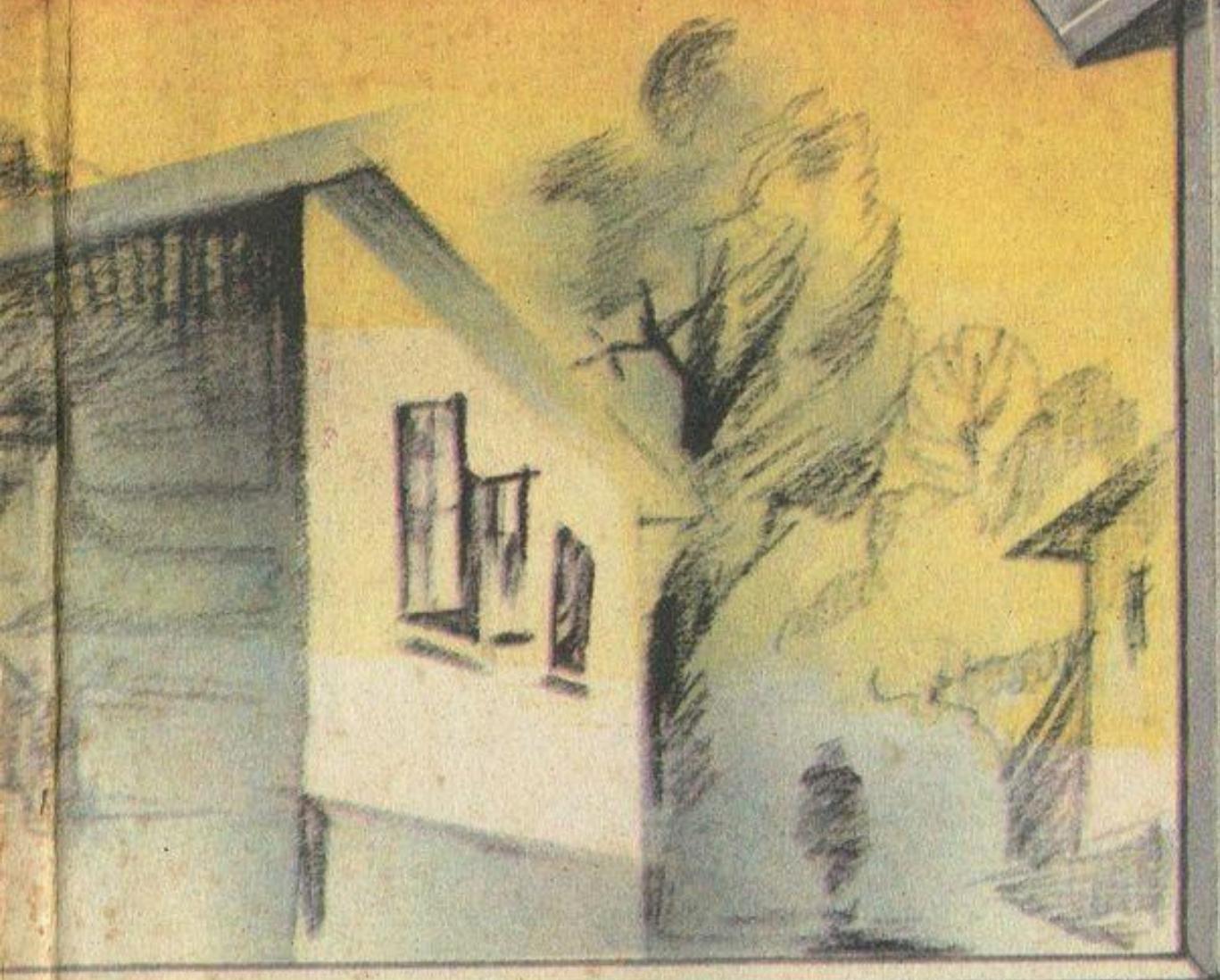


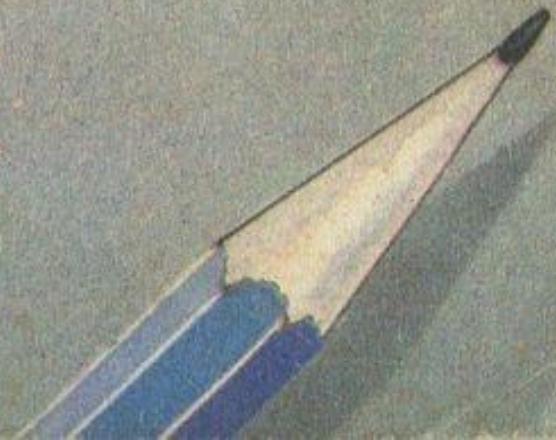


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Владимир БАРВЕНКО

УТРО ЧУДЕС



A Morning of Miracles – V. V. Barvenko, a novel

Annotation

Imbued with a bright lyrical feeling, the psychologically reliable story of V. Barvenko tells about the youth of a boy from a small provincial town.

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Vladimir Vladimirovich Barvenko was born in the city of Shakhty, Rostov Region ([13 July 1943](#), station [Razdorskaya](#), — [13 June 2023](#), [Shakhty, Russia](#)). He graduated from the Shakhty Pedagogical Institute. He served in the Soviet Army. He worked at a shoe factory, as a builder, a Komsomol worker, and as a teacher at a vocational school. Currently, he is the director of the film group to promote the best practices of the cotton mill.

He was published in the newspapers "Molot", "Komsomolets", "Komsomolskaya Pravda", magazines "Don", "Rabotnitsa", "Counselor", "Komsomolskaya Life", collective collections of Rostizdat and "Young Guard".

He lived in the city of Shakhty.

I remember Vladimir Barvenko from a story published in the "Don" magazine. And his story "Morning of Miracles" made me think

that he was "knocking" on the door of literature not by any chance. I was pleased with the sincerity, freshness of feeling, knowledge of what the author decided to share with readers.

But the story also required additional intervention of the author's pen, which I told Vladimir Barvenko about at a meeting [later]. That intervention dragged on for three years before – in the opinion of the author himself – the story took place. I agree with this opinion. The life and customs of the mining town, its youth are not written off by the author from someone else's pages, but experienced, suffered.

In my opinion, the main success of the author is the image of Lida Stepankova, a girl of high moral purity and strength.

A gifted writer goes to literature, who has something to talk about to people.

Anatoly Kalinin

Part One The Yard



The city of my childhood always stands in front of me in a light haze. Everything in it is a little blurry, like in watercolors, devoid of movement. And there is a great desire to take a brush, to touch dusty alleys and old courtyards, where life has stopped, it seems, since you left them, to touch in order to return the transparency of the picture and this lost movement. But you understand that your impulse is just a sad deception, that the fragility of the contours cannot be changed, and the movement on the canvas has never stopped, it just has become different, independent of your time.

Now my city exists as if in two dimensions - the one that really was, and the one that the imagination painted - full of magic, charm and hope. And both cities are infinitely dear to me, although over the years they diverge more and more, move away from each other. And between them, a third, real city has already arisen and asserts itself, with the same streets and avenues, but with new courtyards and, of course, with new people. In it, it is true, there is one and the other, an imaginary and a past city, but there is not and never will be either one or the other ...

My land is miner's, heap, wherever you look - everywhere there are mountains of blue rock, which at different times of the year you will see in different ways. Those that are far on the horizon can be compared with blue sails in the sea, and those that are closely adjacent to the village streets and courtyards can be compared with ships that have swam into the harbor; In winter, smooth, powdered with snow, they resemble the Egyptian pyramids, as in the picture in the history textbook, and in early spring, gloriously washed by the first rains, our waste heaps shine under the sun, like knight's helmets. However, if you dive into the Lisichkin pond and swim to the middle and look at the lemon-pink clouds for a long, long time, and then suddenly look at the blue mountain, it will flash orange-red and become a large and ruddy bun. It happened.

Trolleys walked over the heaps, poured out the rock, spreading some kind of enthusiastic-laughing roar around the neighborhood: "Wow! Ho-ho" ... Torn islands were smoked on waste heaps, as if on

volcanoes. A rubber, bitten child burned his nostrils, if, of course, he climbed the mountain. And they climbed ... At the top of it, the gods could well live, from whom it was possible to find out what it was like for the fathers who remained forever in a foreign land, or to see the only, cherished path-path from the horizon, along which the father finally returns home to spite all deaths. About the gods you want - believe it, you want - no, this is your own business, besides, my father came from the war unharmed, he lives himself, but I climbed the "top" out of curiosity, carried away by everyone. And for the first time I climbed also because I was sure that there, beyond the horizon, there must certainly be a sea. I did not see the sea, but I saw my city from a good height. I easily found my street in it near the center and was amazed.

Our street - Krasnykh Zor - is made of stone houses, adobe huts with blinded windows, low barracks, gray scallops of fences. The yards are densely built up with sheds, kitchens and outbuildings.

Because of this great multitude of unimaginable buildings in terms of material and architecture, and even at random, as God puts on the soul, I have always considered our street the most provincial in the whole world. And that's right, why would it be slim, smooth, like an avenue, if our neighbors - on the left, on the right, on the contrary - did not care at what command the house stands in the general row? However, it's not about how the street will look from a height, for example, the nearest heap. Do not think that on our street people were only born to hastily fence off some "sharp-eyed" outbuilding and show life in it, and then drive through the middle of the street for the last time to the mournful sounds of copper, as they say, from the heart, and sink into oblivion. (Something, but they buried us at all times magnificently and hospitably.) No, no, don't think so.

However, from the top of the heap, Krasnykh Zor Street turned out to be completely straight and quite wide, even elegant in its own way: the eye easily shot it through to the openwork mine piles at the opposite end, behind which bright blue, almost cornflower trees

opened. They captured even more, beckoned with sea deception. At the foot there is a patch of wasteland, followed by a flood of the Lisichkin pond with muddy blue water. On the shore there are bridges made of black tarred sleepers - from them the miners rinsed their clothes, most often gray miners, and the boys fished for boubrys and dived. And a little further, below, the Grushka rivulet - its elastic thread, as it were, hemmed the edges of the master's front gardens running down to the shores with "walk-fences" made of palisade or reeds with a large sparkling stitch.

On the wasteland, juicy overgrown with burdock, quinoa and colza, small craters and trenches were visible, like pockmarks. Boyish voices rang incessantly there. And although the war had already gone to a good fathom, in the wasteland, after heavy rains, the rusty loam of the tubercles still blossomed with dull green placers of cartridges, and the boys saw German machine guns with full clips behind the first pokes of the shovel.

And there was also a cuckoo train with a dozen platforms loaded with coal - it rolled out of the mine yard.

And then there's the sounds...

Of course, I was quite surprised to see my native street as extraordinary, like an avenue in a big, big city. Although, for sure, there was nothing so special about it. Just a street, which must still be preserved in the mining towns against the backdrop of unchanged waste heaps, piles and blue distances of the horizon. It was my maturing soul that touched the future. It was one thousand nine hundred and fifty ... year, and I lived in anticipation of change. However, all of us then lived in anticipation of change ...

Chapter One

The fourth quarter in the seventh grade began with the fact that I caught a cold. The end of March turned out to be warm, somehow the snow melted overnight, and the air lost its coldness. It was an

affectionate deception, but it always seems that the past springs came earlier and were warmer and brighter. In any case, the pavement outside my window dried up, and boys poured out of the yards to play football. I must have caught a cold in this football. In short, on the first day of school after the holidays, I came to school with a strong runny nose, but in order to take time off from lessons, I had to have more serious reasons. In early spring and late autumn, a runny nose is a common occurrence in our classroom.

For several days I sniffed and sneezed. Then, suddenly, the runny nose passed. I got up in the morning, there was silence in my nose, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Only when I exhaled, it crackled faintly in my chest, as if someone in it was carefully breaking the dry. "With this," I thought, "you can live," and went to school. By evening, however, I was completely hoarse, and it became difficult to breathe. At night, the temperature jumped, and in the morning, my mother called a doctor. It turns out that I had the flu on my feet, and now I have a complication - either bronchitis or pneumonia.

After the lessons, my friend Seryozhka Katrish came to find out what was going on. I told him that the temperature was under forty at night.

"I brought you a task." Algebra is a new topic. You, Edka, teach, understood. Learning is light," Katrish said with a grin, and reached into his briefcase for the diary, and I suddenly found that Seryozhka had swung hard over the winter, must have caught up with me, became thin and stooped. The sleeves of the brown corduroy stretched to the elbows. He handed me the diary, and he sat down on the edge of the bed and put on his glasses - two wheels in a brown frame, the face in them turned out to be very narrow, lobast. Behind the glasses are green mocking eyes.

"Well, I'm going, man. Hello. I'll run tomorrow. I've got things to do.

In fact, my friend was a very active guy. He attended three or four circles in the House of Pioneers and was filled with a wide variety of information. Seryozhka knew all the school secrets and

was considered his own in different companies. He could find out anything, instantly understood the task, took the trail like an excellent bloodhound. His name was Kat, a simple nickname, an abbreviated version of the surname, but I tried not to use this nickname: Seryozhka was terribly offended when I accidentally called him Kat.

Seryozhka and then with enviable accuracy visited me after school. He brought homework and talked about school life.

One day, Katrish said that he had proposed friendship to Ritka Zharkova from a parallel class and now walks with her in the evenings in the city center, where there are a lot of people, as on a holiday. And in general, it's so hot outside, just extraordinary. On Sunday, they are going to ride bicycles to Bald Hill for tulips. In short, earthly grace is everywhere - starlings have arrived, and the grass on the lawns has become ankle-deep. Only I'm lying here, and all this insultingly passes me by. But the neighbor girl Lidka Stepankova is after Sergey and says that Katrish is inventing everything. It's still cool, especially in the evenings, and the grass is far from the ankle, it's just very green, velvety - pure emerald. And the starlings have arrived - that's right.

I was friends with Lidka Stepankova.

This, of course, is not like Seryoga and a girl from a parallel class. Lidka was also fourteen years old, she was in the seventh grade, only at a different school. Last year, Lidka earned a category in artistic gymnastics and moved from our school, which is just a stone's throw from home, to another. Her friends in the section studied there and there was a good gym. (Every year, our mining chiefs promised to build a gym, but we still exercised in the hallway, where there was not enough acceleration even to jump over the "goat" normally.)

When I got sick, Lidka took care of me. She even fed me with a spoon once.

We lived in a long barracks of eight apartments. In the yard there is a row of slotted coal sheds, several summer kitchens, a

column with a cement gutter and on the outskirts - "amenities" (the house looked like a cruiser, at least that's how I imagined it).

Of course, our barracks were communal, but you can't compare the apartments in it with communal apartments. It was Seryozhka Kat who lived in a real communal apartment - in a four-story house in the center. The most disgusting thing for me was the corridor in his apartment - a gray tunnel with the eternal smell of washed linen and kerosene, where on the wall, next to Serezhkina's door, hung a teenage bicycle neatly grabbed by the frame, and at the other door stood the dark brown hundred-year-old chest of drawers of Katrisha's neighbor Rimka Vezukhina. Pots, jars, a washboard and a sooty stove were always piled up on it.

I entered this neutral zone, clearly following the indication on the tiny sign near the bell button: "Katrish - two stars." Once I made a mistake and pressed the button three times, and immediately the portly Vesukhina flew out like a bullet. Angry surprise flashed across her plump face.

"Learn to read, sheep," she barked and slammed the door in my face.

"A sheep is still good. She's all jackals or snakes," Katrish later explained, not imbued with my resentment. And suddenly he suggested: "And you also call her somehow, and you will be quits."

"Is it possible?" She's an adult," I was dumbfounded.

"So what's like an adult?" Rimka is mad because she is an old maid. It doesn't hurt to teach her a lesson ...

Crossing the threshold of Serezhkina's apartment, I always remembered Rimka Vezukhina, the "conflict lady", as the elder Katrish called her. And, carefully wiping the shoes scraped at the entrance on the wet burlap, each time I got used to the smells and things in the corridor again, listening with fear to the barracks voice of the neighbor Serezhkina. She was again scolding someone in the common kitchen. And suddenly she appeared, as always angrily impetuous, with a face shining with cream and papillotes on her head. I whispered "Hello" in fright, and Vezukhina, moving her lips in

response, measuring me from head to toe with a squeamish look, grabbed something from the chest of drawers and rushed past, like a whirlwind.

Whether it's - our house is a barracks. The apartments had free access to the courtyard, perhaps the main advantage over communal apartments. So there was no controversy over common areas.

And that's not the point. After all, you can live in a communal apartment soul to soul with your neighbors, if you look at the little things of everyday life not scandalously, but with a smile and think that all good things are ahead, that all good things are expected from day to day. So, probably, they lived in our barracks - easily and with a smile. And if a new life comes, then be calm, they will meet it with us in a human way, they will not go blind and will not weaken in spirit, as they lived, and will live with each other in plain sight. Always, invariably...

On warm evenings, especially in spring, when the yard smells of dung smoke, damp sheepskin, fresh ashes and old sounds from kitchens and sheds, dilapidated backs - primordially yard noises - will get stronger, when life, sweetly flavored with these eternal smells and sounds, begins its next round - everyone went out into the yard. Men fought in the "goat" - here, on the table under the apricot, and talked about international affairs. And things were unimportant. The Americans tested atomic weapons, built military bases and generally showed us a fist. The loudspeaker anxiously broadcast about this every day. And many things were not clear to our men. Well, for example, why did American President Eisenhower, who replaced Truman's enemy, turn out to be no better? Even Lidkin's father, Uncle Kostya, who read more than all the newspapers and was known in the yard as a "specialist" in political matters, was unable to explain to his neighbors: how did the former Allied commander in the war against the Nazis take it and change it for us?

And only to the disabled old man Surin, everything seemed as easy as shelling pears. Almost without participating in the

conversation, he mockingly watched everyone and suddenly, singling out someone with a glance, beat from a large caliber:

"You're stupid, by God. Who is he to you, Ensenhaer, matchmaker or godfather? Maybe he gnawed a footcloth with you under Kastornaya? I guessed the warrior.

And the women, sitting on the thresholds, gnawed seeds and talked about something homemade. Sometimes, they dreamed - they "got rich". The reason was important here. For example, someone in the next yard made himself a carpet suit, which cost "crazy" money, and he was immediately credited with a big win on the loan. Two or three more families who were "lucky in bonds" were recalled. The lucky ones lived nearby and were far from poor people, but money, as you know, sticks to money. So it turned out that happiness was trampling somewhere nearby, so blind and stupid. No, it was not enviable to our women, but it was a shame. Just think - the bond did not agree on one number!

But the women believed and therefore gladly laid out the future winnings for numerous purchases, providing us with bicycles in advance so as not to be molested. This sweet interpretation swelled like fermented dough, until one of the neighbors, waking up, exclaimed:

"What are we talking about, women?" A riddle is never rich. That's why we have a louse on a lasso in our pocket!

In a word, Lidka Stepankova and I lived in such a house on Krasnykh Zor Street. Yes, I liked her. Of course, not like Seryozhka, a girl from a parallel class. Lidka Stepankova, my glorious comrade, just lived in the world.

Now, if Lolita Torres walked through our passage yard - past the cracked sheds and kitchens, past the old man Surin, who froze in thought at the threshold of his apartment, and not a long-legged girl in a gray coat and a white beret. If Lidka was even a little like Lolita Torres, then I would easily fall in love with her. And then a girl rushes towards you, thin, swift, like a racing bike. An ordinary girl. The face is smiling, almost delightful, and in the black eyes there is

surprise and curiosity: "How are we, Edik?" What could change in the world in a few hours in which we did not see each other? "Order, Lidoc." But this is not enough for her. She's waiting. She stands opposite, twists the tail of a thick black braid on her finger and looks mockingly, with superiority, like an experienced person, like a mother, and it seems that I am about to hear the familiar: "Oh, and you are a useless guy." But she is silent, and I explain to her, briefly, as a mother, that nothing special happened in my life - thank God, I did not grab the deuce and did not fight with anyone. I'm a little nervous. Why do I have to report to her?!

Chapter Two

In fact, Seryozhka did not flutter, and next Sunday they still went to Bald Hill for tulips. Seryozhka on her "Eaglet", and Zharkova and her friend - Irochka Proyavkina - on brand new ladies' bicycles, with colorful meshes on the rear wheels. (Katrish admired these nets endlessly.) They didn't find a damn tulip on Bald Hill, they were brutally tired, but this, of course, is a trifle. On Bald Hill, unless, of course, Seryoga is lying, he and Zharkova kissed. However, there was another piece of news that my friend struck me almost from the doorstep:

"Are you lying, Edka?" I'm going to die, and Irochka Proyavkina sends greetings to you. Cracked into Your Majesty. Fact.

Then Seryozhka unceremoniously brushed a geography textbook off the stool to the floor, sat down. His forehead face shone with such happiness, as if Irka Proyavkina from the parallel 7th "B" had fallen in love not with me, but with him.

"Do you know how scared she was when she found out you were heavy?!" Hello, he says, pass it on. Let him, he says, hold on. And this... I sent you a kiss.

He's lying about a kiss.

In general, Ira is a beautiful girl. Only, in my opinion, the Earring is darkening. Probably, Proyavkina chattered that Klimenko was dying, and she simply regretted it. It was worth figuring it out, but I didn't want to figure it out now. I suddenly wanted to jump out of bed and, forgetting about the ailment, fly to school. Just to see Irochka Proyavkina.

He talked again and again about the trip, each time with new details and miracles, and even if he lied, it was still interesting to listen to him. And I don't know what other story I would have heard if Lidka hadn't come.

She said:

"Hello, boys.

I replied, "Hello," and Seryozhka stood up, bowed gallantly, and gave his hand.

"Hello, hello, baby.

Lidka was embarrassed, but still shook hands. And if it weren't for this "baby", I would have respected Sergey, deciding that the trip to Bald Hill abruptly changed his attitude towards girls. In a conversation with the girls, Katrish behaved as if he knew everything about them for certain and he was only busy picking up on the hook and convicting them of some kind of "clumsiness".

Lidka went to the bed, picked up the geography textbook, put it on the bedside table, then straightened the edge of the sheet.

"Sit down, sit down, don't fuss," Katrish said, holding out the words in a melodious voice. It was as if he had been replaced: his head went into his shoulders, his back in an arc, like a cat near a mouse hole.

Lidka sat down on a chair by the chiffonier, put her hands quietly on her knees.

"Well, complain about how you're doing," Seryozhka either asked, or ordered, winked at me and grinned. I guessed that he was talking about Irka Proyavkina, about the mystery that has now arisen between us. But I pretended not to understand.

- Lead, do you have six lessons today? - I asked, in order to somehow distract Seryozhka - suddenly he decides to wink again.

"No, Edik, five. Today we had a meeting with a military pilot, Dmitry Alekseevich Borodin.

- Well, what did this Borodin tell you? How many Fritz did he kill? Seryozhka asked.

"Killed?" Lidka didn't understand. - He's a pilot, a retired major.

- And what, in the sky, except for Borodin's plane, only crows flew? Where do you think the Messers were? Lidka Katriš suddenly attacked. "What did he fly on?" On "donkeys", on "benches" or on "whatnots"?

"On stools," I interjected, "Don't evolve, Serge.

"Borodin, Seryozha, flew on large planes, but I forgot the names," Lidka replied, gratefully looking at me. - In general, Dmitry Alekseevich told little about himself, more about his crew mates. It was then that the boys surrounded him, and he explained something to them. Many of our guys dream of flying.

- Or maybe this Borodin flew on a transport flight? For some reason, Seryozhka doubted. He scratched behind his ear, winced, and suddenly broke down. "Okay, it's good to talk to you here, but I'm busy." Be treated, man, you are still very pale.

And Seryozhka went to the door.

We looked at him with bewildered glances - honestly, there is some kind of ambiguity in the soul from Serezkin's visits. Lidka stood up.

"And your Katrish imagined." "Donkeys", "benches", you think, a clever man. Don't you think that he behaves like an excellent student who was the first to decide on the test and fools around before the call.

"Uh-huh. Only tests in mathematics Seryozhka cheats off me.

- And today I grabbed a three in algebra, here. At the blackboard she answered. Such a difficult example was inherited, just death ...

And then Lidkin's voice went out - I remembered Irochka, smiled.

"Edik, why are you grinning?" Lidka asked worriedly and put her hand on my forehead. Her palm is cool. "Well, you've got a fever again."

"If you had been told this, you fool, you would have a fever too," I thought, and said:

- Lead, you always suspect me of something. Can a person just smile?

"Maybe. This is a completely normal sign. Only I, Edik, see that you want to tell me something. Well, lay it out, spread it.

Why are girls so curious? Amazing instinct and a complete lack of patience. Of course, I will. Did I hide anything from Stepanikova? And in general, I need to consult.

I looked at it from below. Lidka is somehow elongated, as if in a spherical mirror. Her apron was skewed, and a ribbon was untied on her braid.

"You see, Lydoc, a girl fell in love with me. Maybe you know Proyavkina from the 7th "B".

"Proyavkina?" Lidka's eyes sparkled. "Is this such a mess?"

"You're a fool yourself." Normal height, I said angrily.

"Edik, don't waste your energy. How do you know she fell in love with you?

- Magpie on the tail brought.

"I saw this magpie," Lidka grinned. "I think she's just left.

Lidka sat down on the edge of the bed and began to twist the tail of the braid. It's a habit she has. He looks at you, is silent and twists the tip of the braid. It is impossible to be offended by Lidka.

"What do you think, Lid, what did she find in me?" How long is my nose? I asked calmly.

"You, Edik, are neither stupid nor cowardly.

I'm flattered. Well, yes, indeed, I am not a stupid person or a coward. Now, if only it weren't for my long nose.

"I wonder, Lidoc, who would you fall in love with?" Handsome, smart or strong? I asked, and standing up, I sat comfortably on the pillows.

"I don't know... I didn't think so. Listen, why are you clinging to me?"

"And really, why did I become attached to her? Wasn't it then that I started this whole conversation to get Lidkino's opinion about my appearance and first of all about my nose?"

"In my opinion, Lydoc, the beautiful should fall in love with the beautiful. Everything is fair. You should have seen what a glorious nose Irka has, not like mine - I grew up with seven, but I got it," I said and sighed deeply in frustration.

"Do you like her?" Lidka asked and blushed for some reason.

"Of course, I like it," I thought, but I was embarrassed to answer like this.

"I will never agree to have such a spout next to my switch," I bent mine. "Horrible things, Lydoc... You know, the nose ...

Now, now she will not stand it and say: "Why did you take your nose? Weirdo, nose as nose." Frankly, I'm just waiting for this.

"Yes, Edik, it's terrible," Lidka cooed quite seriously, not daring, however, to look me in the eye.

Well, I waited. So it's true. So I'm completely useless with this nose of mine? In my heart, I hated Lidka. Although what is she, in fact, to blame? Did she grow my nose?

... The next day she brought me the book "Notre Dame de Paris" by Victor Hugo.

* * *

I read Victor Hugo's novel in three days. I have never read a thick book at this rate. I put down the book, but the images of Esmeralda, Claude Frollo, Quasimodo, Phoebe de Chatoper did not leave the imagination, and only thought about them.

Seryozhka came, and I immediately began to tell him fervently about the affair. Especially about the beautiful Esmeralda, about her love for Phoebus. In this love, not everything was clear to me. Why did Esmeralda give her heart to Phoebus and not to the good poet

Gringoire? Phoebus didn't lift a finger to save her from the gallows. "An anointed grimace, a poser with a sword in his belt," I was indignant. But Seryozhka listened poorly, was distracted, his eyes became sleepily cloudy. He just me off: he wears a turtle shell and gets out of it only when he needs to.

Seryozha picked up the book, sluggishly flipped through the pages and, as always, thoughtfully said:

— The Middle Ages. The Black Corridor of Humanity. Giordano Bruno was roasted at the stake. Fact. And then some gypsy ...

At night I dreamed of Esmeralda. She looked like Proyavkina, the same huge brown, slightly sad eyes.

Esmeralda and I kissed in the physics room, where boys and girls did experiments. They understood everything and did not pay attention to us. And at the blackboard, physicist Saveli Ilyich played the violin and for some reason smiled sadly. With his smile and music, I woke up.

It was very quiet, as it happens only before dawn.

A smoky purple light swirled in the window opening: it cautiously oozed from the shuttered cracks - the night must have descended, but the light of the morning in fragility was still the shore of the shadow - and, touching the tulle curtain, gently refracted in mesh patterns now dull blue, then pink, created the illusion of movement. It seemed that music was born there, full of incomprehensible mystery and high sadness, music that I had never heard before and which only comes once in late childhood.

I lay unmoved, in sweet unconsciousness, afraid to spill this music, and it seemed to me that I was flying high, high.

And suddenly, close in front of me, I saw the beautiful Esmeralda - the same face in an affectionate smile, the same thick black hair. Yes, she was in my room, very close. I could even feel her warm breath – a completely unearthly being, my only ideal! How I wanted to touch her hair! And I, timidly, touched, and the vision disappeared, and with it the music left. I would sink, fall into a hot

world full of stupid dumbness, and immediately sadness, some kind of mortal melancholy and anxiety would fall.

That night before dawn, I thought seriously about myself. It's just that Irochka Proyavkina did not get out of my head, and one after another I had questions. Why did Ira prefer me to all the boys? Why am I better than others? She hardly knows me. If only she had ever heard me talking to our girls. I'm rude to them! So I started smoking. True, slowly, up his sleeve. But I started. And I don't do exercises in the morning, and in general I do sports from time to time. I just consider myself strong. And if you look at it, it's nothing special. Of course, we can boast of Proyavkina's excellent studies. But it's a completely different matter - I like to study, so I do. Boys, for example, do not really trust excellent students.

And then I remembered: I am an artist!

I know how to draw. I'm just great at drawing! Maybe Irka saw my paintings at the school exhibition?! Of course, I did.

... That night I worked out a program of life. First, quit smoking and seriously engage in sports. Boxing or football. Secondly, to behave with girls, as befits a man - chivalrously. And thirdly, I decided to become a great artist.

I don't have to put anything off...

* * *

In the morning I got out of bed in a great mood. A wave of one hand, a wave of the other. Another wave and another. It turns out that it is not so easy to do exercises when you are sick. With each movement, my hands became heavier, as if dumbbells with increasing weight were put into my palms. I was tired and soaked, a nasty shiver appeared in my knees, but I did the exercises with desperate perseverance. However, the jerks became sluggish, just ridiculously weak. I was gasping for breath, but I kept telling myself, "I won't give up, I won't give up." And suddenly the room crept to the

side, then dived down like the deck of a ship in a storm, and I barely had time to grab the headboard.

... I was lying in bed, and my soul was anxious.

I remembered Lidka, why didn't she run to school this morning? And suddenly I had a question: why did Lidka decide to bring me the book "Notre Dame de Paris"? Lidka often changes my books in the library and knows very well that I like to read about adventures, especially sea adventures. I could easily look for something in the library by Stevenson, Stanyukovich or Green. She already knows that I love the sea very much and dream of living in a big city by the sea.

However, at first I did not attach any importance to this issue - I brought and brought, what's wrong with that? But he did not get out of my head, and I began to look for a catch in Lidkin's actions. She brought the "Cathedral" the day after the sad talk about my nose. Why this book? Who did she mean in it? Quasimodo? The tetrahedral nose of this cyclops?.. Good jokes.

"Did you decide to scoff? She slipped me a book about Quasimodo. Nothing, remember, - I inflamed. - And if she was just advised in the library of a book and she herself did not read? No, we need to find out everything properly. And then I had a thought, a rather funny thought, and I began to wait for Lidka with impatience. I was just exhausted while I waited for Stepankova.

"How are we, Edik?" Lidka entered, asking the usual question instead of greeting.

I said nothing.

She stopped in the doorway, wearing a brown uniform dress with a white collar but no apron. There is a braid on the chest. In the hands of a newspaper bundle. She looked at me with bewilderment - are our affairs so bad?

"Come in," I muttered.

"And I brought you pies." Mom baked. Hot, with potatoes," Lidka said, sliding to a chair by the bed. She pushed back the bubbles and unfolded the bundle. She has fast, dexterous movements, like a fox. The pies smelled delicious. "Here, try it.

Lidka shoved a pie under my nose. "Lidka, why aren't you Esmeralda?" I thought wistfully, and I felt a little ashamed of what I was about to do.

I tugged on her hand and said decisively:

"Sit down, you need to talk."

Lidka had a crease on his forehead, what, they say, is wrong with you, Edik? She sat down on the edge of the bed at her feet. I touched the tip of the braid.

"I'm here, Lida, I thought. In general, I love you," I said briefly, as if about something trifling. I guess I should worry, sigh, bite my lips, finally. And I was completely calm. Only my voice turned out to be hoarse, like that of our school manager Uncle Fedya. He smoked strong tobacco and ruined his voice. And for the first time in my life, I called her Lida. Usually - Lidok or Lidka. I had no idea that I would call her Lida.

Stepanikova's cheeks flushed, and freckles appeared near her nose.

"So what's going on?" She babbled and suddenly looked seriously into my eyes. For some reason, I chickened out terribly and immediately repented of what I said. After all, I didn't feel anything so special for her. It was Lidka Stepankova - the girl next door.

I turned away.

"I don't know what follows from this," I repeated in a hollow voice and thought: "A person is declared in love for the first time in his life, and she is "what follows."

"What about Ira?" Lidka asked, and it seemed to me that she was grinning. I looked at her cautiously—nothing of the kind. Lidka folded her hands in her lap, cringing like a kitten.

"Ira?" What does Ira have to do with it? I love you. So, iron... - I insisted, but my words flew into some kind of resounding emptiness and, starting from something there, returned only in words, light and elegant, like balloons. It was a game I invented, fun, and it seemed to me that Lidka was also playing, only now she turned on a

little later. And in a moment or two she will answer me with the same words and immediately laugh.

But Lidka was silent.

"We're still young," she finally whispered.

- Wow, little ones. I already have one hundred and seventy-five.

"No, we're small, Edik.

"I'm going to kiss you," I blurted out, and I suddenly felt ashamed of falling through the ground.

Lidka threw up her head, blinking her eyelashes.

"Well, a kiss, a kiss." Try it," she said flirtatiously, but deflected just in case. "Of course, she realized that this was a game," I thought, but for some reason with regret.

I approached her. Lidka raised her hands in an attempt to pull me away. Her eyes were close, glowing with anxious curiosity. I still reached my cheek and gently, slightly touched my lips. My palms were sweating, and my throat was choked with excitement.

And Lidka, hesitating, recoiled, sharply, as if from a push. She murmured protestingly, quite unhappily:

"Fools, fools... What fools we are.

And she began to quickly wind the tip of the braid. Her face was red and, in my opinion, ugly. And then I remembered my nose, this Quasimodo.

- Well, yes, of course ... Quasimodo... Give me a handsome man," I was carried away, and suddenly I said mockingly: "But you, señora, are far from Esmeralda.

At my last words, Lidka started up and, covering her face with her hands, rushed to the door, almost knocking her mother down on the way.

"What happened?" Mom asked sternly. "Did you quarrel?"

"Quarreled, what do you care?" I replied rudely. It was disgusting at heart.

Of course, Lidka read *Notre Dame de Paris*. Only, probably, this is not in the book. I just don't understand what's happening to me.

Chapter Three

Lidka stopped coming to me. Offended. In vain, of course, I blurted out that she was far from Esmeralda. But she also cringed about my nose. It turns out that we are quits. Why be offended? For some reason, the earring also stopped coming - I didn't know the school news. How is Irochka Proyavkina doing there?

It began to rain, and spring spread over the glass, as happens when a thinner is overturned on a fresh canvas. Spring remained a purely calendar feeling. This, however, is not enough - at any hour the sun will return everything, restore it, but when you are sick and your friends have left you, it becomes very lonely.

And outside the window it is raining and raining. The pavement was covered with small puddles. The street is deserted and gray, like late autumn.

My temperature jumped again, and in the next visit the doctor prescribed new medications, noticing that if there was no improvement, he would put me in the hospital. Only this was missing. But I wasn't whining. I was sure that my ailment would pass like a rainy day outside the window.

Every afternoon I waited for Lidka. I wished she had attended our school, because then her path would have been past my window. I could knock on the glass, call out. Of course, it was possible to sneeze at the doctor's prohibition to go out into the air - to jump out into the courtyard and - to Lidkina's apartment.

But something was holding me back. Every time I remembered Lidka, I suddenly began to worry for no reason at all.

And I filled my days with drawing.

The windows of our apartment overlooked Krasnykh Zor Street. It was the captain's bridge of a large ship. It was as if I looked from it into the distance and saw the sea ... And I painted the imaginary sea in oil and watercolor. I had a lot of paintings about the sea, which I painted at different times. From my captain's bridge, I imagined a

canoe lost on the horizon and the setting sun falling into the ultramarine surface. And all this exactly fell on the canvas, only, for example, a sunset, reflected from the water, became a fabulous frigate with golden sails. I don't know why I used to paint the sea so persistently, I think it's completely inexplicable. Mom, for example, firmly believes that the love of the sea comes from her father. In fact, my father served in the Navy. But the last thing I want to think like is that. Be that as it may, but in my paintings fishing boats swayed sleepily off the coast, the waves greedily licked the cliff with the lighthouse, heavy cruisers stretched in a chain from the bay, in the distance they were waiting for the horizon curtained with dirty purple, storm clouds. Pictures hung on all the walls: they enveloped me with their brackish expanse, and I dreamed. I wanted to paint an extraordinary picture of the sea.

No, I hadn't seen the real sea back then...

And now I was looking from the captain's bridge and thinking about the sea. And before my eyes there was rain, a truck crawling along the pavement, a passer-by under an umbrella and plying to the grocery store on the corner, old man Surin. He walked rolling, apparently, was drunk and the rain did not interfere with him - the old man was shaggy, shaggy, cheerful.

And in my album lay the street of Red Dawns - oblique jets of rain, an old ZIS, spraying puddles, dirty gray houses in front of my window, a shabby food stall with a dark square in the center. I still hoped that Lidka would jump out to the shop for something, for bread, for example.

Separately, I sketched a portrait of the old man Surin. He turned out to be younger and more attractive. I painted him sitting on the threshold of his apartment, in a striped naval vest, with a pipe in his hand. He had just taken the pipe from his mouth, and a thin stream of smoke licked his cheek. I know Surin never smoked a pipe. And he has a short, plastic mouthpiece into which he inserts a cigarette. But I decided that with a pipe, Surin would have the appearance of a real

sea wolf. Although I'm not sure: did the old man ever see the sea? The vest was given to him the year before last by my mother.

I remember well that May day off, the first day after the holidays. Surin repaired our shutters and hung a new front door. I helped him. Mom, as expected, put half a liter in her neighbor's pocket. But Surin returned the money.

"Don't indulge, Anna. Really rich, you waste money. It's better to buy a lot of sweets. Come on, there's not a lot of help from the dad now?

"Not much," my mother agreed sadly. "Just don't offend us, Yakov Ivanovich, take at least a quarter. After all, we were messing around for half a day.

- Yes, how much work is there. Neighborly. I'll earn money for a quarter at once elsewhere," Surin refused, putting the tool in a carpenter's wooden box. - Another thing, if there is something left of the holiday, well, what a gram is lying around. But no, I'll do it. Neighborly.

"Exactly, there was a gram lying around," my mother suddenly rejoiced, "Lord, how I forgot. The girls were visiting me, for a holiday. We drank a glass. Now I'll set the table, and you wash your face for now. Edik, look, is there water in the washbasin?

Surin waved his hand.

- I don't like this whistle after work. I'll go under the column.

Mom gave me a towel and soap. I followed the old man.

At the speaker, Surin pulled his shirt over his head, and I saw a wide, strong chest with an island of rare grayish growth at the throat. He threw my shirt over my shoulder - it made me sweat and tobacco.

The old man for a long time, carefully soaped the flabby skin of the face, wrinkled neck, whipping the foam with blunt fingers. Then, bending, somehow very deftly removed a piece of wood from under him, dived under the squiggle of the pipe, swung under a thick hissing stream and, gutturally gasping, shaking once, with another curly head, emerged. He drove short, curly brushes over his bluish

body, tenaciously felt himself under his armpits - very serious, somehow significant, and again thrust himself into the water. He did this several times, and it was funny and sad to look at him.

When we entered the hallway, scrambled eggs were already smoking on the table - fried eggs in a large frying pan, there was a plate of pickles, densely sprinkled with onions. Mother cut lard. Surin at once, in a masterly way, sat down firmly at the table and, looking at me, said:

- Sit down, earned, go, on grub. Scholar. Listen, Anna, your son says, you, they say, grandfather dull the shutter unevenly. Like, your eye is on one side. You can't see exactly ...

"I didn't say that. "You've seen it all yourself," I interrupted the old man hotly.

"I've seen it, I've seen it," Surin winked at me in a friendly way. "And you adjusted the shutter." Exactly. Your eye is sensitive. And the palm is wide, peasants.

Mom was laying out lard on a plate, smiling.

- Yes, he can do anything. Just don't interrogate sometimes.

"Ma, I'm not going to eat," I said. I didn't want to get into this conversation, it's always ridiculous and untrue with children. "I'm going to do my homework."

"What kind of worker are you, not hungry," Surin tried to detain me, and said to his mother: "A modest boy. He looks like Paul.

"A copy of my father and walks like this, waddling," my mother sighed and looked dryly at Surin.

"I'll pour you a little, Anna," the old man fussed.

In the next room, I sat down at the table and took out my textbooks. Surin and Mom were talking loudly. At first they talked about some household affairs, and then Surin again remembered my father.

"Oh, it's a fool, Pashka. A woman like you, Anna, was replaced by some kind of thorn. And where he has only eyes," he said and coughed often.

"You haven't seen her, Yakov Ivanovich. She is prominent, young. Have a snack, Yakov Ivanovich, have a snack.

"And I don't need to see her. I see you. And mark my words, he bows to his feet. Comes. Just don't take it right away. Let your elbow bite.

"This will not happen, Yakov Ivanovich. We discussed everything in a good way," my mother objected. "And what kind of life would he have with me - without a soul?" Well, nothing, I'll get used to it. Six months have passed. It's good that at least they left. And then Edka did not find a place for himself.

"You're the reason, young woman. From the face, go, do not drink water. Let me go, Anna, a stranger and I have nothing to keep a confession, but I can't take it into my mind, as it is, for no reason at all ... The family was destroyed. They didn't agree on character. Eco, they didn't get along. Or are you hiding something, Anna.

"I'm not hiding anything, Yakov Ivanovich. He doesn't love me.

"And your son?" Blood is native. How's that? The war, go ahead, died down. Didn't she teach us anything? You need to feel sorry for a person. How about you... Not any. To have mercy and amuse oneself for one hour, and the family is a holy thing.

- Holy. Only the one who is about to leave does not think about children. Did their children hurt to keep them?

"Oh, people. They will litter in life, and then they complain about their bitter fate. Pashka, a hard-nosed man. Fleet...

I couldn't stand it, closed the door to the hallway. I didn't want to hear anything about my father. A few minutes later, the mother looked in.

"Son, I'll give my father's vest to Yakov Ivanovich," she said and climbed into the wardrobe. "When it still fits you."

"As you wish," I replied. I was offended: why does she give her father's vest to Surin? For no reason at all, he gives. In fact: the vest is great for me, but I will grow up. And so, right away, she took it and decided: "On, dear, Yakov Ivanovich, wear it." Offensively...

I followed my mother into the room. Surin tried on the vest, and my heart suddenly clenched. I saw my father.

And the old man, creaking a wooden prosthesis, spun around the mirror, looking around himself and smiling cleanly, like a child.

"Look, sailor, you're a rattle from the stove." Well, I did, Anna, by God, I did," he cooed. - Yes, for such a new thing, I am now an eternal debtor. I'll fix whatever you want at once ... Thank you, hostess.

- No, thank you, Yakov Ivanovich. We, the neighbors, are already tired of you: one is this, the other is another. You don't have time to breathe.

"You say empty, Anna, empty, by God.

As he was leaving, Surin bowed at the door. How buffoonish it turned out for him, although he was not particularly drunk.

"Peace be with your hut, mistress. Don't be angry with your neighbor. And if you need anything, you're welcome. Surin is always ready," he said and smiled diligently, but his lips trembled, and in the depths of the not very large, skilled, yellowish-gray eyes, I suddenly clearly saw an old longing. It seemed to smolder there. No, we were not smiling at all, looking at the grinning old man Surin, flushed from drinking, shaggy. Silent. Mom just wanted to say something to him, maybe something affectionate, her mouth opened, and froze, giving her face an expression of some confused curiosity.

He fumbled with his hand in search of the heck, shook his head, and, turning towards the door, said:

- A lot, go, the Russian people accepted a lot of suffering, but they never learned to feel sorry for each other. Fool, Pashka, by God. He does not value his happiness. Ehma... He thinks he got it so much for a great life.

The old man closed the door behind him, and it was quiet. Staggering, he walked past the windows, stopped, for some reason touched the shutter. I asked.

"Where is he?"

"Who knows, son. Maybe he goes to the grave. Mom brushed away a tear. "What is our grief compared to his..."

From that day on, Surin began to walk around the yard in a vest. Lidka and I nicknamed him the boatswain ...

And now, from the portrait, Surin smiled at me not with a drunken, but with a real, fresh smile. Probably, this is how he smiled in his youth, smiled, not knowing that ahead of him was a war that would take away his wife and son, and mutilate himself, turn him into an invalid ...

Chapter Four

I'm healthy. I get up, no, I get out of bed!

The sun is bright outside the window, and there is a lot of light in the room! I do the exercises quite calmly, although I can't wait to see Lidka. Is it really possible to be offended by a sick person for so long? But I do exercises - I just grind out every movement. Of course, I struggle with myself. Mom smiles - thank God, everything worked out. Her beloved child is healthy.

I noticed that my bass was cutting through. I answer my mother harshly, because I am a man. Mom is always in a hurry somewhere. And where to hurry - today is Sunday!

I step out on the doorstep and find myself in our glorious courtyard. Spring is no longer a guest in it, as on the March holidays, but a hostess. The kitchens are firmly inhabited - lilac smoke pours out of the chimneys. Apricots bloom in our neighbors and in our yard. They are always the first to bloom, and the yards resemble torn feather beds.

I take a few steps. The sun ripples in the eyes. My head is spinning a little. In the kitchens, muffled voices, the clank of pots, the cozy smell of fried onions. At the pump, a neighbor, Aunt Klava, collects water in a bucket. She looks at the hook of the pipe in amazement, like a magic horn. Aunt Klava has a sloppy look: a dirty gray sweatshirt patched at the elbows and galoshes on her bare feet.

She always has a muddy look, because Aunt Klava has a large family - "a lot of eaters."

I greet her and hear back:

"I'm sick, Edyusha. Oh, my God, I'm emaciated.

I noticed that in the spring, when the swan fluff of the first color elevates the ordinary and boring to the heights of enchantment, a movement opens up in our courtyards, familiarly familiar, subordinate to the eternal mode and each time new in its own way. It is filled with some special meaning, secret impatience and something else sweet. And you will not understand, you will not understand what is temporary - the way you lived before this time, or the way you live now?

And here I am standing at the door of apartment number 7. Lidka Stepankova lives here. Does she really live behind this brown door with a boring plywood mailbox on it? I stand on the threshold and do not dare to touch the handle, skillfully carved in bronze by Lidkin's father, a turner. In the center of the circle are drilled the initials "K. S." - that is, Konstantin Stepankov. Lidkin's father is an excellent turner. I worry and feel like a person who left this house many years ago. From here I was escorted around the world and waited a long time, but I was missing. Years have passed, and now they have forgotten about me behind this door. But I survived and, having withstood many trials, still returned, like Robinson Crusoe or the Count of Monte Cristo.

I am happy!

I jerk the bronze handle towards me: the door hook clangs, and I hear music from the depths of the apartment. Very fast foxtrot. The music intensifies sharply, probably, they turned the volume control to failure. This winter, Uncle Kostya "grabbed" the Ural radio for himself. I helped him install the Ural. I don't know a damn thing about radio engineering, but I depicted on my face such knowledge in this matter that Lidkin's father definitely decided that he was a descendant of the great Popov. And we also spent half a day building an antenna. Not some miserable panicle, made of scraps of copper

wire, but a magnificent antenna on two high tubular racks, with stretch marks made of thin steel cable, after which our house in the snowy whiteness of the yard looked like a diesel-electric ship cutting through the ice in the distant Arctic.

Radole identified a place on the bedside table in the corner of the hallway, next to a plush sofa.

I guess - Lidka is spinning records. I fly into a small corridor and seem ready to shout: "Lidka, where have you gone?!" But in the oval mirror opposite the entrance to the hallway, I suddenly see ...

She danced, moving on a tiny patch of the room, light and spacious.

She was wearing a gray gymnastic swimsuit, a thousand times I saw Lidka in it in training in the gym - nothing special. It's just that the room was filled to the brim with blue morning light, and the sparkling sunlight only intensified this amazing blueness, which fell like fresh watercolor on Lidkin's silky hair, very thick and long, almost to the waist, on a gray swimsuit, on bright white hands, now weaving an invisible network, creating some strange, incomprehensible combination of colors. It seemed that the usual old things - a bedside table in the corner under a lacy white cape, a round Viennese chair, part of a table with a brown tangled fringe - exuded this heavenly light - jubilant, light, transparent.

I stood motionless, tightly stopped by a moment of amazement, and the dancing girl there, in the mirror, seemed to me a complete stranger. Maybe because she was more mature than that everyday Lidka, and also, maybe because she was much more beautiful. Her head is thrown back, the profile of her face is triumphant, her figure is somehow rapidly elongated and joyfully tense. And looking at her, I felt delight, violent delight on the verge of an explosion - I was about to break down, I would yell: "Well done, Lidoc! Encore! Hooray!" And I'll still shout something at our whole miserable barracks, Lord, Lidka has talent! Honestly, talent! But then Stepankova on some familiar chord, waving one brush, accurately hitting it on the strings of the harp, turned around, and I was

horrified to catch her alien, absent look, and something went out in me, and it became both shameful and sad.

But then the music stops, and then the snake hisses a sliding needle, and it still makes movements, as if by inertia, but already sluggishly, and some force pushes me out of Lidkin's apartment.

I fly out into the yard, then rush down the street to the food stall, come back and run somewhere again. I'm afraid to go home, I'm afraid to meet Lidka for some reason...

* * *

I come to Sergei. I press the button "Katrish - two stars.", but Vezukhina opens the door for me. "Went somewhere with my father," she barks and disappears. And I catch myself that I am not at all upset that I did not find Sergey at home.

I wander around the center of our magnificent city. I reach the square and trample near the fountains. The fountains do not work, they are turned on for May Day. In the meantime, these are dirty, cracked troughs, which are full of garbage: cigarette butts, crumpled cigarette packs, ice cream cups. Then I walk down the main street, stop at each store and look at the windows with incredible curiosity.

But I'm all there - in apartment number 7 ...

And the day flares up, and warms up hour by hour. The streets are crowded. Now for sure - there is no way back for spring. And many are already dressed in spring, light. Guys flaunt suits. And it seems to me that everyone is smiling. Everyone must be living well in our city!

Still, it's hot in a demi-season coat. Mom did not let me in a jacket, she is afraid of a relapse of the disease. I unbutton my coat and the top button of my shirt, finally breathe deeply, freely, and think, think. About miscellaneous. About your future, for example. I will be fifteen years old in the fall. Soon I will finish the seven-year period and I may well enter our mining technical school - at PRUM. I know several boys from the mining technical school, they like to say

that they are studying at the PRUM. And PRUM is an underground development of coal deposits. Oh, how proud they are to get the specialty of a mining master! Or I'll take it and get a job as a turner's apprentice at a factory where mine equipment is repaired - straight to the machine shop to Uncle Kostya, and go to night school! And what, I will earn money as an adult independent person, and help my mother. From the first paycheck, I will buy my mother beautiful shoes, and from the second, I will buy myself a pocket watch. It would be nice ... But I know very well that I will not do this, I will continue to study. Of course, it's hard for mom, but she won't want to hear about some evening school. She wants me to learn to be an engineer. In general, an engineer is great. But I have another goal - to become an artist. No, I will still continue my studies at school, and when I graduate, I will enter an art institute. Why do I need a technical school? I have to paint. One day I will create a picture that will glorify me all over the world. "Don't you know who painted this picture? This is Eduard Klimenko! He lived on Krasnykh Zor Street, "they will say in our city.

Then I think of Lidka. And I'm sad...

At noon I come home. I silently destroy the dinner. Mom puts her hand to my forehead, and I comment:

"Thirty-six and six." The pulse is clear, seventy-two beats per minute. Will live.

Mom, lightly ruffling her hair, calms down.

I sit down to work. I make sketches in an album of what I saw in the morning and again experience the same morning feeling. I draw a dancing girl - not Lidka Stepankova, but just a girl. I'm an artist and I probably don't have the right to pass by what excites me.

However, nothing works. Some fat aunt waving her arms. It turns out that it is not so easy to convey the dance in the drawing. I was completely exhausted, but there is no dance, I even drew a radio and marked the music flying out of it with strokes - I got angry and laughed. What are these idiotic touches?! They are possible only on caricatures.

I tear out the sheets from the album, crumple it and tear it to shreds. I fall face down on the couch and lie for a long time, listening to the booming beats of my heart. And in every knock I hear: "You will not become an artist", "You will not become an artist", "Never, never"! I jump up and rush around the room like crazy. The floor is littered with scraps, I trample them and almost cry in despair. Then I collect shreds, crumpled sheets, hide them in my pockets, it was still not enough for them to catch my mother's eye.

... In the evening, Lidka comes. She appeared as if nothing had happened. She is in her usual plaid dress above the knees. Only on round knees, brown stockings no longer gather in an accordion. She wears a woolen jacket on her shoulders - it's still cool in the evening. We'll probably go for a walk. Lidka smiles - the same eyes, the same eyebrows - a crease on his forehead. Nothing seems to have changed, only I'm worried.

We're talking. She talks more, and I say so, monosyllables, and try to look at her less, because I have an idiotic smile on my face that is beyond my control. I find out that Lidka was at the regional competitions and took third place there, and for floor exercise she was given the highest score. She arrived last night. She tells me how the competitions went, but I'm not interested in the first time. Our eyes meet, and I feel like I'm blushing.

Then we go outside and walk around the house. Nobody pays attention to us. They are used to us. Our neighbors "married" us in kindergarten.

"You didn't come for a long time, I thought, you were offended," I say, as if by the way.

"Not at all. You were joking," Lidka replies, only very quietly. And I'm a little offended by the fact that she was not offended at all.

- Lead, what do you think a person who falls in love should do? - I ask and immediately regret that I asked this question. Now she will think about Proyavkina, about that conversation of ours. But, honestly, I don't want to remember Proyavkina now. But Lidka does not seem to hear my question, says:

"Look, Edik, Petrushin's grandmother has already kicked out the goat.

Grandma Petrushina's goat is tied to the trunk of an acacia. The goat peacefully pinches the young grass, as if asserting the eternal earthly constancy. Here we stop and look at the goat of grandmother Petrushina for a long time and happily. And for some reason, Lidka declares:

"One day this goat will be gone.

"Of course, it will be eaten by gray wolves ...

"That's not what I'm talking about, Edik, don't laugh," Lidka looks at me with a sad look, and I see her morning and suddenly discover that Stepankova is older, older than me. What is it about? I don't understand her at all.

The first April twilight with purple-blue smoke has already fallen into the courtyards and now spreads along the street, soft and transparent. The variegated shutters of huts and outbuildings lose their color, as if they are lightly covered with silver.

We walk a little more and go home. In the courtyard, saying goodbye, Lidka says:

- By the way, the great Italian poet Dante wrote poems and dedicated them to Beatrice. And you ask what to do...

I can't sleep at night. A dancing girl in front of my eyes, a blue light... And then, suddenly, the night sea rises in front of me. A bright yellow moon bursting out of the captivity of the clouds gilds the swell of weak waves on the horizon. And there, in the distance, a lonely bathing girl. Her hands are upturned to the sky, and it seems that they are touching the disk of the moon. The head with flowing silver hair is slightly thrown back, the body is tilted to the left. And the sea seems like a luxurious dress of a whirling ballerina, and the moon is a golden tambourine in her hands.

I decided to paint this picture. Of course, oil. This is exactly the picture I dreamed of.

In the morning, before school, I lie in wait for Lidka and tell her about the plan.

"Only you don't care about it, okay," I ask.

"Of course, Edik. It will only be our secret," agrees Lidka and, after a pause, exclaims: "Happy!"

That day, I pulled the canvas over the largest stretcher. I called the future painting "The Night Bather".

Chapter Five

At the age of fifteen, it is very good to live in the world, if you are sure that a great future awaits you. I was quite sure that my adult life would be extraordinary, because I am an artist and one day I will paint a picture that will surely glorify me all over the world. I looked down on the elderly men and women in our yard, who seemed to me to have achieved nothing in life. I grinned at their empty vanity, the pettiness of feelings and desires. They will never be written about in the newspapers or talked about on the radio. And who even knows their names? A dozen people in my yard and some authorized person from the housing committee, leafing through the muddied house book, will grin, dismantling the scribbles - a good surname: Banya. Even with Uncle Kostya, who not so long ago was an idol for me, I began to talk hurriedly. No, my attitude towards Uncle Kostya has not changed at all. Is it possible to change the attitude towards a person who understands you? Still, I began to talk to Uncle Kostya as if on the run. I was suddenly in a hurry—time ran in a strange, motionless way. I didn't have time. Or maybe childhood ends when you begin to experience a lack of time?

I painted the painting "Night Bather". I was impatient, like everyone who expects a miracle, and imagined a lot. Sometimes, however, with horror I catch myself thinking that this picture will not glorify me at all. So, I will stay forever in our stunted mining town, imprison myself in a long barracks on Krasnykh Zor Street and flash in the passage yard, like old man Surin or the eternally dull

Aunt Klava from the last apartment at all times in galoshes on bare feet and a tattered sweatshirt.

I started drawing early. In the first grades, I filled dozens of notebooks and albums with drawings of various battles at sea and on land. The predatory noses of the defeated fascist ships protruded from the boiling depths of the sea. Orange, juicy fire devoured the mutilated gun carriages, the fuselages of enemy aircraft buried in the ground with black crosses on their sides got stuck in thick, greasy smoke. However, then everyone diligently drew battles with the Nazis, on paper firing at fascism from powerful howitzers of children's imagination, not sparing black and gray - dirty tones for him. But even at that time, I seem to have enjoyed painting the paper blue, sending three-masted sailing frigates and high-sided caravels on a voyage.

And in the fifth grade, Boris Efimovich Salnikov came to us as an art teacher - a tall, flat, awkward man with a small head covered with thin and soft hair like floss threads. He was wearing a wide checkered shirt made of thick fabric, in which, probably, you will steam - it is sunny outside the window, the first autumn days are still hot in summer, but a strange feeling of some of his inner chilliness, some kind of helplessness was immediately transmitted to me.

After greeting him immediately at the entrance, he stepped to the table, put down the magazine, leaned heavily on the back of the chair with both hands, looked into the classroom. He stared at us for quite a long time, his pale-faced head swaying faintly between his sharp, raised shoulders. The forehead gathered in an accordion, grayish-blue eyes seemed to look out for something in the distance, but difficultly, with effort.

This Salnikov seemed to us angrily severe: from his gaze, conversations, usually free in drawing lessons, died out, the rustle of albums, double sheets, the fractional clatter of pencils subsided.

Suddenly, he smiled. Quite childish, he smiled mischievously. And the thin ice that arose between us crunched like a crunch - the boys and girls took a deep breath, moved vividly and froze again in impatient anticipation of his words and actions.

"Here's what, lads, show me your drawings. The old ones who have them," he said in a dry Basque, in a homely way, simply and immediately went into the depths of the class.

There was little work. After all, no one thought that the teacher would need last year's drawings. But I brought an album that my parents gave me along with a set of colored pencils at the end of the fourth grade. There were a lot of summer drawings in it, but there were still blank sheets of good smooth paper, so I brought it.

I opened on the first page, where the tanks fought to force the crossing, deciding that this was my best drawing. Soon the teacher came up to me, took an album from the desk.

He flipped through the first pages with a smile on his face, and then suddenly became gloomy. Asked:

"What's your name?"

I jumped up like a dumbfounded.

- Klymenko is my last name, Eduard ...

The class laughed in unison: think - Edward.

"Sit down, sit down, Eduard," said Boris Efimovich, emphasizing the name.

The boys understood him and squealed again.

"Hush, lads," the teacher restored order. He turned over another sheet, thought about it, and looked at the first page for some reason.

- I see you like to draw. Everything is so diligently done, with imagination. Only around the war - fights and battles. And you, brother, did not see the war.

"I haven't," I agreed sourly.

- There is little good in it, in the war. The teacher looked around the humbled class. - Yes, there is such a genre - battle painting. Vereshchagin, for example, Grekov. But every battle painter depicts not war in general, as a terrible, sad fact, but a person in harsh

conditions. Is he capable of a feat, of a noble deed, or is he a coward, a miserable woodlouse? Have you, Edik, come across reproductions of the artist Grekov?

"It's... "Cart," I remembered thankfully.

- That's right, the famous "Tachanka". Four dashing horses rush across the steppe, dragging the red fighters with them. Her running is furious, swift, beautiful. The excitement of the struggle, the courage, the revolutionary romance - all this in impulse, in speed. And we believe the artist - such a cart will sweep away the enemy. The Red Horsemen will win! - Boris Efimovich looked at the first page of the album again. "You made the right decision by writing the enemy's blood in black. Let it be black. But here is a boots sticking out from under the caterpillar, and next to it is a German helmet. You're satisfied—that's all that's left of the enemy. And I see only a monstrously crushed life. - The teacher submitted the album. "An artist cannot paint out of hatred alone. Understand, boy, real art is born with a bright feeling.

He said the last words harshly, but immediately seemed to smile guiltily.

"And you can do the sea." There is something in him, Eduard Klymenko.

He patted me on the shoulder and picked up the next album handed to him.

In the same month, I enrolled in the school circle, which was led by Efimich - this is how the guys respectfully called him among themselves.

Since then, our apartment has smelled of paints, and the order immediately disappeared. My desk would be constantly littered with different jars, tubes, brushes, sketchbooks, pencils. Because of the mess, I often quarreled with my mother. Nervous, for some reason she blamed the Commune farm authorities for bureaucracy - for a year in our house they promised to patch the roof and repair the floors. Maybe mom thought it wasn't so bad if her son became a famous artist?

At the end of winter, I painted my first oil painting. It was a seascape with a lighthouse. And I finished it late on Saturday evening, and the night slept anxiously. I dreamed of the sea. I walked lonely along the shore near the water, and heavy foamy waves, rising, hung terribly above me.

I woke up. Strong, booming tremors echoed in the chest of the heart. I remembered the painting, and a feeling of extraordinary joy grabbed me.

Yes, I painted a real oil painting, like an adult artist, and I can look at it at any moment. In general, everyone can look at it as much as they like. What is it worth getting up now and going to the picture?!

But I took my time, sweetly postponing the moment of meeting her.

Morning came, and my mother opened the shutters, but the air outside the window was still pinkish-blue, loose, still kept the late night haze. Clanking, the cart rumbled along the pavement.

Mom rustled the stove, choosing ashes from the blower, poured it into a bucket. A strong, ashy spirit tickled his nostrils.

I didn't like those morning minutes when the stove burned out. In the corners, chilly drafts began to move, and in the apartment from some kind of nervous discomfort it suddenly became vain and painfully poor. And my mother, conjuring over the stove, in a worn-out house dress, in worn-out dudes with a sole made of disheveled conveyor belt, in a gray half-shawl made of goat down, tied crosswise on her chest and sloppily pulled up the hem - seemed like a miserable old woman. And from the strange resentment that arose, I wanted to tell her some impertinence, to be rude. And then, when the former constancy rejoices in the apartment, things will acquire their usual essence - they will be invisible, not the main thing, and my mother will return young, as always, I terribly regretted this moment of mine, but everything was immediately forgotten. Probably until the next morning like this.

However, now I looked at my mother enthusiastically. "You don't know anything, Mommy," my soul screamed. And I didn't care about our poverty, about drafts, about my mother's dudes with a sole from a conveyor belt.

I painted a picture..

After breakfast, at which my mother and I talked about my landscape, she was delighted, and I, of course, imagined, so, they say, a trifle, I began to get ready for Efimich. I decided to show the canvas to the teacher. I found my father's old suitcase - the picture successfully fit into it - the canvas was fresh, I got dressed. But then my mother started washing, I had to bring her water. Then in the shed with a hammer to crumble kettlebell coal, with a margin, chop firewood for kindling, and even go to the store for groceries. I was nervous. Mom knew that I was going to Yefimych, I could have shortened my assignments.

At last I was free. But before going to the teacher, I dropped by Seryozhka. It was somehow embarrassing to show up to Yefimych alone, and I asked Katrish to walk together.

I showed Seryozhka the picture. He touched the edge of the canvas and stained his finger. Asked:

- Will the paint be washed off?

"It will wash off, don't be afraid," I was upset.

Seryozhka had a lot of the most urgent things to do on Sunday. He had already managed to go to the morning session at the cinema, now for some reason he had to go to the House of Pioneers, and then to his grandmother for a pie. So he did not want to stomp to Yefimych on the outskirts of the city. Seryozhka believed that it was better to show the picture to the teacher tomorrow at school. Does Katrish understand what it means to paint a picture?! Seryozha agreed only when I promised to exchange my Dimon flashlight for his penknife, with one blade, which I did not like at all. It was an unequal exchange and Katrish understood, but offered, believing that Klymenko had nowhere to go.

I visited Yefimych once. I was sent to him by our director with an urgent dispatch. The teacher lived in the village of the Frunze mine, far from the school, in a tiny two-story building. The windows of his apartment immediately grew out of the ground.

It took us a long time to get there. It was the last days of February, and nothing was clear yet - in the morning the sun was ringing, almost spring, and by noon the icicles under the roofs would suddenly become cloudy, and the yards would pull cold dampness, some kind of uncomfortable sickness. The sky will be clouded with clouds ...

Seryozhka moped, complained about the biting wind, throwing as if only in his face a prickly snow grits. In my opinion, he is not very chilly in a good beaver coat, in a hat with earflaps, in boots with galoshes. I can imagine how he would howl in the cold in my shabby cloth coat, from which I quickly grew.

The doors were opened to us by Boris Yefimych. He was not at all surprised, as if he were waiting for the arrival of his disciples.

- Hello, lads. Please come in," he invited, pushing the door open.

We greeted each other and hesitated. I was embarrassed by the music from the depths of the apartment, maybe Efimich has guests and we are out of place?

- Yes, come in, come in. Completely cold, - the teacher gently nudged us and explained, dispelling our distrust: - This is my daughter Masha falling asleep under the gramophone. She is our princess, serve only "Champagne Splashes".

In a cramped corridor, he helped us undress and led us into a room with an old faded wardrobe, with a wide oak table and stove. He sat us down at the table and said:

"Warm up." And I am now. Masha is about to fall asleep.

Seryozhka took off his glasses, began to wipe them with the sleeve of his corduroy jacket. He grunted and puffed out his cheeks.

The music stopped, and Yefimych immediately appeared in the doorway.

"I fell asleep. Give her a "record". He pulled up a stool and sat down at our table with his sinewy hands on it. He looked sunken, bags under his eyes. A brown, tight-fitting sweater terribly emphasized his thinness.

"My wife and sons went to my mother in the village, and I and my daughter are on the farm," he said and coughed muffled, heavily. "Well, and you, lads, what winds do you have to me?"

"Klimenko painted a picture, a strong one," Seryozhka said, as if he had given the report, and attacked me. "Show me, show me, Edka. Open your suitcase.

"The suitcase is there, near the hanger," I replied, and did not move. Honestly, I already regretted that I decided to show the picture. Suddenly, it's no good.

"Don't be timid, Edward," smiled the teacher. Of course, he understood my excitement. "Let's take a look at your work."

I brought a suitcase and took out a painting. A vein in my temple trembled.

"The paint is still sticky. I just finished yesterday," I barely said.

The teacher carefully examined the picture.

"Well, Edward, commendable," he encouraged, carefully took the frame and stepped towards the door. "Come with me, lads.

We entered a room with a dense, well-established smell of paints and thinners, like in an art workshop. However, this was Efimich's workshop. Paints were everywhere: on the shelves, on the bookcase, on the table and even on the windowsill next to the pot of geraniums, in empty jars, in bottles, in tubes, in flat boxes of sets. In general, there were a lot of tempting things for me. For example, those canvases that are stacked against the wall one to the other, or albums on shelves.

"Do you paint pictures here?" Seryozhka was curious. Eccentric, as if it is not clear that they are painting here.

"In a way," the teacher replied. He fixed the canvas to an easel, rummaged through the box, found the right tube, squeezed the paint out of it onto the glass and said to me:

"Take a brush." Let's add a little cobalt here.

I barely touched the needle-thin tendrils to the canvas - my fingers trembled. Then the teacher took away my brush, applied a few strokes with sharp, dexterous movements. In the picture, the wave hit the cliff powerfully.

He held the brush in his outstretched hand firmly and easily. I admired it - it seemed to merge with her. Another witchcraft movement is a pity for the tendril, and now a water spark has been carved out of the cliff ...

And suddenly the teacher's face was distorted by a disgusted grimace. He gasped for air, coughed deeply, convulsively, covering his mouth with his palm, straining to the tight blue veins on his glossy yellow, perspiring forehead. The coughing fit was painful, but it was unlikely to weigh him down only with suffering at that moment, rather with a sense of shame for his illness, which, of course, we guessed. And this shame against his will was easily guessed in a cheerfully false, as if apologetic smile on his face.

He dropped his brush and rushed out of the room. And for a long time he coughed in the corridor, choking suffocating and groaning abruptly.

Seryozhka and I looked at each other stupidly. Earring stood by the window and twirled a tube of paint in his fingers.

"It's damp here," he said, almost in a whisper.

And it seems that after his words, I felt how strong and juicy the damp basement spirit was here. Seryozhka wanted to tell me something else, but Yefimych entered, wiping his face with a handkerchief, and Katrish, putting the tube on the windowsill, lowered his hands exactly at the seams, froze like a punished student.

"You have caught a cold," he said quietly, and at that moment I was very grateful to him, because there was a bad pause - the teacher was completely confused, and I did not know what to do with myself from embarrassment.

"I caught a cold, Seryozha. - The teacher raised the brush, thought about my picture. "I caught a cold, I caught a cold.

"Now the weather is bad," I added, for some reason losing interest in my picture.

- What should it be like at the end of February? Winter, consider, has passed. Weather by time. Only she is here so much ... I caught a cold, lads, a long time ago. Back in the forty-fourth in Belarus in rotten swamps. Since then, I have been boasting.

"What were you doing there, in the rotten swamps?" - Seryozhka did not understand.

- They are fighting in war. After all, lads, I served in intelligence. Sometimes, we will go on a mission for two, for three days. On a visit to the Nazis. Dry trails are not indicated on the map. And who will look for them. Well, the water line, as it should be, where wading, where swimming. So I got cold.

"It's probably interesting in intelligence," Seryozhka suggested.

"It depends," the teacher avoided talking.

"You can't live here. It's damp here. You should, Boris Efimovich, move, I advised.

- It would not be a sin to move. Of course, it's damp. Still, three meters below sea level," the teacher joked sadly. "What can you do?" Over there, in the center of the city, almost all the destroyed houses were restored. Soon, then, new ones will begin to be built. With balconies... So let's wait, Edward. And not everything is so scary, lads. Spring is coming soon, and in spring we are doing well. The gardens are blooming. The grove nearby is a ten-minute walk. The air is a miracle! Owls sing, it's a pleasure to sketch.

"And my dad wouldn't live here." He would have succeeded. Folder also fought and wounded. He even agreed on a second room with his superiors. Our neighbor Vezukhina was going to the virgin lands, and we were promised to give her room. There are three of us in the room, and she is alone, like a queen. Fact. Only Rimka did not go anywhere. There, on virgin lands, there is a real front! And she would have to style. Now we are starting repairs. Folder achieved,

fact. He can achieve whatever he wants, because he is not at all a coward of his superiors," Seryozhka said with the usual pressure.

Boris Efimovich narrowed his eyes and looked at Katrish.

"Your dad, Seryozha, is a brave man, but I'm timid in front of my superiors. They will have more of my worries.

"Well, we'll go." Let's stomp home, Ed," Seryozhka suddenly became worried, pulled my sleeve. - Let's go, let's go, learn more lessons.

"You have to learn lessons," the teacher agreed. - Lessons are a holy thing. I understand you guys.

He put the brush in the jar, removed the picture from the easel and made a few more remarks, which I hardly listened to - my attention was captured by the tempting frames against the wall. These were finished works, and I really wanted to look at them.

- Boris Efimovich, show your paintings. You probably have a lot of them," I plucked up courage and asked the teacher. And Seryozhka took my canvas from him and quickly put it in a suitcase. Where is he in a hurry?

- Well, that's a lot. There's something. I just can't offer fresh yet. Although you have not seen my old works. Now, lads, one minute.

I thought that Yefimych would step to the frames that are against the wall, and he brought paintings from another room. There were two of them.

- I don't write much now. I don't have enough time for myself," he said, arranging pictures on chairs, closer to the window. - A lot of design work. And I also help artists like you, Edward. Now we are preparing the exhibition, do you see how much we applied?

With a wave of his head, he pointed to the very framework.

"Here, please...

In one picture, a strong guy, with a face slightly powdered with bluish coal dust, drank milk from a ladle in a black miner's robe. A white trickle ran down his stiff beard. And opposite the miner was a thin girl, almost a girl, in a polka dot dress. She held the bucket with one hand and, smiling, looked at the guy with huge blue eyes. The

sky above them hung blue, full, morning. In the distance, at the edge of the horizon, a faint haze slightly enveloped the mine pile drivers and waste heaps, and its trail stretched to a barely distinguishable village, to the courtyards. Everything on the canvas was familiar, simple and natural, it seemed that Efimich did nothing but open the window on a spring morning. However, I was expecting something extraordinary and was a little disappointed. Only the girl's eyes left a feeling of anxiety, and for some reason I wanted to look into them again and again. Such eyes are remembered for a long time, maybe a lifetime. The painting was called "Night Shift".

On the other - "New" - a cheekbone, strong guy cheerfully tried on a miner. Some of the miners patted him on the shoulder, someone adjusted his collar. And everyone smiled simply and youngly. Only the old dry miner looked evaluatively, severely, and drilled the newcomer with small eyes, from under a steep forehead. And right there, on the bench, next to the horse race^[1] lay burnt, with traces of medals, tunic.

"Before the war, lads, I worked in the mine, as a pile breaker," said Yefimych quietly, as if in thought, in his torn voice.

... I saw Yefimych's paintings after that, because I often visited him with my drawings and watercolors. I liked the healthy, strong people on his canvases, written out by the artist very lovingly. They seemed to assert earthly silence, peace and tranquility ...

When we left Yefimych, it was already windless, quiet, only a hoarse rumble came from the mine pile driver. The village was in no hurry to open itself in the evening, it was still light and crowded in the daytime, but purple twilight shadows were already lurking on the islands of snow on the roofs. It was easy to breathe, and it smelled of thawed steppe freshness. Behind the mine heap on the slope of a beam with gray nostril-like snow, crows laughed. Earring launched a stone at them. They sprang up heavily and long, croaked bitterly. And I became very anxious.

"Wow, crow tribe," Seryozhka threatened them with his fist and whistled again. "Hey, Ed, and Yefimych is probably a tube.

"What other tube?" No Efimich is not a tube, - I got angry. - I'll crack you now, the tube is unfortunate.

I walked quickly, almost ran away from Seryozhka, but he caught up with me, grabbed me by the sleeve.

"You think I don't feel sorry for him, do you?" You think you don't feel sorry for anyone in the world. You're sorry, but I'm not, right? Katrish sniffed. "And... and... I won't take your flashlight. I won't take it, I understand ...

* * *

The painting "Night Bather" moved slowly. I wrote it in the evenings, because during the day there was no time - before lunch, school, and then lessons - preparation for exams, and a lot of other things.

There are always a lot of interesting things to do in the spring, and all of them, it turns out, are there, outside your window, under the blue sky. But every evening I carefully set to work. I cooked paints for a long time, with pleasure. But then I touched the canvas with a brush, and timidity immediately took me, a strange, new excitement appeared. Especially when I was writing a girl. It turned out to me completely different from what my imagination drew - there was no subtlety, grace of the bather's movements, in which her beauty would be guessed and music would be heard. I was nervous and threw the brush.

And at night, her amazing image appeared in front of me again. And I dreamed. But for some reason I did not dream that one day a miracle would happen on my canvas - the night bather would come to life and spin in the dance; The yellow disk of the moon will become a tambourine in her hands, and the sea will become a luxurious dress. And about what kind of conversations my new picture will cause among the children of our school. Yes, only at school, in the whole city!

Sometimes I went to the library and looked at albums with reproductions of great artists: Rubens, Rembrandt, Veronese, Leonardo da Vinci, El Greco ...

I peered into the round faces of the Madonnas with blissful smiles, into the heavy eyes of men, probably written out by the artist not in the best moments of his life, and tried to understand why these paintings were recognized as masterpieces? The big-headed Madonnas of Leonardo da Vinci did not bother me at all, and the anxious-stern faces of the apostles, unfortunate old men and old women on the canvases of distant painters caused me only a feeling of sadness. Why are they? And then there is the dark background of the paintings, on which people seemed to be doomed to suffering - how depressing it acted.

Of course, I understood that there was some mystery behind each picture, and, probably, there was no need to look for the key to it, but to accept it with my heart and soul as real life. Just life. I could not help accepting this, and I protested fervently against her blackness and sorrow.

I closed the album and looked out the window. It was a quiet sunny May, and everything was on the streets of our city as always. Passers-by were in a hurry about their business, cars were rolling. On the corner, a stout ice cream maker in a stale bathrobe beckoned in a bass, almost masculine voice to buy a "popsicle" on a stick. Everything was as usual, but I looked at the cars, at the passers-by, at the fat ice cream maker with the feeling of a man who came out of a gloomy dungeon. And everything seemed to be mixed in this person - and sadness, and joy, and hope. And he really wanted to live. "No, I will never write anything like that," I thought. "Well, what good is the worried, wrinkled faces of the old men of our court?"

Chapter Six

The days ran as usual, one after another in the back of the head, like a guy in physical education. Fun and difficult, quiet and boring.

I finished the seven-year school almost perfectly - there is only one four in the Russian language in the certificate. In June, after the exams, we were gathered in the courtyard of the school for a ruler, and our teachers alternately congratulated us on the successful completion of the seven-year plan. Now it was possible to seriously think about the holidays. I made a promise to myself in the summer to finish the picture and should not lose a single day.

The last on the line was Van Vanych, the director of the school. He was tanned, somehow weathered during these first summer days; A torn shrapnel scar was brightly punctured on his cheek. Van Vanych is habitually tightened - the officer's bearing was felt. In the summer, our director, former political instructor Ivan Ivanovich Zolotarev, had a lot of worries - two graduations and repairs to the school. And this year also the construction of a gym. It seems that the chefs were moving, cars loaded with sand and stone were taxiing into the yard.

Briefly, dryly congratulating, Van Vanych announced mobilization for the construction of a gym. He said:

- No one will serve us a gym on a silver platter. Our chefs have more than enough worries of their own. They need to mine coal, a lot of coal. The country needs it now like air. Here Van Vanych paused and, as if anticipating our objections, circled the formation with a reproachful look: "We are healthy, strong, waiting for some uncles to come and roll up their sleeves. It turns out that we are dependents? No, we're not dependents, right?

"That's right," the formation responded not very unanimously, and Seryozhka threw after me with annoyance: "Summer is gone...

The next day we are at the disposal of the manager of Uncle Fedya and the physical education teacher Pyotr Trofimovich, abbreviated as Peter. Teacher Peter is a broad-shouldered, strong man with a cheerful smile on his face. He is still quite young and with us for a short time. When we build a gym, it will lead the boxing

section. He is a master of sports in boxing and dreams of a real, with ropes, ring in the future hall.

In the meantime, the physical instructor is recruiting a "group of the strongest" - a team of masons. Of course, I would also like to work for him. Pyotr Trofimovich looks at me appraisally and gives the go-ahead. But Uncle Fedya intercepts. He forms brigades of helpers, and he, too, probably, needs strong guys.

I am offended, and I object in the strongest possible terms, and our superintendent, a generally docile man, is ready to give in, but Katrish drags me aside and whispers conspiratorially:

"Bad, where are you going?" There are high school students, I understand. They'll come in. And in the back room are our boys and girls. - The earring with a nod of the head points to Irochka Proyavkina. "Here is your Irka with us." And you're pretty.

Of course, it's good to work next to Irochka. Still, it's a shame. Why does Katrish always decide for me? In the end, it turns out that Seryozhka is right, I have nothing to oppose and I have no opinion of my own. What does Irochka Proyavkina have to do with it, if I decided? Offensively. Seryozhka, however, said everything and moved to the back room. And I, hesitating a little, trailed after him.

And so we drive hand wheelbarrows with sand to a huge vat in which the solution is prepared. The day before, when we were still taking exams, high school students dug ditches for the foundation. Now it is laid with a stone.

Seryozhka works with girls. Girls in old dresses, in white scarves, some homemade. Among them is Irochka. I think about her all the time - the look is looking for her by itself, and it is surprising that every time our eyes meet. Of course, it was not without Seryozhka, but when you are in love for the first time in your life, it always seems that you are also in love without someone's prompting. Girls with shovels pour sand into our wheelbarrows.

"Give me the frying, give it to me." One-two, one-two, - Seryozhka commands them. "Don't you, magpies. Everyone equally.

Klimenko can do more. Do not be afraid, it will not bend. He has a wide neck, a well-known fact.

The girls are pouring sand on my wheelbarrow, and Katrish points to Proyavkina with the handle of a shovel, admire, they say, at his beauty. He pokes so frankly that Ira, guessing, blushes. I show Katrich my fist, only in an empty trail. He yells at the whole yard:

"There are so many good girls...

The girls laugh. But then Uncle Fedya appears, and Seryozhka, seriously, briskly reports to him how many wheelbarrows have been shipped. Uncle Fedya is pleased - you won't get bored with such a boss. He says:

- Well done, guys. Burn the sand a little more. Don't pull it away. He looks at Katrish, and he takes over the tsu.

"Here we are, Uncle Fed. Come on, they took shovels. And then I see, you can't build communism with you. - The earring makes the first powerful throw, includes the girls. "Piled on, lads, piled up.

By noon, it gets hot and I take off my shirt... And five days later, my skin is covered with a bronze tan. In the evening, after work, I am happy to wash under the column in our yard, like old man Surin. Lidka looks at me curiously - she likes tanning. She stands three steps away, nibbling seeds and asking about the construction site. She loves all sorts of details and is angry that I answer briefly, almost reluctantly. And suddenly I extinguish the conversation with a powerful, directed at her jet of water. Lidka squeals, bounces back.

"Nasty, I don't talk to you anymore," Stepankova says angrily. She goes to the table under the apricot, sits down there at it and, propping her face on her hands, looks at me very carefully. And from this strange, piercing look of hers, I suddenly feel my guilt acutely, although the guilt is completely insignificant. But I want to go up to her and say something affectionate. And I come up, but I still can't say anything affectionate. I just come up and we reconcile.

On June nights, summer thunderstorms thunder over the city, with thick showers that roll heavy cast-iron cannonballs on the roofs and burst into sleep with biting blows of hail on the shutters, like shots of lead shrapnel. In the mornings, the city is washed, the air is clear. It smells like steppe, thyme and wormwood. And the cry of a trolley tipping over on the nearest heap: "Wow! Ho-ho" - seems inconceivably close and very mocking.

In the morning, I used to go pick up Katrish, pull him out of bed and wait a long time for him to get ready. We left late. I was nervous and hurried Seryozhka, but he was in no hurry, stretched after, now and then wiping his glasses. I carried his cloth bag of groceries while he tidied up his glasses. Almost at school, Seryozhka remembered the bag, took it away and, squinting at my newspaper bundle, asked:

"What did the mother put down?"

- Lard with bread and eggs.

"I'll soon get fat from your lard, Ed." And there is no sweet?

"No, I don't.

"I don't either. Dumplings with strawberries. Nonsense.

During the break, we ate together. The earring was always given sweets - chocolates, jam pies, cheesecakes or dumplings. And all this, according to Seryozhka, was nonsense. When he started such a conversation, I felt very bad.

Once again, I come to Seryozhka and suddenly meet him at the entrance. Is it just Katrish? A fresh, neatly combed, ironed guy with an officer's tablet in his hand busily descends the stairs. I freeze in confusion, maybe I forgot something and today is not an ordinary working day, but a holiday?

"Hello, Serge. Don't you go to work? I ask wildly.

"Where did you get the idea?" I'm just stomping on work. Well, you came in vain. We are no longer on our way.

I beat my eyes - I can't figure out what kind of work Katrish is stepping on in this form.

We leave the entrance, Seryozhka looks anxiously at the sky, then carefully at the street.

"Do you think it will rain?"

- Probably not. Not a cloud. And what?

- What is "what"? Fyodor Semenych and I are going to the base today. On his "Moskvich". Some materials need to be written out for the school. I will help him with the discharge. I'll do the math. I don't think he's good at math. Probably, three classrooms, and the rest is a corridor.

- And you, of course, cook great. "I suddenly get funny.

"At least. - Earring takes out a handkerchief, carefully wipes his chin. "It's been frying in the morning." It will rain exactly. Will be lucky. We'll fall into a ditch. You, Edka, stomp, stomp on your work. I will wait here for Fyodor Semenych. We agreed, he will pick me up. Hello to the developer.

I'm moving away from Seryozhka. No, I'm not offended at all. Let Katrish roll out on the "Moskvich", helps Uncle Feda to write out materials. This is also necessary. Only for some reason restless in the soul. It's restless, that's all.

At the entrance to the schoolyard I meet with Pyotr Trofimovich. He also goes to work. He shakes hands with me. Still, it's nice when the teacher shakes hands with you.

"You're going to work on masonry today," says Petet. - I'll tell Fyodor Semenovich. Don't worry.

No, I'm not worried. I will be happy to work on masonry.

- Is it difficult to lay walls? - I am interested.

"It's not the gods who burn pots. I'll teach you. I also learned at your age. In evacuation, in Siberia. At first, a military plant was built, then barracks for housing. And he mastered the masonry, and swung an ax like this. Pyotr Trofimovich struck his throat with his finger. "The eyes, boy, are afraid, but the hands do.

And in fact, Pyotr Trofimovich teaches me masonry. How to start corners, how to monitor the level, do stitching. So that, therefore, it was "lovingly expensive to look at" on the wall.

The new job fascinates me, and I forget about Seryozhka. But he reminds of himself - this is when Uncle Fedya's Moskvich rolls up to

the construction site. Earring opens the door, hangs his feet on the ground and writes something in his tablet.

A few days later, however, Katrish finds me on the scaffolding. He's back in his work clothes. The earring rubs nearby, watches the work for a long time, he is kind of plucked. It must have been demoted by Uncle Fedya.

"And you're already tired of waving a trowel," Katrish finally concludes.

- Pyotr Trofimovich taught.

- In general, it's better here. And I was transferred to the mortar section. Listen, why didn't you come in in the morning? I overslept because of you.

Oh, my?! He overslept because of me.

- You work at Moskvich. He himself said that we are not on the way.

- On the "Moskvich". The hunt was to guard this clunker and get up yet, neither light nor dawn. - Katrish chipped off the dried blot of mortar on his trousers. - In general, I have a conversation with you. Let's talk about it, huh?

He utters the last words almost in a whisper, and I understand that Seryozhka is not joking. He definitely has a serious case for me.

I ask my partner to leave, and we jump off the scaffolding, go to the end of the yard. We sit down there on the stones. The earring hesitates. He is still saddened by something and does not look like himself at all, at least not at all like that never discouraged bespectacled Serge, whom I have known for a very long time. I don't understand what happened to him.

Do you think that if a person makes a mistake and then realizes it, he will remain a good person? Seryozhka asks and stares into my eyes.

"I don't know. It depends on what kind of error.

"I shouldn't have agreed to ride this Moskvich," Katrish sighs. "I'd rather load sand." The boys were ruffled. They also tease:

"Deputy. the caretaker on the stool." But I couldn't refuse Uncle Feda, couldn't I, Ed?

I shrug.

"You'd talk to the boys so they don't tease." They respect you a lot. I'm friends with Ritka Zharkova. Fact. What does it feel like for her to hear them call me names. Talk to the boys, huh?

"I'll try."

I get up and have to go to work, but Katrish pulls my hand.

"Take your time, take your time. - The earring suddenly transforms, there are cunning sparks in his eyes. "There's news, man. I agreed with Prodevelopkina. She will come to the park today at seven o'clock. At the entrance will be waiting for you, understood. Lariska Evko will come with Irka, but don't be afraid. Evko so, for the style. You go straight to them, don't be a coward. Larisca will set sail and you will stay. Fact.

I want to ask Seryozhka: "Well, who, who authorized you?" However, the language is not obeyed. But Seryozhka guesses what I want to ask him. It's just that I'm dissatisfied and satisfied at the same time. There must be confusion on my face. Seryozhka states:

"You're going to look at each other until Chinese Easter.

Or maybe he did the right thing? I probably wouldn't dare. In fact, this is how you can look at each other for a thousand years.

"So hold your paw, man. And so, don't be late.

I firmly shake Serezhkin's hand and go to work.

How long to wait until seven o'clock in the evening...

At home, I wash thoroughly under the column. Lidka is spinning around me again. She is definitely haunted by my tan. She says:

- Edik, I'm going to the training camp soon. To Taganrog on the Sea of Azov. You'll see, I'll tan better than you. And then you are painfully imagining.

I'm silent. "Please tan better than me. I don't mind. What makes her think I'm imagining?"

Then I wipe myself off - I quickly drive a waffle towel through my muscles and, as if by the way, I tell Lidka that I am going on a date in the park.

- Is it with the same Proyavkina? Lidka asks, and I catch malice in the intonation of her voice.

"With the same one," I answer just as sarcastically and run into the house. No, it's still strange, why doesn't Lidka tolerate Proyavkina? She doesn't know her at all.

* * *

Of course, I was very worried when I went on a date with Irochka. But everything turned out exactly as Seryozhka said. I came to the entrance to the park almost at the same time as Irochka and her friend Larissa Evko. I politely, in a brittle voice, however, greeted the girls, although it was probably not worth saying hello - after all, we saw each other at school. But if I hadn't greeted them, how would I have approached? And in general, with what words should you start a conversation when you come on a date for the first time in your life? No, I didn't know with what words, and Ira, in my opinion, too. Ira only blushed a lot when I appeared in front of them. I can imagine what would have happened to us if Lariska Evko had not been there. But Larisca immediately took a start, chattered about the school: about the past exams, about the construction site and in general about everything in the world, and it turned out that the conversation between them was not interrupted, there was just a small pause, which was filled with his appearance by Edka Klimenko from a parallel class.

We entered the park, and I thought with horror that at any moment the sonorous murmur of Larissa's voice could break off - she would leave, and I would be left alone with Irochka, and everyone around me would stare at us - you would die of shame.

But the talker Evko, fortunately, was not going to leave us. She once again changed the subject and now broadcast about some silly

aunt Katya, who breeds cats, arranged a cat cattery in her apartment and gives kittens to everyone.

- Oh, Irinka, such wonderful faces! So wonderful! Evko exclaimed.

However, I listened to Lariska inattentively. With excitement, I could barely move my legs at all, as if I were making my way through a hot fog by touch. You must remember how it goes. You walk, neither alive nor dead. The world around you is on its own, you are in it on your own, but you really want to bring together, to merge these two existences, to finally find yourself - to breathe deeply and sing, maybe scream with happiness. But this just does not work. What was I thinking then? And what can a boy think on a first date? The fact that life is beautiful in a moment of magic, which will never be repeated in its original form - such a very naïve and holy moment? No, no, nothing like this ever occurred to me. Honestly, it was terrible to realize that Larisca was about to leave and we would be left alone. Just the two of us...

We stopped near the summer stage. The brass band performed the waltz "On the hills of Manchuria." The musicians - all old men - kept calm, important, and the leader, a plump, red-faced man with a's tuft of red hair, fussed in front of them, jumped up and down funny, writing monograms with his hands. We listened for a while, and then Larisca suddenly remembered that things were waiting for her at home. She needs to help her mother. However, little by little I got used to it, even offered to see Lariska off, but she flatly refused, hurried.

And we were left alone. I turned off the main avenue. Ira meekly followed.

It was stuffy, the air heavy from daytime fumes smelled of fading acacia.

- Do you have a cool Anna Petrovna, a geographer? I asked quietly.

"Yes, Anna Petrovna, what?" Irochka replied, looking into my face with some frightened curiosity.

I knew perfectly well that their class teacher was Anna Petrovna, a geographer. A woman who looked like our geographer was just walking towards us. I even shuddered. So I asked about it - it was already unbearable to remain silent. And now it was necessary to somehow get out, so as not to look like an idiot in her eyes.

"No, nothing. The geography is strict, I began clumsily. - Such a powerful subject, so many interesting things in the world, and she is all according to the textbook, spars from paragraph to paragraph. She did not tell a single case. Could be something from the travels of James Cook or Magellan. Or about the Spanish conquerors-conquistadors. There are such things ...

- And she told us about volcanoes at the class hour. And also about the death of the Titanic," Irochka objected, not very, however, confidently.

"At the class hour - in class," I said, losing interest in the geographical topic. Of course, I could tell Irochka about the Spanish conquistadors instead of Anna Petrovna, I read about them, but wouldn't I seem like a braggart to her?

... The next day and the next, we walk in the park again. We walk and are silent. I don't worry as much as I did on the first day, and I could, of course, talk about something. For example, about your paintings or books you read. But you never know what. But I don't want to talk about anything, and I always think about the fact that the painting "Night Bather" is waiting for me at home on an easel. In June, I hardly touched it. True, there were serious reasons for that - exams and work on the construction of a gym at school. But for an artist, this is perhaps not an excuse. Still, it was possible to find time for the picture.

And in our next meeting, I suddenly discover that Ira does not have such huge eyes and pigtails are very thin. And it's not like that at all. Why did I decide that Proyavkina was a beautiful girl? Esmeralda. Nothing much. A girl like a girl. And it's not just about beauty. It just turned out that we had nothing to argue about. Ira

never seriously objected to me, and we never quarreled. And so, probably, does not happen.

In short, we did not succeed in friendship. But I didn't tell Lidka about it. It's embarrassing, and in general, what is Stepankova's business. But I didn't go to the park in the evenings, and Lidka once mockingly remarked in a conversation:

"And your Proyavkina is still a doo."

"You're making it up," I replied unenthusiastically, avoiding the conversation. In my opinion, Lidka understood everything.

July came. It brought heat and boredom. From waste heaps, as from braziers, it was carried by a rancid child, and the bluish dust under your feet, under car tires, became vigorous. An old gypsy tinsmith, making morning and evening rounds of our streets and shouting: "I'm fixing it ... about... Dra... and... Stryuli", only intensified this boredom, languor. Every time I met him, a bearded, beggarly man with a round tin on his shoulder, when he went to work at school or returned from it. The tinsmith had heavy, glazed eyes. They sat dead in deep dark eye sockets, very anguished and angry.

In early July, we finished the work at school, that is, our, eighth grades. Of course, the opening of the gym was still far away. But the hall turned out to be great. Now the school with an extension began to resemble a giant letter "T".

In July, Lidka went to Taganrog for sports camps, and then I went to a pioneer camp on the Black Sea for two shifts. I would never have agreed to two shifts, but my mother, remembering my illness in the spring, persuaded me - it cost her a lot of work to get vouchers. However, it was the first time I went to the sea and hoped that I would paint seascapes. I took everything I needed with me. I hid the canvas with the "Night Bather" behind the wardrobe, away from mother's eyes ...

* * *

I returned from the pioneer camp at the end of August. The city was covered with clouds, drizzling chilly rain - a harbinger of autumn. Mom didn't meet me, but I wasn't upset. I knew my mother had a lot of work to do now...

In the evening, Lidka ran in, exclaimed:

"Oh, how black you are!" She greeted me like a man by the hand, unceremoniously turned me to the window. "Listen, I think you've matured. Well, now you don't care about your nose?"

I was embarrassed - what did she remember? I have no time to think about all sorts of nonsense.

Stepankova had a lot of news, and the most important one: Lidka at the training camp fulfilled the standard of the first adult category. She wrote to me about this, and now she told me in detail. Of course, I'm happy for her. My successes were more modest. I showed her an album of drawings and a seascape in watercolor. And I also said that I played a lot of football in the camp and would not mind seriously playing football at all.

We went out into the yard. In the evening it cleared up. Clouds fled from the sky, leaving rare silvery-white clouds, thin and round as saucers. The sun, hiding behind the heap, splashed the marble of the rock with the last sunset gold. Shadows blurred in the courtyard. After the rain, the coolness was still soft in summer, but for some reason Lidka cringed and became as if very small. She wore a striped dress with a white lace collar. I had never seen her in this dress before. In my opinion, it suits her.

Lidka sat down at the table under the apricot, I sat opposite. Smiling, she hastily twisted the end of the braid tighter, chipped it invisibly and threw the braid behind her back. She was glowing, and it seemed to me that I had not seen her for a thousand years.

— Do you seriously want to play football? Stepankova asked.

- Of course, seriously.

"If you want, I can talk to our coach. He knows everyone, he will tell you who to turn to," Lidka suggested. - You will sign up for the section. We will go to training together.

... A few days later, I signed up for the football section. The coach promised to make me an intelligent attacking midfielder. Soon I was playing in the youth team of our city.

The guys from the team called me solidly - Klim. And one day I overheard a conversation in the locker room.

- Klymenko is a capable guy. He feels the pitch perfectly," the coach said. - And he hits the goal with precision.

- Exactly! Klim has a blow! If Klim lets you in, it's always dangerous," one of the guys supported.

I tried. I liked to play football, and I lost all my free time in the stadium. I barely had enough time for lessons. Sometimes I thought it would be nice to play for our city in a class B team. The adult coach is eyeing us, and it may happen that he will be interested in the young midfielder Eduard Klymenko.

I rarely remembered the "Night Bather" - the canvas was still lying behind the wardrobe. And then the school circle broke up, because Yefimych went to the Crimea for a long time for treatment.

No, I did not quit painting, but temporarily postponed. That's just the way things were. In late autumn, when it rains, I will return to the easel...

However, in our city, a fine, warm autumn lasts for a long time.

Chapter Seven

... In December, a bald, pince-nez, old man appeared in our apartment with a battered student briefcase without a handle. He held him tightly by the corner, like a puppy by the scruff of the neck. The old man undressed and sat down at the table. He smiled affably and did not hide the fact that he had brought news that would undoubtedly please us. "How do you live? What are you complaining about?" he asked, and was in no hurry. He probably wanted to have fun too. I guessed what he was going to say. This has been talked

about in our yard for a year. And here it is, the official news - our house is sentenced to demolition. This will happen in the spring.

Until that day, I had hardly seriously thought that his last hour might come. More than once, curiosity nailed me to an adult fire in some warm kitchen. And again I heard that "upstairs" everything has already been decided, the barracks will be "soon" broken, the tenants are about to have to brush the dust off their suitcases. In those conversations, there was more desire than truth, and I doubted - moving to new apartments seemed unrealizable. Once, wearing a weekend suit with awards, Uncle Kostya went to the executive committee. He returned quickly and said, with his palm in frustration:

- All this - with a pitchfork on the water.

The neighbors were upset, and I chuckled. I lived firmly in the old courtyard on Krasnykh Zor Street, and only, perhaps, dreams carried me far, far away from it. But I also returned to them. A famous artist, a respected person living in a big city, I still returned to my yard. And he was childishly happy with the consciousness of constancy.

And then an old man in pince-nez came to us first. And moving away for a moment from the good news, I suddenly thought with pain that I would never live on Dawns again.

And the joy went further along the yard, opening apartments and souls. In the evening we had gatherings - all the women of the court gathered. They were noisily discussing the news. No one was embarrassed by the fact that the barracks were the first to be scrapped, and the development would begin almost from the middle of the street. Here everyone unanimously decided that our houses are state and there is less trouble with us than with a capricious private trader. They will relocate the barracks to the "mansions" on the outskirts of the city, and be satisfied. A private trader will demand an apartment in the center, and even for his house, and for the farmstead he will break the price. It won't move out, that's all.

"That's right, dear, the center will have to bow out," argued the corpulent, bug-eyed grandmother Vera from the fifth apartment. - And I think to myself: why the hell do we need a center? My hands are already falling off from the firebox, from the damned ashes and from buckets of water.

Older women agreed with her, and those who are younger, grinned defiantly, to say this - the center is not needed. And in general, is there a law, they say, to expel barracks to the outskirts without their consent? You need to find out and do something before it's too late. (But, of course, no one found out anything, much less did anything.)

I sat on a crayon bench near the stove, churning seeds, and listened to the neighbors. We often had gatherings, but they were so crowded for the first time.

Outside the window, the wind was catching, blowing through the shutters: the run was grinding disgustingly, it was cold and blizzard. And here it is warm, cozy from the stove, from the kettle sucking on the scarlet burners, from the sweet tightness of conversations.

I looked at the faces of the women with intense attention, and something new opened up to me in them, equally pink, drunk with unexpected joy. Funny and disturbing. Probably, this happens when you suddenly move away from people close to you for years and become on a par with them in mind, heart, and experience of your life. You will understand their sufferings and hopes with some kind of maturity that has splashed out of childhood, as if you were touching an eternal earthly mystery, sadly feeling all the amazing brevity of this touch.

Here is grandmother Vera - a yellowish-wrinkled face, tightly framed by a braid, the shape and color resembling a withered autumn leaf, tenderly rattles under her breath. She assents to the laconic, pure opposite, grandmother Nyusya, and her eyes are angelically bright.

... I still see those distant smiling faces of Baba Ver, Aunt Zin, Aunt Klav. They have remained unchanged, eternal in the drawing from those last gatherings in our apartment. In that conversation, the tenants easily destroyed their house, which brought them a lot of bad. In general, it seemed inappropriate for them to remember the past, rare happy days. But even then - in an unexpectedly dull look, in a nervous grin, in the bow of thoughtfully lowered lips - a good memory of the harsh years lived together was guessed ...

Having said plenty of hearts, the women drank tea with cherry jam, quietly talked about their worries, husbands and children. They sang long, drearily and dispersed almost at midnight.

Then the joy somehow quickly spent in the hustle and bustle of days, but I noticed that the neighbors began to smile at each other more often. It's just that a holiday lurks in us. A celebration of waiting... And at the end of March, when the fine days ran and the ground turned black everywhere, covered with a dry crust, the barracks boiled in preparations for the move. Iron beds and couches, faded bedside tables and kitchen tables fell from the apartments to the hardened ground. New pungent smells filled the courtyard. Neighbors melted chocolate slices of carpenter's glue in the kitchens: patched wardrobes and cabinets, generously pickled squeaky "bedbugs" with kerosene, covered bedside tables and tables with oil paint. The bustle of the station subsided only at dusk, and then the young smell of the haze of freshly flooded stoves in the kitchens returned to the courtyard - the first spirit of spring for us.

On Sunday afternoon, my mother and I also took up the furniture. I repaired the chairs - I put the backs on glue, and my mother varnished the bookcase. Our furniture could perfectly furnish some office of scrap materials, and I grumbled discontentedly.

– Furniture is like furniture. As if one of our neighbors has a better one," my mother finally broke down and suddenly smiled: "In a new apartment, son, we will definitely buy a good thing.

"What other thing?"

"Dressing table! Mom exclaimed. "But let's move first."

"Dressing table?" Why did you decide the dressing table? I wondered.

And my mother explained. The dressing table, it turns out, makes the apartment very elegant. She once saw such a mirror miracle from a friend. But I was still against the dressing table - we had a pretty decent mirror. Now, if only the radio. I told my mother that all normal homes have receivers and radios.

"In other houses, son, there are also fathers," she replied fragilely and often waved her brush.

"What are you waiting for?" I would have already found someone for myself. Others jump out to get married and live. And you're still beautiful, look at you," I thumped.

"Thank God, I comforted you. Beautiful," my mother laughed, but somehow insincerely, and I thought with fear that she could really follow my advice. What if she already has someone in mind? We still missed someone else's uncle in our apartment.

I'm dumb.

"Well, who dares to compare with your father," said my mother in a joking tone. She, of course, understood what I was thinking. Suddenly, I wanted to hug her, but for the first time I felt embarrassed.

However, in those troublesome days of preparations for the move, she remembered her father more than once, rightly, she thought about him.

In the next rush, the tenants began to clean the cellars and barn. They pulled out smelly tubs full of rags, torn shoes, plywood boxes, leaky basins and pots. Tubs, without bargaining, were sold to people from neighboring houses, and trash, helping each other, loaded on a cart, noisily negotiated with the coachman about an extra walk and furtively thrust crumpled rubles into his hardened palms. Getting rid of worthless things, impregnated with military and post-war need, the tenants seemed to expel poverty. A new life was about to be opened, and they eagerly hurried this new life, which they could not

imagine without lasting peace, without the full joy of comfortable family unity, without prosperity. They had the right to...

"N-but! Let's go, devil," the coachman shouts, waving the reins, and the cart, loaded with rubbish, rattling from behind with a crushed cauldron, rolls from the yard. Sighing, the tenants look after. And I see how helplessly their hands fall and their faces freeze in an expression of half-annoyance, half-sadness.

Of course, it's not a pity for the tarpaulin leaky boots or that patched-patched miner over there that someone wore in our yard. Or maybe it's the tarpaulin of Nyusin's grandmother's son, who went missing at the very end of the war, or the husband of Aunt Nastya, a red underground worker, thrown by the Nazis into the pit of the mine before her eyes. And now, looking after the cart rolling from the yard, Aunt Nastya saw in it, in this tarpaulin, him, the only one, alive and unharmed.

Neighbors close the sheds, talking sluggishly, disperse to apartments, kitchens, and the yard suddenly seems to me somehow shallow, empty, boring ...

And in mid-April we are moving. We load cars. Lidka and I are dragging a heavy, forged-cornered chest and laughing. Who needs this coffin in a new home? And grandmother Vera, frowning, shouts at us, frivolously, of course, you don't understand anything in life. With this chest she got married - it contained her dowry. Granny tries to help us and only interferes. The men take away the chest from the car and laugh too. The old woman, awake, commands them, and they erect a monument to her youth in the most honorable place near the cabin.

We wear large and small knots for a long time, various trifles.

Then the tenants sit on the thresholds, fall silent, as before a long journey. Women brush away a tear and kiss. And Lidka and I are doing the master's rounds.

We are sitting on the windowsill in an empty apartment, where the doors are wide open and the April breeze brings a faint smell of smoke. We talk - the voices are booming, strangers.

- I heard, Edik, a house will be built on this place and railway workers will live in it.

- I heard, in a four-story building.

- And we have an apartment on the sunny side. I'll have my own room now," says Lidka, but not at all happy.

The Stepankovs received a warrant for a three-room section, and she had already informed me that Lidka would have her own room. One day we went to see the house in which they were given an apartment on the third floor.

I'm holding Lidka's hand. She has hot palms. Then I let go of my hand and put my hand on her shoulder. And it seems to me that Lidka is slouching, maybe she is uncomfortable under my hand? I feel sorry for her. I don't know why I felt sorry for her at that moment. I guess I was saying goodbye to a friend. And even if it was a girl, I had the right to hug her as a friend. And nothing follows from this.

"You're going to come to me to listen to records. I have good records," she whispers.

Why did we decide that we were breaking up? Everything will be as before. Of course, I will come to her every day to listen to records. And she came to me to look at my paintings.

... Lidka and I moved to different areas quite far from each other. I will live on the street with the terrible name of Travel. It has tall houses and almost no huts and master's front gardens. But for some reason, no one plays football on fresh smooth asphalt, and in the evenings it is quiet, deserted.

A quiet life awaited me on the "track" street.

In my entrance on the first floor settled the old man Surin. And soon Yakov Ivanovich's wooden carpenter's box flashed in the new apartments - someone had to put an English lock or fit the balcony door.

At one time I often met him on the platform near my door - the old man was making mezzanines for his neighbors, sawing boards on a stool.

He greeted me gently, suddenly revealing a strange friendliness (in recent years, in the old courtyard, Surin almost did not notice us - children, only a drunk scolded).

"Oh, the carpenters, the workers, the huts were built, and the floorboards are walking, there are cracks under the baseboards, like a grandmother's teeth," he said in his hearts, lisping and deaf from the voice that interfered with the mouthpiece. - They won't sew boards exactly ...

Here Surin, famously putting a bar to his right eye, silently looked at its surface for a second or two, aiming accurately with a gun. No, the pink, fresh face of the old man in small mother-of-pearl eggs of sweat did not express displeasure at all. And in the complaint against the would-be builders, there was no annoyance, but rather a proud sense of their superiority.

I listened to him absent-mindedly, because again I was in a hurry somewhere - in the spring I always have a lot to do.

In the new apartment, my mother gave me a room. First of all, I put an easel at the window. I was determined to go back to The Night Bather.

* * *

Our barrack house was demolished in May, three weeks after moving to new apartments. By this time, almost all the former tenants celebrated housewarming. They were noisy and hospitable. And grandmother Vera and Aunt Klava - with songs and dances to the accordion. Of course, neither money nor affection was spared.

In short, the holidays were over, the outfits returned to the mothball-smelling chiffoniers, and we were no longer insanely delighted with the fabulous murmur of water in the bathroom. Little by little, I began to get used to the place, to the new neighbors, but, returning, for example, from the cinema, I still strayed into the same path and suddenly found myself in the Dawns. And dreams were about the old courtyard, and I woke up with a strange anxiety and

could not sleep for a long time. It seemed to me that I was visiting here, temporarily, and the real life was there and only there - on Krasnykh Zor Street. And I remembered her with sweetness and sadness. I just didn't know yet that this was only the beginning of the pain, that it would disturb my dreams more than once. And I will wake up, as then, with the happy feeling of returning, which will not be.

Every day, along the same path-path along Krasnykh Zor Street, I go to school and see how our barracks melt. The roof had already been removed from it, it had been cut bald, the ceiling had been dismantled, and in the empty eye sockets of the windows and doorways the walls were envied in some chilly blueness.

And today, an old excavator with a tracked shoe polished to a nickel gloss appeared near the yard. He dropped the toothy bucket against the wall, as if frozen in the lowest bow. And I decided to go to the Stepankovs.

Lidka pored over algebra. At the end of the year, the three always argued with the four. Lidka greeted me with joy, I must save her from mathematical torment, as happened in the old courtyard.

- Edka, how are you by the way. You're just smart. "Lidka handed me an open algebra textbook and poked her finger into it. "I've dried up here.

She sat me down at the table and showed me drafts of the solutions. Lidka's fingers are stained with ink, and she is all kind of torn.

"Well, what do you say to that?"

"I'm certainly not a god. Lidok, let's try.

"Edik, please don't imagine, huh?" If I have a triple in a year, there will be no training camps," Lidka said and sighed. - And there the zone will be played.

Lidka sits down next to me, and I ask her not to disturb me yet. I have to figure it out.

The tasks fascinate me. I explain to Stepankova, and we argue hard, almost quarrel. Lidka with a smart look tries to argue the obvious stupidity and only gets angry.

And outside the window, the May twilight hardens, the city lights up. Lidka turns on the table lamp, and her face from the lampshade turns lilac. Lidkin's mother brings cups of dried fruit compote and crispy homemade biscuits.

We drink compote and talk about various trifles, and then I remember that tomorrow our house will be broken, that is, the walls will be broken. I'm talking about this to Lidka, and she really wants to look at it one last time. She hadn't been to Dawns for a long time. We agree to meet in the morning before school on our street, say goodbye to the old house and meet the next day.

The morning was sunny, wide open to a good day. In the master's front gardens it is troublesome, discordant - cherry blossoms bloom there, and the spirit from them is sticky, crazy. In some places, roosters bawl for an encore. But the sounds have long been awakened, strengthened.

In the old courtyard, workers jostle like a master. They loudly talk about how to disassemble the walls more conveniently and quickly. For them, there is no barracks in which we lived, but there is a thick masonry, its power surprises, involuntarily attracts coarse hands. So, they say, there is - armor!

Dump trucks drive up to the yard one by one, and now the excavator lifts up the bucket, crawls away from the house, is made ...

That's all. The flag is lowered, the crew has left the ship, water rushes into the open kingstons, greedily fills the holds. Another moment - and in the depths of the sea there will be deck structures: the wheelhouse, an empty captain's bridge ...

The first blow of the bucket falls on the upper part of the façade wall, in the very place above the window, where until recently hung the first picture I painted - a seascape with a lighthouse. And I can hear my heart - a thin, needle-like pain piercing my chest. In the same way, my heart ached when my father left us. And suddenly I

clearly see him - there, in the whitish plaster haze, in the back of the room. I see his heavy, after many days of insomnia and incessant smoking guilty face, some kind of crushed, senile figure. That's how he was on that last day in our house. And maybe only now, for the first time in years, I think of him not with resentment, but with sadness.

From the next blow, the wall stupidly collapses, and the house seems to settle. Bonfires of ash-orange dust flare up in the stone pores, connecting, tightly curtain the brownish crumb and fall into the courtyard in clubs.

"Edik, look, Surin," Lidka shouts.

He walks from the yard from his former apartment with his usual broad, shaky gait, focused, looking very straight in front of him. That's amazing. Just a few meters away, the house from which he and his son went to war is collapsing, and the old man walks to himself as if nothing had happened.

The old man is wearing a black couple. This is his weekend suit with the Order of the Red Star on the lapel of his jacket. I remember Surin well in it during the holidays. Why did he wear a suit? It's hot in it, and in general the old man does not give the impression of an elegant person, at least today.

He walks through the yard quite quickly, but somehow swampy, probably, thick reddish dust, similar to smoke, creates such an illusion.

And now Surin is close. Seeing us, his face, constrained by stubborn thought, comes to life with surprise and joy. He stops and immediately in the left, wildly twisted eye, the blue-yellow eyelid convulsively pushes a large tear. The old man shakes his head abruptly, with resentment, and, muttering: "Ehma", turns and walks away ...

Part Two

Lida

Chapter Eight

In May, our city gets thunderstorms with greedy showers, but the southern winds already carry dry summer heat, and on fine sunny days a pinkish haze of heat curls over the waste heaps. Chestnut trees bloom together on the streets. In the soft suede of hanging, like poodle ears, leaves there are ochre-white bouquets. A delicate, drowsy aroma emanates from them, and you, engulfed in it, gently soar above the ground.

In May, Lidka and I see each other often. I wanted, as before in the old courtyard, to meet her every day. Perhaps it was the inertia of a past life. How often do we try to preserve what we can't. Inertia will end one day, but have I thought about it?

We go to the cinema, to the park, to school evenings, where boys take care of Lidka, and I also take care of someone. And then, when I escort her home, she admits to me that she has been scheduled for a date again. Lidka laughs, and I advise her to go on a date.

"I'll think about it," she replies, and I suddenly find myself uncomfortable hearing this.

And sometimes we play records at her house. Lidka has great records! She brings them from different cities where she attends competitions. I suddenly discovered that I had a keen love for music. And I also longed to learn how to dance waltz and tango. Especially the waltz, so as not to fool around in a crowd of boys who do not know how to dance, and, standing in the rear, unsuccessfully sharpen.

And Lidka teaches me to dance by all the rules. But classes were still rare - parents interfere. If they are at home, we sit decorously at

the table, solve math problems, and the music from the radio sounds quietly and quietly. And when they leave, the volume turns on almost to failure, and Lidka immediately turns into a strict teacher.

"Please straighten up," she commands. "Do you know who you look like?" On a boxer who went into deaf defense.

- Lidka, how do you know everything?

"I know. And you keep quiet. Well, you're slouching again. Don't you understand the Russian language? To straighten up means to become even.

"Okay, Lid, I'll try." I'm capable.

"That's right. That's better. Lidka looks at me appraisally and takes me by the hand. "Now, please relax, I'll drive you."

"Like a heifer on a string, huh?"

"If you want...

We make the first broad movement, then again and again ...

I wondered where my lightness had gone. The ease with which I burst into the opponent's penalty area and hit the goal from the summer.

In dance, I become tight, kind of rubbery. I conscientiously follow Lidka, but at some point, not having mastered the rhythm, I go astray, step on my feet. And although Lidka is courageously attached, I suddenly lose interest in dance.

"Look, Edik, it's simple. Time... two... Three, once... two... three," Lidka whirls alone.

That's amazing. Where do girls get such dancing abilities? Maybe it's an instinct? I have never met a girl who did not know how to dance.

And sometimes I succeeded. And then there was nothing around but music and movement. The room seemed like a huge shaft, in which only we were spinning - me and Lidka. I drew her very close to me, so that Lidkin's hair touched my cheek. My hair smelled of Lily of the Valley cologne, and I was seized with a vague languishing feeling. I wanted to ask Lidka about something, just so that I could hear her voice. But I didn't dare. She made no remarks,

and I took her silence as gratitude. But after such a dance, Lidka became absent-minded.

She went to the radio and, having taken off the record, searched for a new one for a long time, and a tense silence hung in the room, in which I could not find a place for myself and was completely lost. Lidka stood half-sideways to me, and I could see the profile of her pensive face, covered with a fresh scarlet blush, a black heavy braid on her chest. I think she was looking at each record too closely, and I wanted to come over, touch her shoulder and say quietly, "Hey, Lida." And maybe look into her eyes. But the next moment the room is filled with music again, and we persist in making movements, but something is already gone.

* * *

One day I came to Lidka with Katrish. Seryozhka has long wanted to see the three-room apartment of the Stepankovs. Perhaps his father is diligently working on such an apartment. (It was simply unbearable for Katrish to see Rimka, Vesukhina and other "guests" every hour.) A separate apartment in which Seryozhka will get a room and arrange a radio workshop in it, while for him from the realm of fantasy.

Katrish silently walked around all the rooms of the Stepankovs, looked into the bathroom, and in the toilet for something he let the water out of the tank. We followed him. Lidka frowned.

In the living room, Seryozhka lounged on the sofa in a masterly way and said sourly:

"Nothing, shack. You can live.

Then he turned on the radio, turned the tuning knob, clicked the band switch, telling us something from the history of domestic radio, about different frequencies and hertz there, so persistently that we did not believe him and were about to object. No, Lidka and I had no doubt that Seryozhka was a top-class specialist in the radio business, it was not for nothing that he assembled an

ultra-shortwave transmitter and was already his own boyfriend in the DOSAAF radio club. We just looked at each other awkwardly. Lidka's cheeks burned, his eyebrows quivered and looked kind of tired.

Katrish casually patted the side of the radio and said,

- Rubbish car. The amplifier is weak. Three watts. Fact. And our receiver is better, Mir.

"I, boys, will go and make tea," said Lidka, looking at Seryoga not very friendly.

- Drive teas. Are there cakes? Katrish asked suddenly.

"There are no cakes," Lidka was taken aback. - There is cherry jam. Oh guys, you probably want to eat?

"No, I don't want to," I almost shouted. "Nothing, Lida, I don't want to!"

"If you don't want to, don't," Katrish said calmly. "No one forcibly puts it in your mouth." But I didn't have lunch ...

I almost collapsed on the floor in shame. "The starving idiot ... Dystrophic unfortunate," I cursed Seryozhka. You have to behave like this in someone else's apartment! Is this the first case? No matter how it is. It already infuriates me from its simplicity.

Lidka and I drank tea and listened to music, and Katrish ate cutlets with mashed potatoes, every now and then peppered them and salted them - it was disgusting to watch.

We talk about our future. Actually, Katrish spoke. He believed that the artist is a so-so, frivolous profession, and it would be better for me if I played football in class "B" for our city, and then moved to coaches. And Seryozhka also advised me to go to a technical university, because I cut in mathematics. He did not admit the idea that I could turn out to be a real artist.

- Do you remember Yefimych's paintings? Seryozhka asked suddenly.

"Suppose," I grinned. I wish I could remember Yefimych's paintings! I knew almost all of them.

"Strength! Iron-made. So what?

"And really, so what?" Lidka smiled. She probably decided that it was easier to endure Katrish with a smile.

"Never mind. It is necessary to crow. Salnikov's paintings do not go further than our city. They are felled somewhere and not exposed. He himself told us that it was difficult to break through. Now do you know how much they draw?

- Efimich meant something else. "Hard work and search," I said, but not as assertively as Seryozhka. His words always sounded weighty and solid. And from the fact that I could not answer him as impressively, resentment accumulated in my soul.

- Hard work and search? Nonsense. Father says that our Salnikov has no connections, so he will forever be a loser. Without connections, you can't argue far. And then with his biography he came out. And this is a serious fact, paramount, understood?

- And what does he have with his biography? What do you suspect him of? I snapped.

- I personally do nothing. Katrish raised his hands foolishly. "Calm down. Don't you still know? Well, yes, of course, I forgot, you live in our forest.

"Well, speak, say, why are you pulling your veins," I demanded rudely.

"And really, Seryozha, please explain," Lida asked.

"Well, if you please. This Salnikov of yours surrendered to the Germans. Historical fact. And after the war, he was pushed into the camps for re-education. Northward. There he earned tuberculosis.

"You're all lying!" "He got sick with his lungs in Belarus in the rotten swamps.

- This still needs to be proven. And I have reliable information," Kat said disarmingly calmly. "Why are you nervous, man! He was normally re-educated. He now has a patriotic upsurge in creativity. Maybe, after all, he will be lucky someday. Although it is unlikely. Yefimych has a family of three children. Fact? And he himself is sick, also a fact. If he hadn't hacked, it would have been a pipe. Why did Efimich leave our school for the cinema on posters? Yes, because

they pay more there. You, Edka, are painting your own ... "Bather" and you think that the picture will then be snatched from your hands, in the Tretyakov Gallery next to Repin, - Katrish unexpectedly whipped me through the sore spot. - Hahanki. And so they put it up. Open your pocket wider.

I'd love to hit Katrisha. Why did he remember the "Bather" under Lidka? I entrusted him, as a friend, with Lidka and me. What will Lidka think of me? Traitor! Yes, I told him that I want to play football in class "B", but this does not mean that I renounce my dream. Suppose, I haven't touched "The Night Bather" for a long time, but I'll finish the picture anyway and take up another one for sure. We'll see if I'll become a real artist or not.

"Don't be offended, man, but I've seen something like this somewhere. Maybe Kuindzhi's?

"Uh-huh. At Kuindzhi. Connoisseur," I objected, already hating Sergei. What does Kuindzhi have to do with it!

"And you thought, man, who needs your bather in our time?" People are building spacecraft, the world is bursting with scientific discoveries, a fact. And you're painting some girl.

"You're just jealous of Edik, Kat!" Lidka said suddenly, but so sharply, as if she had let go of Seryozhka's back of the head. Katrish's face took on a kind of duck expression, the glasses slid to the tip of his nose. He had never heard Lidka call him Kat. - Listen to you, so people don't need anything except science. And what about art, poetry?

- Poems are another matter. They have nothing to do with our conversation.

- They have, they have. "The Bather" may be poetry, lyrics. Edik has talent, got it? Are you going to paint a picture? No. And I won't draw. It is not given to you and me, Seryozhka," Lidka said and was worried, red spots appeared on her cheeks. - You can teach how to assemble receivers ...

"Don't tell me," Katrish smirked, and I flashed vindictively: "What, did you eat?!"

- You can, you can, Seryozha, but you can't draw. I believe that Edik will make a real artist.

Katrish took a sip from a cup of tea that had already cooled.

- Yes, I don't mind. He patted me on the shoulder indulgently. - Our Klimenko will also pull on the artist. He has a wide neck, a well-known fact.

"Pour some more tea?" Lidka asked me. I refused what kind of tea it was, and Katrish pushed his cup to her.

He took a full spoonful of jam, swallowed it, and said with an important look:

"And I'll go to the factory." I will work for a year or two and enter the radio engineering department. The case is resolved. I will design equipment for satellites. With a diploma in radio engineering, you will not be lost.

"Oh, boys, we still have two years to go to school. For example, I don't know what I want yet. Sometimes I want to be a teacher," Lidka said.

- Physical education? Katrish asked, and for some reason he laughed a little bit.

"No, why?" Or do you think, since I go in for sports, it means only physical education. Or maybe mathematicians or physicists. Although no, mathematics is difficult for me.

- Physics can still be taught. And teach math? There was a desire to rattle the nerves, - Katrish reasoned in a completely masterly way.

"Booby, who do you mean?" - I sneered, hinting to Seryozhka that he was a weakling in mathematics, but he pretended not to understand the question. Sprang.

"Let's dance, or something."

He changed the record, turned up the volume and shook near the receiver. He flew up to Lidka, bowed his head ceremonially.

"May I invite you?"

I sat on the couch, staring blankly at them, or rather, at the pole-shaped scarecrow in green short pipe pants, in a plaid shirt at the end, and as if I had seen Katrish for the first time. Stilyaga

famously wielded his arms and legs. They danced the foxtrot and ran around the room like crazy. Katrish completely exhausted Lidka with his jumps and turns. I saw Lidka's grinning face, Seryoga's smug face, he probably thought he was irresistible. Katrish shook his head and muttered, repeating the melody, sliding his absent-minded gaze over his glasses. But sometimes our eyes met, and he winked at me, saying, "Learn, man, while I'm alive." Didn't Katrish realize how stupid and ridiculous he was?

Either from the screaming music, or from all this stupidity, my head ached before my eyes, and I thought: "Why am I coming here?" Everything here was new to me: well-groomed, shining with fresh paint rooms, new furniture, the view outside the window. Yes, new and alien. Even Lidka, who was now explaining something to this cheerful scoundrel, also suddenly seemed like a stranger to me. I wanted to immediately go to Krasnykh Zor Street and meet the old Lidka, my faithful comrade, in the old courtyard.

I got up and walked quickly to the exit. He slammed the door. On the stairwell of the second floor, Katrish caught up with me.

"Plague, where did you go?"

- There are cases. - Of course, I didn't have any urgent matters. But I was in a hurry. I wanted Katrish to fall behind, so I turned the corner closest to Lidkin's house. "I'm here, got it?"

I told him rudely to wash his face, but Seryozhka trailed after him - water from him like a goose.

"Good girl," he said. "Exactly, man?" You know, I didn't pay attention to Stepankova before. Doesn't she have a beautiful figure?

I didn't answer.

We wandered along a deserted alley somewhere on the outskirts of the city. In the pre-evening hour, a quiet, clear sky hung above us. Only far ahead, two pinkish clouds froze near the bluish horizon - hurried strokes, like a brush test.

Katrish praised Lidka over and over again. He smirked and saliva gathered at the corners of his mouth.

I stubbornly remained silent.

- Listen, man, in my opinion, Stepankova is following you. How did she shave me off about your talent?! Or do you have everything in openwork, and you feint? He slapped his forehead. "A fool, of course, in openwork! - And, giggling ugly, he sang: - Plush sofas ...

"What did you say, huh?!" - I blocked Seryozhka's way. I was shaking. "What are you thinking, bastard?..

"Never mind, Ed, I'm so... just," Katrish snapped. "Never mind, Ed.

I poked my fist into my face gray with fear, strained:
"And I'm not a man for you, remember ...

* * *

I have always felt sorry for and defended Seryozhka. He was frail and helpless, and boys do not tolerate weaklings. But Seryozhka had a striking nose for someone's superiority and authority, even enjoyed respect from strong guys. The earring has always cleverly eluded danger. I guessed that he was surreptitiously cheating, playing around and ingratiating, like all cowards, but this did not concern me, and I was calm. I trusted him with all my secrets, accepted his rant without objection. Katrish was able to provide advice and sympathy when I had a hard time. And the dexterous obedience with which Katrish fulfilled my requests flattered me very much. How could I not understand that from the third grade, from the first day when I stood up for him, I was friends with an obsequious footman who secretly sharpened his teeth ?!

But what does Lidka have to do with it? I think I stood up for her? Wouldn't I stand up for someone else's, a girl I don't know?! However, I slammed the door in her apartment and left Lidka with this rascal ...

I was walking along Krasnykh Zor Street. I didn't notice how I ended up on my home street.

Loaded cars rolled towards us, and the bluish dust from them quickly melted into the pale pink colors of the burning day.

I walked past the long high fence that surrounded the piles of rubble, and thought about the conversation in Lidkin's apartment. Katrish's reproach about the need for my picture now did not go out of my head - some cruel truth lurked in it.

And suddenly I felt that I was empty - hit, and a booming sound would bounce off me, like a drum. "Yes, I won't be able to write my Bather. Probably, I will not be able to write anything, - I thought lost. - How much time I almost do not touch the picture and generally draw very little. I have a lot of different things to do. A lot. No, you can't do that."

I added a step - now I will come home and get seriously to work ... And the path to my new home seemed so infinitely long to me.

At home, I fixed a picture on an easel, took out paints and brushes. I was about to apply the first stroke and suddenly lowered the brush. Or maybe Kat is right, and someone has already painted such a picture?

"Boris Efimovich! He, only he can tell me the whole truth about the picture, "I happily remembered the teacher and the next minute I was already packing the canvas.

I soon got to the village to Efimich by bus.

The village closed the city limits, and behind the last huts, behind the parade of pyramidal poplars near the dusty tract, a malachite steppe expanse opened.

I stepped on the ground and, taking a sip of the smell of steppe herbs like spring water, quickly walked along a familiar alley. And at the teacher's house, I felt insecure.

I haven't been to Yefimych, probably, since six months, since he returned from the Crimea. And immediately after the Crimea, he left our school. Then I met him more than once, and Boris Efimovich always invited him to his place. I promised that I would definitely come in, but there was a lot of things to do, and I put it off. And then there's the move. Of course, Yefimych does not need my excuses, and he, indeed, will not ask about anything, however, he is ashamed,

damn ashamed. It turns out that I came to him only when I needed to. It's just shameless not to inquire about your teacher's health.

A huge barn lock hung on the door of Yefimych's apartment. On an obliquely nailed plywood plate was written: "Artel warehouse."

"What kind of "artel warehouse" is this, I did not understand. And suddenly, guessing, I was delighted. Yefimych still got a new apartment. It is a pity, of course, that I will not meet him today. Tomorrow I will go to his work. It's great that the teacher got an apartment.

I stepped away from the door and saw an old lady coming down the wooden stairs with a dirty garbage bucket in her hand. She watched me fearfully.

- Hello, grandma. And where do the Salnikovs live now? I asked loudly.

"The Salnikovs?" Uh, baby, far away from the Salnikovs. Go ahead, it's been two months since we moved out. In this... Simferopol. But not in the city, but somewhere nearby. At sea. There is still a sanatorium. Oh, baby, I forgot. "The old lady came down and was now standing in front of me in a gray faded dress with long wide sleeves. She was thin, wrinkled, a huge comb stuck out ridiculously on her tiny gray head. In the mica, bird-like eyes, grief rested firmly, slightly, only a little, disturbed by curiosity. - Boris is a sick man, and there is a useful climate for him. And the work was given to him, child, in a sanatorium, and a hut for the family. The sudden chagrin in her eyes was blurred by a quiet, good smile. - He found a friend there from the war. So he helped the Salnikovs. He came here, this military friend. Troubled, he was busy with everything, he was busy. We, child, have people. Are you too late? There were a lot of guys here, they saw them off, they loaded their belongings.

"Yes, I'm late, Grandma. Goodbye," I said, and walked quickly. I looked around - the old woman was still in the same position and, it seemed, looked with reproach.

"Come, baby, for the address." My daughter has it written somewhere. My daughter is gone," she said.

"Yefimych is gone forever. And I just heard about it today. How so?" - I thought bitterly. Well, yes, of course, he did not inform me of his decision. And who am I, exactly? Why am I better than the rest of his students? But they knew that Yefimych was leaving, they knew the day and the hour. And I don't. They shook the teacher's hand and, probably, said something very warm to him, as a loved one. The teacher will always remember them. Only I didn't say anything to him and didn't shake hands.

And suddenly a terrible thought burned: "The teacher is sick, hopelessly ill, and I will never see him again..."

I stopped, "Lord, what am I thinking?" No, no... He will be cured there, in the south. I'll meet him again. Sure. One day I will go to the sea, and we will meet. After all, I am a marine painter, and the teacher now lives by the sea. How wonderful everything is."

I didn't wait for the bus and walked home. I thought about Yefimych and vividly imagined a distant meeting of two artists years later. There will be the same quiet May evening, a crimson strip of sunset over the sea and the rustle of the waves.

Yes, I imagined this meeting very well. I was captivated by it, like a spring leaf must be a warm wind. But the soul was already drawn to another, as yet unknown to me, and with some sixth sense I understood that none of this would ever happen. That the threshold behind my back will be erased, fading, and only my soul will occasionally return to it from its new distances, but always, however, cunningly and sincerely, forgiving and repenting ...

Suddenly, an old bus slowed down nearby. With a rattle, the door opened, and I saw old Surin.

"Are you going far away, sused?" Come, on our way," he shouted and called: "Come on, come here.

I reluctantly stepped into the stuffy, gasoline-smelling interior - after all, the old man ruined good thoughts.

The bus was carrying miners from their shift. Many had hair that was still damp after the bath, and unwashed eyelashes were brightly blackened.

Surin collapsed in the first seat, blocking a narrow passage with a wooden prosthesis.

"Klymenok, Edka, my sused," commented the old man. He pointed to an empty seat opposite and invited. "Sit down, Klymenok, there is no truth in your feet.

I sat down, put the stretcher on my knees.

- yes, I look - no way Anna's son. Why did you get to Frunze? We seem to be getting out of business. The guys departed at the mine. And I guarded mine in the forest. Where are you so so good from? Surin asked, but glancing past me. And then I realized - he was looking at the picture. The canvas of the package turned away - the bather's hands and part of the sea were visible.

I wrapped the canvas. The old man asked disappointedly:

"Did you paint yourself?"

"I did," I corrected.

Surin shook his curly head, grunted.

"Look at you, scribbler. So show us at once.

"True, lad. Let me take a look. It seems that the sea is there with you," a broad-faced miner leaned out from behind him, with a wedge of copper bangs on his forehead. "Don't be stingy..."

Hesitating, I untied the knot of the ribbon, freed the canvas. One of the miners said to the driver:

- Volodya, stop, let's beat it.

The miners reached for the picture, spoke at once:

- Eka divchina?! Good!

"Well done, lad. The sea is exactly.

- Artist! By God, an artist.

"And I've never been to the sea ...

"It's warm there. On the shore of a palm tree...

The picture was picked up, transferred to the depths of the cabin. Praise poured in from there. Surin shouted affectionately at the miners.

"It's easier, lads. Don't paw. "Then he patted me on the shoulder. He winked slyly. "Let them know." That's who we are.

Honestly, I was especially pleased now with the praise of these strangers, random people. However, the alarm did not go away. The picture was almost ready - there were a few strokes left. And suddenly it seemed that this picture belongs not to me, but to someone else. Someone else writes it. "Or maybe this already exists?" - I again returned to the painful question. What a pity that Efimich is not around ...

But why not around? This does not mean anything that Yefimych lives far away from me. Today I will write him a letter, tell him about the idea of "The Night Bather" and send sketches. Of course I will. The Master will receive my letter and answer me, and our connection will never, ever be broken again.

At home, locking myself in my room, I sent a long letter to Boris Efimovich, conveyed the conversation in Lidkin's apartment. Of course, I did not forget about the doubts that Seryozhka Katrisha had about my picture, but gradually the question that worried me omitted. Is it possible that everything that Seryozhka told about the teacher is true?! No, it doesn't. More on that later... Sometime... Adults...

In the dead of night, I finished the sketches. I drew a lot of them, but for the teacher I chose only two - successful, in my opinion. And the next day I again went to the old apartment of the Salnikovs, found out the address and sent a thick envelope ...

Chapter Nine

In the summer, a gypsy tinsmith disappeared. He walked our streets and measured the time.

"I'm fixing it... about... Dra... Astryuli.

And then he disappeared. But life in our city without him, of course, did not become chaotic. And yet, when you stop meeting the person you saw every day, year after year, something happens. I think we will miss him. But that's not the point...

In the summer, I quit playing football and started smoking. Maybe I would have gone to training, but the coach has changed. The new coach said that my technique and head play were rather weak. It was very disappointing. After all, before this conversation, we played a test game, and I scored a goal. And instead of praise, I heard about myself that he was a bad football player. I broke out, rudely objected to the coach and left. Then he called me to the team, but I didn't want to change my mind.

In August, Lidka came from the training camp. At the competitions, she fulfilled the standard of a candidate for master of sports. She had a lot of different news, but she didn't talk very willingly, at least not in the same way as before. She made some strange pauses and looked at me with sad irony. And once, for some reason, she impulsively took my hand, but immediately let go and laughed unwell, unnaturally.

We sat at her house, listened to records, and then went outside. It was evening, and in the city with the first damp coolness it smelled of baked apples. I told her that I had quit playing football, explained in some detail the reason for this decision, hoping that Lidka would support me - after all, I was very worried about my departure from the team.

"Well, stupid," Lidka replied sharply. "You need it." The coach should be listened to, not objected, and even more so not to make stupid decisions.

"Lidoc, you've always been very smart," I said nervously.

- Edka, that's how you always are. You're wrong, right? Lidka stopped and turned to me. "Look me in the eye and say, 'Yes, I'm wrong. I'll get better'"

"I won't say that.

- You are very stubborn, Klymenko.

"As it is...

And we quarreled.

... In the ninth grade, I went to another school.

* * *

"Wait, Klimenko," Galtseva called out. "I completely forgot. Can you stay after school today?

- Let's say. - Of course, I can stay after school, especially if Angelina Galtseva herself offers it to me. I will gladly stay.

Yes, at the new school I fell in love with a girl with a beautiful name. I was sure I had fallen in love with her forever. With what impatience I walked to school!

Once, in a literature class, I drew a portrait of her with a pencil. It was a caricature. I ridiculously aged Angelina by thirty years. If I had portrayed her as beautiful, she would have immediately understood what was going on. In my opinion, a girl should not know that a boy is in love with her, otherwise she will begin to twist ropes out of him. Let him guess. I was pleased with the caricature, I sent it with the postscript "A. G. from E. K.". At recess, Galtseva whispered: "Thank you" ...

- Today is a meeting of the Komsomol committee of the school. We invite you. Don't worry, it's too early to sand you. It's just that you're good at drawing, and we need a serious artist.

Bravo! I am a serious artist. Did one pencil cartoon reveal my abilities to her?

There was a hell of a lot of work at the club. I come to the club in the evening after class. In the evening, I am more comfortable and more likely to stay with Gela alone.

We work in a large room that recently housed a brass band. The bitter smell of brass copper has not yet had time to disappear from it.

I design the stands, and Galtseva digs into newspapers and magazines, writes out everything you need from them on separate sheets. Then he coordinates the text with someone from the authorities or does not coordinate.

Our theme is the heroic path of the Komsomol. A lot of interesting things. Geli's head is spinning from the abundance of information.

"Believe me, I don't understand anything anymore. It's hard to single out someone," Galtseva laments and rubs her temples with her fingers. - Everyone has their own work and their own feat. Each is interesting in its own way. There are the military, and geologists, and builders, and virgin lands ...

"And our fellow miners," I suggest, looking at the piles of old yellowed city newspapers.

- And ours must not be forgotten. And there is not enough space for everyone ...

Of course, there are many heroes in our country - young people.

And I want to tell you about everyone. Short, succinct, catchy. Honestly, it's difficult.

Gel reads the information aloud. And now I find out that the Komsomol virgin lands of Akmolinsk have already begun to prepare for the first five-year anniversary. Akmolinsk... Akmolinsk... It's very far away from us. The dot on the map is the city of virgin lands. As legendary as Komsomolsk-on-Amur. How great is our Motherland! Akmolinsk... There are also schools and guys like us, perhaps, are preparing their own club for high school students. In the large former room of the brass band, a boy and a girl decorate stands. It's nice to think about it.

- Edik, do you like Asadov's poems? Gelya asks, but grinning slyly. I understand her. She is sure that I have not read the poems of Eduard Asadov. She's waiting. But how can you not love Asadov's poems? I often listen to them on the radio. This is our poet!

I throw a brush into the jar. Meaningfully, silently, I take two steps to the side and loudly, of course, soldering, I say:

- Asadov. Poems about a red dog. The namesake reads. That's me, that is.

The owner stroked his hand

Shaggy red back:

"Goodbye, brother. Though I'm sorry, I won't hide,
But still, I'll leave you..."

And so I read to the end. The reciter, frankly, is no good for me, but that's not the point. Gelya claps her hands. Thank God, she was convinced that Klymenko was familiar with the poetry of Eduard Asadov. She says:

- You are growing, Klymenko, in my eyes. There are no words. "She wrings her hands, and a slight blush covers her face. "But I'll still read other poems to you, okay?" True, you took the initiative away from me, but I really want to read poetry. Just please don't look at me point-blank, otherwise I'll go astray. "And Gelya begins with a feeling..."

She reads poems about love. Asadov's wonderful lyrics, and I am seized with great excitement, and it does not go away for a long time ... In my opinion, all days consist of this excitement. And when it is, when it is in you and next to you, it is very good to live in the world.

And sometimes we run away from the club to the movies. We just get very tired and run away to the cinema for the last session. The lights go out in the hall, and I take Gelin's hot fist in my palm and do not let go until the end of the film ...

Now every evening I accompanied Angelina home, and we chatted about school, teachers and lessons, class tricks. But more often than not, it's about sports, a lot about sports, and here's the thing.

Of all the sports, Angelina recognized only rhythmic gymnastics, although she herself did not do it. A year ago, she graduated from music school in piano and often replaced her mother, who accompanied the gymnasts. Every time after such a lesson, Gelya brought me fresh news: "Emma Glazkova will go to Russia," or "A coach from the region came. He liked our girls, but he does not agree with Anna Sergeevna's methodology. If any of her gymnast friends succeeded in competitions, Gelya was so happy, her eyes sparkled so madly, happily, as if it were her difficult victory. And she always

painfully experienced the failures of her friends, was boring, taciturn.

Gelya was indifferent to football. That she was my stories about the brilliant passes to the gates of the best strikers of the local team, about the masterful crosses of the right edge of Viktor Kozin, who once also lived on Krasnykh Zor Street not far from me, which I was quite proud of. About the "goalkeeper-cat" Stepa Krivoshapko, who knew how to tightly take the "nine". Somewhere in a quiet, deserted street, I seemed to accidentally pry off a tin can with my toe and hit the nearest gateway. I desperately challenged Gelya to argue, proving that football is higher than any other sports, gymnastics, for example, because it requires not only strength, agility and skill, but also intelligence. Angelina was silent. "What is she thinking? About the girls from the gymnastics section? About your music? However, what difference does it make what she can dream of, the main thing is that she doesn't care about football, "I was annoyed and once again I promised myself not to talk to her more about football.

And yet he spoke. One day I told her about the recent World Cup in Sweden - the phenomenal success of the Brazilians, who conquered the football goddess for the first time. I was great, in detail, and suddenly Angelina interrupted me with a question:

- Edik, why don't you play football yourself? You, I heard, played?

What if she knows about my troubles with the coach? Or will he think that Klymenko was ballast in the team?

"Where does the time come from, Gel?" All evenings are busy in the club. The second shift at school is so uncomfortable. I barely have time for my lessons. - I said it quite calmly, although it was terribly insulting. Of course, I didn't convince her, but at least I didn't make excuses. But I still kept the feeling of dissatisfaction with the answer for a long time, and every time I remembered this conversation, I regretted that I had not explained the whole truth to her. It's an amazing thing, a person is afraid to tell the truth about

himself and suffers then ... However, because of this football, we had the first serious quarrel with Gelya.

On a day off, we agreed to go to the cinema. I was going to get tickets, but then I remembered that our city team was playing the last match of the season at the stadium. Posters pasted everywhere have been shouting about this for a week. I decided that we would still have time to watch the film, but the important match in which the winner would be determined was not. That's right, in my opinion, I decided. I explained this to Gela and even showed the tickets with good seats in the center of the west stand. She was so surprised, as if I had offered her an urgent trip somewhere in the Canary Islands. And suddenly she laughed loudly.

"Me?!" For football?! How could you come up with such a thing! Don't you understand, Klymenko, that it's just stupid. Where have you seen girls at football?

"And we went with Lidka Stepanikova, I once told you about her, and nothing," I blurted out suddenly, and the next second Galtseva's eyes narrowed - the always charming light went out in them.

- Well, go wherever you want with your Lidka.

She turned abruptly and walked quickly away from me.

I stood for a while, watching her cross the street and, without feeling resentment, went to the stadium. And after a while, forgetting about everything in the world, bouncing on the hard perches of the bench, I watched the football match. Only once flashed through my head: "If I really liked her, I would still be sitting in the cinema now."

Then we quickly reconciled, but soon quarreled again over some trifle. Of course, there is nothing good in the fact that we often quarreled. But in the films, boys and girls often quarreled at the beginning, but at the end they always had true love. What if we have a lot of love too! In any case, each of us has his own opinion and is not going to tame someone, make him an obedient, running dog.

However, always after the quarrel with Galtseva, I thought about Lidka. And then I immediately wanted to see her. Confess, or

what? But will she listen to my confession? Yes, we once lived in the same house. What of it. Now it's gone. We went in different directions, and everyone has their own life.

After our quarrel with Stepankova because of football (just some kind of punishment with him), I still came to Lidka. We listened to records and walked. But then everything rushed somewhere. The school was seized, and in its everyday life our meetings were lost, and when Galtseva appeared, they were spent altogether. So, the inertia of the old life is over, everything is gone, and Lidka must have had his own interest. What do I care? Well, that's right. Obviously, life is so arranged that there comes a time when you find yourself in front of a choice of new friends, and those others become your good memory. Lidka is now far away from me. But when I think about the fact that Lidka is far away from me, for some reason my heart aches.

However, I see Lidka quite often. I meet her in our neighborhood, almost always at the same time, at seven o'clock, without thinking about what she is doing here. More often it stands at the corner of Matrosov Lane and Anthracitova Street - an inconvenient, crowded place, because on one side and on the other side shops and stalls stretch in small steps, and at rush hour people are always boiling here. This is the route that I take to school and on a date with Gelya. I rarely come back from school alone, usually with a horde. Sometimes Lidka is on the opposite side of the street. I raise my hand in greeting, and she nods her head in response and smiles. And sometimes I only see her receding back. The guys, of course, asked what kind of girl she was. And I explained that this was my neighbor in the old apartment. "By the way, she is a candidate for master of sports in artistic gymnastics," I boasted. And maybe these chance meetings were enough not to forget that there is Lidka Stepankova in the world - my faithful friend.

I noticed that she began to dress well. She is wearing a fashionable short raincoat in dark blue, a blue gas scarf and high-heeled shoes. However, I also dressed fashionably. I am wearing

a brown jacket with gilded zippers, tight trousers and shoes with a thick "micropore". It's all mom. She suddenly decided that I needed to dress well. Fortunately, now there is an opportunity. From the mining and technical school, my mother went to work in the accounting department of the mine. The salary here was higher, and we slowly began to get out of need. I thought she dressed me up out of gratitude for my A's. But is it only out of gratitude?..

* * *

Indian summer was quietly and imperceptibly blazing, and with the light blue glaze of the first frosts, abundant leaf fall began in the city. On chilly evenings, the streets are enveloped in sticky smoke of late fires, and bitterly, ad nauseam, smells of scorched leaves.

At dusk, the city is still crowded, but life has already taken root, it is already turning to winter, and the early light in the windows of the houses irresistibly beckons with affectionate warmth.

On one of these evenings, returning from school, I meet Lidka. I suddenly run into her on the corner, so neither she nor I have nowhere to go.

"Hi, Lydoc," I say and shake my hand. The guys, of course, step aside.

- Hello, Edik. "Lidka has a bundle in his right hand. She shifts it and touches my palm. She, as before, looks into my eyes a little frightened. - Miracles! I just thought about you, and here it is - you. Well, how is life, how are successes?

"Life?.. - I do a sour face. "Not really, Lid, but I think you can live. "I shake my briefcase. - Here, we gnaw at science, we earn ourselves a happy future. You know, Lidoc, in the new school, the fight against lobotras is put at the appropriate height. You have to keep yourself in shape all the time. It's generally difficult.

"Edka, you're still the same braggart," Lidka laughs. I myself know that I have it, but when you are reminded, it's a little insulting. I have a desire to joke, and I ask seriously:

"How's Uncle Kostya?"

"Oh, Edik. I only see him on Sunday. All the time in his factory. He sits in the shop until night. Some urgent orders. You'd look at him. So I lost weight.

"Say hello to him." Why don't you come in? Mom asks how you are there?

As for the fact that my mother is interested in the Stepankovs, I unexpectedly lied. Lidka's eyes flash but immediately fade.

"You're not coming to us either." But I can guess why. You don't have time now," she says slyly. I understood that Lidka was referring to my friendship with Galtseva. Of course she knows. Frankly, I don't really like our conversation.

"Lead, what are you doing here?"

- Yes ... - Lidka clearly does not want to answer - it hurts me.

"It's not the first time I've seen you here.

- You never know what the reason. - Lidka flirts - it doesn't suit her at all. "In my opinion, it's stupid to make a date with the devil in the middle of nowhere," I quickly think.

"Listen, Edik, could you bring this to Surin," Lidka says seriously, and hands me the package. "Mom baked pies here. Yakov Ivanovich, probably, will commemorate Varvara Timofeevna tomorrow. Fifteen years have passed since she died. Mom remembered that day for the rest of her life. So they bombed. The Nazis had already been driven out of the city, and their planes were flying in. Yes, you know about it.

"I know, of course.

I take the package. Of course, it is not difficult for me to convey to Yakov Ivanovich pies from the Stepankovs. But why can't Lidka go to him? Of course, he is late for a date. However, what do I care.

"Let's go to Surin together," I suggest, just in case.

"Edik, I can't now. Well, please, pass it on, huh?

"Usek! You have a meeting with interesting people today. - I'm pretending to be experienced. I lean into her ear and dictate in a patronizing tone.

"You come to see him later." You can't do it in time, so you can dismiss our brother.

"Go, Edik, the boys are waiting for you," Lidka abruptly dismisses me. "Go, please."

I'm taking a step towards the guys. Lidkin's question catches up with me.

- How is the "Night Bather"?

- Great masterpieces have been created over the years. Wait.

"Okay. I wish you success. - Lidka turns and walks away from us at a quick pace.

I look after her and think anxiously, "It would be interesting to look at her boyfriend. She never said anything about him. Why should she tell me?"

... Surin was at home. The old man opened the door, saw me, and grunted in surprise.

- Klymenko,. Ehma," he said in a hoarse voice and, without letting me open my mouth, immediately dragged me into the corridor, grumpily remarked: "It's not good, brother, to say hello through the threshold.

Surin, obviously, was sick - a gray rag was wrapped around his throat. It has changed a lot this year. Where has its largeness and power gone. It seems to have shrunk. Or maybe he used to be like that - a year or two ago, and I, my view of him, has changed? However, when was the last time I saw the old man so close? Long ago. Was it possible that even then his face was so densely excised with wrinkles and his eyes glittered so twilitly?

I handed him a bundle and told him that it was pies from the Stepankovs. The old man didn't understand anything. He looked at me, then at the bundle with a kind of childish silly amazement.

"Tomorrow to your Varvara Timofeevna... Well, in general, fifteen years from that day, - I suddenly began to explain, suddenly agitated, but the old man had already figured it out, nodded his head.

- Yes, yes. Tomorrow it will be. Don't forget, go, people," he muttered joyfully and fussed, tapping the floor with his prosthesis.

"Let's have a supper," Let's drink tea at once with these pies. How is your mother, does she not get sick?

- No, I'm healthy.

- Well, thank God. And I cooled down a little. A disease entered my lower back, and now my throat overcame in the morning. Go ahead, they tore it through with a rasp. "Surin spoke, and he quietly pushed me out of the corridor into the apartment. - The Stepankovs handed it over. Ehma... How is Kostya there? Lidushka?

- I think it's fine. Uncle Kostya works hard, lost weight," I replied and stopped, "not a step further. "I'm in a hurry. Excuse me.

"And what about the seagull, sused?" The old man threw up his hands sadly. - At once boiling seagulls.

"I'm in a hurry. I'm sorry," I repeated, and my voice trembled.

- Nonche everyone is in a hurry. And where, only God knows. You're young, and then, go ahead, and the old ones are running. Surin stepped to the door and resolutely opened the door in front of me. Of course, he was offended. I felt ashamed.

"Goodbye," I breathed out.

"Come in sometime." Don't the old man," Surin said distressed and suddenly asked: "How old are you?"

"Sixteen soon."

"And my Fedyushka was seventeen when the war began...

I didn't hear Surin shut the door—his last words swallowed up all sounds. They seem to be reflected from the walls and stairwells with an increasing echo, revealing the terrible essence: "And my Fedyushka turned seventeen when the war began ..."

I ran up the stairs and the words chased after me.

I stopped. Measurement. He leaned on the railing and slid down the steps.

What is it - an old, sick person was left alone in an apartment, one on one with aggravated grief? Of course, I have things to do, but if you think about it carefully, are they worth the old man's suffering now? He will remember his son and wife and cry. No wonder he said: "And my Fedyushka was seventeen when the war began ..." He

opened the old man's wound and left. He started like a parrot: "I'm in a hurry, I'm in a hurry." If I drank tea with him, I'd still have dinner at home. I would have listened to the old man. Why was he mischievous? We have to go back.

I got up, went down a few steps, and sat down again. What will Surin think of me? Chatter, they say, he does not have any urgent matters. He just "buried the" and then he appeared: "Hello." It turns out that he took pity.

Yes, he will think so. Out of pity, the neighbor returned. And pity will only humiliate him. It would be another matter if the old man felt that I came out of compassion, out of understanding of his grief. Then, therefore, I would not have left.

And then he left. How can you explain to him that he did not return out of pity. And in general, where is the border between pity and compassion? How to make sense of all this?

The front door slammed in the entrance, I jumped up, and immediately two men appeared in front of me - some rumpled, with bluish faces. Small and big. The big one has very drunken swollen eyes. The men were dressed in black, fairly muddy coats. On the head of the big one there is a cap-blade, and on the small one there is a flattened leather hat with cropped ears.

"Hey, kid, where does Yashka live here?" Big asked with impudent pressure.

"We don't have any Yashka. - Of course, I understood that they were asking Surin and lied with a very specific goal. - Your Yashka does not live here.

"Well, yes," grunted the little one. "Don't you know Yashka Surin?"

- There is no such thing here. He doesn't live. You are clearly told.

I turned and walked indifferently up the stairs. Two of them were conferring behind their backs, and they irritated me. Again they came to Surin for a drink.

I went around the stairs and said:

- Why rally?! Yashka Surin does not live with us. You should have come from here, citizens.

"They didn't ask you, breastsucker, what we should do," the big one flared up. - Look, otherwise you will inadvertently earn a runny nose.

"Runny nose?" Killed," I laughed. Honestly, I wasn't scared at all. "Take a walk, take a walk. I've seen those.

The big one rushed towards me, but the little one held him by the sleeve:

"Don't mess around, Sashko. Some kind of paralytic. Let's go somewhere else. Petka messed up something ...

The men, cursing dirty, went out. It became quiet. I felt a little relieved from the soul. I thought: "I did the right thing by kicking the bully out of the entrance. What is it like for an old man to see these faces now? What are they? They don't care..."

I opened the door, and my mother responded to the knock.

"Son, are you?" There's a letter for you.

The letter was lying on the bedside table at the entrance. I grabbed the envelope - from Efimich! He threw off his shoes and, without undressing, rushed to his room. He closed the door tightly behind him.

"Hello Edward!

Don't complain about me, buddy, through no fault of my own, I delayed the answer. The fact is that I spent the summer months in a hospital in Kiev, and your letter was waiting for me in the general mail for vacationers, then still under the cloth of the director. But now it's in front of me and your good drawings too. How is my health? It's much better now, but it's too early to talk about a full recovery. I am very glad that everything is in order with your studies. This is the main thing.

Yes, you have set a task for me - does your picture have value in our, as you say, "such a rapid time filled with grandiose events"? I think that Seryozhka Katrish got excited, so sharply condemning your work. "Who needs it," as he put it, is not a conversation. I

remember Seryozhka, he was always distinguished by a certain categorical judgment. Your "Night Bather" is, first of all, a work, a figment of the artist's imagination, his feelings. Another thing; how it is done. You know what I mean? Of course, I can't judge the canvas as a whole from the drawings sent. Is that about the plot, the plan. In my opinion, the plot of your picture is interesting because it was generated by your youthful imagination. But don't get me wrong, repetitions are inevitable at your age - you are still studying and will study for a long time. Have you seen reproductions of the French Impressionists Monet, Renoir, Degas? They are now being scolded a little. But things, really, deserve attention. There's a lot to learn here. (By the way, Renoir has a series of his "bathers.") From whom, if not from the great masters, should we learn? But now I advise you to think through the plot deeper, more seriously, not to rush to the easel immediately from the excited imagination. It is difficult to paint a picture in one impulse.

It's wonderful, buddy, that your work stirred up the best feelings in you, elevated your earthly existence. As you write, in "The Bather" you hear the eternal music of the sea, and you "feel like a dance". That's right, Edward, in the living fusion of human beauty and the beauty of nature, there is the eternal harmony of the world. You're trying to comprehend it. You are looking for an ideal, but is such a search possible without creating good? No, it is not possible. It means that your soul is open to goodness. So judge for yourself whether your "Night Bather" has value.

However, some details in the letter alerted me. You don't write much. You are distracted by some business. You don't find time for an easel. And then what to do? If you seriously want to devote yourself to painting, be sure to organize your work. No indulgences. Always. And in no case can not be limited to one plot. (In this case, "The Bather.") And what about working with nature? Sketches? Do not think that you will still have time to do all this at the art school you are striving for. A real artist does not have the right to keep one cartridge in the clip. I don't mind the fact that you dream of

becoming a marine painter: "to paint and paint the sea." But you don't live on a bare island. And, thank God, I'm not alone. There is a country and people around. Close to you and completely strangers. Take a closer look at them. If you think about it: every person is such a sea! And they are not eternal - the people around us. I was lucky enough to meet wonderful, courageous people in my life. Both at the front and later. Many of them are gone. But thank God, the drawings remained (miraculously survived!). I appeal to them, to my memory... And what a rewarding job it must be to leave a memory of people. Think about it.

And one more thing. Be sure to put the last one in the picture. smear. Do not betray yourself, the image on which you worked, even if you felt "something is wrong."

That's probably all. Good luck to you, buddy! Don't be penalized for not seeing off the teacher. The main thing is that you remember me. And come on vacation, relax with us. Let's go to visit Aivazovsky.

And to be honest, my soul hurts in our mining town. I miss my fellow countrymen, with whom I chopped coal in the face, and every time, like this in the fall, I am drawn to school. It must be that our caretaker, Fyodor Semenovich, is already heating the stoves. Well, nothing. I'll heal a little more and try to return to teaching.

Write, buddy. Send drawings, and thank you for these.
I shake hands firmly.

Your Boris Salnikov."

I re-read the letter twice in one breath and immediately involuntarily reached for the picture.

I took the canvas off the wardrobe, set it on the back of a chair by the window, sat down opposite and thought. Here Renoir, it turns out, has a series of his "bathers", and what do I know about this artist? No, I have not seen reproductions of the Impressionists. Of course, tomorrow I will rush to the library - what are they, Renoir's "bathers"?.. It's damn annoying after all...

And suddenly the image in the picture was blurred, the bather disappeared, and a large curly head appeared before my eyes, a lively look with a cunning. And I distinctly heard Surin's voice:

"And my Fedyushka was seventeen when the war began...

Chapter Ten

After the November holidays, my father unexpectedly arrived...

The city is already blown through gusty winds with icy drizzle and cereals, and in the dead streets the days are decaying in irrepressible boredom.

My father stopped by on a business trip. I came home from school and smelled tobacco smoke in the hallway. A man's voice came from the living room. I listened, and I was overcome with excitement - the voice of my father I could distinguish from a thousand others.

... In the house on Krasnykh Zor Street, women considered their mother the happiest. The husband, they say, got "hard", handsome and stately, hot before work and "soft" in character. In the war, he did not hide behind other people's backs - there are enough orders and medals for three on the navy tunic. Behind such a thing as behind a stone wall, you will not know either sadness or grief. And my mother also thought she was lucky. She did not hide her happiness, but trouble came, so can you hide it from people? In the old courtyard, everyone was in full view. Then, when my father left us, Grandma Vera assumed that someone in our house had an evil eye. Maybe the old Baklanikha, because she has been lonely all her life, and her eye is black, "like a raven", and in general, they say, some kind of unsociable. Mom, smiling sadly, objected: "Nonsense. What kind of cormorant? The old lady is God's dandelion. Why confuse people here? Paul fell in love with the other. And it's the whole story."

We had gatherings every evening according to a fixed schedule. Mom was terribly tired of them. But people came with advice and wanted to help the whole world, the true truth.

They sat in a circle on the benches, husked seeds and gossiped heartily about the girl-lovebird. Only they considered her frankly guilty, and no one wanted to understand that Paul, my father, simply took and loved her and decided to start a new life. For the women of our court, it was terrible to hear about some kind of love of a family man for a girl. They preferred to see this as a worldly calculation on her part - "a man, go, not drinking, while earning" - and a whim, debauchery with him. The neighbors were not shy in expressing their feelings, they poured strong words on the lovebird, from which I blushed and hid in the next room. But even there, these words bothered me.

"You, Anna, are either a saint or completely stupid," the lanky widow Kireev from the 4th apartment marveled at her mother's calmness. "He, the damned dog, destroys the family, and you are silent, indulge and carry grief in yourself.

"Oh, the chicken is wet," Nyusya's grandmother picked up, excitedly. "I'd scratch her eyes out." I grabbed such a man. And if you're afraid, take me to help. I'd show her.

- No, you can't do that. It's not good. You won't be forced to be nice. He loves her, he loves her. You look at him, he was known somehow, - my mother repeated.

Of course, they sympathized with my mother very much, and they felt sorry for me as an orphan. Someone will hug in between, on the head, sighing, stroke, someone will give candy. Adults think that they are doing the right thing. If only they knew that there was nothing worse for me than their pity.

And some time later, women already advised their mother to get married as soon as possible - "they knock out a wedge with a wedge." Idle grandmother Vera even looked after her fiancé. Mom laughed it off: "I'm going to marry my son soon, and you're going to give me away. "I'm serious. - I have lived a family life. There won't be

a better one anyway. And there will be enough worries about my son for my lifetime.

After my father left, we rarely talked about him. But the memory of her father, of course, always lived with her - bad on the bottom, good on top, in order to get it faster. Give your mother only a reason to remember her father: first of all, she will tell how her father came to her village to woo, but he made a mistake with the address. "Well, this is necessary, I got into another house, and there is also a girl to be married. Her father was confused, well, they say, the daughter did not say, we would have prepared properly. And she doesn't see Paul, but she thinks about her own, shouts from the bedroom: "I knew it, aunt." And when we figured it out, there was laughter ... Well, what about the wedding?! The wedding, son, was... The whole farm was walking. They shouted "bitterly", danced to the harmonica. Only everything is somehow in a hurry. And we went straight to the city. Dad was given an apartment from the mine in a barracks on Zorya. Two rooms. We rejoiced in our corner. The furniture was bought - a nickel-plated bed and a table. And a few months later, the war ... Dad was later drafted, he had a reservation ...

And she also likes to remember how her father was demobilized from the Navy. However, not only my mother, but also my housemates remember that day very well. And it was in the forty-seventh, in the fall, when the need roamed the city, and in our yard in the evening the hand mills creaked sadly - the tenants grinded corn kernels. The flour was then used to cook sticky hominy. And then my father appeared at the gate.

- Great, hulks. Why are you so quiet here? Are you going to die, devils? - he stammered and commanded: - Well, whistle everyone up!

The yard came to life. A table was placed under the apricot. His father dumped the contents of his backpack on him. Aunt Klava threw up her hands when she saw the mountain of tin cans, exclaimed:

- Lord, Pashka has gone crazy, it's a whole wealth.

In mother's stories, the father is always a noisy, restless person, a merry fellow and the soul of the company. Whether these are advantages or disadvantages, I have not yet figured it out. But for some reason I can't imagine my father as a cheerful person. In my memory, his face is completely different.

... He stood in front of me, putting his hands on my shoulders and shaking them gently. I did not recognize the folder - the face was earthy yellow, somehow withered, without blood, there were deep grooves of wrinkles on the forehead, and the eyes, devoid of the usual smile, and therefore seemed to be extinguished, were strangers. It was as if a terrible illness was gnawing at him. Or maybe it was a disease. He left us and tried to explain to me the reason for his decision. It would be better if he did not explain anything. I was already torn. I didn't sleep well the night before, and I hated the dreams in which my father and I drove to the sea all the time—he promised to show me the sea. And during the day I could not bear the silence in the apartment - my father and mother moved around the room with the greatest care, silently, like shadows. At night, when my father did not come, my mother cried. And I dreamed of one thing - her smile. Then he appeared, and the painful game of silence began... And now I heard his confused half-whisper:

"You're an adult... You have to understand dad - life, son, is complicated... You'll grow up..."

I didn't know what he was talking about because I was thinking about my mother. She could barely stand on her feet. "Yes, I'm not an adult! And I won't grow up soon," I was going to object, but I didn't dare.

He asked about something, but did not wait for an answer, he immediately spoke himself. No, he didn't lie anything. I would immediately feel his lie.

"Daddy, don't leave us, please," I said. But my father said nothing, only stroked my hair, my cheek with a hot, dry palm.

And at night my heart ached. For the first time, it hurt a lot.

A big, strong man, couldn't he handle himself? His mother understood him and even sympathized with him in some ways. But I could neither understand nor forgive, because he is a father, and his place is near. How ridiculous was the conversation he started then! He was in such a hurry with my farewell, as if in his new life he could not do without him.

... I walked to the living room door. Now I have to say, "Hello, Dad." Daddy? I'm out of the habit of this word. A heavy lump came to his throat.

Mom appeared in the doorway.

"Edik?!" She was surprised. "I didn't hear you come in." She took me by the elbow and whispered happily, 'Do you know who we have?'

"I know," I replied, and roughly pulled my hand away. What is she happy about? I arrived, so what? Dressed up.

She wore a new woolen dress that she had recently sewn for the holiday. I suddenly remembered how much grief it had caused her. After each fitting, she came upset, complained to me that the dressmaker had no taste, that the fabric was spoiled and again I had to think about the exit dress. Finally I saw her in him. "What a beautiful mother I have," I thought then, and I said to her: "Normal dress. You shouldn't have been worried." But my mother did not believe me - she kept looking for defects in front of the mirror, frowning. And only when the friends unanimously exclaimed: "Sitting, Annushka, just a miracle!" - my mother cheered, even whirled around the room in a waltz.

The arrival of her father took my mother by surprise, and she preened hastily. The powder covered the blush of the cheeks unevenly - it protruded as white islands, especially near the nose. Scarlet lipstick smeared her lips with oil.

Mother's pride - thick golden hair - was rolled up in a huge kul on the back of the head, exposing a thin neck, and the head turned out to be large and round, like a globe. Mom must have really wanted to appear beautiful and independent in front of him, but nothing

came of it - where can you get away from worries, from age. Perhaps the dress only brightened up her routine.

No, my mother was not offended. She smiled at me ingratiatingly, submissively. "Don't be angry, son. After all, my father came. Think of me," her eyes asked. Yes, I must appear before him as a kind of obedient, serious young man. I have to portray the joy of a happy son. He can show up at any time, even in a hundred years, without thinking about how I was without him, and I am obliged to meet him, listen, feel sorry for him. Obliged only because he is a father?! But I don't know how to pretend. And it is unlikely that my mother is happy - so, a pitiful semblance of joy on her face, some kind of game of joy. Why does she need it if it's all over between them?

I probably understood my mother then and could not have shown my resentment so openly. But this dress me off. The last thing I wanted was for my mother to show off in front of him. I wondered if she was going to get her father back?..

"Why are you dressed up?" Nothing else to wear? I grumbled.

Mom put her finger to her lips - hush, they say. Something new opened up in her - in the way she prayerfully held her hands on her chest, catching my every movement, in a look full of some kind of shy caress. Then I realized that it was purely maternal amazement at filial adulthood. How she needed words, some very trifling ones, for someone who was there in the room to cope with her embarrassment. But she didn't find them. And suddenly, resolutely, tenaciously, grabbing me by the hand, dragged me into the living room.

"Here it is, Paul, admire your child," she said and froze, unable to cope with her excitement.

My father made a movement with his body, but did not rise. Greedy rays sparkled in his eyes. He sat leaning back in a chair, almost a toy under his heavy, corpulent body, nervously tossing a black lock of hair. He should have gotten up right away, stepped towards me, but he hesitated, and the moment was lost. I said hello

and suddenly felt that I didn't know what to do with my hands. I put it in my pockets and pulled it out.

"Well, hello, Edward," said the father and got up. He hugged me and kissed me on the cheek. An old, forgotten, very native smell blew from him. Joy swirled in my chest - this is my father!

He did not let go, held him tightly by the shoulders, and for some reason I was ashamed to look into his eyes. I stared at his blue-shaven chin, at the large striped knot of his tie, and looked forward to the end of the necessary ceremony.

"Paul, Edik has caught up with you. It's just as long," my mother says sweetly behind my back.

"I went to our breed," my father agrees. - Ivan Semenovich, your grandfather, son, was two meters tall. Watchtower! Do you remember him, Anya?

- Vaguely. Well, I saw him once in total, how they went before the war ... You drove me for show.

"He was a strong man. Farm blacksmith! He went through the Civil War, he was a partisan in this war. How many contusions and wounds he suffered. And he died stupidly - from a trifling abscess. I could still live.

"I'm looking at you guys, how similar you are. Relatives.

"She's still joking," I thought, offended by my mother. And suddenly he said:

"I want to eat.

"That's right, son, nightingales don't feed fables," my father cheerfully supported me. "Set the table, mother." Feed the man.

"We're going to have dinner now." We've been waiting for you, son. Go, wash your hands.

When I returned from the bathroom, my father laid out the contents from the suitcase on the table - a bottle of wine, two jars of caviar, a large colorful box of chocolates. Asked:

"How are you studying, Edward?"

"It's fine," I replied, and thought. "Didn't my mother tell him how I was studying?"

"You should have shown your father the diary," my mother shouted from the kitchen. - Pavel, he has all A's. Every single one.

"Mom, it's not good to brag.

Mom walked into the room with plates in her hands.

- When there is something to brag about, it is not a sin.

"It's not good," I repeated.

"Don't be stubborn, take out your diary."

"Well, what are you, Anya. I believe that my son is an excellent student.

"My son," I chuckled.

My father lit a cigarette. I followed my mother into the kitchen. Mom whispered:

"Don't leave the folder alone. Inconveniently. Talk to him about something. Show your paintings.

"I'm not going to show him anything. When will he leave?

"He's leaving tomorrow, calm down."

"Just don't fawn over him." I'm asking you.

"You don't tell me how to behave," the mother said angrily.

At the table, my father poured wine into glasses, and so did I. I drank wine only once in my life when I was still friends with Katrish. We received certificates for the seven-year plan, and Seryozhka offered to celebrate. He explained that all adults celebrate important events in life with wine. We bought a bottle and climbed deep into the city park. The wine was cloyingly sweet - I barely had half a glass. And Seryozhka, imagining, sipped from the neck, but he was also disgusted.

I set the glass aside.

"Yes, Paul, he doesn't need to. It's too early. Enough of what is already smoking," my mother said, looking askance at me.

"As they say: smoking is harmful to health," my father laughed and winked at me. - I lit a cigarette for the first time in the navy and since then I am going to quit every year. But someday I will definitely quit.

- At least you started in adulthood, but you tasted this one from the cradle. And he smokes, Paul, all sorts of nonsense. "Surf", some "Theatrical".

"Well, Mom...

- I wouldn't lie: "I didn't smoke, honestly." And from the tobacco itself it carries as from a cabman. Should you put a salad, Paul?

"Yes, yes," my father nodded and took a glass.

They drank to the meeting and talked about their own, long-standing. Mom kept giving my father food, taking care of him. He runs to the kitchen for a clean plate, then for a towel. He ruined her life, and she spread a towel on his lap so as not to get dirty. "It's good that my father doesn't come to me with his questions. And then he will begin to educate. They love to educate everything," I thought.

"For your success, son. For you not to make mistakes in life," the father suggested a toast and lingered on some of his interrupted thoughts, so that his face reflected the struggle. He touched the table with a glass, and it spilled slightly. And for some reason I remembered how once, a long time ago, I lied to the boys that I saw my father on a long voyage. I was ashamed to admit that my father had left us forever. And I composed a beautiful fairy tale about how my father goes on a large merchant ship as an assistant captain. It walks almost all seas and oceans. And he sends me letters from every port. And they believed me. I got so carried away that I believed it myself. Honestly, it was easier to live with lies, to feel not flawed, not half an orphan, like those boys whose fathers died at the front. However, they were proud of their fathers. And I was so offended. But now I no longer felt that acute resentment. For a moment, I even felt sorry for him.

The mother made a movement with her hand, but did not take the glass. A gray shadow ran over her face, a long-standing pain blazed in her eyes. Those eyes rose from those distant, hard days, and I remembered them for the rest of my life. But, obeying a stronger feeling in herself, she could not protest his words, at least with an outward reproach, stopped halfway and retreated. I smiled,

and something whined in me. But her father must have understood it and drank it alone in dead silence.

Then he turned to me and my mother.

- Where do we go after school?

- Ah, well, he wants to be an artist. Only all this is not serious, a hobby, "said my mother.

"An artist?" My father was surprised. "Of course, of course, I remember you drew something, Edward. But as a child, in my opinion, he dreamed of being a sailor. Admiral!"

"What an admiral he is, Paul! I hammered the artistic into my head.

"Mom, you think like Earring Katrish. The artist is just a pathetic painter. But the engineer ... Sounds great, I understand. I can imagine Serezhkina's mother saying to you: "And mine is studying to be an engineer," I said and looked at my father, looking for support.

"Who is he, Katrish?" Father asked.

- Yes, his father serves as some kind of boss in the coal trust. And their son is a good, well-mannered boy.

"You know a lot, well-mannered," I said nervously.

"Yes, son, a well-mannered boy. And I don't find anything wrong with him seriously thinking about his future.

"Of course, Katrish is a very serious person," I picked up sarcastically. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. That's right. If I've learned how to solve math problems, then I'll be an engineer. But I don't want to. It doesn't pull.

- Nothing, then it will pull. The math teacher told me that you have the ability.

"Mom, you're bored, you're bragging again." And in general. How much can you talk about the same thing? "I looked at my father.

- In a year and a half, I will still have time to move out.

"I'll eat for you." Tell him, Paul, that it is possible to remain an artist with a solid specialty. We need to think about it now.

"Wait, wait, Anya, what if my son has talent," the father disagreed.

"Talent?" And here are his paintings. Mom pointed to the wall where several of my old landscapes hung. - What can come of it?

My father got up and walked over to a picture of slumbering fishing boats. I watched him intensely.

"That's what it is, the sea," said the father.

"Edik, come on, show me the last picture." A girl in the sea," my mother beamed.

"It's not ready yet.

— ... Wow. There is a sea everywhere. Seagulls. You have your own theme, son," the father said, moving from one picture to another. - To be honest, I did not immediately realize that these were your works.

My father finished examining the paintings, and sat down at the table again. And I still don't understand whether he liked them or not? The opinion of a sailor would not be indifferent to me at all.

"Son, show your dad your last picture," my mother insisted.

"I'm in a hurry," I snapped suddenly, "We're at school tonight... I'm late, ma.

"What evening?" The mother was frightened.

— Theme evening. I will go... Excuse me. I'm in charge of duty," I muttered, backing towards the exit. "I'll try early."

"At least you put on a fresh shirt," my mother babbled helplessly. She guessed that I had invented the evening. I felt sorry for her. I'll explain everything to her later.

Mom came out to escort me into the hallway, tightly closed the door to the living room. She looked anxious.

"Why are you like that?" What position do you put me in? Do you think he didn't understand anything? You're running away from him.

"And I wanted him to understand everything. And shame, ma, he must be. Go, he's waiting for you. Keep serving...

Mom lowered her head, whispered:

"I never thought you'd grow up so cruel."

"No, mother, not cruel, but fair.

I slammed the door.

Chapter Eleven

I quickly run down the stairs and meet Surin downstairs. The old man froze stone in the darkish doorway of the apartment, in a worn, terribly faded undershirt and dirty green breeches with patches on his knees.

"Didn't your dad come at once?" He asks, measuring me with a dull, heavy look. - Just now I passed by the windows. Really, I think, Pashka?

"He's the one," I reply, and rush past.

I come out of the entrance, and the wind pounces on me like a predator, piercing to the bone. I lift the collar of my coat and pull my cap low. Where to go? With Galtseva, I am again at loggerheads. I don't want to go to my friends. And time must be killed. At least two hours. Maybe in the movies?

It's drizzling. The lantern caps on the poles rush from side to side. The street under the weak pressure of muddy yellow light, in the cold kaleidoscopic scattering of window lights, seems completely unfamiliar, alien. And not a single passerby.

I'm going downtown. A chilly wind pushes in the back. I'm almost running. The Pobeda cinema is full of people. Bad weather is not a hindrance to them, because the demonstration of the Italian film "Lost Dreams" has begun. They say it's a very good movie. The boys, for example, are already purring a song from him: "Kumara, kumarella" ... On a huge poster - a sailor of a stern appearance and a magnificent-haired girl with crying eyes. I carefully look at the poster, and it seems to me that it depicts Lidka Stepankova.

I have to see Lidka. I haven't met her for a long time. How does she live there? It would be nice to buy tickets and invite Lidka to the cinema. I can imagine her face. She will be terribly surprised.

I dive into the crowd and squeeze to the checkout. On my way is a fiery red-haired healthy guy. He's at the window. I touch him on the shoulder and politely ask him to take two tickets, but the guy doesn't respond.

"Hey boy, don't spin around here," says the older man behind him, pushing me slightly away from the redhead, and I leave.

The end of the queue is quite far from the cash register. Of course, you won't get tickets for the next session. So, the next one is the last one. It's late. Lidka will certainly disagree. And why did I decide that she would go to the cinema with me? She may have more important things to do. Or she is not at home at all, walking somewhere with her friend. And in general, somehow it turns out badly - I meet with Galtseva, and I invite Stepankova to the cinema.

Still, I want to see Lidka. I need to tell her about my meeting with my father. I think she remembers my father. Lidka is the only person in the world who connects me with the old yard not only with childhood with games, secrets and dreams. When all these troubles with my father began, I could tell her alone what was happening with us. I knew that Lidka would never tell anyone and would definitely advise something. Something that will make it easier. She always understood me. And now it is unlikely that she will agree with her mother that I acted cruelly with him. It is scarcely necessary to remind Lidka of the letter we wrote to our father shortly after the divorce.

Mom then became seriously ill. She was taken to the hospital. I didn't know how to help her. One day, Lidka and I were walking from the hospital, and she advised me to write a letter to my father. But do not ask him for anything and do not report his mother's illness. And then she told me an incident that she had heard about from her mother.

In the forty-fourth year, in the winter, on the eve of some religious holiday, our mothers gathered in church. They were persuaded by their grandmother Vera. The day before, a funeral was brought to the Kireevs' apartment - the second one in our house.

And the women went to church to pray for the health of their husbands. A church on the outskirts of the city. On the way, they were seized by a blizzard. Such a blizzard suddenly arose - nothing was visible three steps away. My mother was frozen to the bone. In an autumn coat and boots, I decided to go. I barely made it to the church. And near it to the people - you will not be crowded. Grandmother Vera shook her head, said: "Peace!" and offered to pray to the image at the entrance: "Perhaps, the Lord will hear us here too." They began to pray, each for his salvation, but my mother was so stiff - she could not raise her hands. He stands and cries. Then, suddenly, an old lady touched her sleeve: "Come to me, dear." And she took her mother away. An old lady lived next to the church. I warmed it up and gave it boots. Mom thanked her and suddenly admitted: "And I'm an unbeliever, grandmother. Why did I go to church?" - "There are no non-believers now. Everyone has a lord in their souls," the old woman said quite confidentially and added sadly: "Who else should we ask for them, unfortunate? Only the Lord will help them now."

Still, the boots did not save my mother from catching a cold. She came down with pneumonia. The yard got goat's milk from the Petrushins. And grandmother Vera cooked various decoctions for her mother. Left.

And we wrote about this incident to my father. The letter was dropped into a box at the post office - more reliable. And I waited for my dad. Of course, he will guess and hurry to us. For some reason, I wanted him to come at night ... When I woke up, I listened to every rustle outside the window and could not sleep for a long time. I imagined our meeting very vividly. I thought, first of all, we will go to the bazaar, buy my mother the most beautiful apples and pears. And then let's go to her. That's what my mother will be surprised and delighted to see the two of us from the hospital window! But the days fled, and my father did not appear.

Once I asked Lidka doubtfully:

"Do you think your mother didn't tell your father about how you went to church?"

"Only he forgot. You guys always forget about everything," she flared up.

I never waited for my father.

And so I go to Lidka and think about that letter. And in front of me there is a room in an old barracks. I sit at the table and carefully draw each letter on a notebook sheet in an oblique ruler. And Lidka is marking time near me and dictating loudly. Her face is severe, like a real teacher.

I wonder if Stepankova still remembers that old case?

And the rain intensifies. Ice snowflakes are woven into sharp oblique jets, burning the face. My cap was soaked. But here is the Lidkin entrance. I take off my cap, shake off the last drops and, mechanically smoothing my hair, put it on again. There is a nasty wet rag on his head.

And all of a sudden, I feel like I'm terribly worried. On the landing of the third floor, I stop. I put my hands under the windowsill on the battery - the heat from the metal seems to pour into me.

Music comes from somewhere. Maybe Lidka is spinning records? Of course, she got new records. Only a few steps separate me from it. But I can't stop my strange excitement and overcome these damned few steps. "What am I actually afraid of? I have a case for Lidka," I set myself up.

A jerk - and I'm at the door of the Stepankovs' apartment. For a moment it seems to me that I am in the old courtyard near apartment No. 7, I came to Lidka after an illness, but for some reason I do not dare to enter, I hesitate, then I look at the plywood mailbox, then the shiny bronze pen with the initials "K. S." And around spring! Clear, very blue sky, which happens only in April ... How long ago it was. Foxtrot. Dancing girl in blue.

I click on the brown button of the bell. The music stops. Outside the door, they fiddle with constipation for a long time. Finally the door swings open and I see a long, thin guy in a soldier's uniform. He

has a short haircut, funny big ears sticking out. The guy, without blinking, looks at me with green eyes.

"Who are you going to?" "His voice is weak, kind of girlish.

"To them," I answer cheerfully. "Damn it, what kind of locators does this fighter have?!"

The guy stretches out - his head is about to rest against the ceiling. I squint at the shoulder straps - mother infantry. From the depths of the apartment, the voice of Uncle Kostya.

"Who's there, Ivan?"

"Klymenko Edik, a former neighbor," I tell the soldier and he, half-turning, literally translates: "Klymenko Edik, a former neighbor." He listens to the voices for a few seconds, then hesitantly invites:

"Come in."

- No, I need Lida.

But the guy does not have time to answer. Lidka appears from behind him. She is in chintz, in large polka dots, a dress with a round neckline on the chest, sleeves - lanterns. The hair is not divided, as before, by a parting, not braided into a thick braid, but only slightly fixed at the temples. Thick long strands lie on the shoulders, run over the chest. She has such a hairstyle. Lidka is very feminine and generally kind of new. The former, perhaps, eyebrows raised high in surprise.

"Edik, what are you standing there?" Lord, how soaked you are," she says, as if we still live in a barracks on Dawns and parted only a few hours ago. I'm not moving. Has nothing changed in it over the past months? "Come in, come in here. "Lidka drags me into a narrow corridor. The three of us are cramped. Lidka smiles. She is delighted with an unexpected visit from a former neighbor. And my heart beats hard. So much so that they seem to hear it.

"Hello, Lida," I barely say.

- Hello, Edik. And this is Vanya," she hurriedly points to the guy. "Meet me, guys.

I give my hand. Vanya sluggishly squeezes the brush.

"It's Dad's birthday today. His friends came," says Lidka.

"Then I'll come in another time." Hello to Uncle Kostya. "I take a step towards the door.

"Where are you in such a hurry, Edik?" You've got something, right? She asks and looks away for some reason. Vanya is restlessly marking time. Both he and I are embarrassed. But how to get out of this stupid situation?

"It happened, it didn't happen..." I look at Vanya pleadingly. Finally, he understands my thought, moves us down the corridor.

"I wanted to talk to you, but you probably can't today." You have people.

"Let's talk in my room." They will not interfere with us. Undress, undress. I'll treat you to a cake. My mother and I baked - you will lick your fingers. Lidka unbuttons her coat. I stop her.

"You don't need anything. Let's go stand a little in the entrance. I beg you," I say, but the excitement that seized me at the moment of meeting with Lidka, and which seems to be intensifying, completely excludes my determination to remember my father, about those long-ago events. And intercepting her puzzled look, I suddenly think that there is no need to talk about anything at all. It's better to leave, just leave without explaining anything. "All right, Lidoc, I guess I'll go." I'll come in later. Not at the right time.

"Edik, I don't understand you. You've come," Lidka takes my hand. "In general, you become completely different.

"And you?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm different. But you still don't leave, okay? I'll warn mine now.

Lidka disappears. I quietly open the door, go out and go down to the window.

Lidka jumps out after him in a coat thrown over his shoulders.

"They're going to sing there," she says cheerfully, jumping up the steps. And exactly, they sang in unison. Lidka becomes the opposite. He looks at me intently, watches my every move.

— Do you have new records? I ask, but I'm not interested in her records at all. I want to know, for example, what the infantryman Vanya has to do with the Stepankovs.

- Vanya brought the records. You know, he's serving in Germany.

"So this wick is yours ...

"Vanya?!" Oh my God, where did you get the idea?! Vanya is my father's student. He taught him to be a turner. So Vanya came to visit his father and came to visit his father. Do you understand?

- In general, I'm intelligent. It's just wonderful when students visit their teachers at home and bring new records.

"Edik, I think you're distracted. We started talking about records by chance. I asked him, so he brought it. Foolishly. He's five years older than me. I'm just a girl to him.

"Of course you're a little girl to him." He's a big uncle to you.

"Stop, Edik, please." Vanya is a nice guy, that's all. That's better, eat candy. Lidka holds out a handful of chocolates.

- Thanks, I don't want to.

"Do you want to, Edik?" It's like I don't know what kind of sweet tooth you are.

I take the candy and hide it in my pocket. Lidka puts the others in there. "Tell her I wanted to get movie tickets? I wonder how she will react to this, I guess. You never know what I wanted. Here, it turns out, there is a good man Vanya.

"Well, what are you thinking about?" "Lidka shakes me by the collar. - Are you tormented by great ideas again? And... Ah, I guess. You've finally painted a picture, and you don't like something about it. Or maybe just the opposite.

"You're wrong, Lidoc. Ideas don't bother me, and I haven't painted a picture yet. In my opinion, all the ideas waved a pen when they left the old yard.

"Couldn't you take them with you?"

- Probably. But we were in such a hurry. Have you forgotten our life at Dawns yet?

"You're laughing, Edik. Recently, I remembered how you called me Lidukha-capricious. Not fair at all. I was not capricious. Do you remember how you took me for a ride on the frame of Seryozhkin's bicycle and we miraculously crashed into a pole? Nothing for you, but I dislocated my arm. And one day... Once you confessed your love to me..."

I look away. Why isn't she ashamed to tell me about it? I don't like to think about it.

"Well, you see, I brought you only misfortune.

"Oh, Edka, I've never been seriously angry with you. That was our childhood, wasn't it?

"Yes, that was our childhood," I nod in agreement. Now I will say goodbye and leave. Is she able to understand me? Who am I to her now? Vanya is waiting for her with her records. "I'll probably go, Lida. They are waiting for you there.

"Let's wait some longer, shall we?" You put your cap on the battery, let it dry.

I take off my cap and put it on the battery. Lidka smoothes my hair.

- Lida, have you forgotten how we wrote a letter to my father? Long ago. Well, about how the women of our yard went to church, to the war. My mother then got sick. Did we want to shed a tear for him? The cry of the soul ...

"Edik, why are you so worried?" You're kind of weird.

"You didn't answer." Or maybe she forgot? I forgot, huh? I ask desperately.

"Why did you decide that?" I remember the letter well...

"Then tell me, why did we write it?" Meaning? Or we were children, stupid.

- Probably, it made sense. Your mother was very worried, completely exhausted. How about you? You roared!

"Me?" Roared? Don't make it up. "My cheeks suddenly burned. "Maybe I shouldn't have asked her about this letter? I should have

told you about my father's arrival right away, I think, "How stupid everything is today."

"We, Edik, felt so sorry for you. Do you remember when your mother was admitted to the hospital, you refused to live with us? The whole yard begged. Everyone called to him, and you were stubborn: "No, I'll be at home." And he refused our food ... I fried the potatoes myself. She burned with you, and you ate and praised. Funny. Then Baba Nyusya persuaded you. We prepared you and Aunt Anya for the hospital. It was here that my mother told me about that incident during the war.

- Blotter, daddy decided to touch. A sentimental letter was scribbled. And he saw the light. He grabbed his head. Nonsense, nonsense! I say, inflamed. "He was sneezing at us. He didn't love his mother, clearly. Never! And I am ashamed of this letter. As if he was begging for alms.

"Why did you disperse?!" Eccentric, how many years have passed. You're definitely having a belated reaction. Lidka pulls the collar of her coat up to her chin, absent-mindedly looking out the window. - In my opinion, we did the right thing. Look, Edik, have we ever thought about how much our mothers loved? How did they wait for fathers from the war? Probably, they would go to the ends of the world if there was at least some chance in saving our fathers. And no hurricane, no cold would keep them ... Don't suffer, Edik, the point was in that letter. And you didn't beg for alms. - After thinking about something of his own, Lidka adds with regret: - After all, he had to come.

"And what would you do if you were my mother if he suddenly appeared now?" I ask.

"Oh! Has Uncle Pasha arrived? Lidka finally guesses.

- Arrived. "A sharp self-pity suddenly seizes me. I turn away to the window because I'm ashamed of tears. They seem to be about to splash. Outside the window, rain is pouring and pouring, the wind is buzzing. Large drops roll on the black glass, croup hits.

Lidka stands beside him. Very close.

"Is he with his mother now?"

- Well, yes. They have an evening of memories... Mom fawns over him. And I can't look at him normally. How can I imagine that ... And my mother crumbles: "Paul, Paul." Nasty... I put on a new dress. He threw her, threw her. I thought she was proud. Forgive the betrayal, wow stuff! So I couldn't stand it and left. Mom, you see, didn't think I'd grow up so cruel. Did I be cruel to him? And what was I supposed to do with him?! To become on the ears of happiness ...

"I don't know, Edik. But in general, you left in vain. She's alone now, you know? First of all, you acted cruelly with her.

"Well, here you are." Enough for me. Cruel! Cruel! "I'm pulling on my cap. "You're the only ones who aren't cruel... Correct... Kind.

"Wait, Edik. Don't get excited, crazy!

But I'm already rushing up the stairs. Lidkin's voice from above. "You go home... home... You are welcome.

* * *

Rain...

I'm going to get wet to the skin, get sick and die. And what's the point of living if no one understands you. If everyone in the world is busy only with themselves and they need you no more than a talking parrot in a cage. For fun. I have to come home from school and say that I got another A. And everyone is happy - mom can boast to her friends or to his father that her son is an excellent student, an exemplary student. Classy, I regularly raise my overall academic score. It's all good, because I'm not wrong. I can't be wrong. If I got deuces and was a universally recognized mischief, I would probably live more interestingly. In any case, the minxes have the opportunity to arrange small holidays for themselves. Earned a four - hooray! Yes, I have to live for someone's comfort. To live as a good-natured person, for example, easily forgiving betrayal ...

No, that's not what I'm thinking. It's all on the surface of thoughts. And in the depths is my failed life. And what's the answer on the last page? I was painting, and now I've almost quit. I was playing football and quit. I threw everything, and in the end I was abandoned too. First, the father. Although no, the father is different. Katrish and Lidka. Yes, I was betrayed by my friend Sergey Katrish. And today Lidka Stepankova did not understand me. If we had lived in that yard, she would have caught up, she would have blurted out a thousand words, and on the thousand-first I might have agreed with her. But she did not rush up the stairs. Why, there are guests, there is Vanya with his records ...

And the rain does not end, only subsides for a moment, and then in the darkness heavy and sticky snow pulls out a whitish clearing.

It squelches in boots. Wet cheviot trousers are disgustingly sticky to the knees. I'm walking, I think, to the station. You can already hear the trains rushing by. I'll warm up at the train station. Still, I don't want to go home. Or maybe I'm just afraid to go to them?

The lanterns at the station are smoldering. There are several cars on the square and there are almost no people. Through the noise of wind and rain, the roar of the train, the voice from the loudspeaker barely breaks through. It looks like Novorossiysk is coming. I would now get into a warm car and go to the sea. To Efimich, for example. Climb into some closet on the shore and start a new life. Every day at sunrise, set up an easel on the sandy shore and paint, paint pictures about the sea, and let the years fly. Years do not count if one day you return to your hometown as a famous artist. Maybe this is happiness?

And I wanted to die. Weakling. Do people like me make real people?

I enter the station building. People rush towards them with frightened faces. I lean against the wall and can't help smiling. There is a cork at the door to the platform. The hoarse voice of the attendant reminds of politeness.

- Citizens, but you can't do that. If you have time, you will have time for everything.

In the waiting room, I find a free seat, just opposite the clock. They show ten. Warmth. The air is filled with the usual station smell of human overcrowding, disorder. I don't want to think about anything here. When a man in a hare hat eats cool eggs to your right, and an old man snores to your left, you want to close your eyes and also doze off or chew and chew something. Thoughts seemed to evaporate.

And suddenly I remember my mother. Her face as she took my hand and tried to imagine it to him. And I feel someone touching the heart with a piece of ice. Mummy... Perhaps Lidka is right, and I hurt only one mother with my care. Mom, how she is there alone with him.

I get up and go home.

I wander through the streets and alleys of our city and think about my mother. And rain and sleet are pouring and pouring. However, I don't care about all this. I feel sorry for my mother.

I unlock the door. It would be good if they were already asleep. But my mother meets me. Hands folded on his stomach. She looks at her soaked son with a sad grin. The apartment is quiet. There are moments when our mothers understand everything without words. That must have been that minute.

- If you eat, there are cutlets in the pan. The tea is still hot. We had Yakov Ivanovich. Just don't make noise. I put my dad on a cot," she whispers and leaves for the room, but returns a few seconds later. "Take it, here's a gift your father brought you for your sixteenth birthday." Yes, I didn't have time to give it away.

I open the blue box. Watches of the Pobeda brand.

I look at my mother, she looks at me, and a heavy pause suddenly arises between us and rapidly lengthens. Finally I find the strength and say:

"Mom, I'm sorry, huh?" This is not good, I understand.

I make an awkward attempt to hug her. Mom pulls back a little, smiling martyrically. It attaches with all its might, but a treacherous tear glitters on the eyelash.

"Don't rattle the dishes, son," she says and turns away.

"I'm not going to eat."

"As you wish... And the folder will leave early tomorrow.

My father will be leaving tomorrow, but I'm not happy about that. I don't understand what's in my heart. A mixture of guilt and anxiety, some kind of fumes.

... At night, I suddenly jump up from some kind of internal push, and reality immediately returns to me. Father... He's here in the next room. I hear him whispering.

- I came for one evening. For a few years," he tells his mother. - And in a good way, it would be necessary to go to the mine. Friends to visit. And it would not hurt to see the neighbors. How is Aunt Vera, alive and well?

- Healthy. What will she do. Only Aunt Vera got kind, you can't guess," my mother answers.

"Is it still the same talker?"

"Govoruha, Pavel, talker.

"Do you remember, there used to be a single case in the yard without Aunt Vera?" It's right there. Always with your own opinion - neither in the tyn nor in the gate. Yakov Surin argued with her. As he said: "You, Semyonovna, are of little use. You are with us, for the warming of the soul. Father sighs. - Uncle Yasha passed, I don't know. Apparently, he is very longing.

"Longing, Paul, can't forget. And how can you forget this. He lives like a restless. Sharomygi felt a slack, they bring down a little light to get drunk. That's what they told him. The other day, Aunt Vera smelled it. She brought the bride to him. Well, why not get together, right? How much loneliness can be passed. What is there - I put both of them. Aunt Vera told me. The old woman, they say, is neat, economic. I would look after him like a small child. And he fixed one thing: "You, stupid, forgot my Varka."

"Uncle Yasha." What a master! Always cheerful, lively. As I remember it now, before the war. And then he drank a glass - and in tears. He began to complain about his fate, about his neighbors. They began to forget the path to it.

- How to forget? Everyone, Paul, has their own families and worries. Sometimes I'll run in, bring something to eat. And on the eve of the holiday, I was going to clean it up. Offended. "What am I, Anna, without hands, in your opinion? Just sit and talk." Do you have time to sit, Paul?

- That's what he's talking about.

The father coughs muffled. Pause. Outside the window, the wind licks the glass.

"Are you happy with her?" Mom asks insinuatingly.

- We live peacefully. My daughter is growing up ... Housing is, however, worse than yours. You have mansions. Oh, happiness, happiness! Where is it? Do you believe, Anya, I have never doubted you...

"Don't say, Paul, why?"

"I always knew that you would put your son on his feet." And I won't twist my soul. My heart aches for you. Yes, apparently, not fate

...

I am ashamed to hear this, and I toss and turn for a long, noisy time. The voices fall silent. Mom comes up, straightens the blanket with gentle care and kisses me on the cheek. I pretend to be asleep, but there are heavy, viscous thoughts in my head. The whole world is narrowed in them to the size of the room in which the mother and father are now, close to me and so monstrously distant from each other. And only I eagerly rush between them - their hearts and memory.

"Not fate... not fate," the father's words echo bitterly in the soul. What does it mean - "not fate". It was in his power to stay then. The easiest way is to turn to fate.

Or maybe there is something that my soul cannot yet comprehend, my heart cannot understand, and I condemn my father

in vain? And do I have the right to condemn at all? But there are his letters from the front. "My dear, dear Annushka!" They all started like this... Mom keeps them, even re-reads them. The lies have long been exfoliated in the lines, and she does not want to notice anything

...

"Can you hear me, Anya?" Are you awake? Father's voice again.

"I'm not sleeping, Paul, what dream?"

"If everything could be turned back..."

"You know, Pavel, I changed my mind a lot then. We women can endure for a long time, but not forgive. Even if you had come back from it right away, we wouldn't have succeeded. You made a choice then, and so did I. That's the truth, Paul..."

Chapter Twelve

After my father left, I took up the painting. Mom did show him my Night Bather. My father liked the picture, and this praise of his, of course, flavored with my mother's enthusiasm, stimulated me.

It was with great difficulty that I found Renoir in the library. "Bathers", frankly, hurt my pride, and I naively believed that I could do so. But everything turned out to be much more complicated. I suddenly discovered serious flaws in my picture and began to eliminate them with desperate persistence, sometimes acutely feeling that "The Bather" was leading me away from the original plan and I was hopelessly losing something. And what exactly is God knows.

I painted the picture frantically, in the second breath, and I believed that the end was near: just about, another stroke ... But winter came, the school began preparations for the New Year's ball, and I was again overwhelmed with work. I had to postpone "The Bather".

... I go to the skating rink with Galtseva. Most often in the evening after school. It's better to ride in the evening. Music pours from the loudspeaker bell. The treadmill is brightly lit by spotlights.

And at the end of February, it suddenly became clear that Galtseva was being followed by a type from a mining technical school. They were seen together. His name was Stas. Ivantsov or Ivankov, what, however, is the difference.

"Never mind, she'll regret it," I consoled myself with some vague thought of my great destiny. For some reason, always in my failures, I sought salvation in the extraordinary future that awaited me. I walked into it boldly, passing the years, and saw myself as a famous person.

I wandered around the evening city for a long time ...

I came home completely broken. There was a crowd of people standing at our entrance. A lot of old ladies. One of them was talking about something in a grumpy voice. It dawned on me: "Not sick died. He did not anger God. For all his torments, the Lord quietly cleaned him up.

And suddenly, in this crowd, I saw my mother. What is she doing there? Mom hated talking idly with the neighbors at the entrance. I touched her shoulder.

"Mom, what are you standing here?"

"Surin is dead, son. Yakov Ivanovich ...

* * *

Surin died unusually easily. So, in any case, the women of our house decided. Recently, he watched somewhere nearby, at a construction site, went on duty in the evening, when neighbors gathered at the entrance. Surin greeted them and walked on. And then suddenly he spoke, which had never happened.

- That's right, go, women, spring is just around the corner ... It smells very much like earth. Survived, it turns out, the winter. Ehma. They would sing, women, something.

And Surin suddenly sang merrily: "Khazbulat daring, your poor sakla ..."

The women laughed - high, they say, took, Yakov Ivanovich. He tried in a different way, jerked the song and suddenly, like a crippled, donkey ...

Surin had no relatives in the city, and his residents buried the former house on Krasnykh Zor Street. In Surin's apartment, the women cleaned up well. The floors were washed, an iron bed with a sagging mesh was taken to the entrance. But traces of desolation and some kind of triumphant poverty still remained. The sour bad smell stirred up, probably, it was forever absorbed by the walls earthy from tobacco soot.

It was the smell of long loneliness and longing.

I looked at the yellow-faced dead man, with a crumpled chin leaning on his chest, and it seemed to me that even in the coffin Surin managed to lie somehow in a hurry. And I thought that the old man lived in a hurry, as they live only by a long anguished wait, postponing everything for later, or by misfortune.

The older women sat on the chairs by the coffin very evenly and peered into the sleeping face of the old man with dull, solemn attention. Not death itself, not fear of it, but a clear understanding of leaving was guessed in every proudly grieving appearance. Younger women stood in rows behind them, and in their faces the expression of bitterness of loss was fragile, brittle.

Men came in and, standing, crumpling their hats, again went out to the entrance to smoke.

Everyone talked about Surin quietly, in a low voice, of course, about what kind of cabinetmaker he was, what hands he had! Everyone had something to remember, and each of his own, associated with Surin, remembered with pleasure.

... I listened to adults who had lived in the world and experienced a complex feeling: sadness, pity for the old man and protest. It seemed to me that adults, out of the decency adopted at the funeral, were deliberately silent about the fact that Surin had

been drinking in recent years. A few words about the fact that the old man lacked the courage to live does not count. "How is it that you didn't have the courage to live?! Was he the only one injured? Only in our house on Zorya, in addition to the Surins, two more funerals were brought. But people have coped with grief and live like humans. "Was it really so difficult to put the red-faced zabuldygs out of the apartment and say to yourself: "No!"

But by the way former neighbors persistently listed the shelves, kitchen tables and stools, shutters and doors made by Surin, which "will never wear out," I began to understand that the measure of the good he brought was immeasurably higher than the last, stupidly lived years. No, Surin did not perish. And people saw off not the pathetic, abandoned drunkard, but the Master! Of course, if we lived on Zorya, the old man would not be so lonely... I remember very well his clean closet, with gauze curtains in the floor of the window. Once upon a time, a long time ago, he drove goldfinches and was friendly with all the boys of our yard. He lived quietly, as if afraid to disturb the peace of his forever departed wife and son, who remained in everything in his room: in the modest furniture, in the walls, in the smells. Probably, he loved his former home, loved the memory of the happy days of youth, hopes and protection from any indifferent touch. And here everything was alien to him - this spacious apartment with running water, a bathroom, a personal toilet, this asphalted street with large houses outside the window.

And then, when the coffin with Surin was carried by the men from the entrance, I thought that I could not imagine the old courtyard and childhood in general without this old man.

The wake was organized in a fold. A lot of friends of Yakov Ivanovich were sent to the wake. They quickly got drunk and talked noisily, like in a pub.

After the funeral, Lidka and I smashed chairs to the neighbors and helped clean the apartment. The bed was not assembled, they just put the net and backs in their original place against the wall. The net was covered with a green blanket.

"Edik, come here," Lidka called to me. She was looking at something on the bookcase.

The bookcase stood by the window. It was intricately decorated: twisted racks on top are connected by railings and covered with carved ligature. On the middle shelf are thick and thin books. Several volumes of an old encyclopedia, pre-war school textbooks with yellow spines and a brand new three-volume Pushkin book in a blue calico binding. Upstairs, under the railing, in a homemade plywood frame, a photograph - a strong, bushy-haired guy in a two-tone jacket with a badge "Voroshilovsky shooter" indignantly looked into the lens through the eyes of Yakov Ivanovich. The guy stood with his hand on the shoulder of a seated round-faced, thin-browed woman. Probably, the woman was advised to smile, and she tried, and the photographer captured this attempt - a tense and ugly smile.

- This is the son of Yakov Ivanovich, Fyodor. He burned down in a tank in the battles for Moscow. And Surin's wife, Varvara Timofeevna, died in the bombing," Lida said. "You know.

I put the picture in place next to the box from under the "Kazbek", which contained Surin's awards: the Order of the Red Star and two medals. They were removed from the velvet pad and put here.

Lida handed me a volume of Pushkin:

"Here, read it.

"Dear Yakov Ivanovich Surin, a front-line soldier, the father of Fyodor Surin, who died heroically in the battles for our Motherland, from students of the 7th "A" class of seven-year school No. 8. In memory of the meeting.

The dedicatory inscription was deduced very carefully, under the ruler, in purple ink, and the numbers were written for some reason in black ink, in large ...

Late in the evening I see off Lidka. Above the city there is a high sky with thick bright stars. We are going slowly. A thin ice crunches underfoot. From today I have a dull, heavy head and something in my chest hurts.

We're talking about Surin.

"He was only sixty years old, and he looked so old, didn't he?" Lidka hides her hands in her coat pockets, and her shoulders lift.

- Probably from grief. Yes, even drank.

"He also drank in the old yard," sighs Lidka. - Only in a strange way. No one took it seriously. He will buy a quarter, show it to everyone. And then he'll have a drink with one of ours and go to the grave," Lidka says in a voice that is not her own. - Of course, then we were all together. And now everyone is buried in their hole. Yakov Ivanovich used to meet, invite to visit. Begs. I only visited him once and was in a new apartment. Dad agreed with Yakov Ivanovich to make a mezzanine for us.

- Mezzanines were needed. I just couldn't go in, huh?

"What are you, Edik?" Lidka stops, looks surprised. "Don't I understand.

"So what of it! You didn't come, yes another, yes a third. I also never deigned. Do you remember when you gave me the pies to Surin? If only you knew how happy he was. He persuaded me to drink tea with him. I was stubborn, refused. You see, there was no time. So I want to understand, Lida, why did we become like this? Was it really difficult for us to sit with the old man, talk? Now Surin is gone. The cemetery was demolished and buried. Baba Vera squeezed out a tear. If we forgot about him, about the living, do you think someone will remember him - dead?! - I say passionately, but I feel something resisting inside, the words are unconvincing, with some kind of false touch.

"You're wrong, Edik. Our grandfather Yasha will be remembered. Surin defended their homeland. Is this forgotten," Lidka objects excitedly. - Today I found out that Yakov Ivanovich was not allowed to go to the front by the medical commission. He was so indignant. Imagine, I went to the regional party committee. And insisted. And what did we even know about him? In our yard, we always adjusted something to the old man. Do you remember that

we pulled the threads between the acacia and the gate, and Surin got entangled in them and almost fell? Did we really want him to fall?

- No, no. They wanted to scare, as a joke. One of the threads was connected to a powder cracker. I constructed.

"I don't remember. Did it explode?

- The misfire came out.

- Abnormal, they decided to make fun of a disabled person ... You know, Edik, he made me a crib and also, for my birthday, gave me a cage with a goldfinch. I remember this very well. Dad had just been demobilized. After the war, Dad served for another three years. He fought with Bandera. By the way, Yakov Ivanovich helped dad get a job at the plant as a turner. Before the war, my father worked in some workshops and did not want to return to that "sharashkin office". And Surin worked at the plant at that time.

- Yakov Ivanovich also helped us. Once, while still in that house, he hung the doors and repaired the shutters for us. Mom gave him his father's vest, and I, bad, regretted it.

"I remember him in that vest. Boatswain," Lidka laughs, but immediately becomes serious. - Mom says that Yakov Ivanovich was very fond of Varvara Timofeevna. Very, you know. If it weren't for the war...

We are standing at the entrance to the Lidkin House. Yellow, in a metal mesh, lantern above the heads well illuminates Lida's sad face. We remember our house on Krasnykh Zor Street and from time to time we return to Surin's funeral. It's late, but I don't want to leave, and Lidka, in my opinion, is in no hurry either. Sometimes I light a cigarette. I take just a few puffs and throw it away. For some reason, tobacco is very bitter today.

"Have you noticed how old our yard has become?" How our mothers have grown old," says Lidka. - Have they seen a lot of good things in life? How much trouble, huh? One joy is us. All hope is on us...

"We won't let you down, Lid. We won't let you down.

"You know, Edik, I read in one book that a person's childhood is not the past. You know, not the past, because there is nothing serious about it, well, as if deeply conscious to the end. In childhood, a person lives among miracles, as in a dream. Without pain and suffering. And the present past is a great memory. It is a struggle and suffering.

"So, in your opinion, our childhood is a dream. So, there was no one and nothing around. Only ghosts. And Surin is here, and my father. And our barracks on the Dawns, - I break down. - There is no past, so we are empty and stupid.

"No, no, Edik. That's not what I'm talking about. Of course, I do not agree with the writer. Childhood is our memory. But even if it's a dream. Can you imagine how special it is?! - Lidka thinks, then asks: - Listen, where did the gypsy tinsmith go from our city? Remember, there was such a bearded man with a tin pipe on his shoulder. He kept shouting: "I'm fixing it ... about... Dra... Astryuli".

"Lidka, do you remember him?" I thought about him too. Really, where did he go? I think he fixed all the pots and buckets in our town and moved on.

"You see how," Stepankova shakes her head. "First, our house was broken, then the tinsmith left the city, and now Yasha's grandfather has died...

Here Lidka looks into my eyes for a long time. She wants to tell me something, something very important. I feel. And he can't, because he's terribly worried. And I'm also worried and I also want to say something to her. Our excitement has nothing to do with a funeral, with a long day filled with painful events. A completely unfamiliar excitement.

"Lida, and we stay," I say suddenly, and my voice loses its strength, strays into a whisper. "We stayed.

"Yes, we did," Lida says, and for some reason also in a whisper.

"And you're still walking, well... Are you friends with him? With that guy," I ask and take her hand, and Lida leans forward slightly, cringing.

"What guy?" - she does not understand after all.

- Well, that one. You came to see him, didn't you? To us there ... Do you remember that you were still in a hurry to see him, asking me to bring the pies to Surin.

"Stupid. I never went on a date with anyone. And then I was in a hurry to train. You don't ask me why I went there again, okay?

She lowers her eyes.

And then I begin to understand everything. Absolutely everything! Who said childhood is not the past? Who could invent such a thing?!

I stroke her palm and we are silent for a long time. We are alone.

- Lida, if we lived on Zorya, probably, everything would not be like that. I'm kind of like that," I whisper.

"Something like that. But it's late, Edik, and we have to go home. True, they are waiting for us at home, because we are still small," Lida answers.

"You go if you want, and I'll stand still."

Lidka touches my cheek with her palm, does not let go.

"Little boy, you don't understand that I'm going to go to the competition tomorrow and I'll be gone for a long time.

"But you'll be back, won't you?" You'll be back...

- Edka, Lord, is it you?!

* * *

I run barefoot through a long walk-through yard. I'm suffocating from running fast - the sea immediately begins outside the yard! The sun is shining brightly because summer has arrived. From the thick blue of the clear sky, the courtyard seems to be sprinkled with copper sulphate. I'm not running alone, the guys of our and neighboring houses are with me along Krasnykh Zor Street. At the gate, old man Surin stands with his legs wide apart and his arms waved. He's wearing a vest. He is, as always, shaggy and cheerful.

The old man laughs terribly and strives to catch one of us, but we slip through his huge fingers and forward to the sea! We jump into the water - the water is some kind of copper color. Golden, sonorous spray is flying. And suddenly I see Lidka Stepankova next to me. Her hair is wonderfully scattered over her shoulders, and so I want to touch them. But I can't reach it. Lidka swims away from me and laughs. And then huge waves cover our house. It is not there - only two racks of Uncle Kostina's antenna stick out.

I'm left alone. Horror seizes me - I am alone in an empty sea. Lidka is far away, almost at the horizon, a girl with flowing hair. A night bather, closed with the sea, frozen in it, like a statuette cast in bronze. She doesn't hear my desperate cry, "Lee... Yes... ah, Lidochka..."

I wake up. There are tears in my eyes.

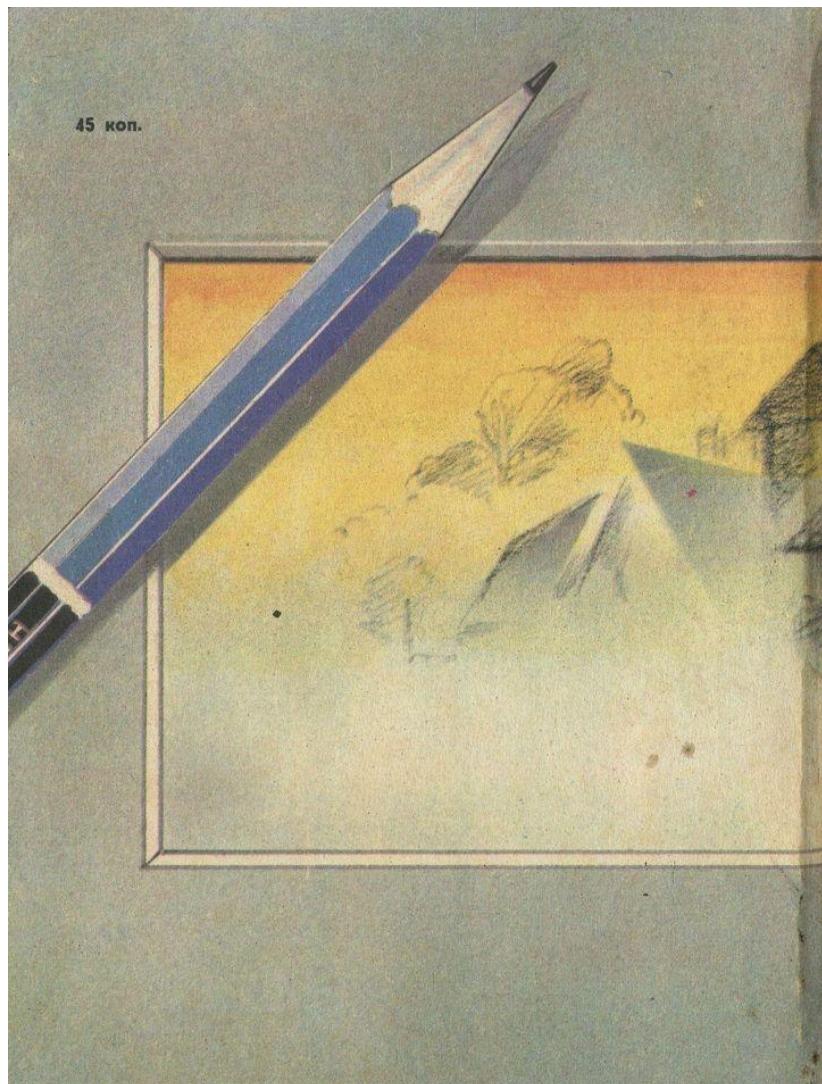
Morning.

... Sometimes it seems to me that what I have lived - beautiful and sad - was, as it were, not in my life. That I then went into the distance with a clear sense not of loss, but only of hopes and gains. But I irretrievably lost something in this thirst for movement and search.

No, it was, it was a quiet spring morning after the funeral of Yakov Ivanovich Surin. And life went on. Mom was busy in the kitchen. The water was rustling in the bathroom, and in the loudspeaker the now forgotten Ruzhena Sikora boldly sang ...

I get up. I'm going to have a tough day. I will finish the picture. Today I have to put a final smear in it.

Yes, I have to finish the picture and start a new one. I already know what it's going to be about.



notes

1

Horse race - the so-called gasoline lamp by the miners.