

I MET him at the laundry again today. He pretended to be completely taken up with his dirty washing and unaware of me.

First came the sheets which people here use for reasons of hygiene. Along one edge of every sheet they stitch in tiny letters the word "FEET." This is by way of precaution against one's lips touching any part which the soles of one's feet may have rubbed and contaminated the night before.

Similarly a kick is considered more insulting than a blow with the hand, and not just because the foot hurts more. The distinction is probably a sign that Christianity still lives on: the foot must be wickeder than the rest of the body for

the simple reason that it is farther from heaven. Only the sexual organs are treated with less respect, and here there is some mystery.

Next came pillowcases with dark impressions in the middle. Then towels, which unlike pillowcases get dirtier round the edges, and, last of all, a colorful bundle of crumpled personal linen.

At this point he started tossing his stuff in at such a rate that I couldn't take a good look. Either he was afraid of giving away a secret, or else he was ashamed, as people always are, to exhibit objects directly pertaining to his legs.

But it was suspicious, I thought, that he had worn his clothes so long without getting them laundered. Ordinarily hunchbacks are clean. They are afraid that their clothes may make them still more repulsive. But this one, surprisingly, was such a sloven that he wasn't like a hunchback at all.

The woman who checked the laundry had seen everything. The marks left by the rarest of juices were old acquaintances to her. But even she couldn't help saying quite loudly: "What are you shoving it under my nose for, citizen? If you can't sleep properly, do your own laundry!"

He paid his money without a word and rushed out. I didn't follow him, because I didn't want to attract attention.

At home things were as usual. The minute I got into my room Veronica appeared. She bashfully suggested that we should have supper together. It was a bit awkward for me to say no to the girl. She's the only one in the apartment

who treats me decently. It's a pity that her sympathy is grounded in sexual attraction. I'm absolutely convinced of this after what happened today.

"How's Kostritskaya?" I asked, steering the conversation on to common enemies.

"Oh, Andrei Kazimirovich, she's been making threats again."

"What's wrong?"

"The same as before. Light on in the bathroom and the floor all splashed. Kostritskaya informed me that she's going to complain to the superintendent."

The news infuriated me. I make less use of the plumbing than any of the others. I hardly ever go into the kitchen. Can't I make up for it by using the bathroom?

"Well, let her get on with it," I answered sharply. "She burns light by the kilowatt herself. And her children broke my bottle. Let the superintendent come."

But I knew very well that an appeal to the authorities would be a very risky business for me. Why draw attention to myself unnecessarily?

"Don't upset yourself, Andrei Kazimirovich," said Veronica. "I'll look after any trouble with the neighbors. Please don't upset yourself."

She put out her hand to touch my forehead, but I managed to dodge. "No, no, I'm quite well, I haven't got a temperature. Let's have supper."

Food stood on the table, steaming and stinking. The sadism of cookery has always amazed me. Would-be chickens are eaten in liquid form. The innards of pigs are stuffed

with their own flesh. A gut that's swallowed itself garnished with stillborn chickens—what else, when you think of it, is scrambled egg with sausage?

Wheat is treated more unmercifully still: they cut it, beat it, crush it to dust.

"Eat up now, Andrei Kazimirovich," said Veronica coaxingly. "Please don't let it worry you. I'll take the blame for everything."

What about preparing a man to the same recipe? Take an engineer or writer, stuff him with his own brains, place a violet in one braised nostril, and dish him up to his colleagues for dinner. Yes, the torments of Christ, Jan Hus, and Stenka Razin are a bagatelle compared with the agonies of a fish jerked out of water on a hook. They at least knew what it was all for.

"Tell me, Andrei Kazimirovich, are you very lonely," asked Veronica, coming back with the teapot. When she had gone to fetch it I had emptied my plate into a sheet of newspaper.

"Did you ever have any friends"—she put in sugar—"or children"—another spoonful—"or a woman you loved?" . . . stir, stir, stir.

It was easy to see that Veronica was agitated.

"You are all the friends I need," I answered cautiously. "And as for women, you can see for yourself: I'm old and humpbacked. Old and humpbacked," I repeated with ruthless insistence.

I honestly wanted to forestall a declaration of love: things were difficult enough without it. It wasn't worth spoiling our alliance against the spiteful neighbors by rousing this unattached girl to a keener interest in myself.

To avoid trouble I thought of pretending to be an alcoholic. Or a criminal. Or perhaps better still a madman, or even a pederast? But I was afraid that any one of these roles would lend my person a dangerous fascination.

All I could do was to dwell on my hump, my age, my wretched salary, my humble job as a bookkeeper, and all the time it took up, to insist that only a woman with a hump to match would be right for me, whereas a normal, beautiful woman needed a symmetrical man.

"No, you are too noble," Veronica decided. "You think of yourself as a cripple, and you're afraid of being a burden. Don't think it's pity on my part. It's just that I like cactus, and you are like a cactus. What a lot of them you've got growing there on your window sill!"

Her hot fingers touched my hand. I jumped as if I'd been scalded.

"You're freezing—are you ill?" asked Veronica anxiously. She was puzzled by my body temperature.

This was too much. I pleaded a migraine and asked her to leave me.

"Till tomorrow," said Veronica, waving her hand like a little girl. "And you can give me a cactus for a present tomorrow. I know you will."

This gentle girl talked to me like a head bookkeeper. She declared her love for me and demanded a reward.

Didn't I read somewhere that people in love are like humble slaves? Nothing of the kind. A man only has to fall in love to feel himself lord and master, with the right to boss anyone who doesn't love him enough. How I wish that nobody loved me!

When I was alone I set about watering my cacti from an enamel mug. I fed them slowly, my little humpbacked children, and relaxed.

It was two o'clock in the morning, when, faint from hunger, I crept on tiptoe along the dark corridor to the bathroom. But what a splendid supper I had then!

It isn't at all easy, eating only once a day.

That was two weeks ago. Since then Veronica has informed me that she has two beaux: a lieutenant and an actor at the Stanislavsky Theater. But it hasn't stopped her showing her predilection for me. She has threatened to shave her head so that I can't keep saying how stupid it would be to sacrifice her beauty to an old freak. Now she has got around to spying on me, lying in wait for me on the way to the bathroom.

"Cleanliness makes hunchbacks handsome"—that's my stock answer when she keeps asking why I take so many baths.

Just in case, I have started blocking up the frosted window between the bathroom and the lavatory with a piece of plywood. I always try the bolts before undressing. I couldn't stand the thought of somebody watching me.

Yesterday morning I wanted to fill my fountain pen, to continue my irregular diary, so I knocked at her door. Veronica wasn't up yet. She was reading *The Three Musketeers* in bed.

"Good morning," I said politely. "You'll be late for your lecture."

She closed her book. "Do you know," she said, "that the whole house thinks I'm your mistress?"

I said nothing, and then something horrible happened. Veronica, her eyes flashing, threw back the counterpane, and her whole body, completely uncovered, stared up at me angrily. "Look what you've turned down, Andrei Kazimirovich!"

Fifteen years ago I came across a textbook on anatomy. I wanted to know what was what, so I studied carefully all the pictures and diagrams. Later on, I had an opportunity of watching little boys bathing in the river at the Corky Park of Culture and Rest. But, as it happened, I had never seen a naked woman in the flesh and at such close quarters.

It was—I repeat—horrible. I found that her whole body was of the same unnatural whiteness as her neck, face, and hands. A pair of white breasts dangled in front. At first I took them for secondary arms, amputated above the elbow. But each of them terminated in a round nipple like a push button.

Farther on, and right down to her legs, the whole available space was occupied by a spherical belly. That is where the food swallowed in the course of a day collects in a heap. Its lower half was overgrown with curly hair like a little head.

The problem of sex, which plays such a major role in their intellectual and moral life, had long troubled me. For safety's sake, I suppose, it has been wrapped from ancient times in a veil of impenetrable secrecy. Even the textbook on anatomy has nothing to say on the subject, or says it so vaguely and cursorily that no one can guess what it truly means.

So now, overcoming my confusion, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity, to take a look at the place

mentioned in the anatomy textbook as the site of that genital apparatus which shoots out ready-made infants like a catapult.

I caught a glimpse of something resembling human features. Only it didn't look female to me, but more like an old man's face, unshaven and baring its teeth.

A hungry, angry man dwelt there between her legs. He probably snored at night, and relieved his boredom with foul language. This must explain woman's dual nature, of which the poet Lermontov has aptly said:

Fair as an angel of heaven,
As a fiend cruel and false.

There was no time to work the thing out, because Veronica suddenly shuddered and said:

"Come on!"

She shut her eyes and opened her mouth, like a fish pulled out of water. She thrashed about on the bed like a great white fish, helplessly, vainly, and bluish goose pimples covered her body.

"Forgive me, Veronica Grigorievna," I said timidly. "Forgive me," I said, "it's time for me to go to the office."

And I tried to tread lightly and not to look back as I went away.

It was raining outside, but I was in no hurry. It was cleaning day in the department. I had escaped from Veronica, pleading official business (the estimates, the nicotine, Head Bookkeeper Zykov, those crazy typists—

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all for 650 rubles a month), and now I could afford the great luxury of a walk in the open in wet weather.

I found a leaky drainpipe and stationed myself under the stream. It ran right down my neck, cool and delicious, and in about three minutes I was damp enough.

The people hurrying past, all of them with umbrellas and rubber soles, looked at me sideways, intrigued by my behavior. I had to change my position, so I took a stroll through the puddles. My shoes were letting water in nicely. Down below, at least, I was enjoying myself.

"Oh Veronica, Veronica," I repeated indignantly. "Why were you so cruel as to fall in love with me? Why weren't you just the least bit ashamed of your appearance, why did you behave with such ruthless candor?"

Shame, after all, is man's fundamental virtue. It is a dim realization that he is irredeemably ugly, an instinctive dread of what he hides under cloth. Only shame, shame, shame can lend him a certain nobility, make him not of course more beautiful but at least more modest.

Needless to say, when I got here I followed the general fashion. You must observe the laws of the country you're compelled to live in. And anyway the constant danger of being caught, of being found out, made me force my body into this fancy dress.

But in their place I wouldn't shed my fur coat, let alone my suit, not even at night. I would find a plastic surgeon to shorten my legs and at least put a hump on my back. Hunchbacks are certainly a bit better-looking than the rest of them here, though they are monsters too.

Dejectedly I made my way to Herzen Street. My hunchback lodged there in a semi-basement opposite the Conservatoire. For six weeks now I had had my eye on this gracefully vaulted person who was so unlike a human being, and reminded me somehow of my lost youth.

I had seen him three times at the laundry and once in a flower shop, buying a cactus. I had been lucky enough to find out his address from a receipt which he had tendered to the laundress.

The time had come to dot the *i's*.

I told myself that it was impossible, that they had all perished and that I was the sole survivor, like Robinson Crusoe. Why, I had liquidated, with my own hands, all that was left after the crash. There were no others here but me.

But what if they'd sent him to look for me? Pretending to be a hunchback, in disguise . . . They hadn't forgotten me! They'd realized what had happened and mounted a search!

But how could they know? After thirty-two years. By local time, but still. Alive and well. That was quite something.

But why here precisely? That was the question. Nobody had meant to come here. Quite a different direction. It couldn't happen. We missed our way. Back of beyond. Seven and a half months. Then it happened.

Perhaps it was accidental. Exactly the same mistake. A deviation from course and the winter timetable. Any port in a storm. Do coincidences happen? Alike as two

peas. Where none had set foot. It can happen, can't it? Disguised as a hunchback. Exactly like me. Even if there were only one, exactly like me!

The door was opened by a lady like Kostritskaya. Only this Kostritskaya was bigger and older. She exuded a smell of lilac, ten times normal strength. Perfume, that was.

"Leopold will be back soon. Come in, please."

An unseen dog was barking at the other end of the corridor. It couldn't make up its mind to spring at me. But I had had nasty experiences with animals of this kind.

"What's wrong? She won't bite. Down, Niksa, quiet!" We wrangled politely while the animal raged, and three heads emerged from side doors. They looked me up and down with interest and cursed the dog. The din was awful.

I got through to the room, at great risk, and found there a small child armed with a saber. When he saw us he asked for berries and sugar and set up a yell, wriggling and pulling faces.

"He's a sweet tooth. Just like me," Kostritskaya explained. "Stop whining, or this man will eat you."

To please my hostess, I said jokingly that for soup I drank children's blood, warmed up. The child was quiet at once. He dropped his saber and cowered in the far corner. He didn't take his eyes off me. They were full of animal terror.

"Is he like Leopold?" the Kostritskaya asked, as though casually, but with a hoarse tenderness in her voice.

I pretended to believe the innuendo. The stale air, laced with the exhalations of lilac, made me feel sick. The smell irritated my skin, and a rash broke out in several places. I was afraid that my face might come out in green spots.

I could hear the savage Nikea scratching the corridor floor with her claws, and sniffing my tracks with a noisy snuffle. The excited lady lodgers, unaware of my heightened aural sensitivity, were conversing in half-whispers. "Anybody can see he's Leopold Sergeevich's brother. . ."

"No, you're wrong, our hunchy is Pushkin's twin compared to this one."

"Hope to God I never dream of anything like that . . ."

"Makes you feel funny just to look at him. . ."

All this was interrupted by Leopold's arrival. I remember that I liked the way he plunged straight into his part—the classic part of the hunchback who meets a monster like himself in the presence of third parties.

"Aha, a companion in misfortune! With whom have I the honor. . . To what am I indebted. . ."

He was copying a psychological pattern as fine-spun as a spider's web, pride protected by self-mockery, shame hiding itself in buffoonery. He mounted his chair like a horseman, gripping the seat between his legs, jumping up and sitting down again back to front, resting his head on the chair back, pulling weird faces, and continually shrugging his shoulders as though feeling the hump that loomed over him like a rucksack.

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"Yes, yes. So you're Andrei Kazimirovich. And my name, funny enough, is Leopold Sergeevich. As you can see I'm a bit of a hunchback too."

I was delighted with this skilful caricature of humanity, this art which was all the more natural because it was so absurd, and I realized rather sadly that he was my superior at the game of living, that I lacked his ability to enter into the only form of being possible for us on earth . . . that of hunchbacked monsters and injured egotists.

But business is business, and I gave him to understand that I wished to talk to him—*confidentially*.

"I don't mind going," said Kostritskaya huffily, and gave me a farewell gust of her caustic aroma as she left the room.

I revenged myself with the thought that she was saturated through and through in this smell. Even her excrement must smell of perfume, instead of boiled potatoes and home comforts, as is usually the case. She must piss pure eau de Cologne. In this atmosphere poor Leopold would soon wither away.

When we were alone, except for the petrified child sitting in the far corner with a dazed look of horror and mystification on his face, I asked him straight out:

"How long since you left?"

"Left where?" he answered evasively.

Our hostess's departure had wiped the assumed merriment from his face. Not a trace of that clownish exhibitionism found in most hunchbacks, who are clever

enough to hide their spines and proud enough not to suffer because of it. I thought that he hadn't pulled himself together yet, and that from inertia he was wearily keeping up the pretense of being something other than his true self.

"Cut it out," I said quietly. "I recognized you at first sight. You and I come from the same place. We're relatives, so to speak. PKHENTZ! PKHENTZ!" I whispered, to remind him of a name sacred to us both.

"What did you say? . . . You know, I thought there was something rather familiar about you. Where could I have seen you before?"

He rubbed his brow, frowned, twisted his lips. The mobility of his face was almost human, and again I envied his extraordinarily well-rehearsed technique, although these cautious habits were beginning to irritate me.

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "Didn't you work once in the Stationery Supplies set-up? The director there in 'forty-four was Yakov Solomonovich Zak—such a nice little Jew . . ."

"I don't know any Zak," I answered curtly. "But I know very well that you, Leopold Sergeevich, are not Leopold Sergeevich at all, and no hunchback, although you keep flourishing your hump all over the place. We've had enough of pretenses now. After all, I'm taking just as big a risk as you are."

It was as though the devil had got into him:

"How dare you tell me who I am? Spoiling my relations with the landlady, and then insulting me as well! Go and find yourself a gorgeous woman like that," he

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said, "and then you can discuss my physical defects. You're more of a hunchback than I am! You're more disgusting. Monster! Hunchback! Wretched cripple!"

Suddenly he burst out laughing and clapped his hand to his head: "Now I remember! I've seen you at the laundry. The only resemblance between us is that we got our clothes washed in the same place."

This time I didn't doubt his sincerity. He really did think that he was Leopold Sergeevich. He had entered too fully into his part, gone native, become human, over-adjusted to his surroundings, surrendered to alien influences. He had forgotten his former name, betrayed his distant homeland, and unless somebody helped him he was as good as lost.

I grabbed him by his shoulders and shook him carefully. I shook him, and implored him in a gentle, friendly way to remember, to make an effort and remember, to return to his true self. What did he want with that Kos-tritskaya, who oozed such a poisonous odor? Even among humans bestiality was not respectable. And besides, betrayal of the homeland, even without malice aforethought, even out of ordinary forgetfulness . . .

"PKHENTZ! PKHENTZ!" I said over and over again, and repeated other words which I still remembered.

Suddenly an inexplicable warmth reached me through his Boston jacket. His shoulders were getting hotter and hotter, as hot as Veronica's hand, and thousands of other hot hands which I have preferred not to shake in greeting.

"Forgive me," I said, relaxing my hold. "I think there's some mistake. A regrettable misunderstanding. You see,

I—how can I explain to you?—I'm subject to nervous attacks . . .”

Just then I heard a terrible row and turned round. The child was dancing about behind me, at a respectful distance, and threatening me with his saber.

“Let Leopold alone!” he shouted. “Nasty man! Let Leopold alone! My mommy loves him. He’s my daddy, he’s my Leopold, not yours!”

There could be no doubt about it. I had mistaken my man. He was a normal human, the most normal of humans, hunchback or not.

I feel worse every day. Winter has arrived—the coldest season in this part of the world. I never put my nose out of the house.

Still, it’s a sin to grumble. I retired on pension after the November holiday. I don’t get much, but it’s less worrying this way. How should I have managed otherwise during my last illness? I shouldn’t have had the strength to dash to the office, and getting a doctor’s note would have been awkward and dangerous. I wasn’t going to submit to medical examination in my old age. It would have been the end of me.

Sometimes I ask myself a tricky question: why shouldn’t I, after all, legalize my position? Why have I spent thirty years pretending to be somebody else, like a criminal? *Andreï Kazimirovich Sushinski. Half-Polish, half-Russian. Aged 61. Disabled. Not a Party member. Bachelor. No relatives, no children. Never been abroad.*

Born at Irkutsk. Father: clerk. Mother: housewife. Both died of cholera in 1901. And that’s it!

But what about going to the police, apologizing, and telling the whole story simply, explaining it all just as it happened?

Well then, I’d say, it’s like this. You can see for yourselves—I’m a creature from another world. Not from Africa or India, not even from Mars or one of your Venuses, but from somewhere still more remote and inaccessible. You don’t even have names for such places, and if you spread out all the star maps and charts in existence before me, I honestly couldn’t show you where that splendid point of light, my birthplace, has got to.

In the first place, I’m not an expert on astronomical matters. I went where I was taken. And in the second place, the picture’s quite different, I can’t recognize my native skies from your books and maps and things. Even now, I go out into the street at night, look up and there it is again—all wrong. I don’t even know in which direction to yearn. It may be that not even my sun, let alone my earth, can be seen from here. It may be one of those on the other side of the galaxy. I can’t work it out.

Please don’t think that I came here with some ulterior motive. Migration of peoples, war of the worlds, and all that rot. Anyway, I’m not a military man, nor a scientist, nor an explorer. Bookkeeping is my profession—my profession here, that is. What I did before is best not mentioned. You wouldn’t understand if I did.

In fact we had no intention of flying into space. To put it crudely we were going to a holiday resort. Then, on the way, something occurred—let's say it was a meteorite to make it easier for you—well then, we lost buoyancy and down we fell, into the unknown, for seven and a half months we went on falling—our months, though, not yours—and by pure chance we landed up here.

When I came to and looked around—all my fellow travelers were dead. I buried them in the prescribed way, and started trying to adapt myself.

Everything around was exotic and unfathomable. A moon was burning in the sky, huge and yellow—but only one moon. The air was wrong, the light was wrong, and all the gravities and pressures were strange. What can I say? The most elementary pine tree affected my otherworldly senses as a porcupine affects you.

Where could I go? I had to eat and drink. Of course, I'm not a man and not an animal; I incline more to the vegetable kingdom than to anything else you have here; but I too have my basic needs. The first thing I need is water, for want of a better form of moisture, and preferably at a certain temperature, and now and then I want the missing salts added to my water. And besides I felt a growing chill in the surrounding atmosphere. I don't have to tell you what Siberian frosts are like.

There was nothing for it, I had to leave the forest. For some days past I'd been looking at people from behind the bushes, sizing them up. I realized at once that they were rational creatures; but I was afraid to begin with that they might eat me. I draped myself in a bunch of

rags (this was my first theft, and it was pardonable in the circumstances) and came out of the bushes with a look of friendship written all over me.

The Yakuts are a trusting and hospitable people. It was from them that I acquired the simplest human habits. Then I made my way to more civilized regions. I learned the language, obtained an education, and taught arithmetic in a secondary school in the town of Irkutsk. I resided in the Crimea for a time, but soon left because of the climate: it's oppressively hot in summer, and not warm enough in winter, so that you still need a room with radiators, and conveniences of that sort weren't too common there in the 'twenties and cost a lot of money, more than I could manage. So I made my home in Moscow, and I've been here ever since.

If I were to tell this sad tale, no matter to whom, no matter how skillfully edited for the general reader, nobody would believe me, not at any price. If I could only cry as my story requires. But though I've learned to laugh after a fashion I don't know how to weep. They'd think I was a madman, a fantasist, and what's more they might put me on trial for having a false passport, forging signatures and stamps, and other illegal activities.

And if, against all reason, they did believe me it would be worse still.

Academics from all the academies everywhere would flock in—astronomers, agronomists, physicists, economists, geologists, philologists, psychologists, biologists,

microbiologists, chemists, and biochemists, to study me down to the last spot on my body, omitting nothing. They would be forever questioning, interrogating, examining, extracting.

Theses, films, and poems about me would circulate in millions of copies. Ladies would start wearing green lipstick and having their hats made to look like cactus, or failing that like rubber plants. For years to come all hunchbacks would enjoy enormous successes with women.

Motor cars would be called after my homeland, and after me hundreds of newborn infants, as well as streets and dogs. I should become as famous as Leo Tolstoy, or Gulliver, or Hercules. Or Galileo Galilei.

But in spite of this universal interest in my humble person nobody would understand a thing. How could they understand me, when I myself am quite unable to express my inhuman nature in their language. I beat about the bush and try to make some headway with metaphors, but when it comes to the point I can find nothing to say. I can only see a short, solid GOGRY, hear a rapid VZGLY-AGU, and an indescribably beautiful PKHENTZ beams down upon my trunk. Fewer and fewer such words remain in my memory. I can convey their structure only approximately in human speech. If I were surrounded by linguists asking "what do you call this" I could only shrug my shoulders and say: GOGRY TUZHEROSKIP.

No, I'd better put up with living lonely and incognito. If anything as special as me turns up it should exist unnoticed. And die unnoticed.

But then, when I die they may put me in a glass jar, pickle me in alcohol, and exhibit me in a Natural History Museum. And the people filing past will shiver with horror and laugh insultingly to cheer themselves up, and say with a grimace of disgust: "Heavens, how abnormal, what an ugly freak!"

I'm not a freak, I tell you! Just because I'm different do you have to be rude? It's no good measuring my beauty against your own hideousness. I'm handsomer than you, and more normal. Every time I look at myself I have the evidence of my own eyes for it.

Just before I fell ill the bath was cracked. I found out about it late one evening and realized that Kostriskaya had done it to vex me. I couldn't expect any help from poor Veronica. Veronica had been offended with me ever since the occasion when she offered me what was, humanly speaking, her most valuable possession, and I'd gone for a walk instead.

She has married the actor from the Stanislavsky, and sometimes the sound of their ethereal kisses wings to my ears through the thin wall. I was genuinely glad, for her sake, and on their wedding day I went so far as to send them an anonymous cake, with her initials and some arabesques executed in chocolate.

But I was incredibly hungry, and Kostriskaya had damaged the bath to destroy me, and, pending repairs, the hole where the water ran out had been stopped up with a wooden bung, and the water turned off. So when everybody had gone to bed and I could hear snores from

the floor above and the floor below and all the rooms either side, I took Veronica's washtub off its nail in the lavatory, where it hangs with all the neighbors' tubs. It banged like thunder as I dragged it along the corridor, and somebody downstairs stopped snoring. But I finished the job, boiled a kettle in the kitchen, drew a bucketful of cold water, carried the lot into my room, bolted the door and stuck the key in the keyhole.

What pleasure it gave me to throw off my clothes, remove my wig, tear off my genuine India-rubber ears, and unbuckle the straps which constrict my back and chest. My body opened out like a potted palm brought home from the shop in wrapping paper. All the limbs which had grown numb in the course of the day came to tingling life.

I installed myself in the tub, seized a sponge in one hand to squeeze water over all the dry places, and held the kettle in my second hand. With my third hand I grasped a mug of cold water, added some hot to it, and tried it with my fourth and last remaining hand to see that it wasn't too hot. What comfort!

My skin freely absorbed the precious fluid pouring down on me from the enamel mug, and when the first pangs of hunger were allayed I decided to inspect myself closely, and wash off the unhealthy slime which had seeped out of my pores and congealed in some places in dry mauve clots. True, the eyes in my hands and feet, on the crown of my head and the nape of my neck were getting appreciably dimmer, from being covered up in the day time by rough clothes and false hair. The friction of my right shoe had

cost me the sight of one eye back in 1934. It wasn't easy to carry out a really thorough inspection.

But I swivelled my head, not limiting myself to a half-circle—the miserable 180 degrees allotted to the human neck—I blinked simultaneously all the eyes which were still intact, driving away fatigue and darkness, and I succeeded in viewing myself on all sides and from several different angles at once. What a fascinating sight it is, and what a pity that it is only accessible to me in the all-too-short hours of night. I only have to raise my hand and I can see myself from the ceiling, soaring and hovering over myself as it were. And at the same time I keep in view my lower parts, my back, my front, all the spreading branches of my body. If I hadn't been living in exile for thirty-two years I should probably never dream of admiring my exterior. But here I am the only example of that lost harmony and beauty which I call my homeland. What is there for me to do on this earth except delight in my person?

Yes, my rear hand is twisted by its permanent duty of representing a human hump. Yes, my fore hand is so maimed by the straps that two fingers have withered, and my old body has lost its former suppleness. I'm still beautiful for all that! Proportionate! Elegant! Whatever envious carpers may say.

These were my thoughts as I watered myself from the enamel mug, on the night when Kostritskaya took it into her head to murder me by means of a cracked bath. But by morning I was ill. I must have caught cold in the tub. The worst time in my life had begun.

For a week and a half I lay on my hard couch and felt myself drying up. I hadn't the strength to go along to the kitchen for water. My body, a tightly swaddled anthropoid sack, grew numb and inert. My desiccated skin cracked. I couldn't raise myself to slacken my wire-sharp bonds.

A week and a half went by and nobody came in.

I could imagine my neighbors joyfully ringing up the health center when I was dead. The district medical officer would come to certify the fatal outcome, would bend over my couch, cut open my clothing, my bandages and my straps with his surgical scissors, recoil in horror and give orders for my corpse to be delivered to the biggest and best of dissecting theaters as soon as possible.

Here it came—the jar of spirit, caustic as Kostritskaya's perfume! Into the toxic jar, into a glassy dungeon, into history—for the edification of posterity to the end of time they would plunge me, the monster, the greatest monster on earth.

I started groaning, quietly at first, then louder and louder, in hateful and indispensable human language. "Mama, mama, mama," I groaned, imitating the intonation of a tearful child and hoping to awaken the pity of anybody who heard me. And in those two hours, while I was calling for help, I vowed that if I lived I would keep my secret to the end, and not let this last vestige of my homeland, this beautiful body, fall into the hands of my enemies for them to rend and mock.

Veronica came in. She had obviously lost weight, and her eyes, purged of love and resentment, were serene and indifferent.

Pkhentz

"Water!" I croaked.

"If you're ill," said Veronica, "you ought to get undressed and take your temperature. I'll call the doctor. They'll bleed you."

The doctor! Bleed me! Get undressed! Next she'd be touching my forehead, which was as cool as the air in the room, and feeling for my nonexistent pulse with her red-hot fingers. But Veronica only straightened the pillow, and snatched her hand away in disgust when it came into contact with my wig. Evidently my body only revolted her, like all other humans.

"Water! Water for Christ's sake!"

"Do you want it out of the tap or boiled?"

In the end she went out and came back with a decanter. She polished a dusty tumbler with such a pensive and leisurely air that I should have thought she was taking her revenge on me if I hadn't known that she knew nothing.

"You know, Andrei Kazimirovich, I really did love you. I realize that I loved you—how shall I put it—out of pity . . . Pity for a lonely, crippled human being, if you will forgive my frankness. But I loved you so much . . . didn't notice . . . physical blemishes . . . To me you were the handsomest man on earth, Andrei Kazimirovich . . . the most . . . man. And when you laughed at me so cruelly . . . make an end of myself . . . loved . . . won't conceal from you . . . worthy man . . . Fell in love . . . man . . . human . . . humanity . . . man to man . . ."

"Veronica Grigorievna," I interrupted, unable to bear it any longer, "please hurry. Water . . ."

"Human . . . manhu . . . hanumanu . . . Human . . . manhu . . . umanu . . . hanumanu . . . human . . ."
 "Water! Water!"

Veronica filled the tumbler and suddenly raised it right to my mouth. My false teeth rattled on the glass, but I couldn't bring myself to take the liquid internally. I need watering from above, like a flower or an apple tree, not through my mouth.

"Drink, drink!" Veronica urged me. "I thought you wanted water . . ."

I pushed her off and struggled up into a sitting position, feeling like death. Water ran out of my mouth on to the couch. I managed to put out my hand and catch a few drops.

"Give me the flask and go away," I ordered with all the firmness I could muster. "Leave me in peace! I'll drink it myself."

Slow tears trickled from Veronica's eyes.

"Why do you hate me?" she asked. "What have I done to you? You were the one who didn't want my love, who rejected my pity . . . You're just vicious and nasty, Andrei Kazimirovich, you're a very bad man."

"Veronica, if you have so much as a grain of pity left in you, go away, I beg you, I implore you, go away, leave me alone."

She went out dejectedly. Then I unbuttoned my shirt and stuck the flask inside it, neck downwards.

Nature is all scurry and bustle. Everything is in a fever of excitement. Leaves come out hurriedly. Sparrows sing in broken snatches. Children hurry off to their

exams. Outside the voices of nannies are shrill and hysterical. The air has a tang in it. The *Kostritskaya* smell—in a low concentration—is all pervading. Even the cacti on my windowsill have a lemony aroma in the mornings. I mustn't forget to make Veronica a present of them before I leave.

I'm afraid my last illness has done for me. It hasn't just wrecked my body, it's crippled me spiritually as well. Strange desires come upon me at times. I feel an urge to go to the pictures. Or else I think I should like a game of draughts with Veronica Grigorievna's husband. He's said to be a first-class chess player.

I have reread my notes, and am not happy about them. The influence of an alien *milieu* is felt in every sentence. What good to anybody is this idle chatter in a local dialect? Another thing I mustn't forget before I leave—to burn them. I've no intention of showing them to people. And my own kind will never read them or hear anything about me. They'll never fly such an unearthly distance to this outlandish place.

It's getting harder and harder for me to recall the past. Only a few words of my native tongue have survived. I've even forgotten how to think as I used to, let alone read or write. I remember something beautiful, but what exactly it was I don't know.

Sometimes I fancy that I left children behind at home. Ever such bonny little cacti. Mustn't forget to give them to Veronica. They must be quite big now. Vasya's going to school. What am I saying, school! He must be a sturdy adult. He's gone in for engineering. And Masha is married.

Lord, oh Lord! I seem to be turning into a man!

No, it wasn't for this that I stood thirty-two years of suffering, and lay on a hard couch without water last winter. The only reason I got better was so that I could go and hide in some quiet spot and die without causing a sensation. That's the only way I can preserve what is left.

Everything is ready for my departure: my ticket and seat-reservation to Irkutsk, my can for water, a decent sum of money. I've got practically my whole pension for the winter on my savings book. I didn't spend anything on a fur coat, nor on trams or trolleybuses. I didn't go to the pictures once in all that time. And I gave up paying rent three months ago now. I've got 1,657 rubles altogether.

The day after tomorrow, when everybody's gone to bed, I shall leave the house unnoticed and take a taxi to the station. A hoot of the whistle—and that's the last you'll see of me. Forests, forests as green as my mother's body, will take me in and hide me.

I'll make it somehow or other. For part of the way I'll hire a boat. It's about 350 kilometers. And all by river. Water right beside me. Drench myself three times a day if I want to.

There was a hole. I'll search till I find it. The hole we made when we fell. Put wood all round it. Juniper blazes up like gunpowder. I'll sit down in the hole, untie myself and wait. Not a single human thought will I think, not a single word of alien speech will I utter.

When the first frosts begin and I see that the time is ripe—just one match will be enough. There will be nothing left of me.

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But that's a long time off. There will be many warm and pleasant nights. And many stars in the summer sky. Which one of them? . . . Who knows? I will gaze at them all, together and individually, gaze with all my eyes. One of them is mine.

Oh native land! PKHENTS! GOCRY TUZHEROSKIPI! I am coming back to you. GOCRY! GOCRY! GOCRY! TUZHEROSKIPI! TUZHEROSKIPI! BONJOUR! GUTENABEND! TUZHEROSKIPI! BU-BU-BU! MIAOW, MIAOW! PKHENTS!

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NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS