

Anthology of Short Fiction



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Stories:

True Values by Dmitry Opanasenko

Finis Enim Viae by Alexander Tsyba

The Whiteism by Andrey Stadnik

The Price of Victory by Vladislav Pismenskiy

Fork by Yaroslav Rumyantsev

A Fascinating Find by Antonina Lyakh

Story of One Family by Sergey Zamyatin

Tom and Jerry by Alexander Belyakov

One Child by Dmitry Bazarov

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True Values

I

The sun is shining brightly – its light is reflected in ice-glazed puddles spread here and there all over the long rural road. The road twists, going into the distance and finally disappearing over the horizon, reminding that civilization exists somewhere within reach, and thus one can possibly be in touch with it. Two rows of houses, which once used to be prosperous, are lined up along both sides of the road. If some wandering stranger walked near those rows, he would see that the houses have forgotten their owners – all their yards are empty by now. He would see their windows were barred up many years ago, their sagging roofs and gardens occupied by weeds and wild grass. He could ask himself, “Is this area free of the human race?” – “Yes, nobody is here.” His mind would give him the most reasonable answer. Indeed, nobody lives here – nobody except for two elderly people. Two houses, one big and one small, standing opposite each other on the counter sides of the road are still inhabited. Smoke coming from their brick chimneys curls up in the frozen air. The calm silence covers many miles all-round the place, but the houses themselves are filled with sounds of life – steps and a radio voice are enlivening the atmosphere.

A door of the bigger house creaks and a tall man comes out into the yard. The temperature outside is close to zero, but the man is thinly clad: wearing neither warm coat nor scarf, he is only dressed in a woolen sleeveless jacket put over a cotton shirt and shabby velvet pants tucked into valenki. The man has regular

features and short hair; his face hasn't been marked by old age yet. The man's eyes intently examine the yard covered with snow and ice. In summer his small garden is always cropped – he has been planting potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, beetroots and other vegetables for nearly 20 years. Surely, he likes spending his time that way, but still the main reason for growing crops is that he has to eat something – since civilization left the village many years ago, as people moved to the town, he has to live under his own power now.

The village once used to be prosperous. It was inhabited by farmers who sowed wheat on a yearly basis. The land gave good harvests; the government gave good price for wheat. However, the youth were unsatisfied with monotonous rural life without any opportunities for big business or other chances to use their potential. Soon enough, rapid social and economic changes forced even elderly people to search for their place in the nearby town – the government stopped regular payments. Everything was ruined – formerly flourishing fields became covered by weed. At that time the man divorced. His ex-wife, Elena, moved to the city taking their little son together with her. Vasily did his best to maintain a relationship with his child while the mother persuaded her son to ignore the father's care. Then she remarried and moved to another city. Vasily lost all contacts with his child and has never seen his son since the break-up.

The man sighs and goes to an old chicken-coop which serves as a source of eggs and chicken. Near the chicken-coop there is a cellar that is used as a big fridge where pickled products and canned goods are kept. At the end of each summer the surplus of

vegetable harvest is salted and preserved for consumption for the following winter. Canned goods are regularly bought in from the nearest city 13 miles to the East – the distance can be covered only on foot, of course. The man used to go there twice during each summer to get some consumer stuff and food, but last summer he had no strength for the second trip. As a result, the cellar was already empty by the end of this winter. Hence, hens and hunting are now his last hope against dying from starvation. Is the man scared? No! He has steady hands and a clear mind – which problems can't be solved?

The man takes two chicken eggs, and returns home with the confident but deliberate step. The breakfast will be ready in a couple of minutes.

On the opposite side of the road stands a smaller house. Its owner, an old woman, is sitting near the kitchen window, looking outside and drinking tea with self-made apple jam. She likes this morning hour when all problems seem insignificant. Vague shapes of the room's interior are mirrored in the plain glass of the window: a big brick stove occupying both the center of the house and the kitchen, a table covered with white linen cloth, two wooden benches and a closet where antique plates and dishes reflecting the cheerful light of the sun are kept. A blue glass vase with a fir branch stands in the center of the table. The kitchen isn't very luxurious – who cares about this stuff here? An atmosphere of solid calmness is in the house. The woman looks out of the window – an apple orchard is near her house. Nine apple trees are the main woman's treasure; their fruits are a simple joy of everyday dinners. "Vasia needs more jam," murmurs the woman,

“I’ll bring some to him”. She stands up, takes her cup and goes to the corner near the stove where she washes the dishes. She is stout, of medium height, dressed in a long skirt made of heavy fabric and a violet sweater.

Her small household is based on the products of her kitchen garden and apple trees – glass jars with pickled vegetables and candied apples fill her cellar in autumn. Her cellar also usually contains eggs and chicken because Vasily generously shares with her. However, at the beginning of every spring the cellar is already empty; the reason is that there is no chance to produce anything during the winter. Vasily tried to hunt, but all his attempts failed – it was impossible to go away from the house even for 300 meters because deep snow restrained any movements.

The woman climbs upstairs to the surface, bringing a jar with jam. Her face is sad – only two jars are left in the cellar. She crosses the garden and is already opening the gate when Vasily calls her:

– “Olga, how are you? Isn’t the weather marvelous?”

– “Vasia, good morning,” says Olga happily, “Surely, spring gives us beautiful days; I’m waiting for warm weather to plant something delicious. By the way,” she stops speaking for a little while, “I brought you some jam,” she smiles cheerfully, comes to him and holds out the jar.

Vasily smiles tenderly. “Olga, thanks a lot, but I haven’t finished eating the previous portion of jam yet.” He lies shamelessly and Olga knows it.

She tries to make him take the jar, but he resists accepting it. A brief comic fight ends up with an unpleasant accident – the jar

slips out of their hands and falls onto the icy ground scattering to pieces – the smell of fresh apples fills the air. Vasily laughs: – “We are two old fools. Don’t be sad, darling; I will go hunting. The blanket of snow has become thinner even in the forest. We live near a treasury full of food – the forest provides us with mushrooms, berries and fresh meat; everything will be OK,” he winks at her and gazes at the trees standing 500 meters from their houses.

II

Summer comes. Vasily and Olga plant vegetables, go berry-picking, talk about their youth – in short, they have that type of fun that you can enjoy only when you become an elderly person. An enormous rain starts in the beginning of August right before the main part of the harvest should be gathered. It rains so hard that real flood happens. Water stays five inches above the ground. The rain at first is considered as a chance to relax for a while – some amount of food has already been stored. However, some obligations can’t be abolished – the hens should be fed and taken care of regularly. One morning Vasily prepares to go to the chicken-coop, as he has been doing for three days, to give the birds some food. Black clouds are hanging above the house that day. Yellow light can’t go through the overcast sky – it is dusky outside. Vasily pulls on an old raincoat and opens the door. Freezing damp air enters the warm house. The man comes out the front door of Olga’s house where they were playing cards all the morning. Vasily takes the stairs down the porch and steps with one foot in weak mud

covered with water. Something happens – the foot starts to slip in the mud. Vasily tries to pluck at the porch’s rail but misses it and falls with a loud sound.

He lies in the water. His head is on the step just above the water line, fortunately. Unconscious, he is waiting for Olga to help him get on his feet.

The rain stopped impinging upon the roof the day before. A shiny and perfectly calm morning came again, but Olga doesn’t care anymore. The house’s windows are blinded, and even rays of sun light don’t push through the heavy curtain. The obscure atmosphere resembles a hospital setting – silence in the house is so deadly that the loud ticking of a cuckoo clock doesn’t fit in. Vasily is breathing smoothly, but he is still unconscious. He is lying on the sofa near the stove; Olga is sitting near him. She hasn’t felt panic yet; she has just been doing her best to help Vasia. But how much can she help him here so far from civilization? Olga carefully sets the blanket to cover her friend.

– “Open the curtains, darling. . . We aren’t in the hospital.”

– Words break the settled silence. Olga remains speechless for a moment.

– “Oh, em-m. . .”

– “I’m glad to see you too.”

They have smiles on their faces.

Olga and Vasily tried to consider that accident insignificant, but both of them definitely know in the depth of their hearts that the order established twenty years ago is broken now. Olga hasn’t al-

lowed Vasily to go outside; according to her, he needed to “gather strength and improve the health.” Evidently, Vasily didn’t put up with the situation.

– “I’m going to go to the city next week; we need some consumer stuff,” says Vasily. They are sitting in Olga’s kitchen, drinking tea.

– “Impossible,” Olga gives a short answer.

– “Olga, what are you talking about? My health is OK; thirteen miles isn’t a big distance for me.”

– “Vasia, indeed, I have no doubts about your health, but don’t be selfish – if anything happens with you, I won’t live through. . .”

– “But we will have problems, darling. Last winter proved that we are dependent on the city’s products,” he gazes at her.

There is a long pause. They are keeping silence. Vasily is waiting for an answer. Olga decides to say finally:

– “We have problems already – the flood destroyed ours harvest. Everything became rotten.”

Vasily is astonished. What can he say?

– “Everything? Are you sure?”

– “Everything. Sure.”

A million questions flash through his mind. What can he do? From where can they obtain any food? Did they save any food for the future? Fortunately, they gathered some amount of cucumbers; there are also some tomatoes and vegetable marrows in the stock. Is this enough for them to survive through the whole upcoming winter? Certainly not!

– “Olga, we need this trip to the city,” says the man crisply. “But it’s not the only reason I want to go there. You know, my life

became senseless since I lost my son. I made a mistake losing his location in the past, but I realized it was a failure and now I'm eager to find Misha."

– "Darling, do you remember how many houses you visited to learn something about Misha last summer? Hundreds! Unfortunately, no one heard about Misha. I'm really sorry to say it, but only a miracle can help you," Olga makes a pause. "Take care of your health now. Everything will be all right."

Vasily knows that she is right. To find the son seems impossible while the distance of thirteen miles is an unacceptable challenge for the 68-year-old man. Being depressed, he decides to go home – everything has to be thought over.

The ground is still wet; Vasily walks in the mud. Moisture paints the ground black – his eyes become tired soon, as the deep bright color blinds him. He crosses the road and comes into his yard. Nothing has changed; only the gate of the chicken-coop is opened. "Curious," he comments aloud, "there is no doubt Olga closed it". He goes to the chicken-coop to find out what is the matter, but silent horror stops him a couple of steps from the coop. A dramatic scene greets him at the doorway – straw mixed with jelled blood covers the floor; tattered feathers are everywhere. He rapidly enters the coop as if to save the birds' lives. However, he sees nothing but the mess. Suddenly his eyes find a hen's body lying in the corner. The bird is dead.

III

Snow covers the ground. The clear winter sky satisfies the eye. Vasily is skiing through the forest with a gun behind his back.

He has been going hunting almost every day since the winter came. Vasily took that occurrence in the hen-coop and the flood as a bad joke of fortune and now he doesn't even remember those troubles. He made ski by himself and started hunting. Now the gun feeds him – and Olga. The old fashioned rifle was bought by Vasily's grandfather and was an antique of a high price nowadays. However, Vasily is proud of his gun because of its history – he doesn't care about the price at all.

In a little while the hunter suddenly finds traces of a fox in the snow. Basically, the forest is filled up with various animals but Vasily is able to hunt only the small ones, so wood grouses, squirrels, and foxes are his common aims. A chance to finish the hunt earlier cheers Vasily and so he follows the traces as usual – the path leads him to bare bushes. A shot rings out – the hunter wanted to make the fox run out of the bushes – something red appears 5 meters away from him. A shot rings out again – off the mark. "Damn it!" Vasily reloads the gun as fast as he can. Meanwhile, fox disappears behind the snow bank. The gun is put behind his back again; he runs on ski with his teeth gritted. However, the red spot moves away too quickly to be either caught or shot. Vasily stops breathing heavily and looking at a brand-new path in front of him. "You'll stop sooner or later; whatever you do, I will find out everything about your movement." This unsophisticated thought makes him take his fault easier and the

man continues his trip. The weather becomes colder; icy snow beats his face. He has already followed the path for an hour, but there was no hint that the path was going to end. Vasily goes deep into the forest, and now he is in an area where he has never been before. Vasily easily orientates in the forest – he doesn't worry about finding his house, but he can't come back to Olga without a bag. Snow covers the traces quickly, so he has to hurry to catch the fox.

“Bang!” The hollow sound suddenly disturbs the calmness. “What the hell?” anxiously asks himself Vasily. “Bang!” “Bang!” “Bang!” The sounds of shots arise again and again while the echo doubles those noises. Vasily stops for a while to find out what happens. He doesn't learn anything before the distant noise of snowmobiles begins to be heard. The sound grows; shots continue ringing out and something yellow and red becomes visible nearby. That is four loud bright snowmobiles following one small dead beat fox. Amusingly, Vasily has been unsuccessfully searching for this fox all day long and now it runs toward him without any efforts from his side. Well, Fortuna never knows what she wants. The fox is about 10 meters from him – it's his chance. “Bang!” “Bang!” The fox is dead.

Vasily with the smoking gun in his hands is looking at the men with smoking guns on their snowmobiles. Actually, there are three hunters with rifles in their hands on red sleds and the fourth man sitting on his yellow machine with a bored face and a gun behind his back. There is a pause for a while.

–“Man, it's our bag,” roughly shouts a thick hunter on a red machine.

–“Get out of here or we will shoot you,” jokingly adds a tall man on another red bike.

Those hunters are obviously drunk.

–“No problems, I will go, but I will take the fox before,” Vasily puts his gun behind his back and confidently approaches the fox. A shot rings out – the tall man holds his rifle up:

–“Don’t stir!”

The man on the yellow bike becomes crazy over the behavior of his drunk fellows:

–“Are you an idiot!?” he shouts at the tall man.

–“Look at him,” the speaker points at Vasily, “An old poor hunter! What do you want from him?”

The tall man becomes confused. The yellow-bike-man continues, “Just let him take this damn fox and go!”

Vasily waits for a resolution; he doesn’t want to make a sudden movement – three drunk armed men appear to be an extremely unpredictable source of danger. One man who kept the silence during the whole period starts speaking in a low voice:

–“Misha, don’t worry too much; I just want to talk with the stranger,” the speaker looks at Vasily intently.

Everybody waits. Pause is becoming silly, when the man continues:

–“You wanted to take our bag; it isn’t good, but I won’t pay any attention to this accident. We are all kind fellows” everybody guffaws, “But could you be kind too? I saw your rifle – it’s beautiful. I know everything about weapon; guns and steel is my passion,” he stops for a while, “What is its age? More than a hundred years? I bet it is. I’d like to own it, so I want you to give me your gun

and I will spare you after this.”

The situation makes Vasily’s skin crawl. What will he tell Olga? How will he obtain food without a gun? Certainly, he has to do something. He asks himself: “Run...? Shoot...?”

A group of men on snowmobiles gazes indifferently at the old man who has no idea of how to save the only thing that he cares about.

–“What is your name?” asks Vasily finally.

–“Nikolay.”

–“Nikolay, you see, I’m the only person who lives here for many years. I have to eat something and this rifle is my last hope not to die from the starvation. This rifle is also my grandfather’s memory. Thus, I can’t give it to you.”

–“Don’t bore me. Pavel, take the rifle, please.”

The tall man giggles and drives his bike towards the victim while the thick man points his gun at Vasily.

–“Stop it!” shouts the man on the yellow bike. “Nikolay, listen, you know I’m looking for one person from this place. He said he lives here so I want to speak with him. He will solve my problems; I’ll solve yours. Please, do me a favor.”

–“If you are sure, do whatever you want.”

Misha gets down from his snowmobile and goes to Vasily who notices an excitement in the man’s eyes. Misha starts:

–“I’m really sorry about those idiots; if I was capable of doing something about their behavior, I would do it without doubts. Unfortunately, I wouldn’t reach this wild area without their help

so I have to consider them. Listen, I'm here because I'm looking for my father. There was a village somewhere in this area – it was inhabited by farmers who sowed wheat. I was born there but my mother, Elena, took me to the city nearly 20 years ago. I remember nothing about my father except his name – Vasily. Oh, I also have a photo of my first house," Misha starts digging in his pockets. "Maybe you heard about someone who lost his son at that time," Misha gives Vasily the photograph.

Astonishment changes Vasily's face – an old faded photograph depicts his own house.

–"Son...!"

Finis Enim Viae

*"Nothing can change us
No one can save us from ourselves"
– Humanity, Scorpions*

Paradisus

Acedia

Snow. Again. I don't understand what's happening. How could there ever be snow at this time? Well, it is all about that stupid place. It is completely unpredictable what will happen tomorrow. Snow, sun, or rain. Probably, doesn't matter. I don't care.

The tram passed by and the noise frightened me. They haven't changed them for years. I remember that sound from my childhood. My childhood. . . Ah, I had better forget it. It was too good to remember it every day. It passed by a long time ago and now it should not matter to me. Especially, in my current situation. In my current world. There is no childhood in my world. Funny. I call it - "my world". If I own something in that world, it is zero percent of what I see now. Even my childhood does not belong to me. It was not mine - it was the childhood of some other person. And the world belongs to others, not to me. Who are they? I do not know. God knows, but not me.

A bunch of stupid thoughts. I hate them. Popping into my head so suddenly and so uselessly.

I approached the intersection of a street, the name of which I hadn't managed to identify for years. The cars stopped at the red

light, and I started to cross the street. One of the cars in the left lane was probably trying to violate the rules and drive through the junction, but the crowd crossing did not leave a chance to do it. Finally, I continued on my way down the street and left the usual street noise behind.

The snow was falling and falling and the pavement became one big snowfield. My summer shoes were not good enough to cope with it, and the melted snow inside distracted me from my stupid thoughts about the world and my childhood. Yes, probably everything has its pros and cons, although it is so ironic sometimes.

I thought that it was a good idea to warm myself a bit on the way to the university. Yes, it is a good idea. I do not want to get ill again, sitting at home alone. It would take another two minutes to get to the subway. An easy and cheap way to warm yourself. When I approached the entrance, my shoes were completely destroyed. A bunch of snow and water. When I entered the station, to my enjoyment I saw my 'colleagues' who were in the same situation. One woman was crying about the unpredictability of the weather:

– Arrrghh! I can't believe that it is spring in the morning and winter in the afternoon! And the city services don't clean anything! They should pay for my illness! I am a victim of circumstances!

Funny. She is the smallest thing on the planet, but she is innocent. The weather must be good. The weather does not owe us anything. It is our mistake that we decided to wear summer shoes. However, people are blind. Well, so am I. At least I don't cry about it.

Fortunately, it was quite warm in the station. I sat in the far

corner, took my shoes off and let them dry. It took something like ten minutes. When I took them off again, I looked at my watch and saw that the lecture would start in five minutes. Shit. Again. If it continues on this way, I won't get there for months. I decided that I had better hurry up and so took the first train. My plans of walking were ruined. But at least my legs were dry now.

I arrived at the next station in five minutes and walked up the escalator. In the end, my lungs were out of oxygen. Asthma reminds me of itself. Or smoking. Yes, smoking. It is a good idea to stop and have a cigarette. I couldn't find my lighter and asked the passing pupils to give me a light. To my enjoyment and disappointment, they actually had a lighter and gave me a light. Even without looking at me. That is funny. But I do not care, as always. At least my cigarette is now alight.

I finished it quickly and headed towards the university. I got there fast. The lecture was underway and I tried to enter the classroom quietly. Someone opened the window, and a gust of cold wind slammed the door shut behind me with a loud blast. However, no one except the lecturer turned around to search for the source of the noise. He glanced at me angrily but continued to slowly talk about the politics. I sat in the rear of the class and tried to listen.

Every year it was getting worse and worse. The deeper the country went into authoritarianism and imperialism, the more we were loaded with the senseless propaganda. The whole lecture was about our country's great power of our country and the senseless and cowardly actions of others. If it continues this way, we will soon converge on that stupid communist autarky in East Asia.

By the way, it collapsed a couple of years ago. It seems that the government of this country does not learn from their mistakes.

However, I don't really care about it. My life won't change dramatically. Study, subway, home, subway, senseless hours of listening to post-rock music. The post-rock is so depressing that our censors will not even listen to it. They care more about other things. And that is good. The lecture lasted for hours. At least, it seemed to me that it lasted for hours. In the end, I fell asleep and was awakened by one of the girls who was walking out of the classroom. She was pretty. Of course, I knew her. Perhaps, a couple of years ago we even managed to go on a date a couple of times. But now she looked at me with regret and contempt at the same time. That was disgusting. I pretended that I didn't see her, woke up, and quickly walked away. Our stream had another lecture in ten minutes, but I decided that I had better go home. I was not in the mood to listen to these boring lecturers. Moreover, it is not the best way to learn – lectures. I can better use that time working on my bachelor thesis. I have three months to do it, but I don't even know what I am going to write about yet. Stupid thesis. It's supposed to be in favor of this country. I do not want to write anything about this country.

I made my way back home quite easily, without any incident. My parents were at work, and I should not expect them to come home so early. That is good. At least I will have time to relax, and they will not bother me with their senseless speeches about my future, my personal life, my job or absence thereof, and other things that I do not care about.

I wasn't in the mood to start my thesis either, so I decided to

play an online game as I always do. In the game I was an administrator, so I had a chance to control the whole in-game world. That game was about building and everybody in my world was building. I had a big city there. With my own rules. With my own ideas. With people who serve and listen to me. I am really excited about that world. It is much better than the one I am living in now. The only minus of that virtual world is that it is made of blocks, of square blocks. Each block is material. It is far simpler than the real world. But at least that is the beauty – who needs such a complicated and at the same time senseless world, where everybody kills and destroys each other. No possibility to build or live.

Every time I play that game, I become captivated by it and do not notice that six hours have passed. My parents came home, but they did not bother me. That is strange. They did not even say hello. Well, that is better for me. Fewer worries spent on them. I walked out on to the staircase and had another cigarette. Now it felt much better. At least I built another metro station in my city. Now it will be easier for players to get to the center of the city from the ghettos they built in suburban areas. The cigarette ended as unexpectedly as it started to burn. I felt really sleepy and decided to go to bed. Tomorrow is another boring day. But I need some energy to get through it.

I took my phenobarbital pills before going to bed. I am not addicted, no. Phenobarbital is still allowed in this stupid country. And it allows me to have a deep, dark sleep without any dreams. I took three pills and instantly felt my head becoming heavier and heavier. I could not control my arms anymore. I saw the darkness

creeping in the window and capturing me in its tight hug. I barely made it to the sofa. I collapsed on it and lost consciousness. The darkest nights of the darkest life in the white world of snow.

The next morning, I woke up as usual. A long rest improved my mood a bit, and I even felt that I wanted to go to the university. I will not describe again how I got there. It was the same as yesterday, partly because I forgot about the snowy weather and wore my summer shoes again. Just as usual.

Corde

Interesting things started to happen exactly when I got home the next day. Usually after the lecture I walk to the subway, go two stops to my home and walk a bit. However, this time I decided to walk all the way home rather than wasting money on the subway. The snow had ended, and only small white circles of it were lying on the black grass. The sun started shining, but it was too smoggy to see it. As always, people were rushing somewhere, making their way through the crowds in a rush. I didn't participate in that senseless race, so I shifted to one side of the pavement. I crossed an unnamed street and was very close to escaping into a web of side streets, which is the easiest way to get home. I was very close to sticking with my usual life. But something changed everything.

That something pushed me in the back so that I nearly screamed. I was really frightened in that moment. Despite the fact that I never took a self-defense course, I quickly spun around and made a very sharp move with my hand. Something, being pushed with my hand, made a loud scream and bent over because of the pain.

It was a man probably the same age as me. He croaked:

– “God... Argh... I am sorry... Oh, shit... I did not... Ouch! I did not see you...”

I understood that he was probably just running, and I happened to get in his way. Later on, I remembered that incident and understood that it was not me, but him, who suddenly appeared on my life path.

At that point, I made an unusual decision. I do not know why. It just popped into my head like these stupid thoughts I usually have. I decided not to turn back and go home. Instead, I asked him if he was all right. Normally, I do not care about the people around me. They did not care about me three years ago, and now I have the full right to ignore that [censored] city that almost put me in a situation of endless desperation and loneliness. But that guy... There was something about him. Something unusual. Something interesting. Something that distinguished him from the rest of grey masses around me.

He was not too tall, probably not taller than I was. He wore a very strange blue jacket. It looked like it was never washed and was probably made more than ten years ago. He did not wear jeans like everybody else, but he had ancient Soviet trousers on him. His boots were extremely dirty, and the dirt was shimmering with rainbow colors, like when you put a blob of oil in water. He had long, uncombed hair that was touching his shoulders. He also had circle glasses, which were partly covered with some strange white scarf. The most unusual part was his hands. His palms were disproportional to his body. Very big and muscular. Very strange. I took the initiative and asked him:

– “Hey, sorry about that. Are you all right?”

He was now standing and no longer beveling from the pain. He tried to answer but suddenly had a coughing fit. I know how people can cough, but his cough was so powerful that I was paralyzed from the fear that he would die right here, on the street. Thankfully, it stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Finally, he spoke:

– “Sir, excuse me please. I was... Ah. Running. Yes. Running there.”

He took a quick look around him and suddenly asked me:

– “Sir! Do you not know where can I find the... Em. Pharmacie?”

I did not understand him:

– “Well-well-well. First: do not call me “sir”. Second: what did you say?”

– “Ah! I mean: drug store! Yes! I need to get to the drug store!”

– “Are you all right? I saw your coughing. Do you have asthma? Me too, I can give you an inhaler for free. Still, the drug store is just round the corner.” – I replied.

– “Oh thanks! No. No. It’s not asthma. I forgot. I only remember the thing that I need to buy...”

He started to search for something in his bag:

– “God! No! I forgot the name of the pill that helps me!”

At that moment, I felt pity for him again:

– “May I help you? Let me follow you to the drug store. We will ask the pharmacist to help. Just try to remember the name of your illness.”

– “You are such a good man!” - he shouted - “Thank you! I will not do it alone!”

So, we headed towards the drug store. It was not far away from the place we met, but in that time he had two more coughing fits. Finally, we made it there. It was a typical governmental store. Unexpectedly, I quickly managed to find a pharmacist. I took him to my strange guy. He asked him:

– “Well. Your friend told me that you are having strong coughing fits. Can you remember the name of your illness?”

The guy thought for a couple of seconds, staring at him and suddenly blurted:

– “Yes! Yes! I remember! It is called . . . - another coughing fit came. - . . . ;arhhh;osis!”

I did not hear what he said, but the pharmacist seemed to understand him. He turned white and said:

– “I know what you need. I’ll give you what you need. Do you have your passport with you? I’ll check the database, because it seems to me that you can be granted some free medicine.”

– “Yes!” - he took his passport out of his bag - “Please, take it! I am in the base!”

During their conversation, and later, while the pharmacist was giving him medicine, I was trying to remember the name of the disease that ends with “osis” and has such a drastic effect on the lungs. I knew a bit about medicine because I spent a lot of time in the clinic due to my asthma.

Suddenly, I understood. I turned white, too. Poor guy. I saw people like him in the clinic. Life. . . No, they do not have a life. It is the hell on Earth. I decided that I would venture further and ask him if he needed any help, and not just walk away.

While I was thinking about these things, he called me. We still

hadn't introduced ourselves, so he was very confused while shouting: "Hey, man!" all through the drug store. I approached him and said:

– "Don't worry. Call me... John. Yes, call me John."

He became confused again:

– "Hhhmmm, okay... John. My name is Alex! Call me Alex!"

– "Alex, I do not like my name. I do not see any sense in it. Really, John is better. So what happened?"

– "John... S-some of the medicine I have to still pay..."

– "Understood."

I took out the needed amount of money and handed it to the drug store clerk.

– "Do not worry, please. I do not need this money. I cannot spend it anywhere; at least it will serve some purpose."

He became so excited that he tried to hug me; however, I pushed him back. No hugs, thanks. Nevertheless, he just made me to listen to his scrappy thoughts:

– "It is! So. Great! Thank YOU! Appreciate a lot! Hey! I want to thank you! Let me propose something for you!"

– "There is absolutely no need to do that. I've got to go."

– "No! Please! Stop! Listen! Am I.. Erggh.. I am a fan! Yes! I know about transport a lot! I have friends! They're waiting for me! We'll show you what we've found! In the subway!"

He continued telling me about something amazing he and his friends found in the subway. I was tired, but I suddenly realized that there was no way of escaping from him without hurting his "soul". Given his disease, I felt that I didn't like the idea. Therefore, I calmly listened to him, weighed all the risks, and decided

to go with him. Sooner or later I'll have a chance to escape. Huh, or perhaps this crazy mob has found something interesting.

– "Stop your continuous delirium. Where are your friends?"

– "Th-th-they are at depot! There is a tram depot! They are waiting for me in canteen. There."

– "If I understand you correctly, I know the place you are talking about. Okay, let's go there."

– "Thank you! Thank you!"

– "Shut up!"

Societas

The path to the depot ran through the street I usually walked every day. It takes about twenty minutes to walk from the beginning to the end of that street. For the whole twenty minutes, Alex was talking, talking and talking. In his strange manner. His speech maddened me, and I tried to shut him up a couple of times, but unsuccessfully. He talked only about transport, tunnels, metro and other shit I hated. I hate public transport. I use it only because I can't walk the distance I need to go.

I don't know how I managed not to kill him during our way to the depot. Finally, we got there. We were standing in front of the entrance. He walked in. I felt a bit uncomfortable, but I followed him. The security guard stopped us and asked:

– "What are you doing here? That is a closed object!"

I opened my mouth and tried to say something, but Alex was ahead me:

– "I-its me! Alex! We are going in the canteen! Just to eat, yes! My friends, fans, are already waiting for me."

The security guard stared at us; then he took his radio and asked something. He got an inaudible reply that I didn't understand, and finally said:

– "Ah, OK. One more crazy tram lunatic. You can go in, fast!"

It seemed to me that Alex and his friends don't have huge respect here. Well, it really doesn't matter to me. I probably won't come here again (oh, how I was right). We finally passed the security post and headed towards the tram drivers canteen.

It was messy, hot and stuffy there. Many people were running with trays full of insipid food. However, it didn't seem we'd have so much as tea, because we headed directly towards a different corner. We finally got there, and it was hard as people were sitting very close to each other. I had to actually push through these eating drivers to make Alex's and my way there. I was not too respectful of them as I heard only inaudible filthy phrases. Conversely, Alex seemed to regard them as Saints because he was as neat as he could be, and excused himself for a hundred times. Yes, so, after we got there, I saw a large table full of non-drivers. Most of them looked like Alex, but everybody had some detail that highlighted his individuality. They expected that Alex would come and were waiting for him. They were very happy to see him:

– "Hey, Alex!"

– "Good afternoon, dude!"

– "Come on, get here!"

– "News! Alex, we have news!"

They did not say anything to me; however, I didn't feel as though I was an enemy to them. It was just the feeling that they did not see me at all.

Alex put me at the corner of the table and sat on the other side. The whole crowd continued to shout and talk with each other. I did not know what to do. At some point, I realized that I didn't know why the hell I was sitting here. Suddenly, I heard a scream. It was Alex:

– "NOTEBOOK! WHERE IS MY NOTEBOOK?"

Everybody started to shout the same word. They jumped away from the table, started moving the chairs, looked under the table, ran around it and pushed people carrying trays.

– "Note..!"

– "NOTEBOOK!"

– "Look everywhere!"

– "It is unique!"

That was the turning point. Sorry, guy. Sorry. I do not know for what, but sorry.

I stood up and calmly walked away from the canteen. No one noticed me even though I was not hiding. No one said a word to me. No one was swearing at me. I was just a phantom. A phantom walking through tables, chairs, people, trays with food. A phantom that was swimming through that senseless chaos. Maybe it was not chaos. But like that whole city, it was not my world. I got there by accident, and I left by decision. It is my decision to escape. No more tram canteens. I was just calm. Similarly, I strode through the security post and walked out to the street.

I felt a strong urge to smoke. The canteen's atmosphere was still sitting in my lungs and I wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible. I took the last cigarette from the pack and realized that I forgot my lighter. Again. That word. That word "again" again in

my life. No, it is always with me. I hate it. In blind anger, I threw away the cigarette and the pack. I need to get home as soon as possible. Play a game, then pills and sleep. Then again a new day. No, just a day. Nothing new in it.

While I was thinking about these things, I realized that my phone was ringing. At first I didn't understand what happened. My phone last rang a couple of years ago. I never used it. It just automatically charges every night, for reasons I do not know. I just got used to it. Even noisy messages from the mobile operators didn't bother me. I use my phone occasionally, just to know the time if I forgot my watch. And now it is ringing. What the shit? I took my mobile out of my pocket. Number. No name. I do not remember it. Someone must be calling by mistake. Well, let's answer.

– "Yes?"

– "Hello! Hello! It is me, Arthur! Hey, remember me?"

– "Yes. What's up?"

– "You have my ID? Remember? I gave it to you so that you could ask for a mine inquiry at the university. I need it back really quick."

Arthur was my friend... Well, I do not have friends. I just knew him a little. He was from a rich family, spending whole days and nights hanging out with girls in the clubs, doing nothing but having fun. Formally, he studied at the same university as I, but he hadn't been there for a year. Last week we met at a cafe, and he gave me his ID so that I could do something for him at the university. He said that he didn't have time to do it, and then jumped into his Audi A5 and drove away. Probably, to the club.

Or a strip club. Does not matter. And now, he's calling me and asking about that stupid inquiry. By the way, I forgot about that shit. Ha-ha.

– "Yes, Arthur, I remember. What's the rush? Why do you need that inquiry so urgently?"

– "Hey, man, don't be stupid. I don't need the inquiry. I need my ID right now. I'll be next to the Beverage club in one hour. They won't let me in without an ID. Be there. See you!"

I tried to say something but heard only beeps coming out of my phone. [Censored]. I know the place he's talking about. I was there once in my previous life. It is located on the other side of that monstrous city. Even if I run like hell, I wouldn't be there until three hours from now, given that I left his ID at home. But not one hour. I decided to call him back and explain the situation. I opened "Last Calls" page, selected his number, and called:

– "The subscriber's phone is switched off or out of coverage. Please, call back later."

Huh, it seems that I have no choice. Well, no. I always have a choice. Of course I can just forget about it, simply go home and get some sleep. However, that would mean one important thing: I will have big problems. His parents are extremely rich and wealthy and they can bury me alive for such stupid things. I do not want these problems. Maybe on another day. But not today. I've had enough for today. It will be better if I just go there. I won't rush, that stupid rich [swear word] will have to wait; he has no choice. But I have a choice. It is important.

I got home quickly. I rarely use trams to get home, but today I understood that it would be easier to do it that way. Ha, I prob-

ably saw the tram driver in the canteen. He called me something very rude and nasty while I pushed him aside to get through. I won't remind him of myself. Pig. Pig in a tram, funny. What a symbolism. The pig in the rasping coffin is getting the grey masses of bullshit to cubic cages they call "homes". The whole of society is in it. You could say that I am rude. My answer: I do not care.

At home, I quickly grabbed Arthur's ID and went out. It was already evening, and my way was going to be very long. Whatever. At least I will listen to my music. I went into the street and headed to the subway. 21 stations, two interchanges. The route is set, the time is set. It is time to float.

Ira

"Aren't We All Running?" The name of the track that popped out first when I shuffled songs in my player. Good question, by the way. I have to admit that we are all running: it's most evident in the subway. It is evening now and the crowds of people are leaving their workplaces for home. I was moving among them and, in a wave of unexpectedly good mood, I started to look at them. The largest part of the crowd was probably those who worked in offices or maybe shops. Dressed in suits and officials skirts that were crumpled in an endless stream of people, with bushed eyes in their smartphones and surrounded with the scent of sweat mixed with cheap perfume. I felt pity when I looked at them. I would never live like that, but... I think I do not have a choice. I have to fit into the system, or it will simply destroy me.

Our subway is the best place to see our city completely naked.

The city full of noise, strange smells and lights. However, the integral part is people again.

Staring deeply into the crowd, I could see a hippie among the office workers. On the right, a homeless was making his way through the crowd and quite successfully, as nobody wanted to get close to him. A woman was trying to get her baby pram down the stairs and nobody, of course, even tried to help her. A few strange people were standing next to the wall: they looked Chinese and probably were offering something illegal for sale. By that time, I was nearly at the edge of the platform and the train was just approaching. Suddenly, I caught the glance of the train driver and reluctantly smiled at him. He smiled too, but the train passed further and I could not see him any longer. I entered the train among the first who were standing next to the doors. However, there were many people who were trying to get inside, and the doors started to close. Our people are always ready to show their gentlemen nature and started holding them in order to let others get inside. "Oh my God, they are so stupid" - I thought. They do not understand that the train driver has a schedule. Moreover, if he waits until everybody gets inside; the trains behind them will have to stop in the tunnel and wait. Thousands of people will get home later. But we think only about ourselves. We do not foresee the future. And we are holding the doors.

Probably, the one who held the doors read my thoughts. He started shouting into the train driver connection device:

– "You [censored] idiot! Don't you see that people are coming?!"

Poor driver. He did what he supposed to do and received such gratitude in return.

At moments like this, I think that our world doesn't deserve a chance. It is impossible to change its ugly nature. Live here, or die free. The question here is it really possible to die free without creating "problems" for others?

At that point, I realized that I am currently in a stupid situation myself by serving as a slave for Arthur. My frame of mind disappeared and I disappeared into the multifarious crowd of subway.

By the time I got there, almost three hours had passed from the time Arthur called me. The club was located in a private, luxurious village next to the city border, and I was enjoying a leisurely walk among the trees. Probably, I was an odd element here: everything around me was looking so fine and expensive. Even the forest around me was strangely cleansed of its natural sweepings, and the trees were straight and similar looking.

"Probably every tree that did not fit the requirements of human taste was removed" - I guessed. Well, like everything around here. It is a place where only the elected could abide untouched. And the criteria is money. If you are rich, you are more than welcome. No matter how you got the money. All that matters is their existence. I felt uneasy after these thoughts and quickened my pace.

I was crossing the parking lot next to the club when I saw Arthur standing and watching me. As I approached, he ran towards me. I could see his face, red with anger, and eyes that were ready to destroy me, as if the Death Star was ready to obliterate the whole planet.

- "[Censored] you! Where have you been? I've been waiting for hours here! Security is now looking at me as though I'm an idiot! I won't ever forgive you! You'll have problems, you hear me?!"

I couldn't say a word, and stood calmly before him. Suddenly, I felt his saliva on my face. He shouted so loudly that he couldn't control his mouth. When I understood it, my facial expression turned to one of disgust. He saw it and became even more furious: – "W-what? How dare you...?"

I realized that I should stop with that humiliation. Who am I, a negro? I quickly took his ID from my pocket and threw it directly into his face. Then, in order to avenge myself, I finished my job with an accurate spittle between his eyes.

He was speechless. His world was broken. There was something happening, something that was not compatible with his world. But I have my own world. I do not want to live in the world they are making me to live in. I turned around and quickly went away. Yes, I will have problems. But I should, I must protect myself and my freedom.

I will regret it later. I will probably apologize in every conceivable way to avoid problems. I will do anything for him. I am a milktoast, I know it. But, now – I am enjoying my moment of glory. And it's worth that.

Murum

By the time I got to my station it was almost 1 a.m. The subway was preparing for closure and the police officers were shouting at the last passengers to leave the station. I slipped through a row of subway workers and went out on the street. The city was charming at night. No people, no cars, no noise. Only distant sounds flowing in the air, creating that magical atmosphere. I headed to the tram station but suddenly understood that it was

too late for trams: they stop their service even earlier than the subway does. The only way home I had was by foot. Fortunately, it was not snowing anymore and I did not mind the fresh, spring chill in the city air. I turned away from the station and headed towards my home. It will probably take me about thirty minutes to quietly walk there. I was in a good mood after the incident with Arthur, so I enjoyed my sluggish gait down the boulevard.

My path took me past the local bookstore located at the end of the boulevard. I saw that store almost every day, and I had not ever visited it. However, on that night, something made me pay special attention to the store and to come closer to the dark glass showcase of the shop. That something was sitting right behind the showcase and was sleeping in a very cute posture of a baby. It was a girl, approximately my age. Yes, she was sitting right on the floor, leaning on the bookshelf and was sleeping. The opened book that she had been reading had fell to her knees, and her head was lying on it. Her face was directed toward the window so I could see its expression: closed eyes and a weak smile that sometimes appears on the face of sleeping person.

The lights in the store were turned off, and it didn't seem that anybody except her was inside. Similarly, there was nobody around me on the darkened boulevard. At that point, my astonishment with that strange girl faded and I felt a great similarity between us. I sat on the cold pavement and leaned against the showcase, just like that girl. Now, the distance between us was less than five inches. I lit a cigarette. The only border between us was that thin, invisible, opaque yet solid glass. Encouraged by our similarity, I felt an urge to do something, to let her to know about me, to

destroy that invisible barrier. I turned my body towards her and raised my hand in order to knock. I lingered for a second seemed like an eternity for me and lightly knocked on the glass. I lowered my hand to see her reaction but... nothing happened. I knocked one more time, and then once more. I started to think that she was dead but then she suddenly moved her lips, smiled broadly and shook her head like people do after they see some pleasant dream. No, she was not dead. She was just sleeping very deeply.

I finished the cigarette, stood up and started to walk away. After fifty yards I turned back, to glimpse the sleeping girl for the last time that night.

Surgere

Strangely, on the next day I managed to wake up on time and to go to the university. As usual, I made half of my way on foot. Fortunately, the weather was good and my shoes were dry that time. For a moment, I thought that it was a good sign, but then I ousted these stupid superstitions from my mind. It is just the weather; it is unpredictable and there could be no special signs sent from it.

It took me only fifteen minutes to cover the usual half-an-hour path and I was not even late for the lecture. I did not remember the last time when I got to the university on time so, I did not know what to do in the ten-minute break before the lecture. I sat on the sofa in one of the countless hallways inside the campus building and started to stare at the opposite wall. Other students were passing by and I did not look at them in order to recognize somebody. However, unexpectedly, one of the girls passing by

captured my eyes and my sight moved to her. I understood the reason in less than a second. It was she. I saw that girl last night. Yes, yes, it was exactly the sleeping beauty from the local bookstore. She was walking in a group of other girls and they were probably intending to sit on the other sofa, next to the one I sat on. Our eyes intersected for a second. I finally saw them, these beautiful grey-with-green eyes. However, our sights continued to move in different directions and eye contact was lost.

I did not say anything to her. I did not even manage to somehow get her name. To get acquainted with the group of girls around her. I remembered the thing I learned about us - there is a thin, invisible but strong barrier between us - and nothing could break it. Our ways aren't crossing like our sights did - and they must never. Life will never allow that to happen. What a funny, stupid life. Finally, the lecture started and I hastened to join the others. After a bunch of usual propaganda by the teachers, I decided to have some tea in the university canteen. There was a huge crowd of my classmates longing for an awaited lunch so there were no free tables inside. I remembered the canteen at the tram depot: so different and so similar at the same time. I was already holding extremely hot tea in my hand, so I had no alternative but to ask if some table could give a spare place for me. I asked the first available group of third year students if I could sit on the corner chair. They agreed and moved a bit so that I could sit among them. I started to drink the tea and unwontedly I became an occasional witness of their dialog:

– "I am having an extremely lucky week: two banks have offered me to join them at the intern position! Hah, I now have to choose

- and I don't know which one what I want!" - reported the guy in the indigo suit.

- "Aaaand, what are the alternatives?" - the other in a white T-shirt stretched his words.

- "Well, they are β etabank and ω megabank!"

- "Wow, that sounds really cool. It will be a haaard decision, dude!"

- "At least it is only 31 March now, so I have some time to decide! But the latter are renting their office just on the top of one of the highest buildings downtown! That will surely make my decision!" - marveled the indigo suit.

At that point two things, extraordinarily connected, popped into my head. Firstly, I realized that my birthday is tomorrow. No, it is not a joke. I do really have my birthday on April 1. I do not like that day just because it is my birthday, but I hated it especially because of the date - everybody unexpectedly started to remember me and make the stupid, humorousless jokes about me. On these days I was always trying to escape and enjoy it at least with the fact that I am alone. Here, I switched to the second thing noticed by the indigo suit: the skyscraper.

What a great idea! I should, no; I must spend my day on the top of such building tomorrow!

There is going to be a great sight from it in the evening. What better present could I afford for myself? Decision made! Only a little job left: to find a high building that has an easily accessible roof, without any stupid security or tenants that would call the police if even so much as a pigeon sits on their windowsill. Fortunately, I know a couple of geeks who can help me with that task

just for a little money reward. I left the remainder of tea on the bottom of the cup and quickly went out in order to call them.

Ceciderit

Yeah, that day came. I couldn't ever thought that I would wait for my birthday to come. Yesterday, I even took a triple phenobarbital dose in order to sleep, sleep faster so that the day could start faster. Fortunately, I woke up at noon and my parents were smart enough not to disturb me with their useless graters in the morning. I wanted to get to the roof in the evening so I spent the whole day playing computer games. The time passed by and I understood that I should quickly get away from the house because I would have no chance of leaving in case they return now. They probably tried to call me and warn me that they want to greet me in the evening, but I providently turned off my phone yesterday evening. I hate calls on my birthdays. The empty people call to say empty words. Do I need it? No.

I quickly packed all my belongings and went out of the house. The geeks that I called yesterday suggested a fine place in the center of the city where I could see the whole town in all its nightly magic. The only drawback was that I had to climb the fire ladder to get to the roof: the security system inside was too good for me to disable it.

I should have noticed that starting from that point events start to happen very quickly, much quicker than they usually happen to me. I got to the building quite fast: the subway was not so crowded that day and the building itself was located just next to the subway entrance. Five more minutes, one broken lock – and

I am standing in front of the fire ladder. I wasn't in very good condition, but I was sure that climbing a hundred meter ladder is not a problem for me. Probably, I was right about that: I started to climb at a very good pace and kept the speed until the end of the ladder. It was almost the end of the ladder when that happened. My eyes very getting ready for the beautiful sight that was going to open before my eyes, when a calm voice in my head told me: – "It is time to sleep, my precious."

I relaxed and believed in every word the voice told me - and I felt asleep. My hands unclenched from the ladder - and I am falling.

Falling.

Second.

Two.

Hit.

Pain.

Darkness.

I did not see anything. I felt only the most terrible pain in my life. My legs. My back. I could open my eyes for a second to see myself lying on a ledge sticking out from the building of the frightening height. It was my end. Senseless life. I did not find myself. No! No-o.. It could not be m.. It.. No.. How.. Wh... y...

I saw, I felt strange creatures flying around me and laughing, laughing, LAUGHING! Suddenly, my mind became extremely clear. Clear for my last, but concise thought:

Phenobarbital.

Libertas

White people. Whiter than anything else. Completely white. They are all gyrating on the ellipse. They have always done it. And always will. They are walking. They do not remember the start. They think they will finish soon, but they forget it every time. They have to take a strict number of steps. Then they have to lie down. Then they walk again. It is an eternal process. They do not know the word 'time'. They know only our steps, white color, ellipse and greyness around us.

One of them is walking. One of them sees the others walking in front of him. One of them knows that other sees him walking in front of one of them. One of them is counting the steps. One, two, three. A new cycle. Reset. One, two, three. Until 337. Reset. 317 times more. Lie down. Reset. One, two, three. One aim - walk. Nothing more important exists. Nothing exists at all - only they and their steps. And that is unbreakable.

Inferno

Spero

Oh my [censored] God! How on Earth could he have fallen there? [Censored], even the fire department won't be able to take that idiot down from here! Aarrgh, I should call the choppers, yes, the only way to get him down. I hung on the other side, cunningly took out the mobile phone and dialed 911:

– "This is a cleaning service worker; my name is Alex, location Northwest Tower, Green Zone. Young man, fallen from roof, on the pillar, on the 35-th floor level... Probably broke his back. You'll

need a chopper to get him down" - I quickly summarized all the information, as I was taught.

- "Roger that" - the voice repeated - "We will be in a few minutes. Please meet the emergency group upon possibility."

I climbed up the roof and detached my hook. After that, I looked down at the poor stranger for the last time and quickly headed to the elevators.

- "Ah, the whole day is now ruined," - thought I - "The emergency service must take me to the hospital with that guy by law. If he is still alive, indeed."

Neglegentia

- "His fractures do not pose a threat to his life" - said the surgeon thoughtfully - "But he is in a deep coma now. That is not usual for such a situation."

- "Well, and what does it mean?" - I asked the doctor carefully.

- "Don't you know that he is drug addict?" - I was shocked by such a straightforward question.

- "Of course no, I've known him no longer than you. I found him when I was cleaning the roof; I am the local worker from the cleaning service."

- "Okay, but just for your interest: we found a large concentration of analgesic drugs in his blood." It was probably the reason why he fell. We think that he won't get awake from the coma. Unless some miracle happens. We still record some brain activity; however, it is not usual and it could be just random signals from his head as a result of drugs." - reported the surgeon.

– “Well, it does not say anything for me. I said, I do not know him. Of course, he is not in very good shape now. But I can’t help him; I did everything I could. Can I leave?”

– “Yes, of course. Take care of yourself.”

I walked out of the hospital. It is time to call Johnny and have some Friday beer! I took my mobile phone and started dialing. However, I saw a strange flash in the sky in my peripheral vision. I was distracted from my phone call to see the last thing in my life: dazzling, extremely white, scalding light in front of my eyes.

Memoria

– “Such a great day! Yes, yes! Yesterday was a great day!” - I thought in joy.

And it really was! I got the drugs for my illness... Again, I forgot its name. I met with my friends in the tram depot canteen and we found my notebook with all the trains in the subway! I love it so much! And we went to see the new trams! They were great! Finally, I spent all night in subway tunnels. It is so cozy there. You can get a really good sleep there unless the police see you, but I was careful! And I enjoyed the best home one could imagine! Today was not so good - but it was not bad! Still it is evening now and anything could happen. Maybe, I’ll see the 81-717.6K train! It is so rare, but I love it so much! Not it, but him! The trains are like people, we need to talk with them as we do among ourselves!

With such thoughts, I was riding the elevator down to the subway station. I was almost on the platform when something flashed behind me. I turned around to see the last thing: collapsing ele-

vator tunnel in front of me.

Veneficii

Stupid prick! I hate him. I will destroy him. Who does he think he is? I was waiting for him for hours, like an idiot. And, after that, he'd dare to do such a things to me. Clearly, the police will suddenly remember about him. I promise. I know that he is taking drugs; he told me once. And I will use it.

Now it is time to have fun! I almost forgot yesterday's situation. The driver took me to a club as usual and hopefully I had my ID with me today. The club. So home. My second home, or even first. I feel like I'm in heaven here. The driver stopped the car in front of the main entrance, opened the door. I walked to the entrance like a boss, carelessly showed the ID to security, and their faces quickly changed from the faces of enemies to the faces of slaves: "Oh, mister, sorry that we did not notice you right away, bla-bla-bla". Enough. I walked through without even looking at them. Inside, I saw my old, good friends.

The evening went as usual; I drank a bit, smoked expensive cigarettes with expensive tobacco and started to feel really good. What a life! What could be better?

I saw my old friend Donald coming towards me:

– "Hi, Arthur! How is life?"

– "Hi, Don, perfect as always! And yours?"

– "Oh, you can't imagine how good it can be if you know how to make it good!"

Suddenly, Don moved closer, lowered his voice and said:

– “I have something that might interest you, Arty. I have some really good weed from the dealer. Want some?” - whispered Don.

I thought it might be a good idea to continue such a great evening with new fun, and I replied:

– “What’s the price? Quality?”

– “That sounds offensive; I never ever took bad things, huh? Price as usual, we all know it.” I insensibly put a couple of banknotes in his pocket, and then he moved away and simply gave me a cigarette. I lit it up and took a long drag.

Wow, it is so powerful. After a few seconds, I felt weakness in my whole body, and the sense of euphoria came right away. I saw how colors started to change in size; I saw the space singing and dimensions playing on the giraffes. I started to feel the time; it was flowing, running around me. I could take a portion in my hand and throw it away. I burst out laughing. It is the best trip in my life.

I felt somebody’s hand pulling me towards the exit:

– “Cmon, follow me, I’ll show you something really cool outside!”

I stood up and walked to the exit, trying not to touch the flows of time flying around. Finally, I got to the fresh air. It covered me like snow, so I had to clean myself a bit before I could see anything. I heard a voice that slowly shouted:

– “Looook heeereee!”

I turned my head towards the voice and the last thing I saw was dazzling, extremely white, scalding light in front of my eyes.

Contemptus

Wybuch... Who can write a book better than he? I am even

proud of the fact that I am reading his books. Yesterday I was in the bookstore, and I took a quick look at his new book. What was my amazement when I found myself lying on the floor and staring at the morning sun! I was so captured by the book that I did not even control myself and left the bookstore closure straight away.

I was completely in my thoughts about his books, so my girlfriends, with whom I was walking, asked me if I was all right. I quickly returned to the real world and assured them that I was just thinking about personal matters.

We walked through the hallway where I saw a strange guy half-lying on the sofa. He was untidily dressed, his hair was uncombed and he looked more like a homeless person than a student of a good, respectable university. Our sights met for a second, and I saw pure anger radiating from his eyes. However, at the same time, it was not only anger, but it was also some... pain. Still, it did not absolve him from getting here in such an image. Disgusting.

After the lectures had ended, the girls decided to go to the amusement park. I joined them without a thought - I love rollercoasters so much! No sooner said than done: and we are there. The only drawback of such an adventure was the homeless sitting next to the ticket office. Brrr. Too much brokes for today. Fortunately, the queue was moving fast, and we got away from that terrible person who dared to beg for our money.

Rollercoasters! So fast, and yes, so furious! I am fascinated even by the thought of riding them. And we are standing in the queue of the rollercoaster called "The New Sun" right now! I do not

know how I withstood not running through people without even waiting for others. Finally, we were seating in the coaster. The cart was moving slowly, but then we saw that we were going to ride very fast uphill right towards the Sun that would rise in front of us. Three... Two... One... Start! At speed, I could not say a word. I saw the opening shelter of the Sun and then instantly the light, brighter than one hundred Suns put together: so dazzling, extremely white and scalding!

Superbia

Occasu

Colonel Sukhanov was sitting and drinking his tea in a very relaxed manner. Big, red Paris Sun was sinking into the Seine slowly, and one could enjoy that view of the evening, dying city. People started to move faster; the cars were arriving and departing faster, the lights in the buildings started to blink more often. The city was preparing for night: the daily, bright side was quickly leaving the streets, hiding in their homes. People think that it will save them: but it is no more than an optical illusion.

At the same time, the darker side of the city was waking up. Fast cars, loud people, night clubs, thieves, hookers, drug dealers and just strangers: they are the only power here, when the Sun completely disappears behind the high buildings of Defense. There was only a colonel and two people sitting next to him who saw that complete change in the city and were not afraid of it. They were not afraid of anything. They knew – even in the darkest time, the light is going to win. And in the brightest days, we

can be sure that the darkness will cover the whole world leaving no chance for the smallest ray of light.

The colonel was finishing his coffee. He twiddled his mug several times and wistfully asked his companions:

– “Sometimes I still catch myself that I continue to see some beauty in that world. Maybe, we should give it a chance?”

– “We will not. We are going to see much more beautiful things there. That world does not have a chance. It has wallowed in the sinful dirt for too long. We must do what we will do. We will create a new chance for a new world, but we won’t give any chance for an old one.” - calmly replied the man in the black suit, finishing his huge cigar.

The third companion remained silent, looking at the sinking sun. His face was carved from stone and was covered with many scars. The only dynamic element on it was his eyes that were shining with interminable energy.

– “I should listen to you more often,” - said Sukhanov – “Sometimes I feel that I am too immature for that responsibility.”

– “Do not pretend to be so. I know your true nature. We all know each other better than each of us known ourselves. You’ll be the first to do your job, and we all know it. And you perfectly know that there will be no responsibility to anyone.”

– “Ah, Black, give me a second to open my hidden romantic nature!” – laughed colonel - “Don’t be so serious - otherwise, you can join them.” – colonel pointed at the group of businessmen loudly arguing over some accounting reports in front of them.

The man in the black suit fell silent and watched over the businessmen. Suddenly, the third companion spoke:

– “Finally, we polished all the details of our plan. Is there is anything left?”

Colonel thought for a bit and replied confidently:

– “No. The plan is perfect. The only important thing we need is our precise watch.” - colonel started the last cigarette of his pack

- “Then it will work perfectly.”

– “I also depend on my people, and you know that.” - the stone face discontentedly added.

– “What is the probability of their betrayal taking the legend you told them about into account?” - asked the black suit.

– “Zero.” - he responded.

– “Then it is, as I said, perfect!” - colonel shook his head.

They plunged into silence again. Finally, when the Sun hid its last rays behind the buildings, they stood up. Each of them looked into the eyes of the other. Probably, these looks were the deepest ones that ever occurred among human creatures. Then, they turned away and walked into three opposite directions.

Contritio

The last shot...

... was made in the ceiling, just to make sure everybody except the President was dead or unable to move anyhow. I calmly walked through the dead bodies to the dying leader and took the suitcase from his hands that were covered with blood. Hopefully,

I managed to get the codes beforehand, so I do not have to torture him. What is more important, I have a very little time. I opened the suitcase and entered the codes. Just as I finished, I heard a husky voice from behind. It was the President:

– “Ssstooop it, p-p-please. . . ! You aree craz-z-zy. . . !”

I looked at my watch, sincerely smiled at him and. . .

...killed the last standing officer right in his heart. I carefully checked to see if he was dead, and then started checking the doors to be in the closed state. I turned the biohazard alarm on: now I can be sure that all exits of the base are sealed with special, almost indestructible doors. Happy with myself, I went to the restroom and washed my hands of congealed blood. I do not want to start my journey to the new world with dirty hands. I returned to the operating point and started preparing the system for launch. When almost everything was ready, I felt that something is trying to grip the lower part of my leg. It was the officer who was wasting his last energy to stop me. What a fool: the bullet is sitting in his head now. I smiled, looked at my watch, took a deep breath and. . .

... was made to destroy unnecessary witnesses. I’ve known them since I was child, and we were playing in the wild sands of Arabia. But they could not go any further. They have to stop here: and I’ll help them to find peace. We will meet in the new world. Your assistance won’t be forgotten. I turned away and walked to the control point. I spent some time entering the coordinates and then turned the whole system on. The last command in the prompt - and the roof of the hangar is slowly opening. The first rays of the Sun fell on me. I looked at my watch. It is time. I closed my eyes and. . .

...pressed the button, to see the light: dazzling, extremely white and scalding.

The Whiteism

There are white people who are whiter than anything else. They wear white coats, white trousers, they have white hands, white heads with no ears. There are no shoes on their feet, which are also white. The only thing that are not white in those people, are their eyes pupils. In total there are two hundred fifty six people. They are all moving like soldiers, marching in step with each other. There are eight people in each line. They have no aim of going, they have no sense of existence but they go. The gap between the lines of people is four and half meters long. Moving stiffly upright, they are progressing with speed, which is approximately half meter per second. Two hundred fifty six people gyrate on an ellipse, which is about 144 meters long. The parallel parts of the ellipse are 40 meters long the other parts are turning point lines.

That ellipse is located in an unknown place. If somebody stood in the center of the ellipse and tried to look toward the horizon he would only see white square blocks covering all the visible space around it. Those square blocks are one-meter in width and one meter in height; between those blocks there are small gutters, ten centimeters in depth and one centimeter in width. The surface of the flags is a little rough like emery paper. Those flags were poured in concrete some time ago. Conversely, the surface of the ellipse is smooth like glass. It was made from nickel at the same time the flags were made.

Let's return to our people who are walking round the ellipse. They are still walking. They have been doing that for many years now. Their way lies round the ellipse through two huge arcs.

Those arcs are about 32 meters in height, and they are the only things, which rise at the allvisible area in the center of the ellipse. The arcs are made from steel beams and, as they have the same color as their surrounding, it is really hard to notice them from a distance. Moreover, the arcs are the reason why people still hold the line. It is a unit, which supports people's minds. It erases people's memory each time they go though them. It happens over and over again. That is why people suppose that they are going to pass through the small part of the ellipse, which is 72 meters long and that all will be over and they will stop their march. As they pass through arcs and they forget that they have just passed that distance. The system has been working that way for more than ten years.

Actually, people cannot walk without having breaks. And that is the reason why there are four people who are totally black, with the exception of their eyeballs, which are white. They wear the same coats and trousers as the white people, except that they are black like their heads, hands and feet without shoes. Black people do not walk; they just stand in the same place and wait till break time. After 317 incomplete cycles of crossing the arcs; the white people have hatted in the same position where they started on their way to complete the cycle ago. After standing for one minute than all the people lied down on the surface of the ellipse at the same moment and closed their eyes at the same moment. That means that the fist stage of recovery has started. After that the black people picked up four ten-centimeter lusterless grey cubes, which are stored in pyramids. The pyramids are located on one side relative to the position position where black

people stood. The distance between black man and pyramid is one meter. The black people approach to the pyramids and open them by turning their top. Taking two cubes in each hand they make their way to groups of white people, who they have to recover. Each group as a matter of course contains 64 people. In of explaining the process of recovery, imagine that you are one of those black men. You take the cubes, and then come to one white man. You put two cubes on his, hips one cube on his belly and one cube on his forehead. As the white men's foreheads are not slippery because of a special white coating on people's skin, the cube perfectly stands on it. Then after a certain amount of time a black man takes back the cubes and goes to another white man. In total the operation takes one minute per person, so after 64 minutes the black men are finished white men's recovery and stage two starts. During two, the black men who stood one the same diagonal at the beginning of the cycle repeat the operation with the others black men who stood in the other line. The stage two recovery actions are different from those of the stage one. While in the stage two "black man recovery program" a black man puts two cubes on the hips and two cubes on the arms of the other black man. Finally, after all men are recovered the black men put the cubes back into the pyramids and return to their old positions.

Talking about those cubes in more detail we appreciate that they are really interesting units. They maintain the same temperature independently of the conditions of where they are. Their temperature is constantly 49-Celsius. So the first possible theory asto why those cubes are necessary is the hypothesis that people should have enough heat to function. Also, all stop-start processes are

controlled via arc commands. So, to stop people, arcs use a special signal, which makes people sleep for certain amount of time in a certain position. The system is perfectly balanced. The system is perfectly designed.

Well, two stages of the recovery process are finished, and the white people opened their eyes, they do so synchronously, so that looking at it from the outside it seems like somebody has triggered knife-switch, which has brought all the white people back to life. After a minute the white people stand up on their feet and start their aimless march. They have been doing that for ages, and maybe they will do it forever. But soon one bug will happen, which the system has never had. Actually, it has strict rules of how to work, and those rules have been perfectly functioning for many years. But there is no algorithm for how to act in the case, which will happen soon.

He had realized it. Of course he did not do that immediately and had to pass through some number of complete cycles, but anyway he had finally done it. He had realized that he was realizing. The point is that the arcs erasing technology had stopped erasing the memory of one white man, who did performed job at the center row of the ellipse march. His brain had adapted to permanent memory deletion. So, this man had started to recover his consciousness.

The lucky white man had realized that he could see. He sows the other men walking with him. As he had not come to himself completely, he did not know that he could move his eyes. That is

why he examined the world around him by looking at the same point. After 37 non-complete cycles, he discovered that he could move his eyes to the left and right. Since, he had existed in that world for a long time, his eyes adapted to distinguish various shades of gray. That quality was really important in the world we are talking about because the sky of the world was gray ostensibly it is cloudy day. Illumination of the sky was evenly distributed if an ordinary man from our world would up in at that place, he wouldn't be able to distinguish the sky from the ground. But our white man had understood where the ground was and where the sky was at once. Actually, he was really afraid of moving his eyes because his brain told him that it was really dangerous: somebody might see that his was conscious and deprive him of it. Time crept on and a paralyzing effect of fear was gradually taking held while curiosity was increasing. Thus, he started devouring the world with his eyes.

It was an unknown feeling for him to move his eyes, so it was really funny and enjoyable for him to do it. Suddenly he detected that he began getting tired. His strength was decreasing with each non-complete cycle he passed. But unexpectedly for him all the white men had stopped. He had stopped with them because the habit had been hammered into his head. After a minute all the people lied down and he lied with them simultaneously for the same reason. He was really afraid of falling into oblivion again, so he did not close his eyes trying not to sleep. Then the moment of his recovery stage came. A black man came to him and put the cubes on the hips of our white man while he was simulating sleep, keeping his eyes closed. The white man was trying not to be in

trepidation from fear. As the cubes were as heavy as foam plastic blocks, the white man practically did not feel anything. After a minute that horrible for him moment passed. The black man took all the cubes and continued with the recovery process.

The duration of the complete cycle is little more than the duration of a day on Earth. So, let's call one complete cycle, which contains 317 non-complete cycles a day. Therefore, our white man was doing the same things for seven days. He just was looking round moving his eyes. But, then he discovered that his speed on turn was a little higher than on the straight part of the ellipse. He was accelerating and decelerating without thinking about it. After he had realized this he started experimenting. He increased his walking speed on the straight part of the ellipse and then decreased it. He did this several times in order to figure out his maximum. He started to speed up but after getting really close to his walking neighbor in front of him some unknown power decreased his tempo. After that he returned to his "home" line and did not do anything for 27 non-complete cycles. While doing that, he was paralyzed from the inside. His feelings, thoughts and eyes were paralyzed. Our poor white man was really scared. Finally, the binding fear escaped. The white man was intelligent enough to understand that it was better not to come close to his colleagues.

The day after the incident our unfettered one improved his skill by increasing and decreasing his speed. So, the time to learn some new movements came. The white man realized that he could control his head direction. He could turn it. Fighting against fear, which was blazing in his breast, he cautiously started turning his

head. After some time he felt giddy. As he had not done such movements since he had started marching, it was too unusual for his brain. So, he needed some time to adapt. Our white man was stubborn, so he tried to turn his head on and on again. He had finally achieved it after some amount of non-complete cycles. But all his attempts made him feel really tired. He lost too much energy learning how to turn his head. But he had to do 26 more cycles. It was really hard for him; he felt how his brain was vibrating. His vision was darkened. Eventually, the recovery stage started, and our white man felt facilitation. It was his first facilitation since he had awakened. While experiencing that emotion our man felt another emotion. It was the happiness of feeling full.

After being recharged, the white man was full of enthusiasm to go. He thought that he could complete two cycles. He was full of energy and optimism. But while doing the 287 laps he realized that he could be somewhere else besides the ellipse. Maybe he could go to the horizon and discover something new in the world. During the white man in reasoning, the complete cycle ended.

While the black man was recovering his strength, the white man was thinking about his dream. He had had his first dream of the new period of his life. He wanted to reach the horizon and discover something else in the grey world. He had been thinking about the dream for 3 days. But then unfettered man explored a new ability of his body. His body had arms.

The white man learned how to use his hands very quickly. And after experiencing all the possible movements of his hands, he decided to use them. He was eager to use them, but he did not know how. 5 non-complete cycles later our man made a decision

to just raise his hands. He raised his hand so that there was a right angle between his arm and his body. Walking like that, he felt proud. He was so proud that butterflies were flying in his stomach. But suddenly he realized that he started losing too much energy again. The situation he experienced after he had tried to turn his head, repeated. The white man is arm movements lied to really severe emaciation. Therefore, our man did not remember the last two days. He understood that his memory was erased again. Fear started spreading in his body. He was thought about the incident the whole day. And, after 317 noncomplete cycles of torment and thousand of thoughts he realized that it was all about the cubes. The black man put the cubes only on hips, head and belly, but he did not put the cubes on the arms. That is why his games with that part of his body had such an effect. After formulating the idea in his head, he felt pride and happiness once again.

Nothing changed 4 days later. The white man tried raising his hand sometimes. He discovered that if he raised his hands not so often nothing would happen with his strength. He also was turned his head from side to side. Of course he did abuse with it. However, all those games with the parts of his body were diverting him from his dream. And it took some time to recall it.

A day later the dream reminded him about itself. Our white man was looking at the sky and thinking about its depth. After that he remembered that he wanted to explore the world outside the ellipse. That made him think about his idea. He understood that to break free of the ellipse way he need to turn before he reached the turning line was. Or he could not turn at all so by

walking forward he would leave the ellipse. He smiled. That was the first smile on his face. Actually, he did not understand what happened with his mouth. He was frightened of the smile because he supposed that it was a sign that somebody else recognized that he knew how to leave the ellipse so his memory would be erased again. He was vainly trying not to think about his escape plan but he could not. Then he discovered that he still had his reasoning ability realized that nobody could see what happens inside his head. The cycle ended.

The new day came. The white man returned to the plan in his head. There was one annoyance. He should increase his speed for the purpose of not touching his colleagues but he should not speed up do much so as not to touch the man in front of him. After formulating that hypothesis, he tried to examine it. Everything going well, so he was in the middle of the lines gap.

After that achievement, he decided to turn left because not turning left was more dangerous. He understood that if he wanted to go through the people's lines at the turning line he should turn left anyway. Furthermore he would have to increase his speed so that he would not touch anybody. It was really a hard task made easier by turning left at the straight part.

The white man shifted left. But he felt that he was losing consciousness again. It was like he was learning to turn his head all over again. Well, that incident made him feel despair. However, after some amount of laps he realized that he needed to learn how to move his head without pain so that he could learn how to turn without negative effects. It took about two days to learn how to turn, but he had finally done it.

The day when he could leave the ellipse came. Our white man was feeling nervous. He was doing laps over and over again gaining strength. He had completed about 65 laps already, but he still hadn't left the ellipse. Well, he finally decided to. Finishing the turning line, he started speeding up. After he held the right position, he started shifting to the right. Fear hammered him, but he kept on moving. First row, second row, third row, border, he left the ellipse!

The white man left the ellipse and stopped at the middle of the squared plate. He was amazed that he had done it. Everything inside him was jumping. After standing for a while and thinking about his achievement, he discovered that the surface of the plate was different from the surface of the ellipse. It was rough. He smiled again. He liked the new surface. He started passing his feeling over the surface gorging on the new notions.

Then after satisfying himself with the new notion, he looked at the other white men. The sight stroked him. He was admiring the march. From the outside, the system looked really differently than from the inside. All the structure and accuracy were visible. The system was perfect. The system was balanced.

After that our man decided to leave his homeland and went to explore unknown parts of the world. He walked along with a spring in his step looking forward to new notions. He wanted to discover something else like the rough plate. But suddenly he realized that he made a mistake. He needed a recharge! And if he did not recharge something terrible might happen. He rapidly turned round and walked back to the ellipse. Lucky for him he had not gone too far from his "home".

Well he quickly found where was his line and without any difficulties he wedged himself in it. After reaching his usual state he began thinking about possible solutions. The day after he found out that he could explore four sides of the ellipse if he knew for sure that his walking resource was. So he needed to measure the number of steps he took during one cycle. For the purpose of counting steps, he decided to use his arms. The white man did not know numbers, so he had to invent his own system to count his steps.

He had been thinking about a counting system for 11 days when finally he invented one. He converted one step to one finger on his hand. Thus when he did one step he bended a finger. After bending all the ten fingers on his hands he bended one finger on his feet. That meant that he had two full hands of the steps or ten. Than, if all feet fingers are busy thus there were 100 steps he could raise one his arm. Raising two arms meant that he had 200 steps. So he could count to 300 using his "technology".

After two stages of recharging the white man started counting. He counted the number of steps that he had made during one lap, and then started counting the number of laps. He knew that each lap would contain the same number of steps. Therefore all day he was counting. After 271 cycles he started feel weak. It was really challenging for him to do that but finally he did it. There were about 91,296 steps.

After two days of rest the white man returned to his dream realization. He knew that there were four sides where he could go. He could distinguish them relatively his starting position, which was constant. Finally he started his first journey. He wanted to

be certain of half of the number steps walking from the ellipse so that he could return.

4 days passed. The white man explored all the sides but did not find anything new. There were only grey squared plates and nothing else. He started giving his way to despair. A did not go anywhere for 17 days. He thought that his dream was impossible.

One day he thought hard about the issue and found that it would be great if the cubes were always with him then he could make an infinite amount of steps and finally reach new places! With that idea his previous enthusiasm returned along with a smile on his face. It turned out that he should take 4 cubes from the black man. He understood that was not hard because the black men were disabled the while white men were active.

During the next recovery stage he memorized which parts of which body cubes were put. He examined himself by looking at how the black man was putting the cubes on another white man. He spent 3 days learning how to put the blocks on properly.

To steal the cubes, he watched the process of their extraction. Realizing that nobody was spying on him, he remained standing while the others were lying. That made it possible to examine the process of extraction. After that the white man confidently reached the center of the ellipse.

He was really close to the pyramid, which was the cradle for all of the white man in the ellipse. Well, he touched it. It was unbelievable for that such shape as pyramid could provoke such notions. He felt that ribbing of its borders. He put his hand on

the top of the pyramid. It was great pleasure for the white man to sense how the tip of the pyramid pricked his hand. Having enjoyed quite enough he turned the top of the pyramid an extracted four cubes. Now he could go anywhere! He wedged himself in line neatly and then left the ellipse. It was the last day he had seen the ellipse. He felt some faint notes of sadness but his dreams and desire were much stronger, so he continued on his own way to new world.

During the first 10 thousand of steps our white man was trying to imagine the new world of notions he would explore. But he had really weak notion imagination so all he could do was burning desire to reach something new, to touch something new, to see or even to smell something new. Actually, the white man did not know that he could also use his nose to explore the world because everything around the ellipse did have any smell.

The white man had done 91,000 steps. And, it was time to have a recovery. He lied down and put cubes on his body. He memorized basic cube positions, which black men used, so he expected not to have any problems with it. Recovery time was densely set in his brain. It was kind of reflex. His brain was perfect timer. It counted 64 minutes the same way as any electronic timers would do.

Taking cubes in hands, our white man continued his way to adventures.

The system was balanced. The system was perfect. The system was broken. Two really necessary elements disappeared. The

cubes and the white man had gone. As it was mentioned before system did not have an algorithm to use in such situation.

The full cycle was approaching to end and the recovery would start soon. The white people did 315 full cycles, 316, 317... As always they stopped on the same positions. All the people lied down. The black men started recovery stage taking cubes in their hands except one black man. He could not take anything because there was nothing in the pyramid.

There was no algorithm and system did not know to act properly. That was the beginning of the end for it. Black man remained standing near empty pyramid doing nothing. The first recovery stage was finished and started the recovery for the black men. As, the one man was disabled. In the result of the recovery stage on behalf of the white people were not charged as two black men.

Cycle started but only 3/4 of the white people got on their feet. They began to walk. But the other part of the white men was still lying on the floor of the ellipse. Those who were walking started falling down on the people who were lying. One cycle before all the white people who had been perfectly marching not so long time ago turned into huge floundering heap. The white men were laying one on another. It looked like system has eaten itself.

Since some time floundering stopped. The white people energy expired. They did not go through the arcs during that so-called full cycle so they started slowly coming to their senses. But they have been being in oblivion for long time. And they needed much more time to consciousness. But black man could not do their work anymore and recover the white men with the cubes. So, all the white men lapsed in coma.

The black man could not do anything with the heap. So they were just standing looking straightforward to the emptiness. Suddenly, one black man felt down on his back. Finally, after some time the last black man felt down. The cycle ended.

The white man was going. He had done three recovery stages being far away from ellipse. Suddenly he noticed that the landscape changed. He did not know what changed exactly but his eyes were giving the signal that there was something unknown. After 300 steps he found out the thing, which was unknown. He saw a figure of a man who was drawing to him. His heart started beating faster. He felt how splitting wave seeped across his body.

When he come close enough to see the man in details he was as shocked so he dropped cubes on the floor. The other man also was white and also had the same cubes. But actually he also dropped cubes as our white man. That seemed him strange. He came closer to the stranger and raised hand to great him. The stranger did the same move. Our man was confused by such action repeat. He decided to do something unexpected and lied down on the floor. The stranger did the same. Our white man jumped on his feet in a sweat and raised one hand. The stranger repeated it.

Unexpectedly, some new feeling grabbed our man. He was full of hatred against the stranger because he thought that he was unique and nobody could understand him so easy. He did not want to return to the ellipse situation when he was doing the same actions as the hundreds of other man did. Being out of tone our white man threw oneself on the stranger. That was the wall

he was jumping on so he bumped against it.

After that episode our man lied down and was started to think about the situation. He tried to figure out the reasons and motives of happening. Suddenly it dawned upon him. The stranger bumped against the wall as he did it. So maybe it was not stranger but it was he or reproduction of him. Our white man slowly raised to his feet. The stranger did the same. After some time of doing senseless movements our man was sure that it was his reproduction. The stranger was he. The white man began to look on himself using that mirror wall.

He had seen a lot about himself he thought so it was time to go. But he could not do it. Something really bad happened. The cubes disappeared. There was not any at the place where he left them. Our man started running over the place where he left the cubes. But there were nothing that looked like cube in an all-visible space.

Our man stopped running. He realized that he lost the cubes that were fatal for him. He glanced at stranger in the mirror. He wanted to beat him. But he recalled that it is just replication of him and just defiantly turned away. He thought that his own replication had stolen the cubes. But he could not anything except trying to return to the ellipse.

That was 90 000 steps he did going away from the mirror wall. Actually that mirror wall was the horizon because it stretched in all the visible space. But our man did not notice it. 91 000 steps passed. Our man was still running trying to return to the ellipse and recover. He was afraid that it was end for him and he would not do anything in the world. He was afraid that something un-

known would happen. Being disabled forever horrified him. 92 000 steps passed. Our man did not know that the cubes were still at the same place where he left them. 93 000 steps passed. The cubes just become perfectly transparent. 93 500 steps... The pyramids were created in purpose to prevent cubes becoming transparent. 93 675 steps... But our man did not know that.

He was running to the ellipse. He did not know that there was no ellipse system in the world anymore or better to say working ellipse system. 183 456 steps... Our man was feeling that he could not move anymore his strength was running out. He knew that it was over. He thought that he did enough steps for one full cycle.

2 thousand steps had passed since that moment. But he was still going. He decided to cunt steps. He was counting them for fun. After 50 thousand steps he realized that he had totally made much more steps than one cycle contain. And, after one full cycle or 91 000 steps he understood that he did not need cubes.

Well, our man has found out one of the main regularity of the system. He needed cubes but only in the ellipse area. But when he left it he could go without cubes. Our man stopped. He decided to find something new in the world. But as he was not sure home much steps he could do till his over would come; he decided to go on bias.

The white man reached mirror wall again. Actually that was the other part of the wall. The white man was partly glad to see his reflection and partly he was disappointed about it because it

might be the last thing he sees in the world. He was going along the mirror wall.

Some enormous amount of steps passed. He saw a gray part straight ahead. It was the part where the right and the left mirror wall were crossing themselves. He reached that part. There was something that he had not seen before. We would call it stairs. The white man did not know how to use it. After all manipulation with the stairs he decided to step on it. During all his voluntary period of life he had never moved up. That was some new cocktail of emotions that he wanted to feel. But than disappointment grabbed him. He understood that it was the border of the symmetric world. So he had seen everything there. There was nothing-new left for him. He beat the gray wall with his hand with grief.

Suddenly the wall moved down and the new way appeared straight ahead him. The tunnel was not illuminated so it was totally black. The white man felt that there was strange air there. It was could and maybe saturated! The white man was breathing greedily. He started walking thought the tunnel. He heard how the back wall closed. There was no light in the tunnel. But our man was sure that he had chosen the right way. Suddenly he saw the exit. When he left the tunnel white over bright light struck him blind. He could not see anything. But then he started recognizing silhouettes. The silhouettes that made the white man to guess about the objects, which rejecting those silhouettes. He guessed the thing, which was obvious. That were other people's silhouettes.

The Price of Victory

"War is sweet to those who have never experienced it."

– Pindar

I

Hiding in the woods, a cavalry regiment was standing right in front of the village. I remember that early and foggy morning. Fires were still burning, and smoke was flowing up to the sky. No single sound, no motion. The whole population seemed to be sleeping.

– Quietly now, boys!

Garry Owen rang out, and the horsemen started the attack. It all took off like a shot. Then screams, people running away, and bodies rotting in the sun. I still feel that smell of fumes... A waking nightmare!

II

My father once told me that to be a well-to-do man, you need two virtues. The first virtue is to love your family and country. The second one is independence. By independence he meant the ability to make your own decisions in life without having to ask someone for help or permission. And this also meant financial independence. I couldn't doubt his advice. Those things seemed to be essential for every man, so I did not interpret my father's words philosophically. Tough, in some way, I tried to develop

these two virtues in myself.

III

I was born in Hamilton, Ohio, in a typical upper-class family. There was nothing extraordinary in my younger years, except a few things. As a boy, I was quite a sickly child, and my father assumed I would work in the civil service as an adult. Despite this, my only dream was to join the military, and I tried to overcome all my natural limitations through rigorous exercises. To my father's surprise, my efforts produced magnificent results, and I was accepted to West Point. The academy at The Point was based on the principle "the more you sweat in times of peace the less you bleed in war". We were to become perfect soldiers. And that included looking to our "hawk" spirits for inspiration, reading several military authors like Plutarch and Niccolo Machiavelli. "The end justifies the means", I assumed. Years spent at The Point were severe to put it mildly. But at the same time I had been given a golden ticket to life. By graduation, I was a brawny and highly energetic youth who was ready to serve for the sake of the US. I also felt myself totally independent.

I graduated in the Class of 1860 with the rank of second lieutenant just before the start of the War. With its outbreak, all the graduates took service either in the Union or Confederate army. Fortunately or unfortunately, both armies felt tremendous need for trained officers. I enrolled the 6th Ohio cavalry and faced some of the battles in the Eastern Theatre. One of these battles was a complete catastrophe. It was a time when I was on the verge of

death and witnessed an act that completely astounded me.

After the battles of Cross Keys and Cedar Mountain, our regiment shifted to the Virginia Peninsula, having integrated with Pope's Army of Virginia (2nd Brigade, 2nd Division, 1st Corps). It was the most significant battle of the whole Northern Virginia Campaign – Second Bull Run. During that battle, the Union forces were crushed and our commander ordered to retreat. I was on the left flank and experienced one of the major strikes. When it came to close combat, it seemed that the southerners had us surrounded. That was the first time I felt real fear. People used to tell me what southerners do with "Yankees". My skin was covered with goose bumps as I imagined myself hanging from a tree. But, I remembered, paralytic fear would get me nowhere – would be of no use on the battlefield.

The southerners were getting closer and closer. Suddenly, I heard a man groaning two yards away from me. I ran up to the northerner. He was wounded in his right leg, so I put him on my back and carried him away from the battlefield. Then I experienced the unimaginable. The southerners were so close that they could easily fusillade us, but, remarkably, they let us go. They simply watched us flee.

Much time had passed before the moment when my euphoria finally terminated. I continued service in the Union's army under the command of a 23 year-old brigadier general. His name was George Armstrong Custer, or "The Boy General", which is a hint at Custer's early advancement. Well, this person requires as much description of his character as possible, as my whole further life was totally connected with him. To begin with, Custer was not

a man whom women would call as attractive. He was lean, with height about 5.5 inches, and the only notable thing in his appearance was his long and curling blond hair. What's really important is that Custer also graduated from The Point. The difference between us was that he graduated as the last of 34 cadets. Whole life he seemed to be testing rules, and that what actually made him well-known, yet last from the graduates. Custer was a kind of a commander who would claim that "A dead enemy always smells good". He was aggressive and understood the art of war in his own and special way, and it seems that warriors of past would admire him. Still, cruelty and rashness with which he fought on the battlefield largely differed from the process of preparing for the battle. He used to scout methodically every piece of land where the combat would occur and tried to identify all the possible weaknesses at the enemy's camp. Having done that, he made an impetuous onrush having his enemies over the barrel. Though Custer was quite a good commander, I can't say that he was a good leader. He considered his soldiers as merely tools for execution of combat missions and did not feel responsibility for their lives. That is why he was one of the chiefs with highest numbers of casualties. Guys felt this, anyway. As for relationships between me and Custer, we were not so close to each other, though we had mutual respect. I did not agree with many of his decisions, but there was no option: I finally realized that it was better no to object.

For me the war ended as suddenly as it started. I was awarded The Civil War Campaign Medal and became a Major. I did not feel a huge joy with the news of a victory as I got used to war and

felt comfortable during it. The only thing which was making my mind excited was anticipation of something hazy and alluring in peaceful time. I intended to settle down and start my own family.

IV

It is true that thinking about such categories as life and death, mercy and ruthlessness is not a good thing for a soldier. And in general, thinking is not the best quality of a military man. Despite this, later, I used to ask myself how it was to kill a man for the first time in life. I tried to recall that feeling on and on. And to be honest, I did not feel anything at the moment. Actually, you have little surprise when you've done the work. The uppermost emotional point makes you mentally dumb so that there is not any rational thinking process. You don't make any identification except from "enemy" or "ally" – you just act. The only thing I remember is emptiness all around me. All the tragedy comes right after the fight when you analyze the experience. You ask yourself: "Who was that guy whom I killed? Was he really a villain? What about his family?" And after that: "What will God say on that?" For several nights I was asking myself these questions in the arms of insomnia, yet could not remember even his face. Again and again I tried to personalize him. Still, it seemed as if I was just shooting at a target. Thank God for his mercy that people tend to forget things!

V

Years had passed swiftly, and mundane life was flowing its own course. I got married and had my first child. Despite the hearth and home, being under peaceful sky was not the best thing for me. Tough I found some job, going there did not give me any pleasure at all. I seemed to be sinking into melancholia as I started to realize my uselessness in life. One thought used to come into my mind repeatedly at that time. I supposed that there was only one job doing which I was properly skilled. And that job was war.

Not much time had passed when I encountered in Ohio Tribune: "Triumphant campaign against the most furious Indian tribes seeks its heroes." And what really shocked me is that Custer was leading the campaign.

There had always been pressure between Americans and Indians at that time. The reason was that new territories were essentially important for growing American economy. And two options were available to the US government. The first one was to follow imperialistic policy, like Britain, trying to capture lands somewhere out in order to make own colonies. But that did not seem to be the easiest way to solve the problem. Moreover, historical context was that US posed itself as the main opponent of tyranny and global imperialism, especially in the face of Britain. Hence, they chose the second option. The idea was to expand westwards, towards the Great Plains, not having to leave the mainland. But there was one obstacle on the way – the Indians. The last wanted to keep their traditional hunting places safe and could not even hear of the possibility to leave the lands. But, no one had any

intention to notice that.

Right after the Civil War now vacant US Army focused its attention on keeping Indians out of desired territories. The result was signing of hundreds of treaties targeting Native Americans and creation of specially assigned state lands where the Indians could “follow their natural lifestyle.” The lands were called reservations, and the Army’s main mission was keeping the Indians there, - separate, remote, isolated. Another thing which the Army had to do was controlling of the Great Plains, i.e. thousands of acres between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains.

But, as it always happens, not much time had passed when the new and fresh soil for the future conflict was ready. Gold was discovered in the Black Hills, in the Sioux and Cheyenne reservations of the Dakotas. And as rumors spread all over the country, thousands of adventurers rushed to the frontiers having been blinded by the golden dust. The Government took the chance and opened a major new war against the Indians.

I read the article and understood that I wished to enlist Custer’s 7th Cavalry Regiment. It was not a difficult thing due to my previous connections with him. The regiment was located in the South Dakota and from time to time took part in various skirmishes. So I made some preparations and left for eternal prairies.

VI

Prairies... There is not a thing in the whole world that could be compared with them. Gardens of the desert, they are not intended for a man. Fierce winds make you hardly breathe, and dust storms

occur there every single year. That's the place where you start feeling your very beginnings, the origins of the essence: mind becomes clear, and nothing mundane seems to disturb you.

November, 1868. Three years of service in prairies resulted in several skirmishes against the Sioux and Cheyenne, but there was no major battle. Indians seemed to be wearing us out using partisan war tactics so that we were experiencing casualties. Thus, they were taking an advantage and did some unexpected raids in Kansas and Oklahoma. Custer was extremely frustrated by the fact that his enemy could not be engaged. He decided to begin a campaign in winter. The idea was that Indians could be found caught off guard staying in camps. And that could be a perfect moment to strike a blow: such camps were the sources of provision for warriors as livestock was kept there.

As always, my group was scouting an area for further promotion of the regiment. We encountered a large village of Cheyenne on the bank of Washita River. The settlement did not seem to be threatening us as there was a white flag waving to indicate that the tribe seeks to avoid the conflict. But nobody expected the situation to turn around this way. Nobody expected Custer to do that. . .

- Sir, these people have nothin' to do with the raids.
- Mjr. Connor, will it ever be the moment when yah understand what on earth it is to be a good commander?
- But Black Kettle was assured that his people would be safe until they stay on the reservation. I promised him.
- And what are we gonna do with raids, boy? We need to show others, give them a nice lesson on what they shouldn't do! Don't

yah see that? In the end, all the military science comes to one thing, and that thing is spirit! If we attack now, barbarian's martial spirit will be low enough to destroy them. Simple logic, son.

– Is it fair?

– You make me sad, Eddie.

Early in the morning, at dawn, a line of mounted cavalry was standing on the top of a woody hill waiting for orders. It was a bit cold and quite gloomy during that morning. Surrounding silence was troubled only by neighing horses, which were impatiently fidgeting, being tired of standing at the same position. Custer pulled his sword.

– Are we ready to start?!

– Sir, I could go down and talk to Black Kettle. He would do anything we want him to do.

– We don't have to talk to anybody. It's a punitive expedition! Don't ask questions and get ready to follow me. Quietly now, boys!

Then the attack began. Seven hundred horsemen against two thousand Indians! Two thousand women, children and old men! Most of the Indian warriors were out – they were fighting on the frontiers. Custer gave no heed to this fact. Those who remained in the settlement had been cruelly massacred during just a single day. I'll tell you how it was.

Regimental band was called to play Garry Owen, and we charged headily into the sleeping village. Rumble of hooves produced chaos among the population, and most of the people started running out of their dwellings. Black Kettle was waving the white flag of peace, yet we continued the advancement. Death was waiting

for Indians outside, we were waiting for them.

I shot at that helpless, innocent people! I heard their screams and pleas for mercy. I saw the children's eyes, full of tears and not believing the terror happening around. And babies left on the frozen ground dead with their mothers...

VII

What is war? Is it just about annihilating the enemy, or it has some code? Does it have place for mercy, honesty and humanity? Many years have passed since I understood true nobility of southerners' deed. It seemed ridiculous to me, but now I see. The origin, the reason for southerners' deed came from the idea that war doesn't come to merely a murder. If it does, it is not a war. It is carnage, slaughter, whatever, but not a war. Everything in the universe has some portion of order, and battle is not an exception.

But I would never forget the offence which I gave to people. I still hear their voices, and the feeling of remorse is eating me from inside. My goddamn sinning soul!

– I told you, Custer!

Again, I assisted him. I was an executor! For whole my life I was doing nothing but carrying out orders to the best of my ability. And now I would never wash my hands from their blood, and... Did I have a choice? Oh, yes. Every independent man has a choice - always and everywhere. And I made it myself.

VIII

The battle completely changed the whole vector of the campaign. Not speaking about Indians' moral spirit, they remained without supplies. After that, the campaign was developing in a flash. Cheyenne seemed to be calmed down forever, and US could continue their policy without any obstacles. The government hailed the battle as a major victory of American arms, and Custer was praised and gathered all the possible honors. He did the most abominable crime in this damn world, yet he is admired. I could not continue the service. I could not see Custer anymore, and everything around was exasperating me. In the end, I returned home.

It is impossible to explain what I felt during that days. I started drinking intensively, and it seems that there was not a single night which I spent without a bottle of whiskey. That was the only way for me to struggle with insomnia. My relations with family came to a deadlock, as every time I saw my own son, a clear flashback of groaning in agony Indian children was appearing in front of my eyes. Being under chronic intoxication, I started seeing delusions, all depicting that horrible day. I asked myself if I could resist the order or say that I was not going to participate.

– I told you not to do that, Custer! I told you!

IX

I changed drastically. Everything at that time was like in a delirium, and it seemed that I was standing on the edge of a precipice. I realized my fall and started seeking God's forgiveness, visiting

services regularly. At one point I asked for a confession with a priest, and that is when it all terminated.

– Father, God would never forgive such a miserable deed. I can't think of anything more horrible. . .

– My son, listen to me. It's true that all the things that happened during that day were horrible. It's also true that part of the responsibility lies on your shoulders. But, in some way, you did not have a choice. You are a warrior, and the circumstances made you act that way.

– But will God care of that? Do you really believe that the fact that I was a military man will remove my responsibility for the most terrible sin, responsibility for murder?

– Eddie, Mankind itself is sinful. From the original sin, from the moment when Caine killed his brother Abel, man has not learned the main lesson. "Am I my brother's keeper?" - Yes, you are. From that moment, for thousands of years it has been brother against brother. Nation against nation. And war was invented by a man to conceal his passion for murder, to conceal his sinful nature. Sin is in each of us, my son, and it is part of us. In our power is only to resist it. That's why I say that it was not your fault. You tried to prevent that from happening, you asked. And now I see that you repent of your deeds. That is what important, Eddie.

– I tried to prevent that, yes. . . But this does not make me feel better as blood is on my hands. I can't live with memories about that.

– Main responsibility lies on the other man. And this is much more important. I mean that the general could avoid such brutality. If he does not realize this today, God will make him under-

stand it later.

Confession with Father Wesley completely changed the way I felt. Atmosphere at the church, that is, priest's ravishing vestments, matchless grace and dignity with which he talked, big stained glass windows, shining with their flickering colors like flames, – all that caused the highest point in my emotional state.

But it was not the state of joy or feeling of easiness that made me aroused. On the contrary, I felt angriness, fury – all the mean feelings that were making me hate just one person. And that person was Custer. It was exactly that moment when I started seeing him as a main culprit. It was because of him that I felt anguish. It was he who ordered to massacre that entire innocent people! I started seeing Custer as a main root of evil, as if he was in charge of all the faults in the entire world. All I wanted at that moment was to punish that man. I wanted to make him realize people's sufferings, make him feel sorry and pay for what he did. And that became my obsession.

X

Actually, I did that. I won't talk about the price of that action, about all the consequences it led to. They were too appalling. Still, I want to describe that moment in every possible way. As possible as a person being in the heat of passion and chronic intoxication might do. I can't say exactly how it turned out that I was standing in front of Custer's office. I remember neither the road to it, nor the process of appointing for an audience. I just remember myself standing in front of the door and waiting for the opportunity to

come in. Shiver was running through my body.

When the signal was given, I entered the room, holding it behind the back.

– Mr. Connor, fancy meeting yah here!

I closed the door and made a kind of a grin. There was no one in the room except us. He commented on me looking terrible and asked the reason of my visit. I replied nothing, but let him notice the whip.

– What the hell!? Where did yah get this?

– The correct question is: “Who is this for?” And the answer is: “For yah, Custer”.

– Are you nuts, boy? Calm down or you’ll be thrown out!

Not taking my eyes off him, I clasped the whip. Here he was – most hateful person for me. Custer’s every feature seemed disgusting. I could not stand his presence. Suddenly, I remembered everything that happened during that day. Terrible pictures started appearing in front of me, and I fell into complete madness. I raised the whip and slashed him for the first time. He fell down from the chair.

– Get your hands off me, yah bastard! Now I’ll show yah!

He made an attempt to get up, but I slashed him one more time. He screamed:

– Get out of here!

I did it once more. Again and again, I was striking him with frantic fury. Dozens of hits, he could hardly breathe. His flesh was rent, blood and meat were flowing equally. Scarlet blood was all around the room. He pled, he begged, and I did not pay any attention to that. I was satisfied by his current state as now I was

sure – he was sorry. He felt everything that those people felt.

In the end, his screaming was heard. Two watchmen burst into the room. . .

Fork

I

It was an ordinary Saturday evening in early spring. The weather was fantastic, and fresh air delighted people on the street. The whole family, father, mother, their son and his little sister of only four, were leaving a sporting complex on the outskirts of a small city. The boy was joyful, and his father held his arm tightly while carrying his daughter in his other arm. His face shone with a smile, and it seemed that it was one of the brightest and happiest days in their life. However, there was something tense and uncertain about this merry scene as it often happens on the peak of the mountain. And it was written in his mother's eyes. But she did her best to hide it from the children, pretending for the last two months or so. They quickly got into the car and went home.

—“Congratulations, son. You did a great job, especially with your right jab, you know!”

—“Thanks, dad.”

—“But, there's still a lot of work to do. Your movements are uncoordinated sometimes, and you were slower than your opponent in the semi-final fight.”

—“But dad, I won that fight. I was better.”

—“Sure, you won the battle of minds. Your technique was subtle, and your punches were stronger. However, you have to learn from your friend, Dima, whose movements are so fast as to guarantee that no one can touch him.”

—“Of course, dad, he's lighter.”

—“Seven pounds? Does that really make a difference?”

–“Mom, what do you think? Mom?”

His mother did not answer. It became evident that something was wrong, and the boy felt it.

–“What’s the matter?” He asked uneasily.

–“There is something we have to tell you.” His mother answered. “Your father and I are getting divorced.”

–“Why?” Asked his father angrily. “Why are you telling him now?” He continued screaming. “Why didn’t you wait until summer? He has a very important tournament in three weeks; you know that!”

After this exchange, time accelerated. I don’t remember details, and I don’t remember my feelings at all, except for one. I was anxious about leaving my best friend. I must have worried about my parents’ divorce as well. About moving to another city. About my classmates, my sport friends and coaches. Or, then again, maybe not. I don’t remember. But my buddy Dima was incredibly important to me. So, I did everything I could to spend more time with him those last three months, and since then I’ve always kept in touch with him.

Time passed quickly. I won the tournament, and we moved to my grandmother’s place in Moscow. My father moved to the capital a month later to be closer to us and to take up a very attractive job offer.

I’d always enjoyed learning, and did pretty well at school, but not to the extent that I loved sports. I entered the physics and mathematics lyceum, which was one of the best schools in Moscow at that time. It was a bit boring in the beginning, but I got carried away by mathematics and computer science, and things started

turning around. My passion for knowledge grew quickly. I've never forgot boxing however, I think I always loved it more than anything else. Yet education came out on top.

I tried to participate in every competition, whether it was team programming or an individual math contest. I succeeded at many of them, and this "education as sport competition" philosophy espoused in high school eventually supplanted boxing for me. I felt a deep want for it inside me because sport developed a passion for being a winner, and it made purposefulness to be my most inalienable trait. I needed as a drowning man needed oxygen, as a wanderer needed water in a desert.

When I visited my hometown one summer, I was surprised at how small everything seemed. I had never taken it into account before, but it was clear at that point. The people were slower, and their movements as well as life goals and steps to achieving them were uncoordinated, unplanned and chaotic like my movements in the semi-final fight five years ago. Yet their eyes shone in the same way my father's and mine did. The people still looked joyful and happy, but they did not care about success and wins. They did not study and put forth their best effort.

Before I left to Moscow, Dima introduced me to his girlfriend, Sveta. She was very beautiful, and this beauty was reflected in each and every millimeter of her face. She was slender, and her body was of the best proportions I had ever seen. She was very well spoken: her words were very polite and appropriate in any situation. Sveta had good manners, and all the boys loved her, their jaws dropping at her appearance. Everything about her was wonderful except one crucial thing: she was just a silly girl of low

intelligence, who didn't know anything and had no ambitions in life.

My trip back home made me realize that Moscow provided so many opportunities and my aspirations shot through the roof obliterating barriers in my head. It was a great time. I finished the lyceum with distinction, and my academic achievements enabled me to enter Moscow State University's applied mathematics and computer science department. I made a lot of new friends and had a lot of fun at student parties. But through it all, Dima remained my best friend. I studied hard and two years later I won the International Programming Contest and received an invitation to study for one academic year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Meanwhile, Dima was expelled from the university and so joined the army.

II

Fall came unexpectedly this year. The father was preparing for his birthday celebration. It was not an ordinary birthday. First of all, it was a jubilee. He was fifty years old. The first half of the way passed as he loved to say. And it was the time to really think about your life deeply, which is why he felt uneasily and anxiously. Moreover, his oldest son, the man he loved the most, promised to join him this day. They hadn't met for the last three years because his son settled in Los-Angeles and worked hard in Silicon Valley. The father was very proud of him. This was what calmed him down every time he thought about his life and destination.

There were about twenty people in a restaurant celebrating the birthday. Despite the fact that the atmosphere was joyful and very friendly, it seemed that each person in the room was thinking about something else. About something that caught them and absorbed their minds. One of the father's oldest friends asked his son about how was it going. He answered "Fine!".

The son was twenty-six years old man with well-build muscles. His haircut and clothes and everything else were up to date. He earned a five zero base salary and a bonus twice as big last year. Moreover, he told that the most prominent California venture fund approved willingness to invest into his own start-up next year. He believed this would make him multimillionaire in the near future. His girlfriend Samanta could not join him on this journey due to her concert tour, but she typed video-greetings. She was great: not the most beautiful in the world but very round and successful.

All the guests left the restaurant and the happy father and his happy son slightly drunk remained in the room to talk. Three hours had passed already; it seemed they discussed everything, but at the same time it was nothing at all as they didn't talk face to face for the last three years. Being in a great mood, feeling deep proud of his son he finally decided to ease his head of "life destination" thoughts and make sure he was a great father and didn't live for nothing.

—"How fast time passes. I am fifty. Nightmare. And you. Such an adult. You are older than I was when you was born. It pleases and scares me at the same time."

—"Yeah, that's odd. Hhhm, you know, it's thirteen years since we

moved to Moscow. It's the same amount of time as I lived in my hometown. Half of my life. But how different these two are. On the one hand, there were so many events during the second half. So many meetings, achievements and success. So few hours of sleep. But from the other hand, this half passed in a moment, like a finger click." "Like my last months before moving to Moscow." He whispered.

—"That's because the last thirteen years were more interesting and busy. You know, if something bothers you it seems like eternity. But if you like something you don't feel time at all."

—"That's true. You don't feel time. But it's because you enjoy every moment, every inch around you. You don't feel time because there is no time at all, because it seems forever. And if time flies away it means routine and emptiness."

—"What do you know about routine, son? You are wrong; routine makes you feel stuck in time. Why are you talking about that? Isn't it great that me moved? That you entered the best lyceum, the best university and eventually got the great job in the US?"

—"We'll never know."

—"What?"

—"We'll never know if it's great or not. I am pretty happy, but who knows what would be if I had stayed."

—"I know. You would have ended up as your friend Dima, who doesn't even have university education and works as a clerk implementing stupid and useless work for peanuts."

—"He doesn't need anything more. He is happy with what he has. Good friends, beautiful and kind wife, which is the happiest woman on the planet I guess. At least, she's happier than Samanta

who is never satisfied with what she's accomplished in her life." –"That's enough, son. I think you drank a lot. This is a one-minute depression. It happens sometimes. You are so tired. Let's leave this foolish conversation and go home sleep."

I left to Moscow two days later and tried to forget this exchange with my father. I had to forget it because there were so many other things to think about: my start-up, some legal issues with my previous employer. Moreover, I planned to make a proposal to Samanta. This was a very important step and I had to think about it deeply, to make her an unforgettable surprise and plan a wedding.

I plunged into my everyday life, and despite the fact that it was quite interested and rich, I would nevertheless call it routine. Two months later I had my first contract signed in a role of CEO and the founder of my own company. One huge vehicle manufacturer ordered my software and information safety system. The contract price was incredible, two hundred million dollars. I was planning to make a proposal on weekends celebrating signing of the contract with my friends and Samanta.

One day before this important event my phone rang. It was Dima. To be honest, at that second I was a little bit scared because we usually talked via email and Skype, and the fact that he called me at night made me think that something was wrong. But he shared with me the greatest news of his life: he had a daughter. They concealed the fact that Sveta was pregnant until the birth. Dima invited me to celebrate the event, and I promised I would visit him as soon as possible.

Children were very important for me, and after Dima's call I

plunged deep in thought why I never talked with Samanta about kids and why I made a decision to make a proposal without even asking her attitude towards having children.

After signing the contract we went to a restaurant with Samanta, and I told her about Dima's and Sveta's daughter. She didn't pay much of attention to it and continued to talk about her concerts. I asked her directly about having our own children, but she laughed at it and said that she didn't want children while she worked. Being an artist was everything for her, and she couldn't leave the job even for a year. At this moment, I decided to wait a little with a proposal and to sort out whether I loved her or not.

We broke up. And to my surprise, I didn't worry about it even for a second. My thoughts were devoted to the conversation with my father. One day, I plunged into a minute depression as my father used to say. To be honest, it was not a minute depression, but rather eternal. And I thought this was an example of what my father meant: eternity of boredom. Or, maybe, I just loved to be depressed sometimes and enjoyed this state. Maybe, it was like a way to abstract from reality, a way of self-defense from endless life challenges that were waiting for me everywhere.

That day, on February 20th, I met a girl in a gym. She was the most extraordinary and interesting girl in my life. She worked as a journalist for The New York Times covering modern art. She had three dogs and a parrot, and twice a month she visited the neighboring orphanage to tell some interesting facts about art and organize entertaining activities. She loved rock-music, and everything about her was so alien for me but at the same time so inviting. Yes, I fall in love with her, but after four dates she was able to

realize that we were very different, and these differences were not attracting, but confrontational. This was the time I felt a strong need to transfer to a native place, to occur on the streets where everything seemed so intimate and familiar, where I was born, where my best friend lived.

He boarded a plane and went home. Dima met him at the airport, and the first place they visited was the boxing gym. He looked at the wall and he saw shabby blue boxing gloves amid at least twenty pairs of new ones, the gloves his coach gave him after the first win, his coach's gloves. He sat down and let a tear.

A Fascinating Find

They were first days of my summer holidays after the end of fourth grade. And as usual, I was sent to the village to spend the summer with my cousin, aunt and uncle. It was a small village in a remote corner of the south of Russia. My relatives had their own one-storey house with a kitchen garden. I liked time spent there as my cousin, Kolka, a 14 year old boy, could always create something interesting. To tell the truth, compared to me, an obedient girl, he was a great prankster who was often punished by his parents for the shenanigans. He had a strong spirit of disobedience as he was always trying to do the opposite of what he was told.

–“Nikolay, you should weed the kitchen garden by this evening.” I heard the my aunt’s request.

–“Okay, mom!” Kolka agreed, but I knew that he planned to go swimming in the river with his friends. As I expected, Kolka asked me to do this work, promising to take me with him another day. And I had no choice.

It was a usual sweltering south summer with baking sun, so that it was hard to be out for a long time. By the midday I had weeded only the half of the kitchen garden. Beetroots. Carrots. Onions. The garden beds seemed infinite. Weeding the one of garlic, I felt as something pricked my hand.

–“Netle!”

I immediately pulled back my hand and rubbed the sore spot. As a result, in addition to an unbearable heat, my hands were pricked. My discontent of Kolka was rising. After two hours, I

finished weeding the kitchen garden and already became angry at my cousin who dared to leave me for such a long time.

At last, I saw Kolka running home. When he came nearer, I noticed his ruffled hair and alight eyes, and I discerned that he was excited. My anger suddenly left me as I wanted to know what put Kolka in such state. But only after giving my word of honor that I would not tell anything to anyone, he told me what happened with his friends and him.

–“We dug out several skulls and riffles in the small forest near the river,” he whispered. “It is a wonderful find!”

But for me, it was as much fascinating as frightening. Maybe I did not have a spirit of adventure, but I preferred adults know about it.

–“What are you going to do with them?” I asked my cousin. “It is better to tell parents about those finds”.

However, I immediately got a disapprobative glance from my cousin. Several days passed, and it seemed that Kolka forgot about the find. However, I knew that it is not like him to forget such things. And soon I became convinced that I was right. One day, after breakfast, when I was wondering what to do that day, he tried to sneak out of the house unnoticed. But his attempt was unsuccessful as I followed him. I hid behind the fence and waited until the moment when my cousin passed the turn. Then, I run to this turn and started to see where he was going.

Kolka came to the edge of the village and entered a small forest. I saw that his best friend was already waiting for him. Kolka came to a big oak, bent down and got two rifles out of the hiding place under the branches.

–“Fantastic. Please, give it to me!” Kolka’s friend asked.

–“Be careful! Do not break it!” my cousin replied giving one of the rifles to the friend.

Kolka was studying his rifle. Then, the boys began to aim their guns at everything they saw. Suddenly, there was a click, and my heart sank. But, fortunately, the rifle gave a misfire.

At this moment I jerked, and a branch snapped. The boys looked back, and I became frightened that they would notice me. Thus, I decided to return home. Ranning back, I was scared that boys’ game could have irremediable consequences. Their occupation seemed really dangerous. What is more, skulls were frightening, too. Thus, I returned to the idea of talking everything to the adults.

I decided to wait the evening when my aunt would come home after the work. This expectation was nervous. I still had doubts whether I was right deciding to tell about Kolka’s findings to his parents as, likely, his parents would punish him, but I did not want he has problems. However, soon Kolka returned home. And his excited state gave me a confidence.

–“What are you going to do with the rifles?” I asked again, but got no answer.

In the evening, I saw as the aunt was coming to the house, and I run to meet her.

–“Aunt, you know, I saw Kolya in the forest, there were guns, rifles.” And I told everything I knew. As I was telling my aunt’s face was becoming more and more anxious, she knew that whatever could happen with her hooligan.

She entered the house suspiciously looking at the son. I was

expecting to hear her voice demanding Kolka to tell what again he had done. However, she did not tell a word about our conversation what seemed a bad sign.

Some time later I heard tense voices from the kitchen room. Coming on tiptoes, I put my ear to the door.

–“But...” I heard a protest of Kolka’s mother.

–“It is not a joke. We should do it.” His father replied in a determined voice.

At this moment I heard as someone stood up and headed to the door. And as soon as I run out into the kitchen garden, the door opened, and the uncle called Kolka.

–“Why is something happening with you constantly?” his father said in a tired voice beginning their conversation.

The content of the conversation remained to me in the secret because I was sent on a mission to a neighbor. Walking back, I was thinking about the meaning of the heard words. I was wondering what Kolka’s parents decided to do. Voltage inside me was raising, and I almost broke into a run. But when I arrived, the conversation was over, and Kolka had already gone to his room.

I had no choice except going to my room, too. Sleep did not come to me that night. Rolling over from one side to the other, I was imagining how bad Kolka felt, and that it was me who was guilty. That was all I thought about. And I gave myself a word to know one’s own business. At last, issuing a heavy sigh, I stood up and headed to my cousin’s room to ask for forgiveness.

–“May I enter?” I asked standing in front of his door. But I got no answer. Thinking that cousin was offended and did not want to answer me, I opened the door. A gust of wind blew in my face.

At first, because of the darkness, I saw nothing, but then outlines began to be seen. The window was wide open. I looked in the right side of the room expecting to see my cousin, but the bed was empty.

I run up to the open window. The night was dark and silent, even usual dogs' barking was not heard. Under the window the high grass was flattened as someone recently was standing there.

It was clear that Kolka sneaked out of the house. My recent promise to stick to one's last and curiosity began fighting in me. And the fear of going outside at night helped me to make a choice. Wondering where Kolka was, I returned to my room.

The morning sky was covered with clouds foreboding the rain. Today I woke up later than usual because of restless night. When I came to the window, I saw as my uncle, aunt and Kolka sat down in a police car standing near our house. All remnants of sleep instantly disappeared. Being in great alarm, I run outside. –“We will return soon,” the aunt said noticing me. And at that moment, the car moved off raising a cloud of dust.

Watching as machine was going away with Kolka and the relatives, I felt fear of what I had done. Kolka would be imprisoned! This thought was tormenting me. Tears became to drop from my eyes. I wanted to scream that my cousin was not guilty, but it seemed that nothing could be changed.

During the followed two hours, the house started to seem empty without Kolka, and I even began to miss our clashes. Being in depressed mood, I was slowly wandering in the hall. Suddenly, I

heard a sound of an approaching car. A sense of relief came over me as I saw that Kolka, alive and well, went out. He stalked into the home without deigning to glance at me.

Soon, the aunt told me what had happened. It turned out that the aunt and the uncle had called a police that evening to report that their son found skulls and rifles. And a policeman had come to take Kolka as he should show where his finds had been, and where he had found them. It should be said that such simple explanation made me feel much better.

The next day, from an ordinary prankster Kolka turned into a local celebrity. The weather was wonderful, light wind was blowing swinging the tops of trees, ringing birds' sounds were heard everywhere. That day a lot of people, almost all habitants of the village, gathered around a local monument devoted to a World War II. On one side from me was the old woman with a grandson, on the other - my aunt. Words "skulls", "war", "remains" were said in the crowd. Soon, Kolka's father went out in the middle. –"As all of you know, only several decades after the World War II have passed, everywhere there are remains which remember us about those awful but heroic times. Recently, my son with his friends found skulls and a rifle in the forest. It turned out that it was soviet soldier's rifle..."

The rest of the speech was as solemn as its beginning. After Kolka's father had ended his speech, the ceremony of burial of the skulls began. I came nearer to the place where actions took place

and suddenly felt as someone touched my shoulder. I turned my head and saw the cousin.

–“I am not angry anymore.” He said and smiled.

Years later, remembering those events, I understood that only one rifle had been shown, and no one mentioned the second one. This fact still makes me suspicious that sneaking out of the house that night, Kolka hid one of the rifles to not give it away.

Story of One Family

It is believed that occasional changes in the political structure of a single country are inevitable. Peoples' opinions on how the system should be coordinated are always modifying which most possibly leads every society to a massive paradigm shift from time to time. With such a size of the gap between reality and changed paradigm there is no way roundabout a significant transformation of the political structure within a certain country.

Russian Civil War which, fortunately or unfortunately, broke out in 1917 after a few years of unfulfilled government's promises about newly-inserted civil rights and many years of economic downturn. There was a severe hunger across the whole country, as a result. Bolsheviks who had Russia in control were still struggling against Mensheviks' faction, despite the largest numerical superiority of the formers'. This inequality in terms of number of supporters could be explained by the fact that Bolsheviks were presenting interests of the biggest part of population – peasants and workers – while Mensheviks mostly consisted of retainers of imperator and different rich people. Thus, life in most villages and cities were still unstable and uncertain.

The village N. in Bryanskaya province did not at first glance differ much from other villages in terms of contribution or anything else, at second glance also: it was absolutely usual village. There

were a set of timber houses and those which were made of brick. Some of them were settled in short rows, but a huge part had a random position divided by country roads. As for nature, it was an indistinguishable part of life of every human in N., because it could always feed anybody and hide anyone from strokes of misfortune. So that people treated the nature respectfully. Many of them planted seeds and the land gave them a food - the only mean of staying alive in hard village conditions. But there always appear "parasites" when something is done. That way, in the evening after the harassingly hot summer day a group of three children at the head of pretty red-haired girl with a thin figure were heading for Ivanov's garden. As they satisfied their hunger a bit with several cucumbers, Andrey Petrovich - permanent defender of his prolific land - had already noticed them and was approaching them to give a hard punch to disobedient children. Lipa - the formal leader of this terrorizing organization - ran away with her fellows before he did anything to them.

- "He is obviously not following me, he is no more following me" kept running in Lipa's head, but the excitement of eleven year old girl did not let her walk afoot.

In such a way she reached her area. There was one-storied wooden house with adjacent big garden. The house was rather neat. Every of three small windows on the path side of the house was surrounded by patterned plat band. On the top of it there was a chimney, from which Lipa could clearly saw an outcoming soothing smoke. "Hope, I will not get punished for being late for dinner" - she thought. The main hostess of this house - Anna Vasilyevna - met the girl at the threshold and they entered the

house.

Lipa was not the one Anna Vasilyevna was ashamed of as Lipa was respectful with her and Ivan Andreyanovich (Anna's husband) and did not trick a lot. Anna Vasilyevna, by-turn, was a woman who devoted herself to prosperity of Tarasov's family. And indeed, all of her 8 children were always full-fed, rather well-dressed and shod, despite the modesty of family's budget. Her husband, Ivan Andreyanovich, also did not complain. Anna V. did not have lots of friends, but, sometimes, she met her old school friend – Tamara Dmitrievna who was very religious.

–“Anna Vasilyevna, let's go to the church, ask the God to help you by prayer” induced her Tamara.

–“I cannot, I cannot waste even a single hour: I must prepare the dinner for my family, weed the garden and feed hens and cows” negatively answered Anna Vasilyevna.

As for Ivan Andreyanovich, he worked a lot to earn money for his family. Some of the neighbors met him at 6 a.m., while he was going up the country road progressing along a row of houses on both sides to his shoe repair workshop, and he usually finished at 8 p.m. with a small break on lunch with his family. The work of Ivan Andreyanovich was very important for villagers since there were no other places nearby the village where they can repair or buy new shoes. In spite of absence of such places, Ivan Andreyanovich did not get smug: he industriously continues to work hard. According to consumers, he was “making shoes for the whole life”. Ivan toiled in a small wooden building with the hired help whom he was paying for a merited labor.

As children do not often much differs from their parents, three

daughters and four sons were also industrious. From the early childhood they were accustomed to work. Every child in the family of Tarasovs had responsibilities. The eldest daughter - Lipa - was looking after the smallest one (Valya). Sima was sewing cloths and cleaning the house. The boys themselves were busy with cattle and the garden. But, sometimes they were allowed to play with other children in the village which, essentially, brought a lot of enjoyment to them. Therefore, children, from one side, did not have enough time to do many stupid affairs and, from the other, manage to relax playing with their friends.

When Lipa achieved the age of 13, Ivan Andreyanovich and Anna Vasilyevna sent her to the only local school to get some education, while Valya was now under control of Sima. And school teachers were often met by Lipa's parents in the village because it was rather small, thus, Ivan An. and Anna V. always knew how their daughter coped with hard years of schooling.

—"Tatiana Lvovna, how is Lipa doing?" wondered Anna Vasilyevna.

—"Well, I feel like she is studying, but I guess she could do it better, she is not a stupid one" informed her the teacher. After these words Lipa not even once was given a scold by her mother.

In any case, there were also subjects which Lipa liked the most. For example, she was reading books around the clock. Luckily, her parents need not spent even a ruble on any book: the school literature teacher, Oleg, was living next door to Tarasovs with his wife. He provided her with A. P. Chekhov, L. N. Tolstoy, N. V. Gogol and other books pleasantly. Lipa sometimes even came to his house to read books there or just to talk about the books.

Once, when she was getting out of Oleg's house, she saw a rat in three meters right in front of her. Firstly, small animal behaved calmly staring at her, but then it seemed to Lipa that it was going to assault her. And when the rat started to run at the child, she quickly dropped the book which Oleg have recently given to her into the gutter area where the rat was and quickly got into the house again. After Oleg heard what happened to Lipa he let her stay in for some time and not at all resent about the book got dirty.

Oleg Ivanovich himself was a tall middle-aged man with carefully combed long hair and benevolent appearance. Conversation with him was very pleased by Tarasovs as he was a well-read man and treated the family with respect. According to his words, the biggest problem was that his wife couldn't cook well, not with a small irony, of course. He knew how good is Anna Vasilyevna at cooking, so he asked about him attend dinners in that family and got absolutely positive answer. From that day he became a permanent visitor of dinners of Tarasov's family; their relationship had significantly increased.

In 1918 the government at the head of Vladimir Lenin created Committees of Poor Peasants which were to dispossess the property of kulaks and transfer it into ownership of supposedly poor people. Since that time in village N. had appeared several occasions of dekulakization of affluent people.

Ivan Andreyanovich went out of his house and picked his way towards the workshop. His mind and mood had not been awakened yet as it always did in the early mornings. Ivan reached the

workplace with no trouble, except for one stumble, but, luckily, he did not start a day with a bad mood nevertheless. . . As the time slowly converged to 12 a.m. Ivan asked his workers, Vladimir and Tolya, if they want him to bring some cabbage soup or bread from his house and after hearing that they are not hungry Ivan went out of workshop to have a meal with his wife and children. While crossing painfully familiar village road he met his friend who recently celebrated the birth of his second child. He smiled at the play of guessing by little children. He crossed when coming by the local church. Then he saw a small crowd of people near the dormitory. As he approached the crowd many people started to look at him disapprovingly and whispered something to one another. Ivan Andreyanovich did not understand what had happened but his heartbeat intensified. Everybody gave way to him when he was going to the wall, where a paper was fastened and read there with the sizzling fear:

“Ivan Andreyanovich is a wealthy man,
All the world honest workers he would like to hire then.
And if there is a bread to share,
He would take it from everywhere.”

Even more astonished he became when he found out that the author of this sharply disapprobatory rhythm is Oleg – the man who is supposed to be the friend of his family. Ivan, surely, did not expect that of a mean act from the person who knows that they are not wealthy at all.

Lipa dropped in a room where her father and brothers were.

Ivan Andreyanovich was sitting in his workshop, repairing worn-out galoshes of one young man whom he saw once with a beautiful wife laughing at the bench. By this time today he had repaired about six pairs of shoes and produced three with the help of his sons.

–“If I sell all of them, it would be enough for buying an unscratched new table” - he said to himself - “and we would no longer squeeze one another at meals”.

As if continuing the speech in his head, Lipa suggest to pause work and have a dinner. The whole family was ready-assembled and comfortable silent dinner time started. Neither the children, nor the wife wanted to talk as they knew that Ivan Andreyanovich would then give a hit to their heads with a big wooden spoon as his parents and grandparents did. So they just exchanged glances and dined. While only the omniscient clocks hanged on the biggest wall of a tiny house were taking their speech. Everybody in the house understood their language and knew that until these clocks would not stop, they are defended.

Usually, a dinner took about a quarter of an hour and then everybody goes to sleep. Some boys slept right in a shoe-repair room, others had more comfort sleeping in one of the biggest rooms with their father. The girls cosily settled in another room in their berths. As they were tired at the end of the every day, dreams did not often attend their beds, but sometimes very interesting plots were unfolding right in their dreams. Once, Ivan saw a phoenix which spread his powerful wings and whirled, leaving fiery color behind it. And people, who tried to breathe this air, started to fly following it.

Tom and Jerry

John Levis, Starbucks

It was a typical September morning in New York. John was sitting in a Starbucks cafe staring at a full cup of cold coffee in front of him. The morning edition of “New York Times” lay next to the coffee, and the headline stated: “Have the crisis eventually come? Stock Market fell by 40% within an hour”. John was sitting motionlessly for the last 15 minutes, and if one were to look into his eyes, he would be scared. John’s eyes were full of agony and madness. A murderer or a maniac could have such eyes, but not successful Wall Street financier and brightest Yale graduate, whom John actually was.

After a little while John sighted deeply. His eyes became normal back, and now he tried to concentrate on the creation of a new plan that he needed so much now. He already had some ideas in his mind, but they were still disconnected, and he was not sure how far he was ready to go.

Rain started. John looked through the window next to him and sighted deeply again. He recalled the similar rain three months ago. That day he had had an interview at the financial firm, where he later was employed, and from where he was fired this morning. John smiled sadly recalling the interview process. He was really excellent that day. All his interviewers were surprised with his deep knowledge of financial markets; he answered all the questions that he was asked correctly. That was his moment of pride. He later learned that his interviewers said that they had never seen such bright candidates before. The interview was followed by the

offer almost immediately, and a happy career was waiting for him. When he started to work, he quickly became much more effective than all other junior analysts, and his supervisor delegated him a lot of responsibilities just after three weeks at the firm. In August, after less than two months at the company, John earned two millions of dollars for the firm, having chosen the correct security to invest in.

The stupid financial crisis ruined everything. Financial firms all over the Wall Street, which previously were believed to be immortal, started to collapse one after another. All of them had many hidden problems that were successfully shadowed by recent market boom. In order to survive those firms that did not fall immediately had to make restructuring.

John's eyes became mad again. Restructuring process means firing ineffective people, those that do not bring value to the firm. What actually happened at his firm was far more different: all junior financiers were dismissed, and management did not suffer. "It is no way fair", - John thought, - "I made much more for firm that all those stupid seniors, who even did not mention the financial crisis, and who let these problems to arise. No, this is no way fair."

John clenched his fists firmly. His face became angry again: he did not want to deal with it. Different parts of the plan that were swirling in his mind eventually came together. John wanted revenge, and the plan that his mind just generated was quite good for that. He took a laptop from a bag that laid on a chair next to him, waited until it turned on, clicked on an icon denoting a mailbox and wrote a letter:

“Hi, Tom,

I have been looking through the documents of the “Cheg Manufacturing” deal that we completed last week. It seems that some numbers mismatch. You possibly have the information on stock beneficiaries. Send me that if you do. Also send me how much premium we paid. I need the information ASAP.

Best,

Jerry”

John addressed the letter to someone named “Tom Burns, CEO” in his computer. When choosing from whom to send the letter, he picked “Jerry Walter, CFO”. No one except for John would understand what he just did, and, more important, no one would understand how John did that. But John just greedy smiled and put away his laptop.

12th June, John’s diary

I have been working at “Burners Financials” for two days already. Great place to work! Other junior analysts seem to be stupid; it will not be difficult to take over them.

It seems some illegal activity is done within the company. Very interesting, and if I am able to find any evidence, I will be able to manipulate company’s managers and take significant control of the firm. Seems as a very quick way to become rich and powerful.

All company’s activity should be documented, and all documents are saved in internal computer system. If I am just able to get those documents and analyze them, it will be great. So the only thing I need is to hack company’s on-line security system. Fortunately I had spent some

time at Yale to study programming. I suppose it will not be difficult, as very few companies on the Wall Street pay much of the attention to their software security.

13th June, John's diary

Oh, Gash! Hacking company's security system turned to be much more difficult than I expected. There should be really important information; otherwise, they would not spend so much money on the security system. None of the attacking programs that I have were able to break the system. I will have to try to penetrate into the system from my workplace computer tomorrow.

14th June, John's diary

That is not possible! My corporate laptop does not support the opportunity of plugging in flash drivers, and it is too dangerous to use virus programs without anonymous flash drivers at work. It really gets annoying! It looks like they supposed that some people would try to break the system from inside. What is even worse, all my attempts of attacking the server from outside failed again. I need another approach.

Evening. It seems I have come up with another plan. I need to get access to the communication of our C-Level management. They usually forward all important documents to each other, so if I am able to read their corporate emails, it might be enough to get an idea of what is going on. Corporate emails should be less protected than the whole computer system. I will also continue my attempts to break the whole system; there are probably some holes in security system that I have not mentioned so far.

15th June, John's diary

Still no success in breaking system from outside. However, system security analysts' computers must support flash drivers. The whole in-

formation security system originates from their computers. Two-minutes access to one of those computers will be well enough for me.

17th June, John's diary

I had a coffee with one security analyst today. His name is Steve if I remember correctly. May be not – this is not important. He looks like a looser, so I think I will be able to make him believe that I am his friend. Not to mention that Wall Street back-office employees need to put up with banker's arrogance and rudeness. This will additionally help me to get his goodwill. However, the best way to make him fully trust me is to support him in a difficult period of his life. Fortunately, I know how to make a "difficult period of his life"

Evening I talked to Peter today. He was one of my university friends, or at least he believes he was my friend. We meet with him from time to time in a bar. He believes he is a Casanova, and he is really good with girls. He also likes betting, and he hates loosing. Peter's psychology is quite primitive, and I made him lay a wager that he would date with a girl that I pick for two months. I already know that I will lose the bet, but I want to lose the bet.

18th June, John's diary

I met with Peter today in a shopping mall. I showed him Jane, the girl whom he will have to date for two moths according to our bet. Jane is not ugly, but Peter certainly got used to the girls of higher class. Peter grimaced but nodded. He went to Jane, and I left the shopping mall.

Jane is Steve's (our firm technology analyst's whose computer I want to use) girlfriend. As I know, Steve loves her very much, and they are dating for almost a year now. I don't know if Jane loves Steve (she likely does), but I exactly know that she will not be able to resist Peter's charming. When she decides to break with Steve, it will be a real strong

psychological blow to him. Here I will come and “support him”.

25th June, John’s diary

My plan worked perfectly. Jane broke with Steve yesterday, and he did not come to work today. When I came to him after work, he was completely ruined. Well, as I expected he did not have a lot of friends, and I might be the only person who came to visit him. Anyway, he trusts me completely now. It is the time to fulfill the second stage of the plan.

2nd July, John’s diary

Success! It has been three weeks since I am working at “Burners Financial”, and I have eventually obtained information containing corporate email addresses and password of all our firm’s employees.

When today I came up to Steve offering to join me for coffee, I intentionally left my wallet on his desk. At the cafeteria, I pretended recalling that I forgot my wallet at his desk. He did not suspect anything – he believes we are the best friends – and said he would wait downstairs while I go for the wallet. In his room, I turned on his computer. The password was requested, but I knew it well, as I watched Steve entering it several times. When the computer switched on, I plugged in a flash driver with a virus. As I expected, his computer supported flash drivers. Without a problem the virus penetrated in the computer, searching for the prescribed information. I switched off the computer, took my pocket and went back to the cafeteria. In two hours from that I received a letter with the information the virus found. It seems that there is additional security on the confidential information, which the virus was not able to break, but even the information I have is completely sufficient for me now.

I am now able to read all communication of our managers, including C-level management. What is more important, I can directly send letters

using their emails. This creates so many opportunities to me. For example, I can send a letter from our CEO to our legal managing director requesting any documents. Of course, it will soon be revealed that someone has access to corporate emails if I use this very often, so I need to be cautious. Anyway, this is cool!

Tom Burns, CEO of "Burner's Financials", Dela Pizzo

Tom Burns was waiting for a waiter in an Italian restaurant. Three minutes passed since he had studied the menu, and Tom already knew what he was going to order. Tom was really hungry and also did not want to spend his whole day in the restaurant, so he started to impatiently look around searching for a waiter. The place was quite crowded at this time of the day, so he quickly understood why no waiter came up to him so far. It did not make him any happier though. He was already regretting that he chose this place for a launch, but moving to another restaurant would take even more time, not to mention that all Wall Street cafes were full at that time. So Tom sighted and returned to the menu.

A waiter eventually came up to him. "Hi. I am Sandy. Nice to meet you! What would you like to eat?" asked she with a smile. "Oh God, you eventually came! A year has passed since I am waiting here!" – responded Tom angrily, "Anyway, bring me Greece salad, then pasta with French Pork, and cheesecake with coffee at the end. And please try to do it as soon as possible". "Ok, sir. Would you like to try our new...", Sandy started, but Tom sharply interrupted her: "NO! I have already ordered everything that I wanted!!!!". "Ok, I am leaving", said Sandy and quickly

went away. "Stupid waiter", Tom thought to himself, "This will be definitely reflected in her tips". As soon as he thought that, his iPhone vibrated, indicating that a new email was just delivered. He got the phone from his suit pocket and noticed that the email was marked red, which is the highest priority. The message was from Jerry Walter, CFO of "Burners Financial", where Tom worked as the CEO. The content was

"Hi, Tom,

I have been looking through the documents of the "Debro Manufacturing" deal that we completed last week. It seems that some numbers mismatch. You possibly have the information on stock beneficiaries, and also send me how much premium we paid. I need the information asap.

Best,

Jerry"

–"What the hell does this mean? We have discussed these numbers with Jerry yesterday. Is Security Commission again studying something? Gash, hate it. But still I understand nothing. We were discussing it with Jerry yesterday. Probably I have missed something", thought Tom to himself, getting his computer from his bag. He was switching it on, when a man from the table next to him coughed and said, addressing to Tom: "Dear sir, I am waiting for my colleague here, but she has not come yet. Could you please watch over my staff while I leave for the men's room?" "Yes, no problem", answered Tom. Man's voice sounded quite familiar to him, but Tom did not remember when he could see this person before. "Anyway, I probably participated on a conference, where he presented. Not a big deal", thought Tom to himself. His lap-

top eventually switched on, and security system scanned his eye. When scanning was confirmed, the system requested password. Tom entered the password, and the system turned on. He opened folder with the documents regarding the “Debro Manufacturing” deal. Suddenly a waiter came up to Tom. This time it was not Sandy. “Good afternoon. I am Mike. I came to apologize for the delay; your Salad will be ready in five minutes. Please have this Earl Grey tea, meanwhile. We really apologize for the delay”, croaked the waiter. His voice was low, and it looked like he had a cold. “Thank you”, said Tom loudly and took the teapot and a cup. “Well, this might actually be a good restaurant. Fortunately they replaced that stupid Sandy. Nice, I really love Earl Grey tea!”

Tom poured the whole cup and enjoyed a deep sip of the tea. It tasted wonderful! Tom’s mood improved, and he started to search information for Jerry again. The person from the next table came back from the men’s room and, having thanked Tom, returned to his launch.

Three to five minutes passed, but Tom still could not find all necessary numbers for Jerry. Suddenly something strange started to happen with his stomach. Sharp pain appeared in the middle of the abdomen, and it started to swirl. Tom immediately discovered that he needed to get to the men’s room as soon as possible. He only managed to shout “Please watch over my laptop” to the man next to his table, and run towards the toilet.

But when he disappeared through the toilet door, the man from the next table quickly moved to the Tom’s seat. Leaving, Tom forgot to switch off his laptop, and even did not close it. The document he had been reading was still open. The man scrolled

the document to the end and added three zeroes to the final sum. Then he got a flash driver from his jeans pocket and plugged it in the laptop. He opened another folder on the laptop and replaced several documents in that folder by the documents from his flash driver. Replaced documents had similar titles. Having done that, the man sighted and looked around. No one in the restaurant paid any attention to him and to the fact that he occupied someone else's seat. Tom was not returning from the men's room.

Forty seconds passed, and the screen showed a green message that the copying process is over. The man clicked several other icons on the screen and stood up from the table. He put the flash driver in the inner pocket of his suit, took 50 dollars from his wallet, put it on his table and left the restaurant. The man passed three buildings and turned to a narrow street between two skyscrapers. Using a wipe, he removed makeup from his face. Then he took off a wig from his head and false mustache from his face, took off glasses and throw it all into a trash bin. No one would have a doubt in recognizing this person now – it was John.

Richard Wolf, Personal assistant of CEO and CFO of "Burner's Financials", parking zone near his house

Richard Wolf was coming home from the work. The day was very difficult. All days were difficult since the financial crisis began. Previously to the crisis, Richard used to work as the personal assistant to the CEO of "Burner's Financial", but when the re-organization process started, he also took the responsibilities of personal assistant of company's CFO. The work amount doubled,

but Richard was still happy that he at least was not dismissed completely as many of his colleagues.

Richard parked his car on the parking zone and went out. It was already dark. Richard expected that tomorrow he would have a day off. The reason was simple: today company's Head of Trading Activities was getting married, and both Richard's bosses were invited. This basically meant that they would get drunk and would not come to work tomorrow. "Of course Mr. Walter and Mr. Burns will forward all their business calls to me, but answering calls is easier than doing all other staff that they usually ask me. I can even do that from home. Very nice."

The parking zone was located on the zero floor of his house. As it was late already, no one else was there. Richard directed to the lift to get to his apartment. He was going, and sounds of his steps echoed loudly. This sound made Richard feel scary, and he stepped up his pace.

Suddenly Richard noticed that a group of five men was coming from the right. "Hmm, I've never seen these people in our house. Who are they? What are they doing here? Damn, they all are black and look like gangsters. I need to call the police when I reach home" – thought Richard and quickened his step even more.

–"Hey, you, stay there" – suddenly called the biggest one of them to Richard.

–"What? Are you speaking to me, Mr.?" – Richard was very frightened now.

–"Did you hear that" – grinned the man to his friends, - "Did you hear that he called me a Mister?" All five of them started to neigh loudly.

Listening to this, Richard understood that these people did not just want to ask him a direction. They obviously wanted to rob him. So Richard made the only correct decision he could make in this situation: he decided to run.

It did not work unfortunately. One of the guys quickly caught Richard and knocked him to the ground.

–“Why did you try to run?” – grinned the man, “Do you have something to hide from us?”

–“I have three hundred dollars in my wallet. You can take it, but just let me go. Please” – cried Richard.

At this moment four other man came up to them. They circled Richard who was lying on the ground with panic in his eyes. Richard tried to stand up, but another man kicked him in the chest, and Richard fell again.

–“Please, take my credit card! I will tell the pass code, but just let me go, please” – was begging Richard.

–“Why not? Hey, Vince, let’s take the card! He seems to be rich!” – one of the men turned towards the biggest one of them and smiled greedy. Obviously Vince was the leader of the group.

–“Shut up, Davis! What did I tell you a couple of minutes ago? We are not here to rob him! We are paid for another thing, so shut up and do what you have to do”, barked Vince to him. And so the five started to beat Richard. Richard wriggled and tried to cry, but it did not help.

In fact, only four of them were beating Richard. Meanwhile, the smallest of them, the one who previously suggested taking Richard’s credit card, insensibly stole Richard’s phone from his phone. Richard did not notice this completely. He had too many

other problems not to look after his pocket.

With the phone in his hands, Davis ran to the nearest car and disappeared behind it. A person was waiting for him there.

–“Here it is”, whispered Davis to the man, “but money first!”

–“I said that you would get money when everything is over, but it is not yet, and you know that. But you will not have to wait a lot. It will take just a minute” – responded the man, doing something in Richard’s phone.

–“Done”, said he eventually and handed the phone to Davis. “Now you have to return it back to man’s pocket unnoticeably.”

–“Believe me, I am the most nimble person in this city. He will never know that the phone ever left his pocket”, responded Davis proudly.

–“I hope so”, - coldly answered the man. “Here is the money. As we agreed. And remember, he should not notice anything” – continued the man and handed Davis an envelope. With these words he turned and went towards the exit from the parking zone.

Davis took the envelope and looked inside. He counted the bills and smiled with satisfaction. He accurately pocketed the envelope, and ran back to the place where his friends were still beating Richard. There he quietly put Richard’s phone back into Richard’s pocket. Fortunately, Richard again did not notice anything.

Having done that, Davis shouted “Guys, leaving”, and all five quickly disappeared between cars. Richard remained lying alone.

A couple of minutes passed before Richard risked opening his eyes. To his surprise, all the five men that were beating him vanished. The parking zone was again empty. He put his hand into

the pocket. To his big surprise, his wallet, phone and keys were there. Nothing was stolen. Richard touched his chest, legs and arms. No bones were broken. Richard sighed with relief.

–“What have just happened? These bastards came and banged me up. They did not rob me. They did not tell me anything. Did they do just for fun?” though Richard incomprehensively. Another minute passed, and Richard stood up and directed to the lift.

8th September, John's diary

Today I followed Tom Burns to the place where he had launch. Using some make up, I changed to a 38-years old man. I sat next to him in the restaurant. I initially worried that he could recognize me, but happily he did not. After he made his offer, I left my place and changed up again to a waiter. I know that Mr. Burns really loves Earl Grey tea, so added a few drops of rapidole into the tea and brought it to him. I knew he would recognize my voice if I talk to him, so I drunk a shot of absinthe. Very awful thing – I do not understand why anyone would like to drink it – but it perfectly helps to reach pain in the throat. When I came up to Mr. Burns I almost croaked instead of speaking, but the idea worked – he did not recognize my voice. Silly greedy jerk – having millions on his bank account, he was so happy to receive a free cup of tea; I understand now why his company almost collapsed. Trap closed as soon as he had a sip. He did not go – he run to the toilet. I know he would spend much more time there than I needed. I replaced several documents on his computer that he prepared to send to the Security Commission, so they soon would like to talk to Tom Burns personally soon.

I also forwarded calls from the phone of his personal assistant Richard to mine. If his personal assistant is not completely stupid, he will release it in a couple of days, but I do not need more than that. I hope it was not too much painful when they were beating him. Unfortunately, it was the only chance I could forward his calls to my phone without him noticing that. Anyway, he will be ok. And I will finish my revenge plan.

And I have several more things to do before tomorrow. Tomorrow promises to be a very productive day.

Tom Burns, CEO of "Burner's Financials", his home

Tom Burns has returned to his apartments. It was a difficult day for him. He approached a window and looked up to the street. It was dark already, but there were still a lot of people in the street. Taxicabs were driving up and down the road. Tom looked at his watch: it was almost 11pm.

His phone rang. Tom looked at the screen: it was Jerry Walter –Financial Director at Burners Financial, the firm that Tom was running. Tom sighted – he did not want to discuss business right now. The day was quite difficult for him. Not only this day, actually – the whole period after the market crash was quite challenging for the company. Not only for his company – a lot of companies on Wall Street - small and large – were collapsing one after another, and those that did not fall immediately had to put enormous efforts to survive. What is even worse, Security Commission woke up and started to investigate possible market manipulation. While the market was growing, everything looked pretty well, but this significant crash revealed that growth was

mostly speculative. As very few firms operated honestly on the Wall Street, so almost everybody was under a threat from Security and Exchange Commission.

Phone rang for the second time. Tom decided to respond – all in all, Jerry was the second most important person in the company, and if he calls so late this must be important. “Yes” – answered Tom, “No, I don’t wanna party now. Jerry look at your calendar, it is Wednesday, not even Friday! ... Who organizes? ... Did you say he gets married? ... Oh, yes, I remember he sent me an invitation around a week ago. Well, I completely forgot about it. This Cheg manufacturing deal and other staff... Oh, you forgot also? ... Yes, at least I am not surprised that Richard did not remind me about it. He must have forgotten himself. Not to much farsightedly – he must be trying to keep his position, but instead he forgets to update the schedule; I will talk to him tomorrow about it... So you decided to attend?... I think I won’t come. Yes, yes, I know he is my brother and I understand that I need to be there too, but I even did not buy a present. Jerry, could you please tell that I am ill tonight and apologize for me? ... Thanks, that would be nice... Yes, yes. I am sure... Buy, good night...”

Tom ended the conversation and shook his head. His step-brother, who also occupied the position of Head of Trading activity at Burners Financial, was getting married, and Tom completely forgot about that. “I will send them a bouquet of flowers tomorrow with my apologizes. It is strange that he did not call me himself. He likely even did not mention that I am not present”. This thought disappointed Tom, and trying to calm himself down, he started to think of how he could effectively punish his personal

assistant Richard for the fact that Richard forgot to remind him about the wedding. In less than a minute Tom created a bunch of ways to fire Howard, and this improved his mood so much that Tom decided that probably he might forgive Richard. Suddenly someone knocked in his entrance door. "Who might that be?" surprised Tom and went to open the door. He did not invite anyone today, and people rarely came to him so late. It was a reception guy, who watched after the building where Tom lived. "Mr. Burns, I was asked to pass it to you" said Robert, holding out a box of chocolate muffins and a bottle of champagne to Tom. –"Who asked?" – responded Tom with surprise.

–"It was a delivery boy, but he said that there is a note inside" – said Robert with a smile.

–"Ok, thank you very much Robert, I appreciate this very much", answered Tom, giving a ten-dollars bill from his wallet to Robert.

Tom closed the door and directed to the sofa. It was not too much strange to him – sometimes women tried to hook up with him by sending flowers, champagne or even sweaters and scarfs. Deep in his mind he understood that those women were attracted by his money rather than by his inner world, but this fact was difficult to accept, and Tom tried not to think of it too much. Tom opened the box with muffins and found the note:

"Hi, Sweaty,

We met with you in a restaurant a couple of days ago. You came there with a woman, but I saw how you were looking at me all the time. Call me when you have time, and I promise that you will not regret.

Completely yours,

Charlotte

P.S. I hope you will like these muffins."

Backside of the note contained a phone number and trace of a kiss. "Not bad, she really picked what I like", - chocolate muffins were one of the Tom's most favorite sweets.

Usually Tom would not eat what an unknown woman sent him, but this time muffins were so much attractive that he decided that nothing wrong would happen if he took one. "Moreover, it seems that I really remember that woman, and she was quite beautiful. I think I do not mind to know her a little bit better".

So Tom took one muffin, and then another, and one more. Muffins were very tasty. Tired but pleased, Tom decided to go to the bed.

Jerry Walter, CFO of "Burner's Financials", Hotel "Park inn"

Jerry Walter barely opened his eyes. His head was almost blowing. "Why did I drink that last shot yesterday?" thought Jerry regretfully. He turned his head to the left looking for glasses, and this quickly caused a sharp pain in his head. There were no glasses on the left side of the bed, and Jerry sadly realized that he would have to turn his head to the right, which meant another dose of pain in his head. Very slowly he started to turn his head to the right trying to minimize the pain.

Just at the moment when he rejoiced that he successfully turned almost painlessly, his phone started to ring stridently. The sound was very annoying, and it completely nullified Jerry's efforts to escape the pain. "Stupid phone", groaned Jerry, and someone from the right side of his bed moaned. "Oh, no," though Jerry to himself, "I again cheated on my wife". He randomly waved

his hand in the direction from where the sound of ringing phone originated, but expectedly his hand did not reach anything.

Angry, Jerry managed to lift his head, then body and stretch his hand to where the phone laid. He tried to look at the calling number but was not able to see anything without glasses. He decided that only his wife could be calling him at such early time. He took the phone and started quickly: "Sabrina, my dear, honey, beautiful, sorry but we had a very long meeting yesterday, and I had to stay in the office to correct some documents that we are going to send to investors today, and I'm almost done and will be at home... Ah, Tom, this is you. Please do not speak so loudly, I have a very strong hangover. I will call you in a minute after I have aspirin. Otherwise my head will blow up".

Jerry finished speaking and threw away the phone. He looked at the woman next to him and sighted. It was definitely a prostitute. Her make-up was smeared all over her face, her tan was obviously artificial, and now she looked very unattractive. "My wife is a billion times better and more beautiful. Why did I sleep with this one? Oh, hell", regretted Jerry looking at the woman.

Jerry got up from the bed and looked around the room. "Wonderful! I don't know where I am! Where would I now find the aspirin?" was his first thought when he looked around. However, Jerry was a chain-drinker, so he happily recalled that he usually has a couple of aspirin pills in his trousers. So he only needed to find his trousers. "Easy to say but hard to do" sighted Jerry and looked around again.

After a couple of minutes, which seemed years because of the pain, Jerry eventually found his trousers near the entrance door.

The trousers lay together with woman's dress. "So we took off right when we came in" realized Jerry suddenly. At this moment it was not important, however. Jerry was estimating how much time it would take him to find a cup of water, but decided to take aspirin without water eventually.

A couple of minutes passed, and the pain in his head decreased. "Oh, perfect! Much better! My life is getting better, and I will survive until tomorrow". He tried to stand up, and when he leaned on his hands, his right hand touched something cold. After a quick gaze at the object, Jerry happily realized that it were his glasses. "I am very lucky this morning!" rejoiced Jerry and put on the glasses.

At this moment the entrance door opened, and a woman quickly entered the apartment. "Jerry, are you here...?" started she loudly, but stopped suddenly, noticing Jerry, who still was naked but in glasses. The woman looked at the bed and saw a naked prostitute. She stepped back and leaned on the wall. She was soundlessly staring at the two naked people and did not know what to say. Jerry recognized the woman immediately. It was his wife Sabrina. It was a puzzle for Jerry how Sabrina managed to find him here, when even Jerry himself did not know where he was. However, he decided to delay this question and tried to concentrate on what to do.

–"Aaa... Sabrina, dear, honey, my beautiful, you understood incorrectly..." started he timidly.

–"Is... is this a prostitute? Did you... have sex with her?" – asked Sabrina slowly.

–"No, no, it is not", reacted Jerry quickly. "It is..." he tried to

make up something, a good logical story, but nothing came into his mind so he signed off.

–“Who is she then?” responded Sabrina. It was obvious that the first wave of shock ended, and she was slowly becoming angry.

“May be it is your assistant?” – asked she sarcastically?

–“No, no, she is not my assistant” – answered Jerry continuing his attempt to create a plausible story of what happened last night, still with little success.

Both Sabrina and Jerry did not know what to say and only were staring at each other. After a minute of silence Sabrina said: “Ok, I can’t put up with it. I am going to the court right now to apply for divorce”. Sabrina looked at Jerry for the last time, slammed the door and left the apartment.

–“Oh no, she wants divorce. I will loose everything! All my money! My Lamborghini! No way!. Hm... If I quickly transfer some of my money to intermediates in Switzerland, practically I will not possess this money; hence, she will not be able to put her hands on it in case of divorce. I need to speak to my lawyer before she is able to sign up divorce application. Damn, I will not be able to transfer all necessary assets quickly enough. Well, I need to catch Sabrina and make everything possible to prevent the divorce. My dad was right: we had to sign that stupid marriage contract! What will I do now if the judge obligates me to split all the money with Sabrina? No, no, no! And this stupid hangover! Hell!”.

While thinking this, Jerry quickly put on his trousers, shoes, shirt and suit. He grabbed his phone and was ready to leave the place, when the woman on the bed slowly pretended “Hey, you

have not paid me yet!". Jerry put his hand into his pocket, took two bills of \$100 and threw them to the woman. "That's better", she responded pleasantly, "Call me if you want to repeat. Or may be you want to repeat right now? Where are you going? See, a beautiful girl is lying in your bed, and you are leaving. Stay!".

Jerry madly looked at her; it was evident that lust and greediness were fighting inside his head. Eventually he decided that if he saves his money he will have much more women than this one and timidly stepped back. "I.. I need to be in the police right now. I.. really need. I call you". And as if to prove his words he took his phone and called someone. Still looking at the prostitute, he said in the phone: "Richard, I will make business call forwarding to you, please tell everybody that I will not be available today". With these words he left the room.

Tom Burns, CEO of "Burner's Financial", his home

Tom Burns was very nervous. An expert from Security and Exchange Commission woke him up this morning, calling to say that he wanted to see Tom because of the "Cheg Manufacturing" deal. Tom knew that, as with many other deals before, several laws were broken while the deal execution. Illegal actions, however, brought a couple additional millions to "Burners Financial". If truth is revealed, all people accessorial to the deal risk to be legally prosecuted. Of course, all reporting documents that were sent to the Security Exchange Commission had been adjusted not to cause any suspicious; Tom himself prepared and sent the documents the day before. Nevertheless, this morning call from the

commission did not promise to be good. “Probably, SEC double-checks all documents that it receives because of the recent market crash. I am sure “Cheg Manufacturing” documents are ok. But if nothing suspicious was found, and experts still want to see me, then someone may have informed them. Someone who had an access to the internal documents.”

The more Tom was thinking about the call, the more he panicked. Tom knew how to handle the stress, and usually he would not start panic so easily. All in all, SEC experts called him several times before for various reasons. This time, however, he could not but thought of how SEC could potentially reveal the true numbers. And the only way he could imagine was that his enemies bribed someone in Burner’s Financial, and this someone killed the company from inside. Thinking of who could potentially be that guy, Tom understood that there were no one in the company to whom he could potentially trust: “They all, ALL, could be rats. Everybody of them.”

Tom did not recognize himself. He usually tried to keep calm in every situation, but this morning he simply could not control himself. He was full of emotions and strange fears. He tried to think clear, but instead some strange thought appeared in his mind. Things that he would usually consider unrealistic, now seemed to happen all at once. Tom already imagined how his competitors took over his firms, how all his firm’s employees were witnessing against him in the court. At the end, Tom imagined how he was put in jail, and this was the most awful: Tom’s biggest fear was to be imprisoned, and he would prefer to die instead.

Tom tried to think away all these strange fears and began think-

ing of who could turn him in to the Security Exchange Commission. After a couple of minutes, Tom decided that Jerry Walter was the only person in the company to whom he could more or less trust. "Jerry is bounded to every manipulation we executed, no less than me. If I have a problem, he also has. Meeting in SEC is scheduled at 4 pm, so I have around 6 hours to understand what they want and to create appropriate answers. I need to see Jerry as soon as possible because he needs this no less than me."

Tom got his phone and called Jerry. Jerry was not taking his phone for a while, and Tom was becoming nervous. Suddenly Jerry took the phone, but to Tom's surprise Jerry started to talk crazy:

–"Sabrina, my dear, honey, beautiful, sorry but we had a very long meeting yesterday, and I had to stay in the office to correct some documents that we will send to investors today. . . "

–"Jerry, are you ok? It is Tom, not your wife" – responded Tom, trying to speak as loud as possible because Jerry obviously did not hear him.

–"Ah, Tom, this is you. Please do not speak so loud; I have a very strong hangover. I will call you in a minute after I have aspirin. Otherwise my head will blow up" – said Jerry and dropped his phone.

This short conversation did not calm Tom; in fact, he became even more nervous. "What if Jerry is in FBI right now? What if they torture him, so he could not but told the truth? Oh no, what if he himself went to FBI and told them everything? What if he decided to pass me to them? They will put me in jail, but he will get free as an informer. No, this can't be true. No, no, no. I know

Jerry for a long time. I can't believe that he could possibly turn me in to FBI".

Such thoughts filled Tom's head, and barely he could sit without looking around nervously every second. Suddenly the doorbell rang, and Tom almost jumped up on the sofa. "Damn! These must be policemen, who came to arrest me. Oh no, what should I do? I am not going to the prison."

These were not policemen, however. It was just a morning newspaper. However, Tom spent five long minutes before he risked coming up to the door and finding out what was behind.

Tom certainly had electronic subscription to all major newspaper, and he could read news from his laptop, but he personally enjoyed reading a physical newspaper while having breakfast, so a copy of Wall Street Journal was delivered to his apartments every morning.

Tom picked up the newspaper and returned to his seat. When he opened the newspaper, however, his face became white. First of all, the deliveryman left Financial Times instead of Wall Street Journal at his door. But this was not the main problem. The headline threatened Tom much more than the wrong newspaper:

"United States Security Exchange Commission (SEC) continues its investigation of financial market manipulation. Five Goldman Sachs bankers were accused in intentional overvaluation. If their guilt is proved in the court, each one of them will be fined by £5mlns and imprisoned for up to 6 years. However, Security Exchange Commission investigators claim that this is only the tip of the iceberg. Alex Rotfield, general SEC investigator, said to FT: "We believe that these traders could not operate without support from senior management, likely C-level management."

We will continue our investigation, and if our suspicions come true, punishment will be very serious.” Another SEC investigator says that Goldman Sachs is not the only firm that manipulated stock prices, and SEC will continue... (Turn to page 7 for the end of the article)”

Another article also attracted Tom’s attention. It was said there that a trader from a financial boutique “Diamond Capital” testified against managers in his company, and after Security Exchange Commission studied company’s business, it turned out that trader’s words were true. The firm was closed, and almost all company’s employees were arrested and are currently waiting for the court. However, the trader was freed from criminal prosecution. He was only fined by \$100’000 (which is small compared to what he earned while working at Diamonds) and was forbidden from working in financial industry for three years.

Tom threw away the paper. He could not keep anymore. He looked at his hands – they were shaking as if he spent an hour in a cold place without a coat. Having read the newspaper, he now was sure that someone informed on him to the Security Exchange Commission. “Obviously someone decided to put all blame on me. Yes, definitely! Somebody believes that sooner or later everything will be revealed, so he decided to save himself. Hell, what should I do? Should I also go to the police and tell them everything? No, this will not work this way – they will arrest me too because more than two people are testifying at the same time. But... Who can be the informer? Well, I may be exaggerating the situation. I should talk to Jerry immediately. He said he would call me back as soon as he finds aspirin, and almost 10 minutes passed. I will call to him myself”.

With this idea in his mind, Tom again called Jerry's number. After two dial tones, the number responded. However, to Tom's fear it was not Jerry. It was Richard – Tom's personal assistant, who also was Jerry's personal assistant.

–“Good day time” – started Richard, “You called Jerry Walter. Unfortunately, he can't speak right now and forwarded all his business calls to me; I am his personal assistant. You can tell me your request, and I will tell it to him as soon as possible”.

–“Richard! It is Tom Burns! Where is Jerry?” – Tom did not say, he screamed that to the phone.

–“Oh, good morning Mr. Burns. I am not sure, actually, but he told me something like he was going to police this morning. And... ahh, he asked me not to tell you this...”

Tom dropped the phone. At this moment he understood how bad everything was. “He asked not to tell you this... Jerry... Jerry is the informer! All pieces of the puzzle now have come together. Of course, he lied about aspirin when I called him twenty minutes ago. His phone recognized my number, and he could see that it was me calling; instead started to pretend that he did not recognize me. He was in the police, and he did not want to frighten off me. Ah, Jerry! I believed you! I thought we were working together. I thought we were friends! And you did this to me... Ok, I will pretend that I do not understand anything. But I need to leave the country immediately. Plane is not an option: they will catch me in the airport while checking my documents. By sea? No, bad idea. I will use my car. I will firstly go to Mexico, pay for a fake new ID there and will start a new life. Yes. But I need to get as much cash as possible from my bank account

because they will definitely try to freeze the account. But not in New York – too dangerous. Yes, but I also need to initially get rid of all documents at the firm. As quick as possible – get in office, burn all dangerous reports, get away from the city, take cash from bank account at Charleston, which is on the way to Mexico, and then drive to Mexico directly as soon as possible.”

Tom quickly collected some personal staff and put them all in a road bag, left his apartments and almost run to the lift. He did not lock his door.

A wind from an open window blew into the room and turned pages of the newspaper that Tom was reading. As the page turned to the first, the date became visible. The newspaper was two weeks old.

Steve Palmer, Security analyst at “Burner’s Financial”, Burner’s Financial office

Steve came in to the office early today. He did not have a lot of work to do, but being in the office allowed him to feel less lonely. Phones were calling, people were speaking, doors were opening and closing – this all successfully distracted Steve from his sad thoughts. Steve has not yet recovered from his break up with Jane. They were dating for a long time, and suddenly she decided to go to another man. “We were so happy together, how could she dump me?” - Steve often thought to himself regretfully at night, when he tried to fall asleep.

To make things worse, his colleague John, who also was Steve’s sole friend, was fired from the work the day before, and for Steve

it meant that he would not see John so often anymore. “John was the only person who was trying to help me to handle the stress. He is so kind, and I cannot believe that we will not work together anymore. I hope he will find a better place – he is a nice man, and I hope that he will get his happiness” – thought Steve.

Suddenly his phone rang. He looked at the screen and almost numbed with surprise: it was Jane calling! He could not believe his eyes. They did not talk for almost three months. “Exactly three months” – Steve corrected himself. He recalled that Jane broke up with him on 24th of June, and it was 24th of September today. For all this time he was trying to forget her voice, her appearance, her smell, and suddenly this call recalled him everything. Steve did not know if he should answer: Jane hurt him, but he still loved her.

Steve decided that he would not take the phone. “Even if we get together again, I will not be able to forget about her betrayal. This is the passed stage of my life, and I am looking forward to new relations. John is right: I should think less of her” – decided Steve eventually. With these thoughts in his mind, Steve put his phone on the edge of the table and started to turn on the computer.

The phone rang twice more, but Steve did not even move to look at it. Eventually, after the phone stopped calling and a five-minutes silence passed, the phone indicated that a new SMS was received. “Ok, I will just look at what Jane wrote to me because that might be important, but for nothing I will respond to her” – decided Steve and stretched out his hand to take the phone. The phone was locked, but the screen contained first two lines of Jane’s message: “Steve, I just wanted to let you know that he dumped

me. It was a bet...".

–“A bet? What does she mean? Someone seduced her for money? What’s a nonsense!” – confused Steve. This thought, however, immediately caused a wave of hope inside him. “May be she is not guilty? May be she was deceived? Oh, no, nonsense again! Even that being the case, she should have had her hear on the shoulders”.

Steve wanted to see the rest of the message, but when he started entering the password to unlock the screen, his phone started to call again, indicating an incoming call from John.

–“Hi, John! Nice to hear you! I strongly need your advice – Jane has written me recently...”, started Steve, but John interrupted him.

–“Hold on, please. We have too little time. I just saw that FBI investigators are right here. They are waiting for the Mr. Burns evidently. I wanted to call and warn him not to come to the office today, but I just noticed how he entered the building. And as soon as he entered the elevator to get to our floor, two more FBI investigators left another elevator and stood near the entrance door. Apparently they do not know if he is in the building right now, and they want to catch him near the entrance door when he comes to work or in his office if he is already in the building. And Mr. Burns certainly directs to his office. You should intercept him at the elevator and tell him not to go to his room. I would do that myself, but I am on the first floor. Quickly, I suppose that Mr. Burns has already reached our floor.” – John’s voice was quick and nervous

–“Sure, John. I will do that. I just hope that I am not late” –

responded Steve, darting off from his table to run to the elevator. "What a nice guy", thought Steve to himself running, "The boss fired him yesterday, and John still wants to help the boss. John is the most noble person I have ever met!"

Tom Burns, CEO of "Burner's Financial", Burner's Financial office

Tom got off from the elevator. "What if those Security Exchange Commission investigators are already waiting for me in the office? What if they understood that I would try leaving the country? No, that's not possible. They think I am stupid and will come to their hands as planned. As we scheduled today at 4 pm. Stupid idiots! At 4pm I will be in Mexico already. May be not that far, but definitely far away from New York".

At the moment when Tom attached his pass card to open the office door, it opened itself and someone almost fell out from it. –"Who are you? Why do you run in the office?" – Tom started groaning. He did not like inadequate people, and a person running in his office could not be called adequate. Moreover, this morning he was especially afraid of running people, as it recalled him of a danger of being chased after.

–"No! No! Do not... enter... into... here..." –panted the person, "Do not enter..."

–"What? Who are you? You tell me not to enter my own office? What's the hell is going on?" – Tom still was angry, but some threats started to grow inside him.

–"Listen. My name is Steve; I am a security analyst working in your company. FBI investigators are waiting for you in your cab-

inet. And also there are several of them near the entrance door. Fortunately, you can use the back door of the coffeshop that is in the yard of the building. I assume that they do not expect that you can use that door”.

Tom barely kept his consciousness: “How? How could I have been so stupid? It is not SEC. FBI investigates the case already. And obviously the first two places where they would start looking for me are my office and my apartment. They work quite operatively: Jerry ratted me out only this morning, and they already started capturing operation. Why do I come to the office? Why? I did have a chance to leave the city, but now I have to escape from the building full of FBI investigators trying to catch me”, thought Tom to himself. He did not know what to say to this boy, who run to inform him about the danger, and whose name Tom has forgotten already. “Thank you, boy” eventually answered Tom. “You will be rewarded for this”.

–“No, that was not me. . .” started Steve, but Tom interrupted him: “So this is what you will do. As you suggest, I will try to leave the building through the coffeshop. But you, go to my office. You will see a safe in the right corner. The safe is locked, and you need to insert the password to open it. If the password is inserted incorrectly three times in a row, everything inside will burn. Do that”.

–“Do you want me to destroy all documents inside of your safe?” – surprised Steve, who now began to understand that his boss might have been certainly guilty, and if he helps him to destroy evidence, then Steve himself may be legally prosecuted. However, his doubts were quickly dispelled, when elevator’s doors opened,

and John got off from there.

–“Oh, Mr. Burns, I am happy to see you here. Look, FBI is looking for you here. And they know that you are inside the building: they have found your car on the parking lot. They did not sound the alarm not to let you know, but in fact they are all around. I do not know what to do, but all exits from the building are closed. I saw that myself”.

Tom could not stand this anymore. Everything was wonderful yesterday, and now FBI literally surrounded him. He can't escape the building, and if he is caught, he will spend the rest of his life behind the jail. Even a small thought about that made him feel horrible, and at this very moment he recalled a line from the morning paper: “Bankers all over the Wall Street jump from the roof of their offices as the financial crisis goes deeper and deeper”. Tom dawned: “Here is the solution! I will not give in! I do not want to spend my days in the community of maniacs and pedophiles. I'd better end my life here. In the place that I have been running for so long. Everything started here, and everything will end here. But before. . . Oh yes, I will revenge Jerry. . . I will make this stupid jerk pay for my death. Jerry will not be able to end this all as easy as I do. He is already in their hands, and they will not allow him to commit a suicide. When you decided to turn me in to FBI, my dear Jerry, you thought to finish all this easy to you. But I will be the cat in this game. And you will see!”

–“Hey, you” – Tom turned towards Steve, “Remember what I have just said to you? Forgot about that. Go to my office. Password to the safe is 65-72-13-19. Memorized? Oh no, you will obviously forget it. Write it down. Insert it correctly, otherwise every-

thing inside will burn. As you open the safe, take all documents from there and give them to those damn investigators in my office. Right now, quickly!” – shouted Tom to Steve.

–“Ok, sir” – responded Steve. He was so much confused and surprised that did not find anything better than just to do what he was asked to do.

As Steve left the place, Tom turned to John. “And you...” – Tom did not know what to say to John; this guy definitely saved him from being caught, but as Tom already decided to jump from the roof, he wanted to have some fun in the last minute of his life: “Did not I fire you yesterday? What the hell are you doing here? Why does your pass card still work? Get out from here immediately” – malevolently smiled Tom.

To Tom’s surprise, John was not astonished by this shout, or at least he did not show that he was astonished. For a second it seemed that John’s eyes filled with anger, but even if it was true then quickly they become normal again, and John answered: “I am leaving already”. With this words John turned and entered the lift. When elevator’s doors closed, Tom walked out to the stairs going the roof.

Steve Palmer, Security analyst at “Burner’s Financial”, Burner’s Financial office

Steve quickly went to Mr. Burn’s office. However, Steve did not find anyone there. “Hmm. Very strange. John told me that FBI investigators are waiting for Mr. Burns, but apparently there no one here. May be they have left already?” Trying to find that

out, Steve approached to a person sitting in the openspace right in front of the Mr. Burn's office.

–“Hi!” – said Steve to the man – “Where are the two men that were sitting in Mr. Burn's office all the morning?”

–“Hi” – the man shook Steve's hand, “Who are you talking about? No one entered this room since I am sitting here”.

–“What?” – surprised Steve - “May be you went to the toilet or somewhere else when they entered and exited the room?”

–“May be, but I do not think so. If you forgive me, I need to work. Sorry” – answered the man.

Steve went into the Mr. Burn's room and switched on the light. It really seemed that no one entered the room for the morning. “May be John was wrong?” – Steve doubted. But after a minute thinking he decided that even if John was wrong about FBI investigators in Mr. Burn's office, he still saw them near the entrance, and it was Mr. Burn himself, who ordered him to get the documents and give them to FBI. “Actually, how John could see FBI investigators here if he was on the first floor when he called me? That is weird, I should ask John about it”.

So Steve came up to the safe, entered the password and got the documents. “I now need to find someone from FBI in the building full of FBI investigators. What can be done easier?” – smiled Steve and left the office.

Steve Palmer, Security analyst at “Burner's Financial”, Burner's Financial office

Steve did not find any FBI investigators in the office. There was no one on the first floor. When Steve asked the security guy where he could find FBI investigators, the man shrugged and said that they might have been in FBI Central office. He also added that no FBI representative had ever been to the building since he started to work in 2003.

Steve was completely confused. John persuaded him and Mr. Burns that the building was full of FBI people, but in fact there were none of them. How could that be possible? Steve was out of his mind, and it was a great puzzle for him. He needed to talk to John immediately to find out what happened. Steve also did not know what to do with all those papers he got from Mr. Burn's safe. Eventually he decided to ask the security guy to send the documents to the police with the morning post.

Having done that, Steve decided that the best way to find John in the building was to call him. However, when he released his phone from his pocket, he noticed that he still did not read Jane's message. He hesitated for a second but decided that reading a short message would not take much of his time, and so opened the text: "Steve, I just wanted to let you know that he broke with me. It was a bet. I guess that someone tried to reach you using me. Call me, please".

–“What the hell does it mean?” – surprised Steve. He already started to understand that something strange was going on around, but he still did not see the point of the situation. “Someone used Jane to reach me? What the stupid thing! I did not communicate a lot to anybody since we broke up with Jane. I became even more reluctant, and I did not hang out with anybody except John.

Except John. . . Damn, John approached me first right before we broke up with Jane. But that could not be possible! John is a very good guy; he could not have something bad in his mind. Really, even fired he tried to save the boss today. Or he didn't?"

Strange thoughts were swirling in Steve's head. From one hand, he tried to justify Jane and accuse John in his mind. From the other hand, he understood that Jane's words could not be true. Really, that would be too strange to suggest that John had some genius plan in his mind, which involved Jane's break up with Steve and using Steve for some personal goals. "That is ridiculous. Even if someone worked against me, this could not be John, as he simply did not have any incentives for that. But I almost barely communicated to someone else for the past two months, so the Jane is wrong. She is definitely wrong".

However, these thoughts about Jane and their break up again filled Steve's head. "Ok, I am not very rich and don't have rich parents or friends. If Jane is right, and someone wanted to achieve something through me, this only could be something within the company where I work. That might be my access to protected data or something like that. But security system would definitely discover any malicious programs if someone tried to use my computer. The program can be bypassed, but that requires some heavy resources and a lot of time. That is quite unlikely." Nevertheless, Steve decided to go up and check his computer. He already forgot about FBI, John and all other staff that filled his head 5 minutes ago. Now he was only thinking about Jane's message.

Tom Burns, CEO of "Burner's Financial", roof of Burner's Financial office

Tom was standing on the roof of the building and watching down. It was almost 200 meters above the ground, and he could barely make out the street below. "How would passing people react when my body drop from the roof? I hope it will not be painful. At least my fate is better than Jerry's. He is going to spend the rest of his life in the prison, where all other prisoners will bully him."

Tom recalled the most exciting moments of his life. His childhood, his parents. He recalled that he was one of the brightest students firstly at school and then at university. He recalled how he started his career, and how quickly he climbed the corporate ladder. He recalled how he received his MBA and started to work in "Burner's financial", and how he eventually achieved the highest position within the firm.

—"Where did I go wrong? Everything was so nice, so happy even five years ago. Why could not I be satisfied with the money I got? Why did I need more? I had a really great salary. Why did I turn to fraud and engaged in all those illegal actions? I should have foreseen how it would end, but I did not. And now I am standing here, on the roof of my lovely office, preparing to jump down. Is this happiness? I dare not."

His sad thoughts suddenly were interrupted by creaking door. "Oh, hell. FBI realized where to find me. This stupid John has likely told them that I directed here. Damn, I should not yell at him. Ok, I decided to jump anyway; so ten additional seconds would not change the situation. They will not be able to catch me

before I die". And he made a step towards the edge.

–“Not so easy” – Tom heard suddenly. The voice was familiar to Tom, and he looked back with surprise. It was John who entered the roof.

–“What are you doing here? I told you leave the office” – shouted Tom.

–“Ahahaha, idiot”, John was laughing, “do you know that in fact there are no FBI investigators in the office”?

–“You are kidding me. You wanna revenge for the fact that I yelled at you a couple of minutes ago, and so you want to lead me directly to FBI. I am not stupid, and you will not succeed” – laughed Tom.

–“You are right, I definitely want revenge. But you were too stupid to understand it so late. And now you will die. But before that, I want you to understand that you are defeated. I want to see your humiliation. You know, I started this plan when you fired me. I was angry, and I wanted to finish with you, I wanted your death. For me it would be enough if you simply died. But now... You yelled at me when I was pretending to help you. And I am not going to accept your simple death anymore. I want you to die with full understanding of why you died and thanks to whom you are dying.”

–“You are mad! What the nonsense you are talking?” – angrily reacted Tom.

–“Well, you know, Jerry did not turn you in to FBI. And no FBI investigators are in this building at all. But let me tell you from the beginning. Do you remember yesterday you had an unsuccessful tea in the restaurant? I brought you that tea. I changed into a

waiter and served you with the tea, and when you run to the toilet, I altered a couple of numbers in your report to Security Exchange Commission. And you know what? Those numbers were not completely wrong. They only served to attract some SEC attention to you. The numbers that I added, they looked like a typo, not as a fraud. And you know what? When today a SEC expert called you, he simply wanted to meet with you, he simply wanted to clarify the numbers. That would not be harmful or dangerous – you would just meet with him and go away. But you decided that they discovered your fraudulent schemes. Do you know why you came to that conclusion? I will tell you why. Remember those muffins from Charlotte yesterday? Those were not sent by Charlotte. In fact, no Charlotte ever existed. I sent them. But I added a little bit ethan-butiloethylenglicole. This is a very dangerous drug. It severely stimulates your brain, and you are getting very nervous. A person under this drug cannot think rationally, and he sees dangers everywhere. Did you notice something strange today in your behavior? Or, I see you did, why otherwise you were standing here trying to jump down?”

As the John was talking, Tom started to realize that this could be true. His strange behavior and everything today – everything could have been explained by this.

–“But I still want to tell you what happened this morning. Do you remember that you called to Jerry Walter today, but reached your personal assistant instead? That was not your personal assistant. That was me. I cheated Richard as easily as many other people. Yesterday I paid a group of jerks, and they attacked him while he was coming home from work. I was with them but stayed the

shadow, so Richard did not notice me. As they were beating him, one of them stole his phone and gave me, and I quickly changed some settings. Particularly, I forwarded all calls from his phone to mine. The phone was insensibly returned to Richard, and he was completely unaware of the fact that no one will call him again, at least until he discovers the virus. It is not important anymore, as I'm almost done with my revenge plan “

Tom was getting white. He started to understand how bad his position was. The drug from the muffins was probably intensifying the fear, but also John's voice and eyes and posture. As he was talking, Tom saw that John really enjoyed his cruel plans, and it was really dreadful. Tom understood that he had to do something to escape from this situation, but he also could not stop listening this mad guy. Meanwhile, John continued his monologue.

–“So today, when I know that you was under the effect of ethanbutiloethylenglicole, and SEC expert called you, you expected that the worst possible scenario occurred. That SEC somehow discovered all your plans. But I wanted you to decide that Jerry ratted you out. And I sent you that old Financial Times edition, which gave you a hint that someone could inform on you to FBI. And as only you and Jerry are completely aware of what is happening inside the company, you decided that Jerry might have told SEC everything. And when you called Jerry, the call was forwarded to your personal assistant. But as I said before, all incoming calls to your personal assistant were forwarded to me. So today, when you called Jerry, you actually talked to me. It was me, who said that Jerry went to police. And it was me, who told you that Jerry asked not to tell you where he had gone. And combined with

ethan-butiloethylenglicole, you decided that Jerry ratted you out. But he did not. In fact, he would not ever”.

–“So you did this all? I will throw you from this building, you a stupid bastard” – Tom groaned and wanted to attack John, but John suddenly released a handgun from under his suit.

–“Not so quick mister, I have not finished yet. The most interesting part is just coming. Do you know what you have just done? You asked that stupid Steve to send all documents, which will reveal all the fraudulent activity within the firm, to FBI. Steve does not have his own brain – he will do what you ask him to do. But as soon as those documents reach FBI, they will imprison Jerry. Until that, Jerry will not have any ideas that he might be prosecuted. And do you know how all of this will look like? It will look like you committed a suicide but decided to inform on your colleague before. No one will ever find the truth. And no one ever will discover my role in this all. And now, when I told you this all, and when you understand how silly it was to fire me, I will let you to jump down”.

–“I will not jump down now, when I know the truth” – exclaimed Tom.

–“Ok, then I will simply shot you from this gun. You know, I could simply shot you from the beginning, but it was much more interesting to make you yourself to commit the suicide. And that’s why I hope I will not have to kill you. It will be much better to see how my plan eventually realizes. But if you decide not to jump, I will not hesitate to shot you. I have never shot a person, so I will at least learn how it feels. And you know what I will do then? I will remove my fingerprints from the gun and put it in

your hands. It will look like you shot yourself. It is so romantic – to reach the roof of the skyscraper to shot yourself seeing a nice landscape. You decide – I wait 20 seconds and then shot” – smiled John.

Tom was very anger. He understood his pity position, and he decided that his only chance is to try to pounce John and get the gun from his hands. But as he was already ready to do that, a sudden airflow blew, and as Tom was standing near the edge of the roof, and he already took unsustain position to pounce John, the airflow pushed him back. With a loud scream, he dropped from the roof.

It took John less than twenty seconds to get to the place where Tom was standing, but when he reached roof’s edge and looked down, Tom’s body has already reached the ground. Even here, 200 meters above the ground, John could still hear women screaming below. “Not so bad”, satisfyingly nodded John, “I am still not guilty in his death. At least I did not kill him directly. And he got what he deserved. I revenged him. He did not, oh he definitely did not have to fire me”. At this moment John’s phone rung. Steve was calling.

Steve Palmer, Security analyst at “Burner’s Financial”, Burner’s Financial office

Steve switched on his computer. The security system showed that it worked perfectly. Steve nodded suddenly. No one penetrated the system, and Jane obviously tried to cheat him again.

–“John was right, I should not believe her, she is such a . . . I can’t say that word even in my mind”.

Sadly, almost by inertia, he clicked button “get last six month report”. The report quickly downloaded and opened in a new window. It was full of green lines, each one indicating that a new penetration was prevented. Nothing strange. John wanted to close the document, but accidentally scrolled the document down. To his surprise, he mentioned one red line. It surprised Steve. Red line in the report could only mean that the system allowed a malicious attack to penetrate. The next line after the red indicated that the attack was blocked subsequently, but the very fact that something got inside surprised Steve. It never happened before. He looked at the time of the incident and requested a detailed report on that day. After a while the new report on the specific date was generated, and Steve looked into it; he was shocked. That day the system was switched off for almost two hours. The fact that he did not know about this earlier could only mean that a skillful hacker used the system. In addition to penetration into the system, the hacker also changed system parameters so that no notification about the incident was reported post-factum. Now, however, with the report, Steve could follow what the malicious program did to the system. It gave access to corporate emails to an external account. “What??? Oh no, someone was reading confidential correspondence. Every letter sent from or to a person within the company was also received by a third party. Hell! He or she not only received letters, but also could send emails from those mailboxes. That’s a catastrophe. That must be a competitor. Hmm, fortunately I can follow the account.”

Steve clicked several buttons, but all program's traces were removed. "Argh, I am dealing with a master, but I am not a fool myself. Let's see what back-up information can tell us". Back-up function was installed to all company's computers. It was intended to copy and storage all documents that were created on company's computer, and if company's computer system was broken, then stored information could be backed up, and operational process would not stop. However, Steve now was going to use it for different purposes – to get removed information that, Steve hoped, was also copied to the server.

Fortunately, it worked. In a couple of minutes Steve had all information about the programs action within the system and where it was sent. Using the provided IP, Steve could see on what devices the information was used. At least several times several mailboxes were opened on a cell phone. Steve followed that and was able to see the phone's number.

–"Yeh! I have a number. If a person from within the company did that, this number should be inside our employee contact base". Steve opened the contact base and inserted the number. The computer showed him: "John Levis, junior analyst".

Steve's head was going to explode. "No, no, no! I refuse to believe that. John could not do it. He is my best friend, he could not, he simply could not. He is such a good guy". But reality was evident: for some reasons John penetrated the system and used internal correspondence to read the confidential information.

–"But if I just for a second believe Jane's words that someone wanted to reach me through her, then this seems logic. John and I became friends right when Jane and I broke up. If a person

wanted to use me, there was no better chance to do that than when I was grieved. And the system penetration occurred almost at the same time. And if I really start from the point that John is not so good as he seems, then his behavior today did not seem so much strange. The world is cruel. I was in love with a girl, but she broke up with me. And at the time when I thought I found a good friend, it turned out that he was actually using me”.

–“No, I must be wrong”, suddenly decided Steve. “I am creating something strange in my mind. This cannot be possible. Of course this is strange, but there should be a good explanation to that, a better one than I have just made up. I need to meet John, and he will explain me everything. He will tell me the truth”.

But firstly he decided to write Jain an SMS: “You are right. Someone definitely used my computer. The system shows me that it was John Levis, but definitely someone else did that, as John could not. I will talk to him firstly, and then call you. We will have a very long conversation”.

When the message was sent, Steve called John.

John Levis, roof of Burner’s Financial office

John’s phone was ringing. He looked at the screen. It was Steve calling. “Oh God, what else does he need? I hate him”, discontentedly thought John, but took the phone and politely, as if nothing strange happened a couple of minutes ago, asked: “Yes, Steve?”

–“John, this is Steve. I have just discovered that someone penetrated our computer system and illegally read all internal corre-

spondence. It is shown that it was done from your device from time to time, but I am sure it was not you. Probably someone also hacked your mobile phone. Can you come, so I check? I also did not find any FBI investigators in the building. Are you sure you did not confuse them with someone else?"

As Steve was talking, John understood all seriousness of his case. Steve was one step away from realizing John's plans, and John could not make it be possible. Fortunately, Steve was fascinated by John's friendliness, and that was the sole reason for the fact that he did not understand that John was guilty. But John also understood that Steve was not a complete idiot and that he would soon find out everything. John's brain immediately started working out a plan from this situation, and he already had one by the time Steve ended his speech.

–"Oh, Steve, that is terrible. But you need to come to the roof. Please, quickly, Mr. Burns is here. Our boss. Oh my God, it seems that he shot himself. Please come here soon, I do not know what to do" – John masterfully conveyed panic and fear in his voice. As he expected, Steve answered immediately,

–"Oh, no. What a bad day. I am already coming. Running. Do not touch anything, I will be in a minute".

–"Quickly please, I think I will lose consciousness here alone!" – simulated John, as Steve hanged up the phone. "Stupid idiot", thought John.

A full five minutes passed, and the door leading to the roof creaked again. Huffing and puffing, Steve entered the roof.

–"Where is he?" – screamed Steve asking John. "Where is Mr. Burn's body?"

–“While you were running, he jumped from the roof” – responded John, pretending fear. –“By the way, what you were talking about the security system penetration? Did you say my phone number was used?”

–“Yes, yes, but it is not important now, we have to do something with this. We need to call everybody, tell them that Mr. Burns jumped from the roof. We need full investigation. . .” – Steve was bustling.

–“How did you know that? I am speaking about the virus in company’s security system. And why did not you learn earlier?”

–“I used back-up function. It gave me that. But really, John, we need to do something” – Steve came up to the edge of the roof and looked down

–“Damn, I completely forgot about the back-up function. Next time I need to be more accurate” – swore John soundlessly and said instead: “Yeh, yeh, you are right, but whom else did you tell about the system penetration? Did you tell anybody?” – John almost did not hide his impatience anymore.

–“No, I did not tell anyone except Jane, John, but this is not important now, how can you think of anything when a human died” – screamed Steve, still looking down from the roof.

–“The last question, did you send the documents from Mr. Burn’s safe to police?” – asked John

–“Yes, I did. But I do not understand your questions, John.” – Steve eventually looked at John with a puzzle in his eyes.

– “Don’t worry”, said John calmly, “Enough from you”. John directed the gun at Steve and shot. Steve fell dead on the roof. The bullet hit exactly Steve’s heart, and there was a bloody spot

on his white short.

–“Why did not he just jump from the roof himself as the previous one? No my hands are in blood. Well, he was stupid anyway. This death does not count.” – thought John and nodded his head. John now was thinking of what to do. He had a small problem, because Steve’s ex-girlfriend now knew some information she should not know. “Oh, well, I already have a plan on what to do with her” smiled John. “But I need to finish my revenge here. Jerry Walter is still free. And also I need to delete all information from the back-up storage”.

John Levis, plane to New Orleans

John was sitting in a plane. Almost five long hours passed since he witnessed two deaths on the roof of Burners’ Financials. John got the plane as soon as he deleted all last traces of his malicious program from the company’s computer system. Now no one would ever be able to learn that one day John hacked the system. John now was going to New Orleans. As John was able to learn, Jane was exactly in that city. He had to get rid of her, but for that he needed to get to the city where she was.

The plane did not start to move yet, and the steward was providing safety instructions. John did not listen to him: he was finishing a letter to Jerry Walter. This letter was the last piece of his revenge plan. In five minutes the steward eventually finished his instructions and asked everybody to switch off all electronic devices for the take off time. John has just completed the letter. When choosing from whom to send the letter, he chose “Tom

Burns, CEO”, when choosing addresser, he picked “Jerry Walter, CFO”. He pressed send and smiled. Thanks to mobile Internet, the letter was immediately delivered. John smiled and decided to have a nap. The last two days were quite exciting, and John had to have some rest. “This letter will make me innocent”, smiled he, “But Jerry, poor Jerry. I would pay quite a lot to see his face when he is reading the letter”

Jerry Walter, CFO of “Burner’s Financial”, “YMCA Wanderbuilt” hotel

Jerry Walter has just entered a hotel room that he booked. His wife declared divorce, and he was not able to convince her not to do that. Jerry’s advisor told him that it was quite possibly that the wife would be able to sue a significant part of Jerry’s wealth. Jerry already ordered to reformat some his bank accounts to offshores, but still he had a lot to loose.

Jerry approached a bar and opened it. Fortunately, there was a bottle full of whisky inside, and he smiled that now he would be able to drunk and forget the stupid day.

In half an hour Jerry was so drunk that he could barely stay on his feet. At this moment his phone indicated that a new email was received. Jerry looked at it:

“Hi, Jerry,

I just wanted to let you know that a stupid security analyst from our company used his internal account and reached several important documents, which can prove our fraudulent manipulation. He sent them to FBI. I killed him. Shot him using a gun. But the documents were sent, and it is not possible to reverse them back. We can try to run, but I am

sure we will not be able to escape. And I do not want to spend rest of my life in prison. So I decide to jump from our office building.

And I don't know what you gonna do. You can try to run, but I do not think you will manage. Police is everywhere, and they likely have our photos on every corner of New York and any other city in America. You will not find piece. Why, why Jerry we pursued so much money? We already had a lot. But we wanted more. I made my decision. It is your turn. But you know what? We will meet again. May be in the heaven, but likely in the hell. It does not matter if you follow me right now, or you live other 50 years and die then.

And now bye,

Tom"

Jerry was so much drunk that he did not understand even a half of the letter. He looked at the screen stupidly for an additional minute and then suddenly fell asleep.

Five FBI people woke up Jerry next morning. The documents that Steve passed eventually reached the police, and the actions were taken immediately. Jerry was arrested.

John Levis, plane to New Orleans

John woke up in the plane. Something strange was happening within the cabin. The light was blinking, and the plane was staggering strongly.

–“Dear passengers, we entered turbulence area. Please take your seats and fasten your seatbelts” – announced a steward.

John mentioned how an old woman to the left from him started to pray. Other passengers also looked nervous. John smiled; he

knew that everything would be ok. “These new planes are designed to handle turbulence. These people all around. . . Oh, they are so stupid, planes are the safest means of transport. According to statistics” thought John to himself calmly.

At this moment a storm light struck the plane. The light inside the cabin switched off completely, and suddenly oxygen masks dropped down. People panicky started to put on the masks. Some people were looking through the safety instruction, trying to understand what to do. But this was too late. Another lightning struck in the left wing, and with a very loud creep it broke in two halves, and one of them fell off.

The plane crushed. No one survived.

One Child

Shen was standing under the scaldingly freezing flows of water, washing off his blood, dirt, pain and insult from his face. He hated those shower rooms with the tile walls. He hated the way they echoed obediently each of his heavy sighs, so that boys in the changing room could easily find a reason for the gibes. His knees were tottering, and he could hardly keep a stand. Although the boy lost it from the very first day here.

It all began, when the 13-year-old son of a driver and a nurse started to show some promise and to stand out from the crowd of junior gymnasts. As if it happened yesterday, Shen remembered very clearly how his family was hiding him and his existence from the demographic service policemen. The first 6 years Shen Zhang was brought up not knowing what buses, rivers and tigers look like and he was barely aware of the smell of grass. He had never heard the sound of the surf, never touched the rough oak bark, and his cheek had never felt the coldness of the snow. However, he knew well the smell of metallic bars and still rings.

Shen's mother gave birth to him in a tub at her house. And when Shen grew up enough to provoke suspicion, Mr. and Mrs. Zhang's neighbor informed on them. The agents of the Family Planning Commission made no bones about the situation, since Zhang's family was against the law. It wasn't about implicit totalitarianism, nor about the atrocity of measures taken due to demographic crisis. It was about the idea of major collectivization in China: alone - you are nothing. Individuals - are prohibited, and "all animals are equal". So when government abandoned the boy

from the family it seemed like all mothers of world cried out for "Goodness sake".

Everything was fresh: endless shouting and arguing, smashed kitchen room, father's bleeding fist and mother's last kiss.

—"Bastards!" - was the last thing that he heard from his older brother. Now, Shen understood very well how it was for his family to resign with paralysis, facing their own son's abandonment from an insolvent family.

The boy's thoughts were broken off as the water had finished and stopped flowing. He didn't want to leave the shower, as he knew that the boys were still in the changing room. He wasn't afraid. Neither did he give up. But he was tired of holding against indignity any longer. Shen sat on the wet cold floor and waited until the last boy slammed the door.

—"Wake up!"

Shen immediately threw off the blanket and started to make the bed. A low broad-shouldered man with sleeked ebony hair stepped up in front of him and inspected, fixedly, Shen's face.

—"Where did you get this bruise, Zhang? he asked.

—"I crashed against the wall, Laoshi" responded Shen amenably.

The boy who was standing near the window sniggered. The whole chamber froze.

—"Crashed against the wall?" repeated the man.

—"Yes, Laoshi"

—"Quite strange, Zhang. You also crashed against the wall last week and the week before. You'd better avoid these walls, Zhang". Two more boys on the other side of the room giggled again.

—"Why aren't your beds still not made, guys? Wash up quickly

and then out for a jogging! Go!" commanded coach. He waited until all of the boys ran into the washroom before he left the bedroom.

It was early autumn morning, but the sky was not as dark as it usually is at this season. Summer didn't want to step aside with all its sultry days, scorching sunny rays and exhausting hours of drill. The merciless sun was sizzling Shen's shoulders as he was running around the grass field, and only light flurries of wind rescued him. Thirst was excruciating the boy, but he knew there was a little time remained until the breakfast.

Wan Laoshi whistled loudly and some of the boys fell on the knees. While Shen was on the way to the changing rooms, coach passed his way: "On two minutes after the breakfast". Shen nodded.

—"What did he say to you, Zhang?"

Tall enough to be arrogant, Fai Li, came around, biting an apple. "I am asking you, Zhang". Shen remained sitting silently with no sign of worry.

—"I see - don't want to talk. That's all right, Zhang. But now look at me boy: if you dare to complain to Laoshi, I'll arrange it so that you will never be able to perform. Did I make myself clear?"

—"I never thought about it!" retorted Shen.

—"I am glad to hear that your precious family managed to teach you at least something", pinpricked Fai Li.

—"Leave me alone", Shen hissed.

—"With pleasure".

–“Come in, Zhang”.

Shen entered the coach’s cabinet. Dozens of framed diplomas were already packed in the cardboard boxes in the table and on floor and bookshelves were empty. The same emptiness Shen suddenly felt inside: the only close friend of him was leaving the school and Shen’s life. The boy attached to the coach, he let someone to take care after him and now his only hope was leaving him. Abandoned boys, like Shen, had so little to rely on, and when the chair is left with one leg it falls down on the floor.

–“I am leaving the school, as you already noticed” began quietly coach. “You should know, in the beginning, Shen, I felt guilty leaving you here alone, after your crashings against the wall. I thought no one could protect you here, beside me. Nevertheless, I came to decision to leave this place. I suddenly understood, that it would be better for you. You have to learn how to survive without any support, how to fight on your own, my boy. Fai Li and other boys are the easiest obstacle you have to face in your life”.

–“I always told you I can cope with it by myself” decisively interrupted him Shen.

–“Of course, you can. I never doubted” smiled the coach.

The boy snorted.

–“And that’s why you leave me here alone?”

–“Shen...” – Laoshi contracted his bow and lowered his head. He felt the guilt, like never before, though he was sure enough in his decision. But for now he had nothing to say for sufficient warranty.

Shen turned around, reached the threshold of the cabinet and then ran away with a thought that one more person found his own

way home.

This warm night was the longest in boy's life. May be because he had so much to think about, or may be because Laoshi's leave-taking evening training wasn't as exhausting as usually it is. Shen experienced something he had never before this night: he felt a furious anger and bitter of friend irreparable loss. Dao Laoshi had big plans on these boys and each morning, during the training, he was introspecting into the eyes of each and every arrayed soldier.

"I want you to erase all the bars. Erase them now!" he shouted loudly. "There is nothing or no one, who can stop you on your way. Work hard - perform hard, and do not be afraid to knock-down your opponents". Dao Laoschi's speeches looked like typical American coach speeches in the changing room of premiere baseball league team during the time-break. But there was one discrepancy: unlike to Yankee's coach Dao Laoshi was rather depressive than inspiring. Shen didn't sleep this night, hiding from the whole world under his thin linen sheet.

—"One-two-THREE, one-two-THREE. Come on Fai Li! Don't make an illusion of hard work", said a new school coach, "Give it your best effort. Look at Shen and take an example from his hard work! Very good Shen, keep on going! One-two-THREE, one-two-THREE". Shen's face was flooded with his own sweat and that of his partner Zhang who was spanned across Shen's shoulders, but he tried his best. Guys were doing special exercises - lunges with a partner on one's shoulders. It was designed to train explosive leg strength. They were doing this for over 40 minutes

and their trainer didn't even think about a break.

It was already 2 years after Laoshi left the school. Shen was 16 with nearly 10 years spent at the same school. Shen grew much taller if you can ever say that about a gymnast. He also became much more determined. Shen devoted those 2 years to train himself emotionally and physically, but he never won any championship. His hard work never resulted in a pedestal. Something intangible prevented him from becoming number one, though Shen tried his best and showed much more effort than anyone else in the team. The only person who didn't notice it (or just tried to dissemble an obvious fact) was a new school trainer Jianjun. The new coach was very tall and his sparse beard and moustache did him an honor. He was too confident for the newcomer but he didn't inspire fear in Shen's head, neither respect or interest at all. As it turned out later, these feeling were quite reciprocal. He was pretty young - just 25 years old. A previous sportsman, he was a national champion of China and was one of the brightest athletes at his age. However his eccentricity and fiery temper ruined all his dreams. Though he was still in fit to become a national hero, nevertheless, Ministry of Sport put Jianjun at the school to train future champions. He didn't manage to overcome that extreme downshift and now he was as harsh as a tiger. Jianjun never let off even a small breach in discipline, and he could never bear laziness. A small delinquency could result in the whole group doing the lunges for 30 minutes or longer. As happened that day.

—"Ok, that's enough! Cool yourself down! Two laps around a sport center and shower. After that I wait for you in the canteen. Move on!" ordered Jianjun.

Shen's irritation reached a peak at that day. He still hated every single thing in that gymnasium: a ragged vault, a pommel horse that looked older than the oldest person in China, stucco pieces hanging from the ceiling, and more than anything he hated the way the coach talked to everyone. Though he was even happy that now everybody was treated equally, and he could concentrate only on himself, working hard for his glory time.

It was half a year left before national championship at which Shen wanted to show everything he is capable of. However, he knew that previously something inside him had always hindered him from victory. He wanted to have the most difficult program on high bar among all participants. He was assured that only people with the most difficult program could win nationals. That's why he needed to practice one element on high bar - forward salto piked over the bar with half turn. Jianjun never let Shen do that element without his support, but because he was always busy, Shen lacked enough practice. That day he decided to practice on his own and developed a cunning plan. Jianjun never checked their shower rooms and went straight to the canteen. After shower guys will go to their rooms, have a rest and then move to the canteen - it is 15 minutes, 20 minutes and 15 minutes respectively. When Jianjun will notice his absence it would be more than one hour. That would be definitely enough for Shen. The only thing Shen had to do was to find secretly his way in a sporting hall.

After two laps and a shower, Shen dispassionately moved towards the hall where all the high bars were located. Nobody noticed his escape. Shen was pacing quickly through the corridor on tiptoe. But suddenly at t-shaped turn Shen bumped into Jianjun.

Coach didn't hear the boy, turned the opposite way and headed towards an exit. That saved Shen.

In 5 minutes he was completely alone, whirling around the bar like a pendulum in a clock. He knew the danger of doing that element alone and the danger of being caught. But he was sure that he was doing the right thing.

He felt quenchless pain and fatigue in his arms after today's training, but still he needed to carry out the element one more time. In one moment Shen's body soared over the bar, made the flip and ? turn and started to descend on the bar. But suddenly the eyes of Shen dimmed, he passed out for a tiny moment but his hands managed to hold the bar. He knew that this was a sign of high self-exhaustion and at the same time of strong preparedness. The nationals were coming and Shen was ready. . .

The tile walls of the Beijing Arena's lavatories were just the same as in school. This dejected Shen even more after failing his first attempt and he could barely force back a cry. The same tile, the same cold water, the same pain and insult, everything reconverts once again. Like a Sisyphus, he compelled to roll a boulder up a hill and to observe how it rolls back in the very end, repeating his action over and over again. His problem, his defect that he is searching for, constantly reminded Shen about its existence. It looks like the end for him, but someone slammed the entrance door.

Shen couldn't believe his eyes.

—"You have 7 minutes until second attempt, Shen" told a man with

ebon sleeked hair.

–“What. . . what are doing here?!”

–“Want to talk about this for 6 minutes, already, before your next performance?”

–“I am not going to compete” turned back Shen.

Laoshi smiled with a note of confidence in his action, but with a warm familiar glance.

–“Shen, I know you think you are weak and I know why”. He paused. “Have a seat”.

The boy obediently sat on the floor and the coach did the same way.

–“Haven’t you ever thought about what is the difference between you and the other gymnasts in your school?”

–“Orphans - they are all the same” replied Shen.

–“Never. I suppose, you see how much is changing as emotions appear in our lives. They bring both power and destruction. And, I suppose, you know, that there are good ones and bad ones. It is difficult to imagine at least one person who would be able to make a decision passionlessly, firmly and rationally. It is close to impossible. A cold mind is what we are looking for from you during the performance. However emotions will be chasing you everywhere and the older you get the more you’ll learn how to keep your emotions in check. But no one could ever deny how emotions can help us in our lives - how differently they could be assigned. Love is a sense, but passion is an emotion. Sometimes it is difficult for us to distinguish between love and other similar emotions. But sometimes these emotions spur us on to achieving something great and outstanding. They can manipulate us, but

still stimulate us to make the crucial decisions. Those decisions often changed and will continue changing the world. And I hope one day, you're going to change yours. Let's begin with a victory".

With that, coach smiled.

—"Did you understand me, my boy?"

The coach was the only person in the whole world who called Shen so - my boy. It was the sign of the highest manifestation of tenderness and care. He was a reticent man with deceptive appearance; however his heart was captured by love and loyalty. His life duty was to become family to hundreds of boys who arrived at the Olympic Reserve School of Gymnastics. Here, the government was building machines who knew no pain, no love, no friendship. They were taught how to fight, how to stick out and how to survive. Their highest happiness was a pedestal and greatest abjection - a defeat.

—"None of us has a family whatever the reasons are for that. But all of us, except you, already forgot what it is to have one. You are much more determined and industrious - these are your pushing factors. And you are less assertive and more emotional than others - these are yours pulling factors. You knew that compassion wouldn't move you forward, but I was sure that knowing your family and the hope of seeing them again is your major strength".

Shen had never thought about it - he wasn't in a position to compare. But in fact he was the only person among hundreds who knew what is meant by mother love and how family could be the most precious value in life.

Now Shen Zhang understood what he wanted the most from today and forever. It is his family that makes him happy and

confident in the future. Once he knew mother's love - he would never be the same. Nothing could change him anymore: not pain, not humiliation, not even the government and dragon policies.

Laoshi smiled gently once again. He could see now the glitter and spark in the boy's eyes. Shen was ready to fight and meet obstacles with enthusiasm better than any of the other gymnast boys. He had something to pray for at night, something to hope for, flying from one bar to another.

–"I see now, you know what to do, Shen" smiled the coach.

–"I do, Laoshi. Thank you very much" the boy looked down. "We will miss you, Laoshi", he added quietly.

–"I know my boy, I know". The coach stretched out his hand. "Good luck, Shen".

They firmly yet warmly shook their hands.

Shen Zhang run out of the lavatory to the Arena enter through the dim-lighted tunnel. As he break forth, the bright light of projectors bedazzled Shen, but the light of the Arena wasn't as bright as the hope inside the boy. He suddenly remembered the moment when one morning, when he was just 5 or 6 years old, his father took him for a walk to the forest. It was captivating sunlight, glimmering through the foliage of different trees with birds, tweeting and chirping all over the place. When Shen and his farther reached enormously huge oak, standing right behind the entrance, a kid asked a question.

–"Pa, do you think that somebody had ever climbed that tree?" demanded Shen

–"Not sure, but everyone can reach the heights in everything they do. Effort and perseverance are crucial in that case"

Shen did remember that moment with his farther, doing one turnover after another. Faith in himself and in his strength was a victory itself, and pedestal was a matter of time.

Ability

It was a sunny day in the end of April. A park near the city stadium was filled with people. Some of them were just enjoying the warmth and light of the sun and fresh air, playing with their children, chatting with each other, relaxing on the young green grass. Still, this peaceful and light atmosphere vanished completely near the tracks of the stadium. You could feel the tension on the skin, rising, penetrating the subconsciousness and mitigating the feeling of joy and relaxation generated by the outstandingly good weather. It was a competition. The runners aligned at the starting line. Their muscles were stretched. Their breathing resembled that of a person experiencing a panic attack: short, uneven and fitful. Yet, their faces were calm so that four young men seemed distanced from all the tension of the stadium. They were all of the same age, around sixteen or seventeen years old. They all were thin and athletic. Nothing could disturb their concentration and calamity except only one sound. A coach blew the whistle, and suddenly the four runners, motionless as stones a moment ago, disappeared from the stadium. Or so one could think, as nobody sitting in the stands was able to track their movements the moment the whistle was blown. They materialized only ten seconds later, at the other end of a 100-meter track marked by a red line painted on the rubber. They were falling on their knees from exhaustion, and it seemed that in these ten seconds they had run not 100 meters but 100 kilometres instead.

—“A professional runner is able to spend all of his body’s resources even on the shortest sprints”, muttered a fat, bearded and middle-

aged man sitting in the first row of the stands. "Those guys are pretty fly, you know", he noted much less formally, turning to the young fellow and smiling at him. "I rarely see somebody so skilled at their age."

The boy barely paid attention to the words of the older man. He was astonished and fascinated by the speed of his peers on the track.

—"But that green guy beat them all, completely, without a chance!", the fatso laughed joyously, pointing his finger at the slim short young man in the green T-shirt who had already caught his breath and was lying on the grass, chatting with two other runners.

Denis, the name of the boy sitting in the stands, finally stopped staring at the track and slowly, seeming to be deep in thought asked his neighbour,

—"Is there a good running club in Tula?"

The older man, showing once again his indifference to his companion, did not react to the impoliteness of Denis. Indeed, he became even more cheery, his eyes shining proudly and his head shaking to approve his words:

—"Yeeeah! The club at the second sports school. A good friend of mine is a coach there. Ohh, poor Olga, I am afraid they", he stopped pointedly, looking askance at Denis, "are going to steal some of her best trainees! That's how the Big Sport's done, you know."

—"What do you mean? Steal?". Finally the attention of Denis was drawn to the fatso.

—"Aghh, what was the name of this green one, I wonder...", the old man scratched the back of his head, "Oh, yeah, Anton! They are

going to take Anton to Moscow, to the Olympic reserve school!"

Denis looked surprised for a moment, then he turned his head towards the stadium field again. The athletes were leaving. Their coach, a woman in her thirties, dressed in a red sports suit with a whistle around her neck and an old notepad in her hands, was arguing vigorously with two men. In contrast to Olga, the men were calm, smiling guiltily at her futile attempts to persuade them. –"I wish I become like them", Denis noted. He stood up, and headed to the exit from the stands. At the last moment he stopped, turned to the old man and, smiling softly, said:

–"Thank you!"

The older man smiled but didn't respond. He was overhearing his friend's battle for the future of her regional team.

In the early morning, Denis was already worn-out. Worried and excited yesterday, he didn't get a goodnight's sleep, and now, having woke up with the headache, he was blaming himself for being so stupid and spineless. Such an important day! And here he was, his eyes closing as he walked, his mind blurred and unable to concentrate! Annoyed with himself, Denis grabbed his rucksack with a pair of track shoes new, expensive and fancy, put on his sports suit and left for the stadium. The coach from the best Moscow running club would be watching their training that day. This meant a rare chance to move forward towards his aim.

Two years passed from the day when he saw Anton Yartsov the first time. A couple of days after watching the competition, Denis went to the running club that the old fatso mentioned and signed

up for training. He put all his free time and effort into track and field. He exercised tirelessly, spending up to three hours a day at the stadium. After a couple of months, Denis got to know the story of Anton's life from one of his acquaintances at the club, and this made him devote even more effort to training.

He stopped watching TV and browsing the Internet, easily abandoning the two main activities that his friends were involved in. He made up a schedule, for he could control his time and not slack. Denis's diligence soon paid off, and he was noticed by Olga Ivanovna Listova, the main coach of the running club, and started to train with semi-professional runners who participated in the national competitions. Still, this was not enough for Denis. Whatever his result, he was always unsatisfied and continued to train. He seemed not to notice his successes at all and was insensitive to praise of his talent and hard work. He had not ever thought of himself as talented, and he denied the fact that he was hard-working as he knew that the professionals trained more than him. Still, above all, he did not care much about other people's words. All Denis wanted was to catch up with the person his same age whom he admired. However, it was not only positive feelings that forced Denis to sacrifice himself to sports. He was envious. Anton, right after getting into the Olympic reserve school, revealed his true abilities and, almost instantaneously, became famous as the most promising athlete of his generation. The light irritation, which Denis sensed while thinking that someone of his age, from his city and almost from his neighbourhood, could happen to have such great talent, developed into a strong feeling of envy over these two years. It was not that he wanted Anton's success

to vanish. In contrast, he wanted Anton to become stronger and even more famous. Denis wanted his competitor to become the best athlete ever, so that when Denis reached Anton's level, they could become friends and laugh together at the fate which failed to screw up their lives despite wanting so badly to do it. They could mock the fate of Anton, who had to leave his ill mother in his hometown for the sake of them both, as well as his sports career. And mock the fate of Denis too, who would manage to become successful in spite of having no talent, simply by devoting his whole life to the track.

Denis dressed, put on his track shoes, and went to the track. Olga Ivanovna and his competitors - though some of them were his close friends, he could not perceive them in any other way at the moment - were already there, as well as two men sitting on a bench near the stands. One of them, a man of medium height, with dark-brown hair and a moustache, was unfamiliar to Denis. The other one seemed to be much younger; he was shorter and much slimmer...Denis felt his heart beating hard. Smiling lightly and observing other runners preparing for the 100-meter sprint, Anton was sitting right in front of him.

—"Denis! Are you awake? Denis!", Olga Ivanovna went closer and addressed him, "I need to tell you something, so please come here for a moment."

Denis shook his head, he needed to concentrate no matter what. Whatever his physical state was, he still could do a good job on the track. However, he knew for sure that if he fails to get rid of fear and panic, it all would be ruined.

—"Denis, I know that you do not believe in yourself. But even

so, I think it is clear to you that in this club there is no person who works more than you. In the end, I believe in you, and my attitude will not change even if you lose this time. So please, calm down and do your best." She smiled to him and headed back to the track.

Denis tried to return her smile but could not. He saw that other runners were set at the starting line. Denis felt that his legs wouldn't move even a little. His career would be solved after a couple of minutes, and he was paralysed by the fear for his future and the fear of losing his dreams of his friendship with Anton.

It seemed to him that hours passed since Olga Ivanovna tried to cheer him up, when he finally regained a clear mind and control over his body. The runners on the track were waiting for him. Denis calmed down. He smiled. There was no point in fearing anything. If he allowed himself to get scared and panic, he would only make things worse. He should just go and do what he always did: enjoy running and competing with his friends. He went to the track and stepped up to the starting line.

"Ready!", he took the starting position, his hands down, with palms on the rubber covering of the track. Adrenaline crammed his blood. His mind finally cleared, and he forgot all about the sleepless night and his tiredness. His world at that moment was comprised only of the track, the air above it, and the voice of the coach.

"Go!", and he finally moved, putting into the sprint all he had.

A second after the start, he understood that he could move faster, and so he sped up his movements. Half of a second later he got the same feeling. Again, he started to move his legs even

faster. "Faster, I just should move faster" was his only thought. Time seemed to adjust itself so that Denis could still control his movements and accelerate even more. He did not notice he crossed the finish line until he saw the turn of the track. Denis stopped slowly and turned back. Olga Ivanovna was waving her hand gesturing him to come back. The other runners surrounded her, looking at their results. Anton...was talking with the other man who apparently was a coach of the Moscow running club. Suddenly, Anton looked at Denis. There was no sympathy or distaste in his eyes, just curiosity and an attempt to evaluate the other runner. Still, Denis felt relieved. He headed toward Olga Ivanovna to get his result.

Three months passed from the day when Denis moved to Moscow to the Olympic Reserve School. He haven't seen his parents and his school friends for a while, but he did not miss them at all. For the last couple of months, Denis had a feeling of achieved happiness, a feeling that you get when you reach a top of your life, and you want the time to stop so that you are able to live all your life in one moment. It was gorgeous. The day, when Anton and the coach of Denis at the School, Arkadyi Dmitrievich, came to see runners in Tula club, became the most significant day of his life. His performance on that day allowed Denis to qualify for the second junior level in track and field. With this in mind, Arkadyi Dmitrievich and Anton were able to lobby Denis's acceptance to the Olympic Reserve School in the upcoming study year. After graduation in the next year, Denis was expected to continue

his training at one of National sport bases. Currently, Denis was completing his studies, preparing for standardized state exams and ... training. Denis never trained so much. Moreover, Denis never wanted to train more. It was gorgeous. It was so fantastic that Denis smiled all the time. His face hurt in the evening, and once one of his classmates jokingly noted that Denis "was always smiling like a dummy". Denis did not mind it. Though, he had to admit that in part, his passion is caused by the new equipment of gyms, new in- and outdoor tracks, stadiums and swimming pools, and in the end, by the school housing he was given. But still, he realized that even if all those material benefits were given away, he would be happier than he was all his previous life. The reason for this was that at the OR school, he finally found peers who understood him and who shared his interests. His friends in Tula were fine lads, but none of them shared passion and diligence of Denis. Here, everybody spent their free time in sports halls. Everybody loved running.

Also, ... Denis trained with Anton. In the beginning, ability to see Anton was one of the most important things for Denis, but then gradually, the importance of these meetings was pulled back by other trainings, meetings with other friends, and studies. Still, Denis admired Anton and respected him, sometimes he respected his friend even more than Arkadyi Dmitrievich and other coaches. Back then, Anton supported the application of Denis to the Olympic reserve school because of, as he himself admitted, weakness of loyalty to his Alma-mater. He, though he was not sure of that, wanted to believe that his town still could give the great sportsmen to his favourite sport. The feeling of envy, which

possessed Denis before he came to the Olympic reserve school, went away, and Denis felt that it was for the better. Anton, being the same age as Denis, still treated him as if Anton was a bit superior. There was never a sense of parity between them. Perhaps, it was like Denis was the younger brother of Anton, naive and inexperienced.

Now most of the time, Denis spent with his roommate, Kolya, who also became his best friend. Kolya was a quiet laborious boy, one year younger than Denis. They often trained together, and though Kolya was losing to Denis almost all the time, Denis found it challenging to compete with him. As a matter of fact, Kolya was weaker as a runner, but his talent consisted of managing the energy in a way that tricked the competitors, making them think Kolya was even weaker. As a result, they relaxed, and Kolya was able to catch up with them on the last meter of a sprint.

Once, in the middle of the November, when the snow has not yet fallen, but, as it was under zero, the ground was as rigid as asphalt, Denis was finishing his training on the indoor track. The track was located on the second floor of the sports hall; it encircled a volleyball playing fields and gym on the first floor, so that one could observe players and sportsmen in the first floor from the track. It was the favourite training place of Denis. Much better than a treadmill, but still much more comfortable than tracks outside, with conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter. More than that, there was always enough of light and the track was open late in the night so that Denis could always train alone late in the evening, which he often did, just like this time.

Suddenly, something in a corner of the gym, behind a stand

with weights and dumbbells, caught attention of Denis. It was Anton. He was talking with three his classmates. It was difficult to hear the words, but Anton looked tense and angry. The boy (it seems that his name was Kirill though Denis was not sure) he was talking with, in opposite, was smiling. Still, there was a bit of contempt and distaste in this smile. Suddenly, Kirill, with his smile even wider, raised his hand and patted Anton on his cheek. Sharply, Anton made one step back and hit Kirill's hand. Still smiling, Kirill went closer to Anton and, swinging his hand, punched Anton in the stomach. Anton, though he managed to block the blow, sank down on the floor. The other two guys who apparently came with Kirill, twitched but did not move neither to help, nor to stop their fellow. Kirill almost shouted the next words, so that even Denis, still standing on the second floor, could hear them:

–“Oh, come on! Money isn't everything! You know all this morality stuff. We are definitely not asking for too much from you! We will let you think for a while...”

Still half-lying on the floor, Kirill grinned and answered quietly. Then for the first time, the face of Kirill went angry, and, as if he was mocking Anton, Kirill kicked him in the chest, slowly and strongly. Anton coughed heavily from pain and prostrated on the floor.

All at once, Denis woke up from watching his friend being beaten. He briefly and bitterly reproached himself for the frustration and hurried up to the lower floor. He never felt and never thought of himself as a coward. He was sure that he always was able to help and protect his friends, but for him, it still seemed

impossible and shocking that anybody in this school could harm Anton, its symbol and the most precious talent. When he got to the gym, Kirill and his lads had already left. Anton, grinning in a strange contemptuous way, was sitting on the floor. He was pressing his hand to the right side of his chest and breathing heavily.

–“Anton, are you all right? I am terribly sorry, I didn’t come to help you. Those guys... I simply...”, Denis faltered. Anton did not seem surprised at all. He was still breathing heavily, but his grin turned into his usual kind smile of a big brother.

–“Ha, are you again training so late, Denis? You should not force yourself to much! You are already a record-holder in a time of training per day at this school, you know. And please relax, those idiots will soon calm down. They were never able of bothering me anyway.” Anton stood up, laughed sharply at the frustration of Denis, and headed to the lockers.

Before following Anton, Denis noticed a small gray pasteboard box, lying on the floor close to the place where Anton had been sitting. It seemed like Kirill and two other guys left it. Denis, still shocked by the scene of the beating, took the box and headed to lockers. Even for him, it was late already. He was tired, and in addition, tense anxiety of the last minutes exhausted him even more. When Denis got to the lockers, Anton still was there. Denis distractedly sat on the bench. He looked at the small gray box in his hands. It seems that it was some kind of a drug. Still its name was unfamiliar to Denis.

–“Well, Denis, rest well tonight and do not overwork yourself!”, Anton smiled once again to Denis and turned to leave the lockers, but suddenly, he stopped, his face pale and serious. Anton looked

at Denis as if he was insulted by his "small brother", and now he was going to fight back. Anton stood with his back straight, his head slanted to the right.

–"Denis, what is that thing in your hands? Where did you get it?", Anton asked tensely.

–"Oh, that. It is some kind of drug, but the hell I know what it's for", Denis smiled lightly, "I guess those idiots left it in the gym".

Anton relaxed when he heard the answer of Denis. He still was cautious and tense, but now the tiredness showed up in his eyes, and his shoulders went down. He stooped.

–"It is a performance enhancing drug, Denis. You shouldn't hold on to it. Give it to me.", Anton came to Denis and took the box with drugs from Denis.

Denis... if he had not been so exhausted, physically and mentally, he would have reacted much more explosively, but, given his state, he simply jumped from the bench and screamed: "Oh, but that's what we need!"

Anton looked tired and absent: "Denis, what are you talking about? What is it that we need? The only thing I need right now is to go and get some sleep, ha-ha", Anton tried to laugh but it seemed totally unnatural.

–"Anton, I have made up a perfect way to punish those idiots! It will be fair! They will not get away with what they did to you. The hell they will! If they intake or distribute the PEDs, I will just go to the principal and make sure he also knows about this!"

Denis was exited, it seemed to him that he found the only right way out of this situation. He would punish Kirill and those guys, who helped him, and still, he won't need to tell anyone about

them beating Anton. For sure, Anton did not want to attract more of public attention than he already had. He would not like it if people felt pitiful towards him so it should be better to conceal everything that Denis saw today. Well, except the PEDs.

Still, for some reason, Anton did not share Denis's enthusiasm. –"No, Denis, please don't do that", Anton asked. Now he looked tired, sad and old.

–"But why? This way, we will punish those who deserve punishment. Anyway, taking PEDs is almost a crime. And it is definitely the crime against sports! I definitely should go to the principal!" Denis still did not understand the reasons of Anton's sadness.

Anton sighed. "Because those idiots do not take PEDs, and they never did as far as I know", he looked bluntly in Denis's eyes. A couple of minutes had passed in silence before Denis realized the meaning of these words. In the last four or three hours, there was nobody else in the gym except Kirill, his lads, and Anton. Staff cleaned the gym two hours ago, when all students were leaving. Anton knew what was in the box...

–"You cannot be taking PEDs, Anton", Denis said quietly. "You are a raising star of this sport. You are everybody's favourite at the upcoming Nationals. It is impossible."

–"You are mistaking a cause and a consequence here, Denis. It is not that I am everybody's favourite, and therefore, I do not need to take those", Anton raised his hand with the drugs in it and shook the box. "I take PEDs, and that's why I am everybody's favourite", he smiled bitterly.

–"Oh, well, but this just cannot be true! You have trained in the Tula club. Olga Ivanovna would notice if you took the drugs",

Denis said distractedly. He looked lost; it seemed to him that he was trying to find an answer to an unsolvable puzzle.

–“Of course, she would. But, as you remember, I wasn’t called a raising star of the sports before I got here. I have started it all when I was accepted to the School.”

–“But why?”, Denis suddenly got angry, “I thought... I thought that you love this sport, that you love running! Taking PEDs is dishonourable, mean, and ... For me, you were like an example of what should become of me! All this freaking time, I gave so much to this sport because I love running, and because I was looking at you, at a great person who seemed to understand me, and who was so alike me! And now you are simply telling me that you are a dope ?!” Denis forgot about being tired; he chucks were red and his breath was heavy. He was almost mad with anger.

Still, Anton was calm.

–“You know”, he said, looking in the window at the frozen tracks of the School’s stadium, “there is a clinic in Moscow, a good private one. Mostly, at this clinic they take care of patients on the late stages of cancer. Sometimes, they accept patients with other types of incurable diseases. For one patient, one month in this clinic costs around \$10000. The price goes up if the patient needs some sort of special care.” Anton stopped for a minute. He seemed to be rethinking something, his eyes fixed at the frozen stadium which was dark and deserted in this late hour. Suddenly, Denis thought that Anton was much older than he seemed.

–“The Nationals are two weeks ahead”, Anton continued. “The champion will likely get proposals from sponsors. You know, advertising and all this stuff. They will not give much to a beginner,

but, well, I could pull it through for a year. Maybe, even for a year and a half. I love running, you see. I really love it. But besides that, for me running is the only way to...", Anton paused, "to live through it. I am not strong enough to make it by myself." Anton looked at the drugs, still in his hands, and whispered, "I need help. If my luck and my effort are not enough, I will borrow them from others."

Denis was frustrated. He already lost a sense of what was happening. To him, it felt like his whole world was shattering in his hands.

—"But, that's f***ing wrong! There should be another way! Charity! Public health insurance! Something else...", Denis shouted.

—"Oh, yeah. But there are always plenty of exemptions and excuses for both of those.", Anton replied. He put the drugs into his bag, headed to the exit, but stopped for a second, "You know, Denis, in the very end, it is easy to do right things for the common good. Everybody supports you. Even if you fail, it is ok as everybody will love you. They will say that your effort was an honourable sacrifice. But still, if you do something, which is not completely right, for the purpose of protecting something, which is precious only to you, you are screwed. Even if it is a life of another person. If you succeed, they will envy you and tell that you were cheating, that you are a screwed little cheating asshole. If you fail, they will gladly forgive you because everybody does the same. They will simply laugh at you, call you a loser, pass you by, and forget. Whatever is a situation, you are so screwed because nobody cares about things that are precious only to you." Anton turned away from Denis and walked out of the locker room. Denis

was sitting on a bench. He was silent.

In the early morning, around 5 am, Denis was already awake. He had a feeling of *deja vu* because this morning resembled the one when he qualified for the second junior level, met Anton for the second time in his life and got an invitation to the Olympic Reserve School from Arkadyi Dmitrievich. He did not sleep a lot, and he felt tired. Still in opposite to that morning, he knew that everything was going to be all right. It was the day of the Nationals. He was participating in a 100-meter sprint and 4-kilometer relay. Anton should be in a 100-meter run as well. Anton...During the last two weeks, "the genius of track" seemed exhausted and nervous. Denis knew that Anton was spending all his time in gyms. Anton even trained outside, despite the terrible weather. They did not talk since that evening two weeks ago. Similarly to Anton, Denis trained a lot, and he was nervous. Still, he was worried not because of the upcoming competition. He was constantly thinking over that conversation with Anton. He looked for answers but couldn't find them. He did not know whether Anton was right or wrong. He even didn't know what would he do in Anton's shoes. Finally, he decided that he should talk with Anton before the 100-meter sprint. Denis simply could not allow this situation to continue any more.

20 minutes before the sprint, Denis found Anton near the track. Anton was warming up unhurriedly. He seemed tired, calm and concentrated.

—"Good Morning, Anton!" Denis hesitated a little. Anton smiled

to him and waved his hand. This warm greeting gave courage to Denis, and he continued, "I thought a lot about what you said that evening. And I... To confess, I do not know", Denis paused, "I do not know what is right, and what is wrong in your situation."

Anton looked at Denis kindly.

-“Uh, I am sorry to lay this burden on your shoulders. But let me explain to you how I view this. You don’t understand me because you think that I am somehow different from you. But this is wrong. In the end, it seems to me, all people are the same. Everyone just protects what is precious to them. I protect ... what is precious to me. Those idiots, Kirill and those two of his friends, protect themselves, their wellbeing and their self-esteem, their pride, if you want to call it so because these are the only things precious to them. When our dear coach was giving me the PEDs, he was protecting his precious career and reputation. When your roommate, Koliienka, was telling Kirill about me taking the PEDs, he was also protecting his career and his future victories.” Anton was smiling, but his sight was bitter. “Just thought, you should know, in case...”, he sighed.

Denis was frustrated. When he came to Anton, he was afraid that his friend will blame him for Denis’s indifference, ignorance and failure to understand Anton. The confession of this kind was the last thing he expected to happen. “So, is it that Arkadyi Dmitrievich knew about the PEDs all the time?” Denis mumbled, “And you’ve said that Kolya told Kirill about the PEDs, to remove you from his way?...”

Anton was going to answer, but suddenly, their names were called out and they were asked to prepare for the start. It was

three minutes before the sprint.

In the first second of a run, Denis understood that he could not compete with Anton. The latter got a leading position right from the start while Denis was only the fourth to move from a line. Denis tried hard to concentrate, but his thoughts were away, and he did not notice when a finish line appeared in 20 meters ahead of him. Anton was almost there, and two of his closest competitors lagged behind. Two more seconds, and Anton would be the champion. One second... Denis and others still behind. Suddenly, Anton stopped. He was just a couple of meters before the finish line. He could just make a step, and this would be enough to grant his wishes, to guarantee future for him and his mother... But instead, he slowly fell on the track. Just as if he tripped or got lost in his own legs. He was falling slowly, and when his head finally hit the track, three people managed to finish the sprint. Denis did not. He stopped near Anton and was looking at his friend. The doctors were on their way, they would get to the track in seconds. Anton's body was twitching convulsively, he was breathing unevenly, and it seemed like he was about to lose the consciousness. He whispered something, and Anton dropped himself on the track to hear the words.

–"Side effect... tell them... drugs are in my bag". Anton coughed heavily and suddenly stopped breathing. Doctors rushed to the track. Denis threw a couple of words to one of them and ran to get Anton's bag. Though Denis did not notice that, he moved so fast that he would left behind even Anton a half of minute ago.

It was a sunny day in the beginning of September. People in the park were walking around, trying to memorize the last days of the warmth and nice weather.

Around a dozen of people were sitting on stands and watching a running competition. Amongst them, was a taut and pale man in his early thirties. Unlike the rest of people on the stands, he was not cheering. He sat down and quietly observed the competition. It seemed like he did not know any of the sportsmen on a track. When the sprint was ended, he turned to the boy sitting right next to him on.

–“You know, I have a friend who once was a genius of a track.” The man hesitated for a while but then he continued, “Unfortunately, neither his life, nor people surrounding him did not allow him to succeed as a runner, and after he was eighteen he never stepped on a track. His mother died in the same year then...” The boy seemed embarrassed by the fact that the unknown man talked to him, and he pretended not to notice the man at all, but this did not bother the latter. The man continued,

–“After a while, my friend became a coach, though it seemed impossible, and after seven years, he managed to get into the Federation of Sports of Russian Federation. He told me then that the sole reason for his effort was that he did not want the things, which happened to him, to ever happen again. You know, I have always wondered, why people, who suffer the most from the unjustness and cruelty of this world, are often the ones who change it to the better so drastically...” The man sighed, stood up, and smiled at the boy:

–“Ah, I guess, that’s because others simply do not understand this

world's worst side. You know, I left the sports then, when I got to know ...about his coach, and Kolya... But he didn't ever leave. After all, he has the two amazing things that I have never had: the understanding of people and the ability to always forgive them".

Short-Sighted

I

The cold wind blew from the sea and made him shrug and scratch his teeth. It was about 5.30 a.m. and the fresh sky without any clouds or even any funny cloudy figures predicted an incredible sunrise. There are two types of sunrises: the first is when the sun, point by point, appears somewhere behind mountains or concrete buildings. The second is when the sun suddenly appears over the water line, spreading around the whole coast its shine and reflecting its miracle on the glance of the sea. He did not used to observe the second one; nevertheless, it seemed for him to be better that the first one because the sun warms us when you do not expect it.

Lying on the coast of one of Dominican Republic's beaches was definitely not the worst fate. Andre tried to think about people born with incurable diseases and starving children in Africa, but he realized that they were too far from being matters of fact for him. He could not get rid of thoughts about himself and how he got what he has. No one actually could interfere with him doing it. That morning unexpected sun served not as the only source of warmth. He held a bottle of whiskey on the bottom of which he tried to find answers. He barely remembered how it turned out that he is lying on a plank. Memories about the past evening were pretty blurred. For Andre the last evening merely flows into the nights of the same scenario for the last several years. Alcohol did not really distort his memory; it was more that he mixed up this night with every other. Being 40 years old, he got to-

tally accustomed to his lifestyle. Evening starts in the company of douches from the high class. They minded themselves to be a part of this party, from vodka-tonic when it was a Friday or Saturday. All other week days he preferred those trendy “flights”-cocktails, like Chilli cocktail flight, which was served as three glasses with different contents perfectly matching each other with their taste. Andre recalled a glimpse of long brown hair that reminded him of that model he met in the bar. At least she introduced herself in a such way; she was from France. But now he was quite sure that she was just an immigrant from Poland and Western Europe, whom he often met in the US. He left her in the number with a sea-view, not far from his current body position. She was better than average. As it was the middle of May, Dominican Republic was not as hot as people tend to. So he wears a light Lanvin jacket from the new summer collection, with a blue-striped white vest covering a white polo both tailored by Anderson & Sheppard. Trying to keep up with the trend, on rose socks with navy blue dots, he wore beige brogs with a white sole from Grenson fitting this all with white trousers, watches that you may have seen on advertisement with a famous Hollywood actor in GQ and simple Gucci glasses that were fixed near his neck.

Suddenly Andre’s vain thought about a small dirty spot on the right brog were interrupted by an uncontrollable impulse of self destruction and contemptuous feelings. He immediately jumped of his plank and shouted, trying call the rising sun to account: –“Where is everybody, and F#&k how did I get here with what I have???”

Not receiving an answer and realizing the useless of his efforts,

he calmed down. At least he was ready to prevent this impulse next time for today. There were plenty of times when Andre should have had a better vision of his real interests and values. However, there was an exact point that made him participate in a 15-year race, the results of which he anticipated for so long without giving them a true value.

II

A nice cozy family house situated on the streets of the West Wood near New York was especially bright today. Andre Bennett inherited this house from his parents. All the walls were colored in contrast yellow and light blue colors. There were lots pieces of old-fashioned furniture which carried the memory of previous generations and reminded Andre of his childhood. Fancy illumination and eight cars randomly parked on the lawn, which looked like they were left by their passengers in a hurry, attracted neighbors and passers by attention. Loud music and unstoppable friendly laughter made every observer to envy and eager to join the party.

–“Happy Birthday, Andre!!!!”, everybody yelled in the room with flying balloons and bright confetti.

–“Don’t forget to make a wish”, Jeremy cheerfully reminded Andre.

–“Guys! Thank you all for coming, I wish my mom and dad were here, they would definitely be happy for me having such great friends! Thank you for your support and being my family”. Andre couldn’t hide his happiness. He blew all 25 lights on the

cake, which was carefully made by Sam's girlfriend Susie, and whispered what nobody could hear:

–“I wish to be surrounded by all my friends in this room until the death” – and the fun continued

The first feature that could be easily said about Andre on the first glance was his positive energy, which was reflected through his bright green eyes and lured everyone to trust him from the very first meeting. He has smooth skin on his face with sharp contours. His short, straight, dark, brown hair laid in a simple way, just on his forehead. Andre was tall with a nicely built body. Outside observers could see Andre as the center of the company, always ready to give a hand in difficult situations. He had recently split up with his girlfriend; however, he didn't regret it because he had so many good faithful friend who could easily fill the gap. Overall, he was a moral, intelligent person keen on engineering and had recently completed his master's degree in the optimization of technological processes.

On the contrary, his best friend Sam did not have a notable appearance. He was among those who had some difficulties in earning people's trust. However, as soon as people believed him, they did for years. Sam had a solid reputation as a lovely boy who had totally fallen in love with Susie since they were both 17. Nobody had a clue, but in fact Sam had an extremely close relationship with Andre. Sam was his moral mentor who always helped Andre with a piece of advice and was ready to commit himself to Andre's happiness. Andre always responded to him in kind.

The party continued. There were about 20 of Andre's closest

friends who really enjoyed being a part of his birthday party. Andre was the center of the party not only because this was his birthday, but because of his internal light that so attracted people. The evening passed so quickly that nobody was watching after the time. After 3 a.m. the guests started to leave.

–“Andre, thanks, it was a great party. I hope you don’t think that me and Susie forgot about the present. Here is a great watch we had been choosing for the whole weekend. Sorry that they are far from being Rado branded, but we are sure they will do better”. Sam gladly presented a nicely packaged watch, which cost quite more than they could actually afford.

–“Oooh, Sam, thanks! I didn’t underestimate in you even for a moment”, Andre gratefully replied, trying on the new watches. It fitted him rather well.

–“And by the way, do you still keep trying to execute that idea of matching web manufacturers with their services in order to decrease their costs and take a fee for matching them?”

–“Yeah, you know I had a lack of funding. I am stuck with making formal documentation and bringing my company’s web resources to a final form. Of course, we still have no money on marketing.”

–“Andre, listen up. You know I’ve always wished you the best. I have found out that a friend of mine is working as a personal assistant to Mr. Donavane. I am sure he can arrange a brief meeting with about your funding. What do you think about it?”

–“Wow! Mr. Donavane! That would be great of you to do it. I know that he is rather keen on such innovations and ready to invest his goddamn millions to them!”

–“Sure, I’ll keep you informed. Plan on it the next week. As soon

as you crawl to the top with your great idea, don't forget about us! And by the way, one more time, happy birthday!"

–"Sam, I am sorry for interrupting you, but could you lift me up to my place? Andre, bro, happy birthday. You know I love you, right now more than anyone, hahah", Jeremy tried to be as polite as he could, despite the fact that he drank rather a lot.

–"Yeah, sure, get in", Sam helped Jeremy lay him on the back seat.

–"Thanks, guys. Sam, of course I won't forget. Take care on the road" – Andre.

A week later Andre headed to one of the biggest business centers in New York. He wore the suit his dad presented him after graduating from B.A. It was the only suit he had. Engineers just aren't used to suits. He went up to the 20th floor. His palms got sweaty because of nerves. He was far from feeling confident. He started to forget his prepared speech. Mr. Donavane was known as a tough, greedy person with a strict character. People thought that business was the only thing he lived for, and he was a master at it. Andre had to wait for 15 minutes before being allowed to enter Mr. Donavane's office. The secretary reminded him:

–"Try to be as brief as you can; he doesn't like people who waste his time"

The office was even larger than Andre imagined. The whole wall in front of the door was a window of incredible size with a picturesque view of other skyscrapers. On the right, there was a big bookshelf in medieval style. The floor of the room represented itself as the world's map, which had not been corrected yet, as the Soviet Union had recently ceased to exist. Mr. Donavane's

massive oak table was standing on the territory of the US.

–“I am listening”, said Mr. Donavane without even looking at Andre.

–“Mr. Donavane, it is a big pleasure for me. My name is Andre. Thank you for the chance to present my idea”

Mr. Donavane looked exactly like Forbes magazine printed him on its cover. He wore a powerful navy blue suit which cost more than Andre’s car. His tie was knotted with a big knot like Prince Albert’s, which perfectly emphasized his massive neck. His watch made Andre blind for a second. They were definitely made in Switzerland, not like Andre’s unbranded one. Mr. Donavane was from another reality. This was the first time Andre even had an opportunity to get in touch with this unreachable society member. He felt curious; a wish to discover more about this unfamiliar reality prevailed in his head. Understanding how big the gap was between them, Andre came up with a thought that played a crucial role. He needed to be different from the others, so he broke the speech he planned for several speech in a flash:

–“Mr. Donavane, I won’t waste your time with all those messy calculations, forecasts and models, which I carefully prepared for the last few months. I am a man of word and I am responsible for the quality of my work. I will just tell you the core idea and why it is the one that will make you lot of money!” Andre attracted Mr. Donavane’s attention.

It took him only five minutes to present the whole idea of a matching mechanism for manufacturers and finding arbitrage opportunities in their services for each other. He was as explicit as he could be. Mr. Donavane listened carefully, analyzing Andre

more than evaluating his idea. Andre thought that he had found the right way to Mr. Donavane's account. After finishing his pitch, Mr. Donavane asked:

–“Young man, I see your point, moreover. Moreover, I like your idea. From this point, what really matters for me is what kind of person you are. Because literally I invest my money in you, not only your on-going project. This is a shark business. No one will forgive a mistake here. I see you as a friendly and soft person. If you want to work with me, to gain access to my capital, you will need to be decisive and able to sacrifice yourself. So, think for yourself, are you ready to give up all your time and efforts to make this great idea work out?”

Andre was quite stuck with that question, he didn't expect that Mr. Donavane would ask him to show all his cards. On the one hand, Andre became less decisive after such speech than he was before. He didn't know if he was able to give up all his time and friends. On the other hand, he wanted to know what it would be like to be in Mr. Donavane's society. His confidence returned with a thought that this business will last only for a particular period, after which he will just quit and devote his time to his friends.

–“Mr. Donavane, I am as ready as anyone could be. I really appreciate your words, and I am that just the of person you want to work with!”

–“That's great! So, send me the other materials you've got. And let's arrange a meeting next week. We will cover some details of your project and our shares in it.”

Andre felt cheerful and full of eagerness to start. He could not get over the feeling that he was going to work with one of the

most powerful businessmen in the US. He called Sam to tell him about the meeting and thank him.

III

As Andre started to work with Mr. Donavane, his business experienced rapid growth. It easily overcame the crisis caused by the Russian sovereign bonds' default. The initial idea generated spinoffs from outside entrepreneurs. Despite this, Andre fully controlled the cost optimization service market. About 8 years already passed since Andre had first met Mr. Donavane at his office.

Andre was sitting in his office which was furnished by a top designer. The gray walls had several modern pictures, most of which were a pop art style. His favorite was Reflections Handshake oiled by Roy Lichtenstein. It symbolized for him the importance of business reputation and contacts. In the middle of the room, there was a great table made of teak wood with a new large Apple computer. His desk was rather clean, so it gave an impression that the owner of the table manages to delegate all paper work among his employees. In the right part of the room there were two business sofas, which were used for informal business talks, and a huge wardrobe.

His look left an impression of a mean, experienced man whose face reflected a great business acumen. He wore navy blue suits from Valentino, a white silk shirt with an English spread collar, French cuffs and gold cufflinks all from Brooks Brothers. His narrow, blue, white-dotted silk Armani tie was knotted with a Wind-

sor knot with a stylish small dimple in the middle of the tie. A pair of black Oxfords were made by Ralph Lauren, and they were so polished that they reflected the greater part of the office on their front side.

Leaving the office at 5 p.m., Andre took a taxi to the Central Shopping Mall. He wanted to meet a one-night-girl and to buy something special for himself as he had a birthday. Heading to the center, he got a call from an unknown number. Opening with pleasure his new Motorola, he said:

–“Andre, I am listening.”

–“Hi! Andre, it’s Sam. Happy Birthday! Don’t know what to wish as you’ve already got everything. I ll just wish you happiness! Haven’t heard from you in a long time. How are you doing? Sorry for being intrusive, but are you planning a kind of party for old friends? Sure that everyone would love to go!”

–“Hi Sam. Thanks, I’m really glad to hear from you. But excuse me, I’ve already planned a business gala party as I need some investors on my new projects. I would like to use this weekend to raise some capital. You know, just a business activity. By the way, Sam, do you know anyone who can be interested in buying my family’s house?”

–“Umm, don’t know buddy. That’s a pity to hear that you intend to sell your house. I’ll try to find someone. Give me a call, once you decide to grab some beer.”

–“Sam, we ought to meet. I’ll manage my time as soon as I will exit my business. I promise that we will party as we did before!”

–“Ok, buddy, see you”

Entering the mall, Andre was contemplating about time when

he will exit the business. He will have an enormous amount of time that he will share with his old friends. He shamed the fact that he is unable to spend more time with them. However, just several more years to shape the business for the right condition in order to exit at a higher price, and he will spend all his time with old friends traveling, having parties and dreaming about future.

Standing in the watch boutique, he hesitated what to choose Rado or Hublot watch. Both of them had a black dial and leather strap. Accidentally, Rado's reminded him Sam's birthday present. It seemed that Andre saw the watch years ago.

–“I'll take this Rado. It looks more luxury and shiny. Pay with card” – Andre thrown his Platinum Amex on the cash desk.

IV

5 years passed. Andre was sitting with Mr. Donavane. He named this day as a day X. It symbolized for him a start of new life. Andre have been expecting for the moment when he could exit all his business activity for the last years. He was lured with thought to devote himself to a real fun and traveling after countless nights without sleep which he spent at work. And now he is one step from signing a deal of selling his 60 percent stake in his company to Singapore investors. Compared to Mr. Donavane he looked a bit nervous. Both worn suits specially tailored for them and looked extremely magnificent.

As Singapore businessmen entered the room, Andre exhaled with a relief, he knew that everything will end soon. The terms of the deal were clear to everyone as it took them about half a

year to structure it. Jeffries was the lead deal advisor and several investment bankers were also presented in the room.

–“Mr. Donavane, Mr. Bennett, it is a great pleasure for us that we are ready to sing up the final terms” – one of the businesspersons said with calm typical for Asian investors.

Putting his signature was a real pleasure for Andre. Now he is able to travel and to party for the rest of his life. Emphasizing every line, he dreamed about parties in Ibiza, breakfasts on the sea shore of French Riviera and furious driving in Tokyo. Now there were no restrictions, he could allow everything. It was truly a pure happiness he imagined the last years. After the deal was signed, Mr. Donavane, asked Andre:

–“Andre, I am glad that we met each other. Tell me what are you plans on the future? Maybe, you want to join me on several other projects as a chief advisor?”

–“Mr. Donavane, thank you, I regret to say that I am out of the business for several years at least. I have planned to travel around the globe. To have some new experience. At present, I am contemplating the route. I guess I will be back at the US in 2-3 years.”
– Andre could hide his smile saying that.

On the next week, Andre will receive so much money on his bank account that it will be rather difficult to spend them in one life. For him a new life has started. A life with new hobbies, interesting people around, private parties on boats, luxury alcohol and drugs. He will easily find himself in this pool of pleasure. After singing the deal terms, Andre headed to the top club to throw a party with hot chicks for his former employees.

The next day, Andre woke up with a hangover and slut he

picked up in the club. He accidentally found her lingerie only in front of the door. Opening his iPhone, he viewed the photos of the last night. Some of them were extremely cool: he is smoking a cigar, two girls shaking their butts in front of his face, Andre's dance on the roof of the limo they rented, his hand holding someone's butt. All of them created an image of a party guy. Andre enjoyed this image and wished to add more luxury in it. As soon as he kicked the slut off his apartment, Andre started to ruminate his tour and people, with whom he did business, he would love to meet and to throw a party with.

V

Traveling for about 2 years around the globe, Andre had gained many great memories. Living on the Mauritius Island and doing kitesurfing, traveling through the Asia on the car with several friends he met in the Brazil, throwing parties in Tokyo. He even founded his own nightclub in Spain and bought a house in Rimini. The last trips were so spontaneous that he could not even remember all people he traveled with and all girls he had sex with. Sometimes Andre lost his conscious and woke up only in occasional moments. Drugs stupefied him a little bit, so it took him always an effort to recall his night outs. His conscious returned to him only when he was in the Dominican Republic.

–“Where is everybody, and F#&k how did I get here with what I have???”

At a sudden point Andre came up with understanding of the root of all his apathy combined with anger to the world. There

were no real people around him. Most of the surrounding shared the same fake values as he did. People were fake, trying to hide it under brand stuff they used and worn. Andre remembered that once he promised Sam to give him a call when he will exit his business. Maybe, Sam and his once-close friends was a real one. The next evening Andre was sitting in the airport waiting for his plane to the New York. Thoughts about returning home after a long journey bothered him a lot.

–“Hi Sam, open the door. That’s me, Andre!” – Andre knocked the door.

A strange granny opened the door and politely informed Andre that Sam had moved to another house and gave his current address. Andre met Sam in the garden in front of his new house –“Sam, I didn’t know that you had moved to a new house! How are you?”

–“Hi, Andre! Didn’t expect to hear from you again. I actually emailed my new address, it’s a pity that you didn’t join me and Jane to celebrate the move. Come on let’s have a sit in the summer-house.”

Sam looked much older than Andre remembered him. By 40 years, he had lost a little hair and his mimic was less active than before. He became fatter. As Andre would find out later, Sam was in the middle of the middle age crisis period and he got keen on gardening. On the other side of the garden Andre heard a children laugh. After a moment, a nice woman emerged from the fence with child running along with her.

–“Hello, I guess you are Andre? I am Jane, Sam’s wife. And this is Robert. I have heard a lot of you from Sam. He is proud with

your recent success. We've even saved several newspaper articles about your business. Wanna have a beer or lemonade?"

—"Ooo, you look gorgeous! Thank you for appraisal. Yes, I'd love to have a lemonade, please."

Jane took the child and smilingly left them.

—"Whoa, Sam, you have a great wife. When did you break up with Susie, I thought that you had intended to marry her?"

—"You know buddy, when you dived into your business a lot of things have happened. We split up with Susie about 5 years ago. It was a hard times for me and I found a support in Jane. She is the person with whom I feel myself as I am. Now we are raising up Robert, his teacher says that he is a talented kid. I enjoy my merely flowing life and this is what I need: a lovely wife and a growing son. I've tried to reach you several times, but you were too busy. I am profoundly proud of you, you made a great job!"

—"That's great! Sam, what do you think, maybe we will reunite and go somewhere abroad to party like as we did before? I can take most of the costs. Just call our old mates, unfortunately, I've lost their numbers."

—"Andre, bro, sorry but I guess I have already grown up. All these parties are a bit noisy and I'd better spend time with my family. Also, I cannot more because of Robert, I am sure that changing environment is not the best thing for him in his age. Others, I guess have already put down their roots and most of us are no longer live in the US. Every summer we rent a countryside house, don't hesitate to visit us. I'll give you the address."

—"Sam, that's a pity to hear it, I thought that we might have a great party time once I return. You know, I was dreaming about times

we used to sing until the midnight, going to bars and so on.”

–“Andre, I understand you, but I just grew up. You know, family is all I devote myself nowadays. By the way, you asked me to sell your house. It is rather old and looks crappy. Sometimes I receive calls from potential buyers and I usually redirect them to you. Just two days ago, I got a call from a girl with a nice melody voice. She wanted the owner to show the house. Seems that she had a serious intention to purchase it. So, gave her a call if you are still interested. Now we are going to the park where I am trying to teach Robert bicycling. You can join us if you want.”

–“No, Sam, thanks, have other plans on today. I will definitely visit you countryside house.”

–“Yeah, indeed, good luck!”

Andre got into his new Mercedes and drove away to the nearest park where he burst into tears. He was petrified by how he became different from his once-best friend Sam. There was a big gap between them in perception of the world and their values. Andre has just been stuck in the past.

The next day, he had a meeting with a potential buyer. He spent a night sleeping in the car and was not in mood. Andre decided to get some fresh air. He took off his jacket and went to the home in jeans and white shirt by his foot. He was rather surprised with its condition. Faded walls, nasty yellow grass. The fence was broken in several sections. Roof of the house did not look too reliable.

Right in the appointed hour the guest has appeared. She had a red lips, auburn hair and deep blue eyes. She wore a light-green summer dress and a small panama on her head. At first glance, she was around 28 years old and left an impression of a shy girl

with a lot of empathy. Andre thought that she looked lovely.

–“Hi there! I hope that I am not late. I was said that it is lucky that the owner has time to show me the house. I really like this district and sure that several minor changes will bring this house its initial shine! Oh, I always forgot to name myself, I am Ashley” - as Andre will find out later, during the excursion, she had been attending the music school and classes of vocal. At present she is not married and work as a director of several art exhibitions

–“Hello, it is nice to meet you. Surprised that someone is still interested in this house. I am Andre. I guess it won’t take too much time to show it. I inherited it from my parents who did take a lot of care of its maintenance.”

Andre quickly showed every room, but he lingered for a while in his own room. Opening the drawer of his working table which was covered with technical drawings from university he found the watch Sam presented to him. Andre was astonished as they were profoundly similar to those he wore! He recalled his Rado which was also similar to the Sam’s watch. It seemed so suspicious that the time passed but Andre always preferred the same model of watch. He was stuck with his observation about watched. In that drawer he also found Jeremy’s phone number. He decided to call as he would finish showing the house.

–“Mr. Bennett, I fall in love your house. It looks much better from inside. And the price we discussed really fits me. I’ll put some thoughts into my decision and will contact you as soon as I can.”

–“Call me just Andre. Sure, I’ll be waiting”

Driving the car to his apartment in the center of the New York, Andre tried to reach Jeremy. But it seemed that Jeremy had also

moved to another place.

VI

On the next evening, Andre was extremely sad. He still didn't manage to comprehend how he got with what he had. He was ruminating about his life sense, just trying to find any. He opened the bottle of whiskey and started to drink in solitude.

Andre was totally wasted, he was cut from the world. All his thoughts end up with one particular explanation for his life: he followed fake values and lost the time. For the last years, he was being stuck in the past; he chased the opportunity that one day he will devote all his time to his friends and they will have fun for years. However, he lost them all, he was too keen on doing business.

In his chase for success in business, Andre totally forgot about his friends. While they changed, started families, Andre tried to exit his business with high profits and to make his materialistic dreams come true. He had lost the time when his surrounding was united by the same values. And he could not return it back. The time is lost and Andre is left with his fortune and there is no person who can share with him his happiness and sadness. Andre understood that he was lured by the values which served only as compliment for the happiness. All people surrounded him in his journeys were just attracted with the same fake values as money. If there is no one real with whom to share your wealth, your wealth is nothing.

–“If there is no one, why I should endure my solitude? I tried to

succeed in order to share my all my fortune with friends, but no one had been waiting for me for the time when I would be able! I just cannot stand this Alone anymore!”

Being pretty drunk, Andre headed to the balcony. Tears were streaming down his face. He took off his white silk skirt and Valentino jacket. All this branded stuff seemed to be nasty for him. No more fake, only reality. Crawling on the edge of his balcony, he observed a nice view. 20th floor was high enough to end up your life. The cold wind dishevel his hair. His phone ranged. Andre picked it up:

–“Good evening Andre, it’s Ashley! Hope that I am not disturbing you... I am still thinking the house... Please excuse me, I am a bit nervous as I call you not about the house. What do you think if you visit one of my exhibitions and we will have a dinner afterwards? Please, don’t think of me as cold lady, I just thought that he might have something in common. I am sure we’ll have a lovely time spending. What do you think about it?”

My personal confession: the story of life I move toward, but want to avoid.

Story

I

It was an unusually dark, gray, you may even say dull day in Nothmady. The territory of Nothmady was mostly European the part of Eurasia, yet the climate was much milder because of the 2025th “transportation” of the Urals from the middle of Eurasia to the northern part of the country and their artificial heightening, which lessened the northern’ seas influence resulting in an average temperature of 20 degrees Celsius. So such a day was an unusual for this country. It was one of those days when you thought that there is absolutely no reason to do anything at all, one that would require a Herculean effort to make yourself get out of bed. Well, at least most people would feel that way. The man in the obviously custom-made suit had such an expression on his face if every day for him was like this day. This man’s name was Archibald Green, yet almost everyone called him Archie because he liked it that way. He was tall, nearly 6 feet and 4 inches. His body made it abundantly clear to everyone, that Archie and sports were closely connected. He was an athlete in the very essence of this word. Slender legs, a massive, masculine upper body and a long neck made Mr. Green look attractive, yet intimidating at the same time. His wavy dark brown hair usually hung over his forehead and slightly covered his right eye. The most fascinating feature of our new acquaintance’s appearance were his eyes. Light grey, they were cold as ice without any hint of empathy or compassion within. The rest of his face ignited completely different emotions when you were watching him. This word for women

was adoration and love, while for men it was respect and a little envy. It is because Archie was literally gorgeous. It was appealing masculine beauty with sharply shaped chin and powerful, yet expressive cheekbones. A straight and sharp nose was perfectly fitted right between the eyes, which made his face almost absolutely symmetrical. He was always slightly unshaven and looked tired at first glance, but people who knew him were able to understand that it was boredom and disappointment, not fatigue. Exactly this disappointment was yet again on his face on that dark, gray, and dull day.

Archibald was at the station waiting for his bus to get to work. He had a luxurious car, but still preferred to use public transportation because it was much more “rational” as he used to say. He trained himself not to note anyone around him because he did not think that anyone of these people, who were using public transportation, could possibly be interesting. In Nothmady it was a signal of your poverty both financially and intellectually. The reason for this was the regime in that country. Meritocracy was that regime. As popular in the early 2000th encyclopedia suggested, meritocracy “is a political philosophy that holds power should be vested in individuals according to merit. Advancement in such a system is based on intellectual talent measured through examination and/or demonstrated achievement in the field where it is implemented.” In other words, you were successful if you were smart. Making it to the top in Nothmandy if you were dumb was impossible. Nevertheless, the gap between the poorest and the richest man in that country was not nearly as big as it was in capitalistic countries of the West back in 2000th. The difference was

mostly in the minds of people rather than in their wallets.

There were several categories of people's "suitability" to the so called top-tier positions. The least intelligent people, called "engines", were doing all the physical work on the plants; they were building roads, cultivating the land, etc. Yet it is of note that all areas of this hard work required some thought processes, for instance, you need to develop a technology to build some roads or cultivate land. "Engines" were not allowed to this kind of work whatsoever.

The status of an "engine" was heritable. It may seem illogical at first glance, yet it had a well-developed theory of evolutionary anthropology behind it. The best anthropologists, psychologists, economists, and statisticians developed a theory that at least 55% of the cognitive abilities of a child are inherited from his parents. That is why the government did not want to take any chances accidentally designating "engine" as higher class, so every child who had even one parent from the lowest class was considered an "engine" by default. Nevertheless, every child was allowed to take an assessment every year to prove that his intelligence is higher than the "engine's" benchmark. This procedure was not just a formality because almost every year more than 10% of children moved to a higher category.

The remaining steps in the hierarchy were: "foundation" and "alpha". Foundation mostly consisted of people who were capable of conducting some sophisticated intellectual tasks such as professors, engineers, architects, businessmen, and accountants.. These people would have been considered as middle class in 2000th. They were called "foundation" for a reason. The whole coun-

try stood on them. Without them, there would be no difference between any third world country with agrarian economics and Nothmandy. They were living in suburbia just like the “engines” but in more sophisticated and more, you may say, refined houses with bigger windows, pools and backyards. These people accounted for almost 35 to 50% of population, and you can say that they were the happiest ones. This is not surprising because of their average salary, which was enough to retire at the age of 55 and provide your four children (this is the average number of children in Nothmandy) with education and make them independent self-sufficient people.

Alphas were all entirely different story. The average IQ among them ranged from 135 to 150, which makes them geniuses. The whole regime was built around them; all political power revolved around them. All senators, ministers, presidents, athletes, and writers were alphas. They were not allowed to marry into any other class, not allowed to do any job besides the one they were designated at the age of 24. Only one man from the “foundation” ever became an alpha. His name was Archibald Green. He had to take more than 25 tests when he turned 20 to be allowed to enroll in the ADC, which stands for Alpha Development Center. It is obvious that no one except for alphas could get access there. ADC is an analog of a university but without a major, because alphas were capable of obtaining majors in economics, politics, literature, philosophy/medicine, and psychology in just five years in ADC. Archie graduated from ADC with *egregia cum laude* (extraordinary) for his economics research project as a student. Moreover, Archibald graduated in two years rather than five.

After graduation he became the head of the assessment center headquarters of all Nothmandy. He was the one, making that call as to whether or not someone could be designated an alpha or not. Now he was 25 years old and worked as the head of the AC (assessment center) for one year now, and during this year not one “foundation”. Archibald held an interview with each and every pretender.

That day at the bus station was different from the other days not only because of the bad weather. Archie was looking around himself feeling the urge to find something interesting. The next second he got interested. He saw a young girl, who was literally staring a hole right through him. Her eyes were directed right at his and her chest was swaying up and down so you could say that she was breathing very fast. There was astonishment in her eyes. This attention to his person was not new to Archie, yet it flattered him every time he saw something like that.

The girl was naturally gorgeous in the very best way of this usually far too strong word. She had big light-brown eyes, which were framed by bleach blond hair. She was relatively tall at 5 feet 11 inches, so you could take her for an alpha, which she was not. She was very well built with long legs and a slender waist. Archie could not tell from the first glance, yet this girl was very intelligent and ambitious. In her day-to-day life she was not paying a lot of attention to people around her, since all of them were from “foundation”, just like her. She felt a tremendous disappointment that she have to wait one more week to take her final test and proceed to the final interview with this man, who was known for his imperviousness and without mercy for anyone who made

even a single mistake during an interview.

–“The odds of such a combination of hair color and eyes is very rare, peaking at 30% probability”, that was Archie’s first thought about this incredibly beautiful girl. This was pure logic and nothing even hinting at his feeling or their presence whatsoever. This thought amused Archibald for a few minutes, and then deepened in his thoughts. He thought about his life in general and why he was not happy in particular. What was even more interesting about Archie is that no one knew why he felt so unhappy, neither did he. You can tell that he desperately wanted to feel happiness. There was absolutely no logical explanation for him not to feel it. This fact pissed him off even more. In the world of common sense, brains, and logic everything could be explained. He felt like a heathen, who worshiped thunder and created a “thunder god” just because he could not explain these phenomena properly. He admired a woman’s body, its beauty and perfection, yet he despised any woman’s emotional outbursts mostly because he did not understand them. However, he never thought that a one-nightstand with a beautiful woman was beneath him; he had his natural desires and needs. The “no strings attached” concept is Archie to a “t”.

After a few minutes Archibald was on the bus and on his way to work. The girl was still standing at the station, saying to herself that she should have approached this man and said something to him. She did not do so because of her pride and all her previous life experience when she was the object of adoration, not the other way around. She was ashamed and went straight home to study for her test.

This week was the hardest in her life. She slept less than three hours a day for almost half a year now, but this week was a week with only a couple of naps during the day. The test was on history, economics, and political science. It was five hours long with one fifteen-minute break. There was one giant room, her and six examiners. She passed; moreover, she was in the 99th percentile among all participants in the test's history. The next and the final step was an interview.

This bleach blond girl had a fiancée, who was a mediocre even for a "foundation" guy. He was short, not ugly, and yet not handsome either. He was a bridge engineer, doing something useful and from a decent family. This was enough for her parents to try to marry them. What they did not know is that they just created one more strong incentive for her to become an alpha. She despised him with all her being. It was subconscious, because she knew that it was not his fault, and that he was a good guy in all other matters other than that. But for her it was unbearable that there was such a great abyss between them. Moreover, after she saw that man at the bus station, she could not even imagine being married to someone besides an alpha. She was firmly convinced that her object of adoration was an alpha.

It was an ordinary day for Archibald Green. He had an interview with some "foundation" girl, who did not seem to be different from any other pretender he had ever interviewed. She was sitting outside his office and shaking like she was at the epicenter of an earthquake. She was never so afraid and excited about anything else in her life. After five minutes of waiting she saw a green light just above the heavy wooden door of Archie's of-

fice and heard him say, “Send her in” to his secretary. She stood up and went right through his door without any hesitation and doubt.

– Jessica? , he asked without even looking at her.

– Yes, sir, it’s me.

– Come on in; sit down, he almost whispered, displaying his deep disinterestedness.

The next moment he raised his eyes, and she was astonished once again. It was him, the one that she stared at, the one of whom she was thinking about this last week, even though she was studding extremely hard. He also recognized her, but there was not so much excitement about it in him.

– Should we start? , he asked politely.

– Yes-yes, or course, mumbled Jessica in a desperate effort not to look so ashamed.

After that there was an hour-long conversation, which was routine for both Archie and Jessica because the former had done such interviews so many times that he lost all interest in them a long-long time ago. She, in her turn, learned each and every answer by heart and rehearsed it so many times to the point where they would not look rehearsed at all. Everything was going just fine, while Archie did not ask his favorite question.

– Why do you even want to become an alpha? Do you think that there is a better life up here compared to good old “foundation”?

– You are kidding me, right? , Jessica replied, looking sincerely surprised.

For a second Archie was shocked by such a daring answer, but then he recalled his own feeling about becoming an alpha, when

he was in her shoes. He recalled his urge to do something, change something, and be different from gray “foundation” without any ambitions.

– You are taking all this alpha propaganda on the TV too seriously, my dear.

– Do not talk to me that way; I do not need your condescending attitude, she almost screamed.

Archie was astonished yet again; no one ever talked to him that way because they thought that their life depended on how clean they would lick his boots.

– Not only a pretty face, but one hell of a temper behind it, he replied with some warm notes in his voice, to which even he was surprised.

– Then. . . Thank you, you are flattering me, Jessica felt that she couldn’t stay calm anymore because she was already afraid that she was falling in love with this cold, man void of feelings.

After that there was such a moment when you do not know what to say, but you need to say something so your conscious kicks in, and you speaking the truth, which you would never do in other circumstances.

– I would like to see you again, I really like you, Jessica’s deepest thoughts broke through.

She felt not like one of the most intelligent people in the whole country, but only like a dumb sixteen-year-old typical girl, running around some stupid but cute guy like a dog on a leash. She hated herself at that moment so much that she quickly stood up from her chair and rushed to the door.

II

– You walk out this door and you will never be an alpha, I can guarantee you that! , shouted Archie almost frenzied.

“Who this girl thinks she is?”, this thought was wandering in his mind.

– Sit down and listen to me closely, he said.

– We will have one more interview because you screwed this on up.

Jessica was so ashamed that she was not able to raise her eyes to look at Archie. She knew that she was wrong and did not deserve a chance to fix it up that is why she was stunned.

She did not know what Archie felt. He did not know himself either. He was firmly convinced that this whimsical girl did not deserve a second chance; in fact, he knew that the only thing she deserved was a lifelong ban for any attempts to become an alpha. Yet he did not do any of this kind; he made an appointment with her for yet one more interview.

Next few minutes were very awkward for both of them and their dialogue was generally mumbling interjection rather than complete sentences. There was something between that; although they did not know what it is, they both felt that the man sitting right next to them could change their entire life. Such an awkward salience continued until Jessica rose up not looking at Archie, and walked out.

Their new interview was scheduled for two weeks from this “incident”. For the first time in her life Jessica did not know what she was supposed to do. Learning something was useless because

she knew all it was to know. The only thing she did not know was how to act in front of Archie. Ashamed, confused, bewildered she was ready to give up all her dreams just not to meet this man again. At the same time she felt a destructive urge to be near him, to see him, to hear his voice, even that voice would make her feel stupid, which was by far the most hated condition of hers.

For Archibald those two weeks were a living hell. He was mad at Jessica for being so reckless and risking her future just to show her temper, he was mad at himself for not dealing with his emotions and getting his feelings cloud his judgment for a while. He saw Jessica at the bus station twice after their first interview; he did not approach her and was mad at himself even more afterwards. He even had a conversation about it with his friend Jason, an alpha from toe to the top of his head. Everything in his statue, gestures, tone of voice, and appearance was condescending towards everyone who is below him. Smart, senseless, and arrogant - these are the worlds, which would perfectly describe Jason. He really did not love anyone but him, but he thought of Archie as equal, yet always thought that it is worth mentioning, by the way, that Archie is a born beta, so he, Jason, always will be superior to him. Despite these obvious grave disadvantages, he was useful when it came to an advice because he could leave all the emotions out of it, and Archie was desperately lacking it right now.

– So, how did it go?, Jason asked

– Well, it was amusing and terrifying at the same time, Archie vaguely replied

– That’s something new, our unsullied guy is confused, mocked Jason

– Yeh, funny, ha-ha, you are hilarious as usual. It is serious. This girl is something that I have never seen: she is pretty, yet smart, she is modest, yet with temper, she is. . .

– Just like your mom, haha, Jason bursted out laughing

– Oh, cut the jokes will ya, I'm trying to talk things out here, barked Mr. Green

– OK, OK. I can see that you like her, yet you do not know why, she is inferior to you on the one hand but on the other had she has all what it takes to be your equal, she is reckless, irresponsible and arrogant, yet the latter is not a sin, in my opinion. There are very few things that you can do really. First of them, just do the interview without any other thought about here. Second option is just go out with her now, and see how it goes.

– What are you talking about, if I go out with her now, there will be an obvious conflict of interests, said Archie.

– The second one the worst, I've just mentioned it to check you adequacy, pal.

– Yeah, right. I think I will go with the video chat, thank you, Archie said and stood up. See you around, thank you for your invaluable advice.

After that conversation he decided to have a walk in his old neighborhood where he lived with his parents when he was not an alpha, when he was still happy. He was just wandering around, playing soccer with some can. After a while he saw a girl who was doing the exact same thing, she was doing nothing, just walking around the neighborhood. Suddenly he realized that he bumped into Jessica. Both of them were surprised because no one knew that they might be neighbors as both of them were walking nearby

their parents' houses. They talked for almost two hours and never mentioned an interview in any way before Archie finally asked a question that he desired to hear an answer for

A: So tell me, why do you really want to do it?

J: Do what? Become an alpha? I want to mean something; I want to make a difference.

A: You cannot even imagine how naive does it sound, do you? There is nothing good about being alpha; you will get more respect, which you do not appreciate because it comes from inferior classes, and each and every alpha thinks that he is the best it is; you will get more money, which you do not have any idea how to spend; you will lose all your friends, who will not be looking at you the same ever again, even though this is you, old you, you just wearing a new label and that is it.

J: So why do not leave it all, became a farmer or something? Why complaining about it instead of change something?

A: I want to, I will. Eventually. Will you come with me?

J: What? What are you talking about?

A: I am sorry; I do not know why I said that. Never mind.

J: But I do mind, you treat me like a child at the interview, and now, all of a sudden you want me to leave everything, give up my dreams and go with you? This is even more selfish of you than it is stupid.

She turned away and walked away.

One week was remaining until the second interview. Six days after that conversation she was thinking about Archie and what he said. Doubts started to fill her thoughts until she completely lost her sleep and wanted to talk to Archibald one more time to clear

things up and hear his arguments for giving up on her dreams. As she was good at achieving what she wanted, she found Archie's number and gave him a call.

J: I do not know why I am doing this, but anyway, I want to meet you, and I need arguments to make up my mind about everything.

A: All right, today, at 7 p.m. A coffee shop near the bust station will be OK.

J: Archie, I am scared, I think I have feeling for you, but I am confused, I think that you were right about alphas, how they are miserable. I think that now I should be thankful for loving parents, friends, and... you, I think that I will be willing to give up my attempts to become an alpha for you.

A: You should know that I have turned in a resignation letter today. I quit. I do not think that I deserve to decide people's fate. I do not think that anyone have such a moral right despite his or her intelligence.

J: It does not sound insane to me, which is insane. I think that I need to back my bags first, and then we can meet.

A: Mine are already packed. I will wait for you then. I really like you.

J: I love you too.

He was standing in from of the coffee shop's signboard, which said "Opportunity". Archie smiled with irony of this disguised mockery when he saw Jessica approaching. As she came closer, he imagined how they would get together, live on a small farm just outside the city and raise their four children so they will not despise people just because they are not so smart. This train of thought derailed right the next second. Archibald heard tired

squeal and saw a truck driver with a horror in his eyes as he could not stop the car. Truck wrecked the bus station and then knocked down Jessica tossing her body up in the air. Archie was watching is with a feeling of helplessness and was not able to comprehend what just happened even when Jessica was already lying on the concrete weltered in her own blood.

He was standing on the top of the hill right behind the whole funereal. He never came closer. The only feeling he got left was indifference towards everything. After the funereal he came home, took out his revolver, put three bullets in it and let the chance decide, whether is worth living after what he did to that poor girl. No rational, only a blind chance.

Betrayed Hero

It was a nice Tuesday evening in English Hampshire County. The sun was shining its golden rays onto a green ground, which looked so fresh and alive in comparison with a dusty road, that ran across the fields. The warm air caused the bushy twigs of the trees to move, as if they were dancing to the spring melody of the English weather. The scenery looked almost like a postcard picture, apart from the noises of the young men, which were approaching from the side of one private residence.

An intense rugby game was taking place at the Harcourt residence, with seven young and fine gentlemen on each side of the field, each one fighting for an every inch and every tackle, just so his team could be victorious in a matter of few minutes. However, one of the boys stood out in comparison with everybody else. He wore white long sleeve t-shirt and blue shorts with matching blue and white sporting socks. It was very easy to spot Jacky on the field, due to the fact that it was almost the end of the match, but there was not a single dirt mark on Jack's spotless uniform. It almost looked like he was the referee, who is standing on the side and monitoring all other players, making sure that they don't break any rules. But no, Jacky was a full time player, who managed to avoid most of the physical action, mainly because he was too slow in getting to all the rocking and tackling. Nevertheless, Jacky wasn't a shy boy, he was shouting of the top of his lungs, in order to cheer up his teammates. Surprisingly, this shouting didn't annoy his team members but on the contrary it gave them extra motivation which allowed one of Jacky's friends, Billy, to

break free from the tackle and make a long run to the try line, which resulted in a nice victory.

–“Great run Billy,” said Jacky, when he finally ran up to him. “That was so quick, I believe that you’ll be faster than a bullet someday. How do you do it?”

–“Just good training, Jacky, and intense participation to the running track. You should come sometime; it will really help you, friend.”

–“Me?” replied Jacky with an astonishing smile. “I’m okay at running. Not as quick as you, but still I’m good. And besides it’s thanks to me that we won this game, because of my tactics and my motivation. Without them you would have not been able to make that run mate.”

– “Are you sure about this?” asked Billy with strong suspicion.

–“Of course, Bill, motivation is everything in life. And even though I can’t run as fast as you can, I’m still a great leader of this team! How I play here, I will do the same in my father’s business, when he passes it on to me.”

–“Your father’s banking business will be passed on to you, seriously?”

–“Oh hey, by the time I’m twenty-five I will run all of his banks!,” said Jacky with a great and proud smirk on his face. “Speaking of my father, God all mighty, I have to run Bill. I have a family dinner with my parents now. See you later, you know that I’m right, you do!” Shouted Jacky as he was already heading towards his family house, leaving Billy standing alone in the field with the rugby ball.

By the time, Jacky finally reached his home it was already seven

pm, which indicated that it was time for the whole family to sit for dinner. On the way to his room, Jacky quickly checked on his younger sisters, Stephanie and Ellie. Both of them were already fully dressed up and ready for dinner.

–“Brother”-said Ellie. “Where have you been? Its dinner time; you know that mum and dad will not be pleased.”

–“Sister don’t worry, everything will be fine. I am a living charmer, besides how could anybody be cross with me? I’m the best there is”,- said Jacky with an enormous smile on his face. “By the way, sisters, you look great today. Both of you are very beautiful young ladies. Now go. I’ll join you shortly.”

Jacky didn’t need to spend ages having a shower. After-all he didn’t get very dirty in game, so he put on his fine gentleman’s royal blue suit, which his mother adore greatly and rushed downstairs in order to join his family. It was a warm family evening. Everyone was laughing and discussing horse racing at Derby stadium. Stephanie suggested that everyone should attend the upcoming races in two days time. The whole family agreed to this happy idea in a very positive way, especially Ellie. She was only twelve years old, but she was very keen on horses. She loved animals and adored nature in general. Her sister Stephanie was more interested in fashion, and she dreamed about becoming a famous model some day. This was due to her artistic style of character, which as she often said “needed to get out in public in order to flourish.” Jacky’s mother, on other hand, was more of the thoughtful persona, who preferred to think before giving away any answer. So she approached this idea with more diplomatic attitude.

–“Yes, it would be great if all of us could get out, but it will depend on your father girls. Will he be able to leave work early? That is the main question.”

– “Of course he will mother”,- replied both of the girls at the same time.-“He runs the business, so he is his own master in command”.

– “We will see about this my little, young ladies, we will see about this. Speaking about your father, Jacky, drop a visit in your father’s study. He wants to have a talk with you about your future. He said it is very important son, so don’t keep him waiting again.”

Feeling very optimistic about the upcoming business talk Jacky stood up, kissed his mother on the right cheek, told his sisters that he loves them and started to head upstairs to where he was summoned.

The study room where Jacky’s father spent most of his life was a very large room with two floors. The first floor contained a sofa and the family’s library. The second floor was devoted fully to the financial works of Jacky’s father. Nobody dared to walk upstairs unless he or she was asked to come up, even Jacky’s mother never dared to disturb her husband during his working hours. The study had four large windows, which allowed the sunlight to enter it. Jacky was always a little scared of his father because of his strictness towards other people. But magically, this strictness attracted Jacky to his bitter father. There was something about it that caused Jacky to believe that it was the only way to be successful in life and for that reason Jacky would listen to his father no matter what he told him.

–“Son”,- a very cold and firm but still elegant voice broke the

atmosphere of silence.

–“Yes, dad”,-replied Jacky with a slight sense that his heart rate had sped up. “Mother told me that you want to see me.”

–“That’s right son. Grab a seat. I’ll come down stairs and we will discuss a very important question.”

After those words, Jacky started to feel, as if he had come to a business meeting in London. Still, he was used to the fact that his father talked to him in the same way that he did during his business meetings. Jacky sat down on the sofa and tried to think about the topic which his father had prepared for him. The answer didn’t cause Jacky to think a lot because Jacky’s father started his descent from the second floor, and while he was moving he addressed his son.

–“Son, how are you feeling today?”

–“Not bad sir, I’m feeling really happy today.”

–“How come, son?”

–“Well.”, said Jacky very surprisingly. “My team won the rugby game this afternoon. It was a tough one. You should have seen it.”

–“Why?”, replied Jacky’s father while staring out the window and admiring the sunset.

–“I was the captain, and I thought that you would be proud to hear this news, that your son is a good leader.”

–“Son, I am proud of you, but winning games was good enough in college. You are a young gentleman, a member of the Harcourt family. You should move on and start achieving real life goals now.”

–“Like what?”

–“Making me proud that I can pass the banking business on to you, that would be a good place to start.”

–“But I passed all my exams with A’s in both economics and history.”

–“And remind me of what you got in Maths?”

–“B, sir”, answered Jacky with a heavy feeling, almost as if he had failed somebody.

–“B minus, that was your mark in maths, which makes you unfit for Oxford or Cambridge.”

–“But sir, you know that I have a business mind. You have seen me working over Christmas holiday. Does this not show you that I’m willing to work for the prize?”

–“No, it doesn’t show me anything. The only thing I see is that some boy has failed all of his exams and thinks that his rich father, a banker, will get him out of this mess. I tell you Jacky, you have disappointed me and your family for at least five long years with your failure.”

–“But sir, two A’s and one B is not a bad combination of results. It is enough to get into London School of Economics. That is a good university.”

–“No, I said no and that’s it. Oxford and Cambridge are the only two places where one can achieve his full potential. You failed yourself. But still there is a way for you to redeem yourself in my eyes.”

–“How?”, asked Jacky in fear and disbelief of what he was hearing from his father.

–“You will serve in the British army for eleven years. It would do you only good. You are weak, lazy and stupid. You are not even

ready start up your own family. You are nothing at the moment Jacky."

—"Sir", cried Jacky in disbelief.

—"I've said everything I wanted to tell you. Pack your things; you are leaving tomorrow morning."

—"But father the. . . ."

—"Not father but sir to you young man, who has no manners."

—"But sir", repeated Jacky very quietly. "the recoupment doesn't start till the last weeks of August."

—"Oh, yes, about that. You will be on your own these four months. I thought that you needed a big head start before all the other men. I don't want to hear a complaint from the officers that you are so unfit that you can't even run three kilometers."

—"I can run",- shouted Jacky back in great depression.

—"You can't do anything. You are nothing in this world. You are the lowest of them all in my eyes. Now pack your things and leave. Don't take a lot of things. It's not a family holiday where you take half of your closet with you."

—"I'm not that stupid sir", replied Jacky as he was walking away from this dark and inhuman study.

—"Let's hope so.", said the father, not even turning around in order to see Jacky walking towards his room.

The four months of spring and summer rushed by very quickly. Thanks to the lonely army training, Jacky had lost six kilograms of weight and weighed only sixty- eight kilograms now. His physical appearance constantly reminded him that he was now in liv-

ing hell. His eyes became darker because of the intense training regime throughout the day and lack of sleep during the night. He constantly felt tired and sleepy due to the small amount of food which was carefully measured by the cook at every meal. His skin turned pale as a sign that his body was constantly stressed and that Jacky wasn't receiving enough nutrition. But all of these signs didn't matter to the training officers. They acted as if Jacky was an Olympic athlete who had the best nutrition diet and who rested in the most comfortable accommodation after all his trainings. Maybe that's why they acted so furiously towards Jacky every time he experienced that all his strength is leaving his breathing body. Every time Jacky would collapse under the tormenting weight of his body armor, the officers would come up and kick him as if he was a breathless dummy or hit him with a stick, co-named the purple dragon, due to the color of the devastating bruisers that remained on Jacky's body for weeks. Still there was an upside to the army training. Surprisingly, Jacky became good at shooting and close combat fighting. "Good skills to have if you find yourself in big trouble", the training officers constantly repeated at the start of each training.

Even though Jacky was able to learn those "good skills", he still felt betrayed by his own family. He especially hated his father for sending him to the army. He hated their last discussion, the fact that his father never looked at him during all his insults, made Jacky's blood boil. He thought of his father as an abomination, which unfortunately was part of his life. The only thing which kept Jacky alive and prevented him from breaking down were the letters written by his mother and sisters. Luckily for Jacky

he received another letter, which he desperately needed after a twenty kilometre run with full ammunition. The letter didn't have any envelop it was folded in three parts and consolidated only with an old fashioned wax stamp, that was engraved with their family crest, a lion with a hook. The letter told:

Dear Jacky

7th October 1912

We are all proud of you; you are great. You were always a great person, especially good son and a magnificent brother. Your sisters are extremely proud of you. We know that you would do fine as a military officer. We are expecting you to rise up to high status. Your sisters are already dreaming of how good they would look next to you in your military uniform. Jacky, I love you very much. You are my only son, and it is so painful for me to watch the quarrelling between you and your father. Please Jacky, I ask you, forgive him and write him a letter. Your father is not as cold-hearted as he portrays himself. You are stronger than him Jacky. So be wiser than him; don't copy all his drawbacks. Turn them into your positive aspects.

Take care Jacky. We all love you and we believe in you. Your family and your loving mummy.

After reading the letter for the second time, Jacky felt a warm feeling of love and trust in his inner self. He folded the letter neatly into his chest pocket and climbed into his bunk. Before falling asleep Jacky retold the letter to himself, highlighting all the draw-backs his father had. When he finished analysing his father, he had a clear picture of what needed to be done. He saw that the man he needed to become was the one his mother asked him to be. Preserving this image his mind, Jacky fell into a deep

sleep.

Two years had passed since Jacky received the letter in which his mother asked him to forgive his father. Jacky couldn't force himself to forget his father, because he thought of him as a physical embodiment of cold-hearted abomination. However, Jacky was able to identify all the mistakes and weaknesses that his father had and was able to turn them into his own advantages. He didn't see people as objects and things as real beings. Instead of scaring people Jacky tried to help his friends no matter how difficult it might seem. These two aspects motivated Jacky to his graduation ceremony, which indicated that he was now a sergent and would be able to serve in a real army now for nine years. The ceremony was a long ongoing jazz concert, where families and friends came to see their sons. Sadly, no member of the Harcourt family was there, due to the fact that Jacky's father thought that a real man doesn't need family wimping around him at any time. Jacky didn't get offended by this. After all, he knew that his mother and sisters would have tried to come and that they will certainly write him a letter. Still, Jacky walked away from the noisy party; he wanted to walk alone. He was walking through a park lane with his hand in his pockets, when all of a sudden he heard a scary, familiar voice. —“Oh, private, what did I tell you about keeping your hands in your pockets?”

Jacky turned around and saw his training officer, Ensign Lee. Mr. Lee was wearing his finest military uniform. He was drunk, but for the first time ever he looked like a normal human being.

—“Oh, private, I asked you a question, are you deaf?”

—“Well no sir, I'm a sergeant, so I thought that you were referring

to somebody else.”, replied Jacky in a very relaxed voice with his hands still stuck in his trousers.

–“God almighty, Harcourt boy is that you?”

–“Yes, sir it is me.”

–“I’ll tell you son. Two years have gone by and you are a real man now, not the wimpy boy I first met on the running course.”, said Mr. Lee with a proud smile and bright fire in his eyes.

–“I can’t disagree with you sir. Well what can I say? Thank you for turning me into a man.”

–“You welcome boy. I tell you, when I first saw you run I thought to myself, a week and he would be out of here. But you stayed and did everything that I and other officers asked you to do. Other boys saw you as a good friend to them and as an efficient leader. I still can’t believe that story, the one when I saw you running with another bloke on your shoulders all ten kilometres, and when I was just about to punish that lazy pig for losing his rifle, you showed it to me, which made me realise that you carried that lazy hippo and his rifle all the way. I’ll tell you son, from that moment I understood that you were not the sissy, that I thought you were. What is your name by the way, sergeant Harcourt?”

–“Jacky sir”, replied Jacky without any hesitation.

–“Jacky? What kind of girls name is that?”

–“My mother always called me that; everyone calls me by this name.”

–“Christ almighty, you were a boy sergeant. That’s why you had that silly name. You are a grown man now, how about just Jack?”.

–“It’s good sir”

–“Christ, Marry and holy trio. It’s a real name for a real man.

Sergeant you are not a boy now and I believe that you would make me, your family and the whole army proud someday. You have in you, yes Jack?"

–“We will see sir. I’ll do my best as always sir”, replied Jack with a feeling that he would explode from all the happiness which he was hearing from Mr. Lee, who used to kick and beat him every time he couldn’t do anything.

–“Thank you sir. I’ll keep it. I like it”

–“Never forget what you learned here sergeant, Loyalty, bravery and courage. Follow these three rules in the army and you will be great someday.”

As it was getting a bit late, Mr. Lee turned around and headed back to the party in order to get another drink. Jack, mean-while carried on walking up the park lane feeling happy and strong as ever before.

It was now May of 1914. Jack and his friends were allowed to take a two week break, so they decided to travel to London and spent their time in the country’s capital. One day, when Jack and his friends, James and Richard were scheduled to leave an unsuspected event occurred. Jack was called up to the checkpoint barracks where he had a visitor. Unfortunately, for Jack, that visitor was his father, who wanted to discuss an important issue.

–“Hello son”, said father in his typical and polite business manner.

–“Hello sir.”, replied Jacky with motionless response

–“How are you?”, asked father in order to break Jack’s stone, military facial stiffness.

–“Good sir”, replied Jack with the same neutral tone still in his voice.

–“Are you not going to ask me why I’m here?”

–“Sir, with all due respect sir, here in the army we don’t ask questions. We listen and we carry out orders in the best and most efficient way possible.”

–“What a damn view of life”, said the father in an almost hateful way.

–“Actually no sir, if you look at any normal human being, what do you see? Two years but only one mouth. From this observation, I can assure you that it is logical to say that any-one must listen twice as long and more efficiency in comparison with the amount he talks.”

–“What rubbish! ”, Father wasn’t trying to hid his emotions now.

–“Actually dad, if my memory serves me well, which it does, it was your idea to send me here.”

–“How dare you? Not even father but “dad”. I see that you didn’t learn anything here Jacky!”

–“Actually mister it’s Jack not Jacky! Secondly I know a whole platoon just outside these walls which would disagree with you. If you don’t like the army program that is your personal problem sir. I like the program, and I love myself for who I have become here.”

–“What nonsense is coming out of your mouth? Jacky, son, you are ill. Yes you’re not feeling not well. I’m taking you home, right now!”

–“Thank you sir, but I feel quite normal and you can’t force me to change my mind”.

–“No, you don’t understand. I’m taking you home and that’s it, full stop!”

–“You don’t have that kind of authority around here. This is not your mansion back at Hampshire. This is a British military base, where you are nothing!”

–“I might have no authority but I do have five thousand pounds in metal coins! You are coming home right now, and that’s it little son.”

–“No I’m not, sir. If that’s why you came, you’d better go back home.”

–“Jacky, I’m afraid that a war is on its way.”

–“It’s Jack sir”.

–“And if a war breaks out, then I will go and defend my country with all my strength and skill.”

–“You’re mad. A war is about to break out and you want to be shipped to the war zone and fight?”

–“That’s not what I want”.

–“Sir, you probably thought that you would always have control over my life. Well, you controlled Jacky, who was nothing in your eyes. But now I’m Jack Harcourt, a sergeant of the British military force, who is capable and more importantly willing to defend his home and all people who proudly call themselves Englishmen. I’m not leaving my friends behind. If there will be a war, then I will go and fight.”

–“You are stupid.”

–“You never understood me sir. You had 18 years to teach me or get to know me. You preferred to control me and shape me into what you wanted. Well there is a strong change in your plans

now. Your son was transformed from nothing into something very proud, but you are too blind to see it."

—"You are a fool!"

—"Maybe. You can say what-ever makes you feel better about yourself, and everything that makes me stupid. I'm not coming back home with you. "

—"Fine, have it your way idiot. I thought that I had a son but it turns out I have a carless idiot."

—"You never had a son, I was always a huge disappointment to you. You remember about me when you need to save your own dignity. Speaking in your own language it's not son to you father, it's sergeant Jack Harcourt, sir. "

—"Ungrateful nobody." , shouted Jack's father with a strong crimson face color. "You are nothing and I hope that you will rote in this ugly hole. Piss off sergeant nobody and get out of my sight."

Dear Son

December 7th 1914

We are all writing this letter to you and we really hope so that it will arrive to you on Christmas night, so that you would be able to feel that we are all celebrating Christmas eve as one whole family, even in a such difficult time of war. Jack my boy, you father told me about his visit to you in May, son why were you so hard on him. I know that he made a lot of mistakes in his life and that he wasn't the best father figure in your life. But you and he are still two elements of our family. If he can't see it, then you can. You became such wonderful man. I saw all your boot camp reports and I am honestly proud of you Jacky (I know that you like to call yourself Jack now but I still adore the name Jacky, it makes me smile so bright)

Jack, be very careful, it is the sixth month that you have been send to the western front. We all believe in you and we know that you know how to take care of yourself, but still be careful. We all miss you very much and we pray for your save return home. No matter what happens you are our favorite and lovely son. I hope that this war would end very soon and that I will be able to see your face again and feel your manly shoulders son. It's been nearly three years that I last saw you, I miss you very much.

Take care son (Jacky) and come back home soon and we wish you a relaxing Christmas night.

Your loving family and your caring mummy!

Jack re-read the letter for the second time in order to memories it. Folded it up and put it in his chest pocket, picked his rifle and stepped outside of the bunker. What Jack saw wasn't beautiful. It was cold Christmas Eve nightfall, there was little snow but the air was cold enough to turn every breath into a cloud of steam. The ground beneath Jack's feet was muddy, due to the heavy rains, which washed off solid ground and turned it into a grey mush. The sky was always dark or grey, mostly because it was winter and the nights grew longer and partially because of the black smoke from constantly firing the heavy artillery. Everything looked lifeless, Jack sometimes thought of himself as being some-where between heaven and hell. If heaven is white and hell supposed to be black, then this war must be something neutral in between, but for some strange reason it seemed that hell was taking over this war. Jack got used to the fact that every day he will see somebody being shot down, burned alive or hit by the grenade shell, that he sometimes forgot the reason why he was fighting

and what he was fighting for. The only thing which reminded Jack about his humanity and about all the good aspects of human life, were letters which he all kept in his left chest pocket, so that they would warm his heart at times of great difficulty. However today was Christmas and both sides decided to stop fighting just for this holly night in order to pay their Christian respects to the Jesus Christ.

Sergeant Harcourt and his rifle platoon were asked to lead the way and be the first ones who would approach the German front line. Harcourt platoon was composed of four different sections, each containing nine soldiers, each armed with a rifle, 100 rounds each and two grenades. Nobody took their gas masks or their medical equipment. Everyone on this mission understood, that if it was a German trap there would be no chances of getting out alive. Jack and his troops walked in two triangular shapes formations, each part protecting the other half. Harcourt platoon reached a white German tend, where the German lance Corporal named Erwin was in charge.

–“Guternag gentlemen. My name is Lance corporal Erwin”, Said Erwin with a military, disciplined voice.

–“Good evening to you sir too. I’m sergeant Harcourt and this is my 7th platoon of men”, replied sergeant Harcourt.

–“I’ll believe, that our truce will go as planned, with no miss understandings?”

–“Everything will go smooth, we will hold our part of the deal. ”

–“And we will hold ours too, without any back thoughts” interruptedly told corporal Erwin. “At the moment we are not soldiers of two different armies, we are two friends!”

–“In that case” replied Jack. “It is nice to meet you Erwin”

With a small surprised look and hesitation Erwin reached his right arm and shook Jack’s hand.

–“In that case Erwin, it is safe to lay down our rifles and call the rest of our boys?”

–“Absolutely, Mr, sorry just Jack. Yes call the rest of your men”.

Jack turned around and walked outside the tent. The night was very cold but bright, the Christmas sky was aiming all of its star’s light onto the battlefield, which was transformed now into a ‘friendly’ zone. Jack took out a whistle and blew three long and one short whistles, thus indicating that it was safe now for the British army to approach the white tent. Erwin on other hand sent a messenger towards his German army, which made Jack think that Erwin wasn’t fully relaxed as he pretended to be.

Christmas music broke down the dark silence of the night, German troops had a gramophone with them, which they brought up to the tent in order to create a Christmas feeling. The tent was vast with two long, wide tables running across each side, one side being painted in British colors and the second one in German colors. Both tables were covered with food, it really looked like a real feast back at home. Soldiers were dancing and exchanging stories and having a good time. Jack was standing by one of the support poles and was drinking his warm cup of German hot chocolate. It was his first hot chocolate for a long time, which made Jack smile, and it was good to consume something extra ordinary which wasn’t on the British military menu. Jack was having a good time, it was good to spend one night not worrying about bullets and running. Corporal Erwin approached Jack and started up the conversation.

–“Enjoying the night Jack?”

–“Yes, thank you Erwin it is good to finally relax from all of this.”

–“You mean war?”

–“Yes, Erwin I just don’t want to say that word, especially today. It’s Christmas”

–“Oh, common Jack,” said Erwin. “There is nothing bad in it, after all we can find out who is the better nation, do we?”

Jack noticed a strong sense of shnaps coming from the Erwin, which indicated that he took the “friendly” night literally. “You know the survival of the fittest and all of that Darwin stuff.”

–“Erwin, I’m not sure you can think as one nation being better than the other one.”

–“Sure I can, that’s why we all live in different countries, so that each nation can break and own the weaker nations. You know what I mean.”

–“Do I?”

–“Yes, of course being a part of the British army. Your country has a huge empire, I once heard that sun never sets down in the British Empire.”

–“Erwin, I think that you are getting a wrong motive. Yes British empire is vast, yes it contains a lot of different nations combined into one single empire. But we don’t break the nation’s spirit of freedom. We take them under our monitoring and we help them develop and grow.”

–“Sergeant, sergeant you are being a fool. The weaker nations were created with only one purpose, to be controlled by the strong and much more efficient nations, like myin and yours. I personally think why do we fight each other, when we can simply create

a union and dominate the rest of the world.”

–“That’s not how the world work Erwin. Every single man, woman and child deserve to have peace, love and freedom. There is nothing of this in fear or military control.”

–“No, no, Jacky” Said Erwin after taking another sip from his flask. “Every Jew, every negro, every ginger head must be put into shekels and be put down like a slave or nobody.”

After hearing all of these words Jack remembered his father and their last monologue before Jack was send into boot camp. Erwin was talking in the same style as if he was talking with his banker dad. Just one thought about Jack’s father and Erwin being the same made Jack so angry inside that he wanted to take his empty mug and bit Erwin to the state where he wouldn’t be able to even whisper a tiny noise. Still Jack remained calm and focused on the fact that he was better than his father, which meant that Erwin was a silly child next to him.

– “But what about Asian cultures?”

–“Oh, I have a great plan about those narrow eyes yellow people.”

–“Germany should pack an alliance with them, learn all their weaknesses and then invade all of them.”

–“So you are proposing to betray your alliances?”

–“Of course not! I propose a plan of how to get read of nasty Asian people, those incompetent Asian minded bastards. ”

–“I think that you are not thinking straight Erwin. Go easy with your drinking tonight and be careful what you say, not everyone is as tolerant as I am.”

–“Jacky, common all those Asian, dirty Negros and women they are all manure nations, we are the god like races. German, British,

French”

–“Why are we fighting then?”

–“Because we Germans are the best and you British and French idiots are too cocky to admit it, that’s why. ”

–“Good night Erwin, and really watch your tong.”

–“Oh, I’ll be fine”

After their discussion Erwin placed his left arm in his side pocket, put a drunk, silly, cocky smile and left Jack standing alone by the pole support. Jack meanwhile was thinking about what he can do. Part of him wanted to pick up his rifle and fire every single bullet which he had on him. But he knew that it would be a terrible thing to do especially at Christmas Eve. He didn’t want to go down in history as a ruthless abomination. Instead he listened to his second half of thoughts. He remembered his mother and sisters and Mr. Lee and quickly thought and imagined them all being disappointed with him, in his actions, killing and starting up the war again. Jack couldn’t do that, he was not a destroyer, he achieved everything through loyalty, bravery and courage and now was not the time to turn back on everyone who he loved and cared about him. Jack grabbed another cup of warm hot chocolate and stepped outside into the night in order to let the steam out. The sun began to rise up, thus breaking the image of the night with warm red and yellow sky stripes. Jack looked at it for a minute and was feeling calm again, knowing that he did a right thing in not shooting Erwin, because he was a true idiot with mental disorder and Jack would not hit a cripple man. It was not right. The blue flag appeared from the British trenches, which indicated that it was time to go back to different sides. Jack

blew his whistle three short times and started slowly heading back towards his base, leaving enough time for his platoon to say good-bye to everyone and catch up with their commanding sergeant.

When the British troops arrived at the home base nobody knew what to do next. Technically both sides were at war with each other but after spending the whole night with friends nobody wanted to pick up their guns and be the first one to shoot down a German soldier. That's why it was special to rest and see what fate will do next. Jack ordered his troops to have a good rest, but keep all their military equipment in check and have them ready in case of the emergency. Jack himself did the same and fell asleep very quickly with a warm feeling of being alive on the first day of the 1915th year.

Jack was awakened by the bugle noise, which approached him all the way from the German front line. Jack stood up quickly but quietly. He tapped two nearest soldiers which slept next to him and told them to get ready and that they need to wake up the rest of the platoon up. Jack meanwhile went outside of the bunker and saw that the German army was preparing for full scale attack, their cannons were aimed straight at British base. German soldiers looked tired but very determined, with a strong expressions of anger and hatred towards their enemy. The bugle playing stopped and a man of small complexion climbed out and started shouting in a drunk voice, it was lance Corporal Erwin.

–“Sheesh you British idiots! We are the Germans and we are the god like race, you will obey as or you will be crushed. Last night you came into our home and you didn't want to share our believes. That means that you are not a strong nation, which we

will prove to you now! FIRE!" The first wave of military canons assault fired and started bombarding. The assault felt like a small earthquake with such a powerful noise blast.

"To victory, superior soldiers, for Germany! ", shouted Erwin from the top of his lungs. Jack was still hearing nothing from the previous blast of cannons, but he knew that he needed to get up to his feet as quick as possible and start fighting back in order to crush the German flow of troops. He was feeling as if he was made of the cotton wool, his legs would not obey and give him the firm support. Jack picked up his rifle, took a deep breath. Looked up and say the edge from which he could fire back. He used his rifle as leverage to pull himself up. Finally, his right leg started moving and gave Jack some support. He was up now. Jack placed his left leg into the right shooting position, at the front. His right leg at the back and aimed. He saw what was peaceful field last night, now was a geographical embodiment of hell again. Smoke covered the white sky once again German soldiers were approaching with a look of a hungry predator which is chasing his prey into a corner. Erwin was fearlessly running, still drunk, but somehow his face showed a great determination for victory. Jack now had Erwin at gunpoint, he started to feel how his heart was pumping inside his body, he breathed out a long breath in order to a line his rifle perfectly. Jack could see Erwin perfectly now, he knew that by killing him the German flow would crumble. He looked at his gunpoint then at Erwin once again. Jack remembered what he was saying last night that Erwin reminded himself so much of his father. But still Jack could pull the trigger, in doing so he would disgrace everything what he

loved. Army, family himself, he looked at Erwin once again and thought to himself “get better” and fired.

Seconds after Erwin stopped running and fell forwards, shouting in pain and holding his left leg he was cry out “help me, help me.” The bullet that Jack fired wasn’t aimed at Erwins head or heart, instead it flew right through Erwins left knee cap, thus rupturing the tendon, bones and cartilage. Jack didn’t miss he wanted to wound Erwin but not kill him. Jack saw that the German troops started to slow down moments after they saw Erwin’s body lying on the ground.

–“Turn back turn back!”, somebody shouted in German. And just like by the miracle the whole flow of troops started to turn left, like a massive swarm of bees changing the direction of their fly. Two of the German troops picked up Erwin and carried him back to the German frontline.

–“We did it, we did it! God helped us!”

–“Yes”, thought Jack, “we did it, amen.”

Jack turned around and fell down to the ground, his back against the wooden wall, his legs lying on the ground. Jack felt tired but happy for what he did and for the fact that Germans retreated. Jack turned his head to right then to the left and realized that there was nobody close to him, both halves of his platoon took the far left and right flanks, just like he tough them. Then suddenly Jack noticed a green grenade which was lying next to him, at the start he thought that it was one of his own, but then he noticed a German writing engraved on its green shell, with black ink. It didn’t have the circular primary pull ring. The grenade exploded, right next to Jack.

At the start it was very difficult to even open the eyes. Still with great difficulty Jack did it and saw that his vision was all bleary. Everything has turned into a white and watery color, no shapes, no figures just one blur. "Am I blind?", was the first thought that appeared in Jack's head. He brought his hands to his head, touching his face gently with the tips of his fingers. As he did it the watery, white vision got darker, because now Jack's hands were in the way of the light. "Good, at least my eyes respond to the outside world", thought Jack with a small feeling of relief. He continued touching his face. His skin felt smooth and clean, not dirty or sweaty as it was on the battle front. His had didn't have any bandages, his hair felt washed and they smelled of herbs and grass. "I must be dead and this is heaven, I have been washed up in order to face the almighty creature, who will judge me and decide my fate."

Suddenly, Jack heard voices. Allot of voices saying "He is awake, come, come, he needs your help."

—"Here come the angels", thought to himself Jack, here they are calling the Jesus Christ and his Holly father to look upon me.

—"Here he is doctor, he just woke up"

—"Doctor?", repeated Jack with a strong uncertainty in his voice.

—"Yes, I'm your doctor Jack. My name is Chris, I'm taking care of you here."

—"Where here? Where am I Chris?"

—"You are in a hospital Jack, back in England. In London to be precise. "

—"How did I get here?"

—"You got injured in a battle and you got shipped here."

–“My eyes, what happened with my eyes I can’t see anything, am I blind doctor?”

–“No Jack, you are not blind. You’re eyes are fine, we gave you a serum, which defocuses your vision for a period of time.”

–“Why? What for doctor?”

–“Jack, because we didn’t want you to see it on your own.”

–“See what on my own?” repeated Jack with some anger building inside him now. “See what on my own, God dam you, see what!?”

–“Give me your arm Jack” said doctor Chris still in a very relaxing and calm manner.

Chris took Jack’s arm and slowly dragged it from Jack’s chest down towards his torso and then carried on dragging his arm further down towards Jack’s legs. Doctor moved Jack’s arm only a few inches down and then stopped moving it, because there was nothing else which was tangible. Only the emptiness. The grenade blast blew off Jack’s legs.

Jack was recovering fine. At the start doctors thought to themselves that he would comity suicide and therefore kept all the sharp objects away from Jack. But Jack didn’t allow himself to get broken down by the fact that his legs were no longer with him. Instead he embraced this fact and carried on living. He sometimes even would joke about it. “There is still a half of me left, and my upper part is much better than my lower one.” Doctors couldn’t believe the fact that Jack was recovering from such tragedy with such a pace and courage. All other soldiers who shared the room with Jack in the hospital, were astonished by his determination

for living and not giving up. Jack spent five more weeks, lying on the hospital bed. During those five weeks Jack received two news. One told him that he was now send on a long military vacation for his courage and loyalty to the British forces. Second news told him that his family knew about his injury and that they were preparing for his soon return home.

It was now spring again. The Harcourt mansion didn't change a single bit for the last three years. It defiantly felt good to be back home. Jack made a tore on his wheelchair around the whole residence, before entering the family house. At the entrance everyone was waiting for him with great anxiety. Jack's sisters were smiling and shouting "brother brother oh dear brother". Both of Jack's parents looked happy and proud of their son. Even Jack's father looked more human than he did at the checkpoint conversation. Everything looked peaceful and relaxed, Jack was feeling glad that finally his family was in a state of peace with itself. It was dinner time.

At dinner, Jack's favorite chicken with rice under a sweet, spicy sauce was served. Everyone looked so happy and relaxed, everyone was smiling at one another, which was unusual and made Jack a bit nervous. A silly remark from Stephanie broke an atmosphere of peace.

—"So how was the war brother?"

—"Eee", Jack was caught off guard with this question. "Difficult sister, very difficult but I don't regret the fact that I fought in it."

—"You did good brother" replied Stephanie with a tipsy voice.

—"What do you mean by that sister?"

—"Well, you know Adam from next door. He returned back home

as well, all in one piece.”

–“Oh I see sister, well let me clear something for you. Adam from next door, served in the British force not as a soldier who fights in the battlefield, but as a car driver in the boot camp. He didn’t achieve anything in his life. He is not worthy to call himself a true soldier, he is a loser and nothing more. A loser who hides behind his father’s wealth and shadow. ”

–“At least he is a real man”

–“I beg your pardon, young lady?” said Jack with a strong burning anger appearing inside of him.

–“Well you are not a man brother. You are half man which equals a cripple. Before I could show your photos to my friends and they would all go crazy about how you looked like: tall, masculine, charming. Now, there is nothing of that, I don’t know how to call you anymore. Half man? Baby, little brother? Oh a rust bucket. That’s it you ride one, rust bucket.” “Be quiet you little drunk. . . .” Jack couldn’t bring himself to say rude words about his own sister. Even after her ridiculous behavior.

Father stood up and shouted: “Girls you better leave the family dinner now, I will speak to you later.”

Both Ellie and Stephanie left the dinner table. Now it was only Jack and both of his parents sitting at the table.

–“Forgive her Jack, she became a bit wild after she found out that you had your tragedy. She started drinking.”

–“Not my problem sir, you are the head of the family not me. If you know that she drinks then do something about it.”

–“Jack, we would talk to her, it is just shocking seeing you like this.”

–“Like what? Seeing me like what?”

–“Well, you were always the best at everything so we thought that you would be fine and you would return unharmed.”

–“I’m fine. Listen sir, just because I’m in the wheel chair doesn’t mean that I am nothing. I still portray all the aspects of the strong and great leader and my army position can reinforce this claim very easily.”

–“About that Jack, the problem is that you don’t show any kind of strength or power. Investors and business people want to see a strong man in charge of the banking business. You are the veteran soldier, a war hero but you are in the wheel chair.”

–“And because I’m in the wheel chair means that I’m weak?”

–“Not to us Jack, no” said father with a very quite voice. “You are our son and we care for you, it is just I can’t give you my business, because you are not in the right format as I planned it.”

–“Not in the right format? Are you crazy?! Sorry for shouting, father! But before I was weak because I couldn’t run three kilometers and you were not satisfied with me, but I had my legs. In the army I wasn’t good for you because I did what I believed was right, with my legs. Now I don’t have my legs and I’m still not good enough for you? What is good enough for you?”

–“You are good enough, it is just. . . .”

–“It is just. . . . Jack you have no legs, but still everyone in the whole county knows what I did and they respect and retell my achievements to their kids, hoping that they would be like me. Your son fought in the most devastating war in the human history and returned a hero, but still he is not good enough, just because his legs got blown off by the explosion. Maybe I was good

enough for you three years ago, back when you monologued me in your study? Maybe I was good enough for you when I failed my exams?"

–"It's not that, Jack. I just can't let you run the business, the investors will lose their trust in our authority."

–"I had good exam results, you said they were bad. I went into the army just like you wanted. I came back with respect and good knowledge, now you don't want it. Do you know yourself what do you really want? Do you?!" Jack was shouting now in depression.

–"I just can't do it son, I can't" replied father while staring into the floor.

–"Mother, please speak. Don't just sit here. Please mother!"

After a short pause Jack's mother stood up and gave a short reply. "I agree with you father Jack, we are sorry for you." After saying those words both of the parents stood up and left the kitchen table, allowing Jack to feel physically that he was betrayed and abandon by his own parents and family.

It was the most devastating blow which Jack has ever felt in his life. Like Mr. Lee told him that "most dangerous hit comes from your own friends" but Jack never thought that it is naturally possible to get betrayed by your own family. He was prepared that he would die on the running course in the boot camp or that he would return home in a body bag but never he thought or even dreamed that his own sister and mother would turn away on him. Especially after all that he had been through, Jack wasn't shocked

by the fact that his father didn't want to give him his business to him. But betray from his mother and Stephanie that was too much. Now, for the first time Jack felt that he really was an empty shell, a nobody with nothing. His whole life was withdrawn away from him, except his three last years. Jack sat in his wheel chair at the dining table and dreamed that his family would run back and say something like "surprise it was just a bad dream." But unfortunately it wasn't a dream. The food was getting cold, he was feeling broken and his legs were not growing back. Jack thought that maybe this is the end of his journey, but then he thought about who he was and who he had become. He saw clearly that he was better than before and that everyone respected him apart his own family. Maybe he wasn't the problem maybe his family was the problem. With those thoughts Jack, called a cab to the Harcourt mansion, ordered to bring his unpacked bag downstairs. Jack now say a clear way ahead of him, he wasn't a cripple he was a hero that cared about people not a dressed up person in his family who couldn't accept the reality if it was ugly. Jack knew what needed to be done. He would go on and leave this fake mansion and he would start up his own family, after all now he was ready for it and he had every tool necessary for doing so.