in the costume storage room, where, on a pile of musty clothes, the mouse cried itself to sleep.

## Chapter 6. The Theater Game

It's been three weeks since Irka worked as an unofficial theater janitor. Nausea stopped bothering her, and with it thoughts of pregnancy. Two new interests purloined her mind, an infatuation with Pavlik and a reprieve from Shakalov's assaults in rehearsals and shows. Every morning she took extra long to sweep and mop to catch actors at practice, and every night she snuck in to watch the performance. She hid in a loge, behind the back row, in the orchestra pit under the conductor's podium, in the wings between curtains, below stage under dusty floorboards. It became a jackal-and-mouse game. She couldn't hurt the despot physically, so she defied his rules.

Predictably, Irka found out that Shakalov was disliked by the entire theater personnel without exceptions. Both ticketing ladies, Ilinichna, the wardrobe supervisor, the accountant, three ushers, costume and make-up girls, four prop builders, the production manager, a dozen actors and even Sim Kotik himself warmed up to Irka, caught on to the game and covered up her tracks. She did an excellent job cleaning, she kept quiet, she smiled. What was not to like? According to Ilinichna, Shakalov smiled once a year and that only if he managed to stab someone

in the back for his own personal gain. For three weeks Shakalov failed to catch Irka, but he must've sensed something afoot and denied her full pay along with the official job papers due to some invented budget shortage. Irka had barely enough money for food and was forced to put her egg-injecting plans aside.

*How much longer will you let that impertinent jackal slabber you?* She thought, rubbing her eyes and yawning. It was six in the morning according to the cracked clock on the wall. A uniform greyness filled the air. Irka sneezed, flung the moth-eaten blanket aside and sat up. She slept on a ramshackle mattress in the corner of a chilly storage room without windows but with plenty of cardboard boxes stuffed with satin dresses, cloaks, and corsets, wooden chests full of shoes, a trunk with nothing but wigs, a glass case of masks, and a crusted vanity table stacked with excess makeup, toiletry, hair brushes, tweezers, and handheld mirrors that Irka has organized during her stay to occupy herself at night before dozing off.

A fat fly buzzed down on the mattress. It crawled around in search of blood, clicked its mandibles in frustration, landed on Irka's thigh and stuck out its proboscis. Irka slapped her thigh but missed. The fly did a circle and aimed for Irka's face. She shooed it away.

*A horsefly! What the hell are you doing here? You should be dead by now, it's almost October.* Thought Irka. You

*opportunistic omnivore, you just try and bite me.* Irka raised her arm, waiting for the horsefly to surface, but it vanished. Irka peered in the shadows. An ominous feeling spread through her chest, a chill lodged itself under her heart and made her shiver. *I have this weird feeling that something will happen today,* she thought, *something nasty.* She shook her head to get rid of the premonition, took off the plush robe she found in the pile of costumes and which served as her pajamas, put on the single pair of pants she owned, the cotton bra, the checkered shirt, stepped into sneakers and waded out into the corridor to do her washing business in the restroom sink. She peed, waddled out of the stall with pants down, wiped between her legs and under her arms with wet toilet paper that felt and looked like sandpaper, washed her hair in the sink with soap, and brushed her teeth with a finger. She hasn't had a real hot bath since she left home and it was the only thing she missed about home.

Irka went back to her closet, picked up the broom, and stopped for a minute. Apart from the patter of the rain somewhere above her head, it was eerily quiet. She began methodically sweeping the corridor that was already clean as she swept it yesterday, and slowly, inconspicuously, as if it belonged in her daily routine, made her way around the corner to the utility room and after another ten minutes to the line of



dingy doors. Here she stopped and touched the revered name framed in plastic.

*Pavel Baboch.* Irka moved her lips as if she said it aloud.

After only one week Shakalov was so impressed with Irka's work that he allowed her to tidy up actors' dressing rooms and gave her a set of twelve keys. And every morning, before Ilinichna showed up at eight, while the theater stood deserted, Irka spent in Pavlik's room.

She found the short copper key, opened the door, and darted inside, her heart aflutter. It was dark and musty. Her fingers found the light switch. She flipped it up and grinned. She had an hour to herself and her secret obsession.

A large mirror over the makeup table more akin to a library carrel populated with mannequin heads in wigs, an old sofa, a coffee table with a water carafe and manuscripts on top, a wheeled rack with costumes on hangers, costumes on the hooks on the wall, costumes in neat piles on the floor, costumes on backs of raggy armchairs, everything was in impeccable order. Over the last two weeks Irka tidied up every part of the room to perfection, and today she wanted to spend her time marveling at things that touched his body, his skin, his hair, things that held him in a way she couldn't. Pavlik stirred up in Irka a toxic inebriation that she tried to squash and couldn't.

She propped the broom at the door, turned the key and walked up to the rack. She ran her fingers through silky leotards, plush capes adorned with feathers, shiny silver cloaks, then scooped them up, buried her face, and inhaled. She thought it smelled of pollen, pollen and flower dust, maybe daisy, maybe clover. Having had her fill, she abandoned the costumes and traced the bottoms of the framed photographs and newspaper clippings that hung on the wall, Pavel Baboch onstage, Pavel Baboch surrounded by spectators, Pavel Baboch and Sim Kotik. Irka sighed, sat on the revolving tabouret in front of the vanity desk, touched boxes of eye shadow, face powder, lipstick, things that typically belonged to women's boudoirs.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. *Can you get any more miserable than this?* A round face with pale blue eyes under unevenly chopped bangs still wet from being washed in the sink looked back at her. The ends of her hair barely touched her collar. Red spots crept up her cheeks. *Dura.* Thought Irka with venom. *What are you doing here?* She narrowed her eyes. *What hope do you have? Where is your dignity? This is not love, you furtive buffoon, this is desperation married to extreme neediness. It's madness, and you know it. What are you to him? Dross. Garbage. An empty blot. He only talks to you because he is polite, that's all.*

Irka stood up abruptly and paced the room, then sat back down again.

*No, it's not just politeness. There is something there, I can feel it.* She looked at herself imploringly. *Compassion.* Her face lost color. *Compassion, see? Compassion is not love. It comes from pity, from condolence, from remorse. You know who instills remorse? Dead people. That's what compassion is.* Irka swept bangs out of her face. *Then what is love if it's not compassion? What is it then? Where does it start? In your dick, in your vagina? In your brain, in your heart, or in some hidden place in your gut? Where?* Irka buried her face in her hands. *I don't know, okay? I don't know!* Her eyes burned. She stomped on the floor, mad. She had these discussions with herself every day since her first encounter with Pavlik.

After everyone learned that Irka was mute, people smiled at her and rushed past her, like Kostya, or unloaded on her a bucketful of their problems like Masha the costume girl or Vova the set builder or Ilinichna, who fed Irka stories about her dead daughter Allochka. But with Pavlik it was different. He always stopped, always said to her "Good morning, Irina!" and "How are you on this glorious September day?" and "Did you sleep well?" and "Is it warm enough for you in that storage room or do you want me to talk to Shakalov and see if he can provide you with a heater?" and "You look tired, is everything okay?".

It caught Irka's breath. It turned her red in the face. It made shake from head to toe, from toe to head and back again. Unaccustomed to sophisticated manners and gracious behavior, she soaked up every encounter with Pavlik like a sponge, staring at him with open eyes and sometimes an open mouth, wishing he'd never stop asking her things, but he always had to go somewhere, to rehearse, to practice with Kostik, to meet actors in the cafeteria, to have Masha measure him for a costume, to see Sim. Irka never had him to herself for more than a few minutes a day. To compensate, every morning she occupied Pavlik's dressing room as if it was the inner chamber of his heart, the atrium, as if the corridor leading to it was his major artery. She was the one who brought him oxygen and carried out the waste, she kept his creative pulse steady, she was the mouse that brought the warmth to the butterfly so it could soak up the heat, shake off its quiescence and soar.

A door slammed above.

Irka jumped. The clock above the mirror struck eight. Ilinichna was never late. Irka's hands shook so bad, it took her a solid minute to lock the door. Sweat streamed down her back as she leapt over two steps at a time and nearly slammed into Ilinichna who shook the rain off her umbrella by the back door.

"Oh my God, you scared me." Ilinichna clutched a hand over heart, her eyes flickered with accusation through thick over-

sized glasses speckled with drops. "Are you going somewhere? Don't. It's pouring. You'll get drenched and catch a cold. The horoscope says it's not a good for travel."

Irka shook her head, indicating that she wasn't planning on going anywhere. Over the last few weeks she ventured out of the theater only to buy white bread, cans of sweetened condensed milk, lemon marmalade slices doused in sugar that she liked to wash off before sucking in the slippery things, soap, and toothpaste. She stopped at the bookstore a couple times to leaf through books, Solzhenitsyn's *In the First Circle* in particular, but couldn't afford to buy it and showing up at her neighborhood library was out of the question. Having reread Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* three times in a row, Irka itched to read something new, but she avoided the metro like a plague in fear of bumping into Lyosha or Valentina or her aunt. It was safer to stay at the theater since no members of her family would set their foot here. They were not the kind who appreciated art, Irka knew that for a fact.

"Not going anywhere then? Good. Let's have breakfast. Look, I bought you honey-cakes, and a toothbrush, and, here, take this. It's for you." Ilinichna fished a cellophane sack strapped with elastic from a wet oilcloth bag and handed it to Irka.

Irka unstrapped it and peered inside. There was a roll of toilet paper, a small towel, a bottle of shampoo, a new

toothbrush, and pair of hand-knit wool socks. She flung herself on Ilinichna and hugged her.

"Get off me, silly girl! That's enough! You'll choke me to death!" Ilinichna cried, and but Irka saw a sparkle in her eyes. She let go and followed Ilinichna in her booth.

"How long have you been up, then? Since six again? Why the devil do you have to wake up so early, then? What else is there to clean? I'm afraid to spit on the floor now, see what you did. Lida would've had a heart attack if she saw how you licked the whole theater clean." Ilinichna muttered as she moved about with an unhurried toil of a turtle, laboriously unwrapped her green shawl, took off the khaki trench coat, hung it on the hook, draped the shawl back on her shoulders, stepped out of resin boots and into slippers that Irka drew from under the table.

"That's nonsense that he won't let you watch the shows. We're all allowed, and you're not! Whatever possessed the man? I can't put my finger on it. So here is what I did. I talked to Sim yesterday." Said Ilinichna importantly, placed the honey-cakes on a plate, and pushed the plate toward Irka. "Eat. He said he'll have a talk with Shakalov, that's what he said. Oh, and one more thing." She lowered her voice and looked around, as if to make sure that they were alone. "I asked Zina, the accountant? She'll give you an advance today, she said, for your salary. That cheapskate has no right to withhold it, I said."

Irka picked up the honey-cake and bit into it. Minty flavor spread on her tongue. She held the bite in her mouth, sipped the hot tea that Ilinichna poured into cups, let it soak, and swallowed. Warmth hit her stomach.

Irka smiled. *Fantastic news.* She thought, half-listening to Ilinichna's prattle. *The drugstore is just a few blocks away, then I'll go get the eggs, and voila, Vladimir Kuzmich, it'll stink between your legs like from a sewage pipe. The very air around you will acquire that shitty quality that it deserves, and if I find a way to sneak into your ratty Zhiguli...* The thought filled Irka with indescribable glee. At last she would get back at Shakalov for all those times he smothered her, in the utility room, in the dressing room, and in his office. He'd be forced to replace his chair, in the worst case scenario; in the best case scenario, he'd be forced to sell his car.

The phone trilled. "There we go again. It's not even nine yet. Can't drink a cup of tea in peace." Ilinichna grumbled, rose from the table and migrated to her desk. "Chamber theater. Yes. Who? Aha..." While she talked, Irka stuffed one more honey-cake in her mouth, grabbed the sack with her new possessions, snatched the broom, and was off skidding down the steps and along the hallways to mop the stage in time for the morning rehearsal that was supposed to start at nine but usually commenced closer to eleven, when all actors and Sim showed up.

Pavlik, however, typically came in on time and disappeared into his dressing room. Whenever Irka passed by, she could hear him tirelessly narrate verse after verse.

She slowed down out of habit, stopped and pressed her ear to his door. It was quiet. *Of course it's quiet, you dumbhead, you didn't see him come in, did you?* Irka pinched herself, ran to her closet, threw the door open, flung the sack on the mattress, dropped the broom, snatched the mop, and darted up the steps to the auditorium. An echo of voices reached her. A chirp, a whoosh, and a bark of a seal.

Irka reached the doorway and halted. *Shit*, she thought, *they're early.*

Kostya and Pavlik stood onstage, faces flustered, eyes on Sim who reclined in the first row, arms spread on the backs of the seats, rings sparkling on his fingers, a bright mottled scarf around his neck.

"Six M's!" He yelled. "How many times do you need to be told? I can't fathom it. Six things, six very simple things. What do you want me to do, burn it on your asses? Repeat!"

"Magic. Mystery. Mask." Kostya and Pavlik chanted in unison. "Mirror. Miracle." They both faltered, stole a glance at each other.

"And? The last one! The most important part. Give it to me." Sim waved his arms in agitation.



"Message?" Pavlik said tentatively.

"Wrong!" Sim shouted and leapt up with such ferocity, Irka thought the chandelier tinkled under the cupola.

He paced in front of the orchestra pit. "Six parts of your inner music. I repeat. Music, do you hear me? Music. Listen. Turn your ear inside. What do you hear?"

Kostya and Pavlik stared, forlorn.

Irka inched closer.

"Sim, I'm not sure I understand?" Tried Kostya. "By hear you mean—"

"Silence!" Sim roared. He shook, his face turned red, his hands balled in fists. "I didn't give you permission to talk!"

"But you asked if we hear..." Said Pavlik.

"I asked you to listen! *Lis-ten!*" Sim became so agitated that perspiration prickled his forehead, he wiped it off with his scarf. "Listen!" He raised a finger.

Kostya and Pavlik stood motionless, eyes glassy, heads inclined. Irka reached the middle row and stopped, the mop clutched in her hand so hard, her fingers went white.

"Malady! I don't know how I could forget. This word always eludes me." Said Pavlik with a sigh. His eyes cleared to their usual blue.

"That's it!" Sim exploded. "Malady. I want you to repeat this ad nauseam. If I were to wake you up in the middle of the

night, you should be able to recite them to me without hesitation. Six parts of your inner music: magic, mystery, mask, mirror, miracle, malady! What is malady? It's sickness. You must become sick with theater, to act, sick for life. Whether you want to or not. You must allow yourself to get infected the moment you step inside, let it consume you, you as a whole. When you do that, you will remain a child forever. Your inner psyche will divide into two parts, the one that dwells outside of the theater and dies of age, and the one that lives within. It will forever remain the child, that age at which you got infected. The inner age of your soul. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, Sim." Said Pavlik.

"Absolutely." Added Kostya.

They were distracted by his speech and didn't notice Irka. She stopped but ten steps away, her ears hurt from strain to catch every word.

*Magic. Mystery. Mask. Mirror. Miracle. Malady.* She repeated to herself, again and again.

"Theater is hell, my children." Sim calmed down somewhat and sat down again. "A huge oven. The temperature of your soul must match that of its hellish fire. If it does, you will grow wings and learn how to fly. You will discover genius, but you must never land, you hear me? Never! Never put on those filthy rubber clogs and walk in dirt. That's not what you've been

created for, that's not why I hired you. The second you splash in mire, you're out of my troupe, out! It's poisonous rubbish, it will make you sink and it will drag the rest of us after you. You must live and breathe theater, to absorb it. You must keep flying, every day. Movement is energy, you can't stop, can't pause, you can't say you're tired! To stop is to die!" He threw up his arms again.

Pavlik looked up and noticed Irka. His face changed.

"What?" Sim barked and turned around.

Irka wanted to be swallowed by the floor. Why did she come so close to them, in open view? Was she planning to mop? If so, she couldn't. Her arms wouldn't move, her heart jumped out of her chest, and her feet glued to the carpet. She stood like a statue awaiting trial.

"What are you doing here, my child?" Sim jabbed a finger at Irka as if he saw her for the first time.

Pavlik opened his mouth, but Kostik was first. He spoke with unnatural flair. "Sim, allow me. May I present to you, Irina Myshko, the mute janitor girl Ilinichna found God knows where, our latest theater attraction." He bowed theatrically.

"Kostya, why?" Said Pavlik quietly. "Sim knows perfectly well who she is. Really, there is no need to be so derogatory."

"Don't judge me."

"I'm not judging you, I'm merely saying, your comment was uncalled for."

"Listen, Pavlik. Nothing personal, but your excessive politeness is getting on my nerves. It hinders you in expressing yourself truthfully, you know that? Are you telling me there would be as much interest in this girl if she could talk? People love the macabre, always have, always will be."

Sim looked from Irka to the boys and back. "Are you suffering from a fit of egoism?" He finally threw at Kostya. "You! I'm talking to you!"

Red spots crawled up Kostya's neck, his features rippled in anger. He flipped back his blond hair and bared his teeth.

Sim's face stretched in a smile. "There, there! Now that's emotion I see. For Christ's sake, my boy, I wish you'd perform like this in the Birds. My ears shriveled up and fell off at your lines yesterday."

Kostik drained color. "What?"

"Sim, Kostya hasn't been feeling well lately," said Pavlik, "he's getting over a head cold."

"Spare me your pity." Snapped Kostya.

"What's wrong? What did I say wrong?" Pavlik threw a mortified look at his friend who got pale, turned on his heels, stomped backstage and out of sight. A minute later they heard a door slam.

"Keep cleaning, it's okay. Don't mind us. We showed up early and messed up your schedule. Sorry about that." Sim told Irka.

She lowered the mop and absentmindedly stroked the floor, not so much cleaning it but rather smearing dirt in circles.

Sim studied Pavlik. "What is this? Why is he pissed?"

*Because his director ass licking didn't produce desired results?* Thought Irka.

Pavlik shrugged his shoulders. "He was fine on the ride here, excited to start early, kept bubbling about this new car his dad has got him. Honestly, I have no idea."

"What do you think?" Sim turned to Irka and advanced in a wide gait. "You've watched every single performance. Who's better, Pavlik or Kostya? Tell me." He came to within two steps of her.

Irka stiffened.

"Sim, please, Irina doesn't..." Began Pavlik.

"I know, I know. We don't need language to communicate, my child. There is only love, nothing else. I love you, you love me. Kostya doesn't love me, I can tell. When there is love, there is no pride, no anger, you simply listen to what I say, and you speak to me with your heart."

Irka merely raised her eyes to look Sim in the face, when he exclaimed. "I knew it! You're right, I agree. Pavlik is the

light. You know, I'll tell you this once, but you must remember it from now on. There are butterflies that fly to the light and burn, and there are butterflies that give the light and we dissolve it inside us. Pavlik is one of them."

Irka became rigid. How could he possibly know she thought of him as a butterfly?

Sim raised his hand so fast, Irka flinched. Partly her instinct kicked in, in the anticipation of being beaten. Partly shock from his mannerism and speech. After working in the theater for almost a month, she still couldn't get used to it. Sim praised his actors one moment, ridiculed them the next. She didn't know what to expect, and so she stood now, taut, expecting him to grab her breasts or hit her.

Sim did neither. Instead, he cupped her chin and turned her head up. His hand was warm, and Irka gulped, relieved. Sim let go, walked around her with a face of one avoiding a contagious disease. "What is this? Who dresses like this? You're making my dick fall off, Irina, you're in the presence of art. You are contaminating the very walls of this sacred place with your appearance. Don't you have anything else to put on? When was the last time you washed these pants?" He peered at her.

Irka glanced at Pavlik, horrified.

"Sim, Irina doesn't talk." He said. "Why are you asking her questions she can't answer?"

"I know. So I heard. She has a voice, doesn't she? Her inner voice, her inner music. That's all one needs to talk. She has arm and legs, as far as I can see. Don't you?"

Irka nodded.

"Excellent. I've seen you sneak up on stage."

"Is that true? When?" Asked Pavlik, interested.

Irka felt a heat wave rise in her.

"Don't be ashamed, my child. It's okay. You either have it, or you don't. This stage," he motioned to it, "is magic. It can see inside you, it knows what you have. If you're empty, it won't allow you to mount it. It will throw you off. Now, show me. I want to see what you can do." He raised his voice and shouted. "Convince me you can act! Go!"

He clapped.

Irka jumped from the noise. *Onstage. Kotik himself is asking me to get onstage.* Her heart thrummed, her vision blurred, her ears rung with strange buzzing. She took one step, another, stopped, walked up to the base of the staircase, and stopped again. She wished herself to be taller, thinner, and infinitely more charming. Girls like her didn't deserve to act. Pavlik leaned and offered her a hand.

In a minute she stood over the orchestra pit, staring at Sim. A jumble of thoughts rushed through her mind, her wish to become an actress, to wear stunning dresses and elaborate

hairdos, her desire to have her voice back, to talk, to deliver performances of such conviction, everyone in the audience would weep and leap to their feet and applaud. She'd stand like this and bow. Pavlik would be at her side, he'd hold her hand, he'd look at her, he'd lean closer and—

"Well? I'm waiting." Sim clapped once.

"Sim, I apologize in advance, but may I say something? How can Irina perform if she doesn't know what you want of her? Could you at least tell her what is it you expect to see?" Said Pavlik.

Sim grimaced. "Quiet, my child. She knows. A true actress always knows, she doesn't need a director to tell her. Watch." With an expectant smile he reclined in the seat and interlaced stubby fingers over his jacket.

Air thickened with anticipation.

Irka's throat went dry, her gut frosted over. But she was good at forcing herself to do things. Since she could hold walk, she forced herself to clean, to organize, to wash, to fold, to keep her hands busy no matter how much pain she was in, to survive, to keep moving, to keep living. It was her way of showing power. No matter how much anyone hurt her she never uttered a cry, not once since Marina threw her across the room after she said her first word, *dura*.



*To stop is to die.* Irka repeated Sim's words to herself. *Theater is a sickness. I must let myself become contaminated, I must fall sick. I must.* She threw the mop to the floor. It clunked loudly against the wood. She didn't flinch, didn't hear it. She stared at the front row, not where Sim sat, but at the middle section where Lyosha reclined the last time in the shape of a boar. There he appeared again, grinning. Irka took a slice of marmalade from her pocket and beckoned it. The boar grunted, rolled off the seat, and trotted to the stairs, where, hoof by hoof, it managed to waddle onstage.

Thick saliva trickled from its jaws, a pair of tusks gleamed in the golden light of the chandelier. Two bloodshot piggy eyes swiveled at Irka. Black stiff bristles of fur stood on end. A halo of horseflies hummed around its snout, and for a second Irka's heart stopped. They were exact copies of the fat shiny pest she saw in her room this morning. She shook the slice of marmalade.

*Come on, piggy, come and get it.*

The boar raised its head, roared, and charged. It ran straight at Irka. She crouched, leg wide apart, fists raised. The hog leapt in the air and she punched it right in the snout. It squealed, flew to the side, and landed on the boards with a deafening thump. The force of the collision threw Irka off balance. She fell on her back, but didn't wince, didn't cry out.

The punch felt good, so good, that within seconds she was up on her feet, at the boar's side, kicking it, jabbing its hairy belly, slamming between its hind legs where she saw its black sinuous dick. The boar yelped, its legs pedaled in the air. Irka couldn't stop. It felt so cathartic to let go of her fury, to beat the living shit out of the pig, she pummeled it non-stop. Sweat streamed down her face.

*Eat that, dickhead!* She screamed in her head at the wheezing boar. *You abominable usurper! You filthy pervert! You scum, you twerp, you lecherous swine!*

"Don't stop! More! More! I want more! Give me more force! I want to see you kill it! Kill it!" Sim sprung up and gesticulated wildly.

Irka grinned. It was as if he opened a faucet, her pent up pain splashed and gurgled and rushed out in an uninterrupted stream. She staggered about the stage. It swiftly became populated with more beasts. The catfish, the giant cockroach, the goat, the herring and the hedgehog arose from nothing. *Die, all of you!* She screamed in her head, slapping left and right. *I want you all to die and never bother me again! Perish! Cease to exist! Evaporate! Leave me alone, forever!*

Irka didn't know how she moved about. Everything melted into one pulsing blur. She grappled with something slippery, struggled with something sharp and hoarse, wrestled, rolled,

punched, bruised her knuckles, hit with her head, her elbows, knees, feet, her entire body. After what seemed like a solid hour, Irka clutched her belly and bent, out of breath. It hurt.

Suddenly the air began to crackle. Irka didn't understand at first what she heard, thinking it was some kind of an explosion.

It was applause. Sim clapped. Pavlik clapped. The rest of the troupe clapped. They arrived for rehearsal in the middle of Irka's impromptu performance and huddled in the back row, watching. "Bravo!" Shouted Sim. "Unprecedented talent! Brilliance! What a delivery! Without a single word! Learn, my children, learn from this girl! The ferocity! The intensity! Where were you hiding? How dare you not have presented yourself to me sooner! Why didn't you tell me, Pavlik?"

"What?" Pavlik's eyes rounded.

"Too bad there is nowhere I can stick you in." Sim said, deflating. "What am I going to do with you?"

"We need another lovebird!" Shouted Tanechka from the back.

"Tanechka wants more pussy!" Yelled Stepan, the mustached man in green next to her. He played one of the cockatiels.

The actors cracked up.

"Shush! I'm thinking." Sim raised one hand.

Tanechka fell silent. She bent heads with Raisa, the other lovebird. They exchanged heated whispers. Nastya and Ida, two

popinjays, slid over the seats and joined them. Katya, one of the lories, stubbornly sat alone. Her partner, Anya, the purple lorry, was late. Parrots Ivan and Gosha studied each other silently, then Slavik, the boy in a silvery leotard pointed at Irka, said something to Stepan, they laughed, turned back to the girls, and huddled in a quiet conversation.

Irka observed them, dumbstruck. *Me? Talent? But I didn't say a single word. And thanks, Sim, now they hate me.*

Somebody yanked on the curtain.

Kostya burst onstage, his face stained with tears.

"Sim! What is going on here, huh? You're auditioning this cow when you told me you have no time for me? Is this how it goes? First you publicly insult me, then while I'm gone you plan to replace me with this mute bitch?"

The actors in the back row hushed, listening.

"What are you looking at? What, haven't seen me perform enough?" Kostya challenged them, reeling. "Sim, what about your promises? All empty words too?" He staggered forward.

Irka smelled alcohol on his breath.

"Kostik, please, don't." Said Pavlik.

"Fuck off!" Kostya shouted.

"What happened? What did I do wrong?" Pavlik reached out.

"Back off, bitch! I'm talking to Sim. Sim! Don't I mean anything to you anymore? Were your words for nothing?" His voice broke. He fell to his knees and began crawling forward.

*He must have drunk a lot.* Thought Irka.

Sim's looked at him in revulsion and said nothing.

"I'll do anything, anything you want." Kostya sobbed.

"Anything at all, just ask. I swear I will. You know how I feel—" Pavlik tackled him and put a hand over his mouth.

"Get off me!" Kostya mumbled through his hold. They rolled one over another, grunting.

"Do we have drunken actors on premises who need to be escorted out?" Said a voice from the doorway.

Everyone looked up.

"What are you doing there? Where is your mop? I told you not to get onstage unless you're cleaning." Shakalov walked into the auditorium, his eyes spit poison.

Irka gave a start.

"I can't stand theater stuff interruptions, have I not said it a million times?" Sim exploded, the breadth of his stance in Shakalov's way. "I don't go for that tone of voice you're using in my presence nor do I care much about what you have to say to my actors."

"Myshko is not an actress, she's a janitor." Said Shakalov, walking up to Sim. "Her job is to clean."

They faced each other, a flamboyant seal and a scraggy jackal. If anyone dropped a pin, it would be heard. The actors gaped, even Kostya stopped struggling in Pavlik's hold. They watched the confrontation with abated breath.

"She's my employee. I tell her what to do, she does it, end of story." Said Shakalov.

"From what I understand, you've never made a formal offer to Irina, which I shall do today." Threw Sim back.

"Well, until you actually do that, Simeon Ignatievich, she is under my jurisdiction." Countered Shakalov. "Get off the stage." He ordered Irka.

She didn't move, and thought, *eat my dick*.

"Off the stage, I said!" He repeated.

"Vladimir Kuzmich, I ask you to vacate the auditorium. You're interrupting the rehearsal." Said Sim quietly. His face turned purple.

"Please excuse me for saying this, Simeon Ignatievich, but you are notorious for neglecting the general theater rules that I—"

"Fuck rules!" Cried Sim. He looked scary, a barking seal in rage. "It's because of narrow-minded morons like you that we suffer. Pitiful slimy vermin with not an iota of appreciation for art. Nothing has value to you unless you can turn it into profit." He shouted now. "You've withheld Irina's pay, after she

has turned the theater speck clean. But do you care? Do you care for your so-called employee? Of course not. You have no mechanism for appreciation of true workmanship because all you seek is to destroy." Here Sim came so close to Shakalov that he was forced to take a step back. The next bit was overheard only by Irka, Pavlik, and Kostya. "If you dare touching this girl again, I will personally see to it that you're fired before the end of the week. Now, get out of my sight."

Irka gasped.

"Out, I said. Are you deaf? Out!" Sim bellowed.

Shakalov left, muttering curses. But when he reached the doorway, he turned and said to Irka. "You will pay for this. Count on it. Today will be your last day here." And with that, he was gone.

"Marvelous, simply marvelous." Sim threw his arms in the air. "It's gone. The inspiration is gone. Poof! Stomped into nothing. By whom? By that jackal."

But Irka didn't listen to Sim anymore. She stared at the doorway. Every shadow in the auditorium came to life. It hummed. Black clouds of horseflies swarmed the air, fell on Irka, brushed her face and followed Shakalov in one long black angry tail.

## Chapter 7. The Attack Of The Horseflies

Irka pulled a slice of stolen bread from under the pillow, crumbled it, and ate small pieces. The rack of costumes stood sentinel over the dingy mattress, occasional sequin sparkled in the glow that seeped from under the door. Crickets chirped in the corner with mechanical accuracy. The clock quietly ticked off minutes. It was almost midnight. Darkness suffocated Irka, but she didn't dare turn on the light. If there were horseflies hiding in the shadows, she didn't want to see them. Maybe there weren't any, maybe it was paranoia. She'd been waiting for hours for something nasty to happen and at last began doubting her intuition.

*I really need to sleep, she thought. I'll be fine. Tomorrow I'll get the eggs and have my revenge, if Shakalov is not fired. If he is fired tomorrow, which is highly unlikely despite what Ilinichna says, because jackals like him are hard to remove from callous institutions, theater or not, then I can go get some red gouache and smear it on his windshield wipers, so next time it rains, it'll look like he hit some old lady and left her to bleed to death. An uncomfortable encounter with militia guaranteed. I could also pour glue in the locks, smear Vaseline*



*on the handles, and spill oil under his car, just to keep him guessing. He'll remember his last day at the theater, and I'll have my last laugh.* Irka smirked, but still felt uneasy about closing her eyes. The dark empty theater, so welcoming and comforting in the last several weeks, felt cold and creepy. Irka's skin crawled. She thought back over the day.

After the rehearsal Shakalov and Sim had another row. Shakalov stormed up the hallway, chastised Ilinichna for her needless intercession, yelled at accountant Zina not to give the janitor Myshko an advance, while Sim came up from behind, took out a wad of cash, shook it in front of Shakalov's face and gave it to Irka. Shakalov said he'd phone Nikita Danilovich Gadyukin, the general manager who hardly showed his nose at the theater, to which Sim replied that he already phoned him the previous morning. Ilinichna gossiped to Alina and Polina, the ticketing girls, that Shakalov was sure to get fired if Kotik put his mind to it. The actors, in view of the unfolding events, dragged Irka away to the cafeteria to have lunch together. Irka ate, nodded, smiled, but didn't listen. Her mind was elsewhere. Immediately after his drunken tirade Kostya disappeared in his dressing room. Naturally, Pavlik went to comfort him, and Irka didn't see either of the friends until the performance. That evening she was allowed by Kotik himself to sit in the front row and watch the show like a VIP guest.

Kostya played poorly. He kept forgetting words, and Pavlik was forced to improvise much to Tanechka's annoyance.

After the applause has died and the audience filed out, Kostya threw another scene. Pavlik and Sim took him home in Sim's car, Stepan rounded the boys for drinks, Tanechka left with Raisa, Katya and the rest of the girls went to drink tea at Ilinichna's apartment, and so Irka was left alone. She slunk into Pavlik's dressing room, burrowed into a pile of garments in the corner and waited until all personnel has left the building, including Vladimir Kuzmich, who stomped along the corridor in search of her, and, with a curse, finally left. She waited for another hour to be sure, crawled out and trotted to her closet. Here she sat behind boxes and stared into shadows. Having determined that there were no flies of any kind waiting to attack her, she scrambled on the mattress, where she sat now, rolled small pieces of bread into balls, and swallowed them.

Somewhere above Irka's head tires crunched on the gravel and came to a stop. *Shakalov!* Thought Irka. Her heartbeat quickened.

Something soft touched her hand. She flinched. There was a short buzz. A horsefly landed on her face, another crawled up her arm, a sharp needle stung her shoulder. Irka cried out. She slapped it, missed, and sprang up. The storage room gradually

filled with contentious hum interrupted by an occasional resonant whine.

*Damned horseflies!* Irka grabbed the blanket and flapped it side to side. The noise intensified, as if darkness itself beguiled the realm of night and solidified into a cloud of whirring insects that vied for her blood.

Panic-stricken, she stumbled between boxes, overturned one. Shoes scattered with a clatter. Irka turned and bumped into the glass case. It careened, balanced for a second, and crashed to the floor with a resounding clang. A shower of shards sprayed in all directions. Irka covered her face and felt with her hand for the light switch. She didn't find it in time.

Hurried footsteps echoed across the corridor. The door flung open. The light flickered on. Irka squinted, momentarily blinded. Through slits she saw a dark silhouette. It rushed at her, yanked the blanket out of her hands, and slapped her in the face.

Irka staggered back and crashed into the vanity desk. Plastic makeup boxes rained on the floor, cracked open. Blue, pink, green, purple eye shadow burst from them in puffs. Irka's foot slid, she groped for the desk, it shifted from the wall. Empty pickle jars filled with combs and scissors fell to the floor and burst to pieces.

Irka hit the wall with her back and lifted herself upright.

"Whore!" Yelled Shakalov. His unshaven face turned yellow with loathing. "What are you doing? Destroying theater's property?"

Irka blinked. Water streamed from the corners of her eyes. She shook her head, indicating that, no, she didn't do any of it on purpose.

His lips stretched in a sickly grin. "I knew it. Knew you'd pull a dirty trick on me. *Dura*. Didn't I tell you, you'd pay for this? You don't know who you're dealing with. If you knew, you'd think twice with that pea-sized brain of yours." He spat.

Irka glanced down in search of a weapon. There was nothing but broken glass and plastic.

"You women are all like this." Continued Shakalov, advancing. "We toil for you, we give you shelter, money, food. We ask but for two things in return. Keep quiet and keep us happy. Is that so hard to do, keep a man happy? But no, you whores rebel, you have this itch in your cunt, you greedy sluts. It's not enough for you. More, more, you want more. Rights, freedom, respect. Listen here, little hussy. You belong in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant, you hear me? I'll teach you how to make a man happy. Come here."

Irka recovered somewhat. *You'll teach me what, how to prematurely ejaculate in your pants?* She thought.

"Take off your clothes." Said Shakalov. His eyes oozed venom, his belly jiggled as he shook from excitement.

Irka glanced at the clock. It was a little after midnight. Even if she screamed at the top of her lungs, chances were, nobody would hear her.

"Don't just stand there, do it." Said Shakalov.

Irka noticed his crotch begin to bulge. She took a step to the right. An oblong piece of glass lay between a pair of scuffed shoes and the mattress.

"Take them off, I said!" Broken shards crunched under Shakalov's heels.

*Come any closer, and I'll skewer you on this.* Thought Irka, bent, snatched the piece and thrust it in front of her. Sharp corner dug into her palm. A trickle of blood swelled, ran along her hand, dripped to the floor. Irka tightened her grip. Pain felt good, pain made her angry.

"You slutty bitch. You think you can fight me?" Shakalov's face contorted with wolfish loathing.

*I sure do.* Thought Irka. *I'll stick this in your gut and twist it until it looks like a spool covered with intestines, then I'll rip open your maw and shove it down your throat so hard, it'll slice you in half and come right out of your cock, you malignant lewd vindictive little man.* This tirade gave Irka the energy she needed.

Shakalov roared and lunged.

Irka threw her arm forward. Slimy with blood, the glass slipped out of her hand at the last moment, but she managed to scrape Shakalov's cheek. He yelped, grabbed his face, and fell on her. She dodged him, darted for her backpack and jacket, tore them off the hook on the wall, and bolted into the maze of corridors that began turning into tunnels dug from packed orange dirt. Her right hand throbbed with pain. Roots caught on her hair, sand filled her eyes, her feet slid apart in the dust.

*No! Not right now, not right now!* She shouted in her head, no longer a girl, her arms, legs, and body shrinking, her skin growing fur. A long pink tail shot out from her spine, and Irka became a mouse. Behind her a jackal howled. First one, then a dozen, then a whole swarm of horseflies buzzed to life. The mouse bounded along the dog-hole. It's little paws skittered with desperate speed. It knew if it faltered, it'd be dead. The horseflies gathered into a dark cloud on its tail. Not one of them stung the mouse yet, but it was only a matter of seconds. The mouse squeaked and darted to the right where a hollow led up and out of the cavern, where a tiny spot of sky showed itself, speckled with stars. The horseflies hummed. The jackal barked, victorious. It caught up to its prey. The mouse felt hot breath on its back just as it shot past the den where the turtle

usually chewed on worms or napped. It was absent now, the remains of its lunch lay scattered in the ground.

The mouse aimed for the opening right after the turtle's lair, an opening into the wild, and, jittering from strain, it pushed through the bramble of vines and rushed into fresh air, rolled down the hill and found itself on an asphalt road.

Leather boots, lace-up sneakers, flats, black, brown, beige, clattered around the mouse. Cars honked, white and red lights flooded the street. The mouse lashed to the side, its tiny heart throbbed with terror.

Footsteps echoed in the theater courtyard. A door slammed. A car started. The mouse drew in air and sped off, away from people, into an alley populated with trash bins, acacia shrubs, and benches. Here, after running for another ten minutes through the labyrinth of broken playgrounds and endless archways, the mouse finally stopped and covered its head with two paws.

Several minutes passed.

Irka opened her eyes. She leaned on the painted brick wall of some old apartment building. *I should've seen it coming*, she thought, *should've prepared for this. Got too comfortable, too lazy. Is that news to you, Irina Myshko? You always get caught off guard when you get lazy. Never do it again.* Irka wiped the hand on her jeans, curled it into a fist to stop the blood flow, and raced along the sidewalks without any definite direction,

with only one idea pulsing in her mind, to get away from the theater as far as she could, to find a hiding place, to rest, and to think what to do next. Only where, where could she find a place like that in Moscow in the middle of the night? *All nice things end, did you forget it? You just had to get onstage, didn't you? Whose fault is it that you got kicked out of the theater? Tell me.* Irka stopped, pinched herself and looked around.

She stood in an unfamiliar courtyard, a desolate square with an empty sandbox, a broken swing and a couple benches, surrounded by eight-story buildings with black windows, only a few of them alight. A smell of fried onions wafted from an open vent-pane on the first floor. Behind tulle curtains, someone cooked something, a hunched figure illuminated by a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. A streetlight by the building's front entrance seeped yellowish glare, hardly enough to brighten the night. Hawthorn bushes huddled in clusters along the sidewalk, as if about to leap at anyone who passed them.

Cool breeze ruffled Irka's hair. She peered at the arch on the opposite end of the yard. Streaks of glow painted the darkness. Despite the late hour, on the main street outside the inner court, cars streamed in both directions. A laughing couple passed by, hurrying on their way from one drinking party to another. Irka sighed, hoisted up her backpack and, spurred by a



vagabond's inertia, marched after them. The couple passed three front entrances, stopped by the fourth, punched in the code, and vanished inside. Irka ran up too late. The heavy metal door shut with a resounding bang.

*One more chance lost*, thought Irka, and gave a start.

A militia car whooped not too far. Spooked, Irka darted along the building. She kept trying entrance doors, desperate to find one with the broken lock. Suddenly a bright light washed over her and passed. A car of foreign make, either an Opel or a Mercedes, rolled along the sidewalk and disappeared behind a utility shack in the far end of the courtyard. Irka trotted after it in the hopes of catching the driver enter the building and sneak in. She slid along the wall, skirted a clump of rowan trees, passed an archway and came upon a stone sack at the end of a blind alley, a bizarre architectural mistake that broke the constant string of houses into a cul-de-sac. The size of a small schoolyard, it had a certain aura about it, as if the things that happened here were cruel, brutal, nasty, and vulgar.

Calls startled Irka. She lurched behind chokeberry shrubs that grew by the entrance on her right, and peeked through. At the far wall of the dead end, car lights tore bright silhouettes from the darkness, about a dozen girls dressed in short minis, big furry jackets, and high-heeled pumps, with makeup that screamed, *hire me*. Most of them smoked. A couple chugged beer

directly from bottles. A groomed man in a leather jacket got out of the sedan, its engine still running, approached them, and, a short conversation later, led one of the blondes back. Irka blinked. The girl didn't look more than sixteen years old. As soon as the car took off, another one replaced it, and then another one. Irka picked astringent chokeberries and stuffed them in her mouth, watching. She knew about downtown prostitutes, but never saw them herself. It was like a pick-a-hooker drive-through.

*Perfect workplace. She thought. Hidden, quiet. I bet the neighbors get a piece of the dough for turning a blind eye on the whole affair and not reporting it to militia. Speaking of which...*

A militia car rode up. Immediately, as if preselected, two tall girls sauntered to it, yanked open the passenger doors and plopped inside. Irka gaped after them until the red lights disappeared in the darkness. *You meagre slime bags*, she thought. *You're in on the deal. Why did I ever think it could be any different.*

Irka ate berries until her belly ached and all prostitutes were gone. Her hand stopped bleeding, but she shivered from cold and exhaustion. The time must have been close to two in the morning. *Would I ever be able to sell my body, to survive, if it came to it?* Irka asked herself over and over, but couldn't find

an answer. Instead, she decided to stay awake for the rest of the night, wait for some early riser to open an entrance door, sneak in and nap at the top landing, when a hand tapped on her shoulder.

Irka wheeled around.

She couldn't make out any shapes at first, only heard a low angry hum, as if a swarm of flies found a decomposing roadkill and were about to infest it with eggs. And then she saw it. A smug face hung over her, two hungry eyes glistened from under a beanie. Green, bulging eyes. "Hey, gorgeous. Watcha doing here so late? Looking for a job?" The face snorted.

Irka's blood stilled.

A couple of hostile sniggers rattled the air. A half a dozen guys, barely in their twenties, trundled up, a couple of them smoking, and blocked her way out of the bramble. They were surrounded by liquid darkness, it trembled with tizzy, and it buzzed.

*Horseflies.* Thought Irka. Heart pounded in her ears. She took a step back and smashed into branches. There was no way out, unless she tore between the shrubs and the brick wall, but the passage was so narrow, she couldn't possibly squeeze through without having to break canes as thick as her fingers. Even if she succeeded in that, with her boobs and ass a fast escape was out of the question. Once more Irka hated her body, her stupid

fat flesh and her idiotic brain. Whatever led her here? Why did she have to spy on this harlot trade? Why couldn't she go to the main streets where there were bright lights and people?

The gang pressed on. Irka got quickly surrounded by interested pairs of eyes that sized her up and down. They shifted and rearranged, as if hanging in the air, restless.

"What's wrong? Cat got your tongue?" Continued the one in the beanie. His voice was husky, his breath stunk with beer. His narrow face looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. Irka blinked. *Shit, shit, shit.* She thought. Her thoughts were in disarray. One moment she wanted to punch the guy in the balls, another to scream, yet another to turn numb so it would be over quickly.

A hand flicked a lighter and held it to her face. "Did you hear what uncle Roma said? Answer uncle Roma, bitch."

*Roma.* Irka's gut pierced with premonition. *Roma.*

Two more voices yammered in the back, they sounded like a drone of flies. Irka shook her head, to get rid of the noise in her ears, but it wouldn't go. It drained her, filled her with terror and impotence. *No!* She shouted in her head. *No, no, no! Keep yourself together! Fight! Fight, I said!* Instead, her knees filled with water and buckled.

"Maybe she's retarded?" Said the one with the lighter.

"I dunno. Hey, slut, are you retarded?" Asked a voice from the back.

"Don't be scared. You can talk to us. We're gentle folk." Said Roma, and bared his teeth. "We won't touch a hair on your head, only on your pussy." His gang giggled.

Irka noticed the curl in his lip, and a chill spread through her stomach. *Roma*, she thought. *Shakalov's son Roma, the one in the photograph, the one who came back from the army. Like father, like son.* Fury welled up in her chest, but failed to give her desired energy. The bottom of her stomach welled up with lead. The darkness of the shadows thickened and started gnashing its mandibles. Her skin grew taut.

*No, go away. No mouse, not right now. I don't want you!* Irka shook her head again, to no avail. She was about to change.

"Fat *dura*. Will you talk to me or not?" Said Roma. His eyes grew to an unnatural size, two compound spheres with multiple lenses, Irka's many faces refracted in them like in a mirror mosaic.

"So what if she doesn't talk, Roma?" Buzzed a voice. "Better for us. She'll keep her mouth shut. Look at those tits. That's like two fucking milk jugs."

"Bit too big for me." Droned another.

"I like them big. Something to hold on to." Whirred the third.

A cackle of hooting laughter followed.

"Come on, girly. Why so silent?" Continued Roma. His beanie grew fuzz, separated into antennae. "It's not very nice not to answer your elders. When an elder asks you a question, you need to answer. Didn't your mother teach you? That's one bad mother. But don't worry, gorgeous, uncle Roma is here. Uncle Roma will teach you proper manners. Say *hello, uncle Roma. I want to suck your dick.*" He grabbed her chin and lifted it. His fingers felt sticky and cold.

Irka lifted her leg to kick him in the crotch, but merely swiped his pants. Familiar numbness and nausea strangled her, leaving no energy for defense.

"Oh, feisty. Are you trying to fight me? Guys, she's trying to fight me!" Roma grabbed her at the throat.

Irka clawed at his fingers, choking. Her right hand didn't cooperate, stinging, her left soon gave up and she hung limp in his hold. No sound came from her lips, not even a sigh.

"Come on, Roma, leave it. There's militia over there." Said the guy from the back.

"Oh no, we're not going anywhere. The whore tried to kick me. She needs to be taught a lesson on how to treat men with respect. See, she agrees with me. Quiet as a mouse. Quiet is good, you slutty bitch. You'll earn yourself more cream that way." Roma let go of Irka. His voice blurred into a monotonous

jabber. His eyes inflated to the size of his head. His body segmented into moving sections, a pair of clear veined wings unfolded from his back.

Irka ogled him with horror. Her own head narrowed into a knob with whiskers, she shriveled, shrunk, and soon there was a mouse sitting on the packed dirt pissed through by stray dogs. A cloud of horseflies half-pushed, half-dragged it out of the bushes, up the stairs and into a damp front entrance. Here, under a twinkling light, on the first floor landing between two apartment doors, the flies covered the mouse and stung it one by one. The mouse squeaked helplessly, clawed at the air, but every time it slapped at one horsefly, five more settled on another spot, sluggish, drunk with blood. Their hairy abdomens expanded, shook from excitement and aggression. At last the mouse gave up. It suffered from blackouts. A dark swarming mass covered it completely, rose when the mouse tried to move, then settled once more, sucking on its trembling belly, between its hind legs, by the root of its tail, everywhere they could find vulnerable flesh.

A dog barked behind the door. Horseflies lifted in a cloud and hung above the mouse. Its hide was swollen with bites, and where there was no fur the skin was reddish and puffy, smeared with some kind of milky mucus. The horseflies settled on its

victim to feed more, but the dog barked again. Panicked, the flies surged up into the shadows and vanished.

The tiny bladder let go, and the mouse peed on itself. It hardly felt warm urine pool around it. It felt nothing except the hellish burn from horsefly stings. It dimly heard the dog scratch and bark again, the lock turn, the door chain rustle. Noises blended into a hubbub of creaks, gasps, croons, the whirr of the rotary phone, the whine of the siren, the staccato of footsteps. The mouse swam in and out of a daze, on the crest of a wave that felt like hands one moment, like an oilcloth cot the next. It swayed back and forth. It grew, it expanded, and the mouse with it.

Irka unglued her eyelids. She was lying flat under a low roof, a stretch of fake leather the color of stale custard. Underneath her crinkled a sheet of starched cotton. It took her brain a few minutes to process this information, to connect it with the medical smell and the annoying mechanical hollering. She was in an ambulance. Everything below her waist screamed, everything above it throbbed in agony. She couldn't remember what happened or how she got here.

A woman's face lowered over her. "Shhh. You're fine. You're okay. We're ten minutes away from the hospital."

*Hospital? What hospital?* Thought Irka. The woman's face blurred. Lulled by the rocking of the van, Irka passed out



again. She came to when two pairs of arms heaved her onto a stretcher. Someone wheeled it between two glass doors, under the fluorescent lights of the foyer.

*Hospital. What am I doing in a hospital?* Thought Irka and squinted. Mundane voices talked across her with that boring tone of someone doing their job only because they had to. "Natasha, where to? Eighth floor?" Said a thin woman in a white coat. Irka could see the bottom of her feeble chin and two arms on either side of the stretcher.

"What? Are you out of your mind? Eighth floor. Ha!" Said a voice on the left, gusty and loud. "We're full. Every single bed is occupied. I don't know where to stick her. What's she got?"

"Vaginal bleeding." The woman left the stretcher, walked off, and Irka could hear hushed whispering. She didn't dare to turn her head in fear of snapping her neck. Her spine turned to ice, and a horrible dread filled her stomach. Vaginal bleeding. At once, the buzzing horseflies filled her head, and Irka wanted to scream, to get rid of Roma's and his mates' faces attacking her, leering at her, laughing at her, panting, sweating...

Irka turned her head and retched.

"Oh my God, another one. We had two cases today already. Why didn't you say it right away?" A pasty face framed in bleached curls leaned over Irka.

"What do you mean, didn't say right away? I'm telling you now. What do you want me to do, transmit thoughts? I'm not a psychic." Scoffed the thin woman.

Irka blinked. Her vision swam, as did everything in her body. But instead of sorrow, or anguish, or at least some shred of self-pity, she boiled with fury. *Congratulations, Irina Myshko, she thought, you got raped. You hapless little shit. Now all you need to do is get your throat slit in some junkyard behind some garages, and the record of criminal offenses you have attracted to yourself will be complete. Just make sure as soon as you recover to go to the most deserted, most despondent wasteland you can find, grab a knife, in case the killer you will be of the forgetful kind, and wait there for your very own personal assassination.* Irka's healthy hand crawled to her thigh and began twisting the flesh with as much force as she could muster in her state.

Two women in white coats engaged in an argument, quacking like two geese.

"The sons of bitches. If I were their mother, I'd tear their balls off. Move her there."

"Where?"

"Where-where. There! To the elevator."

"You think you're the only one overworked? I've been up since five." The ambulance nurse threw arms in the air. "No breaks. It's what, almost four in the morning?"

"Hush, Lyuda. I've got a headache without your complaining. Better help me. And don't shout, the patients are still sleeping."

"You're a good one." Lyuda said.

"You're a good one yourself."

They quacked some more, but Irka tuned them out. Her head pulsed, and she began to shiver.

A heavy thump announced the elevator's arrival. Lyuda departed with a curt goodbye. Natasha rolled Irka in, the doors shut, and the cabin jittered upward.

"What's your name?" She asked Irka.

*Like you care.* Thought Irka.

"You're in shock. You poor girl. Now listen to me, it's not safe in the city anymore, no good walking in the dark alone, you hear me?" Natasha pressed her already thin lips into a line. That made her look older, over fifty, her skin flabby, a prominent wart over her upper lip and another one on her nose. "My liver's been hurting all week, and that's a sure sign. I'm telling you. Bad times are coming, mind my words. I've seen them boys running around, black like horseflies. What's to take from an old woman? Nothing. So they leave me alone. But you," she

sighed, "look at you, a young pretty girl. You can't walk the streets alone in the middle of the night, you see what happens? You need to buy yourself one of them pepper sprays."

*Anything else you want to tell me about life, lady?* Thought Irka, considering the distance between herself and the woman's white coat and if she had enough strength to spring up and break her anserine neck.

The elevator doors grumbled open.

Natasha rolled Irka out. "Galina Viktorovna! Girls!" She yelled. "I got a bleeding one, from the ambulance. Where do you want her, straight in the operating room or what?"

*Oh no, not an operating room.* Irka frosted all over. The fear finally got to her.

## Chapter 8. In The Mole Hole

Stiff light blinded Irka. She squinted, straining to hear what Natasha relayed to a sleepy middle-aged woman in a chalky coat who looked like an albino mole. The woman, most likely the nightshift doctor, nodded, screwed up unseeing eyes, dismissed Natasha with a wave of her hand and without a word wheeled Irka along the corridor, into a room with crummy curtains, a dilapidated gynecological chair, and an odd contraption on top of a trolley, a decadent computer monitor with tubes sticking out every which way. Irka thought if she touched it, it would come alive as a monstrous tick and wring her to death.

The doctor plunked in a chair, jotted something in a lined notebook and studied Irka silently for a good minute. She had no neck, puny eyes and ears, dull hair pulled into a bun, powerful arms and a barrel of a body. She sniffed the air and said in a surprisingly pleasant voice, "Irina Myshko."

Irka nodded.

"So, Irina, can you tell me what happened?"

Irka stared. She expected a command to get up and get into the chair. The few polyclinic doctors she visited, handled her like butchers handle meat, with brusque measured movements,

little talk, and zero compassion. Would this doctor be any different? Irka couldn't remember the last time anyone except Pavlik asked her a question in an amiable manner. *Pavlik*. Irka's chest constricted. Was he still asleep or did he wake up early? Would he wonder where she was when he got to the theater? If by some miracle he found out that she was in the hospital, would he care enough to come visit? Or would he not give a damn about some janitor girl? And what would Sim think, and Ilinichna? Was it really Roma, Shakalov's son, who raped her with his mates? Where was Shakalov now? Would Sim sack him today or not?

The doctor said something else, but Irka didn't hear. A new thought caught her aghast. The doctor knew her name. The backpack. They took the passport from her backpack. Surely someone had already called her mother or would call her in the next couple hours, once they traced Irka's phone number by her address, or, worse, reported the incident to militia.

*I need to run before Lyosha finds me*, she thought.

The doctor spoke with growing irritation. "Irina, can you hear me?"

Irka nodded.

"Why aren't you answering?"

Irka pointed to her mouth and shook her head.

"Does it hurt to talk?"

*It hurts, only not where you'd think it would. I wish it'd hurt like normal pain. Then you could give me a pill that would fix my silence.* Thought Irka and shook her head no.

"You don't want to talk? Or you can't talk for some reason?" The doctor raised non-existent brows. Her poise was that of a mole that located a juicy worm and prepared to snaffle it.

Irka nodded.

"What? Can't talk? What is this, some sort of a speech defect?"

Irka shrugged.

The doctor sniffed the air. "So, Irina, I don't have all night to sit here and pull information out of you with pliers. My ward is overflowing. You think you got it bad? I have an old woman here who got a bottle stuck up her twat. Some riffraff broke into her apartment in the middle of the night, robbed her, and decided it'd be fun to see how big of a vagina she had. How's that for bad? Will you talk now?"

Irka flinched, snatched an invisible pencil from the air and made as if to write.

"That's better." The doctor turned around, seized an empty prescription blank from the desk and handed it to Irka. "Here. Only I don't want you to write me your whole life story, understand? Write what happened, short and sweet."

"I had an accident when I was two," wrote Irka, "it's when I stopped talking. But I can hear just fine."

"What kind of an accident?" Asked the doctor without looking. She took notes.

"I fell." Wrote Irka. "Bit my tongue, really hard."

"Bit your tongue? That's all? That's not enough reason to stop talking."

"You said not to give you my life story."

The doctor drew in air and let it out. "Okay. What happened tonight?"

"I got attacked."

"By whom?"

Irka's hand shook. She wrote, "by horseflies."

The doctor slapped her knee. "What? What is this twaddle? Who do you take me for? Some *dura*?"

*No, a blind mole.* Thought Irka.

The doctor stood. "This is the thanks I get." She slapped the notebook on the desk. "You know when was the last time I slept? Even I don't know. For what? For meager kopecks. There is forty of you, and only one of me." She blinked rapidly. "Why, explain to me, why would you walk the streets alone in the middle of the night? Who in their right mind does this? What are you, a sumo wrestler? You're a girl, a young woman, you should've thought better. Moscow is teeming with scum that don't



know where to stick their pricks. They've got no brains, no jobs, nothing. But you! Look at you. Something in your eyes tell me you're not stupid. What were you thinking?" She screwed up her face.

Irka jolted. She noticed a twinkle of moisture in the corner of the doctor's eyes.

"What am I doing." The doctor shook her head. "As soon as Vera Anatolievna is here, I'm going home." She studied Irka. "Why do you look at me like this? Did you think about your mother? She's probably worried sick."

*I wish, thought Irka. I wish she was. But more than that, I wish I could eradicate her from my mind.*

"I have a daughter your age, Dasha. Every time she goes to those discos with her friends, I can't sleep. The things I see here... ah, it's no use." The doctor deflated, shrunk, her blind little eyes sunk in their sockets. "Do you think you can stand on your own?" She yawned and felt Irka's forehead, back to her sleepy self. "No fever, good. Must not be that bad. We'll see in a minute." She gave Irka a perfunctory smile, walked over to the tiny sink by the window and turned on the water.

Irka waited for her to start washing hands, gathered whatever strength remained, swung legs over the edge of the gurney and promptly fell. She cried out from pain. A pair of wet hands carefully rolled her over and sat her up. "What exactly

are you doing? I don't need you to exert yourself to the point of exhaustion."

The doctor helped Irka up and on the bunk. "Lay still."

Irka seethed. She was too weak to escape. Great. She had to come up with a different plan.

The doctor lifted up her shirt, felt her stomach. Irka bit her lip so as not to cry out. Clammy gloved fingers slipped down her tattered panties, entered her and felt about. Water streamed down the sides of Irka's face. Everything the doctor touched was on fire.

"When was your last period?" Asked the doctor. "Ah, never mind."

Irka stared at her, horrified. It's been too long, way too long. The last time she washed her cheesecloth menstrual rags must have been in August. Clipped by pins to the clothesline on the balcony, they dried overnight, it was that hot.

"So, Irina Myshko," said the doctor. "I suspected as much." She looked Irka in the eye and slowly said, "I think you're pregnant."

Irka's heart dropped to her stomach, then returned back, wild and about ready to explode. Needles prickled her skin. The word 'pregnant', spoken first by that stuffy matron in the metro, the one who resembled a weasel, has completely escaped her mind. In fact, she was glad she didn't have to deal with

bloody rugs, didn't have to wash them, dry them, amble around with them chafing her inner thighs, in constant fear that one wrong step, one powerful gush, and the blood might soak through her pants for everyone to ogle. *You naïve psychotic pissant*, she thought, *do you need someone to drive a stake through your dumb head, to stop forgetting things that are of vital importance? How many times could you have gone to the pharmacy and gotten a pregnancy test, instead of planning to get the syringe for the fucking eggs?* Angry tears prickled Irka's eyes. She balled her hands into fists but didn't dare to hit herself in the doctor's presence.

The doctor lumbered up, tore off the transparent resin glove, stuck her head out of the door and yelled in a surprisingly loud voice. "Teterev! Someone get me Teterev!"

Before she turned back, Irka slapped herself twice, hit her lower abdomen, and twisted an old bruise on her side so fiercely, she moaned.

Within a minute a young balding man in squeaky sneakers and large glasses popped into the room, chewing something and brushing crumbs off his white coat. "You asked for me, Galina Viktorovna?" he said in a cackling call, his head jerked like that of a grouse that's been torn away from a fight, de-feathered and defeated. His glossy eyes slid over Irka interestedly.

Her face grew hot from humiliation. She squirmed to reach down and jerk her panties up. They got stuck around her knees. It took two more yanks to get them up and over her buttocks.

"I need an ultrasound." Said Galina Viktorovna without looking up. She filled the same notebook with broad squiggles.

"Aha." Teterev hiccupped, sat in a creaky chair next to the tick contraption, picked up a plastic bottle by the monitor. "Shirt." He said, without looking.

Irka lifted her shirt.

"Higher." The bottle in his hand hovered inches above her stomach.

She drew the shirt up the edge of her grubby bra.

Cool jelly squirted on her skin. Irka flinched from surprise. Teterev plopped the bottle back on the desk, snatched one of the tubes, pressed its blunt rounded end to her belly, and swirled it around in tight circles.

*Oh God, it's shaped like a dildo. I think I will throw up,* Irka thought. A squirt of bile lashed itself up her throat. Irka forced it down with a hard swallow.

Teterev pushed a button under the desk. The black screen flickered to live. A grainy image shimmered with lines that rose and fell in tune with annoying tinny beeps. Irka bent to see what Teterev and Galina Viktorovna were looking at.

"Like I thought." Said Galina Viktorovna, propped her powerful arms akimbo. "About ten weeks, by the look of it. You're one lucky girl, you know? Don't even think about going out after dark alone from now on. You'll be okay, your baby will be okay, so don't you worry."

*I'm not worried, thought Irka. I want that baby dead.*

Teterev slid the stick an inch, another, paused, and peered at the screen. Galina mumbled some medical terms in his ear, he nodded silently and answered something, but Irka's mind was gone. She gazed at the image. It changed. Broken lines morphed into a clot of something white, a blob with two miniscule bumps on each side. One of them moved. Irka's heart went aflutter. It suddenly hit her. It was her baby, that thing, a tiny fetus with two little arms.

*It's alive, she thought, and began to shake. It's waving at me. I doesn't know that I want to kill it.*

The doctor has mistaken her facial expression for fear, sat down on the edge of the cot and leaned over. "You didn't know you were pregnant?"

Everything inside Irka trembled. She thought, *no, I didn't. Imagine a bigger idiot, be my guest. Please, do me a favor. Select the sharpest pincers that you've got and extract the memory of Lyosha Kabansky from my brain, as well as his malignant offspring from my uterus, before it makes me change my*

*mind. Fuck, cut out the entire uterus, so I'll never have any babies.*

Galina sniffed. "You know who the father is?"

*I wish I didn't.* Thought Irka. She couldn't help herself and glanced at the screen once more. The image of the baby was gone. Teterev wiped her stomach with a filthy towel, placed the dildo back into its holder, and listened with rapt attention, interrupted by occasional hiccups.

"You don't want it, do you. I can see that." Echoed the doctor. "Who'd want a baby at sixteen. How can you be a mother when you are still a child yourself."

Irka blushed, hated herself for it, blushed harder. And then at once, out of nowhere and without any warning, a storm of wretched helplessness encroached her guts, stirred them, and spat them out. Irka's carefully composed façade of indifference crumbled, and before she could stop herself, she clasped Galina's hand and clung to her side. Her face burrowed in the folds of the lab coat that smelled of starch and antiseptics, and Irka broke into silent sobs.

"It's okay, it's okay." Galina's hand patted her on the shoulder. "There you go. Cry it out, you'll feel better. Teterev, leave us alone."

"Aha." Cackled Teterev, hiccupped, and left.

Irka cried for at least five minutes. Finally, her convulsions subsided, and, embarrassed at the snot that hung off the tip of her nose, at the tears that stained the doctor's coat, she withdrew, sniffing. The remnants of the gel on her stomach dried to a constringent film. The sensation reminded Irka of Lyosha's seed desiccating on her inner thighs. A new wave of nausea gagged her. Irka coughed, yanked her shirt down, and turned to the wall.

"Irina? I need you to write me your home phone number."

Irka gave a start and grabbed Galina's arm so fiercely, the doctor sprung up from the bunk. "What's wrong with you? Let go!"

Irka placed two palms together, pressed them to her chin, and shook her head no, pleading with her eyes.

"You're a runaway." Said Galina matter-of-factly.

Irka nodded, relieved.

"It's a good thing you're sixteen. What shall I do with you?"

Irka mimed writing in the air.

Galina gave her the prescription form and pen.

"Let me go." Irka wrote.

"Where will you go in this state? No, it's out of the question. I suppose you don't want me to call militia, to report the assault?"

Irka shook her head no.

"I'm with you there. What good will it do. I have yet to hear them solve a single rape case. What, with homicides on the rise, it's on the bottom of their list. Every time I turn on the TV, there's news of someone killed, in their own building entrance, or, worse, in their own apartment. Some life that is." She sniffed. "So, Irina Myshko, you will stay here until you get better."

Irka let out a long exhale.

"But somebody will have to pick you up when we discharge you. Do you have someone who can get you?"

Irka shrugged. *Pavlik? Ilinichna? Sim? Would they show up if she asked the nurse to call the theater?*

"Do you want to keep the baby or not?"

Irka stared. She wanted to nod and couldn't.

"Well, you need to decide fast. If you want an abortion, I can try and get you in this morning. We're overflowing as it is. I'll talk to Ildar Grigorievich, see if he can squeeze you in."

"Thank you." Irka wrote.

"Can't put a thank you in a pocket." Said Galina, ambled to the door, and yelled. "Girls! Kira? Lana? Someone. I need a blood and a urine sample. Quick."

Irka barely moved. She witnessed, as if from afar, a goose of a nurse straddle in, take her blood, ask her to pee in a plastic cup in the bathroom next door, then wheel her on the



gurney further along the corridor, turn right and park her by the wall.

It was a fully blown morning. Sun streamed through a tall window at the end of the hallway. Dappled shadows danced on minty walls, lace curtains moved on the breeze from cracked pane-vent. It didn't help. The air was stuffy, polluted with the smell of medicine, freshly mopped floors, and despair. Separated by a narrow strip of swollen linoleum, a dozen sickroom doors lined both sides of the hallway. Every free wall space was occupied by a portable bed, a girl perched on top, Irka's age or younger, a few of them in the company of worried mothers. The girls were dressed in almost identical bathrobes of pastel colors, some printed with flowers, some with puppies or kittens, some with convoluted patterns that made Irka's eyes scream from motley overload. They looked to her the same, a flock of timorous sheep poised for slaughter.

Irka's bed was at the end of the corridor opposite the window. Her eyes burned, but she couldn't entertain the idea of dozing. She sat up.

The door by the window flew open. A stocky man in a lab coat and scrub hat stepped out, pulled the surgical mask down to his chin and yelled, "Volkova!"

A plump girl who reclined on the stretcher across from Irka, strands of chestnut hair breaking out of her braid, grunted, swung her legs over the edge, and said. "Me."

"You're next. Hurry up." Said the surgeon and withdrew.

Volkova's feet searched for slippers. She looked no more than fifteen, yet already with a cynical echo in her eyes. There was no mother at her side, but she had an open plastic bag of mandarins spread on the pillow. She threw Irka a curious glance, shoved the mandarins under the blanket, stood and wobbled through the hallway to the operating room.

A whiff of porridge, sugared cafeteria tea, and the pungent odor of black bread made Irka turn her head.

"Girls! Breakfast!" A voice yelled shrilly. A squat pig of a lady in a greasy apron and a cook's hat emerged from behind the corner. She trundled a steel cart loaded with two steaming pots, a stack of chipped plates, faceted glasses, a bowl of cut up bread and another with spoons. Her cries intermingled with loud metallic jitter. "Breakfast!" She grunted into Irka's face. "You in for abortion?"

Caught off guard, Irka stared. Her stomach churned with hunger. She was suddenly so ravenous, she wanted to eat everything this pig lady had to offer. "Yes? No? You can't eat before an operation."

Irka shifted uneasily.

"Say, did you swallow your tongue or something? You want breakfast or not?" Irka nodded, greedily watching a pink podgy hand ladle porridge onto a plate, flop a spoon, a slice of bread on the side, and pour tea into a glass.

"Breakfast!" The cook yelled. The door next to Irka creaked open. A pair of elderly women in ghastly robes shuffled out.

"What's for breakfast this morning, Tanyusha?" Mumbled one chewing her lips. Bent like a hook, she resembled a heron in search of frogs. Her thin legs shook so hard, Irka thought she would tip over.

"Oatmeal kasha, what else? Are you eating or not? I got eleven more rooms to serve, and those, like that one," she waved at Irka, "extras."

The other patient took after a toad. Bloated, green in the face, she drawled, "Black bread again, don't you have any white bread?"

"We're out," grunted Tanyusha, "I got what I got. Don't want to eat it, don't eat it." She began serving them.

Irka couldn't watch anymore. Her belly grumbled. She slurped hot tea, placed the glass on the floor, clambered on the bed, and, her back to cold concrete wall, plate on her knees, dug in. The porridge tasted watery and salty, an occasional oatmeal hull floated here and there, but Irka didn't care. She ate until the plate was clean, licked it, shoved it under the

bed, and stole a glance at other patients. Busy receiving breakfast, none of them paid her any attention. Irka darted to Volkova's gurney, plunged her hand under covers, plucked a couple mandarins, retreated, and stashed them under the pillow, her heart hammering. She finished the tea, gobbled the bread, placed the dishes on the floor, and reclined. Pleasant warmth rose to her cheeks. She wondered if she would stay long enough to catch lunch, on the off chance that they would serve cutlets with buckwheat and dried fruit compote, her favorite, when the door by the window blasted open and a nurse marched out, her painted lips pressed into a line. She took hold of Volkova's stretcher, pulled it into the operation room and, a few minutes later, wheeled out Volkova and an IV stand attached to the girl's dangling arm by a transparent tube.

Irka's heart went cold. *She killed it, killed her baby*, she thought. *So what? She did what she had to do. Maybe that's what I'll do. Maybe it's mercy, to kill one whom you won't be able to love, who was fathered against your will. Take me. Why was I born? My father didn't want me, obviously. He fled when my mother got pregnant. My mother didn't want me either, I was an accident. What stopped her from doing an abortion? She should've disposed of me like I will dispose of Lyosha's grisly piglet.* Irka kicked her stomach, wanting the fetus to feel her hate.

The nurse parked the gurney, locked the brakes, fixed the IV, and turned to Irka. "Irina Myshko?"

Irka slowly nodded, her eyes on Volkova, on her pale face and bluish lips. *Maybe I shouldn't kill it.* She thought. *Maybe I should let it live, like my mother let me live. Maybe I'll grow to love it.*

"Did you eat anything today?" Asked the nurse.

Irka gulped, pushed the empty plate deeper under the bed with her foot, and slowly shook her head no.

The nurse handed her a thermometer. "Take your temperature, use the bathroom, pee, wash up, and see Liza for clyster. Shouldn't take you any longer than twenty minutes. Hurry. You're after Mukhina." She marched off without another word.

Irka mechanically stuck the silvery tube in the armpit. Her heart filed her head with a million hammers. *What Liza?* She wanted to ask. *Where? For what again?* But the nurse was already gone. Stricken with anguish over the fate of the fetus, Irka slid off the gurney and made for the door at which the nurse pointed. Lopsided on uneven hinges, it creaked sadly when she opened it.

A single forty-watt light bulb hung by its cord from a moldy ceiling. An addle scent came from the toilet bowl. Walls, finished in beige ceramic tile, sported a chipped mirror above the sink, a couple hooks for towels, and a yellowing shower pan

a foot off the floor, hidden behind a whitewashed shower curtain.

Irka didn't think long. She hasn't had a proper hot bath for almost a month. She took care of her cleansing business in the theater restroom sink, carefully washing every night and every morning under arms, between legs, soaping her hair every couple days and tearing it apart with fingers since she had no comb. Irka slid the latch, turned on the water, peeled off her duds, and stepped into the scalding stream with a sigh of pleasure.

Water burned her skin, but Irka didn't mind. She lifted her head and let her face get splashed. Steam rose in clouds, beads of perspiration covered the mirror. There was no shampoo, but somebody forgot a lump of soap on the edge of the sink. Irka stepped out of the shower, adroitly snatched it, and stepped back in. She lathered her hair, scratched her scalp until it stopped itching, passed the soap over her shoulders, breasts, and, carefully, between her thighs. It stung. Irka cried out, peeled open every fold, fingered every orifice, and slowly, with care, washed herself clean.

Her skin turned red. There was no sponge, no bast wisp left hanging on the shower rod by a careless patient, so Irka used her hands. She rubbed strings of old skin off her forehead, temples, neck, under her breasts, off her arms, legs, between

fingers and toes. She scraped elbows and knees with nails, brushed teeth with a forefinger, and at last, satisfied, closed her eyes and simply stood under hot water to enjoy it.

The door rattled. "Who's there? Zhanna, is that you?" Yelled a woman's voice. "How much longer? I need to use the toilet."

Irka gave a start, opened her eyes, and slammed her back into the tiled wall.

Lyosha's face stared at her from the shower curtain. It was his custom to sneak upon Irka in the bathroom when she took showers. He broke her last refuge, her sacred place of cherished loneliness where she could lock the door and be alone, untroubled by her mother or aunt or Lenchka or either of the grandmothers for ten minutes straight, if not more. He simply broke the hook one night and barged in, vodka on his breath.

*No, you can't be here,* thought Irka, *leave me alone. Go away!* She shook her head. It didn't help.

Lyosha's face merged with the mustached phizog of car mechanic Dima Mishin, Marina's boyfriend before Lyosha, then with Fedor Chervyakov's upslanted eyes, the brick worker from the construction site up the street, Boris Komarik's cumbersome jowls, never cleanly shaved, Iliya Uzhevatty's nose with tufts of hair sticking out, and the rest of them, whose names Irka didn't remember. They flipped like slides in a projector,

Lyosha, click, Boris, click, Shakalov, click, Roma, click, his mates, click-click-click. They multiplied, morphed into a spinning circle, grinning, grimacing, laughing. Horseflies, jackals, boars, bears, gnats, mosquitos. Their shapes elongated, shifted, and transformed into long white worms. Their wobbling tube-like bodies dropped from the shower curtain and slithered up the shower pan toward Irka's feet. She cried out and stomped on them, squishing them, squelching them. It was no use. Pale gobs of them squirted out of every crack between tiles, boiled out of the toilet, from behind the mirror, crawled out of the sink and smacked with wet slaps on the floor.

*I hate you, I hate you, all of you!* Irka screamed inside her head. She trampled them with both feet, shaking from revulsion. The worms that she managed to smash, popped with a hideous sloshing noise. More crawled over their remains, fat, long, wiggly, and shiny. *Go away, leave me alone! I said, leave me alone!* Irka pressed herself into the corner. She wanted to vomit, but it wouldn't come. Instead of nausea, a wave of hate struck her, hate for men who violated her, white blistering hate for Lyosha Kabansky and his seed. She balled hands in fists and began pounding on her stomach. *I know how I can hurt you, but I can hurt your baby!* She thought. *How would you like this? How would you like me to murder it?* She asked the worms. They stopped their advance, listening. Their transparent skin pulsed



with impatience. *Yes, that's what I'll do. It deserves to be scraped out of me like a gob of bloody mucus, like a hunk of spoiled meat, like a pile of pig's intestines, to be lacerated, chopped into mush and flushed down the drain where its remnants will be gnawed on by Moscow sewage rats. It will perish in their stomachs forever. It doesn't deserve to live. It's ugly, ugly like a fucking boar, and I will kill it! I'll kill it!*

Irka worked herself into a rage, hitting harder and harder. After a moment's hesitation, the worms advanced in a flow of slithering bodies. Sheer mass of them overwhelmed Irka. She suddenly got frightened. Her foot slammed into the nearest creep, but it wasn't a foot of a girl anymore. She started turning into a scared little mouse. Its paws slid on the suds. It flopped back, smacked its head on the tiled wall and blacked out.

## Chapter 9. What Eaglets Eat

Irka was lying face up, covered up to her chin with a wooly blanket. She opened her eyes and winced. Fluorescent light sent needles into her brain where they exploded in painful fireworks. The back of her head throbbed, the tailbone whined from colliding with the shower pad, severe cramps girded her waist, and her damp skin crawled with goosebumps. Subdued babble told her she was back in the hallway. She squinted. A blurry image of a mole's blocked the light. Irka blinked. The snout came into focus.

"What were you doing, trying to kill yourself?" Said Galina Viktorovna. She sat on the edge of the gurney. Irka felt warmth radiate from her through the blanket. "Shower! Who told you to take a shower?"

"Galina Viktorovna, I only asked her to wash up. For your information, I didn't ask her to take a shower. Must've been her own idea." Quacked the anxious surgery nurse. She stood behind the doctor. Her painted lips puckered in an offended sort of way. She reminded Irka of a duck that moulted and out of disgrace was bent on defending itself by pinching, nipping, or plucking everything in its vicinity.

"Don't quack in my ear, Tamara. I know the procedure, I'm not blaming you." The doctor's bleached eyes turned to Irka.

"Irina, explain to me. Who takes a shower without rubber thongs? In the public hospital? Have you lost your mind? You've got to wear rubber thongs. Don't you know what happens when you shower without thongs? You could've broken a bone, you could've caught fungus! Nasty parasite, it eats up your feet before you know what hit you!" Galina sniffed the air. "You could've killed yourself, Irina, or could've induced a miscarriage. Good thing you have a hard head." An idea brightened her face. "Is that what you were trying to do? Have a miscarriage and run?"

Irka shook her head no and jerked. Her eyeballs were on fire, and she could swear she heard her brain slosh around in her skull. Her abdomen swelled with hot lead, and she bit on her lip to stifle another moan.

"And what if it didn't come out all at once? What then, huh? What if there were pieces of the baby left? Did you think about that? We would need to scrape you clean anyway. You know what that could've done to you? It could permanently sterilize you." The doctor inflated like a furry balloon. She spoke with such chagrin, her eyes glistened. "At sixteen! What if you wanted to get pregnant again? You'd blame it on the doctor's, of course. The doctors are the scapegoats, always."

*I don't want any babies,* thought Irka tiredly. *Not now, not ever. Cut out my whole stomach, if that's what it takes.*

In the pause when Galina Viktorovna drew a breath, a resonant change came over the general burble. It hushed. Irka had a sneaky suspicion that the whole ward was eavesdropping on the doctor's rant.

"Galina Viktorovna, patients are waiting." Tamara said, shifting from foot to foot.

"I'm not blind. So," the doctor peered at Irka, "we're carving it out, yes?"

The word 'carve' struck Irka like a clang of some hideously loud bonging noise. It reverberated around her head, followed by the string of jarring images. Bloody carved chickens, carved turkeys, carved pigs, with glistening intestines strewn in hot sticky pools around them. That's what she was about to do, to carve that smug little impostor out of her uterus. The backs of her eyelids got blasted with a picture of herself, naked, torn in two, and something small, a trembling thing coated in dark red slime unfurled between her legs into a parasite, raised its paltry head and hissed, *If you butcher me like a pig, you will commit murder. You will fall below the threshold of Lyosha's crimes. Thievery? Alcoholism? Verbal, physical, sexual abuse? Petty misdemeanors compared to murder. How would that make you different? It wouldn't. On the contrary, it will make you worse,*

*much worse. It will make you a killer.* Irka's head spun like a whirligig, and she wanted to throw up.

"But, Galina Viktorovna, Ildar Grigorievich said—" Continued the duck nurse.

"I know what he said." Snapped the doctor with an audible clang of powerful mole jaws. "Just tell him Myshko will be there in a few of minutes. Can you do that much for me, or is that too hard now?"

"Sure. But I'll tell him that you, Galina Viktorovna, are the one delaying the patients." Tamara quacked and marched off to the operating room.

"Why is she doing this? So nocuous, so boorish. What an unhappy woman. I'm trying to help a patient, and she's only worried about herself, about looking good." Galina shook her head.

A raspy screech startled Irka. Her heart already hammered, and now it descended to her stomach and did somersaults and handstands. She turned her head to look. Volkova was gone from the cot across the corridor, replaced by an old geezer who repeatedly sneezed into the pillow using it as a spittoon. Irka wondered how such a frail body could produce so much noise.

"Irina, listen to me." Whispered Galina Viktorovna. "I understand why you're so uncertain about this."

*Do you, really?* Thought Irka bitterly.

"Don't let that derail you. Think about your future. Have you gotten admitted to an institute, a university?"

Irka shook her head no.

"Well, that's understandable. Dasha had a very hard time to get into the economic school this summer, she studied like mad, and I still had to bribe the dean. Half my salary, that's how little they pay me. I know it's hard to get in reputable places these days, but you've got to try, Irina. Higher education is everything for a woman, otherwise how will you fend for yourself? So many schools take money now... Don't trust those commercial ones, they're scum! Listen to me. You've got to get into a public institute, while it lasts. The difference in instruction quality is like night and day. Have you thought about what college to go to?"

Irka smirked and thought, *The only college I've been to so far had practical courses on how not to gag while sucking on a cock forcefully stuffed in your mouth, how not to scream bloody murder when you're being eaten alive by a boar between your thighs all the way to your neck, because that's how being fucked without consent feels like, how to turn pliant when your sanity becomes brittle ice and you think you will shatter, how to numb yourself to any pain, physical or emotional, without the use of anesthesia, purely by will, and how to furtively hide all feelings by making your consciousness wear an inane mask of*

*indifference and submission. In other words, I was taught how to be an impostor in my own body and mind. Does any college offer a degree in that? I don't think so.* Irka's heart forged a dull ache in her chest.

"You didn't, did you? So, how about studying economics?"  
Continued the doctor.

"Myshko! Next!" Howled Ildar Grigorievich across the hall.  
Irka gave a start. Her hands shook.

"She's coming! Would you give us a minute." Snapped Galina Viktorovna and turned back to Irka. "Don't mind him, he'll wait. He owes me a favor for taking his shift the other night. Anyway. Let's assume you decide what school to go to. You can't do this with a baby, Irina. And what will you do without a degree, be a housewife to some drunken swine? Wash his socks, cook him dinners, iron his shirts? Is that the life you want?"

This caught Irka off guard. *I already am a housewife, and a convenient housewife. Was.* She thought. *Not just for Lyosha, but for my entire family. And then for Shakalov, and for his son and his mates. And no, that's not the life I want. I want...* She sighed. *I want life with Pavlik. He's... different, special somehow. Polite, thoughtful, considerate. He doesn't drink, and he's not some misogynistic boar, he's a majestic butterfly, a black admiral. You know how beautiful they are? Go ahead. I*

*don't care if you laugh, it's who I think he is. He'd never degrade me to second sort. Would he?*

"Irina, it's decision time. A few more weeks, and you won't be able to get rid of it. It'll be too late, do you understand? Yes or no?" Galina pressed.

"Keep it." Said a hoarse voice.

Irka flinched.

The old geezer studied them both with large watery eyes. "Give birth to it, dearie, don't stain your soul with a sin, don't ruin that baby. That baby will shine light on your life, mark my words, I would know. Had five of them myself." She chewed on a toothless mouth.

"Excuse me, but this is a private conversation." Said Galina.

"Private, haha!" The geezer cackled. "It's so private, the whole ward knows. Say, dearie, are you christened?"

Irka goggled at her. She'd been to church once six years ago, and only because Prasha dragged her in to put up a candle for her son Nikita Kryskin who has died of liver failure at the age of forty seven. Raised by Soviet propaganda, none of the women in Irka's family cared about religion, not from the position of faith, nor from the point of historical and architectural significance. Irka didn't believe in God, having parented herself amidst the brutality of her household. It



taught her to believe in her own ass. Her life philosophy was simple. If she didn't do something, nobody would do it for her, not God, not her drunk mother Marina Somina, not her aunt or grandmothers, not Lenin, whose yellowing corpse graced the Mausoleum like a broken roly-poly, not Stalin, who's been thankfully removed from public display, nor any other communist government freak. Not a single angel watched over her, unlike Prasha whispered in her ear. *Even if angels existed, thought Irka, they wouldn't be dumb enough to spend their precious time flapping wings over some mute dura. They'd get drunk and go party over the sordid Moscow sky.*

"It's a sin not to be christened." Croaked the geezer.

Irka wanted to claw out her watery eyes.

"So, that's it then? That's the thanks I get? Well, I've done all I could." Galina Viktorovna abruptly stood up.

"Myshko! Quickly!" Yelled Ildar Grigorievich. "Or I'm filling the slot. Galina Viktorovna, what's the hold up? I'd love to go on a lunch break too, you know, but I've got ten more abortions ahead of me."

The entire ward watched Irka. The sheepish girls, the anserine nurses, the albino mole doctor, the heron and the toad ladies next door, the porcupine visitors with sacks of fruit and chocolate candy reserved for bribes, and the surgeon, stiff, alert, like a wolf surveying his territory.

The air filled with stertorous breathing.

Irka's insides stirred. She glanced down and gasped. Her abdomen became transparent. The same wriggling parasite slued around her uterus, gruff, peevish, querulous. It croaked, it cawed, it waved two little knobs. For a second Irka thought it was one of the newborn puppies that her grandmother Valentina killed in a bucket of water and threw down the garbage chute, but suddenly she recognized it. The knobs weren't paws, they were wings; the creature was some kind of a nestling, wet, jittery, covered in grey fuzz.

*But I thought you were an ugly shoat,* she thought.

*Well, I am ugly, but I'm not a shoat,* it answered. *Although I would gladly dine on a shoat, or on a whole boar, for that matter.* It opened a curved beak and clacked it a couple times.

*What are you?* Thought Irka.

*Something else.*

*A bird of some sort?*

*That's right. I will grow into an eagle. If you let me.* It opened two round eyes and stared at Irka without blinking.

*If I let you,* thought Irka. *If I let you, you would?*

*And if you feed me. I like pigs, shoats, boars, all kinds.*  
*Do you have a pig you could feed to me?*

*Oh yes, I most definitely do.* Thought Irka, boiling with anger.

The eaglet tore with its beak at an invisible boar.

*What if it's your own father?* Thought Irka.

*True father is not the one who conceives the child, it's the one raises it.* Said the eaglet thoughtfully.

*You're smart for being so little,* thought Irka. *I didn't quite examine it from this angle. Does this mean that although my biological father abandoned me, I can still find my true father?*

*It sure does.* Nodded the eaglet. *Say, where is that boar you were talking about? I'm hungry.*

*I'll feed you soon enough.* At once, through every orifice, unexplainable joy filled Irka's body, her mind, her everything. She thought if she could start talking this very moment, she would sing. *Thank you,* she thought. *I wanted to run away from Lyosha, but not anymore. I will go find him and will butcher him like a pig, for you.*

Irka looked up at Galina Viktorovna, at the geezer, at the horde of gnats that populated the ward, and sharply shook her head no.

A collective sigh broke the stillness. The hospital swiftly returned to its quiet drone.

"You're keeping it?" Said Galina Viktorovna.

Irka nodded.

"All right, keep it, but I'm warning you, don't think you can stay here. We're not a five star hotel for a free vacation. You'd need to be picked up right away. Write me a name and a phone number." Galina Viktorovna's voice sounded automatic, as if she lost interest in her patient. She shoved the back of the medical chart and a pen into Irka's hands.

Irka wrote, "The Chamber Theater."

"A theater? You want me to call a theater?" Galina's non-existent eyebrows slid up.

Irka nodded.

"And who will pick you up from the theater? Oleneva herself?" Inquired the doctor suspiciously. "Your parents work there?"

Irka shrugged.

"So that's how it is. Okay. Follow me."

Starched hospital gown crinkling, borrowed slippers squelching, Irka limped after the doctor, still sore from her fall in the shower. They passed the kitchen where the cook fried something smelling like fish, another corridor lined with benches occupied by visitors and patients, turned and came upon a counter behind which usually sat a couple shift nurses, but which was presently deserted. Nurses made their rounds, barked directions, gave out pills and thermometers. Groans, moans, talk and shouts filled the hall, a typical hospital morning.

Galina slammed the phonebook open, thumbed through, pressed a stubby finger to the line, and rolled the disk of a plastic rotary phone seven times.

"Hello, theater? I have a patient here... Irina Myshko."

Irka listened with abated breath.

"No, it's a hospital." Galina Viktorovna tapped a rhythm with a pen.

"I don't know. How would I know, lady? I saw her today for the first time in my life." She paused the tapping. "Uh-uh. Yes. She asked me to call you. Well, what do you want me to do about it? Somebody has to come and get her, we're overflowing as it is." She frowned. "No." She listened some more. "Well, decide faster, I haven't got all day." The doctor threw Irka an impatient look.

Irka's insides twisted.

"In ten minutes? Oh, that would work really well. Who?" Tap-tap. "Aha..." She wrote something down, recited the clinic's address, the ward's name, the floor number, and slammed the receiver down. "Who is Pavel Baboch?"

Blood rushed to Irka's head. *Pavlik is coming to get me?*

"Look at you, blushing! Is he your boyfriend?" Galina Viktorovna leaned over the counter, suddenly all smiles. "Is he an actor? A handsome one?" She lowered her voice. "Is he the father of the baby?"

Irka turned red like a tomato.

"So, an actor. I'll tell you this. Whiny gasbags, that's what they are. You don't want an actor. Why not pick at least an engineer, or, I don't know, a doctor, a lawyer. Why an actor? What is it with you girls?"

Irka shrugged.

A nurse with her head down rushed by the counter and threw over her shoulder without looking, "Good morning, Galina Viktorovna."

"Nastya! Wait up. Do me a favor. Can you get this patient's belongings? Myshko. Tell Sasha I asked you to."

The nurse stopped, startled. Her green eyes grew to the size of large marbles. If not for a strand of reddish hair hanging below her cap, Irka thought she could pass for a scared pigeon. It took her a moment to answer. "But I have—"

"Just do it quickly, will you?" Galina Viktorovna pressed. "I'd go myself but I can't leave her. She doesn't talk." She added in a loud whisper.

"Sure, Galina Viktorovna. I'll be right back." Nastya said in a scared little voice, turned on her heels and scuttled in the opposite direction.

"So." Said Galina. "That's taken care of. Where were we?"

Irka hardly heard her. She stared at the large round clock on the wall, then at the two san-bulletin boards next to it. One

screamed in large red letters, HEALTHY FAMILY - HAPPY CHILDHOOD, eight letter-size typed pages glued to a sheet of cardboard with a badly drawn picture of a smiling family in the bottom corner, like some anecdotage collection gone wrong. Another had a bold line of black cursive at the top, VACUUM ABORTION OF A NINE-WEEK OLD CHILD with four colorful illustrations of a uterus being entered by a metal dipstick through the cervix and parts of the fetus being sucked out, in the last picture its crushed head and body parts displayed against black background, a posthumous portrait of some chronic perfidious miscreant.

Irka shuddered. *Hey, eaglet,* she thought, *I'm glad I didn't abort you. If I would've, it would not have been simple murder, it would've been an exquisite torture.* She looked at the clock again. Its hands indicated it was seven minutes to ten. Irka wanted to slam it so it would go faster. Strung from anticipation, she gazed at the hallway. *Pavlik must have been in Ilinichna's room when the doctor called,* she thought, *he must have ran right out. Was he there because he was worried about me or was it just a happy coincidence?* Irka frowned. Ten minutes was incredibly fast by Moscow standards. Pavlik didn't have a car, was he walking here? Clinical Hospital Number 1 was about ten blocks away from the theater, at least half an hour walking time. Would he hail a taxi? That seemed like an unforgivable luxury.

Galina Viktorovna droned on about her daughter.

Irka nodded intermittently but didn't listen. She watched the clock. After five minutes the nurse Nastya surfaced with her backpack. Irka ran to her, snatched it out of her hands, darted into the closest bathroom, stripped, peed, wiped herself with a hand since there was no toilet paper and nobody was obtuse enough to forget their roll, rinsed her hands, splashed her face with cold water, yanked her hair apart at the absence of a comb, pulled on spare cotton panties and bra, a pair of her mother's hand-me down pants, a flannel shirt, and was out in three minutes flat.

The visiting hours of the Gynecological Ward were from ten to noon, and the hall began filling with people, sick women in bathrobes and their relatives, husbands in bygone era suits, grandmothers in kerchiefs with children stuffed in snow pants as if it was winter already, girlfriends in ultra-heels with ultra-makeup, sweating matrons in wool coats and berets. Irka dodged them, run up to the counter, breathless, heard the elevator jangle to a thunderous stop and swung around.

"That was fast!" Said Galina Viktorovna, impressed, and followed Irka's gaze.

Elevator doors whined open. Shoes clacked on the tiled floor. An assorted menagerie of people stumbled through the ward double-door entrance, a fellow with flowers, a couple middle-



aged women with oilcloth bags, and two young men in fine fall coats. They separated from the crowd and strolled toward Irka.

*Pavlik! With Kostya?* thought Irka. *He came with Kostya. He must have given him a ride.*

"Which one?" Asked Galina interestedly.

Irka motioned to Pavlik, and thought, *the butterfly.*

Pavlik's dark hair was smoothed back. He looked ahead of him searchingly. Irka's body jiggled and joggled. She thought for a moment two magnificent wings unfolded from his back, but realized those were shadows. Kostya walked to Pavlik's left, a little behind him with an air of one who wasn't eager to be here but came out of flashy chivalry. His blond mane flapped in rhythm to his steps. The chatter on the benches ceased. Women watched both actors with obvious longing and jealousy for whomever they came to visit.

"He doesn't know, does he?" Said Galina so close to Irka's ear, she jumped. "Do you plan to tell him?"

Irka passed unseeing eyes over the doctor. Her breath rattled. She didn't know what to do with her hands, now sticking them in the pockets, now fiddling with backpack straps. They saw her. Pavlik waved, Kostya gazed through like she didn't exist. *The macaw wants to show off its new car,* thought Irka. *What a convenient coincidence and an opportunity to stun not just your friend, but also the dumb janitor. I'm but the pleb to you,*

*Kostya, I get it. I inspire no deference in you, only implacable disdain. How could I, the ordinary peasant. Any attention to me would be considered by you as superfluous, oh the venerated kind. The acting genius. Fuck you.* She scowled.

Pavlik strolled up first, preceded by a cloud of perfume. Kostik stopped a few feet away, his expression that of a bored indolent child.

"Irina! How are you? I'm so glad to see you. Good afternoon. Pavel Baboch." He stretched out a hand to the doctor. Galina shook it. "Nice to meet you, Pavel. Galina Viktorovna, head physician."

"And this is Konstantin Araev, my friend and colleague." Said Pavlik.

Kostya gave a curt silent nod.

"We came to pick up Irina Myshko, if we may?" He smiled at Irka.

She felt hot, then cold, then hot and cold at the same time, struggling to understand how that was possible.

"So, Pavel Baboch. Thank you for coming so fast. She's a lucky girl, to survive what she survived. You need to take care of her, good care." Galina studied first Pavlik, then Kostik, who ignored the conversation. He stared at the abortion bulletin. His face grimaced with revulsion.

"Yes, of course, Galina Viktorovna. I understand." Said Pavlik.

Irka thought the doctor melted at his words. "Well, here she is. Good as new." She said. "And who would you boys be? Relatives?"

"No, we work together, in the theater." Said Pavlik.

"Irina works with you in the theater? You don't say. She didn't tell me. And what is it that she does?"

"She's... an actress."

Irka ogled at Pavlik, as did Kostya. "Are we done?" He said. "Can we go?"

"Kostya, please. I'm so grateful you came with me, I really am. Thank you so much. A few more minutes, all right? And we'll be out of here, I promise." Pavlik said quietly, and added. "Irina, Konstantin Araev is my dear friend. I don't think I have introduced you properly. I'm sorry about that. This might not be the best place and time, but, oh well, what can you do, it is what it is. You've seen us perform, of course, but that doesn't excuse the fact that I neglected to make an official introduction."

Kostya shook Irka's numb hand. "We've met before." He said with a strained smile.

Irka gaped at Pavlik. *You're apologizing for this jerk?*  
*Would you please also apologize for his narcissism while you're*

*at it? What kind of a fixture are you? Do you have a heart the size of your head or are you simply a coward?*

"I thought you said she doesn't talk." Hissed Kostya into Pavlik's ear. Irka overheard it. "Enlighten me, please, why waste your breath. Besides, the rehearsal is in an hour, I don't want to be late. You know how Sim gets."

Irka shook her head. The dynamic between the two didn't make sense. Either Pavlik was a vessel of unconditional love, which was a miracle she hasn't been privy to before, or he was simply a pushover. *No, she thought, he can't be a pushover. Not Pavlik. He came here to pick me up, he doesn't even know me. He must really care.* She smiled, her infatuation restored.

"Irina, Ilinichna told us you needed to be picked from the hospital right away." Said Pavlik. "She was on the phone when we came in, so we thought—"

"You thought." Corrected him Kostya.

"Sorry. *I thought.* I thought we'd help." Sighed Pavlik. "She said there is a reason you called the theater and not home. I didn't feel it was prudent to press her for an answer. I understand it must be private."

"You're aware that once Ilinichna gets whiff of something, the whole theater knows in the matter of minutes, right?" Said Kostya. "Remember when Tanechka had an affair with that guy, what was his name..." Kostya snapped his fingers.

Pavlik turned to the doctor in an effort to divert the attention. "Galina Viktorovna, may I ask what happened? Why Irina was admitted to the hospital?"

The doctor bristled. "Pavel, is it? Come here a minute." She pulled him aside.

They huddled by the window. The doctor waved her hands, Pavlik's face slowly drained color. He kept throwing Irka furtive glances. After a few minutes of this, they came back.

Pavlik's eyes were big and dark. Something lurked in them, Irka couldn't quite place it, lenience, perhaps, perhaps worry, perhaps awe, or a mishmash of all of them. "Thank you, Galina Viktorovna." He said.

"Can't put a 'thank you' in a pocket." She grumbled, eyeing Pavlik up and down. "I need your signature." She threw at Irka, fixed the stethoscope cord around the nape of her neck, pulled a notebook from the pocket of her lab coat, and offered it to Irka together with the pen. Irka scribbled her name on the discharge form, Galina flopped the notebook closed, said sternly, "Avoid excitement, don't cut your hair, and eat a bar of Hematogen a day," and stalked off, her barrel of a body wobbling as if she didn't walk but dug out a hole in the dirt with her powerful limbs.

Irka didn't pay much attention to what the doctor recommended. She was swept away by the debilitating effect of

her muteness like she hasn't felt it in a long time. She wanted to reach out, to shout something, *Thank you for everything, Galina Viktorovna, or, I'll come and see you with the baby, or, I hope Dasha does well in school,* but she couldn't say any of these things. Her hand automatically went under the shirt for pinching.

"Hematogen." Said Kostya after a pause. "That's cow's blood with sugar. Disgusting."

"Supposed to prevent low blood levels." Said Pavlik.

"I told you we should've brought something. A box of chocolates, or, I don't know..."

Pavlik shrugged. "Excuse me for saying this, but how come you suddenly care?"

Irka smiled. *A gentle butterfly with iron balls, I like that.*

Hurt, Kostya spun around and began walking away.

Pavlik's face deflated. "Kostya! Wait! Where are you going?" He cried, but didn't follow.

Kostya stopped, threw him a glance and tapped his shoe on the floor. A young nurse trotted by, smiled at him shyly. Kostya lilted back from her with deterrence of a bird that spotted a caterpillar but was spooked by its cryptic markings, thinking it might be poisonous.

"Please. I didn't mean what I said. I'm sorry." Said Pavlik, deflated.

Kostya passed a hand through his hair.

Irka boiled. Not only couldn't she thank the doctor, verbally or by giving her at least a chocolate bar, she also managed to fuel drama between two friends who seemed to be very close. It didn't matter that Kostya was a brazen scumbag, Pavlik must've liked him for a reason, and that was reason good enough for Irka.

She flinched under Pavlik's continuous stare.

"Irina, I'm... I'm at a loss of what to say. Galina Viktorovna told me what happened. It's inconceivable. In the center of Moscow? I'm so sorry about this. Are you sure you're okay? You're not in any pain anymore? Can you walk on your own or do we need to go get you a wheelchair, or would it be too embarrassing?"

Irka shook her head no, struggling not to stare too hard into Pavlik's eyes, hoping she staved off the hotness in her cheeks and or that he wouldn't notice.

"You absolutely sure?" Pavlik offered her an arm.

Irka nodded. *Why? Why does he do it?* She thought. *Does he really care or is it just for show? What does he find in me, I don't understand, some tacit vagabond that has adapted to live off of feast or famine, with an ass so fat it can't pass through*

*a fucking doorway without wrecking the whole building?*

Hesitating, Irka took his arm, and suddenly she wasn't Irka anymore, and Pavlik wasn't Pavlik, and the hospital wasn't the shabby clinic with minty walls but a galvanic grass field mottled with daisies, thousands and thousands of them, the daisies Irka liked to pluck every summer, when Valentina dropped her off at Olya's blind grandmother's dacha, where she stayed for a week and sometimes up to a month, quiet as a mouse, playing with quartz stones on the road or collecting daisies, tearing off silky petals and chanting in her head, *he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me...*

The mouse didn't know how it floated next to the butterfly, a sooty hellion with a mischievous smile. The mouse had no wings, but somehow it didn't weigh a single ounce. It was weightless. The butterfly bobbed next to it in an erratic hustle and bustle. The tiny scales on its velvety wings played in the sun. It held its six legs aloft, its black abdomen jittered. Two delicate antennae curled on top of its head, between two gigantic eyes. Mesmerized, the mouse flicked its tail and sniffed. The butterfly smelled of pollen and warm breeze. It rose gracefully, the mouse sped after it.

They parted the daisy stalks and burst into a stone sack, the Clinical Hospital Number 1 parking lot encased in cracked blacktop, two guard booths on either side of the main entrance



road, and three morose hospital walls with rows and rows of windows, eight stories high. A single rowan tree with clusters of fiery berries grew by the fence that separated the busy street from the clinic territory. A couple dusty Ladas and one white and red ambulance van were parked helter-skelter next to a Mercedes, dark as midnight. A blue hyacinth macaw perched on the rim of the driver's door that stood slightly ajar, its clowny head inclined from impatience. It was smoking a cigarette, and it screeched at the mouse and the butterfly to hurry.

Chapter 10. When Hyenas Go Berserk

Irka climbed inside the car, took a deep breath. New leather, smoke, and expensive cologne. Tinted windows. Boris Grebenshchikov sang from the speakers about a golden city with a yellow fire-maned lion and a deep-eyed ox. Irka stroked the back of the passenger seat, so smooth and tan and ravishing. Pavlik filed in next her, their knees touched. She flinched. Pavlik hasn't noticed. He said something, but Irka only saw his moving lips; her heartbeat deafened her. Kostya drew one last drag, kicked the stub, and started the engine.

The Mercedes rolled forward.

Irka's heart calmed somewhat.

"Hear me? We're going to the theater first." Pavlik was saying. "Have to make it by eleven, well, you know, around eleven, as long as we're not more than fifteen minutes late, or Sim will fry us with acrimonious commentary, and... puff! We'll burn from internal combustion." Pavlik mimicked an explosion with both hands.

She stared, not at his hands, but at his eyes. They were so dark, she thought if she stared long enough, they'd spill out of their sockets and shroud her like a blanket.

"You know, theater is hell?" Pavlik raised a brow. "The huge oven? I think you were there when he pounded it into our heads."

Irka nodded.

Kostya smirked. "Don't forget the sixth M. Malady." He shifted the stick, saluted to the balding guard who regarded them with indifference through the booth window, spun the steering wheel, gave gas, and the Mercedes merged with slow traffic to honks from a tattered Volga and a blare of a large truck with blue letters on the side that spelled BREAD.

"Oh, fuck off, you sorry scrag. Learn how to drive in Moscow or go shoot yourselves." Said Kostya.

"Malady." Picked up Pavlik. "That's right. Man, I keep forgetting it. I'd appreciate it, Kostya, if you brought us to the theater in one piece, however."

"You're talking to a pro, my friend." Said Kostya.

They came to a screeching stop at the red light.

Irka thought that somewhere on the periphery of her hearing she heard a low buzz but couldn't quite place it. It must've been the purring of the engine. Grebenshchikov sang about Ekaterina looking out the window where young lions marched. Irka glanced through the tinted glass to her right. Nothing but the drab continuity of monotonous cinderblock buildings, the soporific drone of traffic, an exodus of workers in pursuit of

early lunch or a shot of vodka at the nearest metro kiosk. Everything looked normal, the typical quotidian Moscow life, yet it felt wrong. Wrong as in a catastrophe of some kind was about to happen. A daunting chill sucked at the bottom of Irka's heart, she shifted uneasily.

"Is there anywhere we can give you a ride after?" Asked Pavlik. "Home, or—"

"The languid knight has offered his gracious help to the maiden in distress!" Said Kostya, grinning at Irka through the back mirror. The light turned green and theirs was the first car to race forward. The engine whined from strain. "Pavlik, my friend, you astound me with your antics, I just never get tired of them." Continued Kostik, his face calm, left pinky on the wheel, right hand casually shifting. "I mean, really? Whose car is this?"

They weaved in and out of gaps between cars. Irka contemplated closing her eyes, her stomach jumped to her throat and sat there, throbbing.

Pavlik leaned forward. "It's one of those moments when I want to strangle you. For both your egotism and your driving."

"Actors must be self-centered. Otherwise, how can we focus on our inner selves long enough to ignite a metamorphosis? But, seriously." Kostya insisted. "Indulge me, please. Whose car is it?"

*Your dad's, dimwit. Thought Irka. Like you're making enough money on an actor's salary, like I believe it for a second.*

"My hands feel dry." Said Pavlik suddenly, rubbing palms together. "Do your hands feel dry?" He asked Irka.

She ogled at him, puzzled. *What kind of a guy worries about his hands being dry?*

"Kostya, you got some hand cream?"

"You used up my stash already, beautiful. And it's very annoying when you try to dodge my question. Nonetheless, back to the topic. Irina, this is intended for you. Sorry, but I'm not driving you *anywhere* after the rehearsal." Kostya said. "So, don't think just because I'm giving you a lift I'm now your personal cabdriver."

They stopped at another red light.

"Do I sense hostility on your part toward Irina? And why, if I may ask, do you always need to be so direct? You could've at least made an effort to camouflage your poorly thought out vitriol." Pavlik pursed his lips.

"Are these rhetorical questions?" Parried Kostya.

"Don't mind him, he's just being sarcastic." Said Pavlik to Irka.

The car rushed forward.

"No, that's not true. Don't listen to this hypocrite. I'm being dead serious." Kostya threw over the shoulder.

"Dead you are not. Serious, that's a whole another discussion." Said Pavlik.

Irka enjoyed their banter, enjoyed the ride in a foreign car. She'd only been in Dima's derelict Zaporozhec nicknamed soapbox when he took her and her mother to circus about three years ago after finally fixing the piece of junk, only for it to fall apart in the middle lane of the Garden ring. They missed the show, spent the rest of the day throwing handfuls of snow into the smoking engine, had a long talk with militia patrol, and the rest Irka didn't remember. When Valentina was in good spirits, which happened once in a few years, she took Irka to Olya's dacha not by the usual electric train, by in a taxi, the typical yellow Volga with stinky interior. This was different. This Mercedes reeked of money. Irka liked it, if not for the annoying feeling of impending danger in her gut.

Kostya slammed the brakes. None of them buckled, they slid off the seats with inertia.

"What is this shit?" Kostya yelled.

"What's wrong?" Asked Pavlik.

"Some idiot stopped too fast. We won't make it, Pavlik. What the hell is going on? This is ridiculous." Kostya's window slid down, he stuck out left elbow, lighted a cigarette, and took a deep drag. City noises drifted in. Grebenshchikov sung about bucks that got bogged down by their own truths. Irka

pressed a button on the door. The glass whispered down. Cool wind brushed her face. She leaned out.

Ivory facades shackled by overhanging cornices embanked both sides of the wide Teatralny Driveway. North-bound river of the traffic stood still. It was impossible to see what blocked it. Cars hollered, drivers yelled, somewhere ahead echoed a distant whine of militia siren. In front of them stood a trolleybus crammed with passengers who peered down with solemn expressions. Behind them a Moskvich chauffeur in a derby brandished a parasol and gesticulated his condemnation.

"Just another wanton rally." Offered Pavlik. "Pensioners trying to overturn the government and raise the ghost of Stalin so he can end their misery by sending them off to Gulag, of all places. A new dacha idea, if you will. Free lodging, free food, swift painful death. Your bones sent to relatives as mementos. What else could one wish for?"

"Can I get a VIP cell?" Asked Kostya.

Irka smirked.

"Undoubtedly. You'd have to carve it out yourself, though, but you have a choice in materials. Would you like marble, or granite, or, perhaps, the symbol of mother Russia, birch? The worms will get to you faster, in a birch casket, I'd recommend marble. Or even labradorite. Bury yourself with Soviet leader style. Grand. I'd sign up in a heartbeat, only I love theater

too much. I'd rather die onstage." Said Pavlik, trying to be funny, but Irka saw a flash of fear in his eyes. She was afraid herself.

Kostya laughed uneasily. "Dying doesn't fit in my current plans, Pavlik. So thanks, but no, thanks."

"May I ask you what does?" Asked Pavlik quietly.

Kostya didn't answer.

A stir caught the tail of Irka's eye. She thought she saw a bird land on the roof of a building unlike any bird she'd seen in Moscow before. Immediately, that drone, that low buzz she heard before, intensified, and it most definitely didn't come from the engine.

First one, then another, then two more cars turned out into the opposite lane to the honks of oncoming traffic.

"I'm going around." Said Kostya, hoicked cigarette butt out the window and kicked the car in reverse. Tires screeched, they plunged back. Moskvich behind them brayed, Kostya flipped it a finger. A few seconds later they swerved into the opposite lane startling a bus into an overtaxed wail and an angry tirade of the driver, who leaned out and yelled, "You scuzzy son of a bitch! I'll teach you how to drive in Moscow! I'll teach you how—"

A resonant boom stunned them. It sounded like an explosion of a hand grenade or a small bomb. Several car alarms erupted in



a cacophony of ululating noises. A flock of pigeons scattered off the sidewalk.

"What the fuck is going on?" Kostya yelled. "You're aware of what Sim will do to us if we're late again?"

"Oh, I'm aware." Said Pavlik. "I'm aware all right, but something tells that our being late won't matter. I don't like the sound of this. I have a veritable feeling that—"

"Whoa!" Kostya slammed on the breaks and laid in on the horn. The car came to an abrupt stop. Irka and Pavlik slid off the seats. The car behind them honked, swerved around.

An old woman in a tattered coat trundled across the street in a non-pedestrian zone. She lifted her cane, brandished it, and slammed it on the hood of the car.

"Ah you old *dura*! Have you lost your mind?" Kostya honked.

The hag muttered something fierce but inaudible, shook her crozier once more and shuffled over to the safety of the pavement.

"Devil's cunt! Did you see that?" Kostya said incredulously. "Did you see what she did? She slammed her fucking stick on my car!" His face was white with fury.

Grebenshchikov began singing about wolves and ravens. Behind them impatient drivers beeped. Kostya got out, shut the door, yelled a rich assortment of profanities at the woman who stared him down from the sidewalk, lowered his face over the

hood and stroked its surface. His blond hair fanned out as he inspected the damage.

Pavlik clicked his door open. "There's probably nothing there, Kostya. Even if there was, it's just a car. Relax."

But Kostya was not easily swayed. "What do you mean, just a car? It's brand-fucking new! It's a Mercedes! Do you know how much it cost?" He slammed his palm on it.

"I'm sure your dad will buy you another one if you total this one." Said Pavlik calmly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kostya nearly shrieked. Veins stood out in ropes on his neck.

Pavlik said to Irka, "Listen, I'll go calm him down, okay? Be right back." He almost stepped out, then turned and asked quietly. "Are you okay?"

Irka nodded, and thought, *No, I'm not. I'm not okay. I'm hearing things other people can't hear, I'm seeing things other people can't see, I can't tell anyone about it because I can't talk, and if I wrote it, not a single hack would believe it.* On cue, the buzz intensified. It came from the right, from the sidewalk. It rammed into Irka's ears with a relentless twang. Her flesh prickled in goosebumps. She was afraid to look.

"All right." Pavlik closed the door.

Irka sat stock still for another torturous minute. The buzz turned to a strident whirr. It rose, looped and fell, as if a

cloud of flies feasted on a roadkill. Irka caught movement with the corner of her eye, turned and froze.

The old woman stood three steps away, two milky eyes fixed on Irka. Her face, long and swarthy, crawled with horseflies. They lighted on her cheeks, her nose, her forehead, and drifted off with a sluggish drone, a black flickering mass. Irka's mouth dropped open. She involuntarily reached for Pavlik's arm, to tug on it, but Pavlik wasn't there. He discussed something with Kostya outside the car.

Irka's throat went dry. She stared. The woman's nose elongated, eyes shrunk, skin shriveled. Her greasy hair fell out in clumps, revealing a pink splotched scalp. Her arms unhinged and folded backwards, growing in length. Her stocking-clad feet tore through galoshes with long sharp talons. Last, her coat spun itself into a coverlet of feathers. The old woman was gone. In the shadow of a flaming maple, against an outcrop of sepulchral stones, sat a vulture, an expert scavenger, a carcass stripper, twenty pounds of predator that wouldn't think twice before killing a mouse.

*It came for me. It came to eat me, thought Irka. It never hunts alone. There's always a fleet of them, harpies of grief, always on the lookout for a chance to feast on the famine of others. This must be it. I think I'm officially going crazy.* The horseflies swarmed away, spooked by the wind from a pair of

powerful wings. A second vulture descended on the asphalt. A couple more circled above. The first vulture opened its beak and snapped.

Irka shirked from the window, trembling. *Hello, vultures*, she thought, *goodbye sanity*. She dimly registered Kostya and Pavlik get in the car. They had some kind of a heated argument.

"—been lied to, Pavlik." Kostya was saying. "He's playing us against each other, don't you understand?"

"Do we have to discuss this right now?" Pavlik was asking.

Kostya drew in breath. "I don't care, I'm done with his happy horseshit. I'm telling you, I'm *done*. I don't give a rat's ass if he cuts me from the troupe. Like he can find a replacement? Ha! I'd like to see him try."

The Mercedes jerked to motion.

Irka dug fingers into her hips, so hold on to something. They turned into Novyy Rabat. There were less people and cars here. A sonorous clap thundered through them. It could've been a noise of a dump truck going over metal plates, or it could be a shell blasted from a tank. A car alarm went off. Then another. And another.

They stopped on the red light.

"I'll be damned... look!" Kostya was pointing. "Tanks firing at the White House! Man, they aren't playing. This is serious some serious shit going on."

"No, they're not. I bet it's connected to yesterday's Ostankino storm. Listen, we better get out of here. Like, right now." Said Pavlik serenely, but his face was pale and his hands shook a little.

"What? You kidding, right? We must stay and watch. Where is your patriotism? Your love for motherland? Dear friend, this is history of Russia in the making in front of your very eyes, and you suggest we flee like despicable cowards?" Kostya scoffed.

"You're so eager to become part of this history?"

"Why the pessimism, beautiful? The Russian bear was always hard to wake, but once awoken, it always displayed an unrivaled megalomaniacal impulse towards dictatorship worthy to watch. Ha! Theater. Who needs theater when we have a life reality show unfolding in the middle of Moscow, for free, my friend, for free!"

"Kostya, please." Pavlik took hold of Kostya's arm.

Kostya's cheek pressed to Pavlik's fingers. "Really, Pavlik, you bore me to tears sometimes. Can't we have a little fun? Come on. We're so late by now, might as well skip it altogether."

"It's green." Pointed out Pavlik.

Kostya gave gas and they spurred forward.

Irka was lost in her thoughts, seething. *Ostankino was stormed? Yesterday? By whom? Parliament loyalists? Or by a bunch*

*of dickering hucksters who don't know fuck about politics and took to the streets out of herd mentality, just because shooting people is fun, because storming a television center sounds more exciting than chugging methylated spirit alone in a bare-walled kitchen in front of a cheap TV, with no hope of getting laid, so of course, hey, let's exercise my chauvinistic muscles, let's go kill some douchebags to give my dick something to do, since that is where my brain hunkers? I bet it's the latter. I bet.* She was upset at missing the whole thing. There was no TV in the theater. Roma and his mates must have attacked at the time of Ostankino storm or shortly thereafter. Nobody deemed important to tell her the news at the hospital.

Truculent, Irka stared through the windshield. A huge crowd of civilians congregated at the foot of the bridge over Moscow river like a colony of ants, some hid behind metal stanchions, some stood in the open. A cloud of vultures circled over them, blocking the sun. The cream-cake structure of the White House eructated billows of smoke. It marred blue sky with hideous smudges of grey. There were shouts and bursts of gunfire. Grebenshchikov's voice switched to a song about an electrical hound, and there they were. Not one, but many. Clans of them. Hyenas. Piebald stiffnecked hyenas with Kalashnikov's rifles, on the ground behind the streetlights, on top of tanks, aiming and shooting, aiming and shooting.

"Fuck me running. This looks like civil war." Said Kostya. They stopped at the huge intersection of the Freedom square. Theirs was the only car on the street. The air smelled of smoldering resin and gunpowder. The road ahead of them was blocked by a barricade made of crates, overturned park benches, corrugated metal sheets, torn out street signs. A couple burned out buses lay on the side. People milled between small bonfires as if they were camping out for a lunch picnic. About a dozen T-80's circled the entire barricade.

Irka's skin tingled. Her mouth turned mealy, hands warred, legs jounced. She was on the verge of changing. *Oh no, no-no-no, not right now.* She thought. *You can't change right now! No, you hear me, I said no!* A horsefly landed on the glass and Irka nearly jumped.

An explosion set off a noise like that of firecrackers going off every few seconds. The racket rolled down the street and echoed off the walls.

"Kostya, are you out of your mind? Get us out of here! Now!" Cried Pavlik. His eyes rounded.

"Shit, this is exciting." Overtaken by a mixture of terror and morbid curiosity, Kostya leaned out the passenger window and waved to the crowd of gawkers. "Guys? What's going on, do you have any idea?"

"Kostya! Kostya, listen to me!" Pavlik called. He yanked on Kostya's coat collar, to no avail.

"Coup d'etat!" Began a brawny man with a camera in his hands. "They say—" But what they said or who they were, he didn't get a chance to finish. A strange whistle pierced the air. The man suddenly pitched forward and sprawled on the ground. A dark spot spread on his checkered shirt.

"Sniper! Sniper on the roof!" A voice shouted.

*That would be the vulture I saw,* thought Irka.

People scattered in all directions, leaving the man to die alone, if he wasn't already dead. A few crossed the square, dashing like mad. Others, too afraid to step into the open, pressed themselves under the awning of the grocery store. One girl fell on the ground and lay there, sobbing, arms over her head.

"He got shot! Holy..." Said Kostya in a trance.

"Go! Fucking go!" Screamed Pavlik.

The engine revved, and they took off.

Irka closed her eyes, kicking the picture of bellicose vultures in the groin. She had another battle ranging within her. Her body pulsed. It quaked, it oscillated, it shimmied in and out of reality. She was on the verge of merging into a mouse, but she fought it. She could hear screams, gunfire, ambulance whines, she even smelled smoke, black acrid smoke, and



yet she was someplace else, deep in the dungeons of her psyche. She lifted her shirt and began twisting gobs of skin with controlled ferocity. Her sides bellowed from breathing.

"Irina, what are you doing?" Pavlik's face was so close, she sensed his warmth, but didn't look, squinted harder, and continued her gruesome work. She pulled handfuls of skin, loped at them, curled fingers into fists and hit her stomach, hard. When she lifted her arm again, a hand caught it.

"Stop." Pavlik said.

Irka opened her eyes.

The car skidded on the corner. They got throw into the passenger door. "Stop it." Pavlik whispered. "Hurting yourself won't do any good. It will only make things worse. Kostya, let's go to my house, it's just around the corner."

"Ahead of you, punk." Kostya gave gas.

The Mercedes lurched. It gave a wide berth to a cluster of trash containers overflowing with garbage, veered into a parking lot filled with prefab metal garages, and here sputtered to an abrupt stop. Kostya hitched up the handbrake and stormed out.

"Wait up." Pavlik followed him.

Irka watched them stop by an elderly elm that threw a dancing shadow on the asphalt. Kostya waved his arms, agitated. Pavlik grabbed his shoulders and joggled him. For a second Kostya didn't move, stunned, and then—

And then Irka swung her head back. That same ominous buzz cursed through her ears. Her belly dropped. What transpired next happened so fast, later when she tried to recall the events in a chronological order, everything got smudged with a flighty blur, a balderdash of feelings instead of clear pictures.

A horsefly landed on the glass. Irka shrieked, yanked the door open, dashed out of the car, and gaped up. *You doddering birdshit cock-knocker!* She yelled in her head. On the roof of Pavlik's nine-story apartment building landed a vulture. It cocked its head, aimed, and Irka knew what was coming. Spurred by instinct, she lunged around the car, when the sky crackled. A shot flashed past her vision.

A golden elm leaf detached itself from the branch and seesawed to the ground. Kostya's knees buckled. He faltered, swayed, and toppled down, just as Irka slammed into Pavlik. They crumpled next to Kostya. There was another crack. Pavlik cried out. Irka scrambled to her fours, hooked him up by armpits and dragged him behind the tree, away from the vulture's line of vision. A couple more bullets bore the ground not two steps away from where they were a few seconds ago. The hairs along the nape of Irka's neck turned to hackles. A line of sweat trickled down her back, her heart hammered.

"I'm shot... I'm shot..." Pavlik kept repeating. He shook, a hand on his thigh. Blood oozed through his fingers. He lifted

his head, said "Irina... where is Kostya? Kostya?" and passed out. Irka's breath caught. Sharp bereavement slapped her in the face. She screamed then, a hideous inhuman cry. She screamed and screamed and screamed, until her throat turned hoarse and she couldn't scream anymore. Wind ruffled her hair. It smelled like it was about to rain. And she was herself no longer.

A scared little mouse sat by a butterfly, a beautiful black admiral. Its wings were torn, its abdomen twitched, sticky mucus trickled from it into a puddle. It held on to life by a thread, and the mouse squeaked at it helplessly. A bird lay next to the butterfly, a hyacinth macaw, its plumage so bright and blue, it put the sky to shame. The macaw didn't move, it lay very still. There was a horrid gash in its chest.

It was dead.

## Chapter 11. The Broken Butterfly

Next three days Irka spent by Pavlik's bedside in the overflowing with casualties Sklifosovsky hospital. She didn't remember being picked up by the ambulance, nor riding it, she only remembered hands, many insistent hands that tried to pry her away from Pavlik and finally gave up. Post-putsch chaos saved her, nobody paid her any heed. At night she slept on a pile of rags in a broom closet by the cafeteria. In the morning she'd creep out, go through her washing ritual in the restroom and spend the rest of the day standing sentry over somnolent Pavlik. Drugged up to his ears, he raved, called Kostya, mama, papa, but was still unconscious. The day they arrived, surgeons extracted the bullet from his leg and told Irka that if she didn't use her shirt as a tourniquet, he'd be dead from blood loss.

It was eight in the morning on the fourth day of their stay. Irka assumed her inconspicuous position by the gurney, hunching over Pavlik's face like a gravid belfry, when heavy footfalls made her perk up and spring aside.

"You can't stay here overnight, do you understand that?" In front of her stood Igor Morzhov, the corpulent mustached doctor

with a chummy face and big meaty hands. He stuck them in the pockets of his lab coat, waiting. Dark circles shadowed his eyes. He reminded Irka of a tired walrus, tired and irritated.

"She sleeps in the closet, doctor, by the lunch room." Picked up a sallow bandaged patient from behind a crimped curtain partition. He issued a wet repulsive cough, and continued. "Saw her sneak out this morning. Won't you know it, doctor, so here I was, doing my business, and won't you know it, I come out, and there she is, quiet as a mouse, slipping through the closet door! And I thought, I said to myself, I have to tell the doctor, I thought—"

"What is it with you? What a bitter man you are. Hush! Let the girl be. Haven't you ever loved in your life?" Said a middle-aged woman from the other side of the room. Most of her head was wrapped with gauze as solid as spider silk. She propped herself up on the elbows, and Irka thought she saw not one but four pairs of eyes. "She's no trouble, doctor. She loves the boy. Dotes to him every day, just stands there and looks at him."

Irka flushed.

"Igor Martynovich, let her stay, please." Added the woman.

"What's it to you? Why is this any of your business?" The doctor rounded on the woman. "Should I maybe give her a bed too? Huh? I haven't left for home in over two days, haven't slept in

my own bed since Monday. We got over eighty wounded that day alone. There's hardly any room for all of them, and you want me to let a perfectly healthy girl stay? I can't have an extra mouth on the ward. Anfisa can barely cook fast enough to feed everyone." He turned to Irka. "You need to go." But there was no stridency in his voice, only tired contempt. "I'm not shunting you off track or anything, do you understand, we simply have no capacity for extra people right now."

Irka pursed her lips. She held on to the metal bar at the head of Pavlik's bed with such ferocity, her knuckles went white. She glanced around the room designed to hold no more than twenty patients stuffed with well over thirty, extra beds positioned at right angles to those butted against the windows and the wall opposite, every surface dressed in off-white tiles that cried out for a good dose of scrubbing. Fluorescent lights threw sharp shadows on the doctor's face, making it look haggard. *I'm not taking up any extra space, I only eat what other patients leave untouched, and I'm not going anywhere*, she thought. *You'll have to make me.*

"Listen." The doctor walked up to within two steps. Irka could smell bad coffee and cigarettes on his breath.

*You need to treat your halitosis*, she thought.

"You don't need to worry." He drawled. "Your friend will recover without complications. Compared to the rest of what we

have here, chest, stomach wounds, it's nothing. His artery got pierced. So what, big deal. The bullet lodged a little too close to the bone, but it didn't touch it." He put a hand over his eyes for a moment. His buff-colored whiskers jittered at the heavy exhale. "He'll be fine. He'll walk in a few weeks. Everything will be tip-top. But I can't have you stay here, do you understand? We have a crisis on our hands, we're overflowing. You'll just have to go. Don't you want to go home, see your family?"

Irka shook her head violently.

"Why don't you speak?" Said the surgeon, exasperated.

Irka shook her head again. It's as if she was unable to let go of Pavlik's bed and indicate that she was mute.

"Why do you just shake your head? Can't you answer me like a normal person?" His eyes bulged.

A bitter smile crept into Irka's face. *I'm so far from normal, dear Igor Martynovich, she thought, I'm as abnormal as they get. I'm one of those overt coochies poxed with dicks into submissive silence and illusory schizophrenia so much so that my reality has split, into human and non-human, you know, wild. Animal. Feral. Like you, doctor, for example, are a walrus, I'm a mouse, and Pavlik is a butterfly. The nurses are geese, the guy behind the curtain is a stink beetle, the woman across is a*

*spider, and the rest of the patients are harelipped maggots. How is that for normal?*

"She doesn't talk, Igor Martynovich." Said the woman patient. "She's mute."

"Who, that girl? I say, it's an act, I say!" Harrumphed the man behind the partition.

"Irina?" Said a feeble voice.

Irka and the doctor swerved to look.

Pavlik blinked at the light. Dark hair clung to his sweaty forehead. Skin wrapped his face like parchment. He licked his lips, struggling to lift his head.

Irka flopped to her knees and shuffled next to him, her face spread in a silly smile. *I'm here*, she thought, *I've been here since day one. I'll stay with you, unless you tell me not to.*

"Well, look who's awake. About time. How do you feel, Pavel Baboch?" Said Morzhov. "Igor Martynovich, head surgeon." He shook Pavlik's hand.

"Pavel Baboch, very nice to meet you." Mumbled Pavlik automatically, and then it hit him. "I'm sorry, did you say surgeon? Am I in a hospital?" Pavlik's eyes swept the room. His wonder changed to dread. "What happened? Where is Kostya?"

Irka swallowed. *Kostya is dead*, she wanted to say and was glad she couldn't. It gave her an excuse not to. She thought of



the way Kostya's knees buckled, the way he fell, the way his hair fanned out on the ground, and was swept by a zealous desire to find every single one of those sniper vultures and break their necks with her own hands.

"What happened to Kostya?" Asked Pavlik again with alarm.

"Shhh, no need to get so excited." Said the doctor, leaned over Pavlik, felt his forehead, his pulse, lifted his eyelids one by one. "Say ah."

"Ahhh." Pavlik opened his mouth wide, but he stared at Irka. She hid her eyes, unzipped her backpack, rummaged inside, closed it, opened it again, hoping it looked like she was busy searching for something.

"How long have I been out? Oww." Pavlik hyperventilated, red splotches crept into his cheeks. He lifted the hospital blanket and studied his bandaged thigh. "I wonder what Sim will have to say about that."

"You suffered a bullet wound in the right leg, four days ago." Said Igor Martynovich. "You were delivered here by an ambulance, operated on, and, now you're well on your way to recovery!" He produced a tired smile.

"I understand you must be very busy, Igor Martynovich, so please forgive me my incessant questioning, but, was I..." Pavlik threw a cursory glance at Irka again. She read fear in his gaze and had to curb her yearning to reach for her notebook.

"Was I delivered here alone? Do you know anything about a certain Konstantin Araev by chance?"

"I'm afraid not." Said the doctor.

"That is rather unfortunate. He's a dear friend and a colleague of mine. I'm sure you heard about Paradise Birds?"

The doctor looked puzzled. "Paradise what?"

"New play, by Simeon Kotik? No? Oh well, me and Kostya, we're chamber theater actors. We were on our way to rehearsal... when... Actually, my apologies, I can't remember anything after we got to my house and got out of the car. Irina, you were with us, weren't you? I do recall that man, that photographer being shot. It was terrible. One minute he was talking to us, and another... Irina, did a sniper get me? Was there a sniper on the roof?"

Irka nodded and glanced at the doctor.

"Snipers, I say." Mumbled the patient from behind the curtain. "It's all a government gimmick. Fratricidal war, is what I call it. That's what I say, fratricidal war."

"I'll be right with you." Said Igor Martynovich to the curtain, puffed up his cheeks and let out a laborious sigh. "I believe that yes, you might've been shot by a sniper, and so were many others. I can't understand why they would shoot civilians, possibly to ignite the angst and the feeling of war in the masses, but, that's a whole another discussion. As to

your friend, there is no patient by the name of Konstantin Araev that I'm aware of. It's very unlikely you'll find him any time soon. The flow of the patients was so intense, we could hardly register them all, but I can ask the receptionist for you."

"Yes, please, that would be great." Said Pavlik with relief. He tried shifting his leg and moaned. A grimace of pain marred his face.

"Easy, easy. You need to rest. As to this young lady," Igor Martynovich motioned to Irka, "I was just trying to kick her out, which proves to be difficult to do. She's stubborn, that one, has spent night and day by your bed." He chuckled. "This girl has saved your life, Pavel. She stopped your blood flow. If not for her..."

Color rushed to Irka's face. She wanted to hide somewhere, anywhere, only to avoid Pavlik's round eyes and the commentary from behind the crimped partition about young brave love and other hogwash like that. *This is ridiculous, Irina Myshko, stop acting like a beggarly fool!* She fumed inside, *You think just because you took care of him, he'll suddenly present you with his heart on a golden plate? Yeah? Dream on, you sniveling spastic piece of manure, you gastric vapor, you scant idiot savant, you, you—* but no matter what names she called herself, it didn't help. Her hands shook. She studied her dirty sneakers, its laces, the way they looped around rusty holes, while Pavlik

asked the doctor when he would be able to climb stage props or jump off them, because that's what he was required to do for work, and the doctor told him it might take weeks, if not months, to fully heal, after which Pavlik descended into gloomy silence.

"Well, I'll be off seeing other patients." The doctor patted Pavlik on the shoulder. "And you... Irina, is it? If I see you here tonight, just so you know, you'll be asked to vacate the premises. Do you understand?"

Irka nodded defiantly, mentally deciding to look for a good hiding spot in another ward. She stared after the doctor.

"Irina, it's... I can't... is that true? You stopped my blood flow?" Asked Pavlik quietly.

*My grandmother is a nurse,* thought Irka, *so...* She hesitated, trying to make up her mind on how to wiggle out of this one, when she heard footfalls trotting along the linoleum floor. She looked up. A typical Moscow intelligentsia middle-aged couple, both in thick glasses, dressed neatly, she in a dark green skirt ensemble, he in a grey wool suit, stopped by Pavlik's gurney. The woman was about fifty, tall, thin, ears adorned with long dangling malachite earrings, a savagely green clutch in her hands. The man looked a bit older, shorter, squatter, cleanly shaved, his gray hair slicked back.

"Mama! Papa!" Pavlik exclaimed, sitting up. "How did you find me?"

"Oh!" The woman drew in air. Slowly, with dignity, she walked over to her son. There was something poisonous in the way she moved, something scaly. She didn't blink, and it gave Irka an almost cerebral chill. The man hobbled after the woman. He *did* blink, deftly, but his eyeballs didn't move. Instead, he moved his entire head. A sliver of ice slid into Irka's stomach. She shifted aside to give way. The man's eyes trawled over her, barely acknowledging her presence. The woman didn't look at her all. She sat next to Pavlik and took his hand.

"Mama." He said, kissing her. "Oh, mama."

*I wonder if my mother would care to try and find out what happened to me. Am I dead? Am I alive? Must be all the same to her.* Thought Irka.

"Pavlusha." Said the woman in a controlled voice. "There you are." A shy tear rolled down her cheek. She lifted her glasses and swatted at it, embarrassed.

"Our Pavlusha, our beloved Pavlusha." Started the man, reaching to touch his hand. "We couldn't find you, son. We called every hospital. We even thought maybe you—"

"Anton." The woman's glare cut him off.

"Forgive me, Yulechka." His lips pressed together. It gave his flat face an illusion of a disc slashed in the middle.

Yulechka searched her son's eyes.

"Mama, don't worry, please, I'm fine. As conscientious family members, can we please not descend to the level of mutual captiousness? I'd prefer it if we didn't."

Yulechka opened her mouth.

Pavlik stopped her with a hand. "Please, mama, I love you very much, but let me finish. Let me give you all the facts first. What happened is this. I got shot by a sniper in the leg."

Yulechka gasped.

Anton tensed, placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. His head jerked, and Irka thought his hair stood up a little, as if it bristled. "A sniper shot you? By accident, or did he aim at you?"

"Papa, I didn't exactly see him, so how do you think I would know? I don't even remember how it happened. Where you home that morning? Did you hear anything?" Pavlik narrowed his eyes.

"No, of course not." Said Anton gruffly. "I was at work. Your mother was buying groceries. Did you see or hear anything when you came home, Yulechka?" Anton swiveled his head to look at her.

"Don't you think if I did know something, I would've said it already?" She arrowed into a metal rod. Irka thought she might break if she fell off the bed.

"You didn't see Kostya's car when you got home, in the parking lot in front of the house?" Pavlik. "Well, that means that... does that mean he left me? No, he'd never. That means he was shot as well, but they wouldn't tow his car so fast, not with political crisis escalating nearly to civil war next door. You sure you didn't see anything?"

Anton and Yulia shrug their shoulders in unison.

*They know.* Thought Irka. She couldn't decide who was a more dangerous predator, Pavlik's mother or Pavlik's father, but that they were predators she was certain about.

"Irina?" Pleaded Pavlik.

Irka stiffened.

"You don't remember anything either, do you?"

"Why are we talking about Kostya, let's talk about you."

Said Yulia. "Tell us how you feel."

"The doctor was just here, mama, he said my wound is not life threatening, I promise. I feel better already." Pavlik beamed his practiced stage smile.

Yulechka looked at him with admiration, stroked his face.

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"I like your attitude, son." Said Anton.

"A leg is wound is not a stomach wound, right?" Yulia asserted. "The important thing is, you're alive, and that's all that matters. I'm very happy we found you." She whiffled. A narrow tongue lashed out like that of a snake.

*A viper, thought Irka, you're a venomous viper.*

"So, how did you find me?" Pavlik tried again.

"Sim called, worried out of his mind, said you didn't show up for rehearsal, which is so much unlike you." Yulia fizzed.

"What time did he call?" Asked Pavlik.

"Oh, I don't know, some time in the evening." Yulia touched her hair. "By then I saw the news, then your father called... Oh, Pavlusha, we were beyond ourselves, we phoned every hospital in Moscow, every single one. They misspelled your last name and couldn't find your records." She tilted her triangular head. "How long have you been awake? Why didn't you call us right away?"

*Nice bite, viper lady, that one right there.* Thought Irka.

"I just woke up, mama." Said Pavlik, a trifle offended.

"Can you please spare me the drama?"

"Drama? Pavlusha, we had no idea if you were alive or not." She folded her arms.

"What were you doing by the White House in the first place, I'd like to know." Tried Anton. His salt-and-pepper hair ruffled up like feathers of an owl.



"Quiet, Anton." Yulechka hissed. "Can't you see he's distressed? He'll tell us when he's ready, won't you, Pavlik? Am I right?"

"Most certainly, mama. Kostya and I—" Began Pavlik.

"That wretched Kostya again." Anton's face clouded. He snapped his bloodless lips like a beak. "That pert egotist, the very child of corruption in this country. Where is the scoundrel now, I'd like to know? Lounging at his father's newly built Moscow suburb villa, unscathed, sipping champagne?"

Yulia flicked two unblinking eyes at her husband.

Irka flinched. *He doesn't know, but she does.*

"Papa, your uncalled for censure disgusts me. Please, don't talk like this about my friend. He might be wounded right now, like me, maybe worse."

"He treats you like a busboy, and you!" Anton brandished a finger. "You're the one who allows it."

"That's enough, Anton." Said Yulia.

"You're making me tired with your petulance, both of you." Said Pavlik. "Irina, do you mind? Anything about Kostya, anything at all?"

Both Anton and Yulia rotated their heads at Irka as if they saw her for the first time. Yulia's tongue hoicked between two bloodless lips, and Irka knew if she disclosed anything, she'd

be dead meat, one sorry weanling mouse to be torn apart by an owl and a viper.

She stared.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them.

Pavlik cleared his throat. "Irina is probably as distressed as I am. To answer your question, papa, we were picking up Irina from the hospital, Clinical Hospital Number One, that's when we heard explosions. To be honest with you, at first I didn't think much of it, but when we saw tanks shelling the White House, in the middle of the day, so ubiquitous, all those people milling around the barricades and piles of rubbish and... I couldn't believe my eyes, papa. We were shocked. We decided to come to my house to play it safe since it's so close, but I don't remember what happened after. Irina, do you have any idea at all? Do you need to write on?"

"Write?" Repeated Anton.

*Pavlik, no offense, thought Irka, but your parents are exceptionally rude. I'd prefer it if they wallowed me in profanities as opposed to this obstinate ignorance.*

Pavlik caught her gaze, and Irka thought perhaps he understood what she meant. "Oh, forgive me. Mama, papa, I have neglected to introduce to you my friend and colleague. This is Irina Myshko, we work together at the theater. She doesn't talk,

she, uh, chooses not to. She's been taking care of me since my arrival here."

Irka threw Pavlik a glance of gratitude.

"If not for her, your son would've been in a morgue right now instead of the hospital."

"Pavlik!" Yulia's nostrils flared. "I'm asking you, please never say things like that. How many times did we talk about it. Words have power. There are certain words that you should never say aloud. You may call bad luck upon yourself by mentioning them. It's better to avoid saying them altogether. You agree with me, right?" She smoothed her skirt and smiled, waiting for an answer.

A grimace of pain contorted Pavlik's pallid face. He deflated. "I'm sorry, mama. Yes, of course I agree. I didn't mean to call upon bad luck." He explained patiently. "I only wanted to point out the fact that I wouldn't be alive if not for Irina who stopped my blood flow with her shirt. I'm forever in her debt."

He looked at Irka, and in his gaze she hoped she saw something more than simple gratitude, more even than compassion, in inkling of affection? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps it was her neediness acting up. She couldn't recall anything about the shirt, in her mind she was a mouse, a mouse that licked the

butterfly's abdomen clean. But she did remember the dead macaw very clearly.

"You don't talk?" Asked her Anton.

Irka nodded.

"Are you deaf also? One of those deaf-mutes?"

"Papa, no. I said, Irina doesn't talk because she chooses not to, but she can hear very well." Interjected Pavlik.

"Ah. That is strange. Do you know why she doesn't talk, Pavlusha? There must be a reason. Maybe it's a birth defect of some sort? I'm simply curious."

"I don't know. I wish I did." Said Pavlik slowly. Color drained him. Irka could tell this visit took a toll on him.

*I said the wrong word at the wrong time to the wrong woman, that's why. She thought. You're right, Yulia, words do have power. Me, the heedless child of two, dared to say dura to her mother. What did I know, I heard it a lot, I probably thought it was something sweet, to be said so many times a day. To commiserate, my lovely mother has provided me with a life-long punishment by pummeling the shit out of me, with great avidity, I must say. I flew across the room, I bit my tongue, I pissed myself. I think that threw a fatal spell on my ability to talk. So, here we go. Irina Myshko, mute, very nice to meet you.*

"Well, if that's true, if you really saved our son's life, that is, why, that's quite extraordinary." Anton studied Irka. "Thank you. We're in your debt, Irina, as my son said."

Yulia said nothing. She passed her eyes up and down Irka.

Irka shrunk, suddenly aware of hair uncombed for days, crumpled clothes with a slept in look, holes in her socks. Nobody was allowed to wear street shoes in the ward, only slippers or gauze covers over shoes. Irka had neither.

"Baboch, Anton Borisovich." Anton shook her unresisting hand. "Yulechka." He prompted his wife, who looked at Pavlik.

"You never mentioned any Irina to me. How long have you been working together?" She offered her hand to Irka, barely touching the tips of her fingers. "Yulia Ibragimovna, nice to meet you. I'm certainly touched by your interest in my son's life. Please accept my gratitude." She bent her scaly neck and looked at Pavlik. "You mean that of all the girls in the theater, you pick the one who doesn't talk?"

"Mama, you're embarrassing me." Pavlik sighed. He was too tired to fight. "There is nothing between us."

Irka's heart dropped somewhere and didn't return. She lost touch with the world for a dark moment. It slipped from under her feet, and she wasn't sure how to find her footing.

"We're colleagues and friends, nothing more, mama." Continued Pavlik. "Besides, it doesn't matter, really, we

communicate very well without words. By the way, Sim thinks Irina has an extraordinary ability to relay her thoughts via gestures. He auditioned her, if you must know. I don't feel very well..." He leaned on a pillow, exhausted.

Irka didn't register much of the rest of the visit. *There is nothing between us*, pounded in her temples, *nothing between us*. She decided to give herself a particularly nasty collection of bruises later for not being able to impress Pavlik with fluent sophisticated speech and for assaulting his parents' eyes with an unkempt appearance.

Somewhere at the end of a long dark tunnel, Yulia was saying sweetly, "Simply friends, I see. That's how it starts. Simply friends, right? And this Irina acts in what play exactly? I don't recall seeing her in any of your productions."

And somewhere Pavlik was answering, "Sim auditioned Irina, mama. He says she has unprecedented talent. Really, do you always have to doubt everything? He's thinking about writing her a non-speaking role for Paradise Birds."

And there, far away, Anton was musing, "A non-speaking actress? Why, that's just the sensation the man needs, as if he hasn't gotten enough already."

Irka could dimly see their bodies around the bed. Pavlik, an inky butterfly, afraid to disappoint his parents, an only child, obviously very loved, very cherished. Yulia, a green

viper, happy her son was alive yet upset at the idea of him banging a girl without her knowledge. Anton, a patchy owl, angered at Kostya for dragging his son into a political crisis that landed him in a hospital, afraid to upset his wife. And Irka in the corner, a scared pregnant mouse that kept thinking back to the blue macaw, to its bloodied feathers, to its glassy eyes poised at the sky.

Irka wanted to slap herself to quit this subliminal sludge, and couldn't. It took over her, coupled with a lack of sleep and food. Her breasts felt heavy, her stomach bloated. Her skin went taut, she sprouted a tail and shrunk to the floor. Her whiskers twitched in fear.

There was a hiss and a screech, and when the mouse looked up, it saw the viper coil and uncoil in a predatory dance. Its jaws unhinged, two fangs shot from the roof of its mouth. Its tongue flickered in and out of existence. The mouse peeped, scurrying away. The owl clacked its claws at the mouse, but missed by a hair. The mouse darted between its feet and nearly ran over a butterfly. It lay prostrate, its wings fluttering meekly. A heavy thud made the mouse's heart go berserk.

A dark cumbersome shape rose over waving stalks of sedge. An enormous eye rimmed with yellow poked between two bluish blades, joined by a sniffing nose. The heavyweight has arrived. The walrus. It snorted, opened its maw and brayed. Its tusks

gleamed with menace. At the sound of its call the nearby parasites came alive. The stinkbugs rubbed their feet in the folds of the walrus's skin, a spider cautiously probed its fur with eight hairy legs. The walrus scratched, the stinkbugs hopped, the spider fled.

The mouse gave it a wide berth and blindly slammed into a pile of wriggling maggots. It piped and retreated. Two geese gaggled at it, defending their food, trying to snatch the fattest of the grubs. Terrified, the mouse tore for the butterfly, but it was too late. The owl picked it up on its wing, the viper slithered next to it with a repelling rustling noise. They parted the sheet of grass and vanished.

The mouse darted after them. Its tiny feet bustled along rows and rows of bluish sedge, then cattails, then brown stalks of dead daisies. Confused and frightened, it lost sight of the predators and sat, sniffing. The air smelled of fresh rain. Cold wind blew from ahead. The mouse squeaked and pelted forward.

Large city noises deafened it. Steely Moscow sky gravid with rain hunkered over, ready to burst. Fallen leaves swished along the pavement. The mouse saw the viper and the owl at last. They slid inside a white Lada, together with the butterfly. It moved its antennae as if to wave goodbye, and then the car took off. Cold drops splashed on the mouse's snout. Its hairless tail shivered in the chill.



The weather did its job.

The feral realm of Irina Myshko cracked along its seams and fell around her in fragments. She stood on the steps of the Sklifosovsky's hospital colonnaded porch, overlooking the tarmac driveway, the fence, and the wide avenue behind it, eight lanes bustling with traffic in both directions. She squinted. The large square clock on one of the streetlights said it was sixteen minutes past twelve in afternoon.

*Four hours passed already? Thought Irka. Great. If someone developed a pill against my treacherous blackouts, I'd swallow it every day without hesitation. She sighed. They left without me. Naturally, they took Pavlik home. What did you expect, Irina Myshko? That they'd invite you to come along? Why, because you saved their son's precious life? Look at yourself in the mirror, inspect your family carefully, then your heritage, then your inability to speak, and think again. Who needs a fat mute penniless ugly girl in their house? Nobody. So suck it up and decide what you're going to do next.*

Irka mechanically stepped down the steps in the gravel. It crunched under her sneakers. A drop plopped on her head, a couple more, and swiftly, all at once, lightning tore the sky in two, thunder rolled across the city, and heaven opened into a torrential rain, drenching Irka instantly. She backed off under the porch awning.

*Where should I go? She thought, feeling her empty pockets. I have no money for the metro, but that's not a problem. I'd sneak in, the usual, but to go where? Home? Forget it. Theater? To run into Shakalov? I've got no knife to maim that scumbucket's face. Then where?*

Irka watched sheets of rain drape the street, cars splash through puddles, tires spuming up the froth. A couple pedestrians ran by with coats over their heads, an old woman walked hastily under a black umbrella. Gusts of wind pushed her in the back. A couple orderlies in lab coats, young men in their twenties, came out behind Irka for a smoke, offered her a cigarette. She waved a hand, declining.

The flow of the rain quieted somewhat. The orderly left.

It was Irka's feet that decided for her. They were eager to get going. Irka unzipped the jacket, slung it over her head and hastened into the downpour.

*I'll go visit where Kostya died, she thought, see if I can figure out Pavlik's house and apartment number. I bet they have a warm landing on the last floor. I'll spend the night there, then decide what to do the next morning.*

## Chapter 12. The Mouse Bites The Boar

Irka slammed into a glass door of Tsvetnoy Boulevard station. Metro breathed warmth in her face like a monstrous multi-throated beast. A couple sneezes racked her. She shook the water off her jacket, stuffed it into her backpack, merged with the throng of bodies and skipped through the turnstyle. Her feet reached the escalator long before the attendant lady noticed anything and began shouting for the hooligans to come back and pay the fare. Irka descended into the bowels of the subway, dove under the arch adorned with a stained-glass mosaic, and joined the expectant hodgepodge of commuters on the narrow platform.

The electric clock above the tunnel maw flashed 12:54.

Familiar whiff tickled her nose, earthen dampness with a bit of wet newspaper, cabbage soup and sweat. Somewhere in the tube the staccato of the train embossed an echoing rhythm. It would be here soon, any minute, the marshy tapeworm with five eyes, eight jigging segments of its body with four openings on either side, to suction in the prey.

*Lice today, thought Irka, they all look like lice, parasitic scavengers feeding on the skin of subterranean Moscow to produce more nits.*

The beat grew louder. Lice crammed the edge of the platform, to catch a favorable spot, Irka together with them. Suddenly the hairs on her back prickled. A heavy stare of a bulky man stripped her bare. Pressed into jostling perspiring husks all around her, Irka felt being singled out for a meal. They were empty, bloodless; she was full, full of tits, ass, and expendable pleasure, a quickie for a passing perv. *He smells like a pig.* She thought. *No, like a boar.*

Her heart stilled.

*Did you say something about a boar?* A voice clanged inside her. *Can I have it? I'm hungry.*

*Eaglet!* Thought Irka. Her feet went cold. *Oh, I forgot about you. I must be stricken with a rare case of infernal amnesia. I'm so sorry. So many things have happened, they have driven you out of my mind.*

*But not out of your belly. I'm still here. I don't mind, though. I forgot about myself too.* The eaglet pegged its beak at her gut. *But I woke up and I remembered. Will you feed me?*

*Of course.* Thought Irka.

Frenetic protectiveness engulfed her. Anything to defend the nestling inside her. It spoke to her, it understood her, it was as much a part of her as it was a part of its inseminator, maybe even more her than him. Irka's hands curled into fists.

*I wonder if me talking to you is precognition or psychosis,*  
she thought.

*Why can't it be simply love?* Said the eaglet.

Irka shook her head. She didn't know if she was ready to think about that just yet, to allow herself to feel it.

The train arrived. Before the doors fully opened, before the exiting passengers could clamber out, the pulsing throng of limbs rushed in, elbowing its way through. Two rivers of pests plunged in opposite directions, two streams of grumpy mugs in a conduit of the door. Irka let herself be carried with the torrent, stashed between a gangly kid in headphones and a kipper lady with an oily tapered face. She grabbed the bar greased by thousands of sweaty palms and hung over the bench. Her stance prevented her from being able to move, except to hold on and to hope she wouldn't land into the laps of those sitting below like she did the last time.

"Be careful, the doors are closing." Said a recorded male voice. "The next stop is Chekhovskaya. Dear passengers, please make way for the elderly and the invalids." The doors smashed shut. The same burly shape squashed into Irka from behind, now with added alcohol breath.

The train lurched.

A meaty palm landed on Irka's buttock and squeezed it. She froze on inertia, but almost immediately hot blistering anger

scorched her. *You fucking pusbag, she thought, you homey pervo, you scummy sexfreak, you—*

*Are those names for a boar?* Asked the eaglet.

*No, not exactly. Not for any boar, thought Irka, but for this particular one, if it is who I think it is, you bet they are. In fact, there isn't a word out there vile enough or offensive enough to call it.*

*Is this my father, then?* Said the eaglet curiously.

*It could be. Thought Irka. Smells certainly like him.*

*Did he abandon me?*

*You may rest assured that if he found out about your existence, he wouldn't just abandon you, he would scrape you out of my uterus with his bare hands. Irka fumed.*

The hand squeezed harder, massaging. Irka's heart leapt to her mouth. She shook with fury.

*Your father abandoned you too, didn't he?* Asked the eaglet.

*He certainly did, thought Irka. That is the only thing I know about him for sure, that he abandoned me, me and my mother.*

*Is that why you're so angry with my father?*

*That, and many other reasons.*

*He's not my true father then, is he?* The eaglet wondered.

Irka hissed out an exhale. *No, he's not, nor would I like him to be.*

*I see, said the eaglet. Say, if this boar is not my true father, can we kill it and eat it? My tummy hurts.*

Yes, thought Irka, yes, exactly that. She drew one deep breath, another, and twisted around. At first she could only stare, unblinking, then something like an inhalatory gasp escaped her.

The opposite party had the same reaction, gawping at her, eyes glazed. Then it started laughing, mouth wide open, laughing like mad. It was no other but Lyosha Kabansky himself, the shaggy boar dressed in the only sweater he owned, worn to baldness on belly and elbows, a pair of trainer pants strapped underneath, his favorite garb. Easy to slip down, easy to pull the dick out. His piggy eyes narrowed, he seized Irka's wrist and yanked her up to his face. "I'd be damned. Irkadura! Holy gee, where you think you're going?" He cackled, showing off a single golden tooth in the row of yellowing tusks. The train stopped, the same male voice announced the station. Lyosha dragged Irka out together with the hurrying tide of passengers and pressed her into a concave marble pillar, slapping her left hand high up on the wall and leaning over.

"Surprise!" He said, swaying. It didn't matter what time of day it was, Lyosha was always drunk. Time of day only changed the degree of the intoxication. "Holy moly, Irkadura! You gained weight, huh? You got fat! Look at you. Look ... at ... you."

*Fat off your cock, dipshit,* thought Irka.

"Who'd have thought I'd find you here, huh? Who'd've thought! I reported you to militia, and none of them motherfuckers could find you!" He cracked up, startling people around. Irka didn't resist, knowing it was futile. She waited for the opportune moment, watching Lyosha's movements with the eyes of her eaglet. "But I did. I found you. You got the job at that theater. Theater-shmeater. What do you do there, wipe actors' asses?" He cackled.

Irka flinched. *More like serve as an ejaculatory prop for a flaccid jackal,* she thought, her mind flashing back to Shakalov.

"To think your whore of a mother wanted me to stay home today!" He imitated her whine. "Lyosha, where you going?... Lyosha, we got no money..." He spit. "I thought I'd pay you a visit, and here you are..."

*Can we strike yet?* The eaglet asked impatiently.

*No, not yet, wait a little.* Thought Irka.

*But it's hurting you.*

*It's okay, I don't mind.* Thought Irka. *I'm used to it. We can't spook it, see. When hunting, you don't attack until you're sure of your target. You just wait, I will hurt it back. Wait and watch.*

*Okay,* said the eaglet, *but please hurry.*



The train sucked in the last travellers and departed. A new mob trickled onto the platform, some individuals throwing nosey glances in the direction of the struggling pair.

"Excuse me—" Said a retired lizard of a man with a cane in a veiny hand and made as if to approach.

"Fuck off!" Belched Lyosha. "Mind your own business, dimwit."

The lizard retreated.

"So." Lyosha turned to Irka. "Where you think you're going, mute *dura*? Where you think you're going, huh? Your mother cried herself dry, worried sick. And there you are, without a nick of a worry, riding around the metro. Fell right in my lap, you stupid mouse. I've been looking for you, did you know? I said I'd look for you if you'd ever ran, didn't I?" His unshaven face grew somber and mean, his voice dropped an octave. "Been looking all over Moscow for you," he croaked into her ear, and added, "you cheap dirty bitch. Enough of this theater bullshit. You're going home with me." His hand flew up, ready to slap her.

Now! Cried the eaglet.

Anticipating the move, Irka ducked, reached for his balls, the soft unprotected sack hanging in the fork of his trainers, seized them and twisted, twisted hard. It felt satisfying, so satisfying, that at first Irka couldn't believe she actually did it.

*Rip them!* Cried the eaglet.

Irka yanked downward.

Lyosha's eyes rounded, his grip loosened. For a split second he was silent, then a monstrous cry broke through his lips and he let go. Irka stole out from under his bulk and stood mesmerized, watching him, heart pounding in her throat. Lyosha's face turned an unhealthy purple. He bent at the waist, grabbed at his crotch, slammed his forehead into cold marble, and bellowed. "You fucking cunt! You cheap dirty fucking cunt! You will pay for this!" His cry drowned in the drone of the incoming train. Five lights broke through the gloom of the tunnel, it entered the station at full speed.

Concerned witnesses congregated around, unsure what to do yet. "Militia!" Called the lizard man.

*Go, go!* Screamed the eaglet.

Irka surfaced from her stupor, turned around and wedged through the crowd.

But Lyosha wasn't to be discarded so easily. He hollered and vaulted after her, rudely pushing people apart.

Irka squeezed against the flux of bodies. She heard him utter strings of profanities. Somebody shouted, a whistle trilled. Irka sprung along the marble-walled length of the vaulted vestibule, dodging and weaving, making for the exit at the very end.

A train bound away from city center arrived and spit out a hustling mass of commuters. Irka accelerated, oblivious to stern comments of a lady she happened to kick by accident. She was about twenty yards away from the exit staircase when it hit her. *I can't run up the stairs*, she thought, *I'm out of shape*.

*Why do you need to run up the stairs?* Asked the eaglet.

*Where else is there to go?* Cried Irka inwardly.

Lyosha cursed, not five steps behind.

Clusters of sweat beaded Irka's upper lip, respiration tore at her lungs. A hot trickle of water ran down her back. Her knees buckled from exertion, her leg muscles burned, she felt faint.

*The train!* Screeched the eaglet. *Board the train!*

Irka glanced to her right, and half-stumbled, half-dashed between the pillars, nearly slipping on the polished floor. The train was getting ready for departure. Last passengers squeezed in. "Be careful," said the female voice, "the doors are closing. The next stop is..."

Irka knew the recording by heart. She had seconds left and two yards to cross. But in that moment, cackling in victory, Lyosha reached from behind and yanked on her jacket. Irka shot forward. Old cotton threads ripped, leaving the collar in Lyosha's hand.

"...Tsvetnoy Boulevard." Announced the voice.

The doors began to close.

Like in slow motion, Irka saw them inching toward each other. There remained a gap wide enough for her to pass. She groaned with effort, leapt and crashed inside. A split second later, the doors banged shut.

Irka doubled down, slick with sweat. Angry knives pierced her right side, her stomach pulsed with fluid. She felt like throwing up, but forced herself to straighten and turn around.

Behind the window stood Lyosha, enraged, shaking her collar, yelling something inaudible. He looked so comical in this fruitless rampage, that Irka grinned. It was a grin of sinister hilarity.

*Eat that, fuckface.* She thought. *Eat that, you slimy tosspot, you swine, you sack of muck, you catfish flunky, you kook, you asshole, you boiled hock, you—*

*Those balls tasted good,* interrupted her the eaglet. *Can I get more sometime soon?*

*You bet,* thought Irka. *Count on it.*

She flipped Lyosha two birds and watched his dark snout grow smaller and smaller. The train pitched, picked up speed, and took off, leaving Lyosha Kabansky behind.

Like in a haze of ecstasy, Irka grinned through remaining two stops, tottered out on Medeleevskaya, stumbled up worn granite risers into the cross-over passage to Novoslobodskaya

ring line stop, passed by an Afghan war veteran, a twenty-something kid with no legs in a wheeled settee who brayed army songs to the accompaniment of a hurdy-gurdy, an inverted fur hat with meager change in his lap, a newspaper lady bundled in headcloth selling yellow press, a pensioner with an outstretched hand, barely noticing any of them, as if they were fixtures, bronze statues aimed to decorate the Moscow Metropolitan of V.I. Lenin.

A sense of unimpeded supremacy rigged Irka, some kind of a luxuriant glory mixed with well-earned spite. She taught that pig a lesson, she did it. Her feet hardly touched the ground, she floated down the steps to Novoslobodskaya, a well-lit underground crypt of brass-border arches fused with illuminated pylons, walked onto the platform and heard a voice.

"What is the goal of your life, citizen Myshko?" Asked Lenin from behind a desk depicted in a stained glass panel.

*To shut you up, she thought, without turning. There will be a day when I won't hear any of you, and it will be your turn to listen to me.*

"Believe in the Soviet power, the power of communism, citizen Myshko. It will cure your muteness, it will teach you the secrets of speech. Do you doubt the Soviet power?"

*The only thing I doubt is if you can stick it up your ass or not, because I think your fingers are too fat and you asshole*

*is as tight as a squirrel's sphincter*, thought Irka and ignored the rest of Lenin's exclamations.

The train chugged to a stop. Irka boarded it, still reeling with her success, rode all the way to Kievskiy railway station, transferred to the blue line, and exited into the city on Smolenskaya stop, from where she could walk to the White House, and, ultimately, to Pavlik's building, provided she could figure out which one it was.

Irka stepped through the glass door, walked past street haberdashers selling baked goods, kielbasa, socks, and other gibberish, walked under the tawny archway patterned with inverted square reliefs, and stopped facing the street. She took in a deep breath. Dark amorphous clouds boiled over the sky. It sprinkled lightly. The avenue bustled with afternoon traffic. It smelled of exhaust. To her left an old lady in a lavender beret waved her arm at the shoe repair booth, discussing the price with the repairman inside, a scuffed boot in his hands. A bearded man picked out roses at the flower kiosk. A thin crowd swaggered by the newsstand. Irka stood, watching them, gulping crisp air.

*Thank you*, she thought.

*For what?* Asked the eaglet.

*For giving me strength. Strength to fight that pig.*

*No, thank you*, said the eaglet.

*For what? It was Irka's turn to wonder.*

*For giving me life, said the eaglet.*

*Oh, Irka shuddered, I'm sorry I wanted to kill you.*

*Every mother wants to kill her child at some point or another in her life. You're not the first, said the eaglet thoughtfully, not the last.*

*If that's true, it's morbidly fascinating, thought Irka. How does that make people different from animals?*

*It doesn't, said the eaglet. People are animals, but they forgot about it. They think because they learned how to walk upright, to think, to talk, to plan, they're somehow better, smarter, supreme beings, but they still kill each other every day. They're worse than animals. Animals kill for survival, people kill for fun. The eaglet fell quiet.*

*But you wanted me to kill the boar, thought Irka.*

*Because I'm hungry. And I'm an eaglet.*

*Irka shook her head, befuddled. Wait. We're talking in metaphors. You're not hungry as in you need me to poleaxe a wild boar for your consumption, you need me to—*

*I'm the animal in you. Let me out, said the eaglet and fell quiet.*

*Irka pressed on her temples, thinking, this is it, I'm going nuts, I'm going nuts. To clear her head, she determinedly marched to an underground pedestrian crossing, wove in and out*

of back alleys for twenty minutes until she made it to Moscow river embankment and here strode north along the stone balustrade for the next hour. She walked in a trance barely noticing the groan of passing trucks, the occasional streetlights, the steps up to the Freedom square. *Let the animal out of me*, kept bouncing around her head, *let the animal out*.

She passed the remnants of the barricade debris in front of the White House, and after meandering through wan shantytown for another hour, circled a peeling church, crossed a daycare property choked with three-story cinderblocks, and stumbled upon the boulevard that led her to the parking lot with an old elm and no sign of Kostya's car, blood washed away by rain. But there is stood, Pavlik's parents' white Lada, right by the first entrance of a five story Khrushchovka fashioned of concrete bricks and single-paned windows.

*The prefabricated temporary low-cost wonder of Soviet architecture that became permanent*, thought Irka. *Would you like some free housing? Sure, let us stuff you in these chicken coops. Sorry, no winter insulation, no privacy, no elevators, but hey, it's good for your health. Good exercise, jogging up and down the stairs. Sucks for you if you're disabled. You see, free comes at a price. I get your idea of communism, Lenin. All are equal, meaning, if you don't fit in our cookie cutter, you die.*



Irka picked up a stone and threw it at a crow. It screeched an ugly cry and fluttered up into the shedding maples.

*There, that's the animal out of me. Is that what you meant?* Thought Irka.

There was no answer from the eaglet.

Drizzle stopped. Dusk pressed on the city. The boulevard perpendicular to the building and the parking lot across were deserted, save for an occasional car passing by and a young woman pushing a baby carriage along the sidewalk. Irka fixed her backpack, walked to the entrance door, and pulled on the handle. The door gave a screech. A foul stench hit her nostrils. She entered into the gloom. Right on the first floor landing lay a drunk, emaciated like a downtrodden horse, mumbling under his breath. He saw Irka and stretched out an arm. "Daughter! Help me!"

*What do you need, you sorry pissant?* Thought Irka and offered him a hand.

He slapped at it angrily. "Not that, I need money! Give me money!" An empty bottle of vodka rolled away from him. His crotch was stained with urine.

Irka carefully edged around him. He attempted to grab at her ankles. She sprinted up the stairs, flanked by walls painted minty green on the bottom, dirty white from the waist level and up.

*Four apartments on each floor, twenty total, she thought. I'll start from the second floor, and maybe by then that sack of shit will depart or pass out.*

She pressed her ear to every door, listening. Some issued sounds of TV, some blasted Vysotsky songs, in one a couple had a fight, a baby cried, a basset woofed maliciously, most were quiet. Irka was afraid to ring the bells, deciding first to listen to every one and then making up her mind. On the last floor the second door to the left was the cleanest, a newly painted metal barrier with a neat lens of a peephole at eye level and the plastic number 18. Delicious smell wafted from it. Irka inhaled, her stomach rumbled. It smelled like meat dumplings, homemade, with sour cream.

She stood on tiptoe and looked into the peephole. The concave glass allowed through only light. She put her ear to it and listened. There were voices, soft voices, discussing something, and the clinking of cutlery. They were eating dinner.

Irka minced her feet.

A pounding of footfalls reached her ears. A man coughed and called, "Pavlusha, the tea is getting cold. Yulia, I'll take out the trash and be right back." A chain rattled, tumblers turned.

Irka's heart shot through her head. She jumped, skidded down one and a half flights of stairs and clung to the garbage chute between fourth and third floor landings, shaking. DON'T

THROW BURNING MATCHES AND CIGARETTES INTO THE GARBAGE CHUTE, said a stenciled inscription in red. The receptacle shutter yawned at her, rank cold expectorated from its depth. Irka gagged, thinking about her grandmother throwing dead puppies into one exactly like that. One floor above slippers flip-flopped, stopped, a rusty hinge groaned, an echo thudded through the airshaft past Irka, crashed somewhere deep down, the slippers shuffled up, the door clicked shut, locks turned, and all was still.

Irka let out a breath. She had to make up her mind. There was a high probability that some salivating neighbor has let his itinerant eyes wander over her through a peephole and was plagued by desire to come out and investigate or, worse, call militia. *Because isn't she droll, this fat girl running up and down the stairs like a scared little mouse?* Thought Irka, peering at the floor above. *Well, what a dilly. Let's see how she dances when I call authorities on her.* Irka's mind retreated to her neighbor Prasha. Snooping was Prasha's hobby. She watched who came and went, then announced it to other hags perched on the bench by the entrance, whose daily amusement consisted of speculation over who slept with whom or who bought what for how much or who got sick with what disease and what would be the cure. Whenever Prasha nannied Irka, she intermingled angel stories with those of germs that ate your limbs, turned them

black and made them fall off, but if she'd only asked her guardian angel, she told Irka, she'd be protected. Irka firmly believed that the old rat has lost her mind.

*Okay, here we go,* thought Irka, ascended to the fifth floor, took a deep breath and rung the bell.

Steps approached. An eye peered into the hole.

Irka brushed bangs out of her face, smiling.

There was movement behind the door, some murmuring, then what sounded like arguing. After a minute of this, the tumblers groaned and the door opened to the length of the chain. Yulia's unblinking eye studied Irka for good ten seconds. A large emerald glistened in her ear. "Are you... that girl from the hospital?"

Irka nodded, relieved.

"Well, that's unexpected. Did Pavlik invite you?"

Irka shook her head.

"No? If he didn't invite you, may I ask why you're here and who gave you our address?" She strained to keep her voice polite, glossy over obvious irritation.

"Mama, who is it?" Pavlik's voice came from inside.

"The neighbor. Tatiana." Called Yulia over her shoulder.

"Asking for butter." She turned the unblinking eye back to Irka.

"What do you want?"

Irka took a step forward.

Yulia shut the crack to a hairline. "Please don't come any closer. Answer my question. Why are you here? What do you want?"

Anton whispered behind her. "Maybe it's just an innocent visit, Yulechka. She probably came to check on her friend." Contrary to his wife's, Anton's voice jousting with...intrigue?

*Why would he be excited to see me?* Thought Irka.

"And how does she know where we live?" Hissed Yulia, then added in a barely audible mutter. "What if she's a scam artist?"

"Pavlusha said they work together." Whispered Anton.

"Pavlusha likes to tell stories."

This was clearly meant for Irka to hear, to warn her that whatever intentions she had, Yulia was aware of them.

"Mama, what's going on? Who is it?" Pavlik called. Irka thought he sounded nasal, as if stricken with a cold.

"Oh, it's nothing, Pavlusha, nothing." Said Yulia and shut the door.

Irka's heart cracked over the concrete floor. She curled and uncurled her fists, not knowing what to do, when the chain rattled off and the door sprung open. Behind it stood flustered Pavlik dressed in jeans and a dark sweater, feet in brown-checked slippers. He leaned on a pair of crutches, his face puffy as if he was crying. "Irina!" He exclaimed with genuine smile. "You came to visit... I'm so happy to see you, you have no idea. How did you find me?"

Irka shrugged, her stomach aflutter. *You know*, she thought. *You know about Kostya, they told you. Forgive me for not telling you, I couldn't. I don't think you'd understand if I did.*

Pavlik's eyes lingered on her face. "Sorry we departed in such a hurry, papa had to— Oh, how unforgiveable of me." He slapped his forehead. "It's the painkillers. What am I doing, keeping you on the threshold. Come in. We were just finishing dinner. Are you hungry?" He exerted himself to sound cheery.

Irka's stomach rumbled. She nodded and stepped inside. Pavlik shut the door behind her and locked it.

The narrow entry hallway and what little she could glimpse of the parlor spelled cleanliness, orderliness, and wealth. The prevalent color was russet, a patchwork of patterned wallpaper, polished mahogany, Turkish rugs, lampshades, crystal chandeliers, decorative plates on the walls and a mishmash of gewgaws. Everything sparkled and shined. *Just like Olya's flat, two-room*, thought Irka. *Although I bet they did a major renovation. I could eat off the floor here, looks like it's being buffed every hour.* She carefully stepped on a mat by the open wardrobe filled with coats and looked up.

Anton leaned on the doorway into the parlor, casual in a plaid shirt and grey pants. Sheathed in a green dress, a large emerald stuck in each ear, Yulia stood next to him, her arms

crossed, her face a frozen mask of politeness, an owl and a viper in anticipation of an easy meal.

"Irina, is that right? Is that your name?" Said Yulia.

Irka nodded.

"Well, Irina, perhaps you can explain to us the goal of your unexpected visit? Pavlik, I take it you have pen and paper you can give to your friend? I'd like to know to what do we owe the honor."

"Mama, not right now. This is the worst time. Please, stop treating me like a little boy. I don't understand your belligerent attitude, what is Irina going to do, eat me?"

"Pavlik!" Exclaimed Yulia, offended.

"Yulechka, they're friends. It's perfectly natural for friends to visit each other, especially when your friend is such a brave young lady." Interjected Anton, pleased that a girl has visited his son. His flat face broke into a smile.

"Oh, natural. I see. Since when is visiting people without notifying them in advance is *natural*? I would've preferred to know in advance."

"But, Yulechka, she can't talk! Pavlusha said—"

"I remember what Pavlusha said, so you don't need to remind me." Yulia poised her unblinking eyes at Irka. "Your parents know that you're here, right?"

*My mother is an alcoholic high-school dropout, thought Irka, my father left me before I was born, and my mother's current boyfriend doesn't qualify as a parental figure because he used to rape me for his personal pleasure, so no, my parents don't know that I'm here because they don't give a shit about where I am.*

"Mama, I appreciate your forwardness. And thank you for welcoming my friend and colleague in such a warm manner." Said Pavlik with burlesque flair. "If you don't mind, let us continue at the table. Irina is hungry, there's plenty of dumplings left." He turned to Irka, balancing on crutches, one arm outstretched. "There must be a pair of slippers on the bottom shelf... Do you need me to take your coat?"

Irka vigorously shook her head, slid off her backpack, unzipped the ruined jacket, stuffed it helter-skelter between other coats on a free hook, slipped off sneakers, and suddenly had a strong premonition. She was beguiled, confounded, blinded. The russet around her turned orange, the exact hateful shade of those wretched curtains, the glow and sparkle turned to glue slapped on top of quicksand in thick oozing layers. Another step, and it would suck Irka in so fast, she wouldn't have time to squeak, the helpless little mouse. She didn't step into the typical two-room Khrushchovka flat, no, she landed in a viper's



desert lair from which there was only one way out, to be eaten  
and excreted.

## Chapter 13. The Viper's Lair

Irka stayed for dinner, then for a couple of days, then for a couple of months. Pavlik convinced his parents that he needed company to pull him out of depression over Kostya's passing, Anton lobbied for debt repayment in the form of providing refuge for the mute girl, and Yulia, reluctant but impressed with Irka's cleaning skills, bestowed upon her the duty of a housekeeper, even supplied her with cash for grocery shopping. Irka honestly pilfered only from the store, never from Yulia's stash. She slept on a thin mattress on the kitchen floor, rolling it out at night and putting it away first thing in the morning. The kitchen became her room. It was packed with food. It was perfect, the perfect mouse cage.

Rainy fall gave way to winter with its freezing wind and snow. Snow everywhere. It swaddled Moscow streets with a pristine blanket. Dirt, ditches, dints disappeared, replaced with a veil of infinitesimal zircons that refracted cold sunshine. The city changed, and Irka changed with it. She gained weight. Her breasts swelled, her belly grew. It unsettled her like a growing carcinoma, both malign and benign, an insuperable process that would result in her rupture. Irka was scared of

childbirth, scared of being ripped apart by the eaglet, eager to get out. Yulia's hand-me-down sweaters barely covered her middle now. To divert attention from it, she dressed in copious layers, and so far neither Yulia nor Anton noticed anything. Pavlik kept mum. Content with this state of affairs, upswept by convenient ignorance and the close proximity of the object of her desire, Irka tried not to think of her future, her progeny, her promise to slaughter the boar. She allowed herself to relax and spent most of her time doing two things, scrubbing the apartment clean and listening to Pavlik's rants on the glazed balcony where he secretly smoked when his parents weren't present. He said he picked up Kostya's habit to remember him.

So it was on this first Saturday of December.

Behind the window snowbanks glistened in the sun, their slopes bored with freckles of yellow doggy pissholes. Sardonic pedestrians dotted the pathways cleared and strewn with salt in the wee hours by omnipresent blue-and-orange snowblowers. The cuckoo clock in the kitchen showed seven minutes past ten in the morning. Yulia and Anton left an hour ago to prepare for a jewelry exhibit. Unlike many, they didn't lose a ruble in the mess of the Soviet Union collapse. With palpable faith in precious stones, they pooled their savings into Malachite Box, a small jewelry manufacturing business. Compared to the squalor Irka grew up in, this reality seemed as inconceivable to her as

Pavlik's employment at the theater and her own potential participation in *Paradise Birds*, provided Sim didn't play a cruel joke on her last night when he came over for dinner to commemorate Pavlik's recovery.

Irka chewed on the shortbread cookie and sipped tea. *Lyosha's mother was killed for a bottle of vodka in a liquor store, she thought, Lyosha himself is an unemployed butcher ready to decimate any dork dumb enough to carry cash. And my mother... my mother would prostitute herself for a loaf of bread or a bottle of beer without a blink, and yet there are people out there making high art. This paradox will kill me.*

"Okay, but only because you cooked it." Said Pavlik.

Irka surfaced from her thoughts and smiled.

Pavlik sat across the table, in the sun-dappled shadow of the tulle, his jaunty eyes seemingly darker because of the black turtleneck. He forked up the last bit of sunny-side up eggs with bologna, washed it down with coffee, and plonked the cup on the oilcloth. There were no crutches propped by the window next to him, the source of his good spirits. He stood up. "Coming?"

*Always. Anywhere. Anytime,* thought Irka, brushed off the crumbs, pulled out of the narrow gap between the bench and the table, and tottered after him, to the parlor balcony, a cozy hovel the width of a chair and the length of a bed, finished in knotted pine and outfitted with a folding table, two padded

stools in either corner and a pulley clothesline contraption under the ceiling.

Pavlik locked the door, cracked the window open, pulled out a pack of Davidoff's, matches, lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. Freezing air drifted in. Irka's skin bristled with goosebumps. She crossed her arms, shivering.

Pavlik puffed out smoke. It coiled in ringlets. There was no wind, only hard frigid sunshine. The quadrangle of the inner court spread five stories below them like a bleached hankie. "Simple pleasures in life." He said, and plopped on a chair. "Oh, I'm sorry, are you cold?"

Irka shook her head, pulled up the other stool and sat next to him.

It's been two months since Kostya's funeral. Pavlik hardly talked to his parents but dished to Irka on everything from cruelty and fatalism of human existence, to the importance of art as a poetic inquiry into our essence, our hunger, our constant need to understand ourselves, to the reactionary ineptitude people display when faced with death. "Death," he would say, "the beast that attacks without warning." He'd go into rages, wave his arms. "Death is part of life, death is the catalyst for the regeneration and renewal that exists to fight the stagnation of mind. You hear me, Irina? It's like the cycle of nature seasons, the demise in the winter, the rebirth in the

spring. But nature, see, nature is not art because it's not manmade. And we, artists, we are sieves that catch the debris of the mundane and syphon out the beauty." Irka would lose herself in his talking, watch his lips move, his eyes shine with mirth, no longer listening, her face cupped in both hands, fascinated.

On a two-month sick leave from the theater, Pavlik would act for her, for her alone. She soaked up every minute of it, every touch he granted her, from an accidental brush of the hand to a greeting kiss on the cheek. This scarce physicality was to Irka the height of gallantry, it both awed and excited her. After Lyosha's butchery, she couldn't hope for more and didn't reach out in fear of breaking the delicacy between them. Pavlik was the sultry butterfly, and she was the mouse watching it flutter from flower to flower, for hours on end.

Pavlik theorized that Irka repressed the traumatic memory of the shooting just as he did, so he stopped bothering her with questions. But several times he tried discussing her pregnancy. He asked her who the father was, what she was going to do with it, keep it, give it up for adoption? And if she would keep it, where would she go? Irka stared at her feet, immobile, yearning for him to touch her, but he never did. He usually fell silent and lit another cigarette.

"Listen," he began, and Irka knew immediately what would come next. "You can't hide it forever, you know."

She sighed and thought. *I suppose I'm in the midst of some luxurious dingle of denial. I get that, yes. But, you know what? For once it's so fucking comfortable that I don't want to shake it, don't want to be reminded of that pig, is that so detrimental? I know I'm sitting in a vat of congealed shit, I know, but I don't want you to stir it, because it will stink. So please, don't spoil the perfect morning.*

"Let's say, Sim offers you a role," continued Pavlik, "you could maybe swing the chubby angle at home for another month or so, maybe. Although I don't think mama will buy into it for much longer, but onstage! I mean, how do you think you can hide it onstage? You can't. Your costume won't fit. It's simple physiology. At some point your belly will become too large. What are you going to do, pretend like you swallowed a watermelon by accident?"

Irka bit on her lip. She was scared, scared to disrupt this flux of safety she fell into, and yet Pavlik was right, she couldn't run away from it forever, it was coming.

"So, not to sound like an old parrot, but... do you know who the father is? Or do you sincerely have not the tinge of an idea?" Pavlik took her hands.

Irka flinched and lifted her eyes. She thought he mocked her, but he didn't. His face was pallid, slack, lapped with discomfiture, a face of someone who cares but doesn't quite know

how to express it and is ashamed and bewildered for that very reason.

"Look, I'm sorry if I seem too forward, too intrusive perhaps, asking you this. Please, believe me. It's not some claptrap worry. I don't intend to promulgate your private information to anyone, if that is your fear. I just wanted to know, because...I thought I'd understand, that's all. It's your choice of course, to keep it inside you. But, if you ever decide to spill, to get it all out, I won't betray you. It'll die with me. I promise. You see, I wish you'd stop giving yourself those nasty bruises. You helped me. Christ, you saved my life, Irina! How can I ever repay you? I wish I could help you somehow, help you in return, do you understand?"

Suddenly there was sadness in Pavlik's gaze, sadness and... and what? Rue? Compassion? Something else?

*What is this? Thought Irka. Platonic friendship? Am I that ugly, that repulsive?*

"May I...can I hold you?" Asked Pavlik.

Irka stared, paralyzed by yatter of panic. She wanted it, wanted it so bad, she thought she'd break like a floe of ice if she agreed and he retracted for some reason.

Pavlik waited a moment longer. "I feel like you need to be held right now, hope it's okay." He swooped her, two butterfly wings around a jittery mouse.



Irka undulated against his chest, barely breathing.

For two months she fought against the rising tide of her infatuation with Pavlik, calling herself an unrealistic bitch, a cloying midden, a bawdy twat, a fucking lout, a slut, a tramp, a harlot and every other vulgar word she could think of. And now she couldn't fight it anymore. Pavlik's body heat knocked down the last of her defenses. Diffident, desperate love covered her with a cowl. It arrested her thoughts in a hammerlock. It strangled her, it slapped her face, it made her heart suffuse with blood. She was in pain, she suffocated, she wanted out, but instead she got under and dissolved in it.

*You dura, she thought, you mute idiotic dura, he said there is nothing between us, he said it himself, he...* Hot tears spilled down her face. *I think that's it. I think I love him.*

"Is something wrong?" Pavlik let go.

*Yeah, Irka blinked, everything?*

He inclined his head. "Why are you crying? Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. *No, I hurt myself, because I'm exceptionally good at it, wouldn't you know.*

He pulled out another cigarette, looked at it, put it back. "Okay, let me try a slightly different tactic. May I ask you something?"

Irka shrugged. *Sure, why not? I'm yours, you can do what you want.* She sniffled, embarrassed, wiped her face with a sleeve.

Outside kids called to each other, rushing down the frozen playground slide on pieces of cardboard. A dog barked. A car honked.

"I know people must've bothered you with this a thousand times." Pavlik began. "I didn't want to ask you, out of respect to your privacy, but, I'm genuinely curious. This is not some desire to pry into your life, okay?"

Irka waited.

"Do you mind telling me why it is that you don't talk? Was it a conscious decision on your part? Or, is there a medical reason behind this?" Pavlik pulled out a notepad and a pen that was stashed under the stool and handed them to Irka.

She opened the pulpy cover, flipped through dozens of crinkly written-in pages, and hovered the pen over the clean sheet. *I know, she thought. This is how I can find out. If you feel anything toward me, anything at all, you will understand what I tell you. If not, well, then this will be a good deterrent, as good as any.*

"I haven't told anyone." She wrote.

"Not a single person?"

Irka shook her head.

"Wow. Well, I'm honored that you choose to share it with me. I really am." Said Pavlik. A readiness lurked in his gaze, readiness for the worst.

*You have no idea what's coming,* thought Irka, and wrote. "I don't talk because the catfish made me not to." She squinted up.

"What?" Pavlik's brows knitted. He reread what she wrote, his lips moving.

*This is it,* Irka thought. *I knew it. Now you will ask me, what do you mean, the catfish made you not to? What catfish? And that will be the end of it.*

She waited. Pavlik studied her for good ten seconds. A crow screeched, another bird answered. They fought, by the sound of it, for a scarp of food. Children's catcalls echoed between the walls of the yard.

Irka expected disappointment, expected Pavlik to tell her that she's mental and needs to seen by a certified professional. Or maybe he would laugh it off, think it was a joke, and tell her to stop pulling his leg. She expected anything but this.

"Why?" He said. "What did you do to it?"

Irka gawked.

There was no ridicule in Pavlik's eyes. He looked at her, solemn and patient. A streak of color marred his cheeks, and his hands shook a little. He fumbled with a cigarette.

"I called it a name." She wrote.

"What name?" Asked Pavlik.

"*Dura.*"

"And what did it do?"

"It chased me, so I turned into a mouse. Mice don't talk."

"Is..." Pavlik hesitated. "Does the catfish know who the father of your baby is?"

Irka shook her head. "It doesn't. Probably never will. It won't believe me if I told it." She hesitated, then added. "It's the boar."

Pavlik dropped the cigarette, picked it up. "Do the catfish and the boar know each other?"

"They live together, if you can call it living."

Pavlik placed a hand on Irka's shoulder. "Have there been...other boars?"

"No. The boar is the only one." She wrote, wishing he would never take his hand away. It burned a stellated hole in her sweater. "There was a bison, a hyena, a wolf, a mosquito, and a few others I don't really remember."

"What did the boar do to the mouse, if you don't mind me asking?" Said Pavlik.

"Ate it. From leg to leg. Every night."

Pavlik swallowed. "When we...picked you up from the hospital, did...did you get there because the boar has hurt you?"

"No, that was horseflies. Six of them. One was the son of a jackal, I think."

"A jackal." Repeated Pavlik.

"Yes. The one that works at the chamber theater."

Pavlik's eyes rounded. "Did the jackal bite you?"

"Just a little bit, no blood, though, his teeth aren't that sharp anymore, he's old. He's—"

Memories rushed up Irka's throat in a viscous glop of bile. She hyperventilated. Her chest constricted. There was a cruddy taste in her mouth. Overtaken by an unknown force, she began writing it all out, everything, the bed in the woods, the catfish sleeping with the boar, the goat, the herring, the cockroach and the little hedgehog making the life of the mouse hell, the rat with the angel stories, the woodpeckers, the statues of Lenin and Karl Marx, the roosters, the turtle guarding the theater, the lavish birds directed by the seal, the mole hole, the geese, the vultures, the hyenas, the walrus and the viper and the owl. She even wrote about the eaglet, and when she came to the end of the last page, she wrote on the cover, until there was no space left. She hasn't mentioned the macaw or the black admiral butterfly.

The street grew quiet. The sky has garnered that golden haze of the afternoon, not quite twilight yet, but close. If not

for the built-in heating on the balcony, they would've both already frozen solid.

Pavlik threw his fifth or sixth cigarette stub out of the window, closed it, stashed the notepad back under the stool and looked at Irka. "Thank you. For telling me. I have a story for you too."

Irka goggled at him, befuddled.

"I was seven. I was walking home from school one night, right along the Moscow river embankment. It was November, I think, so it was cold and dark, around six in the evening or so. Anyway, I should've known better. I should've just gone home right after school. That sorry chickenshit, Mishka Shchukin, hid my schoolbag between the trash bins and it took me hours to find it. Hours. So, I got to the bridge, turned to climb the stairs, and there they were." He paused, eyes milky and unfocused.

Irka held her breath. She could tell Pavlik wasn't present anymore. He was gone, gone into the land of animal terror.

"There were six of them." His pupils grew large. "Six...eels. Giant, with long, spiny bodies, and they—" his face contorted in a rictus of pain, "they fell on me and they burrowed into me. One after another." He sat stockstill, absent, then added quietly. "When they were done, they left me. I lay there, looking at the sky, at the stars blinking like bits of ice on velvet, and I thought I would die." Dark circles fell

around his eyes, a brilliant line traced his cheek. He didn't make an effort to wipe it.

Irka didn't dare to move, dumbstruck. *You too?* She thought. *It can't be. No, it can't be.* She had a transient urge to reach out, suppressed it, went through the familiar pantomime.

"You want the pad?" Pavlik pulled it out, mechanically, as if his body obeyed a signal from an automaton.

Irka took it with shaking hands. "The vulture killed the macaw." She wrote on a margin. "In the parking lot, in front of your entranceway. I'll never forget it."

"The vulture...what?" Pavlik nearly jumped. "Can you elaborate?"

"It was on the roof. It shot the macaw, and the butterfly."

"The butterfly?"

"The black admiral. It lived, but the macaw died. The mouse pushed the butterfly out of the way. I'm sorry the mouse wasn't fast enough to—"

Pavlik clasped his face. Irka couldn't resist anymore. She tossed the notebook and hugged him. At last, she passed a hand through his hair, smooth and silky, just like she expected. She rocked him a little, back and forth, back and forth, while he wept into her sweater. So they sat until the darkness pressed on the balcony's glazing and bright yellow light went on in the parlor. Somebody knocked on the window.

Pavlik stirred. Irka craned her neck.

Yulia's face, greenish through the glass, exuded irritated wonder. Next to her Anton smiled in a fleering sort of way. They obviously misunderstood Irka's and Pavlik's embrace for intimacy.

Racing heart broke through Irka's head. She jumped up so fast, the edge of her sweater lifted, exposing her midriff. In the harshness of the forty-watt lamplight her silhouette printed clearly against the dark row of windowpanes. The agitated profile, the swollen breasts, the bump on the way to pubis. Conscious of her mistake, Irka yanked the sweater down.

"Oh, hey! You're here already?" Said Pavlik, unlocking the door. "Sorry, we lost track of time. Mama, you okay?"

Yulia didn't look at her son. Her amber eyes swam with sickly jaundice. Her eyelids grew open and fused with the sockets, as if she was permanently startled. Her face turned scaly, parchment-thin. She threw a hand over her mouth.

"Yulechka, what's the matter? Are you all right?" Anton peered at his wife, puzzled.

Yulia pointed an elongated finger at Irka's belly, a questing spiny vertebrae aimed to poke. She gulped air in an effort to say something.

*Shit*, thought Irka. *Shit, shit, shit. She's going to eat me, guts and all.*



"What is it?" Anton followed Yulia's finger.

Pavlik traced his father's gaze and suddenly lost the joyful demeanor he portrayed a second ago. His face fell. He tried to avert the inevitable. "So, are you guys hungry? Can you believe it, we've been sitting here all day, *all day!* I think we talked about everything under the sun. I mean, *I* talked, mostly. Irina wrote, of course. I don't know how it happened, but we've completely forgotten about—"

"She's pregnant." Yulia whispered. No, it wasn't a whisper, it was a hiss. Her bloodless tongue lashed out. "Irina is pregnant." Mortified, she looked at her son, who stood still. Not a muscle twitched in his face.

"Can we come inside? Thanks." Pavlik stepped over the threshold, pulling Irka behind him. Her legs turned to water, she could barely walk without stumbling.

Yulia let them pass, clicked the door shut and said quietly, without preamble. "How long has this been going between you two? How long, I'd like to know."

*I'd prefer it if you yelled, you viper-faced mouse-eating hypocrite,* thought Irka. *Be honest and say it straight to my face, why can't you? Say you hate me. Say you'd want your son to be thirty-something, successful, rich, say you want him to marry a famous actress that shits diamonds and not have him knock up a sixteen-year-old fat dummy. Say it! SAY IT!* Irka gritted her

teeth. More than ever in her life she wanted to speak. Yulia's enigmatic voice, her iron self-control unsettled her. It was poison, snake poison that entered your system without your knowing and hit your brain with a cosh until you dropped from prostration.

"Yulechka, what are you talking about?" Said Anton, still under dubious veil of incomprehension. "Whatever gave you that idea? Irina is a chunky girl, yes, but pregnant, why...how? Surely you don't think—" he cut himself off sharply, his flat round eyes on Pavlik.

"Do you consider me being incapable in that regard, papa?" Said Pavlik.

"Watch what you're saying, son." Warned Anton.

"I'm sorry, but what exactly is it that I said that I should watch?" Pavlik's voice became high, unnaturally glib.

"I can't fathom how I could've missed it." Continued Yulia. "All this time it was right in front of me, and I missed it. You never hid any secrets from me, Pavlusha. You always told me everything..." She glanced at her husband. "Told us everything. Is this how you repay us for all that what we've done for you?" Blotches of red sprung on Yulia's cheeks.

Irka felt behind her and slouched into the sofa that stood across the mahogany stereo console with a color TV on top. This was the end of her stay at Pavlik's house, she was convinced of

it. The fabric of her security ripped in half. In the back of her mind she knew it wasn't sustainable, but she didn't expect it to end so fast. *Let's say, they will kick you out right now. Where will you go, Irina Myshko?* She thought. *In the middle of winter? Pregnant? What will you eat, where will you sleep? Who is the hypocrite now? Whose ass will you smarm this time, to make them take you in, the poor murine girl?*

"Mama, may I ask you to be civil? Please. Really, there is no need for this animosity." Pavlik lowered himself on the armrest next to Irka. He found her hand and squeezed it. Irka held on to him, full of gratitude.

Yulia pulled a chair from under the crocheted tablecloth of the dinner table and unspooled herself into it. "Animosity? *Animosity?* I almost lost you once already, and you're talking to me about animosity?" She hissed to Anton. "Anton, can't you see I'm right? Don't you think by now she would've at least shaken her head 'no', if she *wasn't* pregnant?"

"Of course, Yulechka, of course." Said Anton soothingly, sitting down on a chair next to his wife. Over the last two months he warmed up to Irka, encouraged her to spend more time with his son, contrary to Yulia's wishes. A few actresses visited Pavlik, but those were girls from his theater troupe, colleagues. Irka didn't see Pavlik profess any signs of affection toward any of them, nor did she hear him talk about

girls. Pavlik didn't have a girlfriend and it didn't look like he planned to get one. She secretly attributed it to his amorous tangents toward her, but suddenly it struck her as odd.

"Irina, are you pregnant?" Anton fixed his glasses. He perched on the edge of the chair, fingers interlaced, like an owl ready to smite. A desultory battle reflected on his face. Irka knew he liked her. In his eyes she was Pavlik's first serious infatuation, it proved Pavlik's manhood to him, as he often said. On the other hand, the prospect of it going too far didn't sit well with him, but on some level she thought he was happy. The corners of his lips lifted a smidge.

*I don't understand, thought Irka. Don't you share your wife's sentiments on teenage pregnancy?*

"Why are you asking her? Save yourself some breath. It's clear that she is. I'm worried about another problem right now." Yulia glanced at Pavlik, who froze solid, as if he was preparing to dive into ice-cold water.

Anton backtracked. "Yulechka, I think we're scaring the girl. She's only sixteen. She's rounded out a bit, I must say, on our food, but that doesn't automatically mean that she's pregnant. Are you, Irina?" Anton inclined his head, a leering smile cut across.

"Lift your sweater, please." Said Yulia. Her piercing glare penetrated Irka's skin. She covered her belly automatically,

without thinking, in that protective gesture of a mother, and jolted.

Something moved. Something within her moved. She glanced down, and there was the eaglet, swimming in the clear caul, its beak snapping. *Are you scared?* It asked. *Scared of the viper?*

*I guess I am,* thought Irka.

*Don't be.* Said the eaglet. *I failed to mention it last time we talked. I do like to vary my diet. Snakes make for good dinner when there are no boars. Owls too, if you'd help me pluck them clean off feathers.*

Irka could do nothing but stare. The eaglet moved about. She was sure of it. This wasn't the sensation out of her double-realm, no, this was real. The baby inside her floated. She looked up, her mind blank. Anton still waited for her to react with a gregarious smile. Gradually, the corners of his lips drooped and his face grew arid. "You are pregnant." He said with jarring finality. "Who is the father?"

An etherized pause stretched among them.

Both Anton and Yulia studied their son.

*Are you going to do what I think you're going to do?*

Thought Irka, breath caught in her throat.

Veins pulsed on Pavlik's neck. He passed compressed air between his lips, gripped Irka's hand tighter and said. "It's me. I'm the father of the baby."

Irka hiccupped from surprise. *What are you doing, Pavlik, why?* She stared at him, uncomprehending. Swelling gratitude subverted her past doubts. She wanted to believe it, before it got annihilated by her inner reproach, rejection, and mistrust.

*I think he loves you,* said the eaglet.

*You think so?*

*I do. Only, it's a special kind of love.*

*What do you mean, special?*

"I suppose that's it, isn't it." Said Yulia. "We raised you. We got you into one of the most prestigious Moscow schools, we're paying your way through evening theater courses, we're bending over backwards for Sim to aid in your career, and what do you do? You knock up a sixteen year old. You're eighteen yourself, Pavlusha, a child, no more. You realize what this will do to you, right? This will ruin your life. Premature fatherhood will *ruin* your life. It will, it—" She groped for words, green with disappointment.

"Mama, what do you know about bending over backwards?" Threw Pavlik. "You have not a clue. You never even cared to ask me."

Yulia went pale and whispered. "Don't talk about it like this. Don't."

"Look what you're doing to your mother." Said Anton. His voice dripped bitterness. "How could you? After all we've been through with you, how could you..."

Pavlik stood up. His hands shook slightly. He pushed them in his jeans' pockets. "Let me remind you about something, if I may. Didn't you tell me, papa, that you became a father at fourteen, in your village, on a haystack? Didn't you tell me how your parents pressured you to never see the baby, even when, what was her name-Varya, Vika-when she tried to get in touch with you, you chose to believe it was the vagary of life and you weren't ready to become a father?"

"I hoped you'd have enough decency to keep this private, son, as I asked you to." Anton hands curled in fists.

Pavlik pushed on, his voice sharp, cutting. "Didn't you also tell me how you regretted that decision, years later, how you wanted to find her, but it's as if she vanished from the face of the earth? Nobody knew where she moved? How you wished you've never pushed her away? Doesn't that mean that I have a brother or a sister out there who have no clue about my existence? How does that make you feel?"

Anton's face looked like it was about to explode. "That was right after the war!" He grunted.

"And now it isn't?" Pavlik's voice caught. "Kostya was shot! In the middle of the day! Right in front of our house. He

was shot, papa, like some wild turkey, like a trophy firebird, like a—" He made a strange choking noise, as if holding down a manifold of emotions.

*—like an exotic macaw, thought Irka balefully, too unorthodox for the smutch of grey that Russia is, the vapid repetitive pattern of knolls and valleys, the reedy defiles that separate nodules of cities from desolate taiga, the gullies, the tarmacs, the cubistic nature of people who forgot they were supple once. Anything of color gets squished, lest it threatens the equanimity of the great lazy bear.*

"What's your next move, Pavlusha?" Hissed Yulia. "Is that why you were so adamant Irina stayed? For us to get used to her? Am I right? Is that what you were planning all along? Are you counting on us feeding you, providing a roof over your heads, raising your brat, while you happily skip across the stage, having the time of your lives? Well, no. If that's your plan, I won't have it. You'll get it only through my dead body. Only through my dead body!" She stood now, high-strung, her eyes huge and shining like galvanized tins.

"This is inconceivable, simply inconceivable." Anton shook his head. "After all that I've taught you—"

"I suppose at this point it doesn't matter what I say, does it?" Said Pavlik. "You've made up your minds. May I deduce that



the impending consternation of the baby's arrival has poisoned your ability to think logically?"

Pavlik glanced at Irka.

But Irka was gone. The eaglet moved again. Her eyes opened wide, everything else forgotten. How far along was she, four month? More? *My baby moved*, she thought. *I felt it, I just felt it!* She put both hands on her belly, waiting with abated breath for it to stir again, or to speak, but it was silent. She wanted to share this moment, share with whom? Lyosha? She'd rather quarter him then let him near her. Pavlik? But Pavlik wasn't the father, would he care enough not to spoil it? Irka didn't know.

Time turned viscous to her. Yulia and Anton alternately regurgitated lectures on everything from contraception, to venereal diseases, to unsafe sex, to teenage pregnancy, to raising children, to the cost of raising children, to the complexity and unforgiveness of adult life in general, to their son's potentially thwarted future because of this irresponsible parenthood. It looked to Irka like some dumbshow. The parlor slowly changed to a sandy grove. The owl flapped its wings, hooting. The viper lashed, wound into spiral, sprung out again, uncoiling. The butterfly flitted left and right, dodging rebukes.

And Irka, depleted, shrunk into a mouse.

Before long the mouse was prodded, poked, flopped on its back, pronged teeth and bills and claws. Its stomach was inspected, its belly was felt. Oblivious to everything, the mouse stayed in a delirium of discovery. The miniscule thing inside it lived, it was real. If she'd let it out, it would grow into a majestic bird. An eagle. A predator. It would surpass its mother, canny, fearless, inimitable. It would destroy the viper and the owl and anybody who dared to encroach the mouse. It'd turn them into a puddle of gore, an abattoir, it would guzzle them up, warm vitals and all. This swelled the mouse with motherly pride.

*Let the animal out of you,* sounded somewhere on the periphery of the mouse's mind. Its fur crumpled, its whiskers twitched from exhaustion, its tail hung limp. At last the mouse was kicked aside, into a dark corner on the side of the lair. The butterfly flew up to it.

The merciless bang of the door brought Irka back to surface. Her heart raced. She was sitting on Pavlik's creaky bed draped with a hand-woven carpet. A crystal chandelier too big for the room threw dancing coins of light on the ceiling. A couple jackets hung on a chair pushed against a writing desk. Posters depicting Sim, Kostya, half a dozen Paradise Birds placards were tacked to the diamond-patterned wallpaper above. A backpack lay carelessly on the Turkish rag, red-and-brown, with

elaborate flower patterns. Irka has been in this room before, barely large enough to turn around between the bed, the desk, and the wardrobe, but it never felt this intimate. She sensed liquid warmth of excitement build up in her lower belly. It ached, it expanded.

*Well, Irina Myshko, aren't you horny?* Thought Irka. How long has it been since...since when? With heavy heart she realized she'd never made love to anyone of her own free will. She was either taken, or...or what? There was no *or*. She was forcefully fucked, period. She suddenly wanted to do it, right here, right now, to know what it must feel like.

Pavlik stood next to her, she could smell him. The pollen, bitter flower dust redolent with a note of citrus. A wave of dark hair fell across his forehead, his eyes grim in the shadow. "I told them to piss off and leave us alone." He said. "I don't know about you, but I'm done for. And also told them I don't want you sleeping in the kitchen anymore. So, if you want, you can take my bed. I'll sleep on the floor."

He pulled the turtleneck over his head and dropped it on the rag. Next went the muscle shirt, jeans, and socks. Left in his underwear, starkly white in the light of the chandelier, he looked around in search of something. Irka's eyes traversed his every ridge and hollow, milky from lack of sun in the winter,

but not deathly pale, no. It was ambrosial. Irka became dimly aware of the fact that she wanted to lick it, and lost control.

Her hands moved on their own accord. While Pavlik was unrolling her mattress next to the bed, while he unfolded a plaid wooly blanket with tassels on it, Irka stripped. It took her less than a minute. She loved him, she wanted him, she shook with anticipation. Her head reclined on the pillow, she offered her body in the easiest position she knew, spread-eagled faceup with legs spread wide apart.

Pavlik straightened and a strange sound escaped him. "Yeek." He gasped, gawking between her thighs, then up at her face.

Irka's heart hammered, her pelvis thrummed, her every nerve ending roasted over fire. She gathered the sheets into fists, willing herself not to moan.

Pavlik gazed at her for a few seconds, transfixed, then croaked. "Irina, what's this for? What are you doing?"

*I want you to have me. Take me.* Thought Irka. *I love you.* She smiled and opened her arms.

Like in a trance, Pavlik turned off the light, then picked up the blanket he laid so carefully over the mattress a minute ago and covered Irina with it. His hands froze midway. He stared at her breasts, at the bruises on them, then pulled it all the way to her chin.

Irka sat up, bewildered. The blanket slipped off her naked shape. *Why wouldn't you take me?* She thought. *You don't want me? Am I too fat? Are you afraid to hurt the baby? Do the bruises make me ugly?*

She reached for the pad to write her question, but Pavlik stopped her. He gave her a wan smile and sat on the edge. Old rusty mattress springs creaked. His finger passed over her breasts, touching them softly.

"You have beautiful nipples, you know that?" He said.  
"They're so large and velvety."

*Are you just shy?* Thought Irka. *Wait, are you a virgin?*  
*Don't worry, I'll remedy that.* She reached for the bulge under the cotton of his briefs, and froze. It was limp. Pavlik stiffened, then slowly relaxed, letting her hold it through the fabric. "I...I'd prefer it if you didn't touch it."

Irka jerked her hand back.

"It's not what you think it is, you're lovely, you really are. It's just that...only Kostya was allowed to touch it." He hung his head.

Irka's ears rung. She thought she heard wrong. Her feet got cold, then her belly, then her heart. Everything within her stilled. *Kostya? What?* She thought. *Did you say, Kostya?* The realization downed on her, chilled her to the bone, made her brittle. *How could I be so blind?* She thought.

Pavlik quietly talked to his hands. "I'm gay. Kostya and I, we were...together." He swallowed hard. "My parents don't know. Please don't tell them, it'll kill them. Promise me you won't."

Irka didn't know how she did it, but she nodded. Her world shattered. When Pavlik leaned on her, she wrapped him in the blanket and held his head in her lap until he fell asleep and she herself dozed off when cold morning light spilled into the room, coloring it dusty blue, the ghost shade of the macaw.

## Chapter 14. The Ravens Pay A Visit

The cawing of crows woke Irka with a start. She was cold and stiff. The alarm clock on the desk showed five minutes after six in the morning. Long shadows traced Pavlik's face. He snored lightly. It took Irka ten minutes to slide out from under him. Her skin erupted in goosebumps. She balanced on one leg, barefoot, pulled on her panties, trousers, donned the bra and the sweater. Dazed, she hovered over Pavlik. He would never be hers. All this kindness, all this admirable self-restraint was nothing more but a thin veneer of social appropriateness. Pavlik didn't love girls, Pavlik loved boys. The concept didn't fit in Irka's mind. Her life was saturated with coercive misogynistic fuckery. She hasn't come across gays before, it simply hasn't happened.

Or has it?

She thought back to interactions between Pavlik and Kostya, Sim, the actors. Kostya's fits, emotional and over-the-top, Pavlik's immediate concern, them always spending time together, rehearsing together. Sim's words rung in her head. *There is only love, nothing else. I love you, you love me. When there is love, there is no pride, no anger, you simply listen to what I say,*

*and you speak to me with your heart.* Did he mean love in the pure sense of the word, or was there an intimation to it? A hidden message? Was it a sanctimonious call for unanimous buggery? And if you didn't open up your ass to the entrance of engorged genius, were you jettisoned from the troupe like an interloper? Maybe Kostya wasn't a blowhard after all, maybe he simply didn't want to screw the director? Or didn't want the director to screw others? Sim's theater was notoriously portrayed in the media as the homosexual heaven. Did that mean that Sim was gay? It wasn't a publicity stunt, was it?

Irka frowned, took out her notepad and shook Pavlik awake.

"Lemme alone." He mumbled.

Irka shook him again.

"Kostya, stop. What do you want?" Pavlik covered his head with the blanket and turned away.

Irka insisted. It was her turn to ask questions.

"What? What time is it?" Pavlik sat up, rubbing his face.

Irka pointed to the clock, then to her notepad. "Why did you say you were the father of my child?"

"Oh. This." Pavlik squinted at her writing, trying to make out the words in the dim light. "Do we have to talk now? I'd like to sleep in, if I may. It's Sunday and I don't have to be anywhere."



Irka brandished the notepad, her lips pressed tight. *Good for you, she thought, but I can't sleep. I need to know. I already guessed the answer, but I need to hear it from you.*

"All right, all right." Pavlik yawned, covered his mouth. "Look, it's simple. You saved my life. I wanted to return the favor." He had an expression of a man who was done pissing and wanted to shake, tuck in, and go back to sleep.

Irka shook her head. She could tell he was lying, or, rather, not saying the whole truth. Her fervor acquired a smidge of ambiguity overnight. She loved Pavlik with abandon of the first adolescent love, but his confession forked something into her spine, a nagging sense of betrayal. He lost his sacrosanct status. A butterfly turned pest. She had to cut Pavlik adrift before he ate her heart. It was better to end it at once, amputate it with a scimitar, nice and clean, bleed it out, and be done with it.

She wrote the next line. "Not true. That's not the real reason."

Pavlik sighed, deflated. "No, it's not. You're right. Very acute. I can't hide anything from you, can I?" He looked beaten, almost fey. "Is that what you want, my repentance?"

A crow squalled an ugly cry, another answered.

Irka waited patiently, immobile.

"Okay. I guess I owe you the truth. It's papa." Said Pavlik quietly, glancing at the door. "I did it for papa. It was the perfect opportunity for me to prove his suspicions as pointless. Last year, after my first premiere, he pulled me aside, flung a finger at my makeup and asked me if I was gay, because, you know, no girlfriend, no interest in girls whatsoever, that kind of stuff. Tanechka came over to hangout once in a while, sometimes with Raisa and Ida. It didn't escape him, of course. The coldness between us, simple friendship, nothing romantic. I spent most of my free time with Kostya. Mama bought into the whole boy friendship as standard pass into manhood idea, but papa was suspicious. Plus, there is Sim's reputation to take into account. So, anyway...I wiggled out somehow, said I'm an old-fashioned guy, saving myself for the one, you know. He chuckled at this. I think he liked it. Your pregnancy...it secured his belief in-", he broke.

Irka's face was a havoc. She balked. *Here we go, Irina Myshko*, she thought. *You got used again. What is wrong with you? You just never learn, do you?*

"I'm sorry. I owe you an apology. I really *am* sorry. Please, I know what I did is...I should've asked you first. Oh, I'm such an idiot." He took her hands.

Yesterday it would've sent Irka's heart aflutter. Now his touch pained her. She sat motionless. *I'm just a tool for you to*

*solve your problems, I get it. I'm used to it, no worries. Have been a tool all my life.* She freed her hands and wrote. "Why?"

"Why what?" Pavlik's face was a picture of pallor.

"Why didn't you tell him that you're gay?"

"Why didn't you tell me who the father of your baby was two months ago, when I asked you the first time?"

*Because it wasn't yours to know,* thought Irka. But outwardly, she shrugged.

"See, we all have our secrets." Said Pavlik with triumph.

"Does Sim know?"

"What, about me and Kostya?" Pavlik paused. "No, no, he doesn't." He looked uncomfortable.

Irka fought the urge to reach out. "I'm sorry." She wrote. "About what happened to you."

It took Pavlik a moment. "Ah, that. Well. It's in the past. What can you do, it is what it is. To be honest with you, you puzzled me at first. I was like, catfish? Took me a moment to stifle myself and let you continue with your story, the way you wanted to tell it. I guess nobody really listened to you before, did they?"

Irka shook her head.

"In a way, it made it easier for me to share mine." He paused, eyes glassy. "Eels. They really did look like eels, they—"

Irka stuck the notepad under his nose. "You don't love me." Her hand shook, holding it.

"What?" He looked startled. "Oh...of course I do. I do love you. Albeit not in the sense of, you know, how a man loves a woman. You're more like a friend to me, a very dear friend, like a...sister." He waited for a second, before asking her. "Do you love me?"

"Yes." Was all Irka could write. Chagrin martyred her. Men were, after all, the same, gay or straight, it didn't matter. She deluded herself that she found the one, the perfect companion for the perfect future together. She was mistaken. *It's part of growing up, isn't it, she thought, but fuck, it hurts, it goddamn hurts! I need to root it out of my system, this desire to dream. Once more, it didn't do me any good, did it? Once again, a man made a decision without asking me first, without considering my feelings. I'm tired of it, tired!*

"What if I don't want you to be the father of my baby?" She wrote in large sprawling letters. It was hard to write, harder still to turn the page toward Pavlik.

He flinched. "I thought...I assumed..."

*You assumed? Irka stood up. You had the effrontery to assume I'm nothing but a victim, a bimbo, a failure? A lab mouse for your charity practice? Is that it? Is that what you assumed?* She wanted to scream, her speech handicap made her furious. She

stuffed the notepad into her backpack and slung it over the shoulder.

"Irina, please, don't go."

Irka placed her hand on the doorknob. The corners of her eyes itched. She gulped, to force the tears down. *Maybe it's for the best your parents found out, she thought, maybe it's not my place to be here, in this shiny mouse cage. Maybe I should go home, back to where I belong, in a shithole.* As much as she despised her mother, Marina Somina was real. Yes, she was an alcoholic, yes, she swore and beat her, but it was the truth. Irka was sick of Yulia's slithering pretense, of Anton's pompous smarts, and now of Pavlik's slyness. She couldn't trust anyone in her life, could she? *No, thought Irka, I can only trust myself, trust in my own ass. If I won't do shit, nobody would do shit, there isn't any help coming from anywhere any time soon, not from some dude sitting in the clouds, not some hypothetical guardian angels, nor Lenin or Stalin or any of those government poppets. Forget it. I don't need anyone's intercession, I'll be fine on my own.* Irka wanted to shout an obscenity, to slap Pavlik with a juicy word. This was the right moment, only her tongue wouldn't move.

She grunted.

Before Pavlik could stop her, she yanked the door open, crashed through the parlor past his sleeping parents, stepped

into Yulia's scuffed boots she inherited for good housekeeping, grabbed her hand-me-down coat, busted the door outward, slammed it behind her, skidded down the stairs and ran out onto fresh crunching snow.

Frost slapped her in the face. It must've been at least fifteen degrees Celsius below zero.

In the sidewalk gutter a pack of crows nibbled on a cat ran over by a car, frozen stiff, its eyes gone, its raggle-taggle belly open. They burst into the sky, cawing madly. Irka gagged, turned away, and stomped across the road to the parking lot. Steam puffed out of her nostrils, nose hairs glued together when she inhaled. Her ears ached from the cold. Irka didn't care. All she wanted to was to get away from that stuffy lair, to breathe, to think, to decide what to do next.

The crows screeched in displeasure. A dozen or so, they hopped after Irka, goading. One of them, the biggest and blackest, threshed its wings, flew up and swooped so close to Irka's face, another inch and its claws would've scratched her. Irka windmilled arms, shooing it. The crow retreated, perched on a branch of a denuded elm, its beak open. Two beady eyes studied Irka; it cackled, jeered at her. Irka's skin crawled. It wasn't a crow, she realized, it was a raven. All of them were. Their feathers had that characteristic wet sheen, their bills powerful, curved for easy carnage. They didn't caw, but croaked

in short hoarse bursts. The black shifting mass of them scrummed for the cat. Beaks dug into the carrion, ripping out strips of meat.

Irka tottered on the edge of precognition. It happened before, was it going to happen again? The horseflies, the vultures, and now the ravens? *You're just paranoid, stop it.* She thought. But she couldn't, wouldn't. She heard the familiar thrum in the air, and turned around with a wild heart.

Behind the trellis of the parking lot fence, two meters away, the squat shape of the snowblower, blue head, orange abdomen, scraped the pavement with a concave mandible. Warning lights blinked on its crown. Blotches of slush riveted the already lofty slope of the snowbank. The ground shuddered and hummed. Irka drew air. *It's nothing*, she thought, *nothing*.

Morning light broke over the rooftops, a jagged line of pink against steely sky. New snow fell during the night, and Irka made tracks in it, the first to disturb it. She stepped at right angles, a foot pressed into the nook of another, making a pattern like that from a tire of a gigantic truck. After a while she stopped, kneeling. She looked at the snow, at how peaceful it seemed, smooth and white. *Why can't my life be like this?* She thought. *Why does it always have to turn upside down just when I glimpse a shred of happiness? Why couldn't I get lucky, for once?*

Crackling footfalls reached her ears.

Irka jolted, leapt between snowbound red Zhiguli and beige Moskvich, peeked out. A dozen guys in dark coats and caps poured out of Pavlik's entranceway, slapping each other and gagging like ravens. Black ravens. For a moment Irka thought one of them looked like Roma, but he couldn't be. Roma was a horsefly. These ones were ravens. They rounded the building and disappeared.

*What the hell were they doing here, at seven in the morning? And how come I didn't them enter, only exit? Do they live here?* Thought Irka. She waited, uncertain what to do next. Her hands turned numb from cold, her head filled with ice. She forgot the hat and the mittens.

The entrance door opened again. An elderly woman walked out with a piebald cocker spaniel. It sniffed the air and barked at Irka, its ears flapping.

"Quiet, Nika, quiet!" The woman yanked on the leash. The spaniel yelped.

Irka quickly crossed the road and ran inside, into the warmth, stomping off the snow. Her ears and fingers burned. Voices echoed up the stairway. A young mother with a little girl bundled up to the nose passed by. Two middle-aged women, both in greasy aprons, quarreled on the landing. A door opened several floors above and banged shut. Irka smelled cabbage soup and piss. She pressed hands to her ears, warming them. Nothing



looked out of the ordinary. She stole up the stairs to the first landing, peering around. What did they want here? Could it be a coincidence? Maybe they were just similar looking guys. She didn't get a chance to see their faces, did she? Suddenly Lyosha's bulk swam up in front of her, and she darted up, running like a scared mouse, afraid he would materialize out of thin air and snatch at her ankles.

She heaved by Pavlik's door, rattling keys in nerveless fingers, having a hard time inserting them. She got too comfortable, too lazy. She dared to forget about the dangers of the street. They, on the other hand, didn't. They were waiting for her, their lambent eyes awash with bale, their jaws adrip, their shoddy withers trembling with hunger. She'd have to stay here for as long as Yulia and Anton would allow. What choice did she have? To raise her baby with an alcoholic catfish? An abusive boar? An ignorant cockroach, herring, hedgehog? An old feeble goat? There was no place for her there, no life. Nor did she have any other place to go. Sleeping in the theater was out of the question.

A raven croaked outside.

*It's decided, then,* thought Irka, *I'm staying.* She crept in.

## Chapter 15. The House Of Donkeys

Irka peeled off the coat, unnerved by breakfast smells and noises. Sizzling kielbasa in the skillet, scraping forks, running water, morning news on portable TV. Her stormy departure must have woken either Yulia or Anton, or both of them, and she was going to pay a price for that. They liked to sleep in on Sundays. She pulled off the boots, glanced in the mirror, smoothed her overgrown bangs, and put on a smile. No matter what happened, her goal was to make sure she didn't get kicked out. Irina Myshko had to become indispensable to Baboch household. She took a deep breath, another, and walked in the kitchen.

The cuckoo clock showed a quarter to eight. A pomaded newscaster rattled about something on the screen. Below it, in the sallow circle of light, Anton and Yulia hunched over the table in their daily humdrum poise, the owl and the viper.

*So Pavlik went back to sleep? Thought Irka. Great. Gay my tits. Pavel Baboch, you're the paradigm of manhood.* She sighed. *I hate it how guys can do this, glaze over any occurrence in their lives, trivial, significant, doesn't matter. They just lie down and fall asleep with such casualty, like nothing happened,*

*while we girls scramble to collect the detritus of what's left of us.*

Anton read the newspaper Kommersant with a big portrait of Yeltsin on the front, an empty plate and a cup of Turkish coffee in front of him. Yulia chewed, a fork in one hand, 7 Days in another, the glossy magazine filled with news about Russian pop stars and television personalities, pompous text underneath pictures of their newly erected monolithic dachas, new cars, new teeth, or new bodies achieved though new secret diets.

*I'd rather be dipped in shit than read this kitschy ersatz toilet paper,* thought Irka, a grin on her countenance. *Never mind, you couldn't even wipe your ass with it, it would reach into your brain through your guts like a hand of a dauber and stain it with suppurated sod, to atrophy your thinking, to dull your acumen. Just for fun. Just to confirm to you that you've been born a dum dum, you'll die a dum dum, and there is nothing you can do about it. I'd rather read Solzhenitsyn, In the First Circle, if I could afford it. Or I'd reread The Master and Margarita for the umpteenth time than poach in this yellow crap.*

Irka stood in the bubble of invisible tension. She was deliberately being unnoticed, after yesterday's explosion of passions over her pregnancy.

After a minute of this, Anton peered at Irka over his glasses and went back to reading without a word. Yulia raised a

brow and watched as Irka strapped on the apron, turned on the water, lathered the sponge and began washing the dishes. She did the cutlery, the plates, the oily pot from yesterday's borsht, and was scrubbing the skillet, when Yulia's hand stopped her cold.

"We need to go see a gynecologist, you and I." She said, her voice acidic solvent. "To make sure the baby is healthy, make sure *you're* healthy. You're such a young mother, Irina. It can be both a good thing and a bad thing. We don't want you to have any complications at childbirth. Right?" She smiled pleasantly, her eyes narrow as slits.

Irka froze, hands covered in suds. *It's not me you're worried about*, she thought. *You're worried about the identity of the father. I bet you want me to do some tests to make sure Pavlik did indeed inseminate me, not some crook off the street. You want to make sure I won't profane your family's dignity. Right?* Irka mocked her inwardly. Still, her chest filled with lead, her stomach felt heavy. Was it possible to find out who the father was? Was there a test for that? Irka continued scraping the already clean skillet.

"How are you feeling?" Asked Yulia. "You feeling all right? You scared us. We thought maybe you two had a fight."

Irka shrugged, thinking, *like you care*.

"We would appreciate it if in the future, no matter the cause, you would be more considerate of other people. Slamming the door like that, at six in the morning? Unacceptable. You can't do that, Irina. It does not belong to negotiation. It is our house, after all."

Irka's hand stopped.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

*No, thought Irka, I'm mute, which to people automatically means I'm retarded. My own family went as far as nicknaming me Irkadura because they think I'm an idiot.*

"Well, I want you to be on your best behavior today, please. Simeon is coming in a couple hours. When he wakes up. He's taking Pavlusha out. And you, of course."

It was Irka's turn to raise a brow. *What?*

"The big news." Said Yulia like it was supposed to be obvious. "Pavlusha becoming a father. It's very nice of him to celebrate with you, don't you think? Here." She took her snake-leather handbag from the chair, unclasped the wallet and pulled out a wad of rubles. "I need you to get some caviar and—" she unfolded a piece of paper. "I made you a list. We didn't expect him to back to soon, but you know how important it is to make an impression. For Pavlusha's career. And we're out of practically everything after yesterday's dinner. Do you mind?" She smiled

again, which gave her already triangular face a spurious quality.

Anton put the coffee cup down on the saucer with a clink. His spherical eyes latched on Irka.

Irka snatched the paper and the money out of Yulia's hands. *You told him? She thought. Without asking me? Did you at least ask Pavlik? Does he know you told him? That's just lovely.*

She turned back to the sink, toweled off the dishes, stacked them in the cupboards, snatched a couple oilcloth bags off the hook by the cupboard, dressed and raced outside.

The sun failed to break through the pall of haze. Gravid clouds pressed on the cityscape like tangles of graying hair. Air pealed with car honks, children's cries, dog's barks, and awful singing of the alcoholic from the first floor, in a drab jacket over soiled shirt, the deadbeat horse Irka saw from time to time since their first encounter when she was looking for Pavlik's apartment.

"Morning, daughter! Help me! Help me!" He stumbled off the bench, clearly squiffed, took a step, and collapsed in the snow.

Irka ignored him. Her eyes went skittish, glued to the curb. Some kind of rabid terror enveloped her. The dead cat was gone. Either somebody removed it, or the ravens managed to drag it off, or it wasn't there to begin with. Neither were the ravens, not a single one. Instead of relief, fright whammed into

Irka. The hackles on her neck stood up. Dozens of omniscient eyes crawled up her back. She lifted her head.

Five stories high, abreast the roof cornice, sat a muster of ravens. Not a dozen, not two dozen, but over fifty of them. Their wings touched, their feathers ruffled slightly on the breeze. Their beady little eyes were pure wangle. They planned mischief, dark mischief, the reward for which was death.

*We're watching you*, they seemed to say.

Irka's heart leapt up her throat. *It's a portent of doom*, she thought. *That, or I lost the last of my marbles*. Tasting copper, she hurried across the road, along the boulevard cleared off the snow, grooves of salty slush already formed anew from cars tugging to and fro. In ten minutes she reached the grocery store tucked deep in the warren of Khrushchevkas, a lackluster one-story cement slab with letters UNIVERSAM along the front, paper appliques of bread and milk and meat plastered over slatted windows. Irka yanked the door open.

The rumpus of shoppers filled her ears, the yelping and the yipping and the yapping. She edged along the soggy strip of cardboard placed on the floor to retain the dirt but instead creating a pulpy mash. A corpulent matron busted toward exit with two bulging grocery bags. She nearly knocked Irka off her feet, and with—"watch where you're going, young lady,"—battered into the snow.

*I'd rather not, thought Irka, because this place looks like a fucking mink farm.*

It did. It milled with lumps of fur. Fur coats, fur hats; brown fur, fake fur, matted fur, inverted fur. Minks, colonies of minks swarmed artless rows of shelves filled with packages and jars, endless 3-liter jars with everything from pickles to soaked apples to birch juice. The minks grabbed their swag, parted into rills and trickled by four cashier ladies each glaring from behind a dais like a bobcat on the prowl. *You ladies should write this on your foreheads, as a warning for customers, thought Irka. "Foist me your cabbage the wrong way, tell me the wrong word, and I'll snuff you out on the spot."*

She snatched a basket. It took her twenty minutes to fill it. A tiny jar of sturgeon caviar, a loaf of dark bread, a stick of butter, a one-liter packet of milk, one of kefir, a small jar of pickles, a package of sour cream, two of quark, a tin of sprats, smoked scad, whole, wrapped in butcher paper, a hank of cheese, and a log of bologna.

Irka's arms shook from the load. She placed the basket on the floor and slipped a package Zemlyanichnoe shortbread cookies in her coat. Not a mink noticed. Irka stood in line for another fifteen minutes and at last, a heavy oilcloth bag in each hand, she stumbled out.



Irka reached the entranceway just as a pearly Mercedes labored into the parking lot. She deliberately didn't look up at the roof but stared at the car instead. It parked. The driver door opened. A familiar blimp of scarves and perfume filed out. Simeon Kotik himself, a bouquet of red carnations in one hand, a fancy grocery bag in another.

*What is it with artists and Mercedes cars?* Irka thought.

"Irina!" He strode to her. "My genius silent child. So good to run into you. Grocery shopping?"

*No, I'm just out for a walk with two heavy bags to build up muscle,* thought Irka and nodded.

"Going up?"

Irka nodded again. *Where else would I be going? Down?*

A raven croaked above.

"That scoundrel let you go alone? To haul a hundred kilograms? In this freezing weather? Pregnant?"

A dozen wings lapsed into a wild susurrus. Irka refused to look up. Her eyes hurt from staring at Sim.

He shook his head. "That's a bad boy. Bad boy. I'll have a talk with him." He leaned closer. Irka could smell his expensive perfume, something sweet and extravagant. "Why didn't you tell me yesterday? That you're pregnant? That's not good, not good at all. But!" He raised a finger together with carnations.

"Remember what I told you. Do you remember? I said I will only

tell you once. Go on. I'm listening." He stood there, puffs of warm air escaping his nostrils, and Irka goggled at him, bamboozled.

*I can't talk, she thought, have you forgotten?*

"You don't need to talk to communicate, remember that. This is what I said." Sim continued. "There are butterflies that fly to the light and burn, and there are butterflies that give the light, the light that we dissolve inside us. Pavlik is such a butterfly. There is an enchanted beginning in you, I felt it. But! Make it more than a butterfly. Make it stronger. Make it a bird, my child, a strong proud bird."

Irka gawked. *Can you see right through me or something?* The eaglet has been quiet lately, not moving, not talking.

"From my heart to yours, congratulations on creating a new life." He offered Irka the flowers.

She gave him a wan smile. *Do you really mean this, Sim, or are you offering me your covert condolences?*

"Oh. Sorry about that. Allow me." He took the bags from her unbending fingers, and Irka stuffed her face into carnations, sniffing their nonexistent smell.

"I thought we should make it a special outing, to commemorate the occasion," puffed Sim. "How would you like to go to The House of Actors? Wild boar brisket? Steamed catfish? Ah?

Taste exquisite food fit for actors? My treat." Delight stole over his face. He'd look like a jocund seal, if he had whiskers.

Breath caught in Irka's throat. *Why*, she thought, *Yulia wasn't lying. Boar brisket sounds especially appetizing. Better than me being fed alive to ravens.* She thought the eaglet moved. *I'd love to go. It just so happens that apart from being taken out to the hospital in an ambulance, I haven't been to a fancy restaurant before. This would be a welcome change.*

"In the car, my child." Sim boomed. "I'll go fetch that prig and chastise him for you." He pointed the key fob. The Mercedes headlights flashed.

Irka opened the door and sunk into leather. It was warm inside, it smelled of the same perfume. She sat, enthralled, unsure about Sim's motives. Why was he taking them out? Was it his proclivity to throw wealth in people's faces? Pompous lavishness so intrinsic to all artists? Or was it genuine care? Or was he going to give them a lecture of a lifetime?

*Eaglet?* She thought.

No answer.

*Are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong?*

A raven croaked. Irka's heart knocked against her chest in a mad jig. She swirled around, startled. She couldn't see a single raven, only Pavlik, decked out in a fine sheepskin coat and a cap, Sim behind him.

Pavlik got in. "Hey." He said. "Listen. Sorry I fell back asleep. I didn't know mama asked you to—"

"Liar." Pontificated Sim. The car wobbled as he sat. The engine purred to life. "Do not expect me to pander your lies. I spoke with your mother." The tires crunched on the snow, and they rolled out onto the boulevard that led to the sleepy bowels of Moscow.

"Sim, honestly, I respect you, and I love you from the bottom of my heart, but your—" Began Pavlik.

"I don't want to hear it." Sim raised a hand. "I don't want to hear it!" He shouted. His voice turned prissy and exultant at the same time. "I'm not interested in your pitiful adolescent antagonism! Enough! I've had enough of this! Oh, but it is my fault. I've been greedy, greedy for talent, and now this is my punishment. Vultures!"—Irka nearly jumped—"Vermin! Perfidious cocksuckers with no balls!"

Both Irka and Pavlik winced, glancing at each other.

Irka scanned the sky for birds. A few pigeons sat on the sidewalks they passed, but no crows. No ravens.

Sim was in a roll. With one hand on the wheel, his attention dangerously ascent from the road, with another he painted pictures in the air. "They violated my theater! They desecrated it, my sanctuary of art! They tore my Kostya, tore him, right out of my heart."

Irka was surprised to see that Sim was bawling. Tears streamed down his face.

"Sim—" Pavlik tried again.

"Silence! I gave you no permission to talk. Oh, I'm bleeding. Can't you see? They left me bleeding over Kostya. And now you!" He suddenly yelled.

Pavlik found Irka's hand, she didn't take it away, distracted. They rolled out into a wide avenue and merged with traffic.

"Where were your minds, stuck up your sweet asses? What were you two thinking? A baby? What baby? You're both nestlings, chicks, look at you! Don't expect commiseration from me. We will have a talk about this."

"I should've thought this was coming." Mumbled Pavlik.

Irka fought to stay present. A sense of impending doom enveloped her. She tried to shake it off and couldn't.

They turned into a narrow alley girded with old peeling mansions on either side, bottom floors given over to hair salons, restaurants, cafes, and a curtain store, among other places. Distant shouts echoed ahead. Sim turned again, into a lane behind a gaudy egg-tone colored edifice with a grocery store on the first floor, and stopped. They were blocked by a moving rally. Led by a stalwart man in a black beret and a black military looking uniform, a megaphone to his mouth, a throng of

dour men marched with red pennants aloft, red, a white swastika circled in the middle.

"What's this now?" Said Sim.

*Ravens*, thought Irka. *Fascists. The slag of Russian youth.* She shuddered, pierced by consternation. The shouts mixed with cackling croaks. There were ravens now, they came, they circled above in hysterical figure eights.

The men swooped past them. A gangly kid lowered his face by Pavlik's window, grinned, and slapped it. Another sat astride the flag shaft and rode it like a horse, hooting. He flipped a finger, shouted in Sim's face, spit on the car. His jeering was picked up, and Irka heard it now.

"Homos out of Russia! Homos out of Russia!"

"What is this?" Sim's face drained color. "What have we come to?"

"They must've recognized us." Said Pavlik.

"No! They did not recognize us." Sim shook. "How can they? They can't recognize themselves! I feel sorry for these men. They have no love left in their hearts. None. They're black with hate, black. Oh, I need a drink."

The lane cleared. A few shouts reached from behind, and then the rally disappeared. Silent, pallid, Sim pulled up to the curb, swiveled his Mercedes between a Lada and a BMW, and got out without a word. Pavlik held the door open, waiting for Irka.

It took her a minute to follow. Pins and needles shot up her legs. She shuddered. Her eyes trailed up seven stories, narrow windows, a stone knight on a cornice of a gothic apartment building on Arbat lane, and then she froze. Her gaze met a stare. An avian stare. A couple black birds perched on the lip of the roof. Irka's heart drummed.

"You okay?" Asked Pavlik.

Irka nodded, her eyes on the ravens. *Don't you think about crapping on me. I'll find a way to break your necks, if you do it, you hear me?*

The birds took off.

Sim urged them along, through oak doors, to the sixth floor awash with bohemian ambiance revered by famous actors, poets, and theatergoers. Irka paid no attention to décor. She went through the pantomime of extreme need and ran to the restroom, an obscure cabinet at the end of a twisted corridor. She splashed her face with cold water five times in a row. It felt good. It felt sane. She wasn't going crazy, was she?

It took Irka a few minutes to meander in and out of three dinners halls to find Sim and Pavlik in the smallest of them, bent over a round table in a corner by an old piano, deep in a heated argument, their faces tense, their voices harsh yet controlled. The red-gold wallpaper, the chandeliers, the rouge velvet of the chairs gave the place an aura of a theater

auditorium. There were only a dozen tables, six by the windows and six by the wall hung with actor portraits. A well-dressed middle-aged couple, not anyone she recognized, sat at the table by the door. Directly across lolled a party of young men in expensive suits. They laughed loudly, pugnacious, rich, and arrogant. The waitress brought a carafe of vodka. One of the men ululated an expletive and attempted to snatch her ass, roaring like a donkey when she twisted out of his grasp. He was drunk, they all were.

*Actors celebrating a premiere? Wondered Irka. Or donkeys partaking in degradation? I'd serve these gluts their own livers, just to see them goil.*

She walked over to the table by the piano, pulled out a chair and sat, expecting Pavlik and Sim to continue. They fell silent. Pavlik's face grew long, his eyes dull.

"Irina! You're alive, my child!" Boasted Sim with a sophomoric smile. "We thought you made out with the chef and left us here, all alone, deprived of your quiet charm." He kissed her hand.

Irka blushed from surprise.

Sim picked up the menu, as if hiding behind it. "Choose your dishes, children. We've got lots to cover today, with Pavlik being my new star for Paradise Birds." He squeezed



Pavlik's shoulder. His touch was more than friendly, it had something intimate in it.

Pavlik smiled shyly. He didn't wince, didn't pull back. On the contrary, he leaned toward it. It was a smidge of a movement, but Irka caught it.

*I can't believe it.* She thought, aghast. *Are you sleeping with him? Did you sleep with him to get the role?* It was too much. Too much too fast. Irka didn't want to think about any of these things right now, not Sim, not Pavlik, nor the ravens. Her stomach rumbled. Angry, ravenously hungry, she attacked the menu. Every dish name drew saliva. Irka swallowed. Her mind succumbed to the computations of how much food she could eat at once. She tuned out the rest.

Somewhere at the far end of a gold-red tunnel, a waiter surfaced, a nervous young man embellished with pimples, a little notepad and a pen in his nervous hands. He was inquiring about their choices. Sim asked for steamed salmon with Siberian caviar, Pavlik ordered a champignon cream-soup, Irka pointed her finger to the wild boar brisket.

*Eaglet? This is for you.* She thought. *Eaglet?*

No answer.

*Listen, if I did something wrong, I won't know what it is unless you tell me.*

*You promised something and you forgot.* Said the eaglet.

*You're there! You're alive! I thought maybe you left me.*

*What is it? What did I forget?* Thought Irka.

*It's not time for me to leave yet. Another five months.*

Said the eaglet thoughtfully.

*What did I forget?* Thought Irka.

*You promised to slaughter a whole boar for me, but I only got a taste of its balls, and now you want to feed me some other pig's brisket.* The eagle pouted.

*Oh. You're right. I'm sorry. I was going to—*

*You weren't. You weren't going to. You found a safe place and you forgot.* Spanned the eaglet.

Irka had nothing to retort with. Her ears burned from shame. She didn't teach Lyosha a lesson, she flaked out.

The food arrived. Irka bit into it with such force, her teeth clicked. She ate all of it, prodded Sim to order more, and ate the second portion, until her stomach protested and she belched.

Pavlik smirked, his first smile since morning.

Sim sipped a Bloody Mary, swirling it around the glass. Suddenly he leaned over the table and said hotly, "Pavlik's got a gorgeous cock, doesn't he, Irina?"

Baffled, Pavlik whispered, "Sim!"

Irka's mouth dropped open. *You do sleep together*, she thought. Her stomach dropped like a stone to the floor. Both

thoroughly chewed hog briskets rose dangerously close to her throat.

"Don't look at me like you don't know." He said, a dry gale of alcohol on his breath. "Pregnant! At sixteen! Oh, the sickness of love. You must love him very much. Is it him who you love, Irina, or is it his cock?" Sim's eyes were shiny, unfocused.

*How many Bloody Maries have you had?* Thought Irka.

Pavlik sat motionless, a horrified expression on his face. "Sim." He pleaded. "You promised."

"You think she's blind? She's mute, but that doesn't mean she's weak in the head. On the contrary."

"I didn't—"

"Shhh! You're not giving Irina enough credit. She's more perceptive than you and I are together. Acute perception, the virtue I love in an actor." He snapped fingers. "Waiter! Here. Another one of these. Move your pussy, darling. Move it!"

Sim was getting tipsy.

The waiter ran up to their table, bowed, and was off with the empty glass, only to resurface minutes later with the new cocktail.

Sim downed it in one gulp and slammed a fist on the table.

Irka watched him in a trance. *So, Pavlik slept with Kostya, and he slept with Sim? Did Kostya know? I wonder. Does Sim know? Or am I imagining things? But the way he touched him, the way—*

"Sim, please. No more." Pavlik placed a hand on his arm.

Sim picked it up, kissed it with a loud smooch. "To the future father, future mother." He raised the glass, unaware that it was empty. "Waiter!" He hollered.

Irka sensed Pavlik looking at her, but didn't turn.

"What's your last name again, Irina?" Sim belched.

"Myshko." Said Pavlik.

"Myshko? What kind of a name is that?" Sim slapped on the table so hard, the plates rattled. His heavy shape shifted and he caught himself in time by sticking out a foot, for balance. "Myshko is no name for stage. Primitive, fit for plebs. Get married. Change it to Baboch. Much more spectacular sounding. Ladies and gentlemen, I give to you, Pavel and Irina Baboch! Why, I ought to write a new play just for you two." He roared at his own joke.

Pavlik held on to his face.

*Wallop the piss out of me, why don't you. You're jealous! Realized Irka. You're hurt and jealous, drinking yourself stupid like the last buzzard, like a sorry wailer, like a—*

"Sim, that's enough. Let's go." Pavlik said in a scared little voice.

"When we met..." Began Sim. A tear rolled from the corner of his eye. "When we...you were so young, so pure. Our hearts fused together. I only had to look at you. I only looked, and you—" His hand cupped Pavlik's cheek.

Trembling, Pavlik took it off and rose from the table.

"Come on, Sim."

Air left the director, he visibly deflated, shrunk. "Right. You're right." He flopped a wad of cash on the table, groped to a stand and stumbled to the exit.

Pavlik glanced at Irka. "I'm sorry about this."

She shook her head and followed him. The premonition grew anew in her chest, and she struggled to get it out of her mind. It was paranoia, nothing else, it was—

They walked through oak doors. It has warmed up under the afternoon sun but now began to crust over again. Twilight approached, early. Pedestrians trickled by in that lazy Sunday idleness. Dirty snow covered the ground, no longer pristine, a gooey mess produced by hundreds of feet.

Sim stopped by the car, drew a lungful of air and howled. "Scum! Vulgar, raffish scum! What hideous beast has bred you, you imbecile moronic varmints!" Words dropped like rocks from his mouth. He yelled and yelled, employing his full arsenal of profanities.

A pair of strolling women shrunk back, whispering to each other. An old curmudgeon, his face one porous nose, rocked his head.

"Oh God. What is this..." Pavlik stopped so abruptly, Irka slammed into him.

In the middle of Mercedes's hood lay a page torn out of a notebook. A pile of something gungy steamed on top of it. It stunk. Irka looked closer. Someone defecated on a piece of paper and dropped it on Sim's car, recently, by the look of it.

In his inebriate delirium, Sim cursed the sky.

By an unspoken solidarity, Irka and Pavlik scooped handfuls of snow from the curb and dumped it on top of feces until they were covered, then doffed them off the hood. The paper tore. The mess slopped down, leaving a hideous smear. They dowsed the car with more snow, until it was clean.

Irka's hands turned red, throbbing from cold.

"Thank you, children, for cleaning the dross of our nation off my car. Let's leave. I'm sick in my head." Sim staggered around the car, got in and started it.

"And I'm sick in my stomach," Pavlik nudged Irka. She didn't move. A raven perched on the wire right above them. It grunted. A white glutinous blob splat a step away from her foot. The raven screeched, flopped its wings and took off.

Irka's hands curled into fists. *Oh, you dirty little miscreant, you paltry, razzing shitbird! I said I'll break your neck if you crap on me, didn't I?*

Oblivious to her threats, the raven dwindled to a black spot, to a speck, to nothing.

"You coming?" Pavlik said from the salon.

Irka barely had time to climb in. Sim yanked Mercedes in reverse, seesawed it out of the gap between BMW and Lada, gave gas and they tore into the street, weaving. Irka closed her eyes. Sim swore under his breath and swerved.

"Sim, maybe it's not a good idea for you to drive right now? Should we stop and get some coffee?" Said Pavlik.

"You are full of fear." Sim slurred. "Let go."

They lurched to the right. The car bobbed up a precipitous slope of a side lane, its asphalt bucked from roots of overgrown poplars, naked and forlorn against the snow.

"Stop! Where are we going?" Cried Pavlik.

"Wrong question, my child, wrong question! Move-ment! Movement is everything." Sim's words draggled. "You stall, you die. We stalled, we made a mistake. Now we're making up for it. Hold on." He gave gas.

The Mercedes swung around a hairpin turn and for a second Irka thought they would glide onto the ice of the opposite lane

and ram into a bus, but they didn't. An angry honk erupted behind them as Sim righted the car.

"Stalled...what? What are you talking about?" Said Pavlik.

"You're not listening to me. Listen! *Lis-ten!* You're deaf! Deaf from fear! Trust me. Trust is love. We will jump over this noisome darkness, we will fill it with light. Like butterflies, magnificent butterflies. We'll make them glareblind. They won't catch us. That's all!" He cackled.

"Who?" Cried Pavlik, bewildered.

"You're disappointing me with your circumspect refrain from corollary. Who did we run into a few hours ago?"

"Oh." It clicked for Pavlik. His vacuous expression cleared. He turned to look. "Sim? I think we're being followed."

Behind them trailed a black car. A *Boomer*, Irka thought. A *black BMW. Full of ravens. Ravens, fascists, and gay haters.* She couldn't decipher who sat by the wheel or how many people were inside, but she didn't need to. She felt them. Slush spumed from its tires. Its headlights flashed, unashamedly acknowledging the chase.

"Naturally! What else they've got to do?"

"You're not worried?"

"Never been afraid of anyone in my life and don't intend to start now. Who's to be afraid of? Those depraved, unrepentant, prick-stupid extremists? Ha!" He slapped his knee. "There is



only one thing to be afraid of, losing touch with yourself, getting old, botching your wings. What do you think those parasites do? They got no wings. Their function is mutiny. Multi-ny. Their dicks would be riddled with impotence if they didn't smear shit over someone's face once a day. It's what gets them hard."

They screeched to a stop on a red light, between a crowded trolleybus and gasoline truck, the Boomer behind them.

Sim turned the blinker on. "But!" He raised one unsteady finger. "That's beside the point. I don't want them to find out where you live, Pavlik. We're going to my house. Nothing they can do except shit on my car again. No-thing."

The light turned green. Sim spun the wheel.

A tremor of...of what? Irka couldn't tell. Inner contradiction? Scruple? Dormant fear? A pallid shade of it, something, passed over Pavlik's face, as if Sim's suggestion carved his gut. "You think I'm in danger?" He asked.

"I don't think. I *know*."

"How?" Pavlik's face tumbled off him.

*They know where you live*, Irka wanted to say, *I saw them leave your entrance this morning*. But as she turned to mime for a pen and a notepad, brakes screeched, and Pavlik toppled on top of her, elbow in her belly, neither of them buckled. She cried out.

"Sorry! Did I hit you?" Pavlik's polished façade cracked. He looked scared, his eyes skittish.

Irka shook her head, struggling to sit.

City noises broke in a string of blares.

"Sim, I'd appreciate it if we went a little slower."

"Never! Move-ment!" Yelled Sim, intoxicated. "Movement is everything!" He gunned the gas pedal. They ran a red light and sped into Garden Ring, a ten-lane belt around central Moscow, crisscrossed by over a dozen arterial routes. A drone of honks. Red and blue lights behind them, joined by a siren.

"Light of my loins, core of my asshole. If it isn't another mouth to feed." Sim pulled to the curb. The Boomer dropped speed and turned out into a side street. A horde of curious onlookers eyed them from the bus stop. Sim swiftly stepped out, greeted the militant like an old friend, slipped a wad of rubles into his hand, said something. The militant laughed, saluted.

*Cash, the grease of Russian bureaucracy.* Thought Irka.

"Degenerates." Said Pavlik suddenly with force. "Fucking degenerates."

Irka raised a brow questioningly.

Pavlik gazed at her and through her, his lips white.

"You're aware of who was trailing us, right? The rally people? Swastika on red? Yeah. I didn't place them at first. Russian National Unity, the nationalist party. They sieged the

parliament in the White House, among others. The dross of human kind. Hydrocephalic cretins." He talked with uncharacteristic petulance, like Kostya. A vein pulsed on his neck. His face went from pale to sanguine.

*Don't know about cretins. To me they're vultures, hyenas, and ravens. Thought Irka. Scavengers of putrescence. Except what's putrefying to them, is blooming to others. Love reeks to them. They don't have it, so they hate it, hate it for not having it.*

Sim climbed back in. "Well, that was one expensive celebration. Very expensive. Don't know about you, but I feel like getting out of my clothes. I'm hot, tired, and disgustingly sweaty. Shall we?"

Pavlik slacked, as if Sim imposed on him a request he couldn't decline. "Sure. But can we go a bit slower?" He tried to put on a smile.

"I will quell this fear of yours. It's truly maddening." Sim turned the key. The motor purred to life. They jerked and merged with traffic.

Pavlik sagged more. "You know," he said to Irka, attempting to sound cheerful, "Sim's apartment has a view on Kremlin. Would you like to see it?"

*What's wrong? Thought Irka, nodding. Why are you afraid of his place more than the thugs who were trailing our asses? What*

*did he do to you there? What filthy desecration did he perform?  
What?*

She looked at him beseechingly, but he averted his eyes.  
For a moment Irka thought Pavlik would cry. He didn't.

He held it in.

## Chapter 16. The Seal's Music

A sense of awe smothered Irka. They parked on Tverskaya by a pompous neoclassical building. Its granite base flaunted a boutique after boutique every ten meters, a showcase of unaffordable opulence. Above it, five marble stories gazed over snowy Moscow with narrow windows, some propped on balcony nubs, others plain. Rills of cars and people filled the air with that constant big city noise. The street clock struck four. Lights came on just as last sunrays gilded steeples of Historical Museum poised two hundred meters distant, by Red Square entrance. In front of it an enormous spruce tree twinkled with white, blue, and scarlet.

*It's almost New Year, thought Irka, stepping out of the car, and children are dreaming about Kremlin New Year tree celebration. I never got a chance to see it, dammit. She put a hand on her belly. Do you want to go, after you're born and grow up a little?*

The eaglet was quiet.

*You're not talking to me because I didn't get you a whole boar? Only his soggy bollocks? Is that.*

Silence.

*Fine. Have it your way.*

Irka sighed, thinking about her classmate Kristina and her stories about the show, Uncle Frost who wasn't drunk out of his mind for a change, the cantering Snegurochka, the stellated gift-box full of chocolate candy. She thought of the way all celebrations always went down the same line of demarcation. Human on one side, animal on the other. It started out civil, with best intentions, and always ended in a gorge-fest of some kind. Food, vodka, skirmish. It's like Russians had an inherent tendency for sedition that had to be forcefully curbed by Lenins and Stalins of this world.

Irka followed Sim and Pavlik, deep in the swirl of her mind. *We're all savage beasts*, she thought. *Me too. I'm no different. I glorify my victimhood, for what? To justify hate. I hate everyone and everything. I don't trust anyone. I love Pavlik, but now I'm mad at him too. Because he didn't turn out to be who I wanted him to be. That's no love, that's possession. Hey, you're defective, you don't fit my prerogatives, so fuck you. That's lame, Irina Myshko, lame and pitiable.*

*Let out your animal*, spoke the eaglet.

Irka flinched from surprise.

And then life around her froze. It paused in a tableau. Snow ceased falling, suspended in mid-air. Cars stopped. People stood still. Only they weren't people anymore.

Terror locked Irka's throat.

They were there, all of them. Her classmates in red kerchiefs, staring at her with beady eyes of woodpeckers. Pensioners with flags, heads cocked like those of roosters. A spate of sprats from the metro tapeworm. Milky maggots. Turtles, rats, a fat listless mole. A gaggle of geese. A walrus. Spiders. Vultures. Hyenas. Horseflies, clouds of horseflies, buzzing, scudding. And ravens, a black killer army, one on every post, every outcrop.

They turned their eyes at Irka, sharp as arrows. *Let out your animal*, they said in a chilling chorus. *Who are you? We want to see.* They took a step at her. They gnashed their teeth, flapped their wings and opened their chops. Wide. So wide, Irka could see insides tenebrous throats, pulsing, ready to swallow.

The ground shook from a distant explosion. A rumble of broken rock joined a steady thunder and clutter of tank tracks on stone pavement. Historical Museum collapsed in a pile of bricks and out rode the Mausoleum, a colossal panzer with a statue of Lenin on top, one arm outstretched, another in a trouser pocket. It thundered along Tverskaya, an influx of marching beasts on its tail.

*It's not a statue*, realized Irka with horror, *it's his mummified body, it's—*

"What is the goal of your life, citizen Myshko?" Shouted Lenin, sunken eyeballs dull as stones, lips bloodless, skin a sallow cellophane sack taped tight over his skull. "What animal are you? Answer me."

Fear slipped into every cavity of Irka's body. Vertigo grabbed her head in a brute hold. She was a mouse. Or was she? She didn't know anymore. Her knees were ready to give out. Dimly, she felt Sim take her arm, lead her under the archway, through a lobby, into an ascending-room type elevator behind metal-grate doors.

Irka rose to the present in Sim's apartment, partly due to the sound of the closing door, partly due to music. Classical music seemed to come from everywhere. Bells, trumpets, piano. A corridor stretched ahead, walls hung with heavy frames. Paintings, mirrors, photographs, more paintings. She gasped for air, disoriented. The blood in her body tore piping hot ropes through her heart.

*Let out my animal*, she thought. *Yeah, right. Like there aren't enough of them out there already.* She wiped cold sweat from her brow. *If I was an alcoholic like my mother, I'd drink myself into a stupor right now.*

Ahead of her figures moved.

Sim threw his coat on the floor, keys on the narrow glass table littered with magazines, receipts, loose change, kicked



off shoes and donned slippers. "Coffee? Tea?" He vanished through a doorway. There were sounds of running water, jangling silvery, clinking cups.

"Where are you?" Asked Pavlik. "You just sort of...blanked out. One moment you were fine, then I looked in your eyes, and they were empty. Gone."

Irka blinked. *Trust me, I was there where you never want to go, unless you want to end up behind bars with a catheter up your dick and pills as your daily diet.*

"Your jacket?" Pavlik helped her with it, picked up Sim's coat, hung both on hangers in a mirrored wardrobe. He moved with acute familiarity. Irka could tell he had been here before.

"You're so pale. The baby is eating all your blood, is it?" He tried to smile.

*It is, maybe. Maybe it isn't.* Irka wanted to say. *I don't know anymore.*

Pavlik took her hand, frowning. "You're afraid of the guys that followed us?"

Irka shook her head.

"Hot tea? Hot tea will make you feel better."

They entered the kitchen. It sparkled with chrome. Tall windows overlooked busy Tverskaya, windowsills wide enough to sit on. Bottles of liquor and half-eaten food occupied every surface. It looked good and expensive. Baguettes, sliced ham,

smoked fish, jars of wild mushrooms. Irka's stomach rumbled, hungry again.

Sim hummed in tune with music, his hands working an elaborate machine. Freshly brewed coffee sent up ribbons of aroma. "Smile, children, always smile." He said. "Out with the misery. You're not allowed to brood on it. Ne-ver!" He poured coffee.

"Today you witnessed a pitiful remonstrations, that is all." He put two steaming cups on the table. "Irina? Tea?"

Irka nodded.

"One minute, please. Pardon me, but I'm not sure I understand. A remonstrations against what?" Asked Pavlik.

"Power against art." Sim poured water into an electrical kettle. "Not the first time, not the last."

Pavlik smirked. "Sim, let me see if I got this right. Are you saying they have—"

"Yes!" He turned around so fast, his faithful scarf unraveling. A line of hair fell over his eyes. "Yes, they shat on me before. My whole life. If I took a wrong step, bam!" He fisted a palm. "I'd be gone. What is happiness? Happiness is love. Turn your ear to your heart. Listen. *Listen!* That's where it is! Love is what creates your inner music. They have no music, those bedbugs. None. They're envious of us, nothing more.

It mustn't stop you from practicing your art, never." He took a sip of coffee.

Pavlik lowered his eyes.

*He suppresses you with his presence,* thought Irka with aversion. *The genius director and the pet actor, the seal and the butterfly, the cloven pair of inequitable lust. He'll eat you, Pavlik, chew you and spit you out without blinking. Shit, I forgot. I need to tell you about the ravens.* But she still felt shaken by the presentiment she had on the street, the heathen creepy feeling that unless she did something, soon, her sanity would go to hell.

"Okay. I see your point. I concede, there is truth to that." Began Pavlik. "But what if it escalates? What if it's shit today, a—"

"You think I haven't seen shit in my life?" Sim almost screamed. His eyes sent daggers. "Why, I see it everyday, my child, coming right out my old lovely asshole." Sim slapped himself. "You needn't worry. Let's worry about this girl over here. Let's talk about her pregnancy and your future. Your joint future."

Irka mimed writing.

"You want paper?" Asked Sim. "Pen and paper?"

Irka nodded.

"Go to the end of the corridor. Last door on the right. There should be some paper on my desk. And pens. Plenty." Sim sat on the sill, cracked the window open and lit a cigarette, tugging on it with obvious pleasure.

"Want me to show you?" Asked Pavlik.

*No, thanks. I want to be alone for a moment,* thought Irka, shaking her head. A part of her ached to be with Pavlik, but a bigger part wanted to cut all ties. To tear out her foolhardy adolescent love, throw it on the floor, and stomp it to death. She slunk out of the kitchen, stepping in rhythm to cymbals that clashed down from the speakers, a symphony crescendo. It was louder here, two doors down. She entered what must've been Sim's office, a large room lined with rows of bookcases, an oak writing desk by the window with a heap of manuscripts tangled around a blocky monitor and a grey keyboard. A glass ashtray full of cigarette stubs. A small leather sofa. A pile of shoes and scarves in the corner. Numerous jackets, on backs of chairs, on the sofa. A creative mayhem of a theater director.

Irka fished out a sheet of paper from the stack in the printer, found a pen, and stood for a moment, marveling at the fact that everything here was either new or well taken care of. Nothing creaked, not the door, nor the parquet. It was quiet, if not for mechanical ticking.

*You bollixed up idiot, she thought, staring at the minute hand of the clock on the wall. It showed twenty seven minutes past four. This is not some feral realm inside your head, Irina Myshko, this is a beginning of schizophrenia, an irreversible osmosis of your brain. You either condone it, or seek medical care. Your choice.* She fiddled with the pen. *Only what will they offer me? Stick me into a sanatorium for mentally imbalanced, for a weekly treatment? Like grandma sends mom every fall and every spring? Yes, you got that right, you dumb ragamuffin. They'll feed you drugs, some canteen roughage, and send you home. To your dear alcoholic catfish of a mother and Lyosha Kabansky, the insatiable boar with a fat sinewy dick that he'll stick up your vagina like a halberd.* Irka pressed her lips. *No thanks. I'll figure it out on my own.*

Feeling a little better, she stole to the kitchen and was about to enter, when her heart cinched. She grew into the floor, numb.

Sim leaned over Pavlik, pressing him into the counter. A hand, burly, encrusted with rings, massaged Pavlik's buttocks, slid down between his tights, rode up again. Irka couldn't see their faces, but by the way Pavlik's body tensed she could tell he tolerated it. Sim's bulk rubbed against him with little grunts. He whispered something, the cup of coffee forgotten on the windowsill. A quiet sigh parted Pavlik's lips.

Without realizing she held her breath, Irka released a shuddering exhale. Pavlik jerked around. Sim followed his gaze and broke into a grin as if nothing happened.

"Irina! My child. Find the paper all right?" He hobbled to the table.

Irka turned on her heel and stormed out. She intuitively found the bathroom at the end of the corridor, opposite the office, ran in and slid the latch in place.

Pavlik rushed after her.

*You won't, you won't, you won't! I said, no! You won't cry, you hear me? What did you expect?* But Irka couldn't hold it. Bitter disappointment and first broken love rebounded off each other. Tears scalded her eyes and fell in big splats. *You're the one letting Sim do this, Pavlik! Kostya was love, but this! This is subjugation! It's like a spat on your dignity, your privacy, your—it's a roundhouse slap on your right to exist as an individuum! On your personal freedom! Sim is like...like Lyosha!* She slammed a fist in a sink. It hurt. She cried out, lifted her sweater, grabbed a handful of skin and twisted.

A knock on the door. "Irina? What are you doing in there? Open up, please. Let me in." Pavlik breathed through the crack.

The door rattled.

*I don't ever want to let anyone in! Never ever!* Irka wanted to cry these words, to scream them. She hacked at herself with

malice. Physical pain dulled the pain inside. Tears wet her face, she hardly noticed. *Go away and leave me alone!* She slapped the door, kicked it. *LEAVE ME ALONE! GO!!! I hate you! I hate everyone! I hate people, people hurt each other for no reason! At least animals do it for food, so scat! Shoo! Fuck off!!! I want to be alone, get it?*

Pavlik said something, but she didn't hear him. She slid to the floor, sobbing. Did she hate him? Did she love him? If she did, what kind of love was it? Platonic? Physical? Mythological? Feral? She rammed her head at the wall and collapsed into a mouse.

The mouse slipped in a tarn of tears. Its paws slid apart and it bellywhopped, squeaking. Something hammered the door, something large. The hinges groaned and gave, dust sprayed in a chalky cloud. The door hung askew, lopsided. A seal thundered next to the mouse, one fin-foot holding up a butterfly. A black admiral. Dark, sooty, jittering.

The mouse flipped its tail, as if saying, *I'm fine, leave me alone.* Dark thoughts swirled in its tiny mind. The butterfly was leaving it. It didn't know how it knew, it just did. The seal picked up the mouse with the other fin-foot. The mouse peeped in protest, bared its sharp little teeth and bit the seal. The seal barked. One gruff roar. The butterfly flitted up.

Black pollen fell off its wings. It battered the seal's snout. The seal snorted, disgruntled.

There was no use fighting it. It took over with sheer size and the power of its weight. It lifted the mouse to an impossible height. The mouse knew, if it jumped, it'd break its spine. It couldn't fly like the butterfly, it didn't have wings.

They were in an ice grotto, bluish with shadows. The seal wiggled itself up a round hole, cut through a snowbank with surgical precision, perfectly round, perfectly white. An underpass leading out, into the billowing raging winter. They suddenly bore loose, into the night on the glacial plain. Wind soughed with flurries. The mouse's extremities curled from cold. Freezing air slapped its nose. It couldn't breathe. The butterfly cleaved to it, sluggish. They sled on ice, joined by other pinnipeds, ursine, eldritch.

The clamor of beasts rose to the velvety sky dotted with stars. Bright lights made the mouse's eyes water. White, halogen, auxiliary orbs dashed through the night, bright red at the tail. The seal tore forth, yawed downward, swerved left, right, tilted over drumlins, topped knolls, dipped in valleys, crawled up steep upgrades, dodged hulks, dark, elliptical. Mechanical mammals sent to tumble down the millrace like pebbles.



The mouse felt dizzy. Soporific murmur lulled it into a semi-doze. It rolled off the seal's flipper onto something soft, rugose. Leather? Animal hide? The mouse didn't care, it fell asleep and dreamed of ravens. They surrounded the butterfly, beaks open, eager to stab, to peck, to nib, to—

"Irina." Said Pavlik's voice.

Irka rose to the surface for a moment and plunged back.

"We're home. Wake up." He said, louder now, shaking her.

Irka fought the pasty quicksand of slumber. *What?* She wanted to say. *What do you want?*

"I could, of course, attempt to carry you, but I don't think it would end as a successful endeavor."

Irka blinked.

Pavlik's face crystallized, white in the shadow. "Are you feeling any better?" He looked concerned. "Do you remember what happened? No? You passed out in the bathroom. Out, like a light. Sim had to break-open the door, to get you. You scared the devil out of us."

Irka rubbed her face. They were sitting in the back seat of Sim's Mercedes, and he was looking at them.

"Irina! The destroyer of my property." He said cheerily. "You sucked my bathroom door into the whirlwind of your talent. Like some splinter. Bam! Poof! And it was gone." He pursed his

lower lip in mock disappointment. "Listen. Don't worry about it. I'll install a new one. How are you?"

Irka shrugged. *Fuck if I know. For one, I'm glad you're out of your seal-suit, and I'm out of my mouse. But I need to pee.*

"Good, I presume. I'm not offended, you're not offended. No harm has been done. No harm!" His theatrical fervor greyed a little. "Sorry to wake you up, but it's getting late. I need to be back, to work."

He leaned between the seats. "I have something to tell you both, before I go."

"We are all ears, Sim, as always." Said Pavlik.

"Listen to me, children. This is important. To be perfectly frank, I don't believe this baloney pregnancy story of yours for a second. It's a big fat lie. Innocuous, but nonetheless."

"What?" Pavlik said, startled.

"Don't interrupt me. I'm trying to help you, both of you. Here is the reality of life. Irina, I've known Pavlik for over five years, and I get what he's trying to do. He's trying to help you. And who wouldn't? After you saved his life? I would."

Pavlik's mouth opened. "Hold on a minute. I don't understand. Where did you get—"

"You don't need to understand. Just listen. *Lis-ten!*" Sim's jowls shook. His eyes glittered with little light trickled in. "Irina, this boy here can't lift his precious cock unless

another one is up his darling butthole. He's gayer than a box of birds."

"Sim!" Pavlik glared at the director. "Stop it! You're embarrassing me."

"Shhh. You do each other a favor." His scarf slipped down, he flipped it up. "I don't know who the father of your baby is, and frankly, I don't care. It's your business. What you should do is, you children need to get married."

"Married?" Pavlik's voice came out in a croak.

*Married?* Thought Irka, heart at a gallop. *Me, married to Pavlik?*

"What's the big surprise? What's so unusual about two young people getting married? Nothing. I tell you, no-thing! It's perfectly natural. You get married, you have a baby, and voila! People will think the baby is yours, Pavlik. Good for your family, your career, reputation. Until you grow skin thick enough to deal with that scum, the marriage will protect you."

Pavlik sat silent, dumbfounded.

"One more thing, before I forget." Sim shifted his gaze to Irka. It danced with dark hilarity. "Do not be offended by what I'm about to say. I trust you understand that the boundaries of love cease to exist when you enter the realm of art. Do you?"

Irka nodded, puzzled.

"Theater!" Sim brandished a finger. "Theater is divine. Theater defies social norms. Actors must feel the full range of human emotion, to draw from it. We must suffer, to feel. Art is born of love. There is only love. Nothing else. *No-thing!* You either love me, or you don't. That's all!" He flashed a smile. "My actors love me. All of them. All! Tanechka loves me. Nastya, Id, Slavik. They all love me. Pavlik loves me."

Pavlik looked at his palms.

*So grabbing his cock without permission is called love now?* Thought Irka, wishing she could say it aloud.

"Today I felt a strong desire to show Pavlik how much I love him, and Pavlik felt the same. Same desire to show me! A beautiful union was created, but for a moment. You, my child, interrupted it. But!" He raised a finger. "I forgive you. I intend to teach you. You must commit to being pliable to my genius, if you want to learn how to act." His puffed the hair out of his face. His breath smelled of expensive cigarettes. "Is there a place in your heart to love me?"

*If you weren't gay, would you rape me and call it love?* Thought Irka, teeth pressed tight.

"Sim, look, that's enough." Said Pavlik. "We'll think about this marriage idea. But honestly, we need to get home. Mama's probably worried."

"You're not going anywhere until I tell you to. Sit! We're not done yet. I need to see you children understand me. Yes or no?" Sim studied them.

Someone ululated outside. Soft flops of snow started falling, hushing all noises.

"Yes." Said Pavlik at last. Irka saw his hands shake. "Yes, we understand you."

*You're used to getting everything your way, you furry scumbucket.* Thought Irka, giving Sim a curt nod.

"Excellent! Now we're done." He gave them a stern look. "Out. Both of you. I'm tired. Happy coming New year, if I don't see you until January. Don't forget, first rehearsal on the fifteenth."

"Happy coming New year to you too, Sim. Thanks for the lift, as always." Said Pavlik.

They fled the car, through the patter of snow, into the warmth of the entranceway.

As soon as Irka stepped in, she felt a threat. An insectile hum mixed with avian tremor. And a smell, the fecund smell of rot. Sweet and nauseating. *Horseflies*, she thought. *And something else. Vultures? No.* The hairs on the back of her neck lifted. She seized Pavlik's arm.

"What?" He asked.

*Ravens, she mouthed, writing in the air. It smells like ravens...and a jackal. I think it's a jackal. Shakalov was here. Shakalov and his—*

"We're almost there, you can write when we get home." Said Pavlik, irritated. "Look! That's just great. Somebody broke our mailbox again."

On the lobby wall hung a row of mailboxes, painted sickly green. Each box had six slots with stenciled-on apartment numbers, some broken, bent, others burned. The one with the number eighteen yawned open, the lock chewed off by a vise or a pair of pliers. Gone for good.

"Mama will be hysterical." He pulled out the newspaper and unfolded it while they ascended the steps. Suddenly he stopped. A piece of paper lay in the centerfold. Pavlik's hands shook. Without hesitation, Irka snatched it. Her feral instinct suggested that if she didn't, he'd never let her read it.

"Hey!" He said. "Give it back!"

Irka twisted out of the way. The note was written on a lined notebook page in screaming capital letters.

PAVEL BABOCH, KOSTYA PROBABLY FORGOT TO TELL YOU CAUSE HIS FAGGOT FACE GOT SCRAGGED. IF YOU WON'T LEAVE KOTIK'S THEATER, YOU'RE NEXT, JEWISH HOMO. HAPPY COMING NEW YEAR, HAPPY NEW EXPERIENCES. WAIT FOR IT.

Irka's insides froze. *I saw them!* She wanted to scream. *I saw them leave! The ravens!*

"Okay, give it back please. Irina?" Pavlik reached for the paper, but Irka was seized with fury. She crunched the paper into a ball and threw it up the staircase with such force, her shoulder popped. It bounced off a riser and landed by the garbage chute column, rolling into shadow.

*Fucking xenophobes!* She screamed in her head. *Prick-stupid nationalists! Retarded warmongers! I hope you drown in a vat of dogpiss, you soup of rotten offal, you chickenshits, you-*

"Irina!" Pavlik cried. "What did you do that for?"

Irka, deaf from rage, looked at him, shaking.

"Pavlusha?" Yulia's voice called. "Pavlusha, is that you?" Slippers flip-flopped down.

"Oh, shit." Pavlik was about to dart upstairs, when the door to apartment number 4 blasted open. A woman in her thirties, with a contemptuous mouth and a head full of curlers pushed out a man and slammed the door behind him. Irka recognized him, the downtrodden horse, the local drunk who always asked for money.

"Daughter! Sonny!" He announced, slurring, and fell on them, spread-eagled, one arm over Pavlik's shoulder, one over Irka's. "Help me. Drink." He reeked of piss. "Need a drink."

*You stinky fucktard!* Thought Irka, revolted. She threw the drunk's arm off, but he slapped it on again.

"Get...off...me, old hoss." Pavlik tried pushing the man away, but he clutched to him for dear life. "Sonny!" He wailed. "Help me, sonny!"

"Get off me, I said!" With combined effort, they sent him bellydown to the landing.

"What is this?" Said Yulia's voice, high-pitched, crumpled note in one hand, empty trash bucket in another.

"Mama, no." Pavlik reached for the note, but Yulia waved her hand away.

*Great.* Irka covered her face. *This is my fault.* Guilt flooded her with hot water.

The drunk issued a string of curses. The door to apartment number 2 creaked open, revealing thready paralon of its backside. A little girl's face peeked out. From behind her a fat woman came up, scolded her, and shut the door, locking it.

Yulia clutched her heart. "Where did you find this?"

"Yulechka?" Anton called from above. "Yulechka, you all right? I'm coming down."

The drunk began calling his wife a whore, a slut, and a bitch. With each epithet his voice picked up in volume. He drew up on all fours, careened and fell over again.



"Shut your dough-hole, you worthless dick!" His wife yelled from the doorway. "You'll wake up the whole house! Honest people are going to work tomorrow, you unemployed parasite! Shut up, or I'm calling militia! It's my last warning!" She spat and shut the door once more.

"Whore!" Shouted the man. "Are you going to leave me to freeze here?"

Anton took his wife by one arm, his son by another. They mounted the stairs in silence. Yulia's hand trembled, clutching the note. Pavlik kept glancing at Irka. She looked at her feet, hot from shame.

Anton rattled the keys, let everyone in. Once inside, Yulia gave him the paper. He peered at it through glasses. "What's this?"

"That's what I would like to know." Her voice trembled.

"Mama, there is no need for hysterics. Please. It's just a joke, someone played a prank." Pavlik spoke with a wide stage smile, but his eyes betrayed him. They danced with mortal terror. "I think I know who it is. I bet it's Stepan. Silly dimwit. He likes to—"

"A death threat?" Asked Anton slowly. "But who would—why? Why would someone call you a...*Jewish homo*?"

Pavlik's face has gone ashen.

Irka had to act. But how? What would she tell them? Didn't matter. Something, anything. She tapped the note, then pointed to herself.

"You?" Asked Anton, his flat face tight with suspicion.

"You wrote it?"

She shook her head, thinking quickly.

"You know who wrote it? Is that what you're trying to say? Am I right?" Asked Yulia.

Irka nodded. And then it hit her. It made perfect sense. She walked into the kitchen, took the notepad she used for jotting down the list of groceries, and wrote: *It's Vladimir Shakalov, the chamber theater house manager, I'm sure of it. I was in his office. He had a portrait, now that I think of it, the man there looked like one of those Russian Nationalist Party people we saw in the rally, on our way to The House of Actors. He calls all Kotik's actors homos, regardless of their orientation. And, since Pavlik's hair is curly and black...*

An ominous silence spread behind her.

"Is this a joke?" Said Anton quietly.

"A jackal...?" Asked Yulia.

"Mama, can we talk about this tomorrow?" Said Pavlik.

"Irina is tired, I'm tired. My leg is acting up." His eyes on Irka, frightened.

*What, she thought, what is it you don't get? It makes perfect sense! It's him! Who else—* She couldn't finish her thought. The notepad slipped out of her hands and landed with a smack on the linoleum floor.

"It's the jackal," was printed on it in wide scrolled letters, "the birdhouse manager, I'm sure of it. I was in its lair. It had a portrait, now that I think of it, the thing there looked like one of those ravens we saw in the sky, on our way to The House of Donkeys. The jackal calls all seal's birds fairies, regardless of their plumage. And, since the butterfly's wings are silky black..."

An atavistic shiver seized Irka. She took a step back and slid into a chair, close to fainting.

## Chapter 17. The Fox On The New Year

Irka spent the last four weeks in a delirium. She flickered in and out of reality, her mind a malfunctioning servomotor spun by a wrong hand into a wrong eddy. She'd surface to communicate with Pavlik, write for five minutes, sink back without respite, rise up again, plunge deeper. They hunkered in his room, or on the balcony, on good days; Pavlik smoked and talked, Irka listened. On bad days they were forced into family counsels. The topics of discussion included their marriage, agreed upon Yulia and Anton as the best protective move, the futility of militia involvement to identify the death threat adversary, Irka's speech impediment and her mental lag, its aggravation chalked up to pregnancy hormones, Shakalov's sacking from the theater, per Sim's assertion, and the living arrangement for the future couple.

At noon on December 31 it was finally decided to move Margarita Petrovna Lisovaya, Yulia's elderly mother, out of her one-room apartment in the south of Moscow to Pavlik's room, and settle Pavlik and Irka in her flat so they could start their own little family, with an added benefit of an address change. Yulia discussed the final arrangements with her mother on the phone

all morning, and now, after a day of cleaning, shopping, and cooking, they have arrived at Margarita's door on the seventh's floor of the nine-story Brezhnevka, with bottles of champagne, jars of Olivier salad, herring under beets with mayonnaise, pickled forest mushrooms, dark bread, caviar, a waffle torte and a kilogram of mandarins.

The door, ensconced in lurid vomit-brown vinyl, a slipshod job done by a sloppy builder some thirty years ago, gazed at them with a peephole and three plastic numbers, 274. Yulia, dressed in a mink coat, her pride, and new creaky leather boots, pressed the bell. It ding-donged with an echo. They waited.

Anton coughed in a fist.

Pavlik passed the heavy bag of groceries from one gloved hand to another, glancing at Irka.

She hardly breathed. A sense of doom played a trick on her vision, like pendulous feet of a corpse swinging on a gibbet, its neck rotted to threads, held up by a few stubborn vertebrae. A careless step, and it would fall on her head. The texture of the world grew rough, ugly. She could reach out and touch it, if she wanted to, but she didn't. She was nailed to the floor, arms unbending rods, head a ball of fire. Another second, and she'd cross the ledge of peril and shrink into a mouse.

*A murder, thought Irka, her skin brittle as ice. A murder is about to happen.*

The elevator whined to life. Its wheels and cogs and jacks revolved with a vespine drone, nasty and calamitous.

*In the apartment across the landing,* thought Irka, and swiveled her head.

She didn't see them, but she heard them. Felt them as if they stalked across her hide. Behind the door number 278 a handful of horseflies alighted sluggishly on a threadbare divan, buzzed off, returned with a bottle of vodka and shot glasses, their hairy legs rubbing in glee of the future drunken debauchery. A pair of wolves were ripping at each other throats in the apartment next to it. A leech of ginormous proportions watched TV two doors down. A handful of cockroaches crawled over the floor above, scores of hungry ticks sucked on a frog the floor below.

Irka shuddered from both compulsion and aversion. She didn't want to know, and yet she did at the same time, out of morbid curiosity.

Yulia rang the bell again.

The elevator came to a thunderous stop seven stories below. Its partitions groaned. Someone entered. The sliding doors rolled with a smack, the cabin ascended.

Irka gawked at Pavlik. He blinked, distant, as if he wanted to protect his placidity from her malefic stories, as if they could ensnare his thoughts in jagged arms and blight his reason.

Just this morning she wrote to him that she heard the hum of the horseflies again, and he barely glanced at it, impartial.

Irka shifted from foot to foot. Yulia's hand-me-down clothes felt to her like moulted skin of a dead snake. She crossed into the shadow of some throwback; she couldn't help it. Her wit regressed, confirmed by Yulia's remarks, Anton's pronouncements, and Pavlik's cowardly stares, and yet she didn't feel witless. On the contrary, life was clear, sharply drawn with teeth, claws, bills, and insect cutters. It unfolded in its beastly beauty, made Irka eschew human contact and become an inexorable recluse. Pavlik's family, perhaps even Pavlik himself, began to think her a retard.

*Fine, she thought, label me an idiot. Go ahead. Her chest rose and fell, but it didn't feel like any air entered her lungs. She stood on inertia, an apathetic mouse. The less I listen to your demagoguery, your prejudice, your recriminations, the more compulsion I'll have to spend my hate on Lyosha, in place of skewering your asses on your own complacent pride.*

The elevator stopped a floor below, footfalls battered across the landing, keys jangled, a door creaked open and shut.

"She's probably using the bathroom. Right?" Said Yulia with a tight smile and pushed retracted the bell button for god ten seconds. When pealing echoes died, they heard a brittle voice, "I'm coming! I'm coming! No need to ring through the whole

house!", a measured patter of feet, and there stood Margarita Lisovaya, on the heels of a roast chicken and mashed potatoes smell, a fashionable old fox in her seventies, petite, rugose, gray hair hennaed flaming red and pulled into a bun. Bright lipstick gave her thin deflated lips a bloody coldness.

"Mama, what took you so long? You made me worried." Said Yulia.

"We brought delectable treats, Margarita Petrovna." Hooted Anton, his rounded eyes growing big in anticipation of the meal. "Herring under fur coat, your favorite. Yulechka spent all day making it."

*And I was just a fixture in the kitchen. Thought Irka. Didn't lift a single finger.*

"Grandma. Happy new Year!" Said Pavlik.

Margarita ignored them all.

"Good evening, my dear." Were the first words out of her mouth. Her vulpine eyes fastened on Irka with acute sharpness and practiced reticence, couth and mild on the surface, gluttonous underneath. Irka thought she belonged to the old Moscow aristocracy, with her manners and stature. "Why, it turns out, you look absolutely lovely." She turned to Pavlik. "That's my grandson. Good job, Pavlusha. Lovely bum. Something a good man likes to hold on to." She pressed her lips together, as if in mockery.



Pavlik flushed.

Anton chuckled under his breath.

"Don't just stand there." She threw at them. "Come in. You're letting in cold air."

Irka smiled. She liked the old fox immediately, and it seemed like the green drained out of Yulia's face. Gone was the poison. She fell under the ruling thumb of her mother. "Well, we can't quite come in with you in the doorway now, can we? Am I right?" She said awkwardly.

Below, somewhere in the guts of the Brezhnevka, the elevator whined again, descending.

Irka's leg froze over the threshold. A wasp. She thought. *A wasp is coming, for a horsefly.* Pavlik gently pushed in the small of her back.

They entered.

Compared to Yulia's spick-clean shiny flat, Margarita's place had a lived-in feel, a pleasant sand-colored hole dug out among knick-knacks, mirrors, slippers, pillows, books, and framed photographs in old dusty frames. There were no rugs on the linoleum floor. It ran in rivulets of paisley pattern to the kitchen and the only room where a celebratory table was decked out with plates, cutlery, and tumblers.

Pavlik followed his parents into the kitchen to offload the food, while Margarita took Irka's coat and led her to the dinner

table. Three mismatched chairs flanked its one side, a broken-in sofa the other. A TV sat on a narrow console covered with a tapestry. Next to it a scraggly New Year tree decked out in mélange of ornaments and silver tinsel winked with tiny lights. Behind bobbinet curtains, beyond the balcony, glistened lighted windows of other Brezhnevkas, nightly Moscow vista to be punctured by a volley of fireworks at midnight.

Margarita studied Irka silently. "Come here." She said, patting a chair. "Sit down."

Irka sat and saw a predatory fox, claws out, sharp. Yet a thin thread of keenness slung between them. Something sprung forth in Margarita's gaze, only for a moment. A shrewd understanding, an inference.

*Does she know? Irka suddenly thought. Does she suspect that Pavlik is gay? Somebody in this family must have. I don't believe they're blind, although I was blind, wasn't I?*

"You'll have a beautiful baby, I'm sure, with genes like these." Margarita said, her tone almost derisive.

Irka nodded, uneasy.

"It must've been a great shock that caused you to stop talking." She said, one veined claw over Irka's hand.

*Yeah, a catfish walloped me in piss, that's great shock, all right.* Thought Irka.

"Mama, you didn't have to!" Exclaimed Yulia.

Irka nearly jumped from surprise.

"I asked you not to cook, but you never listen to me. You must think about your health, at your age, all right?" Yulia deposited salads unpacked from jars and transferred into bowls on the table, stuffing them among assortment of viands.

"Yulechka, my dear, shut your trap."

Yulia audibly closed her mouth.

Irka felt her lips begin to stretch of their own accord.

"I'm fine." Said Margarita sharply, lips thin with concealed indignation. "I said I'd cook. What is all this?" She pointed a shaky finger. "Why did you bring it? You think I can't afford to feed you on my own?" She stood, shorter than her daughter, but she towered over her. "I'm not dead yet, thank goodness. Stop fussing around me like I'm some bairn. Better fuss around your future daughter-in-law."

"Very well, mama. I'll do that. I'm only worried about you." Said Yulia in a sibilant voice. "Your heart—"

"Leave my heart alone, it's fine." Margarita's domination of the atmosphere was complete.

"Margarita Petrovna, if you don't mind—" Anton entered with an enameled kettle and a stack of teacups, Pavlik behind him with towel napkins and the torte on a special crystal plate.

"Mind? Heavens forbid! Sit down! What did I cook all this for?"

They sat to dinner. Irka with Pavlik on the sofa, across them Yulia and Anton, Margarita at the head. She insisted on serving the food herself, moving with surprising agility for her age. She chatted up Yulia and Anton about their jewelry business, Pavlik about his acting. She gave Irka a notepad and a pen, so she could participate in the conversation.

Irka's mind was gone. She listened to the whirr two apartments down. The wasp and the horseflies were fighting. It hasn't escalated into something volatile yet, but it will. The wasp has raised its stinger. It dripped venom. The fattest juiciest horsefly kowtowed, retreating, others chivvied.

A door slammed on the landing. Male voices, hushed, subaural. The winch of the elevator.

Irka let out a breath. *It's real. They're there*, she thought, and wrote, *The wasp is about to snuff a horsefly*, elbowing Pavlik. "Hold on, hold on a moment," he said, abloom in his recounting of the coming Paradise Birds season return in January to his grandmother, who imbibed every word.

*Should I go ring the bell?* Thought Irka. *Is it really any of my business? What if there's nothing going on? Am I that eager to confirm my own beatific dementia?*

Anton turned on the TV. It buzzed with blue glare in the background. Midnight was a half an hour away, and with it the presidential address.

*Sure, let's pretend no shit is happening in this country and watch that squiffy bear slur words of patriotic pride, thought Irka, then stare at The Little Blue Light, the apotheosis of Russian musical dumbshow, a cabal of pop stars that look like sequined pieces of pemmican with holes for singing mouths and bleached poodle manes, stiff cosmonauts—shaggy mongrels in suits—and doleful heroes of social labor, decked out in medals that are worth a pile of crap, so righteous, so full of their false modesty, their chicanery. Why not dump them all in one pot for the viewing pleasure of every Russian citizen. Irka smirked. Please, I want to puke.*

The pen hovered above paper. Irka debated whether or not she should alert Pavlik again.

It was quiet two doors down. No hum, no buzz. A malefic calm before the storm.

Yulia's narrow tongue flicked a blob of Olivier salad off the fork. She chewed, her green eyes watching Irka closely.

"—telling you, it needs to be done proper. You ought to visit Irina's parents, that's what I think you should do." Margarita was saying.

"It's in the works. January, I think. Isn't it what we decided, Yulechka?" Said Anton pleasantly, and poured himself another shot of vodka.

"Yes, mama, we're going to. After the move." Said Yulia.

"Hold on a minute. I don't remember anything about the visit? First time I'm hearing this." Said Pavlik. "Mama, you neglected to include us in this important discussion, if I may say so. Again." He glanced at Irka.

She sat paralyzed, cold water washing her every hollow. Pictures of dirt flashed in her mind, two dogs, three cats, a hedgehog, a rat, her alcoholic mother, wile grinning Lenchka, aunt Sonya, Valentina with her hideous laughter, Nadezhda. And Lyosha Kabansky, checkered greasy shirt open on his hairy chest, trainers propping a convex belly.

*Do I get to eat the boar when we visit it?* Asked the eaglet.

*Eaglet!* Thought Irka. The baby moved inside her. She placed a hand under her sweater. An elbow or a knee kicked it.

*Do I?* It asked again.

*I promised you, yes. Yes, you will.*

"Is it a boy or a girl, do you know?" Asked Margarita.

Irka flinched.

"Mama, we don't know yet. We'll go see Karina, she'll do an ultrasound." Said Yulia.

"Who is Karina?"

"Remember Karina? My gynecologist?"

"Of course I remember! She divorced that alcoholic husband of hers. His loss. That's one smart beautiful woman."

"Karina divorced Sergey?" Anton raised a brow.

"Well, they're in the process." Said Yulia through teeth, glaring at her mother. "What I wanted to say was, she's a very good gynecologist. One of the best in Moscow. Irina and I are going to see her first week of January. She couldn't get us in earlier, can you imagine? She has a waiting list now. We all want to know if it's a boy or a girl, right, Irina?" Said Yulia, glancing Irka up and down.

Irka stiffened. She imagined Yulia's face upon finding out that Pavlik wasn't the father of her baby after all.

"I'm coming with you." Said Pavlik, taking Irka's hand under the table. She latched onto him. "Don't you love my family?" He whispered into her ear.

*Wait till you see mine,* she thought.

"What for, Pavlusha?" Asked Yulia coyly.

"Excuse me." Said Pavlik. "What do you mean, what for? It's my baby. I'd like to be there when it happens."

Irka's breath stopped. *You do care.* She squeezed his hand.

"That's no business for men." Snapped Margarita. "Leave it to women, grandson. You already did your part." She tittered.

"Mama!" Said Yulia sternly.

"What? Mama *what*? I'll talk how I want to talk. At my age I don't give a damn. You mean to say, he doesn't know to make

babies? Look at her. Think she ballooned from drinking too much water?"

Yulia said nothing. Red crept up her cheeks.

"Yulechka, Margarita Petrovna. I love you both, but please, it's almost midnight." Interjected Anton.

"Oy!" Exclaimed Margarita. "Is it, already?"

"Here it comes. Thirty seconds!" Proclaimed Anton, standing up. He uncorked a champagne bottle with a practiced move. The plug shot at the ceiling, froth spumed over his hand. He poured bubbly gold in glasses. They all stood, counting.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

The giant clock of the Spasskaya tower ding-donged on the television screen.

Three. Two. One.

"Happy New Year! Happy new luck!" They clinked glasses and drunk.

The puffy face of the president appeared on the screen, an insipid bear in a suit, white-haired, squinch-eyed. "Dear citizens of Russia—," he began, and that's when the silence broke.

The fireworks started.

And the killing.

Irka sprung up.



It rushed at her in an avalanche. The apartment. The grot living room. A cellophane bag of scag ripped open on the floor. Two insects. The wasp flexed its wings. Its exoskeleton undulated, mandibles clicked. It fell on the horsefly. The horsefly bucked beneath it, buzzing with insane compunction. "I won't...won't anymore. I won't! Promise. Please, no. No!" The voice broke through the drone. And then another, hale, white with fury, "You damn cheapskate! Teach you how to cheat! Teach you!" The noise was constant, like a whine of an electric current, or a chainsaw.

Strike, another, with a stinger. No, with a jackknife. It cleaved the fly in two, head and thorax torn apart from the abdomen.

"Irina, something the matter? Afraid of the fireworks?" Said Pavlik in a startled voice.

Irka dashed to the lobby. She fumbled with unfamiliar locks, heart ramming in her throat, eyes nearly blind from the rush of adrenaline, fingers sweaty, slippery. *It's killing it, it's killing it*, pounded in her head. She heard a door slam outward just as she managed to yank Margarita's door open.

*The wasp! It split!* She thought frantically.

Skidding footfalls echoed down the stairs.

Then the screaming started.

Irka ran out onto the landing. It was biting cold here, after the warm apartment.

A bony woman with a crazed face and rolling eyes, her cardigan askew over a cheap dress, stood in the doorway opposite, tearing at her hair and producing an strangely sciurine noise, a wail-bark. She'd run out of air, take a shuddering gulp, and scream again. Gulp, scream, gulp, scream. The sound pogoed up and down the cement buttes of the building, one crazy protracted yowl. The woman's face was purplish, gummy, as if bloated from near suffocation.

*A squirrel, a sick squirrel stricken by hemorrhagic fever. High on some shit, I bet.* Thought Irka. She made it to the woman, placed a hand over her shaking mouth, to silence her. The woman sagged into Irka's hold, wet face in the hollow of her neck.

"Roma." She wheezed. "He's...Sashka...he's..."

"Pavlusha!" Yulia's voice shouted from behind. "Where are you going? Leave it!"

"What the hell..." Irka felt Pavlik's breath on her back, then quiet whispers of Anton, Yulia, and Margarita.

"I beg of you, what's with the racket?" A new angry voice howled.

*The leech, thought Irka, the leech woke up.* She ran eyes over the place, a three-room flat identical to her mother's, a

narrow corridor with peeling wallpaper, in places torn off to bare concrete. A ladder leaning against dilapidated wardrobe, cardboard boxes with soiled duds, jars, cigarette packs, empty liquor bottles. It looked like a ponce's joint or a drug dealer's hovel.

"I beg your pardon, I'm trying to sleep. Svetka, have you lost your mind?" An old-timer in a bathrobe, corpulent and bald, poked in his head.

"Excuse us for barging in like that, we heard you screaming...did something happen? Can we help somehow?" Asked Pavlik politely.

Svetka stared at him uncomprehendingly, her thin chest in mad seesaws of oxygen crave.

"Pavlusha, let's call the medics. They'll know what to do." Suggested Anton.

"Papa, you know how long it'll take them to get here? On New Year's? You're joking, right? They're seeing boozy magic dreams by now." Said Pavlik bitterly.

"Papa speaks the truth, Pavlusha. Nothing we can do. She's in distress, right?" Said Yulia. "Or intoxicated." She added under her breath. "Besides, it's none of our business."

Pavlik ogled his mother with contempt. "No, mama, it is. It is our business. It's our future neighbor."

*And here I was thinking if it should be of my concern or not,* thought Irka. *Great job, Irina Myshko, worrying about your own hide. How's this not egotistic, explain to me.*

"Sashka," said Svetka suddenly. "Sashka, bastard!" She cried, quaffed for air, and flung into hysterics. "You knifed him! You *knifed* him to death! I'll kill you, you bloodsucker!" She rudely pushed Irka aside and skittered down the steps and out of sight, her bleached hair flailing behind her.

Led by her nose, where the smell of alcohol was the strongest, Irka walked into the biggest of the three rooms, where in her mother's flat Sonya, Valentina, and Lenchka resided, and froze, breath caught in her throat.

The hideous flesh-tone wallpaper was printed with an intaglio of gory smears, as if someone was chased around the room, bumping into obstacles, bleeding. Irka's pupils widened. Dark runnels of blood trickled along naked parquet. The room was mostly empty, save for a bed with a tangle of soiled sheets, three tabourets, and a rickety table with plates of salami, a hunk of bread, bottles of vodka and Zhigulevskoe beer—*my mother's favorite*—thought Irka absentmindedly.

But that's not what rooted her. By the window stood a sickly New Year tree, decorated with the same silver tinsel as Margarita's. Underneath it lay a crumpled figure of a man. By the stiff unnatural bend of his body it was clear that he was

dead. His naked torso pinned one arm to the floor, another was flung over his face, as if in protection. The belt of his trousers was unbuckled, and Irka could see dismal cotton of the underwear in the notched fork of the fly. Both legs tangled in a fall, one socked foot caught in the blinking garland. Next to the other sat a torn polyethylene baggy of white powder.

*Scag.*

The man's hairless chest was a sieve of knife wounds; slits, welts, cuts. They dribbled blood. Whoever killed him, was careless, mad with irrational ire. Suddenly the dead man's arm slipped off his face and thumped listlessly on the floor, driven by gravity that took its tool. If Irka could scream, she would, but her vocal cords locked. She only gagged noiselessly, feeling her tongue grow.

She recognized him. It was Roma, the guy who raped her with his gang. His eyes were bright blue and vacant, staring into nothing. His mouth was half-open.

*The son of the jackal. Cursed canaille. Dead.*

Irka crossed into the shadow of rage. She dimly heard Pavlik telling her something, reaching for her. She brushed him off. The only thing that mattered in her plane of vision was Roma. She stepped into the pool of his blood with Margarita's borrowed slippers. Soft woolen bottoms soaked in the gore. She didn't care.

*You dick-stupid parasitic piece of scum.* She raised her foot and began kicking his body. *You low-life dumbass motherfucker.* She buffeted his stomach, his chest, his face. The slipper made disgusting squelching noises. The body jerked lifelessly, Roma's eyes glassy, indifferent. It infuriated Irka even more. *You pervert! You douchebag fucktard pest with an axle of torpor stuck up your ass so far, it pierced your idiotic brains!* Kicking Roma didn't seem enough. Irka leaned over and began fisting him. *You petty scalper! You scut! You misogynistic degenerate!* She beat his body methodically, sensing hands on her, someone pulling her away, voices shouting. She resisted vigorously, punching, stamping, hitting. Someone dragged her. She kicked at the air, until the fetus became restless and slammed into her diaphragm, causing her to gasp.

"Stop! I said, stop!" Irka heard faintly, not clear to whom the voice belonged. She flailed her arms with an intent to grab onto something, to get back, to do more damage. Hot tears prickled her eyes. She wasn't done, she just started. Who interrupted her, why? Her bloody hands slipped on the doorway, and she stumbled. Hands caught her, lugged her into the corridor. *I hope your death was painful,* thought Irka, *I hope you suffered. Wish I was there to see it. WISH I WAS THE ONE WHO KILLED YOU!!!*

Irka knew what she wanted. With a flick of her mind, she collapsed into a mouse and slipped through the fingers of whomever it was hauling her.

The mouse tumbled to the floor, hustled back to the New Year tree, skirred up to the prostrated horsefly and tore at it with sharp teeth. It started with the head. It bit it off, spit it out, and squished it under its paws. Then it nibbled off every one of its six hairy legs. It squeezed molassic juices from its abdomen, and then it threw itself on top of the fly's remains, smearing the black smudge of resinous mess all over the floor and its fur. At last, it was done, just in time for the viper and the owl to come for her, a black butterfly fluttering over, a fox barking something to the leech at the door.

Irka emerged as herself in Margarita's kitchen, a wet towel on her forehead and pills being shoved in her mouth. Voices murmured around, petulant as winter winds. Her head pulsed and she felt like vomiting. She gagged. Pavlik helped her to the bathroom where she stuck her head under cold water from the faucet over the bathtub, letting it run over her face.

"You scared the living daylights out me." Pavlik handed her the towel, his face white. "That heinous, disturbing thing you did. Honestly, I don't understand. Why...why in the world did you beat him? For what purpose?"

Irka smiled. Heavenly nirvana filled her heart chambers, making her feel high, besotted with unrepentant bliss. *I kicked the shit out of that motherfucker*, she thought, grinning. Her cheeks hurt, but her lips kept dragging them up to her ears, until she thought her head would split in two. *Kicked the shit out of him! Oh, it felt divine. If I could hit him more, I would.*

"Look at me. Look...at...me, please, just for a second." Said Pavlik. "Here is the problem I have. I'm not sure how to get you out of this mess now. Mama and papa both think you've gone mad."

*I have*, thought Irka. *So what, I don't care. Let them think what they want. I got my revenge.*

"Naturally, grandma says there must've been some reason for what you did—I think she likes you—but I don't know anymore. Can you write? Can you please explain to me what it all means?" His pupils widened, but Irka could hardly focus on him, elated.

*One horsefly.* Said the eaglet, restless in her belly. *That's not much. I'm still hungry.*

*I'll get you the boar*, thought Irka, a permagrin on her face. *You just wait, I will.*

*You let a little bit of your animal out*, said the eaglet with a hint of a glee. *That was good.*

*Was it?* Thought Irka, but received no answer.



She suddenly swayed, in the hands of vertigo, and slumped on the toilet seat. Her head leaned on Pavlik's stomach, he stroked it. "Sorry. I confess, I'm a bad boy. I didn't mean what I said, honest. I don't think you're crazy. That thing you wrote, the wasp snuffing out the horsefly. You meant that guy? Did you really know what was going to happen ahead of time?"

Irka shrugged, nodded.

"Seriously? That's impossible. Wait a minute, the horsefly. That the same, one of...the guys that attacked you?"

Irka nodded again.

"Oh, I'm an idiot. Idiot. Sorry, I get it now. You know, I would've done the same. I think. I'm jealous, actually." His voice shook.

Irka hugged him. Pavlik stroked her head. So they stayed for a few minutes, until Yulia ushered Pavlik out.

Irka was given Margarita's old dress to change into. She stripped, washed the blood off her hands and feet, donned it on, stepped into boots, buttoned up the coat, and was escorted by Anton and Pavlik to the car. Yulia stayed with Margarita who suffered heart pains from witnessing the blood.

Dawn tinged the sky violet. It was early morning. Irka's breath puffed out in little clouds. She looked around dazedly, letting Pavlik open the passenger door. A couple neighbors huddled by the entranceway, discussing the murder, waiting for

militia to arrive. There were no ravens on the curb, no dead cats. No vultures on the roofs. No beasts of any kind. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary, except one thing. Irka stared at it as they drove away. Parked next to a frost-dusted blue Lada stood a car. It was black. It was clean, as if it didn't spend the night on the street. And it started moving as soon as they turned out of the alley.

Irka nudged Pavlik. He whirled around, squinting.

"Is that the same Boomer that..." He said quietly.

*It is, thought Irka. I can feel them. The ravens.*

## Chapter 18. The Test Of The Salamander

Irka didn't get a chance to talk to Pavlik for the next two days. She passed out in the car, sleepwalked to bed, and woke up at half past four in the afternoon to find out that he'd been sent to cajole Margarita Petrovna. Freed from their son's presence, Yulia and Anton spent the evening and the following Sunday interrogating Irka on everything from her mental health history to her motive for battering a dead body. She felt like a clay mouse in a skeet shot with queries at close range. She dodged them with sardonic silence, faked miscomprehension, and plain bold lies.

On Monday morning, January 3, the first workday of the year, Irka was finishing breakfast. Yulia and Anton surpassed ten hours of combined questioning over the weekend and decided to have another go. It was still dark. Yellow orbs of streetlights glinted through the tulle on the kitchen window. The cuckoo clock struck eight. The teakettle whistled hysterically on the stove. Yulia got up to turn off the gas. The whistle chocked and petered out.

Irka bit into her fifth cookie. Crumbs fell on the notepad filled with scrolled handwriting. She brushed them off.

"Irina." Said Anton, exasperated. Gems of sweat prickled his forehead. He cleaned his glasses on the hem of his wooly sweater and shoved them back up. "I'd appreciate it if you paid attention. Look at me! Once again. When did you stop talking? What was the cause? Have you been able to talk before? Your writing suggests a modicum of intelligence, at best. I bet you're fooling us on purpose. Either that, or you are, indeed, slightly soft upstairs. Do you understand where I'm going?"

Irka broke off a piece of the cookie and placed it in her mouth. *This automatic assumption that a mute individual has if not mild, then unquestionably severe mental impairment, frankly, astounds me, she thought, chewing. To see an educated man in his fifties feed me subjective bullshit about half-wit's genetic predisposition to violence, about which he knows jack-shit, is amusing. Just because I kicked a dead man, doesn't mean I'm a future killer. Oh gee, what if I kill your son? Your logic, Anton, either points me to stasis in your thinking, or, I don't know, total ignorance? Like, have you noticed that Pavlik is gay? Have you ever cared to ask? And if you do find out, will you cast him aside just because he somehow doesn't fit your ideal image of a son? How's that for a repartee?*

But she wrote only one word, "No."

Anton pressed on his temples, his hands tarsi of an unnerved creature. "No, you didn't know how to talk, or no, you're not a few brain cells short?"

Irka smiled. *Keep guessing, owl.*

"Or no, you don't understand my question?" His voice grew acid.

"Anton." Said Yulia.

"No, this is outrageous. How much time did we waste? Can't you see she's playing us?" He rose. His elbow caught on the edge and the table jerked. Spoons clinked, tea sloped over.

"See, if you left it to me, like we agreed," fleered Yulia, "I would've been done with the whole talk yesterday. Right?" She mopped the tea with a waffle towel.

"But Yulechka, if her muteness is not genetic, then why hasn't she seen a speech therapist?" Continued Anton relentlessly. Irka thought he'd sprout feathers and start hooting any second. "Irina, didn't your mother worry about your ability to assimilate among peers?"

*My mother worried about booze,* smiled Irka.

"No? Didn't it cross her mind that without a college degree, without so much as a disabled status her daughter will be sentenced to either look for a husband with money—I'm wondering if that's what led you to Pavlusha—or for a life of beggary?" He stared at Irka, ruffled, upset.

She marveled at her own calm. Her future was at stake, yet she didn't flinch, didn't titter and totter on the edge of shame. Did the mouse start growing sharper fangs? Or something meaner, stronger, better?

"No." She wrote next to the first 'No'.

"I can't do this anymore." Anton gripped tufts of his hair, then pushed the curtain aside, looking out the window, seemingly not knowing what to do with his hands.

Irka followed his gaze, searching for ravens or vultures or any other beasts. There were none. Not yet. The emptiness and darkness of the naked tree limbs adumbrated their return. Irka drew in air.

*How much longer before you strike?* She thought. *How much longer?*

Yulia put a spoon of sugar into her cup and swilled it. "Irina. Let me be straightforward with you, all right? We're taking you into our family without knowing anything about you. It's a big and scary step for us. The truth is, we're doing it for our son. He seems to love you very much."

Irka's heart clenched. *If you only knew,* she thought. *Please don't tell me you're as blind as your husband.*

"Personally," continued Yulia, "I have my reservations. There will come a day when you'll understand what I mean. When

you become a *mother*." She peered at Irka, eyes as narrow as slits.

*Is that a euphemism?* Thought Irka. *You mean, when I'm a dry crone like you who's too gritty to fuck?*

"Please, do us a favor. Let's get this over with, so we can move on to happy things, right? The wedding. The restaurant. The dress. All that good stuff." Yulia's face bloomed with verdure.

Irka perked up. A wedding? That's right, marriage. So they were going through with it? Despite labeling her a mum floozy and a dolt?

Anton chuckled. "You got her attention, Yulechka. Master class." He sat back to his tea.

"I told you." Said Yulia mildly.

*You know who you are, Irina Myshko?* Thought Irka, stewing. *You're a venal materialistic milksop. You're a bribable doormat. You're doughface. You're—* But she couldn't come up with any more rebukes. The damage was done. Pictures of frilly dresses invaded her mind. Flowers, veils, makeup. Bride's ransom, toasts, kissing. *Kissing!* Irka blushed. *Pavlik would have to lock his lips with me, publicly.*

For the first time in over a month of talking about it, the reality of their marriage sunk in, as did the reality of it not happening once Pavlik's parents found out that he wasn't the

father. She'd have to return to the bed in the woods, to the tippling catfish and the prurient boar with a sinuous cock.

Irka's face fell. *Is there a test that can tell who the father the fetus is before it's out of the womb?* She recoiled.

"Why don't you tell us the truth about your family?" Hissed Yulia. "Your mother, for example, where does she work? There is no Marina Somina in the Opera Theater, nor are they touring Europe at the moment. I checked." She pushed the notepad closer to Irka.

*Very smart, Irina Myshko.* Irka sighed, red-faced. "She doesn't have a job. She dropped out of high school."

"I see." Yulia let out a long breath, glancing at Anton.

"I suspected as much." He interlaced his fingers, leaning over. "Keep going."

Irka wrote. "She looks after the house. My aunt, Sonya Seledkina, is a kiosk grocery seller. Lenchka, her daughter, goes to third grade. Valentina Tarakanova, my grandmother, is a nurse. Nadezhda Koza, my great grandmother, is a retired factory worker." She hesitated. "Lyosha Kabansky is my step-father." *I hope you behave like one when we visit, you pig.* She added mentally.

Anton sipped tea. "That everybody?"

Irka shook her head. "Also two dogs, three cats, a hedgehog and a rat." She wanted to add, *and a catfish, a boar, a herring,*



*another hedgehog, a goat, and a giant cockroach, but stopped, a picture of the wedding dress blotting out her resistance.*

*Oh, you fool, Irina Myshko, you're such a fool!*

"You finished high school, right?" Yulia asked.

Irka wrote until her hand got tired. She told them about her daily life, her family, her school, everything she could recall except about Lyosha rending her with his dick every night and it being the reason she ran away. She blamed it on an argument with her mother. The last sentence she wrote was, "when I was two, I fell out of my crib, bit my tongue, and stopped talking." She put the pen down, exhausted.

The clock struck nine. By this time usually both Yulia and Anton left to open their jewelry store.

"One more thing, Irina." Anton inclined his head. "What prompted you to pummel that, uh...unfortunate young man?"

"He hurt me." Wrote Irka.

"Hurt you how?"

*Have you ever been bitten by a legion of horseflies shoved up your ass so deep you can't draw breath, can't think, can only hope your lower part would segregate from you because whatever is inside you feels like a stick of rough hobnailed cordwood?*  
Irka slammed the pen down.

"What's this supposed to mean?" Anton ogled her.

"I think she's done." Said Yulia with disaffection.

"Except, you're not, Irina. Phone number, please. So I can call your mother, to arrange the visit."

Teeth clenched, Irka scribbled the number.

"Well, I'm off. Call if anything. Good luck." Anton pecked his wife on the cheek and dissipated in the gloom of the parlor. Irka heard the clutter of shoes in the hallway, the jingle of keys, the slam of the door.

She raised her brows. *Good luck with what?*

As if in answer, Yulia said. "We're going to see Karina. She said she'll squeeze us in today. Get dressed. You have about ten minutes."

Irka's belly filled with ice. She gripped the chair, thinking. *Today? All of this ends today? I haven't even talked to Pavlik. Very clever, Yulia. Why spend money housing a pregnant prey when you're not sure what's inside its paunch?*

Unmindful of her, Yulia picked up the phone handset, a big shiny plastic thing with an antenna, punched in the numbers with a manicured nail, and sat erect, listening to the tone.

Somebody picked up on the second ring. "Hello?"

Yulia cleared her throat, but whoever spoke on the other end, was faster.

"Hello? Hello, who is it?" Cried the receiver.

"Good morning. My name is Yulia Ibragimovna—"

"Who?" Yelled the phone. "Kesha, get off me. Get off, you bitch! Say again?" There was muffled barking.

*Hey, grandma, so nice to hear your voice,* thought Irka. *How I missed it.*

Yulia's face spotted verdigris. "I have your Irina here. Irina Myshko?"

"Who? Irka? *Where?*"

"Right here, in front of me."

"Irkadura? You found *Irkadura*? Marina! Marina, *dura*, come here! They found your daughter! Quick!"

Yulia took the phone away from her ear, it yelled so loud. She studied it with aversion, as if the screaming woman's face was painted over it.

The receiver cried. Irka couldn't tell if those were tears of jubilation or disappointment. "What a nightmare! We went through such nightmare! We thought she was killed in that White House shootout!"

*Gee, get a grip on yourself, woman,* thought Irka. Yet part of her liked that reaction. They did care what happened to her, after all. Her mother was not feeling well, Valentina said—*drunk out of her mind*, thought Irka—and Lyosha was out, but she was home and Nadezhda was home, and Sonya left to walk Lenchka to school, but would be back soon. Yulia asked about a good day and time to visit, and Valentina yelled she only needed to clean.

Yulia shook her head. "Not today. Please, calm down. We can't come today. We will be coming some other time. What would be a good day for you?" She waved Irka off, pointing to the clock.

Irka stood up with her mind in welter. She dressed in Pavlik's room, her ear to the door, but there wasn't much to eavesdrop. Yulia offered a few days and clicked down the receiver.

An hour later they stepped out of the Nogin's Square metro station in the old center of Moscow. The day was cold and overcast. Galvanized sky stood tall behind three-story buildings with scuffed pastel-colored facades. Trucks highballed through the street. Huddled figures scurried by, bundled from head to toe, only eyes and nose on display. It was cold, minus fifteen degrees Celsius.

Irka crunched in her hand-me-down boots after Yulia, glancing about. Pathways have between stomped in the snow by thousands of feet. Slush spumed and crusted over the curb. Two lanes of traffic skirred back and forth like tureens on wheels. The roofs were blank, stark lines of prosy Moscow streets terrain. Not a pigeon on them, not a crow or a raven.

*I don't like this ominous absence,* thought Irka. Her skin crawled with goosebumps.

They passed a church, a bakery with its gluey dark bread smell, a bank, a couple shoe stores, crossed the street and dove under a low archway into the bowels of inner courtyards' web.

Irka hardly kept up with Yulia, puffing with effort.

Decked out in a mink coat, her pride and glory, Yulia talked non-stop, warning Irka that she took precious time out of her day to get her to this gynecologist, that Karina Semyonovna was very difficult to get to, that it was a privilege that she agreed to see Irka in the first place, that of course it was only due to Yulia's connections, and that Irka should be thankful, and-

Irka stopped listening. She noticed movement with the tail of her eye. They were being followed. Or was she being paranoid? A couple meters behind them crept a black Boomer. It flashed headlights once, twice. The narrow alleyway between the building and the broken playground, a moat dug out in waist-high walls of dirty snow, didn't leave much room for maneuver.

"Watch out. Car!" Yulia pulled her sideways.

They canted, pressing themselves flat against icy banks. The car whispered by. As it did, the passenger window rolled down. A strapping fellow grinned wordlessly at Irka. Next to him slumped the driver, a cleanly shaved lump of suet. He lowered his head, sighted down on her breasts and stripped her with a seamy stare. Their garb was metallic black, with a smidge of

indigo. Black wool coats, black caps over short-cropped hair, black unspoken plot between them. Baleful, calamitous. Irka's spine turned to ice, her legs flagged. She groped the snow behind her for purchase. The car disappeared into the murky archway.

*Ravens, thought Irka. Professional killer ravens. Rooks with an arm span twice as long as their bodies, to reach deep into my bowels and yank them out, still steaming. The ultimate reprisal enema worthy of national valor. Listen, citizens, we freed mother Russia from another homo Jew, his whore and their offspring.* She shuddered. *Fucking chauvinistic fanatic jingoists.*

A raven croaked in the distance.

Irka's heart did a summersault.

"Such polite young men." Said Yulia, motioning after them.

A gag rolled up to Irka's lips. She forced it into a cough.

"Like our Pavlusha. Didn't honk, just slowed down and waited for us to notice them. Educated young men with heads on their shoulders and money in their pockets, I can tell." She bore down on Irka. "You need to learn how to make a living on your own, Irina, to stand on both your own feet."

Irka couldn't believe her ears, thinking, *is this a ploy to make sure I bring dough into the family and don't suck out all*

*the juices from your beloved son? Or is it an improbable occurrence of Yulia Baboch actually giving a shit about me?*

"Men come and go. They know nothing about bearing children." Said Yulia. Small puffs escaped her lipless mouth. "It's on us, women. We take the blunt of it. If anything happened to Anton, I have the means to carry on. Do you?"

Irka blinked. *I have my ass to fall on, as long as it's fat enough to cushion the blow and skate along whatever shitriver whisks me away. Guess I'll use my arms for sculls and my nose for ingrate disdain?*

"Nothing." Pressed Yulia. "You have *nothing*, Irina. Not even a college degree. Get that acting job. Make sure Sim Kotik pays you. He seems to have a thing for you. Use it. Get along, get ahead. You're chunky, that's to your disadvantage. Once the baby is born, I'll help you lose weight."

Irka stopped breathing for a second. *Do what?*

"You think I don't like you? You're mistaken. I'm cautious, like any mother would be, right?" Yulia lifted her collar. Biting wind ruffled the fur. "Wouldn't you do the same in my place? For your son?"

Irka stared. *Did you just say, use Kotik? Like, grow a dick and let him suck it? Woman, you have embolism or something in that viper brain of yours? Sim Kotik is gay!*

"I want the best for him. Soon, you'll understand." She patted Irka's belly with a gloved hand, her eyes two icicles. "Irina, I need to know the truth." A pause, a drawing of the breath. "The father of the baby. Is it Pavlusha?"

For a split second Irka was caught off-guard, then she nodded, eyes open in mock innocent surprise.

"Just making sure. Let's hurry. We're late." She pulled Irka by the hand. It was the first time Yulia touched her.

Irka flushed with sudden guilt. *I suppose vipers care for their litter and for those who gestate it. I bet the second Yulia finds out I don't, she'll unfold both fangs, gape her jaws and the mouse that's me won't have time for a peep. Unless...what if I carry an eagle? What if it proves too large, to unwieldy to swallow? I wonder how vipers eat prey that doesn't befit their throats.*

They turned the corner of the building, hastened along a tight lane, passed an archway at a trot. Yulia looked straight ahead, but Irka glanced into it and wished she didn't.

Deep in the shadow, by the parked militia car, sat three hacked off women's heads, bloody, hair caked over their dead bloated faces. Two militants dug in the trash dumpster nearby, cursing the cold and their job, taking out body parts and dropping them on the ground. Neither of them wore gloves.



The lips of one head parted. "It bites off your head," it said with a knowing mien.

"Slowly," added another.

Irka stumbled, heart in her mouth.

"What is it?" Threw Yulia over her shoulder.

*A case of haranguing madness?* Irka thought, rushing after. Images flashed in her mind. The bulletin board, VACUUM ABORTION OF A NINE-WEEK OLD CHILD, the last illustrations of the fetus's squashed head and body parts against black background, its posthumous portrait.

"Come back," trailed the third voice. "Take a look, you'll know what happens to those who lie."

Irka shook her head. *Those aren't dead heads talking to me, that's some divining sickness of my psyche, the product of my daily sub-reality trips. I think it's time to—*

Something grunted at her feet.

Irka jumped, frantic with panic.

*A boar!*

A sniffing snout, gypsum tusks. Two piggy eyes looked at her. Big tricorn ears flicked back and forth.

"Don't mind her, she's afraid of dogs." Said Yulia apologetically to the man in a besmirched hat with earflaps, a huge hairy mongrel barking at the end of the leash in his mittened hand.

*Dog, it's only a dog,* thought Irka.

A military van trundled by, compacted snow squares flying off the tires. The rumble of its motor was joined by a hogwild rumpus of animal cries.

Irka swiveled around and looked up.

Every building cornice was packed with ravens. They crowed in chorus. Behind them cohorts of vultures screeched apocalyptic chagrin. Every drainpipe crawled with chiggers, mites, cockroaches, rivulets of them. They boiled over into piles of ghastly slithering splotches in the snow. Garter snakes slithered out of manholes. A jackal howled in a gateway, its yowl bounced off the walls like a torrent of invective. Cars turned to carapaces of some blatting fuliginous crawlers. Passersby transmuted into wolves, jaws dripping saliva, eyes rimmed red, aflame with hunger.

Irka clasped Yulia's hand, closed her eyes, and treaded on.

*I know what I need to do,* she thought.

*What's that?* Said the eaglet.

*Eaglet! I'm sorry it took me too long. I know how to let my animal out.*

*You do?* It asked, curious. *How?*

*I need to screech at them, like they screech at me, to yell at them, to tell them to piss off, to get out of my mind.*

*And how would you do that?* Wondered the eaglet.

*I need to learn how to speak again.*

Yes, said the eaglet thoughtfully. *Animals don't talk, they hunt and mate and live their lives. But people talk. People can't shut up. It's their détente. You have to let the mute little mouse out, I think. Yes, I think that will do the trick.*

*But how do I do it?* Cried Irka inwardly.

*Go back and remember how you talked before.* Said the eaglet.

*No! I don't want to go back, I don't—*

Irka's foot bumped into a riser of the stair. She opened her eyes. The squalling stopped. The beasts were gone. They arrived at a squat two-story building tucked between a ramshackle house covered with green mesh, slated for demolition, and a monotone block of some governmental institution. A gilded plaque on the ingress wall stated City Polyclinic Number 223. Gravid women came and went through the flopping door, some with children in tow, others with babes in hands, yet others alone.

A dozen empty prams stood parked by the porch. A lone nervous father smoked a cigarette.

"We're late. Hurry. Hurry!" Yulia hissed.

They entered the polyclinic lobby.

Warm thermals hit Irka's face. Compared to freezing air outside, this place felt like a stuffy banya. They corkscrewed through an imbroglio of sweaty bodies, pulled off their hats,

shoved them down the sleeves of their coats, and pushed their way to the booth behind a large glass window with REGISTRATION stenciled on it in blue letters, past the line of those waiting their turn.

A squat lady with a lip hanging to her chin just stepped aside. Yulia shouldered a young mother with a bundle in her hands and leaned to the square opening. "Good afternoon, we're to see Karina. Karina Semyonovna. She—"

"Woman! Where do you think you're going? It's my turn!" Said the mother indignantly. Her baby began to cry.

"Name." Said the orderly inside, her labcoat straining to hold a shapeless bust, permed hair pulled into a ponytail, her expression vaguely equine.

"Irina Myshko."

"Woman! Do you hear me?" The mother tapped on Yulia's shoulder. Yulia ignored her.

The orderly produced a medical record notebook and slid it to Yulia. "Second floor, room 34."

*I can't decide if you're a sheep that looks like a pony, or a pony that looks like a sheep, thought Irka, grazing high on the summit of indifference.*

"Lady, we're standing in line too!" Shouted a voice.

"It was my turn and she just barged in like a locomotive!"  
Exclaimed the upset mother. Her baby cried in long drawn-out  
wails.

"I say, some women have no shame. Roam here like it's their  
own private apartment." Shouted someone deep from the line.

Yulia didn't even glance at them. She slid the notebook  
into her purse and motioned Irka to follow. They mounted the  
stairs to the second floor. The air here smelled of medicine and  
chlorine. Irka's boots squeaked on the linoleum. They rushed  
along the hallway lined with vinyl-covered benches, the  
omniscient bulletin boards printed with advice for pregnant  
women's health, and doors. Women in various stages of ripeness  
sat close to each one.

*Cows, thought Irka. Bloated cows. I imagine soon I won't  
look much better.*

As they reached the end of the corridor, the last door  
opened. A woman came out, her eyes on the ledger, a pen in a  
hand hovering above. She was petite and slim, lizard-like.  
Elaborate braids of dark shiny hair circled her head. Her skin  
was yellow, splotchy; nose blunt, eyes slanted upward.

*An amphibian, thought Irka, a salamander. Toxic, warty,  
moist like a soggy decal. A prefect friend for a viper.*

"Finally." Said the woman in a thin voice.

"Karina!" Said Yulia. "We were just—"

"I started to think you won't show." Said Karina.

"Excuse me, Karina Semyonovna, I believe it's my turn. I was here first." A pregnant woman as emaciated as a mosquito stood, her stomach so large, it looked like she would topple over any minute.

"This woman over here said, I'm next." Said the girl with a pallid face and large protruding teeth. She pointed to a woman slumped in a chair, napping.

"I've been sitting here for two hours already." Buzzed the mosquito.

"So what? None of my business, is it? I took my place in line like all of us did. Girls, tell her."

"That's right. Doctor, we've all been waiting. Why does she get to go out of order?" A cow with a long face gestured angrily at Irka.

Karina didn't say a word. She ushered Irka and Yulia into her cabinet and shut the door. The room was decked out with a writing desk, a cot, a couple stools, a gynecological chair, and a frail plant fighting for life in the pot by the window. Harsh fluorescent light added a surreal silver shine to the feeble daylight streaming through the window. Traffic bustled along the street behind it.

"Karina. This is for you." Yulia dug into her purse and produced a box of Godiva chocolates and a bottle of Baileys cream liqueur. "A gift."

"Yulechka, what for? You didn't have to. I don't need it. Put it away, put it away." Karina pushed the bribe aside, unconvincingly.

"From Belgium, Karina Semyonovna. Would be a shame not to try it." Yulia insisted.

*The mandatory tug-of-war, thought Irka. The one giving delicately persists, the one receiving delicately declines. If cash can't grease your hand, hey, I'll give you a bribe. Only we won't call it that, no, bribe is a bad word. We'll call it a gift, chocolate hard to get. In special cases, we'll call it pussy hard to get, because, of course, not everyone has cash or can afford expensive confections and alcohol. Open your legs, bitch, serve as the forage to Russian bureaucracy. Give me all I want, or go beg shamefacedly for the rest of your life.*

The candy and the bottle tucked away into the recesses of Karina's desk, Irka was asked to undress and climb onto the chair. She winced as her feet touched the metal holders. They were cold.

*This is my scaffold, she thought. The end is near. One prick with a needle, and they'll know I'm an impostor.*

Karina's gloved hand unceremoniously felt inside Irka.

"Well, she's about five months. Why didn't you bring her earlier?"

"Oh, you know, busy-busy." Yulia smiled, and then added, as an afterthought. "Karina, I heard about this new DNA testing technique...to determine—"

"Paternity?" Asked Karina, curious.

Irka thought her heart skipped a beat.

"Well, yes, that too, but that's not what I'm worried about. I'm worried about any pathologies, to make sure the baby doesn't have any—"

"She really doesn't talk, does she?" Karina measured Irka with her slanted eyes. "Are you afraid the baby might have a speech defect?"

*You can't openly ask for a paternity test, Yulia, thought Irka. Of course not, it would lead to questions and subsequent rumors.*

There was an angry knock on the door. "Doctor? Excuse me."

Karina marched over, yanked the door open, and shouted in thin irritated voice. "You get in when you get in. I don't have ten arms. Now, if you stop interrupting me, you'll get in faster."

"But doctor—"

Karina slammed the door in the woman's face.



"They think I'm their slave." She commented crossly. "I get paid meager kopecks for this, and I'm dealing with their rubbish every day. Now I forgot what I was going to do."

"Tests?" Suggested Yulia helpfully. "And an ultrasound?"

"Yes, tests." Karina studied Irka. "We can do a DNA test. It's expensive," there was a greedy glint in her eyes, "it won't determine paternity, we'd need DNA samples from mother, father, and child, but it can—"

Irka didn't hear the rest. *It won't determine paternity, it won't determine paternity...* Her ears buzzed, dots skipped across her vision in spilled millet.

*Don't you want to find out who I am?* Asked the eaglet.

*I already know,* thought Irka.

*Do you?*

*Yes. A boy.*

*I am.* Said the eaglet. *What gave it away?*

*It's the force with which you talk,* thought Irka. *You're a prizefighter. I mean it in a good way. Must be the testosterone. You fill me with this destructive energy, this...caisson of emotions. I want to plunder, to maim, to devour. Those who caused me pain, I want to tear them apart, slake my thirst on their blood, and then stomp them. Stomp them into dirt. Until they're gone.*

*That's good. Said the eaglet. Food for worms. It shifted in Irka's belly. I'm hungry. Do I get to taste the boar soon?*

*You get to pig out on it, thought Irka. From heart to lungs to liver, all yours. Except its dick. The dick is mine. I want something to hold on to while I gut it.*

## Chapter 19. Back To The Catfish

Irka didn't walk back to metro, she floated. Scudded. On wings of assurance. On wings of an eagle? She didn't know, didn't care. Nothing bothered her, not street pigeons pecking at a discarded bread loaf, nor the absence of the beasts. Her worries over parentage tests had been deracinated, gone. Her fear over thwarted wedding plans had been assuaged, anxiety over black ravens forgotten. The mouse would wed the butterfly. An eagle would be born of its womb, a predator. It would dine on a boar, on the jackal, on any creature it wanted.

Distant, not quite present but not quite gone either, Irka followed Yulia into a grocery store, a bakery, a flower shop, an underpass to Nogin's Square station. Here, in the warmth of the vestibule, Yulia waved her to stop. She made three calls from the pay phone by the ticketing booth. Commuters straggled by, lackadaisical brutes woken from hibernation. Irka waited. *I will*, she thought, *I will learn how to talk again. For you, eaglet.*

They got home at a quarter to three. Pavlik and Anton sipped tea in the kitchen.

"At last." Anton rose. He was swathed in a thick nappy sweater that gave him an appearance of an owl vexed at bad weather. "It's almost three. I was beginning to worry. You said, *five* is when we have to be there?"

*Be where?* Irka frowned. Her stomach rumbled.

"Five, yes. More or less. We don't have to be there at five o'clock exactly, right? I took the liberty to stop by a couple stores. Got the cake, you know, the usual." Yulia took off her fur and neatly slid it on the hanger.

Irka placed grocery bags on the floor, unbending stiff fingers. They pulsed with fire. *We're going to my mother's apartment? Right now?* Her eyes sought Pavlik.

"How did it go?" He sprung up to meet them. Festive, nervous. Dark combed hair, dark suit, searching eyes. His face grew sour. "Mama, did you make Irina carry all this?"

"She offered." Said Yulia carelessly.

"Mama, can you get any more insensitive? She's pregnant."

"So what? I carried ten kilograms in each hand when I was pregnant with you, Pavlusha, and I was just fine. You turned out just fine."

"Did I?" His voice rose an octave.

They bickered.

*He's dressed up,* thought Irka, massaging her hands, *that means we're going. Never mind informing me of the plans, I'm*

*supposed to excel at telepathy. Whatever wings she grew have fallen into a quagmire of hopelessness. Dammit. Why today? I'm not ready yet.*

*You'll never be ready, said the eaglet. There won't be a perfect day. You know it.*

*Do I? I guess I do. Makes life a perspicacious bitch that knows how to con you. Irka's mouth felt dry as a desert.*

"How is your grandmother?" Said Yulia to Pavlik, pulling off boots one by one. "Is she all right?"

"Better, mama, much better." Pavlik said through teeth. "You know grandma, never admits to being in pain. She sends her greetings, by the way, says not to worry. Frankly, I don't understand why you asked me to spend time with her in the first place." He waited for an answer.

There was none. "Well, I need to go change." Said Yulia with finality.

Anton tried to placate. "Yulechka, you want these in the kitchen?"

"No, we're taking it with us."

Pavlik inclined his head. "Is that all? Mama, please. I'd appreciate it if you cut the suspense. It's unnecessary. I know you told papa, but he wouldn't divulge. Why keep me in the dark? Seriously, you both are exhausting me." He tried to make it sound like a joke. It didn't.

"We wanted to tell you together," said Anton with a shining smile, "properly, without rush. Certainly *not* in the hallway. Isn't that what you wanted, Yulechka?"

"It's all right. It doesn't matter now. Pavlusha?" Yulia fixed her hair, straightened her jacket, and stood still, an equipoised viper. "You'll have a son. It's a big step in your life, becoming a father. Congratulations."

"A father. At eighteen! You're a child yourself. Both of you. Who would've thought? How did you grow up so fast?" Anton shook his head. A tear cropped up in the corner of his eye.

Pavlik feigned shock, silent.

Words rose to Irka's mouth but died on her tongue. She grunted in frustration. *And I'll just witness this familial exultance like some speechless fucking furniture*, she thought. *A pregnant bogey to go through travail of carrying three kilograms of fetus, seven kilograms of amniotic fluid, a couple more of fat, and a ton of piety to my adoptive parents. A bogey that can't talk.* She slid off her coat, reached under the sweater, and twisted.

"A son?" Pavlik's voice was strangely jubilant, not his eyes. They were wide with fear. "A son." He looked at Irka in a mix of agitation and wonder.

She shook her head slightly. *It's cool, they don't know he's not yours.*

Pavlik raised a brow in question.

*I'll tell you later*, she mimed.

An odd silence filled the hallway.

As if suddenly remembering what couples do in important moments like these, Pavlik strolled up to Irka and kissed her. A dry peck on the lips, nothing more. "Irina. I'm so happy. A son. We're going to have a son. Are you happy?"

*Act more convincing, will you?* Thought Irka, nodding. She tried to shed a tear. It wouldn't come. To hide her face, she flung both arms around Pavlik. He warily held her, like a man holds a dipper full of water, afraid to spill it.

"Well, that's enough." Said Anton, a trifle uncomfortable. "A kiss and a hug should suffice, no use standing there. We need to get going. I'll go warm up the car while you guys get ready."

They piled into his Lada a half an hour later, Irka's stomach full of a hastily swallowed bologna sandwich.

It was a little after four in the afternoon, an hour from sunset. The sky was a slab of indigo faint with stars. Streetlights glared blindly at the pother below them. Strolling mothers with babes in prams, school children fighting for a piece of cardboard to chute down the ice-slide, grandmothers standing watch, dog walkers urging their pooches to piss so they could scuttle home, to the warmth of cabbage soup, bone marrow on dark bread, television and vodka.

They screeched through traffic, dodging crazies who darted across to catch a trolleybus or a taxi van or simply because they got tired of waiting for the green light and resolved to jaywalking. Jayrunning. In the snow. Irka watched them with the pit of her stomach fluttering each time. Anton cursed under his breath. Nonchalant, composed, Yulia applied makeup.

Pavlik's hand shook. He wrote, "the test—"

Irka snatched the pen from his fingers. They were cold, deathly cold. She squeezed them. "Not until birth."

"And then?" He looked up at her, frightened.

"Then, yes. They'll take samples, from you, me, from...the baby."

Pavlik sucked in air.

They stopped on the red light.

"We have four months," wrote Irka, "we can—" She followed his gaze.

Pavlik stared at a Moskvich parked by the curb. KILL A FAG SAVE THE PLANET was scrawled on its powder-covered window.

Light turned green, they lurched forward.

"Fucking ravens." Wrote Irka. "They followed me today."

Pavlik just looked at her, no face on him in the dark.

"Same black Boomer. When we went to see the doctor, they trailed me. I'm positive it was them. Have you gotten any more threats in the mail?"



Pavlik averted his eyes. His fingers laced, to hold on to each other, to stop trembling.

"Did you?" Irka tapped on his shoulder.

He refused to turn.

"Talk to Sim. Ask him for help, for advice, I don't know. Something. This can't go on like this forever." She thought a little, and then added. "Tell your parents you're—"

Pavlik's eyes flashed, each an incendiary fuse. A spark, and he'd burst into flames. It. A hellish butterfly, recalcitrant, obstinate, angry. He snatched the notepad from her hand, tore out the page, crumpled it into a ball, rolled down the window and threw it out.

A gust of cold air wafted in, city noises, squealing tires, a street vendor's cry, "Chiburekki! Hot Chiburekki!"

"Pavlusha!" Exclaimed Yulia. "What did you open up the window for? It's freezing! Close it, please."

"With pleasure, mama." Said Pavlik.

Irka saw a flesh-eating grin she hasn't seen before. She smiled, thinking. *Butterflies can grow teeth, I'm convinced of it. Catch yourself a viper for dinner, chew it to the bone, why don't you, Pavlik? Break an owl's neck, strip it of feathers, char it over fire. Let them be afraid of you, not the other way around. Let them—* Irka stopped. *Says who, a pathetic puling mouse that's shitting its pants at the prospect of facing a*

*boar? Stricken with stupefaction? How about it, Irina Myshko?*  
*It's easy to direct others, doesn't it?*

They stopped at the light.

Irka crossed her arms, fuming.

"Outrageous." Said Anton, upset. "This traffic is outrageous! Where are the snowblowers, I'd like to know?"

"On strike, I presume." Said Yulia. "Where else? Every shirker's favorite excuse. Less work, more drinking."

"We won't make it at five, Yulechka. Not at this pace."

"Anton, there's nothing to worry about. We'll get there when we get there. They will wait."

A red electrical eye clicked to yellow, to green.

They took off in a confusion of cars, buses, trucks, and snow. Melted snow, dirty snow, icy snow. Anton swung the wheel to the left. They skidded by some metro station. Swarms of pedestrians pressed on either side of the road, impatient, eager to cross.

Irka's heart suddenly cramped. She held her breath, listening. There was that buzz again, harsh, whirring. It coiled and looped, the noise blowflies make when feasting on rotten offal. *A death, thought Irka, an accidental death is about to happen.*

They were twenty meters from the crosswalk, picking up speed. Irka peered at the mass of bodies. One of them stood out.

Bent, tarnished, old. It was covered with horseflies, a sooty moving blanket. And that drone, that sluggish drone. Irka covered her ears, as if it would help. She recognized who it was. The figure in the front row, ghostly sallow in the pool of the streetlight. An old woman, a hag, bundled in grey downy headscarf, a cane in one shaking outstretched arm, an oilcloth bag in another.

*The vulture, she thought, the same vulture that—*

She yanked on Pavlik's sleeve.

He looked at her, irritated. "What?"

Irka pointed.

"I don't see anything. What is it?"

*The vulture that hit Kostya's car, Irka wanted to say.*

They were nearing the intersection. Their Lada led the farthest of the five lanes.

*She will die, thought Irka with horrifying clarity.*

It happened in the matter of seconds. The hag decided she'd had it. From where she stood, she couldn't see the flux of oncoming traffic. The pedestrian light was red, but the road was empty. She hiked up her coat, hobbled over slushy gruel by the curb, and staggered into the street, cane thrust upward like a probing claw. A beat, two beats, and a hurtling squadron of cars splashed her with light. She momentarily stopped, mouth agape. Anton's Lada drew parallel with her, some five meters away. Irka

glimpsed her face, rugose, startled. Shreds of greasy hair escaped her headscarf, shiny in the beam-light. She hasn't realized yet what was about to happen, probably never would.

*Get back!* Thought Irka, waving frantically. *Get back to the curb! Now!*

It was futile. A black car with tinted windows, a BMW, revved forward. A second later, it hit her. The hag's bony body flopped, flew up, bumped on the windshield once, cracked it, bounced, flew higher still, rolled over the roof on inertia, hit the trunk, turned once more, slammed on the asphalt and was still.

"Anton!" Cried Yulia. "Anton, look!"

"Oh God." Pavlik mumbled.

"I can't talk when I'm driving. Let go!" Anton snapped at his wife. They went with traffic, unable to see what happened, if any drivers rode over the body, blind in the dark; if anyone stopped. The Boomer flashed red ahead of them and vanished in a side alley.

Irka heard a stipple of laughs, ravens cracking up, hysterical, flippant, warped by committed atrocity. *You bastards*, she thought, *damn ass-kissing underlings on the prowl. You wait until your boss sees the damage to his car. He'll cut off your cocks and force them down your throats so deep, you'll*

*choke on your own junk.* She stared out the window, seeing, unseeing.

The car was sick with silence. None of them talked for the rest of the ride. After an hour of meandering through dingy streets, they arrived at the Brezhnevka where Irka grew up. Its façade, cream in color some thirty years ago, was now covered with streaks of mold and grime, dismal in darkness. Irka's heart skipped. She hasn't seen it since September. What was it, four months? Five? She involuntarily glanced up to the ninth floor. Same windows, same glaring light from the naked forty-watt bulb. Same orange curtains.

Orange.

Irka closed her eyes. *Go back*, she thought, *you said I have to go back, to remember.*

*And to feed me*, said the eaglet helpfully. *Don't forget to feed me. I'm starving.*

*I won't.*

They parked. They got out.

Irka got out last.

An old woman sat on the bench, a fixture of every entranceway. Felt boots, mangy coat, grey fuzzy kerchief. She waved to them, her face a big toothless smile.

*Oh, hey, Prasha rat*, thought Irka. *What's the deal with freezing off your tail in below fifteen degrees Celsius? You're*

*not here to see me, you're here to see who I'm with, you sleazy skinflint.*

"Irinka!" Peeped Prasha. "The angels! The angels brought you back! I knew they would, knew all along! I put up a candle for you, every time I went to church. Every time." She squeaked to stand. "Is that the groom then?" She squinted at Pavlik, two diminutive eyes. "Lemme see."

Anton and Yulia looked at Irka in question.

*If Prasha is here, the whole building knows about our visit,* she thought. Fingers stiff from cold, she scribbled on the notepad, let them see. "Praskovya Aleksandrovna Kryskina, my neighbor." *Ex-neighbor, I should've written, ex-neighbor.*

"Good evening, Praskovya Aleksandrovna," said Pavlik. "Pavel Baboch. Nice to meet you. My parents, Yulia Ibragimovna, Anton Borisovich."

"Good evening." They said in unison.

"Oh!" Prasha chewed on her mouth. "What a fine young man! Good catch, Irinochka. Atta girl!" She tittered a little. "That'un, I wager, would make a beautiful baby!"

*I'm tempted to step on your tail, old rat,* thought Irka. *Just to hear you squeal, make you shut up. Very tempted.*

Prasha wobbled up to Pavlik. "Lemme see, lemme see...those coal eyes. What I wouldn't give to be young again. Oh, I'd fetch him for myself!" She sniggered, patting his cheek. "Go in then!

They been waiting and waiting. One hour, it's been. I thought I'd freeze my fanny to the bench!" She sniggered again, pulled the door open.

Irka stepped into the warmth of familiar smell. Piss, rot, sour soup, rancid garbage. *Home*, she thought, *I used to call this home*. It was both nostalgic and unsettling. Sweet and disgusting. She wanted to run, jump out of her skin and spring without turning. Yet she didn't. She felt no premonition. Nothing bad was going to happen, at least not today. No bugs rushed in the corners, no dark birds pecked on dead cats. No hum, no drone, only muffled TV voices. She forced herself to mount steps. *I need to go back*, she thought, *to remember. I need to*.

Prasha chatted. "I knew Irinka since she was *this* little." She spread hands to the size of a loaf of bread. "So small, she was, so skinny! Look at her now! Round, pregnant. Atta girl. She like daughter to me."

*I'm like a daughter to no one*, thought Irka.

Prasha pressed the elevator button, it glowered red. Several floors above a dozen cogs and wheels whined to life. The cabin labored down, slowly.

"Fed her, watched her." Continued Prasha, each word punctured with saliva. "Valentina went to hospital, every God's day. She's a nurse, honest woman. Her and Nadezhda, both. God

forbid to have a child like Marina, that's one worthless *dura*, I tell you. Shouldn't of been allowed to have children, that's what I think. Squeezed her out, and phew! Vanished. Men, men. Only men on her mind. Brought one mongrel back home after another. Poor Valentina. Scum, all of'em. Alcoholics." Prasha hawked up a murky gob and spat. It plopped on the floor with a smack.

There was a pause. It stretched. Irka could hear the whiz of machinery. Pavlik hid behind a smile. Anton and Yulia studied Prasha with inordinate dislike.

*Wait till you see my family*, Irka sneered inwardly. *Prasha is nothing. You're in for a delectable surprise.*

The cabin thumped to a stop, yawned open.

After two months of living in a building without an elevator, Irka peaked inside with distrust. Nothing changed, it was as ugly as ever. Same ochre linoleum floor, same shiny fake wood paneling with patches of scraped off adverts, SPARTAK CHAMPION spray-painted next to the metal panel with black buttons, white numbers on them, 1 to 9, 3 and 4 burned, melted, barely visible. It stunk of cigarettes and rubber.

Prasha stomped in. After her Irka, then Pavlik, Anton, and finally, Yulia. There was barely room for five people, one of them pregnant. Prasha pushed the button with number 9. Sliding doors rolled shut and they were jerked upward.



All through the shaky ride, Prasha talked. How Irka wet her bed to fifth grade. How Marina beat her up for it every morning. How their cats and dogs crapped through the floor. How the neighbors below complained, because the urine corrupted their ceiling. How Sonya shagged some new Russian millionaire and got ditched after he found out she had a daughter. How Lyosha—

The elevator doors mercifully opened.

Irka stumbled out, gulping for air. Familiar door confronted her, bottom corners chewed off by animals, familiar plastic numbers, 275, above the peephole, handle polished with wear. Prasha pushed her aside with surprising agility and pressed the doorbell. It ding-donged.

"Open up! It's Prasha!" She yelled into the crack.

"Marinka? I know you're there! I brought you your daughter, *dura!*"

A bark, uncertain at first. A volley of them. A screech of a cat. Scurrying claws on wooden floor.

"Praskovya Aleksandrovna," said Yulia with a saccharine smile, "thank you very much for your assistance. I think we're good from here on, right?"

*A viper poised to snatch the rat and chomp it down whole,* thought Irka. *If only I wasn't a mouse.*

"Yes, thank you." Picked up Anton. "You were very helpful. Have a good evening."

"Please don't mind us, Praskovya Aleksandrovna," said Pavlik apologetically, "we're late and we're in a hurry."

Prasha grumbled something inaudible, scooped Irka, smooched her cheeks, and retreated across the landing, not quite gone to her flat, pretending to fumble with keys, watching.

Irka hardly felt it. She stared at the door.

It flung open.

## Chapter 20. The Animal Talk

Irka gagged. Out of the doorway came that reek, that odor she detested like some physical sullied being. Old sweat, animal stink, a musty hint of unwashed garments. Alcohol fumes. Badly cooked food. Too much fat, too much salt, too much leavened vapor that clung to your clothes like a barnacle. She used to smell like that, her hair, her underwear, everything. It infiltrated her like a disease. The smells blended together, bludgeoned Irka's nose. Her eyes watered. She blinked a couple times.

And then she saw them.

All of them.

They were there, standing, waiting. Bound by some incalculable moment of time, an absence. The gap between *before* and *after*. She saw them like a picture. Her mother Marina, Lyosha next to her, to the left of them Sonya with Lenchka, a hedgehog in her hands; behind them Valentina; Nadezhda leaning on a cane. Kesha and Kasha, done barking, undecided if they should bark more or leap at Irka.

The picture flickered, in and out of reality. The catfish, the boar, the herring, the hedgehog, the cockroach, the goat.

Back to people. Back to beasts. People, beasts, people— Irka took a deep breath, to stop hyperventilating.

Then the moment was broken.

"Daughter! My daughter!" Cried Marina. She threw herself on Irka, swept by affection displayed for the benefit of strangers, an incessant worship diametrically opposite the hatred she behooved one-on-one. Irka despised both. She stiffened. Her mind went blank. That same waft of hangover, so close to her face.

Kesha and Kasha barked with abandon, paws on Irka's legs, tongues lolling, tails wagging.

Marina let go. "Shoo!" She yelled at them. "Get off her!" She turned back. "Irka! Irka, look at me. Somethin' wrong? Don't you recognize me? Don't you want to kiss your mama?"

*Would you want to kiss a catfish?* Thought Irka with revulsion.

"Four months! I thought you might've died or somethin'. And I, you know, I woke up, and I thought, somethin' happened. Somethin's missing. And you were gone! No calls, no letters, nothing. Have you no heart? You should of asked them to call me earlier. I got grey hair worried about you." She pursed her lips like a petulant child. Or like a parasitic fecal matter eater.

"Did you gain weight? You look fat." Said Sonya matter-of-factly. "What are they feeding you?" She gawked at Yulia, her

mink furs, her boots, the obvious sign of unattainable wealth. Sonya's herring eyes bulged out with jealousy.

"*Irkadura* came back home! *Irkadura* came back home!" Yelled Lenchka. "With a baby! With a baby!" She jumped up and down, tapping a rhythm with slippers.

"Come in, come in." Valentina wiped hands on an apron, pushed her daughters aside. "And I'm here...see...I washed all the floors today." She nervously eyed the corridor. It looked dirty. "It's all dogs and cats. We have five, Kesha and Kasha here—both mutts looked up at Valentina with admiration—and Vaska is somewhere, hiding, he's shy. I locked Nyurka and Tuzik on the balcony. So much hair, see, hair, hair everywhere. Can't never clean enough. Oy!" She clapped hands, tipped her head back and produced a raspy laugh. It sounded like a cockroach mandibles rustling turned up in volume.

Irka crossed the threshold. Pavlik, Yulia and Anton piled in behind her. The door clicked shut. Irka flinched. She was back in the dump, the place she came from, with rotten parquet, warped wallpaper scribbled with phone numbers in different pen-ink, cracked rotary dial telephone underneath, on a dresser with half of its drawers missing. Copper hooks driven directly into cement, overtaxed with hats, coats, jackets; threadbare, dirty. Broken commode spilling shoes, slippers, a pair of Irka's ice skates, still in the same place she plonked them three years

ago, too small for her grown feet. The absence of lampshades, either smashed or torn off in the heat of drunken fights between Marina and Sonya, or Marina and Lyosha, or Marina and whoever it was she imagined in front of her, battering air.

*Good job, thought Irka bitterly. Good job strolling in like you don't give a fuck. Commendable behavior for a mouse.*

*The boar! The boar!* Said the eaglet, excited. *I get to eat the boar!*

*You bet you do, thought Irka. You bet. As long as I can bring myself to it.* She struggled to keep her gaze steady.

The boar grunted at her, an arm's length away. Squiffed. Swaying. Flannel shirt unbuttoned over hairy chest, piggy eyes shorn with indifference, intoxicated fiddle-faddle. That was Lyosha all right. He grinned at Irka, pinned her with a stare that spelled irrevocable ownership, ninety kilograms of flesh on top of the gutted mouse. He said nothing, only hiccupped twice. Out of surprise? Glee? Too much vodka?

Irka clenched teeth, stepped closer. They were now a breath apart. A crackle of loathing on one end, lust on the other. Irka tensed. It was now or never. She flexed her fingers, not knowing what she would do, but knowing that she'd do something horrid, painful, a tacit mutilation, her face concentrated, composed, calm. She would make him pay for his retroactive crimes, will make him—

Nadezhda broke the spell. She pulled Irka into a clumsy hug and planted a pair of dry lips on her sweaty forehead. "You forgot all about us. That's a bad girl, *bad* girl. Come here, give your grandmother a hug. Congratulations on the baby there." She patted her belly.

Irka squirmed out of her hold. *Not now, dumb goat!*

When she raised her eyes, she met those of Lyosha. The moment was gone. Irka boiled with frustration.

"Whatcha looking at?" He snapped. "Take it off. Show us what you got there." His eyes darted over Irka's coat, watching her unzip it. The zipper got stuck. Irka jerked it a couple times. It wouldn't budge. Then there was Pavlik, his hands steady. He peeled her fingers off one by one, blocking Lyosha out of sight. Two butterfly wings, big, black, seemingly impenetrable yet fragile. "It's okay. You're okay." He whispered. "Relax. You're not alone. I'm with you." Then, on a breath, "he *does* look like a boar, you were right."

Irka swallowed. *Stop it*, she thought. *Stop it, you're making me weak. You're making me want to fall apart. I can't afford it right now, I have to—*

Have to what?

Irka didn't dare pinching herself in front of all these people. She bit her lip instead, hard. It drew blood.

"Yulechka, your coat." Anton served his wife, revolving his head one hundred and eighty degrees, trying to decide where it was safe to deposit the precious garment.

"So many of you." Said Yulia sweetly. "Such a big family."

"Like fucking ants in a an anthill! Only bitches! Five bitches! Eight, if you count them mutts and damned cats!" Lyosha laughed at his own joke. Marina joined uncertainly.

That drew a beat of silence.

"Fat swine." Hissed Lenchka and stuck out her tongue.

"What? Did you hear you right, little whore?"

"Don't call my daughter whore." Snapped Sonya.

"You watch your mouth. I'll show you swine. Show you. Come here!" Lyosha's eyes bulged out, but Lenchka already disappeared into the kitchen where an ugly table was covered with a higgledy-piggledy of plates, viands of Valentina's labor, the only woman who cooked in the family.

"A man's gotta show them who's boss, blast them." Lyosha wiped his hand on the shirt. "I tell you that as a man to a man, you understand. Aleksey Ivanovich Kabansky." He shook Anton's unresisting hand.

"Baboch, Anton Borisovich." Said Anton, still in shock.

"Welcome to our home." Said Sonya with oily sarcasm.

A stiff exchange of introductions followed, congratulations, handshakes, titters, small talk, where are the



slippers, was there enough slippers, would it be okay to stay without slippers. It went on in the background, while Irka studied Lyosha. She noticed something new, something strange. A change. He was cleanly shaven, an unlikely sight. His hair was cropped short. And there was a new black coat, where Pavlik hung her jacket, too new to belong to this household. And a black beret, cocky on top of headscarves, hats, shawls.

*A boar recruited as a raven? Thought Irka. What swineherd had this brilliant idea? Let's stun it with an electric current, hoist it on a rail, exsanguinate it, castrate it, scald it, pull out six meters of its shiny bowels, then wait and see if it grows wings.*

Irka sucked on her bleeding lip. *Scald it, I like that.* There is always plenty of hot tea. She walked into the kitchen and sat on a rickety stool by the window, her usual place.

The rest of the party dispersed around the table with intermittent success. Pavlik perched on the edge of a stained tabouret, shifty, worried. Yulia and Anton lowered themselves with calm, a bulwark of propriety. Lenchka slid in her mother's lap. Nadezhda leaned on the cane, urging Valentina to stop fussing by the stove and sit down. Marina flopped next to Lyosha. Dogs fought for a femur bone by the sink; Sonya yelled at them, they scat. Tabby Vaska sprung down from the refrigerator, hissed, slunk out. Feet shuffled. Chair legs

scraped the floor, settled. All eyes poised on Irka, ten square meters crammed with ten people and one solid awkwardness.

*Here we go, she thought. Brace yourself, Irina Myshko.*

Lyosha slapped both thighs and leaned forward. "So. Irka, ya grey foolish mouse. Holy moly. Pregnant, huh?" He grinned. "Blast me! How did that happen?"

*Ever thought about it when sticking your cock up my hole, you dowdy dickhead?* Thought Irka.

"How it usually happens," said Pavlik, "brought to us by a stork, of course." He threw Irka a glance, it danced with a murderous intent.

*Glad I'm not the only one who wants him dead,* she thought.

Valentina burst into laughter. "Oy! Pavlik, you're funny."

"A stork, huh?" Said Lyosha, puzzled, not at all amused.

"A stork, yes." Pavlik confirmed. "A wading bird with a long bill. Not to be confused with 'pork'."

Irka held back a smile.

Anton and Yulia chuckled lightly.

"*Irkadura* got knocked up! *Irkadura* got knocked up!" Chanted Lenchka, bouncing the hedgehog from one hand to another.

"Shh!" Hissed Sonya. "Shut your trap or get out of here." She flicked her forehead. Lenchka cried out and fell silent, livid eyes under furrowed brows.

Marina opened a beer bottle, took a swig. "Irka, pregnant! Can't believe it. At sixteen! At least I waited till I got eighteen. If not for your poppa—damn randy prick—might have waited some longer. Might've had a career. The animal had me day and night. I'm not saying, I'm not glad. I am." Another swig of beer. "Some young grandmother, you made me! Maybe I don't want to be a grandmother yet. I'm too young to be one—watcha staring at me for? What do you want me to say? Somethin' like that happens, what do you say?" She looked around the kitchen for an answer, words slurry. "What do you say to somethin' like that?" Her gaze fixed Pavlik with a mixture of jealousy and distaste. "That one, right there. That who stole my baby from me. Could of at least've told me—"

"Please accept my deepest apologies, Marina Yakovlevna." Said Pavlik. "You know how it is with us, young people. I couldn't resist. Irina stole my heart, I stole her in return."

"Left your mother with naught." Interjected Lyosha. "Not a note, no nothing. I looked all over for you. Found you in the metro, of all places, and *blast* me! You slipped through my fingers! We'll talk about that, by the way. Later." He sneered. "Got unfinished business to discuss."

*Didn't know that 'talk' stands for 'fuck' now.* Irka glanced at the kettle on the stove. Chipped enamel, rusted spout,

hideous orange peonies painted on its side. That hated orange again. Water rumbled, close to boiling.

"Oy! Cabbage pies. Cabbage pies are getting cold." Uttered Valentina. "I just...just baked them. This morning. If I would've known you'd be coming, I would've made meat pies. We're short on meat this month." She giggled a little.

"Stop it, all of you. Have you no shame?" Nadezhda struck her cane on the floor. "We have guests. Ought to comport yourselves."

"Don't tell me to be quiet in my house." Lyosha's boorish face blotched with purple.

"Your house? *Your* house? Listen to him." She lifted her cane. Lyosha caught it, yanked it out of her hand. "Watch your mouth, old *dura*."

"Don't you like it here?" Sneered Sonya. She gawked at Pavlik with a desperate hunger that suggested a fruitless hunt for viable suitors. "One big happy family."

"I feel practically at home." Said Pavlik with a smile.

Yulia raised a brow. "What are you saying, Pavlusha?"

"Excuse me, if I may?" Anton put up a hand. "I'd like to say a few words. First of all, please forgive us for intruding. It was rude to come uninvited and on such short notice. For that I humbly ask you to be easy on us. Our intent was to meet you, to discuss the future of our children, Pavel and Irina. It's why

we're here. And, well, as occasion demands—" he picked up his leather briefcase "—we thought you might like a little token of appreciation for your hospitality."

He unfastened the flap, dug in.

"Bailey's liquor." The squat bottle went between a bowl of beet salad and a pot of boiled potatoes. "Belgian chocolates." The box got wedged between Pavlik's and Sonya's plates. Lenchka reached for it. Sonya slapped her hand without looking, "Don't touch it."

"Perfume for the ladies." Anton took out a handful of finger-sized glass vials.

"Papa, you've outdone yourself." Exclaimed Pavlik.

"French!" Gaspd Sonya, sniffing it. Valentina tittered, Marina took hers like she was more interested in drinking it, Nadezhda grumbled, slid the vial in her housecoat pocket.

Anton produced a tin of caviar, to a collective gasp, a tube of German gumballs for Lenchka. She squealed, before her mother snatched it and shoved it under her thigh, for safekeeping. Last, Anton handed Lyosha a steel flask. "For you, Aleksey Ivanovich."

Lyosha croaked in delight. "Holy moly. That's what I'm taking about." He opened it. "Marin, sniff. First class vodka, huh?" Marina took a whiff. Her eyes blazed excitement. "First class."

"What did I say?" Lyosha boomed. "A man knows how to do business right. Thank you, Anton—what was it?"

"Borisovich. You're very welcome. Consider this the ransom for the bride." Anton propped up his glasses, pushing Kesha away, who took on humping his leg.

"Get out. Out!" Hissed Yulia.

"Just kick it." Sonya demonstrated her suggestion in action. Kesha yowled, scurried out of the kitchen.

"Well, I propose we talk about our future plans." Anton wiped his face. He began to sweat. Irka cracked open the narrow windowpane behind her to a gust of freezing air.

"As future relatives." Added Anton. "By *future* I mean, immediate future. The wedding."

The word settled in the air like sediment.

The kettle boiled. Valentina reached to the stove, turned off the gas.

*Should I snatch it and pour it on him outright, thought Irka, or should I pretend to serve tea and make it look like an accident?*

*I don't care how you do it.* Said the eaglet, upset. *It's getting late. I want my boar.*

*Just give me time, just a little more—*

The eaglet kicked her diaphragm. She suppressed a gasp. It hurt.

Unchallenged, Anton launched into a spiel about the wedding ceremony. The restaurant to hold it at, the type of car to rent, the number of guests, the invitations, the dress code. The cost.

Irka's family began to eat. The slurping, the chewing, the finger-sucking made Irka sick. Pavlik tentatively tried a cabbage pie. Yulia sat still, hands folded, politely declining Valentina's offers due to a fake stomachache.

"How much would you be willing to contribute?" Asked Anton.

Marina champed on a potato. "How much-wha...?"

"To the wedding." Explained Anton patiently. "How much would you be willing to contribute to your daughter's wedding?"

"How much do you need?"

"Have you lost your mind? From what money?" Lyosha snapped. "Forget the wedding! Let them sign the certificate and be done with it. We don't have no money for luxuries like that."

"Well, you see, Irina has been living with us for the past two months without any financial assistance from you." Said Anton quietly. "We would certainly appreciate it if—"

"Fuck if we knew where the *dura* was!" Lyosha shouted. He groped for the table, stood up. Plates rattled.

"Lyosha, don't." Said Marina.

"Shut your mouth! Man of the house speaks. I'm the one bringing dough here. I'm the one with a steady job. My job pays real money, not like yours, *duras*. What they pay you, huh?

Hardly enough for bread?" He leered at Valentina. She shrunk into her stool. "What do you do in that hospital of yours, carry out piss? Wipe shit off the asses?"

"And you?" He turned to Nadezhda. "What can you buy with your pension, a sack of potatoes?"

*I think the handle on the kettle cooled down enough,* thought Irka, *but the water's still hot.*

"What kind of job do you have, if you don't mind my asking?" Said Yulia with stealth.

Lyosha sized her up, deadpanned. A viper was not to his taste. "Security," he blurted.

"Well, that's excellent news. Irina told us you were looking for a job, right, Irina?"

"Did she?" He glanced at Irka warningly.

"That and much more." Said Pavlik icily. "Irina told us how hard it was for you to remain unemployed and still take care of her family, *herself* especially."

"Tea!" Valentina suddenly exclaimed. "Oy, we forgot about tea. It's getting cold."

Irka stood up, touched Valentina's shoulder.

"Will you pour it, Irka? Just don't spill, it's hot."

She nodded, staring at Lyosha, at the kettle, at Lyosha.

"Whatcha looking at, huh?" He demanded. "Teach her manners, that one." He admonished Pavlik. "Sly mouse, she is. Playing



stupid. I know *stupid*. She ain't stupid, it's all pretense. Be careful with her, show her who the boss is, boy."

Sounds muted for Irka. Reality edges blurred. Time slowed down. *I'll show you*, she thought, her hand on the kettle handle, *I'll show you who the boss is*. She felt the sides. Hot, piping hot. Good. She spun around, fingers white from grip.

*You pig*, she thought, taking a step.

Lyosha gawked.

*You're nothing but a pig to be slaughtered. A wanking cockshit hogface*, thought Irka, advancing. *A pulpy plebeian pissbrain. Sex-crazed loser! Shitbreath! Porkprick! Boil alive, you cuntin bastard fuck!*

She lurched forward. The kettle tipped. Its lid flew off, knocked an empty beer bottle to the floor. It broke with a bright clatter. Irka rammed her belly into the table, hard. Plates clinked, cutlery tinkled. Scalding water slopped over the rim, out of the spout. Irka's sweaty hand lost grip. The kettle dropped into Lyosha's crotch, sideways, soaking it through.

His eyes bulged out of their sockets. He didn't make a sound at first. Then he squealed. A boar, scalded, scorched, steaming. Hysterical. It kicked up its hind legs in the air, rolled to the floor, grunting, shrieking. The catfish slid off the chair next to it; its barbers jittered, it opened its maw at the mouse.

The mouse trembled but didn't scurry away. It watched.

The goat bleated. The herring and the hedgehog fled the kitchen, the goat on their heels. The cockroach bustled around in circles, aimlessly, lost control of its spindly legs, sprawled flat. Green flashed above it, the slick body of the viper, uncoiled; wings flapped, those of an irritated owl; black wings, a black butterfly. It fluttered to the mouse.

The boar roared, in pain, its paunch flamed red. Sharp wheezes escaped its snout. It filled the kitchen with the stink of half-digested food.

The mouse couldn't look away, mesmerized, immobile. It wasn't the belly it stared at, it was the thing below. A sinewy twisted hunk of flesh, rubbishy, purplish, limp. The mouse fought an itch, an almost sickening prurience to scuttle up and bite it off. If only the boar didn't twitch, if only it lay still...

*Eaglet! We got it! Said the mouse. We got it in the dick.*

*Yes, we did, said the eaglet. Not enough for me, though. I wanted more. It'll have to do, I guess. For now. Let's scat, before it tramples us to death.*

They did.

## Chapter 21. The Move Of The Fox

Pavlik shook Irka awake at five past nine on a crisp Sunday morning. She yawned, sat up, foggy. They spent the last five days in the drudgery of the move preparation. Pavlik sorted things into boxes. Irka helped. She washed, cleaned, organized, packed, no thoughts in her head except two. The room had to be emptied by Saturday night, to receive Margarita the next day. They'd migrate into her one-room apartment. They wouldn't have to hide on the balcony to talk, wouldn't need to exhibit pretend intimacy. They could be themselves. Lyosha Kabansky was another thought. He got admitted to the hospital with second degree burns. For a week? A month? The accident was chalked up to pregnant women clumsiness. But it wouldn't last long, this reprieve. Irka knew it. The backlash would be prompt.

There was a third thought. Not a thought, a bruit. It grew, mutated to a constant undercurrent in her mind. Drone in her ears. Silt in her eyes. A permanent presence.

The ravens.

They watched her, out of every shadow, every corner. Watched them both. Pavlik refused to admit he got any more death

treats. Irka refused to believe him. He looked frightened, his face peaked, eyes traced with darkness.

"You know, when you scorched that...freak," he fingered the corner of a cardboard box stacked by the door, "I thought, I wouldn't have the guts. If I came across those guys that...the eels I told you about, if I ran into one of them, say, on the street somewhere, or if I recognized one of them, in a social setting, I don't know. I probably couldn't. Wouldn't be able to. To hurt them, or say anything. I'd get paralyzed." His eyes fastened on Irka, waiting for an answer, a solution.

She slipped out of Yulia's flannel nightgown, donned her usual garb, drab cotton bra, shirt, sweater, woolen pants, hand-knit woolen socks. The familiarity between them hung like a tapestry. Irka felt no shame. Pavlik didn't stare. His eyes slid over her body like bugs over an eggshell. She regarded him. *Freak?* She thought. *Freaks have faces. Lyosha has no face. He's got a muzzle. That of an animal. A boar.*

Pavlik squinted. "Didn't Lyo...the boar, didn't it ever make you feel paralyzed?"

*Every single time,* thought Irka. They talked this over to holes. Pavlik still couldn't get over her dare. "Listen, I'm worried about you. What if he threatens you? When he gets out?"

As if on cue, a raven croaked behind the window.

Irka flinched, bristled, angry. She sliced across her neck with the edge of her palm. *I'd carry a kitchen knife with me, because he doesn't deserve any other blade. His throat must be slit like that of a pig. End of story.* She fumed. She wanted to say it, not think, say it aloud, word by word. She wanted to throw the window open, lean out, and yell at them to piss off, to leave her alone. Words rose on her tongue and died by the teeth, dry, broken.

"It might happen any day. Today, tomorrow."

*Thanks for the reminder,* thought Irka.

"Let's think about this objectively, okay? Irina. You won't stand a chance against him, not *that* hulk. He's huge. Strong. Look, I don't mean to offend you with what I'm about to say, but you're weak. Pregnant on top of it. I can't be by your side at all times."

*At the sight of the boar the enervated cavalier drops his maiden and opts for decampment. Suck it up, girl, you're on your own,* thought Irka.

"Even if I was, it's not like I'd be much help if he decided to attack you. *Us*. Think about it. He'd probably squish me like a bug. Smear me all over the wall with a thumb. Like you said, poor feeble butterfly." He chuckled.

An image of bloody streaks on wallpaper in Roma's apartment blinded Irka. Her face lost color. *Don't say that,* she thought.

Her lips had gone white. She picked up the pad from the desk, the pen, slumped on the bed and wrote. "He may be big, but he's a caitiff. A coward. Inert, indolent unemployed butcher and alcoholic who got dangled a carrot and bit it. High paying security job? Right fucking on. It's an ostentation. Very much in his character. I don't believe Russian National Unity pays him more than he got for slicing pork."

"So what do you suggest?" Pavlik looked at her, a hopeful boy, and for a second Irka abhorred his fragility, his gayness, his lack of volition.

"Fight him." She smacked the pad with a fist and croaked. An actual noise, louder than a clearing of a throat or a grunt. "Fight them. The ravens. The eels. Whatever the hell they are, fight them." She dropped the pen. Heavy respiration. Wheezes. Rattles came out of her mouth.

The raven screeched again, another joined it. A jackal howled. Or was it a hyena? A wolf? They seemed to communicate.

Irka tore to the window, pulled the semi-cheer curtain aside. Steely sky boiled with constipated clouds. No sun, no fresh snow, no thaw, same dreary cold of Moscow winter. Black dots crawled along trodden paths without a hitch in pointless peregrination. To store, from store, to walk a dog, out for a smoke, to get drunk. Cars lumbered along snow-swept streets like

shelled bugbears. Naked tree boles spread twigs in hundreds of scrawny fingers. And on them sat ravens.

A hundred of them. Maybe more.

Irka recoiled.

"What is it?" Said Pavlik quietly.

She snatched the pad, scribbled, shaky hands, thoughts in disarray. "The ravens. Look. Do you see them? There must at least a hundred."

Pavlik peered down. "I see one." He studied Irka for a tense moment. "You mean, it feels to you like there is a hundred?"

Irka grabbed her head. She wanted to ram it through the glass, have shards peel the mouse hide off her. The pad flopped to the floor, the pen rolled under the accordion radiator by the window. She bent, picked both up. "Something will happen today." She wrote. "I feel it. Let's not move today. Let's do it some other time. Tell your dad."

"Why? What makes you so certain?"

"I don't know. Just a feeling." She hesitated. "I haven't told you. Remember I was jumpy? At your grandmother's, on New Year's?"

"Were you?" Pavlik frowned. "I don't recall."

"I knew that filth, that Roma, knew he'd be killed. I didn't know who would kill him, why or how, I only saw a wasp,

sensed a wasp, with an aim to exterminate a horsefly. It's like a bestial ventriloquism inside me. Or something. I don't know."

Pavlik's pupils widened.

"Roma's apartment was full of horseflies. They were drinking beer, mixed with vodka. On a threadbare sofa."

"You...saw that?"

"No. I heard. The drone, the hum, then the buzz. Then pictures in my head. Not so much pictures. Perceptions, the whirr of wings, the prod of the stinger, that sort of thing."

"Are you saying you're a soothsayer?"

"More like a polymath and an opsimath married to one other. Listen. It doesn't matter. What matters is—"

A volley of sharp barks echoed up, bounced skyward.

"There. That was the jackal. Did you hear it? Shakalov is nearby."

"Shakalov is at the theater, prepping for season opening. Or getting squiffed. That was a dog, a bark of a dog." Said Pavlik carefully.

"I'm not mad, okay? I simply have this..." Irka nibbled the pen, exasperated. "First comes the noise, animal noise. Crowing, hooting, hissing, whatever. It's the harbinger of the main premonition. Then I start seeing them, beasts, birds, insects, in the streets, on the roofs, everywhere."

Knuckles rapped on the door.



"Tell him, not today." Irka added hastily.

"Yes?" Said Pavlik.

Anton peeked in. "Good morning, Pavlusha. Slept well, I take it? Ready to go?"

"Yeah, I think we are."

Irka yanked on his sweater.

"Irina woke up not too long ago."

"Thought I heard voices. Well, let's load her up. Your mama has gone to the store. There are cold sandwiches in the kitchen. Help yourselves." Anton vanished into the corridor.

"No!" Irka wrote.

"Irina, I understand that you're worried. Believe me, I do. I also understand your *unorthodox* way of seeing things. If I could only do the same, maybe I would've been able to deal with my own baggage in a more effective manner, but—"

Irka threw the pad at the wall. It flopped, slid to the floor, pages ruffled, fell still.

Pavlik took a step back.

Irka saw her reflection in his eyes, ashen, a face of a whited rodent, two holes carved out for pupils, eyelids ragged frowzy rims. A mouse gone wild, savage. Avian? Did she see a bill? A spread of remiges?

"You know, Irina, sometimes you scare me." Whispered Pavlik.

*Sometimes I scare myself,* thought Irka.

"Let's go eat something. Sandwich? Hot tea? Come on, it will make you feel better." He put on a smile, that professional theatrical fixture.

*I feel excellent,* thought Irka. *High on adrenaline, eager to take wing against those feathered dunces outside.*

A chorus of croaks answered her.

*Shut up!* Thought Irka.

They screeched, offended.

*You're not ravens! You're not even birds! You're the pabulum spat out of my brain, not real, so fuck you!*

The noises stopped.

Irka's eyes danced with flocks of dizzy snow. Her heart fell into a faint. She felt like an empty shroud, leached of color, of sanity, to be measured by an undertaker, fit in a wooden box, and interred in the frigid ground.

She shook her head, scurried after Pavlik, entered the kitchen, sat down. Mechanically. Watched him fuss, place a plate on the sticky oilcloth, a cup, pour cold concentrated tea out of ceramic teapot, add hot water from the kettle, drop in three sugar cubes, slide in a spoon, swirl it around. Irka half-listened to him talk.

"—fit the most valuable items in the car first, like the TV, you know, the VCR, the computer. Once we're there, you can

stay, and I'll go back with papa, bring grandma with whatever possessions of hers we can fit in the car. Papa's idea. Sound good? Two trips should do it. We'll be done before dark."

Irka nodded, took a bite of the sandwich. Chewed it. Cold bologna tasted like rubber smeared with butter.

"You okay? Do you want to stay here, maybe?"

She shook her head vigorously.

After ten minutes of apathetic eating, Irka washed her plate, crammed it in the dryer rack, followed Pavlik into the hallway, slipped on her coat, boots, and wobbled down the steps after him, agitated.

She stepped into snow. Packed, old. Only snow, no dead cats, no birds, no other beasts.

*This doesn't mean shit, thought Irka. I know where you are. You're ahead of the game. You've gone to meet us there. Clever little numskulls. Are you to tell me you've got more gumption than me? More guts? Are you?* She stooped, picked up an icy maple bough off the ground. Waited.

The yard rebounded with children's catcalls, dog barks, the regular Sunday hullabaloo. Irka ignored it, watched for motion, in shades, arched orifices, dark open doorways. There was none.

She held the bough tighter.

It took Pavlik and Anton several trips up and down five flights of stairs to haul heavy boxes outside, a handful of

grunts to get them into the trunk. Irka's toes, fingers and nose grew numb. The temperature fell to negative ten degrees Celsius, Irka checked it on the thermometer outside the kitchen window.

They piled in, took off.

The ride lasted less than an hour. Most of the snow was cleared off the streets, the traffic was light. Irka watched buildings flash by the side window, smear in the muddy haze, disappear; thought of Roma's blank face, knife wounds in his chest, his dead glassy eyes. Compound horsefly orbs, iridescent mosaics.

They arrived at quarter after eleven by Margarita's Brezhnevka, circled it around for a good ten minutes until a grubby Lada left a spot between a Moskvich, crusted with granular snow, and a clean shiny Opel. Anton backed into the gap, wheels skidding on the icy asphalt.

They got out.

Irka fought the impetus to cover her ears. Not a buzz this time. An insectile susurration. A murmur of feathers, talons. Claws. *They're here*, thought Irka. *Horseflies, menial to ravens, menial to...jackals? Hidden. Waiting.*

*Shout at them*, said the eaglet, peevish. *Wheedle them out. I'm hungry.*

*Good morning, hungry*, thought Irka, still bitter at the eaglet kicking her diaphragm.

It eddied and struck her liver.

Irka winced. *Is that the way of it now?*

*I'm hungry.* Said the eaglet stubbornly. *Feed me.*

"See? Everything is fine." Said Pavlik in Irka's ear.

She jumped from surprise.

"I don't know what you were worried about." His eyes sparkled cold, blue. Breaths broke through his lips in warm round clouds. He waved at the empty inner yard, broken swings, snowbound benches, a tatterdemalion stumbling along the sidewalk in an earflap hat, trainers, quilted jacket thrown over the naked tattooed torso.

*A pike, thought Irka, a homeless inebriate pike, bait for the ravens, to pick on after the debauchery, whatever that might be. What are they going to do, attack us in broad daylight?*

"The trunk lock is stuck." Asked Anton, sneezing into a checkered cotton kerchief. "Give me a minute." He wiped his nose, owlish eyes round through thick prescribed glasses, rattled keys, turned. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing, papa. Nothing."

*Nothing, is it?* A sour hurt scoured through Irka. *Okay, she thought. Don't listen to me, don't believe me, see what happens for yourself.* She spun on her heel and marched to the entranceway.

Pavlik caught up to her on the landing. She stood at Margarita's door, listening, eyes wide. He said a string of words, rang the bell. It ding-donged in silence. Irka didn't react, glommed by the trove of her feral sub-reality. A play unfolded there, with animal actors, a savage script, blood.

*Whose blood?* She thought. *Whose blood is it?*

It escaped her, a tail of a slick fish.

She closed her eyes, concentrating.

The door behind her opened, Margarita greeted them. Pavlik pressed on the small of Irka's back to get her inside. The elevator doors rolled open, out staggered Anton, a heavy box with the VCR in his strained arms.

"Papa! Have you lost your mind, carrying this alone?" Pavlik rushed to his aid. "You should've waited for me. You'll strain you back."

"I'm not that old, son. I got this." A groan, a hoot. "Good morning, Margarita Petrovna. Well then, should we—"

Irka screamed.

An animal cry. Not of a wound, or of mortal terror. Of pillage. Of a bird finding its nest looted, eggshells broken, sucked dry. Of a mammal, its den ripped apart. Pups gone.

It took Irka by surprise. She sensed what they did. The cowardly nature of it, the pettiness, infuriated her. *You craven*

*dullards! She thought, hands clenched, breath ragged. Jerks!*  
*Dolts! Thievish blockheads!*

The clamor overwhelmed her. Breaking glass, snapping bones, croaks, wheezes, whirrs. Outlines, silhouettes. Flies, on alert, a black hairy swarm of them, to block the action. Ravens, sharp bills pecking at...at what? An effigy. An unlikely voodoo doll. Lurid, togs torn, face long, flat, a snout, nostrils, bleeding. What is it? A filigree of lines, etched in her mind, in the snow; umber, from dirty boots; red, from blood; yellow, from piss.

Another noise broke through the first. Hands. Grips.

"Irina! Stop!" Pavlik's voice.

Margarita groaned, keened.

Anton wiped sweat off his brow, shocked, silent.

Irka closed her mouth with an audible click. *You wait and see. I'm coming to get you, bastards.* She rushed into Margarita's packed kitchen, instinctively ripped open the first box she saw. They were there, wrapped in waffle towels imprinted with picturesque jam jars, basketfuls of wild mushrooms, ladles, pots. Irka took the top bundle, shook it out. Cutlery tinkled to the floor. She snatched a big steak knife, blade worn, wooden handle oily, and, weapon aloft, ran out to the landing, down the stairs, and into the inner court.

Her heart hammered a mad rhythm, her eyes felt like hot melting marbles. Arm outstretched, knife in front of her, ignoring the shriek of a passing charwoman, Irka coned straight ahead, across the alley, to the row of cars where Anton parked his Lada. She stopped five steps away, by a naked scraggly bush, gaping.

She was late.

Her hurt mumped her logic, robbed her of savvy, trivialized her hunch. There was no atonement for this, only a price to pay. She should've known better, should've made sure Pavlik listened, should've— *I deserve to be reviled*, she thought, *in most gruesome off-the-wall expletives. Go ahead, eaglet. You know you want to. Do it.*

The eaglet said nothing. Its silence was worse than rebuke.

Irka wanted to move, couldn't. Muscles didn't obey her. She could only stare.

Running footsteps. "Oh God." Pavlik beside her, gingerly prying her fingers off the knife. Anton behind him, Margarita. They halted, winded, gaping.

The shiny Opel has departed. In its place, sprawled on muddy snow lay the same waif they spotted earlier, prostrate, the earflap hat missing. A freshet of blood ran out of his nostrils, a hideous red mustache over the unshaven lip. Bits of



shattered glass covered his spiked hair, his bare chest, his urine-stained crotch.

Anton's Lada gawked at them with jagged holes of shattered windows. Its tires hissed air, slashed. Its trunk gaped open, lock gouged out like an eye. Everything had been taken, the box with the TV, recently bought, the computer with Pavlik's secret decompression tool, Doom, the ultimate first-person shooter, the VCR, the radio and cassette tower with both speakers. Gone. Not stolen, gone to mock.

Anton unfroze first. "My car!" He held his face. "My car! My car! Why did you scream? Did you know about this, Irina? Did you?"

Irka stared at him silently.

"Perhaps she felt it. Pregnant women often have a second sight." Said Margarita. "Leave the girl alone, Anton. She's has enough stress for today. Damn hooligans. I'm calling militia."

"Don't waste your breath, grandma." Said Pavlik, subdued, shocked. "Better call the ambulance. This man is injured." He squatted next to him, shook him. "Can you hear me? Can you hear what I'm saying? What's your name? Tell me your name. Your name!" He yelled in his ear.

The man stirred, moaned. Glass bits rolled off his chest. Something stuck to it. A piece of paper, lined, filled with screaming capital letters.

Irka noticed it first. She kneeled, tapped Pavlik's shoulder. "What's that?" He craned his neck, caught sight of the writing, went pale.

PAVEL BABOCH, QUEER JEW. WE WARNED YOU. LEAVE KOTIK'S THEATER. HERE IS A TASTE OF WHAT'S COMING. COUNT ON IT.

The note shook in Pavlik's hands. His eyes met Irka's. There was terror in them, the kind animals get when caught in headlights, an inertness, a passivity.

*Am I permitted to think, I told you so?* She thought. *Not to say aloud, merely to think. To say it would be cruel. Not like I could. But I tried, didn't I? I tried telling you.*

The man's eyelids unglued to a pair of bloodshot whites. His pupils contracted, focused. He tried saying something, it sounded like wheezing, like "I didn't...I didn't..." and then he passed out.

Irka tugged on Pavlik's sleeve, pointing. *We need to get him off the ground. He'll get hypothermia.*

Pavlik hunched, immobile. His face stood blank against black hair, the atrous butterfly that lost color.

"What's this, son?" Anton took the note from his unresisting hand. His lips moved soundlessly as he read it. "What's this rubbish?"

*Let me see if I can explain,* thought Irka, standing. Her mouth filled with spit, bitter, frustrated. *It's a message.*

*Harassment aimed at Jews and homosexuals, to leave them unemployed, force them out of the country. In this particular instance they cared to use a live prop, for improved comprehension. You see, certain individuals, like members of Russian National Unity, for example, believe that foreigners, Jews especially, gay Jews even more so, are enemies whose purpose is to destroy Russia and Russian people. Have you heard what they chant at rallies? RUSSIA OR DEATH!*

"Pavlusha, explain this to me, please? Irina, do you know anything about this?"

Pavlik looked up, deathly pale. "What?"

Irka shook with rage. *Are you blind?* She wanted to scream into Anton's face. *This is genocide. They've killed before, they'll kill again. They're not squeamish, they don't care if the job involves men or women, pregnant or not. They'll kill children, if they get paid enough, don't you get it? They wouldn't stop at slashing my belly like your tires, to let out some Jewish homo blood! In the country where you could be killed for a bottle of vodka, anything goes, didn't you know, Anton Borisovich?*

"I don't know, papa. Somebody is playing a sick joke on me, I don't know why..."

Irka stormed off.

She ran inside the entranceway, unseeing, held on to the wall, sucked in air, let it out, sucked it in, let it out. By the time her breath steadied, Pavlik and Anton lugged the man in, propped his head on the riser, took turns talking to neighbors. They got nothing, no witness accounts, only irritated looks and shaking heads.

It took the ambulance another twenty minutes to arrive. Medics hauled the waif out on the stretcher, slid him inside the van, *like a pecked pike*, thought Irka. A crowd of curious passersby formed by Anton's Lada. Voices supplied various theories over what could've happened, who could've done it, what punishment they deserved, how much it would cost to replace the windows, the tires, who's to blame for the chaos in the country, who ought to be fired for the increased crime rate. Anton chatted with the ambulance driver about the best towing service to call. Margarita lectured Pavlik in her typical peremptory manner that some people would call anyone gay, just to spite them. He nodded, somnambulant. Irka stood by him, disgusted, watching.

The ambulance left.

Margarita expressed desire to see her daughter. Anton hailed her a private minder who idled by the curb in the red Zhiguli, observing the scene. As they turned out of the alley and disappeared behind a snowbank, an army-green truck with

KAMAZ stamped between its round headlights and TECHHELP stenciled across the chassis lumbered in, revved up, screeched to a stop.

The driver, a burly bear with a cap pushed back on his tonsure, leaned out the window. "Is that the car then?" He whistled. "Curse them rubbers! Good thing they didn't undress her."

Anton waved to Pavlik and Irka. "Get inside, no use freezing here. I'll come up when done."

They trudged to the entranceway, up three flights of stairs, to the garbage chute between the landings of the second and the third floors. Pavlik took out a cigarette, lit a match, drew in smoke with obvious pleasure.

Irka felt vacant, empty. Cold hands of lassitude pulled her down. She wanted to sit, to lie down, to nap. To forget and to not give a shit. She waited for Pavlik to ask her, about the knife, about her scream, anything. He didn't. Why? To avoid it like it never happened? Uncomfortable? Guilty? What's unspoken, can be swept under the rag? *What the hell, Pavlik*, she thought, *I'll try again*. She traced with her finger on the wall, SIM, turned an imaginary dial, placed a hand to her ear.

"What? Call Sim? No." Pavlik shook his head. "He's got enough of his own problems. Besides, what's he going to do? Call

militia? I can do that. Not like it'll do anything." He let out coils of smoke, took another drag.

The elevator chugged down. Somebody coughed two flights up.

Irka pointed to herself.

"You? Are you saying, you will talk to him?"

*Could it be more obvious?* Thought Irka, nodding.

"No. Besides, you don't—" He caught himself. "I mean, you don't know his number."

Irka walked with two fingers in the air, folded hands in the shape of a building.

"You'll talk to him at the theater?"

She nodded.

"No, please, don't. You'll end up bothering him and involving him into all this extra drama he doesn't need. Trust me, it won't do any good. I know Sim. He doesn't help lightly." Pavlik squished the butt of the cigarette against the chute, dropped it into its maw. The lid slammed shut with a bang.

They ascended the steps to the elevator, rode it in silence, locked Margarita's apartment door behind them. Irka grabbed the phone from the commode, lifted the receiver and thrust it at Pavlik.

"I said, no." He turned away.

Irka slapped her forehead. *Why? Why be a prude? Who else will help you with this shit? Unless you come clean with your*

*parents, I don't see any other option.* She looked around, in search of her backpack. It had a notepad and a pen.

"Irina, please. Stop it." Pavlik said tiredly. "What do you want me to tell him? Hey Sim, can we live at your place for a while? I'm getting death threats, so we're afraid to stay at my grandmother's apartment? Like, why is this any of his business?"

*You're his bitch, wouldn't he do this for you?* Thought Irka. The phone rang in her hands. She started.

They studied each other.

The phone trilled. Two rings, three rings.

On the fourth ring Pavlik snatched the receiver. "Hello? Yes?" His face spread in a smile. "Sim! We were *just* talking about you. How are you?" He looked at Irka in amusement.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine. Irina is fine too, thanks. We just moved into my grandmother's apartment today. How did you—" he frowned. "What?" Pavlik glanced at Irka with significance.

She raised a brow. *What does the seal want now?*

Pavlik listened to Sim's tinny voice rant for a couple minutes. "Of course. Nine o'clock. We'll be there." He tugged on his hair absentmindedly. "I understand. Bye."

He put the receiver in the cradle, placed the phone on the commode. It made a strange echoey sound, loud in the emptiness of the flat, forlorn.

Pavlik's eyes contained a concoction of emotions. Astonishment, hurt, a smidge of recoil. And something else. Something furtive, something he tried to hide. Remorse? Regret? "Sim knows already. About the threats. About today. Everything. He got tipped off...by whom, I wonder. How is this even possible, it just happened! He wants to meet us tomorrow, at the theater, you and me. He says it's the safest place." A pause. "You were right. It's Shakalov." Another pause, longer, slower. "The jackal."

Irka studied him, dumbstruck, relieved, validated. *I'm not mad after all, is what you're trying to say? That you will trust me from now on? Trust the things I show you?* She didn't want to write this. She wanted to say it aloud. Words formed on her tongue, willy-nilly, grudgingly, stooped, fell. A heap of nothing. Of emptiness. Unspoken. Irka bit the inside of her cheek, hard, bit it until it bled.

"Did you scream...because you sensed them coming? The ravens? You knew?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry. Sorry I didn't believe you. I'm an idiot." He covered his face.

*I get it. I'm having a hard time believing myself.* She held him.



## Chapter 22. The Eagle In The Mouse

*Today*, thought Irka, *it will happen today*. She ran after Pavlik up the steps of the underpass. It was a quarter after nine on Monday, January tenth. They were late. It took them almost an hour to get to Teatralnaya station from Margarita's apartment, another five minutes to get out. Sweat ran down Irka's back, prickled her lip. She licked it off. Warm. Salty. They sprinted along the sidewalk, corkscrewed through the barrage of pedestrians, closer to the crossing, to dash across the street when the light turned green. Cars stalled, honked, crawled forward, like bulls wanting to get out of their oxbows. Pavlik took Irka's hand. They stood, watching, waiting, pressed from all sides, a mouse and a butterfly in a tin of sprats.

The light switched. They bolted.

"Look! Over there." Pavlik pointed. "Pensioners on the promenade."

Irka turned her head, thinking, *thanks for jamming the traffic, blockheads*.

About a hundred meters up the street marched a rally. Irka heard shouts, mechanical, distorted by the megaphone, with a shrill whiny feedback. "For motherland!" and "For Stalin!" and

"For government resignation!" and "Death to capitalism!" and "Off with capitalist slavery!" and "Off with unemployment!" and croak-croak-croak. Echoes. Banners. Flags. Red flags with golden hammers and sickles crossed in the corners. Roosters. Crowing in tune with their leader, yodeling almost.

A pair of elderly ladies in red vests walked upfront, two poles in their hands, a huge placard stretched between them. Scarlet background, golden wreath, a portrait of Stalin and Lenin in the middle, cheek to cheek, in semi-profile, like hopeful newlyweds with eyes pegged at some ridiculous vanguard future.

*Fucking communist party supporters,* thought Irka. *Chickens, too dumb to think. Lets resurrect a couple dead shouting mouths, see if they can fix my life for me. Save me from oppression, from poverty, from impotence. Because I'm too lazy to do jack-shit on my own.* Distracted, she stumbled on the curb of the opposite sidewalk, stooped. Pavlik caught her. They broke out of the tide, skipped along the street, dashed under the familiar archway, around the theater building, and burst through the back door, panting.

"Your passes." Barked Ilinichna.

"Ilinichna, you're offending me." Wheezed Pavlik.

She glanced above her thick glasses and melted. "Oh my God! Pavlik! Irina! Get in, quick. He's here already."

"I know." Panted Pavlik. "How long?"

"Showed up about an hour ago. Furious." She scrambled out of the booth, waddled up to Irka, patted her belly. "Well, look at you! Nice and round. Did you hear?" She added with a glint in her eye.

Irka and Pavlik exchanged a glance.

"Hear what?"

"Shakalov got sacked." Ilinichna tittered.

Pavlik let out a breath. "When?"

"This morning. I'll tell you more later. Don't want to anger him more. He's waiting for you in the auditorium." She nudged them with motherly solicitude. "Go, go!"

Irka grinned. She felt at home. Ilinichna, with her reptile grace. Her brisk touch. The cookies she fed her, the tea. The actor posters on the walls. The theater smell, that mix of dusty velvet and perfume and mothballs. The place she lived in, temporarily, auditioned, almost performed. *I missed you, chamber theater*, she thought. *Did you miss me, you titillating buffoon?*

They skidded down the steps, along the corridor, bounded to the auditorium. Entered. Halted, hushed by its grandeur. It stood still, empty, ringing with silence. With the absence of the hustle and the bustle of the play, and the actors, and the spectators, and the music, the voices, the applause. Curtains were drawn. Lights were dimmed, except for a handful of

projectors over the stage. Two shafts of light fell on the first row, on a hunched figure.

Sim. A bright goldenrod scarf about his neck, hands interlaced. He didn't raise his head as they approached, didn't indicate he heard them, deep in thought, eyes cast down. They came up a step away, stopped, waited.

"You're late." He said to the floor. His fingers tapped a little dance, fingertip to fingertip, wicket to wicket.

"I'm sorry, Sim. We—"

"Pavlik, my child." He looked up, eyes tired, lined with shadows, his whole face sunken, sallow. None of the flamboyant flare, only weariness, fatigue. "Ache of my loins, light of my asshole, when did I tell you to be here?"

"Nine—"

"And what time is it now?"

Pavlik closed his mouth, hung his head.

Sim shifted his gaze to Irka. "I'm sure it wasn't your fault, Irina."

*Say, do seals have balls? I wonder, thought Irka. In case I wanted to reach out and twist them, how many folds of pelt do I have to lift, you fat piece of lard?*

"When did it start, Pavlik?"

"When what started?" He blinked.

"When did you get the first threat?"

"What do you mean, the first. There was only one, I'm telling you, today was the only time—"

"Don't lie. When did you get the first threat?"

"Excuse me, Sim, but, if I may say so, you're insulting me, you know?" Pavlik looked at Irka for help.

*I don't understand why you can't just tell him, she thought Irka. What is he going to do, fire you? That's surely better than being stabbed with a knife, or am I wrong?*

"Who told you about it? Did papa call? I don't remember him—"

"Close your precious lips. I asked you a question. Answer. Was that the only note you got?" Sim shifted his gaze from Pavlik to Irka. She moved her head a hair, enough for Sim to know there was more than one.

"But, how did you find out, Sim? Can you tell me—"

"Do you want to get shot?"

Pavlik flinched. "No."

"You're a bad liar. When?"

It took Pavlik a moment. "In December. Before New Year."

"What did it say."

"Something about Kostya forgetting to tell me, because he was...dead, that if I won't leave your theater—"

"You'll be next, Jewish homo."

"Yes." Said Pavlik, face slack. "That's exactly what it—"

"They send those to me too, you know. Every holiday, every occasion. I get particularly nasty ones on my birthday, promising to rip my ass in two. They're not very elaborate, primitive, rather. Not enough complexity to them, no literary talent." He pierced Pavlik with a cold stare.

*When I learn how to talk again, thought Irka, I want to talk like you, Sim. Chop with words. Slash, rend, rip. Throw the truth in their faces. Like a slap. Each word. A smack. A swat. An eruption.*

"Look, Sim. I didn't want to bother you with this nonsense." Said Pavlik, crushed, withdrawing.

"Nonsense? You call this *nonsense*?" His face darkened. "Do you understand what this means? Murder, Pavlik. Mur-der."

Something tipped. Pavlik ran out of patience. His façade of decorum ruptured. "I know, I'm not an idiot! Why do you talk to me like to a child?" The echo of his voice bounded up at the ceiling, stirred the dust in the shafts of light.

"Sit." Sim forced him into the velvety chair next to him.

Irka sat on the next seat, perched on the edge, tense. That feeling she had, when they were running up the underpass steps, a precognition, an omen, was back. *Today, they will strike today*, she thought. She heard a faint scratch, like claws of a dog. Of a jackal? Impossible. He's gone.

"But you are a child." Said Sim with mock surprise. "You are. Don't ever grow up, Pavlik. I want you to remain a child for the rest of your life. You're an artist. True artists should create from nothing, knowing nothing, learning each time they do their work as if it was their first. First play, first act, first story. Do you hear me?"

"Yes." Said Pavlik, calmer. "What do you suggest I do?"

"Look them in the face and smile, smile with knowledge that they're all stupid. Keep making your art. Never quit. Never give up. You have wings that have been given to you. You can't stop now, can't pause. You must keep moving."

"Where?" Said Pavlik. His voice shook slightly. "Where do I move? How? How can I make art when I can't be myself? When I can't tell my own father that I'm—" He covered his face, embarrassed.

"That you're what?" Prodded Sim.

"You know what."

"Say it."

Pavlik looked around, thievishly, covertly, as if afraid someone might be listening, eavesdropping.

"What are you afraid of?" Asked Sim gently.

"Of...of being harassed. Beaten. Killed." Whispered Pavlik. Irka slipped her hand into his. He snatched it, held on to it.

"Don't be. That's what they want, for you to be afraid. Art is an artist's way to flip a finger to the ugliness of this world, animal world, savage, barbarous place we were born into. Remember that. Everything inside you has a right to live, to be free. It's beautiful. Let it out. You can't hide it forever, it will destroy you." Sim lifted his face. "Listen to me. I want you to lis-ten. Remember the six M's of the theater. *Magic. Mystery. Mask. Mirror. Miracle. Malady.* You must live and breathe theater, be sick with it. Possessed. When you stop creating, you die. Not when you're killed. When you're killed, only your body is gone, your art will live on."

"And why do you care about my life, Sim? What's my life to you?" Pavlik's voice caught. His eyes welled up with water.

"Oh, I see what this is about. Come here."

Pavlik suddenly came unglued. He buried his face in Sim's goldenrod scarf and began to sob. Sim patted his head, fatherly almost, whispered, "shhh. Cry it out, cry, it's good for you. I miss Kostya too. Miss him dearly."

Irka winced.

At the memory of the gorgeous blue macaw, and at the movement she caught with the tail of her eye, in the thick jellied darkness of the stage. Something stirred there, kicked up a cloud of dust, no, of midgets. An eddying swarm. It twisted, round and round, settled. Disappeared.



*Horseflies come next*, she thought, on alert.

They did. One. It buzzed out of nowhere, circled the light, landed, crawled around in jerky stop-and-go patterns, sat still. A hideous black on the bright shiny surface.

Irka watched it, waiting for more. She took out her hand from Pavlik's, slipped off her backpack, quietly unzipped it.

"I'm sorry." Pavlik was saying. He disentangled from Sim's hold, wiped his face.

"Sorry for what?"

"For falling apart like that."

The horsefly moved on the light. A couple more buzzed up. There were three of them now.

*You think you can catch me unaware?* Thought Irka. *Not this time.* She took out her pad and a pen.

"Oh, you're only human." Sim rummaged in his pockets, took out a pack of Davidoff, lit up, migrated to the edge of the stage. Regnant. One leg on the floor, another dangling. "Don't be afraid of them. They're starving vermin, starving for love." He let out a billow of smoke. "They don't understand that by getting it by force, they gain nothing. They remain hungry. Some of them grow out of it, most never do. Until their grave."

"That is a..." Pavlik hesitated, "...very simplistic way of looking at things."

"Of course it is. Why should it be complicated? We're simplistic animals. You think you're somehow above it all, think your life has meaning? It has none. The meaning you constructed in your head is just that. A delusion." He took another drag, his eyes dancing. "I've lived plenty of life to know. We're *nothing* but animals. A-ni-mals." He glanced up at the lights, squinted. "Say, how come we have flies here, in January?"

Irka started, stared at Sim, pen frozen over a new clean page. *You can see them?* She thought.

He blinked. "Probably a trick of light. It's gone now. Strange."

Pavlik tagged on his hair, deep in thought. "If you say we're all animals, if life has no meaning, then why live at all?"

*To find those eels that hurt you, thought Irka, squish them under a rock, sit on it, hear them squelch, twist, listen to them suffocate.*

"For love." Said Sim. "There is only love, nothing else. It's the only thing in nature given to humans. Not to animals, animals mate, procreate, they're led by instinct. But humans, humans love. Love is rare, a rare butterfly. There are only a few who know how to love, how to abandon themselves, to awaken their sensual beginning. Those vermin, they don't know how to do it. There is only one path to it. It's very simple, and very

difficult." He took the last drag, extinguished the cigarette on the edge of the stage.

"What is it?" Asked Pavlik.

"Be yourself." Said Sim.

*Be myself*, thought Irka. *There is only love. Let the animal out. Okay.* She wrote "I have a feral sub-reality inside my head. I can see—" She cried out, dropped the pad. A fat horsefly took off. It stung her index finger. Something soft touched her other hand. She jumped up. The cushioned seat behind her folded back with a thud. A buzz, a couple more flies alighted on her face. Irka slapped at them, missed. A nagging drone of mandibles and wings, prefatory, descended from the ceiling. A shroud of danger. Irka emitted a hoarse croak, grabbed Pavlik's arm.

"What's wrong?" He sprung up. "What do you see?"

Irka shook, sucking on her finger. She missed it. Somehow this time she missed it.

"They're coming, aren't they." Said Pavlik.

"Did the fly bite you?" Asked Sim. He slid off the stage, strode closer. "Let me see."

Irka jerked away, eyes open, ears straining to hear any noise, any disturbance. Her heart thudded in her mouth, filled it with spit, metallic, the taste of horror.

"Sim, we need to leave the theater. Irina can sense things, before they happen. I don't know how she does it, she just—"

"Sense things?"

"It's...hard to explain. There is no time for it. We need to go."

Sim fixed Irka with a heavy stare. She stood still. A terrible knowledge ambulated at her from every corner, implacable, incantatory. Darkness and noise solidified into a posse of insects hungry for her blood. Pavlik's blood. Sim's blood. They were helpless, trapped. The theater was closed for the break between the seasons, not to open until this Friday. Apart from Ilinichna, there was nobody else in the building. Shakalov had the key to the back door.

Irka felt a blade hanging over them, a guillotine, waiting for the prefect moment to drop. She reached inside her backpack with unbending fingers, took out a rag bundle, unwrapped it.

"You're an extraordinary child." Said Sim. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Sim." Pavlik touched him. "Let's leave."

"Coward! Have I taught you nothing? I'm not leaving my theater. Never." Said Sim. "Besides, I have an idea about who it might be so eager to see me."

Irka listened to Sim and Pavlik talk at the opposite end of a tunnel, a bore of a jackal's den. Dread spread through her. The auditorium filled with resonant whine. It grew thicker, more concentrated. It came from the stage. She bolted up the stairs.

Each step made her alarm grow. Someone was waiting for them behind the curtains. Or something. She ran up to the middle, where heavy folds overlapped, and wrenched them apart.

Dust swirled in the spotlights. Musty smell hit her nose. Nothing. There was nothing there. Only darkness, with an afterimage of the future. A foreboding. Irka let the air out of her lungs, turned, faced the audience. She wished she could speak, meet them with obscene perverted malapropism. Derisive. Sardonic. Insolent. Dole out profanities like whips that left welts in their flesh. Kill them with words, pluck them naked, make them genuflect. They were here. She could smell them, hear the rustle of their feathers, the clacking of their claws, their beaks.

Twenty ravens and one jackal.

*Come here then, bastards,* she thought, *come and show me your real faces.* Her breasts felt heavy, her stomach pulled down. Every cavity of her body filled with lead. She felt movement, faint. Kicking. *Eaglet?*

"They're here." Said Pavlik.

Footsteps reverberated along the halls. Walking.

*Eaglet, talk to me.* Thought Irka.

Silence.

*They're coming, eaglet!* Screamed Irka inwardly. *The ravens!* She trembled, transfixed by horror and disgust.

*Nothing an eagle can't kill,* said the eaglet suddenly.

*You're there. I haven't lost you,* thought Irka. *I'm not an eagle, you know it.*

*You're not a mouse either,* said the eaglet.

*Who am I then?*

*Who do you want to be?*

The ravens moved in with avian dexterity, a stream of beaks and wings, an atrous limb of an enormous fiend. Young guys in black coats, black berets, black gloves, Shakalov at the end of their ranks.

"Who are you and what are you doing in my theater?" Bellowed Sim. "Get out!" Then he saw the familiar face. "Ah, Vladimir Kuzmich. I thought I might be you. To what do I owe the pleasure? Didn't I ask you to vacate the premises this morning?"

Shakalov didn't answer. He looked scared, beaten, a jackal gone through serious mauling. He avoided Sim's gaze, spit out the stub of a cigarette. Barked. "Come on, do them. Quick."

"You're making a mistake, Vladimir." Said Sim with exaggerated benevolence. "It's a sin to betray yourself. You've betrayed yourself. Go ahead, hit us, one old man and two children. We're dangerous people. You know why? Because we will stand for our art. But what will you stand for? Nothing. You're nothing. Look at you, you're afraid. It's because you're a slut. I hate sluts." He smiled.

Shakalov shouted. "Whatcha waiting for? I said, do them!"

It happened very fast.

They were swarmed with bodies, separated. An arm flew up. A truncheon flashed, the one used by militiamen. A blunt whack. Sim toppled to the floor, taking the hitter with him.

Pavlik got dragged upstage, pinned to the back wall. "Don't touch her!" He yelled. "Get your hands off her! She's pregnant, you morons, let her go!" His head thumped back with a dull whack. "Irina, run!"

"Mute *dura* pregnant with a Jewish homo freak." Said someone.

A jitter of laughter.

*I'm not going anywhere*, thought Irka, *I'm done running*. She charged. Somebody stuck out a foot. Her legs tangled. She went sprawling, got caught, grabbed from behind and positioned so that she could see Pavlik. The knife fell out of her hand. "Watch, whore, watch." Shakalov's breath prickled her neck.

Dozens of arms worked on Pavlik in unison like pistons of a large machine, hitting him everywhere, hard, with flat sounds of impact. Something was happening to him. Pain unlocked him, broke down his barriers. There was nothing else to lose, not anymore. His face grew malicious, eerily pale. He went mad. "Hey, Shakalov!" He yelled. "Didn't know you needed twenty hitmen to beat up one feeble *gay*!"

"Shut him up!" Shakalov spit.

Pavlik fought back, clumsily, erratically, with ruthless abandon. He hooked one attacker under the jaw, sent one more flying. Blood streamed out of his nose. "Are you a voyeur, Vladimir Kuzmich?" He yelled, his voice hysterical. "Do you get hard watching a gang bang with a fairy?" His body jerked with an awful passivity, like that of a puppet yanked by the threads. "Do you guys like it, kicking me? You don't get laid enough, do you?" He screamed in their faces. "Why? Can't get your dicks up? Girls don't want you? Guys don't want you? How sad. So you watch, watch and kick, surreptitiously, like some seedy-looking—" The breath got knocked out of him. He doubled, wheezing, raised his face. "No. You're soi-disant frotteurs. Do you even know what means, you idiots? Do you—" A blow in the face cut off his words.

"This will be a lesson to you, getting knocked up by Jewish faggot scum." Whispered Shakalov into Irka's ear. "How he do it, wanked off in a tube?" He squeezed her buttock. A livid fury covered Irka's vision like a curtain, separated her from reality. It flickered in a screen of images. Ravens pecking a butterfly to death. Men beating Pavlik. Ravens. Men. Her hands, arms, felt awkward, shrinking one moment, growing the other. Skin, sweaty, pelt. Fur. Skin again.



*No, she thought, no! I'm done being a scared little rodent. Done!* She saw Pavlik's face, a grimace of suffering. He looked at her, his lips moved. Irka tried to read them. What was he trying to say? *Love, she thought, it looks like, love you.* One of the guys knuckled Pavlik's mouth. His head hung listlessly, his entire frame slunk and slid against the wall.

*I love you too, mouthed Irka. I don't care what kind of love it is. Does there have to be a distinction?*

Shakalov grunted, feeling her about.

Irka went berserk. *I hope you die, you fucking anti-Semite misogynistic scum!* She emitted an earsplitting guttural screech, bucked, struck his crotch, twisted out of his hold, spotted the knife a meter away, lunged for it, swirled around and slashed at him. Shakalov, shocked, ducked in time. The blade missed. Nonplussed, spurred by hatred, Irka snarled, whipped the knife around her with such ferocity, that a couple guys who rushed to subdue her, took a step back.

"Bitch!" Cried out Shakalov. "Put that away, before I carve your face with it!"

Irka advanced. Fear deserted her. The mouse was gone. She was here, in the now, there were no animals, no beasts. No obstacle between her and these men, no veil of haze. She pushed forward with her belly, daring them. *Try me!* She thought. *Try hitting a pregnant woman, you lowlives!* The words almost spit

out of her mouth, a string of something unintelligible. Almost human speech. A screech of an eagle trying to talk. Such madness was in her eyes that the beating stopped. Battered shape of Pavlik lay on the floor, crumpled. A pile of rags with a bloody face. The guys straightened. One, a kid with a young face and big blue eyes, said, "What the—"

Irka stabbed his coat, not deep enough to get through to his skin, but deep enough to scare the shit out of him.

"She's mad!" Shouted a voice.

"Do her." Said Shakalov.

"But, Vladimir, she's pregnant." Said another, eyeing her belly. "We were told to only—"

"I said, do her, moron!"

Irka lashed at him. A strong hand grabbed her wrist, twisted it. The knife dropped from her hold. "Keep quiet about this, cunt, and we'll keep you lover boy alive. You got that?" Said Shakalov. Then something hit her on the head, and she collapsed, losing consciousness.

Chapter 23. Where Cows Burst

Irka dreamt of having her baby. The doctor ripped her open, from thigh to thigh, pulled something out of her belly, handed it to her. A wrinkly squirmy shape. Large ugly head, furry, matted with blood, attached to a hideous body. Puce. Brunneous. With a fat sinewy cock. The thing fastened two piggy eyes on her. Sniffed. Latched at her breast. She screamed in her dream, dropped it, woke up, screaming, on a bed in a room filled with hospital smell. A hand patted her. A nurse with a thermometer. Red-faced, thickset, impervious. A crab. Irka tried to recall how she got here. The theater, the ravens, the jackal, the beating, Sim knocked out. And Pavlik.

She jerked up.

"Shh. Lay still." Croaked the nurse.

Irka struggled.

"So stubborn. I said, lay still! You'll make it worse for the brat. Here. Let me..." She reached under her armpits, lifted her, propped her up a pillow. "There. Better?"

Irka moaned. Everything muscle in her body hurt, every bone felt like glass, brittle. Head stuffed with cotton, throat

parched. She tried to swallow, couldn't. The hospital gown slid off, baring a breast. She tugged it back up.

"Measure your temperature, will you?" The nurse handed Irka a silvery tube and departed to the next bed. "Larisa, wake up. Temperature."

"What's your hurry, Lida?" Mumbled Larisa. "Can't I sleep in? Just write it's normal." She was in her thirties, huge, a cow with a bloated udder. Large doleful eyes, freckled skin. A brown robe with daisies on it, legs swathed in elastic bandage. She rolled over. The bed springs whined in protest. "I took it yesterday, it was fine. No need to measure it every day. Right, Galya?" She addressed the young woman on the bed across.

Irka glanced about the room.

Greige naked walls. A bed and a nightstand in each corner, headboards and footboards touching. Sweaty window in the middle. Floral patterns of every kind, on the oilcloth floor, on the curtains, on the bedding, on the towels, the robes, the slippers. Ochre, bronze, brown. Cows in dead flowers.

Irka closed her eyes in aversion. *Let's slap a blossom on every surface, she thought, won't that make my shit pretty? Who cares if they don't match? It's nature, patsy, nature.* She opened eyes to slits. *At least the walls are bare. Gee, you're a captious snob, Irina Myshko. Coming from that shithole pissed through by cats and dogs, who would've thought?*

"Galya, you hear me?" Repeated Larisa.

"What? How would I know? I'm not a doctor." Answered Galya. She sat on the bed with legs crossed, young, barely twenty. A bony heifer in citrine robe with poppies. Feet in home-knit socks. Suspicious eyes, oily hair pulled into a ponytail. "Look, girls. New arrival woke up. What's your name?"

Irka thought, *What do you care?*

Galya toddled over, plopped on her bed. "I'm Galya. This is Larisa. She's having twins. Huge, isn't she? And that's Natasha. She's due any day."

"Thank God it's not triplets." Larisa snorted. "Egor would've killed me."

Natasha said nothing. She had a round shiny face, callous, the type that doesn't smile lightly.

They studied Irka for a moment.

"Why are you silent?" Said Galya.

*Do you want my life history?* Thought Irka. *I can give it to you. It's not pretty. By the time I'm done, you'll be puking out your guts over there in the corner.*

"Something wrong with her maybe?" Asked Larisa. "Maybe she's deaf?"

"I don't know. She's not saying anything." Shrugged Galya. "You have some kind of speaking problem?"

Irka pointed to her mouth, shook her head.

"Mute, are you?"

Irka raised a brow, thinking, *slow on the uptake, are you?*

"But you hear me all right? That's weird. Why are you mute?" Asked Galya.

*If you won't leave me alone, thought Irka, I'll strip you off this heinous robe and stuff it down your throat.* She held back a moan. Her head thudded, her belly cramped. Sour bile crawled up her throat. She forced it down. *Pavlik, she thought, what did they do to you, bastards?*

"So how far along are you?" Asked Galya.

Irka spread out five fingers.

"Only five months?" Galya stuck out her lower lip. "I thought you looked small."

"Why did they put her in here, idiots?" Snapped Larisa. "This is the gynecology. They should've put her on the third floor. In obstetrics."

"The clinic is full, that's why." Said Natasha. "Leave her alone. Can't you see she's in pain?"

Irka propped herself up on the elbows, slid legs off the bed, rose to stand, reeled, and passed out.

She came to in the evening, an IV hooked to her vein, a catheter between her legs attached to a plastic bag half-filled with urine. Natasha was gone, the mattress on her bed stripped, blooms of castory spots on it. Larisa snored. Helpful Galya

hopped over. "You missed the doctor." She whispered. "He said you'll be here for a while. To prevent preterm labor. What did you do, fall down the stairs or something?"

*Yeah, something like that,* thought Irka. *Fell out the wrong pair of legs.* She turned away.

"Don't want to talk to me? Fine. Have it your own way." Said Galya bitterly, retreating back to her bed. "I'm not going to stay here sitting by you, retelling you every bit of news. Just so you know."

Irka picked at the paint on the wall, sullen. *Hospital, again,* she thought, *more like prison.* Her stomach cinched with a belt of fire. Her head pounded. She couldn't get up without fainting, couldn't call anyone to find out what happened to Pavlik, couldn't escape. Her baby was in danger of premature birth. Five months gestation period was too short for a newborn to survive. She read about it somewhere.

*Eaglet,* she thought. *Eaglet, can you hear me?*

Silence. No movement, not a stir. It felt like she carried a rock, stiff, solid, heavy.

*Eaglet, please, talk to me.* She peeled off a chip of paint, glib surface beneath it, stroked it, hooked the nail under the edge of another chip.

*Eaglet,* she thought. *Say something.*

Nothing.

*Please*, thought Irka.

She cried herself to sleep that night, wetted the pillow silently, let tears pool, soak into the bleached hospital cotton.

She woke up the next day to the merciless shine of fluorescent lights. Lida doled out thermometers. Larisa and Galya chatted over plates of porridge and faceted glasses of tea. A new girl occupied Natasha's bed, barely older than Irka, precocious, wrapped in a violet bathrobe. Irka averted eyes, glad she had hospital issued garb, washed out, threadbare, colorless.

She propped herself up. The needle in the vein hurt like an old bruise. The IV bottle was nearly empty. A plate of gruel, tea, and a tied plastic bag sat on top of her nightstand. She grabbed on to the headboard, pulled up closer, lifted the bag. It crinkled.

Larisa and Galya paused, peered at her.

*Mandarins*, thought Irka, *a whole kilogram of mandarins. Who is this from?* She winced at the orange color, picked up a folded note. "Irina Myshko, 7th floor, room 714."

She opened it.

*Dear Irina! We're very worried about you. The doctor said you need rest, so no visits are allowed. Pavlusha is in critical care with two broken ribs, bruised lungs, and a concussion. Sim*



*is at home, feeling better. He's sending his greetings. It's very cold outside. It takes two hours to cross the city from Pavlusha's hospital to yours. How are you feeling? We hope the baby is okay. Please, write. Yulia, Anton.*

Irka read the note again and again. Her heart hammered. Her hand shook so hard, the note slipped out, seesawed to the floor.

"Good news or bad news?" Asked Galya.

Irka looked up, unseeing.

Galya handed her the paper. "I thought I'd ask. You have no face on you. Good news or bad news?" She waited. "You want pen and paper, to write back?"

Irka blinked, licked something salty off her lip. Tears.

Galya pulled out her backpack, unzipped it. "Here?"

Irka nodded, took a couple deep breaths, to steady her hand. *Dear Yulia! She wrote. I'm feeling good, the baby is good. I'm worried sick about Pavlik. Please tell him that I love him. Irina.*

"Who is Pavlik, your husband?" Asked Galya, looking over her shoulder.

Irka shook her head.

"She's got no band, you idiot," said Larisa, "can't you see?"

The girls told her she was due for magnesium shots in an hour, to relax abdomen muscles. They said it hurts like a

motherfucker, can't sit on your ass after. They left Irka in the space of three days, first Larisa, cursing Egor at every contraction, then Galya, huffing through parted lips, both to the delivery ward on the floor below. They sent her folded notes a day later, with baby names, weights, labor stories, well wishes and phone numbers. The new girl in the violet bathrobe, Polina, left a week after them. New women came, went.

Irka stayed in the hospital for two months. She felt trapped, like a bird in a cage, women around her, not cows anymore, just pregnant women, whisked away to delivery day and night. Their moans, their trips to the nurse for the enema to flush out the feces, the shots, the tests, the gynecological examinations. After two weeks Irka was able to stand up, wobble to the toilet to empty her pissbag, walk to the cafeteria the whole length of the corridor, envious of women by the pay phones. Moving mouths, bits of conversations, smiles, tears. Voices. Talking voices.

*My name is Irina Myshko, thought Irka, I'm mute. Not because I'm a mouse, or an eagle. I failed all that. Just a mute stupid dura. Never talked, never will.*

Her habitual refuge crumbled. No more beasts, no more maggots in showers, spiders, horseflies, moles; no more ravens, vultures, woodpeckers, no birds of any kind. As if Shakalov's blow drove it out of her mind. As if it never existed. Turned to

dust before it was born. That comfort of feral sub-reality, gone. The eaglet didn't answer her anymore. The pregnant women in the ward didn't transmute into cows. The clinic didn't shape-shift to a cattle pen. Irka's world turned flat, lugubrious. Life had been sacked out of it. She existed through written notes from Yulia about Pavlik's improvement, through her nightly trips to the roof, to gaze up at the sky. And to gaze down, from the height of eight floors.

Each evening she waited for the clinic to grow quiet. Then she threw on her jacket, stepped into hospital slippers, and crept out of the room. She usually made her way to the elevators without bumping into anyone, nurses' chatter echo in the distance, passed the landing, mounted the rickety service ladder, pushed open the trapdoor. Nobody locked it. Nobody thought a pregnant woman would attempt to get on the roof.

It was the first of March. Irka scrambled onto the snowy tarmac. She didn't mind the cold. It numbed the pain, made her feel less. Her large belly tugged down. Fierce wind whipped her hair, froze her face. Black sky flickered with stars.

She huddled, looked around dully.

The apartment blocks formed a monotone carpet of roofs, dark and grim. Snow trailed from them in wisps. Rare cars crawled along the street. Streetlights bathed them in pools of yellow glow. Figures huddled by vending kiosks. A blaring

militia car tore through the night. There was life down there. People, talking, together.

*I'm a supernumerary entity, thought Irka. Defective. An outcast. A recluse. My illusions are defunct. I can't hide anymore. I don't know who I am anymore, eaglet, do you hear me? I don't know!* She slapped herself, hit her bloated breasts, helpless, angry, desolate. Her toes and fingers burned, she shivered. *What is there left of me? Nothing. Who am I? Nothing. What am I good for? Nothing!* She hit her head with knuckles, hard, harder, grunted with effort, panted. Gulped air. At last, her arms got tired and she stopped.

*I can't lie anymore, she thought, I can't. But as soon as I come clean, Pavlik's parents will kick me out. I don't want to go back, not to that shithole. Then where? What kind of life can I give you, eaglet? Of misery? Of poverty? Birth you into a country where you can't be free? Can't be you, whoever you decide to become? How can I?* She waited for an answer, something, anything.

There was noting.

*I can't, eaglet. I'm sorry.*

She crunched through the snow to the edge of the roof, stepped on the low parapet, looked down. The parking lot was mostly empty. A few sedans, an ambulance van. All she had to do was lean and fall.

Wind whipped her hospital robe. She thought back, to when she was ten. She used to sneak to the balcony, pick tomatoes from spread out newspapers on the floor, placed there by Valentina to ripen, lean out, find a target and throw. She'd retract and wait for the scream. Sometimes she succeeded, sometimes she didn't. Sometimes, when there were no tomatoes, she stole eggs from the fridge. Once she scored big, struck an army colonel with an egg in the head. He figured out their apartment number by the balcony position, came up, told Marina. Irka didn't remember what happened after, which meant that the punishment must've been severe.

A gust of wind powdered Irka's face with snow. She wiped it off, thinking, wondering, if she jumped, would she splatter like a tomato, would her belly crack open and throw the eaglet out, or would she flatten and cover the street with slime as if she was an egg, squishing the eaglet underneath? Was the clinic high enough to guarantee a certain death? Would the jump kill both her and the eaglet, or would one of them live on, with terrible injuries or deformities? Or would she sprout wings and fly, like an eagle? Was it worth a try?

"Hey! Whatcha doing up there?"

Irka started, windmilled arms for balance.

A man stood by the ambulance van. "Are you crazy?" He screamed, hands to mouth like a megaphone. "Get down, *dura!* What are you doing up there?"

Irka swayed, staggered back from surprise. Her slippers slid on black ice, she sat down, hard, cried out. Adrenalin pumped her with panic. Instead of crawling back inside through the trapdoor, she skidded along the roof, one hand on her belly, another on her breasts, to stop them from shaking. A couple times she almost fell, righted herself, stumbled forward. Where? She didn't know. She reached the opposite end of the roof, stopped. *That's it*, she thought, *they'll put me in the nuthouse now.*

Behind her the trapdoor banged open.

The medic climbed out. "Hey! Come here!"

Irka couldn't move. Her teeth chattered. Her legs atrophied. By the time the medic got her to the gynecological ward, she felt too fatigued to respond to any stimuli. To anything at all. To anyone. Nurses, doctors, ward neighbors.

They talked to her, poked her, needled her. Someone massaged her feet, someone placed hot-water bottles on either side of her belly. Someone covered her with a blanket. Whispers, worries, concerns.

Irka warmed up and dozed off.

Into a dream. Into a nightmare. Into a frenzy.

A mouse covered with maggots. A pregnant girl under too many blankets. No, a mouse, gutted, shiny intestines spilled about, soaked bloody sheets. Red. Viscous. Hematic. The eaglet gone, taken, cut out. By whom? By the doctor? By the boar? By the catfish? Irka, hot, sweaty, feverish. Temperature forty degrees Celsius and rising. She threw off the blankets. A mouse with wings. Both broken, feathers plucked out, chicken wings. It tried to flap them, to fly, fell to the floor. Squeaked. Hands picked it up, placed it back into the bed, covered it. Her. Irina Myshko. Swarmed with horseflies, a droning fidgeting coat. They alighted on her face, on her stomach, dozens of proboscises in search of the womb. The tender flesh inside. Huge eyes, glossy wings. Jittering wriggling bodies. Black, awful, blood thirsty. Loud. Then came the woodpeckers. Sharp bills, beady eyes. They poked at the mouse, at Irka, at her belly. Eating the horseflies? Her? Both?

Lights were turned on. Faces, bodies, bustle, flurry. Lenin came, leaned, asked Irka about her purpose in life. Her goal. What was she going to do with the rest of it, citizen Irina Myshko? Was she deaf? Did she listen? Karl Marx behind him. Stalin. They commiserated. Wished her a speedy recovery. Lined by the window, three of them, chanted songs, some communist party tune laid to bad doggerel. A howl. From the jackal. A chorus of jackals. Tongues lolled, wanting to lick Irka. Strip

her, feast on the salt of her sweat. Moles dropped on her face from the ceiling, naked, a rain of soft disgusting lumps of meat wrapped in skin.

Irka bent over the edge of the bed, threw up. Someone wiped it, someone, *something*, slurped up her vomit. A tapeworm. Flung out of a dissected belly of a woman on a bed across. Not a woman, a cow. Its udder sat split, serpentine coils of dermis hung from it in loose rivulets. Of membranes. Of pelt.

Irka retched. Nothing came out. Her heart palpitated. Beads of sweat dripped down her face.

Hospital walls began disintegrating. Pain peeled off in huge hunks. The cement behind it crumbled. The floor brimmed with moisture. Bibulous fenland. It stunk of mold, septic reek, putrid, an allure for insects, mosquitoes, to breed.

Animals advanced on Irka. Hordes of them. Of hyenas. Minks. Donkeys. Vultures on their rumps.

Ravens.

The cacophony they produced fired up Irka's nerve endings. She shrieked. A hand covered her mouth. She bit it, kicking, thrashing. Strong arms pinned her down. A needle bit into her vein, hot liquid bore through her arm, heart, brain. The edges of reality ignited, curled, like negatives on fire. Boiled, bubbled. Broke.



Solid darkness. There was darkness, emptiness, and a little spot of light. Far off. Twenty meters, maybe more. It glowed, eerily, in the middle of a field. A fallow. The smell of damp overturned earth filled Irka's nostrils. She walked to it, crawled, on her knees and hands, closer, closer. What was it? Something white, almost metallic. A lode of quicksilver? Couldn't be. It was swathed in luminescent cotton.

*A baby, thought Irka, a newborn baby. A boy. My boy.*

He opened his eyes. Big, blue, piercing.

"I'm dying." He said.

"What?" Said Irka. "No. You can't die. You haven't even been born!" *I'm talking, she thought, it's a dream and in this dream I'm talking.*

"I'm sorry." Said the boy.

"You can't just leave me." Said Irka. She touched his cheek, smooth, velvety, warm. Tears wet her face. She didn't care to wipe them. "Please, don't go. I don't have anyone else, only you. I can't live without you. What will I do?"

"I don't know." Said the boy. "Live life the best you can, I guess." He sighed. "I don't have much time. Thought I'd say goodbye. Thought I'd ask for something...special. Can you hold me?"

Irka wept, silently. She picked up the bundle, so light, so fragile, pressed it to her breast, rocked it a little. "Why,"

she whispered, "why are you leaving me? What have I done wrong? Please, tell me. What can I do?"

"Nothing," said the boy, "I'll be going."

The light went out of him.

"Irina Myshko." Said a voice. The voice of her doctor.

"Wake up, Irina. You have visitors."

Irka stirred, rose to consciousness. Waded through layers of gauze in her mind. Glutinous, groggy. She sat in her hospital bed, hands on her belly. The dream had already left her. She snatched at its pieces, tails of thoughts, images. They disintegrated into nothing.

What happened?

*Eaglet?* She thought, confused. *Eaglet, answer me.*

She held a rock in her hands, a dead rock wrapped in skin. In her abdominal muscles. Stretched taut, a chalice of iron.

*Eaglet!* Horror hooded her head. She wanted to shake it off, to get rid of it. *Eaglet!*

Coughs, sighs. Breathing.

They stood around her, the conscientious consortium. The obtruding tableau. The butterfly, a black admiral, gloomy, doleful. The viper. The owl next to it, the fox. The catfish and the herring, sisters. The giant cockroach with golden incisors showing. The seal in a bright scarf. Checkered, yellow on cobalt. But no boar.

*Is your dick still hurting?* Thought Irka, suddenly livid. *I wonder. I hope it does. I hope it burns like a skinned puppy dipped in pure surgical spirit. Alive. For the rest of your porcine service.*

They studied her. Pairs of eyes, red-rimmed, frayed at the edges, shrewd, questioning, wondering. In collusion over something, written in their pupils. Contracted. In that lie they were about to feed her. Irka sensed it, strident, a licking tongue on her skin. Did they cry? Did they pretend to cry? She shuddered, overcome with fury and mortal terror. Was something wrong with her baby? Why didn't he move, why did he feel like a hunk of stone lodged under her diaphragm?

*Eaglet! Are you alive?*

Irka's heart froze. Her blood flow fell into a swoon. No air syphoned into her lungs, no oxygen. She choked, remembering now. It floated up in her mind. The bundle of cotton, no light in it. *Eaglet...*

They shuffled closer. About to force upon her the unsolicited ministration, the act of pitiful mercy. A devout deception, to make her feel better. As if. Nothing could revive her boy. Nothing. She destroyed him, like she wanted to. It happened. A heavy stone sat inside her stomach.

*Fuck you,* Irka wanted to tell them. *All of you. Leave me alone. I want to die.* She turned to the wall.

"Well, Irina." Said the doctor gaily. "We're letting you go. Don't strain yourself, don't carry anything heavy. Stay home, lay in bed. You should be fine."

Irka heard him and didn't. *What?* She thought. *You're discharging me?* She squinted.

Bright fluorescent light sank on her shoulders like snow. Cheap cotton curtains adorned with asters that resembled dead spiders hung limp over the window. Was it night? Day? Stuffy air reeked of bloated women's bodies. Floor washrag. Tea and cream-of-wheat. It must have been morning. Spoons scraped plates. Lips slurped compote.

Figures huddled around her. Not beasts, people. Pavlik sat on the edge of the bed. He changed. His face was peaked, posture ignominious. As if the filigree of lines of which he was composed got broken, stirred, messed up.

"Hey." He said.

Irka parted lips, wanted to say "hey" back, in that natural casual way, and couldn't. She lifted a hand to give herself a bruise, lowered it. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

"How are you?"

She shrugged.

He took her hand. "I got discharged last week. You ready to go home?"

*I don't have a home,* thought Irka. *I have nothing.*

Yulia and Anton greeted her. Margarita. The usual politeness. Marina flung herself on her daughter. Sonya gave her a derisive smile. Irka scanned them. Ordinary people. Impatient. Callous. Valentina lectured her on proper newborn care. Sim smiled, a bit distant. Unsure.

Irka reached for her backpack, pulled out the pad. "Eaglet is dying." She wrote. Her face had grown still, looking at these words. At their finality. Perfunctory, vacant.

"What?" Pavlik stared. "No. It can't be true. The doctor said you're better. We came to pick you up and—"

"He wants to get rid of me. Thinks I'm crazy. They all do. I don't care anymore what anyone thinks. Pavlik." She glanced at him. "I don't want to lie anymore."

"About what? You're scaring me."

"I want to tell them—"

He stopped her hand. "No." Whispered. "After the wedding. Please. I've been thinking this over. And...I wanted to talk to you first."

"No." The pen shook. "I can't wait."

"Why?"

"Because that's all I ever did. *Wait*. I'm done."

"Irina." He looked frightened.

"Sorry you got stuck with me. I'll fix this. You won't have to endure my presence any longer."

"What are you *talking* about?"

New page. Clean. White. Irka grinned, thinking, *Can you hold this? Can you hold this dirt, paper?* She wrote fast, with hunger. "Lyosha Kabansky raped me, every night, for over a year. I'm carrying his baby, he doesn't know. I ran away to stop him." The page shrunk under words, puckered. *I destroyed you, eaglet,* thought Irka. *I deserve no redemption. Only penance. I will destroy myself. If you can still hear me, know this. I love you.*

She tore out the sheet, handed it to Pavlik.

## Chapter 24. The Boar Is The Father

Irka wrote the same three sentences. Again. And again. And again. Ripped out pages, shoved them into faces. *Here, she thought, read this.* She pushed them into hands. *Know this. This is what happened. This.* She foisted, jostled, jabbed. *Do you believe it? You don't believe it? I don't care if you believe it or not. Not anymore. It's moot now.* They looked at her, confounded. Took the pages, read them. Yulia, Anton, Margarita. Her mother, her aunt. Valentina. Sim. The pregnant girls, the doctor, the nurse who brought the documents for signature.

*Losers, cowards, slobs,* thought Irka. *It's not me who's crazy. You are. Look at you, pests in a circus. Animals. Liars.*

They lost shine. That fake joy, plastered badly. It peeled off, in clumps. Their scintillating smiles. Color from their faces. Eyes, dull, lips, rustling, reading, rereading. They scrutinized Irka, her belly.

And then, the catfish. Long barbels. Long arms. The parasitic sot rolled in mucus. Marina Somina, not quite drunk, not quite sober. She fixed her daughter with a mixture of hatred and jealousy. "Bitch." She spat. "If the bitch does not wish it, the dog will not jump."

*The boar, thought Irka, you mean, the boar. The boar will fuck you, wish it or not.* Her face contorted, the face of a toddler before a vocal eruption, a scream, not audible yet. Hurtling. Arrested. Irka choked. It stuck in her throat. *Curtains, she thought. Orange curtains.*

The curtains in the ward room weren't orange. They had orange undertones, russet, fawn. A fleece of a month with tawny spindly asters.

Irka shook her head. *No. Get out of my head.*

*Dua, said the eaglet.*

*Eaglet!*

*Dua.*

Irka's legs buckled. She held on to a shoulder. Someone's. Someone stood nearby. Who was it? Pavlik?

*Dua, repeated the eaglet.*

*Stop, Irka thought. Please, stop.*

*Dua, dua, dua!*

"*Dura.*" Said Marina with relish. She stared at her daughter with familiar loathing that came before the beating. "Show you how to whore yourself with my man. You watch. I'll show you." She raised her arm. Her right arm. Flesh hung off the humerus bone, flabby. Irka could see it through the viscose blouse. Fat fingers curled in a fist. Red. Why were they always red? Like she dipped her hands in hot water.



Irka tensed, nerves on fire. Orange. That same vivid orange. It lashed at her eyes. The curtain, the threads on the bottom. Her heart filled her throat. She rushed at her mother, pushed her aside, and bolted.

Where? Somewhere. Anywhere. She didn't know, didn't care. She had to run. Run, until she couldn't see that face, couldn't hear that voice. Patients looked at her strange as she darted along the hallway, down the stairs. Through the front door. Out. Onto the trodden paths in the melting snow, by parked cars, to make distance. Her belly cramped.

Irka panted, leaned on a tree. A rowan. Clumps of pomes, last year's—*How did the sparrows not eat them?*—in her face, rubious, blackened. She plucked one, slipped it into her mouth. Bit into it. Dry like a bone, bitter. It calmed her somewhat. She ate a couple more. Chewed, swallowed. They tasted like dust, dead. *Rowan berry jam*, she thought. *Grandma used to pick them after the first frost. Boil them with sugar. The foam, the spume, I'd spoon it, lick it.* She gulped, watched her breath curl in the morning air. It wasn't going to be cold for much longer. She smelled spring, took in a lungful.

*Eaglet?*

Silence.

*Eaglet, please.*

Movement. Faint enough for Irka to detect it.

*Why? She thought. Why did you do this?*

*Because you let it out, said the eaglet.*

*I let what out?*

*The animal. Said the eaglet. The mouse. You thought it was small, but it wasn't. It took quite a bit of space. There is room for me now. I can move around. I'm not dying anymore. I decided.*

*You're not! Oh, eaglet. Thought Irka. She clasped hands under her belly. You scared me. Eaglet.*

*It stirred. Poked her with knees, elbows. I'm here.*

*Don't do this again, please. Irka chuckled. Incredibly, she wanted to laugh. She was crying. Tears wet her face, and laughter. It came out of nowhere. Please, don't. Eaglet. Never.*

*I'll try my best, said the eaglet.*

*Thank you.*

*This is how Pavlik found her, holding on to the rowan tree that grew on a dirt patch by the clinic's parking lot, fingers clenched around its bole. Droplets in her eyelashes. A smile on her face, lunatic. A frieze on the border of reality. Her reality. Feral no longer.*

*"Irina! You scared me to death." His eyes swollen, puffy.*

*Irka studied him questioningly.*

"She's gone." He said. "Your aunt, too. And your grandmother. Sim's coming with us." He pointed behind him.

"What's wrong with the baby?"

Irka shook her head.

"Is everything fine?"

She nodded.

"I don't believe you." He studied her eyes. "The nurse said they found you on the roof, trying to kill yourself. Is that true?"

Irka didn't move, didn't blink. *Why are you asking?* She thought. *You don't need to ask. You know what it's like to be raped. To be taken against your will. To want to explain what happened. To anyone, anyone who would listen. Then learn that you can't. Can't talk. And why would you? They're deaf, all of them. So what's the use? Tell me.*

"Please." He handed her the pen and the pad.

Irka pushed it away. *No, too long, too complicated. Doesn't matter now. I'm over it.*

"He's not worth it." Said Pavlik. "They're not worth it."

A Zhiguli trundled by. Slush sloped over the curb. Pavlik shrunk to Irka. A pair of old matrons, arm in arm, eyed them with suspicion.

He touched her belly, gently. "Don't leave me."

For a moment Irka thought she'd crumble. She peeled off his hands, one by one. *I'm a burden to you*, she thought, *not an inamorata. Never will be. Why do you need a girl with a bastard baby? Not enough shit on your plate? I don't understand.*

"Irina, please. I...love you." He said it to his hands, head down. "You're...family."

*Family.* Irka smirked. *Until you meet a boy who looks like Kostya. Fucks like Kostya. No, thanks. I'll manage fine on my own.* She picked lint off his coat. Wool. Expensive.

"I can be *me*, with you. Do you believe it?"

*Then why can't you be you with everyone else?* Thought Irka. *What am I now, your security blanket?*

Snow sloshed under two pairs of feet. Yulia and Anton walked along the curb, side by side. Tense. Yulia's complexion celadon, same as her shell, a fine leather parka. Anton's mouth a thin line, hair riffled. They stopped a couple meters away. Anton took one tentative step, another, and then, without a warning, hissed into Irka's face. "I want you out of my son's life." He looked scary, predatory. "Out!"

Irka withdrew.

"Papa, enough with the drama." Said Pavlik. "Why do you do this?"

"Why? You know perfectly well, why. For you, Pavlusha, I'm doing this for you."

"We are doing this for you." Added Yulia. She burned Irka with her stare, down to cinders.

"Oh, I see." Said Pavlik. "Pardon me, if I come across insensitive in any way. Such is not my intention. But may I ask something? Did it ever cross your minds to ask me first?"

Anton opened his mouth to answer.

"Do you perhaps think that I need an approbation from you, papa, for my every life decision? Do you think—"

"Approbation? What right have you to talk about approbation." Anton's voice shook. Yulia stroked his arm. "We took in this stray girl you brought home."

*Stray is right*, thought Irka.

"We fed her, we clothed her. We thought you were in love. Young reckless love. We forgave you. Thought you were going to be a young father. Your mother convinced Margarita Petrovna to move in with us, so you two could have your own flat, start your own little family. I lost my car as a result of this move!" He gulped air. "And you...you lied to us."

A whine of the ambulance erupted in the parking lot. A white van with red stripes rode past them. The guard saluted the driver from the booth by the fence. The iron gate slowly retracted. Its hinges screeched, rusty. The van turned out into the street, blended with traffic.

"You know something, papa," said Pavlik when the echoes died, "this will blow your mind." He took Irka's hand, squeezed it. "I'm gay."

Irka choked on air. *Did I hear you right?* She thought. *Did you say what I heard you say?* She shivered. The wind cut through her hospital bathrobe. Her slippers soaked in the moisture from the ground.

"You're *what?*" Anton gulped, dumbfounded, slapped in the face. Uncomprehending.

"Why do you say that, Pavlusha?" Yulia's lips moved imperceptibly.

"Why?" Pavlik cracked up. "What do you mean, *why*, mama. Because I am. Haven't you noticed? Haven't you ever wondered?"

Gravel crunched under tires. A Mercedes rolled up to the curb. The passenger's window slid down. "Heavens!" Sim leaned out. "This is hardly a convenient place for a serious conversation. Irina, you look frozen. Are they chilling you on purpose?"

They all looked at him like at an apparition. A luminary against the gloom of the dissention. Not real. The smile. The scarf. Too much color, confidence. Irony. Theater.

Sim turned on the blinkers, strolled out of the car. "Why the long faces? Yulia Ibragimovna, my queen. Get off this lawn, I beg you, you will mar your shoes."

"Oh." Said Yulia, studying her boots.

"Anton Borisovich," he touched his shoulder, "I thought you left already. Tell me, have you picked out the venue yet? The restaurant? I know a few chefs, good friends of mine, downtown Moscow. Let me know if you want me to put in a word."

"A venue for what, Simeon?"

"The wedding, of course! What else?"

"There will be no wedding." Said Anton firmly.

"Why not?" Asked Sim, genuinely surprised. "It'd be easier for Pavel to obtain the international visa after the marriage." He flipped up his scarf, hid half his face behind it. His eyes sparkled.

"What would I need a visa for?" Asked Pavlik.

"We are going on tour, child. To America." He leered at them, knowing, this was something neither Yulia nor Anton could refuse.

*And I'm a convenient tool, am I?* Thought Irka. She yanked her hand out of Pavlik's grip. *Go ahead then, use me as a prop.*

"To America?"

"New York, to be precise. You'd have to leave something of value here, to be granted the visa. A young wife with the newborn baby is just the ticket. My dearest," he addressed Pavlik's parents, "I think it would be good for your son to

leave Moscow for a while. In light of recent events. Wouldn't you agree?"

Anton's face worked on processing too much news at once.

"Well, this is quite unexpected, am I right?" Yulia turned to stone. Only her lips moved. "I think we need to discuss this before making any decisions."

"Thank you, Sim." Said Pavlik. "I appreciate your concern over my wellbeing, but I don't need to be protected. Have you thought about the possibility of me not wanting to go anywhere?"

"Pavlusha, don't rush things." Yulia nudged Anton. "We need to think this through."

*Have you lost your mind? Thought Irka. Get out of this shithole. Go.*

"This is no place to talk." Said Sim. "Why don't we get our precious girl in the car and continue in the comfort of home? What do you say?"

Irka didn't need to be asked twice. She splashed to the car and hopped in. Soft leather interior. Quiet music. Saint-Saëns. French. Sim loved French composers. Her fingers tingled. She blew on them, rubbed them.

"Move it!" The guard, a mosquito in a standard issue uniform, leaned out of the booth. "Can't park there! Blocking the road! Step on it!"

Pavlik climbed in after Irka.



Sim got in the driver's seat, mischievous, smiling, wound down the window. "Anton, Yulia. Would you mind if I took the liberty to transport the children to your flat?"

They shook their heads.

"Excellent. I shall see you there." He started the car, glanced in the rearview mirror. "What did you to your parents, you miscreant? They look like they're about to pass out."

"I told them I'm gay." Said Pavlik simply.

*Fucking subversion, is what you did,* Irka wanted to say. *Fucking stratagem.* She flipped both thumbs up.

"Good heavens!" Sim gasped. "Did you? Well, about time, my child, about time. Did you hear that, Irina? Listen. *Lis-ten* to him. He told them. Just like that, under a rowan tree. Now that," he shook an admonitory finger, "is a thing of beauty. Light. You've found your light, Pavlik. Congratulations."

"You're saying it like I wallowed in darkness before."

"And so you did. And it *felt* it. The darkness. It tried killing you. Garbed in black, like ravens. Vultures. Vermin. There is nothing they can do to light. Nothing! It blinds them." The Mercedes rolled out onto the street. "I'm not surprised, Irina," Sim added.

"Sim, may I—"

"No, you may not. Shut your precious dough hole, Pavlik. Irina, I'm talking to you. Look at me, child." He peered at the

mirror. Squinted eyes. Shrewd. Vested in energy. "Your mother...hope you don't mind my saying this. What a fish. That woman. What a fish!"

*Catfish, to be precise, thought Irka. And I don't mind at all.*

"You're grown wings, I see."

Pavlik shuddered. "Can we not talk about fish, please? I happen to have an aversion."

"Silence! I'm talking to your future wife. That pig, huh? That pig. What's he got for a cock, a pizzle?"

"Sim!" Pavlik cried.

"Do not interrupt me!"

Irka grinned. *A pizzle.* She thought. *Yes. Something like that.* They shared a smile.

Pavlik glanced from one to another. "I take it there is an unspoken sentiment here that I do not fully understand."

"You don't understand because you don't *lis-ten*."

"I can't help it but to experience both extreme love and extreme hatred toward this man, you know?" Pavlik threw up his hands.

"Liar. You worship me. You idolize me, you extol my virtues. In my presence you burgeon with flame. Flame of the heart. Tell me I'm wrong."

"Oh, but how can I?"

They screeched to a stop at the red light. Hordes of pedestrians launched across, sluggish, stiff with winter. Mice. Rats. Shrews. Minks. Sable, hoary, ashen. Irka thought, *food. You're nothing but food for me.* She flexed her fingers. Feathers. Opened her mouth, closed it with a clack. A beak. Hooked, heavy.

*I'm an eagle, she thought, from Grebenshchikov's song. From the golden city with a yellow fire-maned lion and a deep-eyed ox. The golden celestial eagle.*

A tremor passed through her.

*Eaglet, look at me.*

*Let's fly!* Said the eaglet.

The car was suddenly too small. Irka burst out of it. Soared into the sky. Spread wings over Moscow. Screeched at it, disappointed. It wasn't golden. It had no color. A dull, monochrome metropolis. Black, gray, and white. Black roads, train tracks, dark creeping cars, naked trees. Grey building blocks, maladroit, formulaic, squeezed between avenues helter-skelter, squatting in colorless haze like they were taking a dump. White snow, melting, slushy. A living thing in a web of lines. It squirmed, it clamored, it hungered. An arthropod with a dozen legs projecting out of its fat busy belly. With one eye in the middle. The Red Square. Around it, spiral orbs. The Boulevard ring. The Garden ring. Rings three, four, five. Six,

Moscow Ring Road. Seven and eight, two more suburban tarmacs.

Injected with creepers, forage. *Her* forage.

*It's a spider*, thought Irka.

The spider saw her.

Its red eye swiveled up. Its fangs flexed, twitched.

Irka felt a tug. It pulled. It called her down. It wanted to liquefy her, to suck out her freedom. Catch her. Wrap her. Suffocate her. Cut her wings. Leave an empty hulk. More red eyes opened. Ten, twenty. Clumps of red flags. Demonstrations. Demands. They stared up at her, hypnotized her. It.

The eagle.

The eagle took wing, rode on warm thermals. Freezing wind cut it off, slammed it into a wall of a Stalinist high-rise, one of the Seven Sisters, seven venom glands. Sharp steeples on top of each. Needles. Drops of clear toxin trembled on their tips. The eagle tumbled in mid-air, recovered. Feathers brushed against abrasive concrete, broke off, seesawed to the ground. The eagle screamed, flapped wings once, twice, hovered above the tips of the buildings, dangerously close.

The spider gave an earsplitting squall. Car honks, squealing tires, savage shrieks. It understood that the eagle saw it, recognized it for what it was, what beasts it bred, for what purpose. It couldn't forgive the eagle. It attacked.

Waves of muddy fluid pumped into its legs. Ribbing, rippling. The legs fattened, expanded. Hairs stood out on them in scrubs. Its hundred blazing eyes swiveled, focused on the floating bird. Sprang open. Fixed.

A hideous aboiment filled the air. Every creature of the city groveled to its master. Cockroaches, horseflies, tapeworms. Birds, their wings cut short to prevent them from flying too far, owls, vultures, woodpeckers, ravens. Tapeworms crawled out of every orifice, leeches, turtles, moles, hyenas. Jackals. Vipers, donkeys, boars. A pack of wolves. A bear. Foxes, squirrels. Hordes of them, colonies, gangs. They settled on the spider's belly, muzzles up, maws open, saliva dripping.

The spider jumped.

The eagle looked on in horror.

The whole of Moscow detached itself from the ground.

A fleeting thought passed through the eagle's mind. It wasn't the beasts who were dangerous, it was the place itself. It dripped poison, years of famine, oppression, corruption, slavery. Civil war. Forced Collectivization. Military Communism. Red Terror. It intoxicated every creature born into it from the first breath. First scream. Strangled it. Squashed it. Made it crawl in misery, subversive. Castigated it with Soviet power, until it had full control. Until it eradicated will, confidence, individuality. Until there was nothing left, no optimism, no

faith, only sarcasm. Bitter biting sarcasm. Followed by depression, alcoholism, suicide.

A hundred meters between them, fifty.

Twenty.

The eagle had two choices. Fight or flee.

It flapped wings, desperate, rose higher, and that's when it saw others. Others with wings. Lifted out of the darkness, caught by the light. Fast birds. Falcons. Swifts. Albatrosses. Colorful exotic birds. Birds of paradise. Macaws, popinjays, cockadoos, parrots. They screeched, nudged the eagle on with their cries, darted, zigzagged, dodged spider legs, its gigantic mandibles.

The uproar was deafening.

The eagle panicked. It saw a black dot out of the corner of its eye; careened, swung around, circled it. A butterfly. A black admiral. It flittered in confusion, weak, slow. The eagle dipped under to offer its back. It had to get the butterfly out, it couldn't leave it. If it stayed, it would die.

Wind twirled into a vortex, an eddy of dust, twigs, and dirt. The eagle lost altitude, fought to stay aloft.

The spider's ocelli rose from the heart of the twister, bore into the eagle, ten meters away, five. A robust shape grunted on top of its head, comically small compared to the

giant insect. Hooves planted in soft coating. Stance aggressive. Tusks gleaming. Tail stiff, hairs bristled.

A boar.

The eagle tore toward it, late.

Its piggy eyes full of drunken hilarity, the hog swung its head, dropped open its jaw, and swallowed the butterfly.

The bird and the spider collided.

Feathers, bones, teeth crackled. The eagle's beak flashed in a reckless frenzy, took out both of the boar's eyes to its shrill squealing, jets of hot piggy blood. The boar charged, lost footing and fell to the ground. The spider lashed at the bird. Sharp fangs pierced through its skin, injected it with venom. The eagle screamed and tumbled into a black hole, the spider's gut, where it would be ground to pulp, digested with the help of acid. Perish.

The mandibles clicked in victory.

Irka jerked, heart pounding in her ears.

Car. She was inside a car. A Mercedes. Parked by a five-story Khrushchovka. Same entrance. Same alcoholic hoss passed out on the bench. Dog walkers. The red Zhiguli of the plumber who lived on the first floor. That same denuded elm, but no crows and no ravens. No birds of any kind, not even pigeons.

Sim pulled up the handbrake, killed the engine. "You knew this and you didn't tell me."

"It wasn't my secret to share, Sim. Irina, back me up, please." Pavlik frowned. "You okay?"

Irka stared. Did she dream? Daydream? Foresaw the future like a clairvoyant? Dipped into a feral sub-reality?

"There are no secrets! There is only the quivering of the soul, of the heart. Heart to heart. I felt it. You felt it. And you said nothing." Sim grunted.

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Irina, tell him. Four women!" Sim shook his head. "How could four grown women overlook a child being raped right under their noses? In a three-room flat? Think about it. The walls! They walls are paper thin! I'll tell you how." He leaned between the seats, agitated. "They ignored it. We don't like to see what we don't want to see. We like to play blind. More convenient that way."

"Can I ask—"

"You, Pavel! You are different. I knew it as soon as I laid my eyes on you. Remember the school play? What grade were you in, seventh, eighths? You played a sparrow. Such a luminous boy, fragile, tender, thirteen. Velveteen eyes. Beautiful. Oh, I was afraid to break you with my filthy old man's stare. I picked you because you're a butterfly. Innocent, transparent. You can carry emotion, heart to heart. Good heavens, this is making me emotional."



He stepped out, lit up a cigarette.

"Are you scared?"

She blinked at Pavlik, flabbergasted.

"There is nothing they can do to us. It makes no difference now. It's out, in plain sight. I actually feel better. If not for you, I wouldn't have had the courage...I don't think. Thank you for this. You coming?" He offered her a hand.

Irka climbed out.

The city, the street she stood on, was alive. It didn't look alive, it felt alive. The tremor that ran through the cracked asphalted road, the rumble, the jolts. It was going to pounce. Irka knew exactly when.

*The wedding, she thought, it will happen at the wedding.  
The boar will strike, and the butterfly will die.*

Chapter 25. The Eagle Weds The Butterfly

Irka stood in front of a mirror, in the ZAGS foyer. At quarter to ten, on the morning of their marriage registration day, Saturday, March 12<sup>th</sup>. Two bribes were given to get around her underage and the 30-day waiting period after the documents application. The air buzzed with talk. The mirror reflected gaudy sofas, wall panels inlaid with tasteless depictions of spousal happiness, marble floor, ten other couples awaiting their turn. Corsets, ruching, ribbons. Bridal veils, gelled hairdos, suits, bouquets of flowers. Red sashes across shoulders stamped with WITNESS in gold. And Irka, in a tacky white dress. None of the store gowns fit her, so Valentina fashioned something wearable out of a lacy curtain. A teapot warmer. Frilly sleeves, puffy skirt, clumps of bows.

*If I were to vomit on myself, thought Irka, nobody would notice. They'd think it was part of the décor. So much for an eagle, you fat wimpy chicken.*

"Nervous?" Asked Pavlik, fingers on the necktie.

Irka pushed his hand away, smoothed the knot, tightened it. *Would you be nervous, she thought, if you knew that your groom was about to be killed, but you didn't know how or when? You*

*knew who would do it, and you knew it was going to be your fault, because you failed to convince him to call the whole thing off, to save his dainty life?*

She searched his eyes.

"Me too." Pavlik sighed. "I just hope nobody throws a scene. I've had my fill of drama over the last week, you know." He inspected the tie in the mirror, brushed off invisible lint, passed a hand through his hair.

*That's a good hope to have,* thought Irka. *My hope, for example, is that Lyosha doesn't throw a knife at you or does some other such shit, stinking urinous shotclog.*

"I know what you're thinking."

*Really? Enlighten me,* thought Irka.

"Put it out of your mind. Forget about everything for a day. It's *our* day. It's supposed to be happy and joyful and—"

Irka gave him the look.

"Stop staring at me like this. Can you do me a favor?"

A man in an ill-fitting suit, dry as a vobla, poked his head through the double doors of the ceremony hall. "Pavel Baboch and Irina Myshko! Ten minutes!"

"Pavlusha, it's almost time." Yulia hissed.

"We'll be just a moment, mama. Look," said Pavlik to Irka, "please. Let go. Enjoy today, have fun."

*Have fun? Thought Irka. With this bunch?*

"Listen. I love you."

*Nice try.* Irka listed back and slammed into the mirror.

"You don't believe me. All right. How else can I prove it, die for you or something?" He gave an uneasy chuckle.

Irka's heart dropped. *Don't you say that, don't you fucking say that!*

"Do you love me?"

Irka froze. *Of course I do, you piece of glorious ass. Every bride has checked you out at least twice and burned a hole in me with jealous stares. I'm surprised none of the grooms took notice. If I were one, I'd turn gay on the spot.*

"The truth is..." began Pavlik, "I'm scared of leaving you. I grew fond of you, your constant presence, your silence. I can hear you thinking. You're always there, always listening. I'll miss you, Irina. I'll miss you very much." He played with her fingers. "Will you miss me?"

Irka winced. *What kind of a question is that?*

"Will you come to Kostik's grave with me? Before I leave?"

The front door banged open.

Lenochka ran up to Irka, grabbed two handfuls of gauze and started jumping up and down. "Irkadura is getting married! Irkadura is getting married!"

"Shut your mouth." Spat Sonya. "Irka! Look at you. Your grandmother did a good job. Come here, give your auntie a hug and a kiss." She swept Irka into a slimy hold.

"Oy! Irka! See? What did I tell you? You look pretty!" Valentina grinned, two golden teeth, bad breath.

Irka cringed. She endured her wet kisses, Nadezhda's blabbering on young men these days, cheaters, mostly. Her mother's hard embrace, a slurry tirade on Irka being a gift, a talented and extraordinary girl.

"She could've at least greeted us, right?" Yulia said. "Marina Viktorovna, good morning. So nice of you to come right on time."

"Yulechka!" Marina scooped Yulia into a tight hold. Irka thought Yulia's eyes would pop out of their sockets.

"Forgive me for saying this, Marina Viktorovna," said Anton, "this is a special day for our children. I would appreciate it if you behaved appropriately."

"Who are you to tell me how to behave?" Marina bristled.

"Mama, papa, I love you both. May I remind you...may I ask, I should say. May I ask you to be nice today? As nice as you possibly can be? Please?" Pavlik smiled.

Yulia and Anton stared him down, silent.

"Don't look at me like you're attending my funeral."

"That's funny! Dead groom! Dead groom! Irkadura and a dead groom!" Lenchka danced around.

Sonya smacked her on the forehead.

"Pavlusha!" Exclaimed Yulia. "We talked about this a million times, am I right? It's bad luck saying such words out loud, very bad luck. Now, if I recall—"

Whatever it was Yulia recalled, Irka didn't catch.

She felt a tremor in the fabric of the city. A thump. A grunt. A shriek. The boar, hundreds of kilometers away, galloped toward them. She touched the kitchen knife through her sleeve. It was there, tucked in, the handle at her elbow, the blade flush above her wrist.

*Come closer, piggy, closer,* she thought. *I'm dying to gut you.*

The vobla man's voice announced them. They were ushered into the ceremony hall. Stark, utilitarian. Empty, save for a pompous rug that led to a massive desk, a couple Russian flags on it, rows of chairs at each wall.

A woman stood by the desk, solid, hands clasped, a burly otter with an allure of a brick. "The Civil Registry Office of the city of Moscow greets you." Her tone was dull and edifying.

*This does feel more like a funeral,* thought Irka, *if not for the nauseatingly pink wallpaper.*

"Respected Pavel and Irina. Today is the day of your marriage. In this large and complicated world you have found each other to become the most cherished people in each other's lives." Words fell out of her mouth like stones.

Irka listened for the boar. The rumbling, the trembling echoed. At her feet, at the floor. She fingered the knife.

The no-nonsense, no-romanticism speech dragged on for another five minutes. The other woman asked Pavlik and Irka if they wanted to marry.

"Yes," said Pavlik.

Irka nodded.

She asked her a second time.

Anton trotted over, whispered something.

"She's mute! Mute *dura*." Yelled Marina and hiccupped. She scored a couple vodka shots before the ceremony. "Wouldn't talk. Slap her, yell at her, no good. I tried everything. Been like that since two."

Irka clenched fists. The knife tip punctured her skin, drew blood. She barely noticed. Her mind stood still. No boar in it, no eaglet. Nothing. Only her mother's face, pasty, wasted. A word rose in her throat, a familiar word. It stopped by the backs of her teeth. Irka rolled it on her tongue, sucked on it.

*Piss, she thought, it tastes like piss.*

The otter lady recited the codex of marriage, called for the bride and the groom to sign the certificate, pronounced them husband and wife. Pavlik slipped a ring on Irka's finger. She mechanically slipped on his.

He kissed her.

A peck. Timid. Brief.

Irka's lips turned wooden. Her arms, legs, felt numb. A low rumble reached her, just on the periphery of hearing. A gallop. Rancorous. Uneven. Ripples passed through the floor. The rug shifted, imperceptibly. Irka noticed. The pendulum has swung. The wheels of fate have sprung to motion. It wasn't the boar alone anymore. The giant spider stirred, stretched and yawned, excited for the coming battle.

March of Mendelssohn blared out of the sputtering speakers. Marina cried loudly. Everyone clapped. The otter said her congratulations, foisted fake-leather folder into Irka's hands. Pavlik led her out. She followed, in a trance.

Ten steps, down. Worn concrete. Asphalt. Shouts, congratulations, snaps of opened champagne. A black shiny Chaika. Leather seats. Moscow streets flashing by the window. Wedding pictures at the Moscow State University observation point. Back in the car. The restaurant entrance, first floor of a massive building block. The jeering faces, the eyes, the teeth, the smell of the melting snow.



*Where are you?* Thought Irka. *Where are you hiding?* Her stomach flooded with ice. A shape in a shadow stirred. She jerked her head. Whatever it was, it vanished.

Pavlik accepted congratulations. They stepped inside. The aroma of stew, baked pies, pastries. The chef greeted them with two crystal flutes. Irka took hers, gulped it. They walked into the dinner hall and her knees buckled.

A large hall, one long table set in the middle, covered with dishes, drinks, plates, glasses. Parquet floor. Harsh lighting, yellow. The wall on the left decorated with newlyweds posters. Fake frozen smiles, kitschy dresses. And on the right, one big long window, and over it...

"What's wrong?" Pavlik voice, close, concerned. "You don't like it? I thought it's quite tasteful, no?"

Irka shook. Blood raced through her veins in hot panicked ropes. She was back to being two years old. Small, standing in the balcony room of their apartment. Large. Sunny. Windows hung with orange curtains. Same color, same shade.

"Go on, get seated!" Shouts behind them. "We're starving!"

"Don't make us say *bitter*, naughty kids!"

"I bet he doesn't know how to kiss a girl."

Taunting, laughter.

Pavlik leaned to her. "Irina, what's wrong?"

She fixated on the curtains. The way they folded, the way they hung, the way the breeze ruffled them.

Pavlik's face lost color. "Dammit, I forgot. I completely forgot."

"What's the holdup?" Yelled Marina. "Tell him to get a move on, daughter, he's yours now!" She cackled.

Irka's stomach flipped. She forced herself to take a step, another, get around the table and plop into a chair.

"Don't look that way, just don't look that way." Pavlik's lips brushed her ear. She nodded.

Both families, relatives from out of town, Sim, his theater troupe, Ilinichna, everyone piled in, seated. Shoes scuffed the parquet. Cheers erupted, whistles, whoops.

"Excuse me, can I have everyone's attention?" Anton tinkled on the glass.

Guests hushed.

"Today is a big day for us. Thank you for gathering here to celebrate this important occasion, the joining of our families, the creation a brand new family. I'd like to propose a toast."

Pavlik glanced at Irka, mouthed. "You okay?"

She forced a smile.

"Oh, this is difficult." Anton took off his glasses, cleaned them with a napkin, put them back on. "Pavlusha, our beloved Pavlusha, our only son, our pride, our joy." His chin

jittered. "Our blood. We give you away into the hands of a young beautiful woman, Irina."

"That's right." Confirmed Marina.

"Irina, Pavel." Anton sniffled. "We hope you take care of each other. We wish you love, health, and prosperity." He gulped. "May...your child have loving parents. To the newlyweds!" He raised his drink.

People stormed up, poured champagne, reached over to clink glasses. "To the newlyweds! To the newlyweds!"

"Bitter!" Shouted Ilinichna.

"Oy! Bitter, so bitter!" Picked up Valentina.

"Should we show them how it's done?" Pavlik took Irka's hand. They stood. "Rub it in?"

*Are you serious?* She thought. *Don't I disgust you? Don't I—*

He kissed her. A gulp of breath, at first. Then no breath, no oxygen, only feeling. A real kiss. Irka's eyes watered, spilled tears. She let them roll, mad at herself, for losing it, for loving it, for wanting more.

Somebody started to count. "One, two, three..."

"I would like to—" Marina labored up, swaying, cleared her throat, "—say something."

They pulled apart, surprised, flushed.

"This," she flung an arm at Irka, "is my daughter. *My* daughter." She paused, passed eyes over the table. "I carried

her right here," a hand on the blouse, under breasts, "just like she's carrying her baby now."

*Talk about me like I'm a fixture, thought Irka, a pregnant piece of furniture to obviate on your hunt for beer.*

"Irina, daughter, I'm proud of you, but you need to understand something." A hiccup. "I'm still angry with you. That baby, it had no right to be. No right!"

The room went still.

"Sit!" Hissed Nadezhda.

"Marinka, *dura!*" Valentina yanked on her blouse. "Get down."

"Leave me alone, mama. It's my daughter's wedding. I'll say what I want to say." She choked on a sudden sob.

Irka saw a reflection of herself and her mother, one generation down. Same intolerance and control. Same preachy tone. Two generations. Nadezhda sputtered saliva into Valentina's ear, upset and offended.

"Pavel! You're such a handsome young man," Marina's voice quivered, "you know how to talk well, how to comport yourself, you're a successful actor. You've got good parents, good genes. You'll have a good future. And my Irka...you took her in, you...how to say this."

*Yes, I'm a piece of furniture, all right.* Thought Irka.

"I respect your decision..." she started slurring, "and I admire it. But I think, I think, you're making a big mistake." She surveyed the table. "Yes, I think so. You all do, don't you? You, for example," she stabbed a finger at Yulia, "you're an educated woman. Why don't you say anything, huh? Why the silence? Your son doesn't want to be with my daughter, you know it as well as he does! Your son—"

Valentina tugged on Marina's hand so hard, she plunked back on the chair. They quarreled.

"Marina Viktorovna," hissed Yulia through a smile, "why do you say this? At the wedding? I'm not sure I understand your reasoning."

"She's a *dura*, that's why." Snapped Valentina.

"I do want to be with Irina," Pavlik's voice cut through the muttering. "Please, let me explain. Marina Viktorovna, I apologize if I made such an unfavorable impression on you. This is entirely my fault."

A shadow fell over the window. The light disappeared, snuffed out by someone, something. Big hulk, two pairs of hairy legs over the asphalt road, up the stairs, to the doorway. It gave the floor a shake, dishes a rattle.

Noises muted for Irka. She jumped, her heart berserk.

It was here. The boar. She missed it. Focused on her pathetic equivocal self and missed it.

She grabbed Pavlik's arm, suddenly knowing, seeing. *You need to get out of here! Now!* She pulled him away from the table, and when he wouldn't follow, screeched at him, in short powerful bursts, like an eagle.

"Hey, where are you—" Pavlik's words fell short. He read terror in her eyes. "Lyosha? You feel him coming? So okay. There is nothing he can do. Not here, not in the room full of people."

Irka hung on his arm in useless inertia. *Curse my tongue, rip it out with pincers, please, I don't want it.* She bit on it until it bled. Warm taste of iron filled her mouth. *If I could only tell you, if I could explain, in plain talk, I could convince you...not with this indisposed neurasthenic note-writing—*

The dinner hall doors parted.

"Surprise!" Lyosha's pissed voice announced. "Holy moly, Irka! That's a dress. That's one helluva dress. Look at you. Look...at...you."

Hush filled the room. Heads turned to inspect the new attraction.

Propped by the double doors on unsteady legs, a cluster of red carnations in one hand, a bottle of vodka in another, Lyosha Kabansky grinned a stupid smile.

Time stopped for Irka. She let go of Pavlik, nudged at the butt of the kitchen knife hidden in her sleeve, hooked the tip with a nail, started pulling it out.

"You bunch thought I wouldn't come, huh?" Lyosha ambulated forward. "Marinka, why didn't you tell them?"

Marina shrugged, petrified.

"Well, I'm here. Thought I'd see my *daughter* off myself."

The blade sat in Irka's palm now. She hid it in the folds of her lacy skirt, yanked at it, eyes on Lyosha. The handle got stuck at the cuff.

*This is the place, she thought, remember you asked me where I was going? Here. They butcher pigs here, gut them, quarter them, skin them and roast them over fire, then serve them on a platter, asses stuffed with lard. She burrowed a hole in him with her gaze. You know what they do, to make them taste better? They kick them, for days, get them bruised, tender, juicy, crush their ribcages, and then, as a finishing touch, they rip out their dicks and listen to them squeal.*

"Aleksey Ivanovich! Please, come in." Anton pulled out a chair. "We were just starting."

"Anton Borisovich, my man." Lyosha plodded over. "Sorry I'm late. Had to—" he lifted both arms, "—buy flowers and whatnot. To be a proper...parent. To the bride." He passed his piggy eyes over Irka.

*I'm waiting, she thought. Dare to come closer.*

Five guests between them, four, three.

Pavlik nudged her to the seat. She didn't move. He noticed the knife. "Have you lost your mind? Put it away."

Irka wiggled out of his hold, adamant. *You're drunk out of your fucking mind, you hog, she thought. It'll make my job easier.*

"Irina, put it away." Pavlik reached for the knife.

Irka dodged him. The dress skirt swished against the carpet. The corset clamped her heaving breasts too hard. She didn't pay it any heed, wound up.

A pair of waiters, cranes on stilts in over-starched shirts, brought a stuffed roast suckling pig on a tray, placed it in the middle of the table, departed.

Hands reached for it, knives, forks.

"Excuse me, Aleksey Ivanovich, but both Irina and I would like for you to leave." Pavlik grasped the back of his hair, leaned on it slightly. "Immediately."

"What?" Lyosha made an effort to focus.

Two chairs between them, two bodies. Yulia and Anton.

Irka tensed.

"I said, we'd like for you to leave. You're not welcome here. Thank you."



Comprehension wrinkled Lyosha's porcine face. "What? Who says? Irka? She can't talk. How do you know what she wants. Speak for yourself, boy. My Irka wants to see me, don't you?"

*I want to see you dead,* thought Irka.

It must have reflected in her eyes.

Lyosha's expression darkened. "Don't you?"

"No, she doesn't." Snapped Pavlik.

Irka yanked on the blade, harder, worked at the cuff. She either had to cut herself or rip the sleeve open.

"That husband prick of yours is not the father, so I heard." He advanced. One chair. Yulia. "Good for you. I say, ditch the faggot. Come home. We'll fix this baby. Raise him right. Like a proper man, proper Russian."

"Lyosha—" Started Marina.

"Shut your mouth! Nobody's asking your opinion."

*Did you guess it's yours, you moron? Did some rat spill to you the news already?* Thoughts choked Irka, she wanted to scream them, throw them in his face. Her fingers fumbled, trying to free the handle. A drop of sweat rolled down her nose.

"One more time, in case I wasn't clear." Pavlik's voice shook from strain. "This is mine and Irina's wedding. We request that you leave. Now."

"Pavlusha, Aleksey Ivanovich, please, take it easy." Anton professed in his ingratiating manner. "I'm sure there is some

kind of a misunderstanding. We can discuss this peacefully over food and drink."

"Why don't we all sit down?" Said Yulia brightly.

"Mama, we don't want him here!"

Not a scrape of a fork could be heard, not a swallow.

"Did you know your son is a homo? Did ya?" Lyosha leered at her, snatched a fistful of the tablecloth and pulled. It slid off the edge, plates rattled.

Lenochka shrieked, Sonya hushed her.

Yulia unfolded, uncoiled, her neck elongated. She hung over Lyosha, hissing. "Yes, he's gay. What of it?"

Pavlik sucked in air.

"What of it? Think your gay sonny could knock her up?"

Lyosha cackled. "How did you think he got it up, eh? Show me the trick!" He leered at Pavlik. "Show me your cock, I want to see it. Show it, to all of them! Go on!"

Pavlik stared, shaking.

"What, can't do it? Thought so. I bet you haven't got one. Well, I tell you what, a bit of news for you, for your wedding night. It's me who fucked her. Me!" Lyosha's already blood-shot eyes bulged, in danger of popping. "And I wasn't the first. Who knows how many before me. She'd lain with all of Marinka's mongrels, every one of them. She's whore. That's whom you married. A whore!"

"Don't ever...call...my wife a whore." Said Pavlik quietly. He listed, lurched past Irka, past his mother, raised a fist and drove it into Lyosha's jaw.

Lyosha careened, windmilled both arms, sprawled on the carpet three chairs over. The floor quaked under his bulk. The bottle of vodka crashed against the wall, carnations scattered. Marina screamed. The air filled with the smell of cheap bootleg. People stood up, craned their necks, to see better. A free spectacle.

"Damned faggot." Lyosha scrambled up, the broken bottle held by the neck in front of him, a jagged bore.

The eaglet jolted Irka's belly. She freed the knife at last, clasped the handle.

*Get it!* Said the eaglet. *Get the boar!*

*I will,* she thought, *you bet I will,* and charged.

An animal moan escaped her. The moment came. She didn't simply want to hurt Lyosha, she wanted to slay him.

"Irina!" Pavlik rushed after her, snatched for the skirt, missed and stepped on it. A strip of lace tore off.

Irka tripped, flailed both arms for purchase.

Lyosha ogled the knife. His eyes widened. He stooped, the broken bottle aimed at her belly.

She was falling straight on it, helpless. There was nothing for her to hold on to, nothing.

A body rammed into her side and pushed her over.

Irka cried out, mid-air, a meter from the floor.

Where she was a second ago, stood Pavlik. Arms spread wide, dark, in his new suit jacket bought for the occasion, like black wings of a butterfly. Lyosha's hand, tense, shaking, moved upward. The teeth of the bottle struck Pavlik's neck, the stretch between the starched white shirt collar and his cleanly shaved chin. It drew a thin red line and sunk deep into the muscle. Blood spluttered on the silk tie knot, the knot Irka smoothed this morning. Pavlik jerked, took in a gasp of air with a sharp hiss.

For a moment nothing happened. Two startled figures regarded each other, out of time, out of space. Then they toppled to the ground. Lyosha flat on his back, Pavlik on top of him. Irka spread-eagled two steps away. Her head hit the floor. She gave a yelp, knife clutched firmly in her hand.

The hall went deathly quiet.

Irka blinked, focused. Table legs. Chairs. Feet. Shoes. Lyosha's eyes, swiveling in horror. Pavlik's arms doing strange swiping motions, like he was swimming, dark liquid oozing out of his neck. Lyosha grumbled a curse and pushed Pavlik off.

Irka's mind left her. It pulverized itself, became a void, a gap of excruciating pain. With inhuman effort, she lifted herself to all fours and vaulted at Lyosha, a horrible scream

parting her lips, filling the room, echoing across the walls, overpowering people's shouts. She saddled him, belly to belly, lifted her arm and struck. Sunk the knife deep into his gut. The blade coalesced with her hand, grew into one thing. The beak of an eagle. It ripped through the pig's sweater, made an ugly squelching noise. Irka wrenched it out, struck again. And again. More. Lyosha gurgled. Blood pulsed out of his mouth in rhythmic gushes. Irka's fingers got sticky, slippery. She tasted blood on her tongue. Her bridal dress stained red, like the Soviet flag, like the pioneer neckerchiefs she used to forget to wear to school. Like the stains on the sheets, after she was violated. Like the ragged hole in Kostya's chest. The eye of the spider.

The scattered carnations.

*Do it! Do it!* Eaglet was hysterical.

*I am, eaglet.*

*Gut it!*

*I'm gutting it.*

*Cut off its dick!*

*I will.*

People screamed around her, hands tugged on her, someone tried lifting her by the armpits. Irka tossed her head up and hollered, with the force of years. Years of silence. She howled until her voice cracked, until she grew short of breath, only then did she lower her head.

The first thing she saw was her mother.

"Lyosha! Lyosha! What did she do to you? What did the *dura* do to you?" Marina shook his limp shape. Her upper lip curled, mustache bristled. Barbels of a catfish. Dazed milky eyes drilled into Irka. Malice swam in them. Hatred and disgust. "You bitch." She looked scary, pallid, teeth missing, bleached hair lank over her face. "What did you do to him, huh? You killed him! You—" She raised a hand.

It rushed at Irka in a split second, the day, the sun, her mother on the naked mattress, the potty, panties on her ankles. She dropped the knife, blocked Marina's arm, and slapped her. That word she held inside her for fourteen years, the word she didn't know was so bad, burst through.

"*Dura.*" She sad. It felt strange, moving her tongue, forming sounds. She tried again. "*Dura.*"

"What?" Marina's eyes rounded.

"*Dura.*" Repeated Irka. "*Dura!*" She sucked in air and began screaming on repeat. "*Dura! You stupid dura! You dura, dura, dura!*"

She heard shouts, "Call someone! An ambulance!" and "He's hurt!" and "My son is bleeding!" and "Pavlusha!" A pair of strong arms lifted her, and still she yelled the same word on repeat. The flood that had been held back couldn't be stopped. Marina's face scrunched up, like that of a toddler about to cry.

Irka thrashed out of the hold, screamed "Pavlik!", fell to her knees, pushed Yulia and Anton aside, looked him in the face, searched his eyes, trying to see something in them, anything.

They were still.

Pavlik was gone.

Chapter 26. The Birth Of A Bird

Irka's waters broke. A gush of warm fluid between her legs, wet stockings, drenched skirt. At first she thought it was piss. Sim pulled her off Pavlik's body, half-dragged, half-carried to a nearby chair. Bridal pumps, stained with blood, caught on the edge of the carpet, slid off her swollen feet. Her hands, her breath shook. She hardly noticed. The rumble of yells enveloped her in white noise. Sim's urgent whispers. Marina's wails. Militia , ambulance sirens, an echo in the street, closer. Yapping voices, clattering feet. A spasm seized her abdomen, cinched it in a hard fervent belt.

She doubled down. *Eaglet!*

*It's time.*

*But it's early.*

*I want out.*

*Don't. Stay. They'll take you away from me.*

*Why?*

*I killed a man, she thought, I'm a murderer.*

No, said the eaglet. *You slaughtered a boar. Big difference.*



"Heavens, child! You're wet!" Sim exclaimed over her head.

"Are you having contractions?"

*He killed Pavlik, thought Irka, Pavlik is gone.*

*It, not he. That's why you slaughtered it. It deserved it.*

*But it's my fault he did it, eaglet, my fault. If I didn't—*

*No, it's not. Not your fault.*

*Yes, eaglet, it is.*

*I disagree.*

"Call the doctor! Quick! She's in labor!"

*I'll go to jail.*

"Breathe, Irina, breathe. Let's do it together. One, two, three..."

*Eagles don't go to jail, people do.*

"Do you hear me? You need to breathe."

*And what do eagles do?*

"Vadim Grachev, ambulance doctor." A new voice, official, vacant. "What happened?"

"I think she's in labor."

Cold hands on Irka, a swarthy face with close-set beady eyes, the smell of surgical masks and cigarettes.

*Eagles fly.*

*Where?*

*Away.*

*I don't want to fly without you.*

*I'll come with you. I have wings, remember.*

Two medics frisked about her dress, rolled Irka onto a stretcher.

She sat up. "Pavlik!" Her voice unfolded, bounced around the room, orotund, startling.

A piece of gauze, smelling of medicine, pressed to her nose. She inhaled and fell into a numb dizziness. Relaxed, apathetic. Her body turned immaterial, a circle of flames around her abdomen, slow steady heartbeat, sedated mind. Gaudy chandeliers passed her vision, the dinner hall ceiling, yellowish in the glow. Fluttering orange curtains. Marina's frightened face. Yulia's, Anton's, Valentina's.

Irka closed her eyes, let movement take her.

The stretcher was hoisted into the van, on top of a fake-leather bench. An emergency nurse in a tarnished lab coat sat on a bench across, jaded, with a look of a stupefied deer frozen in the headlights not from shock but from fatigue. Dried smeared nacreous lipstick, sunken cheeks. A red metal case, scuffed, with a red cross painted over a white circle stood on the floor between her legs. She unlocked it, produced a wet cloth and started wiping Irka's face without a word.

A militiaman, young, with a thin mustache and an expression of distaste on his bony face, banged the doors shut, squatted next to the nurse.

The engine revved.

The ambulance pulled out into the street, careened. The siren whooped above them with repetitive annoyance.

Irka's head rocked from side to side. She shifted in and out of clarity, in and out of mind, when something rose from her gut, punched through her lungs, slipped into her mouth. A dam broke inside her. Other words, the words she hasn't said yet, the tangle, the tumble of them, rushed forth. She clamped nurse's sleeve, searched her eyes.

"I can talk. I can talk now." It came out clumsy. Irka licked her lips, wanting to laugh and cry at the same time.

"Shhh." Said the nurse. "Almost there."

"How far?" Asked the militiaman, a uniformed sturgeon.

"About fifteen minutes. What'd she do?"

"Knifed a man."

The nurse shot Irka a horrified look.

"I couldn't talk for fourteen years." Said Irka.

"Uh-uh." The nurse rubbed inside her eye, inspected something on the tip of her finger, flicked it off.

"Listen. I'm an anachronism in reverse," Irka glanced between them. "I am what I was to be, but never became." Arduous respiration rung in her ears. It was hard to talk, yet she couldn't stop, she had to.

The nurse felt her forehead.

"They don't like it," Irka swallowed, "when you stand athwart in their throats. Do they?"

"Your throat hurts?" The nurse lifted a brow. "Vova! Hurry up. She's delirious."

"They couldn't swallow me, so they spit me out." Irka implored at the militiaman. He remained blank, an impassive sturgeon. Bottom-feeder, just like her mother.

"Tanya, five more blocks!" The driver's voice danced with sprightly gaiety through the partition window. He whistled in tune with a pop song blaring from the radio.

"I'll have to forfeit my freedom, the freedom I never had." Said Irka, louder. "Then what is there to forfeit?"

The nurse stared past her.

"Is it a crime to want to be free?" She waited, for some reaction. Anything. She got dull impartiality, the engine rumble, and the monotone whoop of the siren. "It doesn't matter that I can talk now, you don't hear me."

A contraction overwhelmed her.

Irka rolled to the side, pulled up her legs, panted. It didn't last long, the pain, only a few seconds. It was bearable, nothing compared to being torn from thigh to thigh by a boar and then guzzled up from the bottom of the spine to its very last vertebrae. It gave her an idea.

"You're a stupid deer." She said, eyes fixed on Tanya.

"You're so afraid, you forgot you're afraid. Fear soaked into your muscles, made your venison dry and stale, your brain languid. You pretend not to care, that's your escape. Torpor, stupidity, cowardice."

The nurse flinched. "What?"

"Don't listen to her." The militant smirked. "She's probably schizo. You know, cuckoo in the head? Killed a guy like a pig, with a kitchen knife. You should've seen the wounds."

"And you," Irka glanced at him, smiled with the air of melancholy knowledge, "are a sturgeon. A blunt hick, a spineless anacletic. You let your bosses ride you, because you have no teeth. You suck rotting gruel with your mouth, bayou dirt and slime. That's your diet. You're a swindle and a profligate, living off bribes."

"See? What did I tell you? Schizo." But his face flicked through a shadow of doubt, of hurt.

The driver honked at someone, tossed a line of expletives.

"You know I'm right," said Irka, "both of you. You like to hide behind hypocrisy. It has a broad convenient back. Nice way to exist, but not to live. You're desiccated hulks that fell into the trap of trusting this place, its lies, and you've lost your humanity. It's been sucked out of you, but you don't miss it, do you? What's to miss? Truth? Honesty? Love? Compassion?"

No, fuck it. It's too painful, too hard, it's easier to be a dimwitted beasts."

The siren died.

They pulled into the hospital parking lot. The driver hopped out of the van, banged the doors open. Fresh scent of the rain and damp earth wafted in. "Tanya, you've frozen or something?"

The nurse tore her gaze away from Irka. "Tired. Take no notice. Everything is fine."

The militant blinked.

They clambered out. An orderly, crouched, wet, pulled the stretcher out, heaved it in on the gurney, and swore.

"Oho! A bride? Why so much blood?"

"I've practiced in butchery today, for the first time." Said Irka calmly. It gave her immense pleasure to move her tongue, make sounds, hear them ring. "Gutted a man. I can practice on you, if you'd like?"

The orderly, a short stalky fellow with a potato for a nose, recoiled. "Crazy, that one."

"Roll her in. She's in labor."

Irka convulsed in another spasm. She didn't mind the cloudburst that instantly soaked her through, the gusts of wind, the wheels of the gurney jolting over asphalt cracks, the sharp

medicinal smell and harsh fluorescent lights of the clinic lobby.

Same shabby interior, impartial faces, stuffed air.

"What's this riffraff?" Said a high-pitched voice. "Look at all the blood!

"A criminal. Killed a man in broad daylight. With a kitchen knife. More than twenty wounds."

"God almighty! You don't say. In labor?"

"About an hour."

"What a bitch."

Irka abruptly sat up. Her skirt was hitched to her thighs. Her legs in clammy stockings, still damp from the amniotic fluid, slid over the edge of the vinyl mattress. She grasped its sides, for balance. Lank hair fell on her face in streaks, making it look murderous. "Call me a bitch one more time, you old rat, and I'll yank out your long intestine, make a noose and hang you on a meat-hook, for the crows to feast." She clicked her tongue.

The elderly nurse, a tubby muskrat with patchy fur curled and pomaded into a pitiful semblance of a hairdo, ogled Irka with latent contempt and fright. "Are you staying then?" She asked the militant.

"Have to. Orders."

Irka stared at them in an open challenge. They turned away.

The din of the lobby gradually hushed.

The medical staff behind the registration counter, the doctor who passed the lobby with a stack of papers, the gravid women and their relatives perched on chairs along the hideous beige wall plastered with omnipresent bulletin boards stared Irka up and down, whispering, agitated.

"What? You like my dress?" She looked down at herself and laughed. She must've appeared ludicrous and horrific at the same time. Lacy wedding gown, home-made, torn, stained with blood, wet from rain, swollen over her giant belly. Dirty feet, no shoes, torn nylon pantyhose. Red gloves of Lyosha's gore on her hands. And the odor. Irka stunk. Of sweat, blood, and ripe vaginal excretions.

After a brief consultation with the shift doctor, the nurse wheeled her into the elevator and exited on the delivery floor, overcrowded, filled with moaning disheveled women, holding on to the walls, crawling along, doubling over in pain, ripe breasts swollen behind threadbare hospital gowns. No bras permitted, no underwear. One of them, young, barely eighteen, retched onto the floor, a stream of half-digested breakfast.

A cramp took hold of Irka slowly, then all at once, sharp needles jabbed her sides, front, groin. She cried out.

"Keep your mouth shut!" Squealed the nurse.



"Come closer," panted Irka, "and I'll claw out your eyes. Blind rats tend to get smarter with age, did you know?"

The nurse thrust the gurney into a tiny room, appallingly dirty, crammed with portable beds, groaning women in various stages of labor. Sheep, vulnerable, exhausted, left to struggle by themselves. They reeked of despair and complaints, the kind that happen while bonding over communal misery.

"Go wash." The nurse threw a hospital gown at Irka. "End of hallway. She ain't going anywhere, don't worry." She said to the militiaman, intercepting his protest. "Have a cup of tea in cafeteria. I'll walk you. This is no place for men."

"You sure?"

"Are you blind? She's in labor. Where will she go?"

"All right. No funny business, you hear? We'll find you if you run. Bet on it." He threw Irka a dubious look and departed after the nurse.

The women, a dozen of them in a room fit for four, studied Irka.

"What happened to you?" Asked the one by the door, twenty-something, beautiful in the classical Russian style, high cheekbones, long neck, if not for the dark circles under her eyes and pallid skin, sweaty from pain.

Irka pulled the wretched dress off, talking with surprising calm. "My mother's boyfriend raped me. Knocked me up."

"No. The blood!"

"I killed him."

The woman gasped, shrunk back.

Irka slid off the gurney, wiggled out of the pile of lace, tore off the tights, the bra, the panties, tossed them on the sticky linoleum floor, and, naked, cotton robe pressed to her breasts, waddled out of the room, to the end of the corridor, into the only shower. She found it instinctively, following the standard layout, the same in every Soviet hospital.

She had two more contractions there, threw up on herself, and passed out from pain.

That night, after nine agonizing hours of misery, she was hauled to the delivery room, her pubes shaved with a rusty razor, an enema forced into her anus, to cleanse whatever junk she had in her colon, and at about three A.M. the doctor, a brusque woman with sharp canine features and doggedly pressed lips, finally declared Irka as unable to dilate. Bluish light reflected in the lines of her face, her silhouette stark against white tiled walls of the delivery room. An angry cur, upbraiding, stropky.

"Five centimeters. You're not trying hard enough."

The baby's head lodged itself in Irka's cervix. The pain was unbearable. Wet from sweating, feverish, frantic with pain, she cried a terrible scream. Her legs were held apart by two

nurses, grim matrons with morbid miens. Fleas, jumping parasites.

"What are you yelling for?" Shouted the doctor suddenly. "Who asked you to get pregnant? It didn't hurt screwing your pal, did it? But now you're having a baby and you cry like it hurts? Shut your mouth and push!" Her harsh face darkened with resentment.

Irka moaned. "What would you know about screwing? When was the last time you got laid, you sadistic psychopath? Who'd want to fuck you? You're nothing but a yapping bitch full of conceit, baseness and envy! You—" An avalanche of pain silenced her, a hot torturous wave.

"Push, *dura*, push!"

Irka grunted, delirious.

"Bad mother! You'll suffocate the baby! Push!"

Both nurses threw themselves on Irka's chest and belly, pressed down. She couldn't draw in air, choking.

"Where's the scalpel? I'm cutting her open." The doctor leaned in and slashed a line from Irka's vulva to anus, without any anesthesia.

Irka hollered in agony.

At once, a huge burden propelled through her birth canal so fast, she was afraid it would drop.

"I got the head! Push!"

Irka pushed.

Out came the shoulders, the body, and tiny legs. Irka's belly collapsed onto itself like a deflated balloon. She couldn't see clearly through tears. Everything ached, every muscle, every bone, every nerve ending.

"It's a boy!" The nurse announced.

"Pavlik." Irka called. "Pavlik!"

And then, a cry, weak at first, growing stronger. Taking big gulps of air. A reddish squirming shape, in gloved hands, wiped, dressed. Screaming. Louder, louder. A buckram tag with a number tied to its foot, an identical one to Irka's wrist.

"Give him to me." Irka's voice caught at the end, hoarse from the screaming. Her lips burned, cracked and dry.

The nurse carried the baby out of the room without a word.

"Give him to me! Where is she taking him? I want my baby! I want my—" Irka felt to her right, on the little wheeled table. Over blood-stained cheesecloth. Steel instruments. Scissors. Needle-holders. Forceps. Retractors.

She snatched a scalpel just as the nurse slammed it out of her hand. "Killer! She's a killer!"

Irka's abdomen contracted. Something else plopped out. A warm slimy thing. The placenta.

"Keep your mouth shut. One pain drives out another." Said the nurse and began stitching Irka up, needle on the raw flesh.

Irka lost consciousness.

She woke up a couple hours later in a dark room, groggy, her breasts engorged with milk, no baby at her side. She flipped off the blanket, shifted legs, and stifled a cry. Her thighs rippled with pain, the fork of her crotch burned from stitches.

She gripped the headboard, wobbled to standing, squinted.

Soft snores. Wheezing, breathing. Three bodies, three beds. Bare walls, grey in the glow from the window, gauzy curtains. Sky hung with clouds, aurulent in the rising sun.

*Beneath the sky of blue the golden city stands, thought Irka, where live a yellow fire-maned lion, a deep-eyed ox, and a golden celestial eagle.*

The eaglet didn't answer.

"Pavlik," she whispered. It felt good to whisper, to know she could. "The song is wrong. There is no golden city, only sky."

She stepped into slippers a size too big, and, wincing, crept to the door, turned the knob, clicked it open. The hinges squeaked. Irka froze. A body turned with a sigh. Springs whined, settled. She let out her breath, slipped out, held on to the wall, shuffling forward a couple steps at a time, toward cries, baby cries, clearly audible. They rang louder as she moved closer. A row of identical doors, a nurse station with a nurse

asleep, head on the desk, a turn to the right, flickering  
fluorescents above, making that pinging noise.

Another hallway, another turn, there.

A line of square windows, shoulder-level.

Newborn crèche.

Irka pressed her face to the glass. Room the color of  
eggshell, albugineous. Dimmed light. Two rows of insect-like  
trolleys, mosquitoes on casters, atop each a plastic tray with a  
pupa. Twenty of them. Swaddled, heads in bonnets, bodies in  
washed out blankets, tags with numbers tied around the bottom  
ends. Most of them asleep, a handful crying. Desperately,  
shrilly. Scrunched faces gaping in toothless holes.

"Pavlik." Irka's breath fogged up the glass. She wiped it,  
moved to the door. It was unlocked. She stepped in, touched each  
cradle, walking up the row. "Pavlik?" One voice stopped crying.  
In the corner, by the plastic baby scales. Irka rushed to it,  
leaned over, her heart in a mad swoon, hands shaking. Hair fell  
over her face, she held it back.

A face looked at her. Scrawny, yellowish, but stubborn.  
Eyebrows in a frown. Eyes dark, unblinking. Beads of tears on  
the lashes, one spilled on a cheek.

Irka checked the tag. "Baboch Pavel Pavlovich, boy, labor:  
March thirteenth, three twenty A.M. Weight three kilograms,

height fifty centimeters." She lifted him out, freed her breast, pressed it to his mouth.

Pavlik latched on, hungry. His jaw worked as he sucked. Irka's nipples buzzed. Milk spilled out of her other breast in a warm trickle, soaked the cotton. She stroked his cheek, his forehead, his nose. Tears rolled down her face, dripped on his blanket. "Hey, how are you?"

He breathed quietly, working, his nostrils flared up, his face round like Irka's, serious, as if he'd seen plenty of life already.

"It's me, remember? Eagle? Eaglet? I'm sorry things have turned out the way they did. Sorry for everything."

Pavlik stopped sucking.

Footsteps echoed along the corridor. A fast rhythmic staccato of heels. Two pairs.

A stone dropped into Irka's stomach. She watched Pavlik with dilated eyes. He let the nipple out, hiccupped. A thin stream of saliva mixed with milk oozed between his lips.

"I won't let them take you away," whispered Irka, "don't worry." She covered her breast, stole along the cribs, slunk out, halted by the door, listening.

They were ten steps away, maybe less.

Irka glanced around, frantic. She couldn't stay in the crèche, couldn't dash into any of the patient's rooms, not without causing a racket, couldn't—

The steps rounded the corner.

"There she is!" The militiaman, his uniform crumpled, pointed at Irka. Next to him walked the delivery doctor, her face contorted with dogged hate.

"You can't have him," cried Irka, "he's mine!" She stumbled to the end of the hallway, to a large window. Its pane was cracked open. A breeze carried in a smell of dust and car exhaust. She grunted, stepped on the hot radiator, and hoisted herself up on the windowsill, thigh-high, wide enough to sit on.

"Where you going?" Asked the militant stupidly.

"No use talking to her." Barked the doctor. "Just get her down."

A door opposite the crèche cracked open, a blond greasy head of a woman stuck out. Another door squealed. Curious footfalls ambled closer.

"Where I'm going? Where I don't have to see your retarded mugs." She spat each word, like she always wanted to, bright, loud, cutting. "You want me to relinquish myself, to become a perennial pollyanna, to venerate a system you believe in, so well-intentioned, I wonder why it mashes people into ground."



A swarm of patients, tired post-labor women, appeared out of nowhere, like bleating sheep, filling the hall with scraping noises.

"That's enough." The militant strode to the window, a hand on his holster. "Get down yourself, or I'll have to help you." Ten meters between them, seven.

"You want my entreaty, to be forgiven!" Yelled Irka. "You won't get it! I'm not sorry! I would've killed him over and over! You want to accuse me of manslaughter, of perfidy, of committing an illicit act. But who are you to decide what's unlawful? What do you do, day in and day out? Substantiate, accuse, corroborate, attest? Those are empty words. They make me feel nothing."

The militant stopped a couple meters away, inexperienced, uncertain, his eyes frightened. "Last warning. Get down."

"Or what? You will shoot me? Go ahead. I don't have to vindicate my life to appease you. You're not worth it." Irka passed eyes over the assembly, clumps of women, nurses, the doctor, scared, expectant, prying. "You're animals, caged by fear." She gripped Pavlik firmer, slapped at the pane. The window banged open. A collective gasp of air, a shriek. A gust of wind flapped her gown. She looked out.

Moscow was waking. Grim, bleak, monochromatic. Seven stories below cars bustled along the street, like dander on the legs of a spider. And above it, gold, backlit clouds.

"Pavlik, we have wings, remember?" She faced the crowd. "You think it's the end of me? You're mistaken. It's only the preamble. The end of restraint, the beginning of freedom."

She glanced at the sky. It called to her. Called to the eagle. Her fingers elongated into feathers. The hospital gown slid off her body, giving way to a bird's mantle, shiny black, with a white crown and a goldenrod beak. The garb of a predator. The eagle gently rolled the eaglet on its back. It crawled up, a ball of silver fuzz with tiny talons, strong and sharp. They sunk into the eagle's nape, got a firm grip.

The sturgeon flung itself at the birds. A powerful swipe of a leg, and the eagle sent it flying, at the matted dog, at the shifting mass of sheep. It watched the hospital walls crumbled like loose mountain rock, bury them in the rumble, form a hillock. Puffs of dust rose up. The eagle climbed it, clumsily, moving one leg after the other, until it reached the top.

A field of rosy cotton covered the sky. The eye of the sun stared over Moscow, burned its all-encompassing greyness and chill. Gusts of breeze ruffled the birds' feathers. The eaglet trembled, peeped, sunk its talons deeper. The eagle screeched, spread its wings, swung them once, and soared.

The city below slanted, fell back. A medley of roofs and throughways blurred by the bluish haze, inert, abandoned. Wind bathed the eagle's body, whistled in its ears, carried it upward, into the mass of gold and turquoise and pink and iridescent. Now whole, now patchy torn. Bursts of green shone through, down below. Forests, ropes of rivers, coins of lakes. Galvanic from the flight, the eagle screamed, tore down, slowed and floated. It came upon a densely wooded hill. A low slope overgrown with shrubs, then giant pines, tall ashes, alders, birches, wrapped in a shimmering glow of brand-new leaves.

The carpet of the trees, so uniform, suddenly parted into a clearing. There stood a bed. A catfish slept in it.

The eagle and the eaglet flew on.