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In the Pupil

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IN THE PUPIL

1

HUMAN LOVE is fearful and keeps its eyes tightly shut: it dives into the dusk, it scurries through dark corners, it murmurs, it hides behind the curtains and extinguishes the light.

I am not jealous of the sun. Let him look on—as long as he does so together with me, amidst the popping of buttons. Let him peep through the window. That does not bother me.

Yes, I have always been of the opinion that noon is much more suited to romance than midnight. The moon, on which so many enraptured exclamations have been wasted, that sun of the night under a blue petty-bourgeois lampshade—I cannot tolerate it. The story of one “yes” and its consequences, to which the present novella is devoted, began in the bright sun, by a window opened wide into the light. I am not responsible if in the end it got caught between day and night, in the dim crack of dawn. She is responsible—not the story, but that *she*, whose “yes” I awaited passionately and for so long.¹

However, even before that “yes,” certain events took place which necessarily must be mentioned. One can affirm with conviction that in love the eyes, well, how to put it, always skip ahead. It makes sense: they are more mobile and can do their thing, that is, they can see *through*. While the bodies of the lovers, clumsy and huge in comparison with their eyes, hide from each other behind the fabric of their clothes, while even the words huddle and hesitate on the lips, afraid to jump in the air, the eyes—outstripping the rest—give themselves to each other.

Oh, how clearly I remember that bright day, shot through with azure sky, when both of us, having moved to the window which was thrown open into the sun, simultaneously, as if by pre-arrangement, looked . . . needless to say, not out the window, but at each other. At this very moment, the *third* appeared: it was a tiny man that stared at me out of the pupil of her eye, my diminished likeness, who had already made it all the way

¹Krzhizhanovskij is playing on the feminine grammatical gender of the Russian word *istorija* (story, history). The previous sentence therefore literally reads “I am not responsible if in the end *she* got caught between day and night, . . .”

over there. I did not yet dare touch the hem of her clothes, but he . . . I smiled and nodded to him. The little fellow responded politely. But the eyes were abruptly pulled aside, and I did not meet him again until the “yes” itself.

When it called me, that tiny, hardly audible “yes,” I was not about to ask again; seizing her submissive hands, I saw *him*: displayed in the pupil’s round window, *he* drew his animated face nearer and nearer. For a moment, the eyelashes were pulled over him. Then he popped up again and disappeared: his face, as I managed to notice, was glowing with joy and proud satisfaction; he resembled a successful administrator, bustling and fussing about somebody else’s business.

From then on, in every new encounter, before finding her lips with mine, I would look under the eyelashes of the beloved, in search of *him*, the tiny manager of love: he was always at his post, punctual and obliging, and no matter how tiny his face, I always guessed its expression with precision—be it boyishly cheerful, be it a little tired, be it tranquil and pensive.

Once, during one of our meetings, I told my lady friend of the little fellow who had sneaked into her pupil, and also my thoughts about him. To my surprise, my account was received coldly and even with a touch of hostility.

“What nonsense,” and I saw, how her pupils—with an instinctive motion—moved away from me. I took her head in the palms of my hands and tried to use force searching for him. But she, laughing, lowered her eyelids.

“No, no”—and it seemed to me that in her laughter there was also something other than laughter.

Sometimes you get used to some trifle, you think up a meaning for it, you philosophize it,—and lo and behold, the trifle lifts its head, begins to challenge what is important and real, insolently demanding a greater share of Being and conceptualization. I had already started to get used to the trifling fellow from the pupil; when I was saying this or that, it was comforting to see that both *she* and *he* were listening. In addition, a new game gradually emerged in the routine of our encounters (lovers will try just about anything). The game consisted in the following: the woman would hide the fellow and I would seek him: along with that went many kisses and much laughter. And so it happened once (to this day it is strange and difficult for me to think about it) . . . once, when

my lips were approaching hers, I looked in her eyes and saw: the man who looked out from under the eyelashes nodded to me—his face was sad and guarded—and suddenly he turned his back sharply and with mincing step walked away into the pupil.

“Well, come on, kiss,” and the lids were pulled over him.

“Come back!” I shouted and, forgetting myself, gripped her shoulders with my fingers. Frightened, the woman raised her eyes, and in the depth of her enlarged pupil I glimpsed once more the outline of the tiny me, walking away.

I kept silent throughout the alarmed inquiries, concealing the answer. I sat, looked aside, and knew: the game was over.

2

For several days I did not show myself—not to her, nor to anyone. Then a letter found me: inside a narrow, cream-colored envelope, with some ten question marks: had I suddenly gone on a trip, was I sick? “Perhaps that is it—I’m sick,” I thought, after rereading the slanting web of lines, and decided to go—immediately, not wasting a minute. But not far from her house, I sat down on a street bench to wait for dusk. No doubt it was cowardice, completely absurd cowardice: I was afraid—do you understand—afraid not to see what already I had not seen once before. It seems the easiest thing would have been to search pupils with pupils right then and there. Probably it had been no more than an ordinary hallucination—an ocular specter. But that was exactly the point, that the very need for verification itself seemed to me a sign of the little fellow’s independent, real being in the pupil, that it appeared to me as a symptom of illness, of mental disorder. The impossibility of the absurd trifle—as I thought then—had to be disproved purely by means of logic, without giving in to the temptation of an experiment: after all, a series of real actions undertaken for the sake of something unreal will give the latter a certain share in reality. Of course I easily succeeded in hiding from myself how terrified I was: I was sitting on the bench because the weather was nice, because I was tired, because all things considered a man from a pupil was not a bad topic for a story—and why not now, in my free time, plan one, even if only in general outline. Finally, the evening came on and admitted me into the house. In the dark vestibule I heard “who is there”: the voice was hers, but a touch *other*, more precisely—for another.

“It’s about time. Finally!”

We entered the room. Her arm, gleaming white through the dusk, stretched towards the light switch.

“Don’t.”

I pulled her towards me violently, and we loved each other with a love that had no eyes, that was tightly wrapped in darkness. That night we did not light a fire. After we had agreed upon a new rendezvous, I left feeling like a person who had been granted a reprieve.

There is no need to tell this in detail: the farther along, the less interesting. In essence, any person wearing a plain gold band can finish narrating this chapter: our meetings were abruptly moved from noon to midnight and became viscous, blind and sleepy like the night. Our love gradually turned into the love of the average citizen, complete with double bed, and requiring sophisticated supplies—everything from soft slippers to the night potty. I agreed to anything—the fear of running into her pupils and finding them empty, without me, woke me up an hour before dawn every morning. I would get up quietly, put on my clothes, trying not to disturb the sleep of my beloved, and leave on tip-toe. At first these early disappearances seemed strange to her. Then that, too, became part of the routine. Thank you very much, person with a ring on your finger, from here on I will narrate myself. And every time, walking in the chilly urban pre-dawn to my own place, at the other end of town, I would contemplate the man from the pupil. Gradually, from one meditation to another, the thought of him stopped frightening me: if before, I was afraid of his real being and thought of him with alarm and suspicion, now his nonexistence seemed sad to me. His very ghostliness and illusory nature.

“How many of these tiny reflections do we disseminate around the eyes of others,” I would wonder, walking along lonely and deserted streets, “and if one were to collect them, the tiny likenesses, settled in other people’s pupils, into an entire population of modified, diminished ‘I’s’. . . . Of course, they exist when I look at them, but then I, too, only exist while somebody, I don’t know who, looks at me. And if those eyes were to close . . . nonsense. But if it is nonsense, if I am not somebody’s vision, but exist all by myself, then that one, in the pupil, must also exist.”

Here my sleepy thoughts usually ended up in a tangle, and I had to sort them out all over again.

“Strange. Why did he have to go away? And where did he go? Well, fine, let’s assume that her pupils are empty. What follows from that? Why do I need some tiny reflection that resembles a face? Whether he exists or not—isn’t it all the same? And how could it happen that some minuscule pupillary gnome dares to mess with my business, ghostify my life and separate two human beings?”

Having hit upon this thought, it would happen that I was ready to turn around, to wake up the sleeping woman, and to extract the secret from under her eyelids: was he there or was he not?

But I would never return before evening; more than that, if there was light in the room, I would turn my face away and not respond to her caresses. I was, probably, gloomy and rude, until the darkness would finally blindfold us. Then, courageously, I put my face close to hers and asked her, over and over, whether she loved me. And the nightly routine took over again.

3

On one of those nights I felt—through the layers of sleep—that an invisible something had taken hold of a lash on my left eyelid and was pulling it down painfully. I opened my eyes: some somersaulting little speck flitted down my cheek into my aural cavity and screamed shrilly into my ear:

“Damn it! It’s like knocking at an empty apartment: no response.”

“What is it?” I articulated quietly, not knowing for sure whether this was reality or one dream replacing another.

“Not what, but who—first of all. And second—bring your ear to the pillow, so that I can jump out. More. Here we go.”

Next to the edge of the pillowcase that seemed strikingly white through the dawn’s gray air sat the little person from the pupil. Leaning on the white fibers, he hung his head and breathed heavily like a traveler who has completed a long and difficult hike. His face was sad and concentrated. In his hands lay a black book with gray clasps.

“So, you are not a figment of my imagination?!” I exclaimed, looking the little person over in surprise.

“What a stupid question,” he cut me off, “and moreover, don’t make any noise: otherwise we’ll wake up her over there. Put your ear closer. There you are. I have something to tell you.”

He stretched out his tired legs, settled more comfortably, and began in a whisper:

There is no need to elaborate on my move into the pupil. We both know and remember it well. I liked my new quarters: full of crystalline reflections, with the window in a round iridescent frame, it seemed cozy and cheerful to me; the convex pane was carefully washed with a tear, at night the automatic curtains were lowered—in a word, an apartment with amenities. True, to the back stretched a dark corridor that led one knew not where; but I spent most of my time at the windowsill, waiting for your arrival. Whatever was there—behind my back—did not interest me. Once one of your arranged meetings did not take place: I was pacing back and forth along the corridor, trying not to walk too far, so that at any moment I would be able to meet you. Meanwhile the day was fading beyond the round opening of the pupil. “He’s not coming,” I thought. I became bored. At a loss how to entertain myself, I decided to walk to the end of the corridor. But as I mentioned before, it was dim in the pupil, and after a few steps I found myself in utter darkness. My outstretched hand did not encounter anything. I already wanted to turn back when my attention was attracted by a soft muffled sound which emerged from there, from the depths of the narrow passage. I tried to listen: it resembled the sluggish singing of several voices, out of tune, but determined to drag along some sort of melody. It even seemed to me that my ear distinguished individual words: “twig,” “death”—the rest was incomprehensible.

The phenomenon seemed curious to me, but I decided that it would be more reasonable to return to my old place before the lowering of the lid would block with darkness my retreat.

That was not the end of the story. The very next day, even without leaving my place, I heard the voices again behind my back. They were combined in a mad cacophonous hymn: the words were still hardly distinguishable, but it was completely clear that the choir consisted exclusively of male voices. That circumstance made me sad and thoughtful. It would be necessary to explore the passage which led towards the interior. I would not say that I was very eager to begin the search, with the risk of stumbling upon who knew what, and to lose my way back to the window and the world. For the next two or three days the occurrence did not re-

peat itself. “Perhaps I hallucinated?”—I thought, trying to calm myself. But once, in bright daylight, when the woman and I sat each at our respective windows, waiting for an encounter with you, the acoustic phenomenon appeared again, and this time with unexpected brightness and strength: a disorganized jumble of words, viscous and sticky, repeated itself time and again, crept into my ears, and their meaning was such that I firmly decided to reach the singers.

I was overpowered by curiosity and impatience. But I did not want to leave without giving you some warning: we parted—remember?—perhaps somewhat unexpectedly for you—and I quickly walked towards the interior of the pupil. It was absolutely quiet. The light that for a while stretched behind me along the narrow cave gradually weakened and dwindled. Soon my steps sounded in perfect darkness. I walked, groping with my hands for the slippery walls of the passage, halting from time to time to listen. Finally a yellow, dead light flickered dimly in the distance: probably the glow of decay on the marsh emits just such a sad, muddy light. I was suddenly overcome with exhaustion and dull indifference. “What am I looking for, what do I want in these catacombs,” I asked myself, “why should I exchange the sun for this rotten, yellow mire?” Maybe I would still have turned back, but at that very moment the singing about which I was about to forget returned. I could already distinguish individual voices leaping from the bizarre hymn:

Li- li- li-, little fe-, little fellow,

Lest the pupils approve, don't you dare make your move.

Odd.

You're in the pupil, did the trick? Keep in mind: there is a twig
Stick your neck in the noose—gone. One wedge pries the other
loose.

Even.

You're quicker than the eyelid, kid: watch yourself, do not skid.

Lives divide—death inside. Days drain to the same dregs.

O - dd.

Little fellow, fello-fell-fe-f:

Was and isn't. Trace erased. Poof!

Even.

The nonsense drew me like a hook the fish. A round opening from which seeped a yellow light was approaching to meet my steps. I took hold of the rim of the hole and stuck my head inside: a dozen throats were howling from the void beneath; the yellow glow blinded me. Straining to see something, I bent over the abyss, but at that moment the slimy edges of the opening gave way, and I plunged downwards, flailing helplessly in the air. The bottom of the cave was obviously not far down; quickly, I raised myself on my elbows, sat up and looked around. Gradually my eyes adjusted to the light and began to distinguish the surroundings: I was sitting in something of an opaque glass bottle with pulsating walls—right in the middle of its convex bottom. Below spread a glowing yellow spot; around me, there were some ten human contours, half-hidden in the shade—heels in the light, heads to the wall—solemnly finishing the chorus:

Little fellow, fello-fell-fe-f:
Was and isn't. Trace erased. Poof!
Even.

My question, "Where am I?" was lost in the howl. In search of an exit, I attempted to stand up on the bubble, but my very first step pulled me down the slope. Under the joyful roar of general laughter I landed, feet in the air, between two of the well's inhabitants.

"It's getting crowded here," grumbled my neighbor to the left, moving to the side. But the one on my right turned his face towards me with concern: it was, I would say, of the part-time professor's type, with an erudite, bulging forehead, thoughtful eyes, a little, pointed beard, and a carefully groomed balding skull.

"Who are you all? And where am I?"

"We are . . . predecessors. You understand? A woman's pupil is like any other residence: first they move you in, then they move you out: and everyone ends up here. I, for example, am the Sixth, that one, to your left, is the Second. You are the Twelfth. It is true, we are not arranged strictly by numbers, but in the order of association. Do you get it, or should I simplify further? But then . . . perhaps you hurt yourself?"

"Against the wall?"

"No sir, against the meaning."

We kept silent for about a minute.

“Yes, by the way, don’t forget to register as forgotten. Oh, these women’s pupils . . .” he scratched his little beard, “pupils calling you under the shade of the lashes. Think of it: such a marvelous entrance, dressed in the gleam of the rainbow . . . and such a dark and ugly pit. There was a time when I, too . . .”

I interrupted: “And who’s responsible for the registrations?”

“Quagga.”

“I’ve never heard such a name.”

“Well, have you heard of telegony, then?”

“No.”

“Hmm . . . In that case you will not have heard of Lord Morton’s mare, either.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“One thing has to do with the other. There was a mare—actually, I’m sorry, first there was Lord Morton. The mare gave birth to a striped foal from Quagga, and Morton gave birth to the theory of telegony from Quagga and the mare. The thing is, no matter with whom they bred the mentioned mare, her offspring was always striped, in the memory of Quagga, so to speak, who was her first. From here, conclusions were drawn that the link between the female organism with *her first cannot be severed* and continues to live on, as it were, within future relationships—that it cannot be washed off or canceled. The first inhabitant of the pupil, at the bottom of which you and I are located, in as much as chronology favors him, claims the role of Quagga. It is true, as I have more than once explained to him, that this theory was already disproved long ago by Mr. Ewart, but this eccentric character keeps trying to play the dictator, claiming that he is the ground from which we pump, and that all of our attempts to repeat the unrepeatable . . .”

“Tell me,” I interrupted, “but this telegony or whatever you call it, is it really disproved once and for all, or . . .?”

“I knew it,” smiled the part-time professor, “I noticed it a while ago: the higher the number, the higher the interest in the question whether love is striped or not. But let’s talk about it later. Do you hear: Number One is calling you.”

“Forgotten Number Twelve, over here!”

I got up and, sliding my hands along the walls, walked towards the sound. I stepped over legs which stretched across my path and noticed that the outlines of the pupillers were of varying degrees of clarity and definition. Some of them so faded into the dim yellow glow of the floor that I unwittingly bumped into them, not noticing their drab, half-erased figures. Suddenly two invisible but firm hands took hold of my ankles.

“Please answer the following questions.”

I bent over in order to inspect the hands which shackled me, but I could not see them. Number One had faded out all the way and matched the color of the air. His invisible fingers liberated me and unlocked the clasps of the book. Of this one. Its pages, decorated with signs, were lifted and dropped, and lifted again, until an empty page opened which was marked with my number.

The form went on with dozens of questions. It began with the date of my move to the quarters, the reasons for the same, the proposed duration of my stay (across from this point it said, one above the other: a) for eternity, b) to the grave, c) until something better comes along—please underline the correct answer); it ended, it seems, with a list of diminutive and tender appellations and your relation to jealousy. Soon my page was filled. The invisible finger bent it slightly; underneath it, the gleam of blank pages.

“Well,” said Quagga, closing the book, “yet another neophyte; slowly but surely, the book is filling up. That’s all. I won’t keep you.”

I returned to my old place between the Second and the Sixth. The whitish little beard of the Sixth attempted to stretch towards me, but as it encountered my silence, it immediately hid in the shade.

For a long time, I sat, absorbed by speculations about the as yet blank pages of the book of residences. A sudden noise returned me to reality.

“Number Eleven, to the center!” cried Quagga’s voice.

“Eleventh, Eleventh,” could be heard from all sides.

“What is that?” I turned to my neighbor.

“The story on duty,” he clarified, “in the order of numbers: the next time you, too, will . . .”

I did not need to inquire in any more detail, since the number who had been called up was already climbing the bubble of the floor. His plump figure seemed immediately familiar to me. As he settled on the

yellow stain, my predecessor calmly looked around. His lips had caught the loose string of his pince-nez, and he was chewing on it thoughtfully, with a tiny movement of his sagging cheeks:

“Y-yes. It is funny to remember, but there was a time when my only goal, just as with all of you, was, one way or the other, honestly or dishonestly, to make it into the pupil of our hostess. And here we are. And now what?” He wrapped the string of his pince-nez around his finger, pulled the glass from his eyes and continued with a squint of distaste.

“A mantrap. Yes-sir. But let’s get down to business. The very first encounter decided everything. I remember: our *she* on that day was wearing a high neck black dress. Her face also seemed to me, so to speak, completely buttoned up. Her lips were pressed together sternly, her eyelids half lowered. The reason for her melancholy is now sitting to my left, our esteemed Number Ten. We all remember his story, which we listened to last time, for the forgotten do not forget. At that time I was not yet honored to know him. But of course, even then I already guessed that not all was well in the pupils which were hiding under the eyelashes,—and indeed, when I finally succeeded in glancing into the woman’s eyes, there was so much *abandonment* in them that I, who at the time was searching for appropriate pupils, immediately decided to occupy the empty quarters.

“But how was I to do that? Each has his own method of insinuating himself into someone’s soul. Mine consists in the accumulation of minor and preferably cheap favors: ‘Have you read such and such by so and so?’—‘No, but I would like to. . . .’ In the morning, a delivery boy hands her an uncut copy of the book. The eyes you intend to enter encounter under the binding a dedication full of respect and your signature. Whether the end piece of a hatpin is lost, or a needle for cleaning the petroleum stove—remember, carefully remember all those trifles, so that at the next meeting you can, with a grimace of loyalty, dig out the needle, the end piece, an opera ticket, some *pyramidon*, and who knows what else from the pocket of your vest. For, in essence, a person penetrates into another person in tiny doses, in small, hardly visible homunculi who in the end, when they have accumulated in sufficient number, take over the consciousness. Among them there is always one who is just as pitifully minute as the others—but if he leaves, all sense departs with him, you see, and the whole atomistic order collapses at once and irreparably. But to you, pupillers, one does not need to spell that out.

“So, I set in motion a system of tiny favors, everywhere—among the knick-knacks, books and pictures which clung on the walls of the room where our hostess then lived, my envoys began to appear. Her eyes could not avoid the tiny homunculi who had reached all the corners, and who whispered my name from every fissure. Sooner or later, I figured, one or the other would squeeze into her pupil. But the work advanced slowly; the woman’s eyelids, as if they weighed God knows how much, almost did not budge at all, which created for me, the man from the pupil, a rather difficult situation.

“I recall that in response to my n-th favor the woman remarked, with a smile somewhere to the side, ‘You, it seems, are courting me. It’s useless.’

“‘That’s all right,’ I responded obediently, ‘during a train stop halfway on a journey to the Crimean coast, I happened to look out of the window. I saw a pitiful small brick building that rose among the yellow patches of fields; on the building there was a board, and the board said: Station Patience.’

“The eyes of my interlocutor opened. ‘In your opinion, then, you are halfway there? Curious.’

“I do not remember what I blabbed in response, but I do remember that the train, when it had arrived at the station Patience, did not move again for much too long. It was then that I decided to draw upon your support, my worthy predecessors. I did not know yet who and how many you were, but instinctively I felt that her pupils were, so to speak, inhabited, that some unknown predecessors had bent over them, their reflections. . . . So, in a word, I decided to dip a spoon into the past, to the very bottom, to stir, and to cloud it up anew. If a woman *already* does not love one, and has not *yet* started loving another, that *yet*, if there is even a drop of common sense in it, should shake up the *already* and not let it rest until it has revealed all the points of access and entry.

“I wielded my spoon approximately like this: ‘One does not love people like me. I know. The one you loved did not resemble me. Am I right? The one or the ones? Won’t you tell? Of course. Probably, he was . . .’ With the stubborn determination of a worker whose task it is to stir malt syrup, I continued to turn my questions. At first, her response was silence, then half articulated words. On the surface of her consciousness

I saw bubbles that had risen from the bottom grow and pop, those momentary iridescences that seemed to have been buried in the past forever. Encouraged by my success, I continued my work stirring. Oh, I knew perfectly well that it is not possible to mess with the stimuli of an emotion without getting the emotion itself messed up. The once-loved images, raised from the depths, immediately descended back into darkness. But the feeling which was awakened along with them, and the quivers one thought had long ceased, refused to quiet down and maintained themselves on the surface. The woman's eyes somehow more and more frequently glanced up to meet my questions. More than once did I bend my knees to prepare to jump. . . . But that huge double of mine, in whose pupil I was at the time, because of his clumsiness and bulk kept wasting one good moment after another. Finally, the decisive day arrived. I, or we, found her at a window; her shoulders were hunched up, shivering under a warm shawl.

“‘What's wrong with you?’

“‘Nothing. A fever. Never mind.’ But a man who upholds the method of small services is not allowed not to mind. I turned to the exit at once, and after a quarter of an hour I was ordered, ‘Turn away.’

“‘Staring at the circular motion of my watch's big hand, I heard the rustle of silk and the snap of a fastener. The thermometer was being appropriately placed. ‘Well?’

“‘98.6.’

“‘The moment had come when even my clumsy giant could no longer mistake the diagnosis. We moved towards the woman. ‘You don't know how. Permit me.’

“‘Don't.’

“‘First you have to shake it. Like that. And then . . . ’

“‘Don't you dare.’

“‘Their eyes were close to each other. I seized the moment—and leaped. The woman's pupils were covered with that characteristic film which is the most reliable sign of . . . Well, in a word, I miscalculated the jump and ended up hanging on to one of her eyelashes, which was swinging back and forth like a branch in a storm. But I know my business, and after a few seconds, having climbed through the pupil inside, agitated and out of breath, I heard behind me first the sound of a kiss, and then the ring of the thermometer being dropped on the floor. Her eyelids immediately shut me off from the outside. But I am not curious. With

a sense of fulfilled duty, I settled under the round dome and contemplated the difficult and dangerous profession of the man from the pupil. The future has shown that I was right. Moreover, the future turned out to be gloomier than my gloomiest anticipations.”

The Eleventh fell silent and sat down, stooping sadly over the luminous elevation. And the forgotten chanted—quietly at first, then louder and louder—their strange hymn:

Li- li- li-, little fe-, little fellow,
Lest the pupils approve—don't you dare make your move.
Odd.

“Obnoxious creature,” I concluded, as I met the questioning gaze of the Sixth.

“One of the odd ones. They are all like that.”

In confusion, I asked what he meant.

“Oh, sure. Didn't you notice: on one side of you, you find me, the Sixth, on the other, the Second and the Fourth. We, the even ones, keep to ourselves because, you see, all of the odd ones, as if by design, are jerks and bullies. So for us, for people with quiet and cultivated inclinations . . .”

“But how do you explain that?”

“How? What can I tell you: probably, a heart has a rhythm of its own, alternating wills, a sort of dialectics of love which changes thesis for antithesis, jerks for humble and peaceful characters like you and me.” He giggled good-naturedly and winked. But I did not want to laugh. The Sixth also wiped the mirth off his face.

“You see,” he started, moving towards me, “one should not rush to judgment. The audience shapes the style of the orator—as you will soon prove for yourself. A certain perceptiveness on the part of the Eleventh cannot be disputed. Let us put it this way: one turns to diminutives for the expression of augmented emotional processes; the significance expands—the sign shrinks. By diminutive names we call those who are *more* to us than others, and not by accident in Old Slavonic the words *mil* and *mal* are equivalent.² Yes, just like the Eleventh I am convinced

²*Mil* and *mal* are Russian words for “dear” and “small” respectively.

that women do not love those huge humans who shake us from their pupils into other pupils, but precisely us, the wandering little homunculi who spend our whole lives finding sanctuary in other people's eyes. Moreover, if we disregard the banality of the theory of small favors, then here again the Eleventh is correct: to make someone love you—that means to gain control over the so-called associative mass of the one to be pulled into love; more than that—love proper, schematically speaking, is nothing other than a particular instance of *two-way association*. . . .”

“What is that supposed to . . . ?”

“It's like this: in classifying our associations one way and the other, psychologists failed to notice that the connection between the presentations may be either one-way or two-way. . . . Wait, wait,” he hastened, noticing my impatience, “a minute of boredom, and then it will be interesting—you will see. The seducer, of course, combines not an idea with an image, nor an image with a concept, but the image (of a person) with an emotion; he must remember that this process moves either from the emotion to the image, or from the image to the emotion. And until you close, so to speak, a double circuit, until What? It is not clear? Why don't you think for once, I can't think for you. Examples? Fine.

“First scenario, the emotion is already at hand, but it is not directed, not associated with an image; at first ‘the soul longed for someone,’—objectless worries, a discharge into the void—then the ‘some-’ drops off, and at this particular moment it is extraordinarily easy and unproblematic to occupy the vacant ‘-one.’ Second scenario—when the image has to wait for the emotion: here the growing together of the associative elements sometimes proceeds in a slow and difficult manner. The romance of youth more often than not takes the first route, that of later years—the second. But the law of associations brings the lovers an inordinate amount of trouble. In the case of a smoothly-running love, every time the so-called beloved person enters the room, the feeling of loving him will necessarily appear by association. By the same token one might expect that any sexual agitation would immediately call up the image of the same much-discussed ‘beloved person.’ But in reality, the feeling and the image normally connect like the currents in a cathodic electric circuit with a built-in detector, i.e. *unidirectionally*. The majority of relationships are built, in essence, on these unidirectional semi-loves. The first type of relation, when the associative current flows only from the image to the emotion,

but not the other way around, yields maximum infidelity, but good passion.

“Why? My God, he doesn’t understand anything. Well, instead of the detector, let’s take the blood flow through the heart. As it flows in one direction, the blood every time opens the heart’s valves, and as it moves in the other direction, it closes them, cutting off its own path by so doing. Here it is the same: every encounter is passionate; what is more, every thought entering the consciousness (in this case the image) causes the tide of passionate feelings to rise; the blood, so to speak, opens the valves for itself. But the emotion, as it emerges in the absence of the image carrier, easily takes different paths; people of that type of infatuatedness are infatuated only during encounters; the image of the chosen one always quickly finds the path to the feeling, but their feeling does not know the path to the chosen one: the blood, striving towards love, itself closes off the heart valves. You seem to be yawning. Nervous? Well. The second type of infatuatedness produces, if you will kindly note it, a small percentage of infidelities, but at the expense of a weakness of desire: an attack of love’s hunger evokes in consciousness —both during encounters and outside of them—always the same, the one and only image, but the image, if it entered the consciousness first, does not draw along the emotion: this kind of one-way association is very convenient for daily relationships, it is good for the family and it avoids catastrophes. But only the third case, the two-way association, when the image and the emotion are inseparable, produces what I might perhaps agree to call love. No, whatever you say, the Eleventh knows where the dog is buried, but he doesn’t know how to dig it up. I, on the other hand . . .”

“But why dig up an old carcass,” I exploded.

For about a minute, the Sixth was sitting in silence, with the appearance of a person who is carefully mending the torn thread of his thoughts. “Because the Eleventh made it precisely as far as, but did not go beyond, that fundamental and most pointed question for those who, like you and me, have ended up in this black pupillary pit and . . . It’s no secret, we all here suffer from a strange chronic colorlessness; time glides over us like an eraser over penciled lines, we perish like waves in a dead calm. Fading more and more, I will soon no longer be able to distinguish the tints of my thoughts, will lose any contour and fall into nothingness. More irksome than that is that along with me so many

observations, scientific facts and formulations will also perish. For had I climbed out of here, I would have shown to all of those Freuds, Adlers, and Mayers the true nature of forgetting. What could they, those pompous geniuses, those collectors of slips of the tongue and of the pen, oppose to a man who has walked out of a black pit, the very name of which is Forgetting. Unlikely though: it is easier to return from death than from here. It would be intriguing however.

“You know, from a young age all my thoughts have been absorbed in the problem of forgetting. My encounter with the problem occurred almost by chance. I was leafing through a volume of somebody’s verses, and all of a sudden:

Beyond the flight of birds, beyond the sheet of dust,
The sun’s disk was fading:
If I was forgotten,
Then right now, this very moment.

“As I started thinking about those few words, little did I suspect that, once I entered the thought, I would never leave it. Our mental images, I speculated then, constantly wander from consciousness into the unconscious and back. But some of them go so far into the unconscious that they cannot find their way back into consciousness. I became interested in the question how such an image dies. Does it go out slowly like smoldering coal, or like a candle, extinguished by a single breath; gradually or at once; after long and painful suffering or unexpectedly. At first I agreed with the poet; the process of forgetting appeared to me as an avalanche which takes a long time to prepare, but happens instantaneously: was—isn’t. I recall that I even used the Ebbinghaus mnemonic series to try to calculate the moment of disappearance, the washing away, the disintegration of this or that image.

“My attention was immediately captured by the question of forgotten emotions. Because it is actually very curious: a particular *she* meets *n* times with a particular *he*, during which encounters they both experience a certain excitement; but during the $n + 1$ st meeting, that *she* comes to that *he*, but the excitement does not come along. That *he*, obviously, tries to fake it and, even when he is alone again, performs a thorough search of his soul, trying to scare up what has been lost. But all in vain: to

remember the image of her who has left is still possible, but to remember the feeling, once it is gone, is absolutely impossible. The lizard, so to speak, has escaped, leaving its tail in someone's hand; the association between the image and the emotion has been dissociated.

“During my study of the cooling process which turns love into loathing, I could not but succumb to the analogies: it became immediately obvious to me that the cooling process of passions shares something with, let's say, that of a piece of sulfur. Removing calories from sulfur, we transfer its crystals from one system into another, that is, we make it change its form, make it assume a different appearance, image. More than that, it has been shown that the chemical body, phosphorus for example, when it is cooled gradually, not only changes its crystalline structure and color (violet, it turns red, and then black), but it also—at a certain stage of refrigeration—loses all form altogether, decrystallizes, becomes amorphous. It is thus a matter of capturing the moment when the loss of shape occurs. . . . Because, if one can observe that second when the sparkling piece of carbon we call a diamond is converted into ordinary coal which we fear will make us dirty, then why can't we observe the moment when 'I love' becomes . . .

“But even in the realm of chemical signs it was not easy to do. Just before a crystal deforms itself, loses its facets and becomes a shapeless, amorphous body, it traverses a stage of so-called *metastability*, something between form and formlessness. That analogy seemed convincing to me: the relationships of many, many people are precisely metastable, somewhere between the thawing of ice and the boiling point. It is curious, by the way, that metastability produces the highest coefficient of viscosity. The analogies led farther. A body heated to a high temperature, left to itself, will cool naturally and steadily; with emotion it is the same. Only by changing the emotion's objects, only by throwing ever new logs into our feeling, is it possible to maintain its elevated temperature. Here, I recall, it seemed to me that the analogies had led me into a dead end from which they would not be able to deliver me. But science, responding to my question concerning cases when a lowering of the temperature turns a crystal into an amorphous something, had in some sense given me the answer concerning the precise instances when the process of natural emotional cooling converts, as it were, diamond into coal, cherished into indifferent, formed into unformed. It turned out that the crystalline body which

undergoes cooling strives not so much to lose its form, not at all, but rather to *change* its form. But since the speed of the cooling exceeds the speed of recrystallization, the latter does not have time to come about, the particles are arrested by the cold halfway between one form and another, and the result is something frozen and unsightly or, to translate from chimisms to psychisms, something abject and forgotten.

“Under such conditions, a stable and lasting relationship can only be explained as a series of infidelities to one another, committed with each other. What are you staring at? Precisely so: for were one able to find at least one person who was absolutely faithful to such and such an image, which would be engraved in him like a drawing on a copper plate, then his love might be able to survive for, well, perhaps a day or two, and even that is unlikely. For the real object of love constantly changes, and it is possible to love you today only by cheating with you on the one you were yesterday.

“You know, if I were a writer, I would write a fantasy. My hero meets a girl—let’s say a young, charming creature, seventeen years old. Good. It’s love. It’s mutual. Then children. Year after year, they love each other as they used to, firmly, honestly, simply. Then, of course, there’s his asthma, her wrinkles under the eyes and her pallid skin. All of that is natural, habitual, familiar. Suddenly, the door opens, and she enters—but it is not her. More precisely, it is not her as she was an hour or a day ago, but the seventeen-year-old friend of the past, the same one he promised to love faithfully forever. My hero is perplexed and, I would say, stupefied. In confusion, the stranger surveys the aged and alien life. Her children, whom she did not bear. The bloated, semi-familiar man who is fearfully looking over his shoulder towards the door of the neighboring room: will the other one, the same one, come walking in? ‘Yesterday you gave me your word,’ says the youthful creature, but the asthmatic rubs his forehead in embarrassment. ‘Yesterday’—it had been about twenty years. Baffled and uncomprehending, he does not know what to do with his guest. At that moment, the steps of the other, the contemporary version of the same one, approach the door.

“ ‘You will have to go. If she sees you . . . ’

“ ‘Who?’

“ ‘You. Hurry.’ But it is too late. The door opens, and my hero, well, let’s say . . . woke up or something. . . .”

“You can’t carry on like that, Number Six, from psychology to chemistry, from chemistry to fiction. I can’t see how you’ll make it back from here to your crystallization—was it of images or of phosphorus and carbon.”

“Just watch me get back. Listen. Some A is being loved, but tomorrow today’s A will already be A_1 , and in a week he will be A_2 . Hence, to keep up with a constantly recrystallizing being, one needs constantly to readjust the image, that is, to reorient the emotion from one representation to the next—from one stepping stone to the next, from that to yet another, cheating on A_1 with A_2 , with A. . . . If this series of infidelities, which is determined by the changeability of the lovers, moves at the same speed as the change in the beloved, then everything is, so to speak, in place. Just like a person who is walking along and who after a hundred steps does not know that his body was falling a hundred times, but was always caught just in time by its muscles, the lovers, too, who have lived with each other through a sequence of weeks and perhaps years, never suspect that *however many encounters, that many betrayals.*”

He concluded with the air of a fashionable lecturer waiting for applause. But theory affects me like a sleeping potion. After a moment of silence, Number Six cranked up his tune again. Differential speeds, infidelities which fail to keep up with transformation, transformation which falls behind the infidelity. . . . My eyes closed and I plunged into a sleep. Even here I was chased by swirling swarms of tiny chemical and algebraic symbols. Amid piercing and nasty buzzing they consummated their mating flight.

I do not know for how long my sleep would have lasted, had I not been awakened by nudges and voices. “Number Twelve, to the center.”

“Let’s hear the newcomer.”

“Number Twelve. . . .”

There was nothing to be done. Pushed and urged on from right and left, I climbed the yellow glowing hill. Some ten pairs of eyes, squinting at me from the dark, were getting ready to absorb the secret of a couple, to snatch it up and distribute it over all their brains. I began my story: you are familiar with it. It passed by. When I finished, they started singing their strange hymn. Dull gloom seized me by the temples and, swinging from side to side, empty and dead, I sang with the others:

Stick your neck in the noose—gone. One wedge pries the other loose. Even.

Finally they let me return to my place, and I scrambled into the shadows. An intense tremor separated my teeth. Rarely have I felt more miserable. The little beard from the right nodded to me sympathetically, and Number Six, leaning towards my ear, whispered:

“Forget it. It’s not worth it. You’ve talked it out, take it easy. Boy, it really shook you.”

Dry fingers abruptly squeezed my hand.

“Listen,” I turned to Number Six, “myself and those others, I can see why we are here, but you, what do you need from love, why are you pacing the floor of this pupil with us? Your soul lives in the library, all you need are books. You should have stayed with them and with your formulas, should have kept your nose to the page instead of sticking it where it does not belong, intruding where you were not invited.”

The professor hung his head in embarrassment. “You see, it can happen to anybody. . . . They say that even Thales once, when he was walking with his face raised to the stars, fell into a well. And so did I. I didn’t mean to at all, but if the pupils are so readily offered . . . In a word, at the time I was lecturing on psychology at a women’s college. Well, you know, seminars, tutorials, papers and suchlike things. Naturally, the women students would come to me—sometimes even to my home—for topics, information, sources. Among them also the one, ours. Once, then again. At the time I did not know yet that for women, science, like everything else, becomes personified. Questions—answers—and more questions. I would not say that she was particularly quick. One day, when I was spelling out for her the logarithms of irritation in the Weber-Fechner equation, I noticed that she was not listening. ‘Please, repeat.’ She remained silent, did not raise her eyes, smiling about something. ‘I don’t understand why you keep coming here,’ I burst out and, apparently, banged the book on the table. Then she did raise her eyes to me, and I saw tears in them. I don’t know what one does in cases like that, but I moved closer to her and was careless enough to look into her moist pupils. That’s when . . .”

Number Six waved his hand scornfully and fell silent. Again the yellow mire of the pit closed over us. I let my eyes slide along the glassy

walls, cylindrical and closed, and thought, is this really my last dwelling, is it possible that the present has been taken away from me irrevocably and forever?

In the meantime, Number One's turn had come. A black spot settled on the yellow one. Next to it this very book. (Quagga never parted from it.)

"With the help of one intimate sign," began the black spot, "all women can be easily classified in four categories. To the first belong those who, once they grant you a date, allow you to undress and to dress them. To this type I would consign many high-class courtesans and in general those women who have mastered the art of turning their lovers into obedient slaves on whom they place all the responsibility and full feverish labor of unhooking and rehooking the fasteners and press-buttons which jump between the fingers. During this process, the first type behaves as if she had nothing to do with it, she closes her eyes and merely permits. The second category consist of those women whom you undress, but who dress themselves. Meanwhile, the man sits, looks through the window or at the wall, or smokes a cigarette. The third category—perhaps the most dangerous one—are those who themselves show the way to the fasteners and buttons, but afterwards make you lovingly serve them in all the tiny and touching details of their toilet. In most cases, these are malicious coquettes, lovers of ambiguous conversations, experienced predators, in a word, women of the 'come hither' type! Finally, the fourth category are those who undress and dress by themselves, while the partners wait, some more, some less patiently. These are one-ruble prostitutes, wilting wives, and whatnot. Now let me ask: in which of these categories do you, my worthy successors, place our hostess?"

The spot paused. Immediately voices rang out from all sides, one louder than the other, "In the first, obviously."

"What nonsense! In the second."

"Liar! In the third."

Over the screaming, someone's hoarse bass bellowed, "In the latest one."

The black spot shook with inaudible laughter.

"I knew it. The opinions could not but diverge. This book—here it is in my hands—knows a lot and about many. Of course, it still has quite a few blank pages, and we are not all gathered yet. But sooner or later, the time will come, when the hostess's pupils will lose their ability to

attract and to lure. Then, after I have committed the last one to these pages, I will occupy myself with the compilation of 'A Complete and Systematic History of One Charm.' With an index of subjects and names appended. My categories only provide a model with a certain methodological significance, as our own Number Six would say. The doors between categories are wide open, and it is not surprising that our *she* has walked through them all.

"It was with me, as you know, that she became a woman. How many years ago was that? Well, it *was*—that's all that matters. We were introduced at some kind of literary tea: 'She's just arrived from the province, please make her feel welcome.' An unfashionable dress which made her girlish fragility look rigid confirmed this. I tried to catch her eyes with mine, but no—with a flutter of lashes, they broke away—off to the side.

"After that we were idly stirring our tea glasses with our spoons as someone was reading aloud, getting his pages mixed up. The organizer of this cultivated boredom led me aside and asked me to accompany the provincial young lady home: 'she's alone, you know, it's night, what if she loses her way.' I remember the tab of her coat was torn.

"We left. It was pouring. I called a cab, and across the diagonal lashing of the rain we dived under the leather hood of the carriage. She said something, but underneath us the cobblestones had already begun to rumble, and I could not make out a word. One turn, then another. I gently squeezed her elbow: the young woman gave a start and tried to move away, but there was no place for her to go. The carriage made short, nervous jolts over the stones, pushing us towards each other. Somewhere nearby in the darkness were her lips. I wanted to know where, bent over—and at that moment something unexpected happened. Moving abruptly forward, she jerked aside the leather carriage-rug and jumped out of the carriage at full speed.

"I recall reading in novels about tricks of this kind, but in those novels, the trick was usually performed by men, and also the pouring rain was, I think, not included in the composition. For several moments I sat next to the empty space, completely discouraged and lost, and about the same amount of time was required to rouse the cabman and for him to stop his jade. The cabman saw me jump out of the carriage, interpreted it his way, and screamed about his fee. A few more seconds lost. Finally I started running along the wet pavement, trying to distinguish the runaway's

silhouette in the black night. The streetlights had been put out. At the intersection, I thought I had caught up with her; she turned and, with an unexpected fiery glow between her teeth, called: 'Wanta go to bed?' She was a streetwalker. I ran farther. The intersection— a tangle of streets: nothing. Almost in despair, I directed myself at random across the street and suddenly almost bumped into my runaway. Frozen and whipped by the rain she stood in the web of streets, obviously confused and not knowing where to go.

"I will not repeat our conversation. I have retold it to you many times. My repentance was sincere. I kissed her wet fingers, begged her to forgive me, and threatened to kneel right down in the puddle if she would not stop being angry. We found another cab, and no matter how much the cobblestones urged me on, I sat quietly all the way, trying to keep our shoulders separated. We both were freezing, and our teeth were chattering. Taking my leave, I again kissed her cold fingers, and suddenly my companion laughed youthfully and happily. After a couple of days I paid her a call and brought along a pile of assurances and some Dover powder. The latter proved useful: the poor thing was coughing and complained about chills.

"I did not resort to your method, Number Eleven, at the time it was still . . . premature. The slightest carelessness could easily have destroyed the budding friendship. Back then I still cut a better figure than this pale gray spot here. Sitting on the shuddering springs of the sofa, we often talked until dusk. The girl knew neither the city, nor the world, nor me. The topics of our conversations were hurled from one direction to another as though by the wind. Sometimes I patiently explained how to use the kerosene stove, sometimes, confused and garbling it myself, I expounded the premisses of Kant's critique. Huddled in the corner of the sofa, her legs pulled up, she listened eagerly—both about the kerosene stove, and about Kant—and never took her dark, deep eyes off me.

"Yes, there was one more thing she did not know: herself. So, during one of our conversations which lasted late into dusk, I tried to explain herself to her, tried to open the clasps of the book that you all see right now in my hands, worn and half filled with writing. Yes, that evening we talked about her future, about the encounters waiting for her, her passions, disappointments and new encounters. I insistently knocked at her future. Sometimes she laughed in brief and dry bursts; sometimes she

corrected me; sometimes she listened quietly and did not interrupt. By accident (a cigarette had gone out, something like that.) I struck a match, and in the yellow light I saw that her face was *different*, older and more feminine, as if it were a vision from the future. I blew out the match, and threw myself farther into time: her first love, her first clashes with life, the bitterness of separation, the repeated experiments with the heart have already been left behind. In a tongue-twisting rush I approached the years when one's emotions are whipped and weary, when the fear of aging makes one hurry happiness and spoil it, when passion succumbs to a desire for novelty, when . . . at this point I struck another match and with amazement we looked eye to eye until I scorched my fingers. Yes, my esteemed successors, had I set up my experiment correctly, a dozen phosphor-matches would have shown me all those faces of hers which you have snatched up. But she whisked the matchbox from my hands and threw it away. Our fingers intertwined and trembled as though whipped by a cold downpour from above. It's not worth it to continue, is it?"

The human-shaped muddy spot slowly began to slide downwards.

"Well, how do you like our Quagga?" Number Six asked with curiosity.

Impolitely, I kept my silence.

"Hey, looks like you are jealous? I confess, the pretenses of this guy Quagga, his bragging about having been the first, at times annoyed even me. But you can't dethrone the past: it is more royal than the Czar. One has to reconcile oneself to that, and besides, once you think about it, what is jealousy anyway?"

But I turned my back on his lecture and pretended to be asleep. Number Six grumbled something about rude people and, offended, fell silent.

At first I only pretended, but then I actually did fall asleep. I do not know how long my oblivion lasted. A sudden light forced its way under my lids and made me open my eyes. I was bathed in a phosphorescent blue. I raised myself on my elbow and searched for the source of the strange glow. To my great amazement, I saw that the light emanated from myself. My body was wrapped in a phosphorescent halo whose short-lived rays dissipated within a few feet. I had become light and elastic, the way it sometimes happens in dreams. Everyone around was asleep. With one leap I jumped onto the globule of the yellow spot. The rays

of the two radiances crossed, filling the air with the iridescent hues of the rainbow. One more effort, and with somnambulant ease I began to slide up the vertical wall towards the vault of the cave. The narrow crack widened, and taking hold of its edges with my hands, my pliant and flexible body easily emerged outside.

Before me stretched the low corridor which had once lured me towards the bottom. Once I had already wandered through its turns, bumping into the darkness and the walls. But now the blue light surrounding me was showing the way. Hope was roused in me. In my phosphorescent silhouette, I walked back towards the exit of the pupil. Along the walls, overtaking me, slid reflections and outlines of some sort, but I did not have time to give them a closer look. My heart was beating in my throat when I reached the pupil's round window. Finally. I threw myself blindly ahead and painfully hit against the lowered eyelid. The damn leathery shutter cut off the exit. I swung back my arm and hit it with my fist, but the lid did not give the slightest twitch. Apparently the woman was sound asleep. I started beating against the barrier in a fury with my knees and shoulder; the lid quivered, and at that point the light which had been surrounding me began to wane and fade away. Distraught, I threw myself back in fear of being left in complete darkness; the rays withdrew into my body, and with them the heaviness returned. Winded from running, my steps more and more leaden, I finally reached the opening in the cave's vault. Obediently, it expanded to meet me, and I jumped down. My thoughts were blowing about like grains of sand in the wind: why did I return, what force threw me once more to the bottom, from freedom to slavery; or perhaps all this is just an absurd nightmare? But then why. . . I crawled to my place and began to shake the shoulder of Number Six; he jumped and, rubbing his eyes, took on my torrent of questions.

"Wait, wait, you say 'dream,'" he asked back, attentively regarding the dying flashes of my fading halo. "Hmm. . . very likely there is indeed a dream in process here, and this dream (don't be surprised)—is you. Yes, yes, it has happened to some others here as well. Her dreams wake us up and make us wander around like somnambulists, nobody knows why and whereto. She's dreaming you right now, you see. Wait—you are still glowing—there! Eh, it went out—that means the dream is over."

"Number Six," I whispered, grasping his hand, "I can't go on like this. Let's escape."

But my neighbor shook his head: "Impossible."

"But why? I was only just there, near the entrance to the world. If it hadn't been for the eyelid . . ."

"Impossible," repeated Number Six, "first of all, who guarantees that you will find your host again when you get out of her eye? Perhaps they have already separated, the space is tremendous, and you . . . will lose your way and perish. And secondly, there were some heroes before your time who tried to escape. They. . ."

"They what?"

"Believe it or not, they came back."

"Came back?"

"Yes. You see, the breach in the vault opens only for those who are being dreamed and for those who come from there, from the world. But the dreams lead us on a leash, they separate us from reality by the lowered lids, and they throw those who are 'dreamed out' back to the bottom. There remains a second way: wait until the moment when the breach in the vault opens to meet a newcomer, jump out, and then continue through the corridors of the cave (you know them)—and you are free. It looks simple. But there is one detail which reduces everything to nothing."

"I don't understand."

"You see, the moment you are climbing out, you have no choice but to meet—head to head, shoulder to shoulder—the new one, who is jumping in to take your place. The temptation to look at your successor, however briefly, is usually so strong . . . well, in a word, you lose the moment, you lose your freedom: the breach closes, and the fugitive together with the newcomer falls to the bottom. Such, at least, was the fate of all previous attempts. Here, you see, we have a psychological trap from which there is no escape."

I listened in silence, and the more he repeated the word "impossible," the firmer my resolution grew. I spent several hours thinking through my plan in detail. Meanwhile, the turn of Number Two had come. My taciturn neighbor to the left crawled into the yellow light. For the first time I saw his faded outline, stooping and faint. He began with a timid cough, stuttering slightly:

"It all happened like this. One day, I received a letter: a kind of longish envelope. It smelled vaguely of verbena. I opened it—a spider-web of letters, kind of slanted—and read, what is this?"

“Quiet,” Quagga’s voice rang out suddenly. “Stop your story. There, above . . . you hear?” The storyteller and the voices around him fell silent instantly. At first there was nothing. Then—was it hallucination, was it reality—in the distance, above the vault, there was a light and cautious step. It ceased. Again. Quiet.

“Do you hear it?” Number Six whispered in my ear. “He has arrived. He’s wandering.”

“Who?”

“Number Thirteen.” And we, at first quietly, in order not to scare him away, and then louder and louder, started singing our hymn of the forgotten. From time to time—according to Quagga’s cues—we interrupted our singing and listened. The steps, it seemed, were already very near, but suddenly they started to move away again.

“Louder, come on, louder!” Quagga shouted. “Draw him here, draw him. You won’t get away, honey, no-o-o.” Our hoarse voices, growing furious, beat against the slimy walls of our prison.

Number Thirteen, who was hiding somewhere out there, in the dark passages, obviously hesitated and was uncertain where to go. Finally, we all ran out of steam. Quagga granted us a break, and soon sleep overcame everyone around me.

But I did not allow exhaustion to overwhelm me. My ear to the wall, I continued to listen into the dark.

At first, everything was quiet, then the approaching step—there, above the vault—sounded again. The breach in the vault ever so slowly began to open. Gripping the slippery protuberances on the wall, I tried to climb up, but I could not hold on and immediately dropped to the floor, hurting myself on some hard object. It was the Book of Oblivion. Trying to move without a sound (what if Quagga wakes up), I opened its clasps and, using their hooks, quickly began to pull my body up from one protuberance to another, until my hand grasped the edges of the exit as they were moving apart. Somebody’s head was hanging down towards me, but with a brisk effort and keeping my eyes tightly shut, I threw my body outside and ran away without looking back. After my two previous wanderings in the pupil’s labyrinth, I could orient myself even in the dark. Soon a dim light began to dawn from under the half-closed eyelid. I climbed out, jumped down onto the pillow and started walking, fighting the gusts of oncoming breath.

“But what if it’s not him, not mine?” I thought, suspended between fear and hope. When finally in the early morning light I began to distinguish my gigantified features, when, after so many days of separation, I saw you, master, I vowed never to leave you again, never again to hang out in another person’s pupils. But of course, it’s not me, it’s you who . . .

The little fellow from the pupil fell silent and, taking his black tome under his arm, got up. Pink patches of dawn were wandering over the windows. Somewhere far away a wheel began to rap. The woman’s eyelashes twitched a little. The fellow looked back at them apprehensively and then again turned his tired face towards me: he was waiting for instructions. “Let it be your way,” I smiled and moved my eyes toward him as well as I could. With one leap he got under my lids and stepped into me: something, probably a sharp corner of the book which protruded from under his elbow, scratched the edge of my pupil and an acute pain echoed in my brain. My vision darkened. I thought it would be only for a moment, but no, the dawn turned from pink to black. There was dark and silent night all around, as though time were bending down on its paws and crawling backwards. I slid down from the bed and got dressed quickly and quietly. I opened the door: a corridor, a turn, a door, another door, and, groping along the wall, one step after another—out. The street. I walked straight, making no turns, not knowing where and why. Gradually the air became thinner, liberating the outlines of buildings. Looking back, I saw I was being pursued by a bluish-purple second dawn.

Suddenly, somewhere up above, on their roost in the belfry, the bells began to stir, clapping brass on brass. I raised my eyes. From the pediment of an oldish church a gigantic eye, painted into a triangle, stared at me through the mist.

Between my shoulder blades, I felt a shiver, like prickly compass points. “Painted bricks.” Nothing more. Disentangling my steps from the fibers of the fog, I kept repeating: painted bricks—that’s all it is. Before me, emerging from the mist pierced by light, a familiar bench: here I had waited—how long ago was it—for my companion, darkness. Now the bench glittered with dawn and scattered drops of early dew.

I sat on its moist edge and remembered that here I had been visited by the novella about the man from the pupil—its outline still uncertain. Now I had enough material to consolidate the theme. Right then and there, facing the approaching day, I began to imagine how to tell people everything without telling them anything. First of all, one must cross out the truth—who needs it? Then make the pain so gaudy that it turns into a story. Yes, yes, give it a slight touch of daily life, and on top—like varnish on the paint—a hint of vulgarity; that, too, is indispensable. Finally, add two or three philosophisms and . . . reader, you are turning away, you want to shake these lines from your pupils, no, no, do not abandon me on this long and deserted bench. Let us hold hands—like that—tighter, even tighter—I have been alone for too long. I won't tell anybody else, but I will tell you: why make children afraid of the dark when it can also quiet them and lead them into dreams?

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