The Sublimes

Yuri Mamleyev

Шатуны

Юрий Мамлеев

Yuri Mamleyev. THE SUBLIMES

Translated from the Russian by Marian Schwartz

The Sublimes, by Russian writer and philosopher Yuri Vitalievich Mamleyev, is indisputably one of the most stunning works of contemporary world literature, a profound, multidimensional, vivid, and initiatory novel.

The present edition is unique in several respects.

First, this is the novel's first complete translation into English, brilliantly executed by Marian Schwartz (previously only an abridged version had been published and in a less than satisfactory translation).

Moreover, this is the first English-Russian bilingual printed edition of The Sublimes, from the Tradition publishing group.

Western literary critics once wrote that "the world wasn't ready for this book." Well, the "world" may never be "ready." The main thing is that you are, dear readers!

Юрий Мамлеев. ШАТУНЫ

Роман русского писателя и философа Юрия Витальевича Мамлеева "Шатуны", бесспорно, одно из самых потрясающих произведений современной мировой литературы. Это глубинное, многоплановое, яркое, посвятительное произведение.

Данное издание уникально во многих аспектах.

Это первый полный перевод романа Ю.В. Мамлеева "Шатуны" на английский язык, блистательно выполненный Мариан Шварц (ранее на английском публиковался только сокращенный вариант в небезупречном переводе).

Это первое двуязычное печатное издание "Шатунов" на английском и русском языках в редакции издательской группы "Традиция".

Когда-то западные литературные критики писали, что "мир еще не готов к этой книге". Что же, вполне возможно, что "мир" так никогда и не будет "готов" – главное, чтобы были готовы вы, дорогие читатели!

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Шатуны (Original Russian Version)

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Part One

I

In the spring of 1960-something, an evening commuter train slashed the darkness of the small towns and forests outside Moscow, carrying its sounds rhythmically away, farther and farther. Inside, the train cars were bright and nearly empty. People sat frozen, as if spellbound, as if they'd tuned out from everything they normally did, from life itself, and didn't know where this train was taking them.

There were all of seven people in the middle car. A disheveled old woman stared into a sack of potatoes, nearly falling into it face first. A strapping fellow chewed an onion the whole time, peering straight ahead into the emptiness with a frightened and bemused look. A fat woman was curled up into a ball so you couldn't even see her face.

While he sat in the corner—Fyodor Sonnov.

He was a bulky man of forty or so, with an odd, inward-looking, dully fixed face; the expression on this large, furrowed, and wrinkly plane was brutally alienated and self-absorbed while also aimed at the world—but aimed only in the sense that, for the owner of this face, it was as if the world didn't exist.

Fyodor was dressed simply and his gray, slightly ripped jacket covered his large belly, which he kept sucking in, in a focused way, occasionally slapping it as if his belly were his second face—eyeless and mouthless, but perhaps even more real.

The way Fyodor breathed out made it sound as if he were actually taking air in. Sonnov's eyes, bleary from his bulky existence, kept scrutinizing the people sitting there.

He practically skewered them to his gaze, although his inner being itself passed straight through them, as if through a condensed emptiness.

Finally, the train slowed. The little people trailed each other to the exit, wagging their behinds. Fyodor rose with the same feeling an elephant does.

The station was small, cozily lost among persistent, lopsided little wooden houses. As soon as the little people hopped onto the platform, their folly slipped away and, after bizarrely reviving, they ran off—onward, onward!

The sack lady carried her sack to a dark fence, leaned over, and shat in it.

The strapping fellow didn't run; he galloped forward, in leaps and bounds, comfortably swinging his paws. Evidently, life was beginning. Fyodor, however, was unaltered. He meandered, swiveling his head, examining his surroundings, as if he'd just landed from the moon.

On the central square, a mangy cur of a bus—no, two buses—were parked alongside each other. One was nearly empty. The other was so crammed with people, it even emitted a voluptuous sputtering. But Sonnov ignored all that folderol.

Walking past a pole, out of the blue he punched a solitary lad wandering nearby right in the jaw. Though the blow was hard and the lad sprawled into a ditch, it was delivered with such inward indifference, Sonnov might as well have been poking the emptiness, except that a physical shudder passed through his bulky body. He walked on, benumbed as ever, glancing at the poles.

It took the lad a long time to recover from the bizarre expression on Sonnov's face when he dealt the punch, and by the time he did, Sonnov was long gone.

Fyodor wandered down a narrow street, darkly maddened by absurd, ugly houses. Suddenly he stopped and sat down in the grass. He lifted his shirt and started slapping his belly, deliberately, with meaning and significance, as if his consciousness were focused in his hand. He looked at the treetops and snarled at the stars. And began to sing.

He sang like an anguished animal, coughing words through his rotten teeth. It was a nonsensical song criminals sang. Finally Fyodor hiked up his pants, stood up, and slapped himself on the backside, as if propelling himself forward with a new thought born in his brain: to walk "til kingdom come. Finally, he turned into a dense forest. The trees there were exalted now, no longer grown from their former element; not too badly soiled with vomit or trash, they simply shone from within with a turbid human degeneracy and affliction. It wasn't the grass that was cropped but human souls.

Fyodor strayed off the path. An hour later, he saw a dark human silhouette a way's off walking toward him. Then it turned into the angular figure of a fellow of about twenty-six. At first Sonnov didn't react to him, but then he suddenly showed a keen, dead interest.

"Got a smoke?" he asked the fellow glumly.

The fellow, his stupid face all cheerful, rummaged through his pockets as if he were playing with his penis.

Right then, Fyodor gave a convulsive grunt, as if tossing back a glass of vodka, and planted an enormous carving knife in the fellow's belly, the kind of knife ordinarily used to slaughter livestock.

Pressing the fellow up against a tree, Fyodor dug the knife around in the man's belly, as if trying to find and kill some unknown but living thing in there. Then he calmly laid the corpse out on God's green grass and dragged him off to the side, toward a glade.

At that moment the moon was bared, high in the black sky. A deadly golden light flooded the glade, the rustling grass, and the tree stumps.

Fyodor, his face now mellow, sat on a stump, took off his cap in front of the corpse, and checked the dead man's pocket for a passport. Fyodor didn't touch the money, but he did look at the passport to get a name.

"A visitor, from far away, Grigory." Sonnov was touched. "Must've been on your way home."

His movements were deliberate, calm, and rather affectionate; evidently he had committed quite a familiar deed.

He took a bundle of sandwiches from his pocket, set them on a piece of newspaper near the deceased's head, and readily started his dinner, taking his time. He ate with relish, not disdaining the crumbs. At last, he calmly packed up the meal's remains in his bundle.

"Well now, Grisha," Sonnov said, wiping his mouth, "now we can have a little talk. Eh?" He patted Grigory's dead cheek affectionately.

Then he coughed and, once he was comfortably seated, he lit up.

"I'm going to tell you about the way I live, Grigory," Sonnov continued, the self-absorption on his face suddenly replaced by a rather smug benevolence, "but first about my childhood, about who I am and where in the world I came from. I mean, about my parents. That papa of mine told me all there was to know about himself, so I can tell it to you. My father was a simple man, lively but stern of heart. He didn't spend a minute in public without an ax. So... If he'd been surrounded by as much softness as resistance... He was melancholy about females because you can't spend all your days with logs. He just couldn't find a woman. At last he did find one to his liking, the one who was mother to me. He tested her for a long time, but that papa of mine liked to recall the very last test. You see, Grigory, my father had a whole load of money. One time he took my mother—Irina, that is—to a lonely cabin deep in the forest. He led her to understand that he had some money hidden away there, money no one knew about. Well... The way he'd set it up, my mother decided, no one knew about the trip and everyone thought that papa of mine had gone off on his own to work, for a whole year. He'd set everything up so as to lead mama dear into immaculate temptation, and if she got it into her head to kill him, to take the money for herself, she could be sure there was no danger. See, Grigory?" Sonnov paused briefly. It would've been hard to imagine him so talkative before.

He went on.

"So there's that papa of mine sitting one evening in a remote cabin with my mother, Irina. Pretending to be a real simpleton. And he sees Irina's all worked up, but she's trying to hide it. Her white breast is heaving, up and down. Night fell. That papa of mine lay

down in a separate bed and pretended he was asleep. Snored. But totally aware. Darkness fell. Suddenly he heard my mother get up very, very quietly, her breath barely fluttering. She got up and went to the corner—for the ax. My papa's ax was gigantic—it could split a bear in two. Irina picked up the ax and walked toward my father's bed so you could barely hear her. She got very close. As soon as she swung it back, that papa of mine gave her a swift kick in the belly. He jumped up and crushed her beneath himself. And had her then and there. I was born from that conception. Because of that incident, my father loved Irina very much. Straight off, the very next day—a wedding, church. And they never ever parted. "Got a head on her shoulders she has," he said about her. "No namby-pamby. If she hadn't come after me with the ax, I never would've married her. But that way I could tell—she was tough. No tears for her." He'd say that and usually give her a slap on the backside. But that didn't embarrass my mother. She just bared her angry face, but she respected my father. That's the kind of conception—murder, nearly—that led to my birth. Why don't you say something, Grigory?" A shadow passed across Fyodor's face. "Or aren't I telling it right, fool?"

Clearly this unusual loquacity had sent Fyodor into mild hysterics. He didn't like talking.

At last, Sonnov stood up. Hiked up his pants. Leaned over the dead face.

"Hey, where are you, Grigory? Where are you?" he started lamenting. Something womanly came over his brutal face. "Where are you? Are you going to answer? Where did you get to, you son of a bitch? Hiding under a stump? A stump? You think just because you crapped out you're safe from me? Eh? I know! I know where you are! You aren't getting away! You're hiding under a stump!"

Sonnov suddenly went over to a nearby stump and started kicking it furiously. The stump was rotten and crumbled under his kicks.

"Where'd you get to, you son of a bitch?" Fyodor howled. Suddenly he stopped. "Where are you, Grigory? Where are you? You hear me? Wipe that smirk off your face! Are you going to answer me?"

"Answer me!" came an echo. The moon suddenly hid. Darkness gripped the forest and the trees coalesced in the dark.

Sonnov skulked off into the forest, snapping invisible branches.

Come morning, when the sun rose, warmth and life seemed to permeate the glade from within. The trees and grass shone, and water gurgled deep in the ground.

The corpse lay under a tree, like a rotten, abandoned log. No one had seen or disturbed it. Suddenly, a man emerged from the bushes; grunting, he looked around indifferently. It was Fyodor. The same worn jacket hung on him like a crumpled sack.

He hadn't been able to get very far and had spent the night in the forest, by a fallen tree, blindly confident that all would go well.

Now, evidently, he'd decided to bid Grigory farewell.

His face held not a trace of the previous night's hysterics. He'd drawn himself inward and was looking at the outside world woozily, puzzled. At last Fyodor found Grigory—the way people usually find mushrooms.

Casually, he sat down beside him.

His idiotic habit of eating near the dead man returned now, too. Fyodor unwrapped his bundle and ate his breakfast.

"Well, Grigory, you're not the first and you won't be the last," he suddenly muttered after a long and indifferent silence. He was gazing not so much at the deceased's forehead as at the empty space around him.

"There was a lot I didn't get to say," Sonnov said suddenly. "It got dark. I'll say it now." Whom he was addressing now was unclear. Fyodor wasn't looking at the corpse at all anymore. "My mother had two of us kids, me and my sister Klavdia. But my foolishness scared my mother. I beat her bloody, on the sly, because I didn't know who I was or where I'd come from. She'd point to her belly, but I'd tell her, "Wrong answer, bitch. That wasn't what I was asking. That had been going on for I don't know how long when, as a young man, I started working at the life-boat station. I was a curly-head then. But not talkative. People were afraid of me, but they knew I'd always keep mum. The guys, the rescuers, were simple, cheerful. They had a big operation going. They drowned people. They'd

dive in the water and drown them. They did what they did cleverly, without a hitch. Sometimes the families had second thoughts—supposedly the guys were searching for people who might have drowned, but they always dragged out a corpse. The men were given a reward. They'd drink up the prize money or spend it on women; some bought pants. Out of respect, they took me on. I drowned deftly, simply, and without a moment's hesitation. I sent my share back to that father of mine, home. Later it became second nature to me, to bury whoever I drowned. Their families would arrange a celebration in my honor; they thought, "What a long-suffering rescuer," and I never turned them down. Especially their vodka. I liked to drink. Later, though, something started eating at me. I'd look at the deceased and think, "Where did the person go to, eh? Where did the person go?" I started to think he was hovering in the emptiness around the dead body. Sometimes I didn't think anything. But I started to always look at the dead person as if I were trying to look into the emptiness. One day I drowned a little boy, just a chick he was; he went to the bottom so confidently, without fear. That same day I dreamt he was sticking his tongue out and laughing, as if to say, "You fool, you're lying through your teeth. You drowned me, but the next world's even sweeter. And now you can't get me." I leapt up in a sweat, as if I had cholera. Barely morning in the village, I went to the forest, thinking, "I'm not doing anything serious. This is one big joke. It's like killing goats. One hop and they're in the next world, easy as pie." I thought, "I killed." But what if it was just a dream?

"As I was walking, I came across a little girl. I strangled her, I was so angry, and I thought. "That's so much nicer, so much nicer, to see someone go off into the emptiness with my own eyes." By some miracle, I was lucky. The murder was never solved. After that I got more cautious. I quit the life-savers because my urge to kill was too blatant. As it was, I kept being drawn to it, as if with each murder I were solving a puzzle: Who am I killing? What do they see? What if I'm killing the fairytale while the essence slips away? So I started roaming the world. As it is, I don't know what I'm doing, who I'm touching, who I'm talking to. I'm

in a complete funk. Grigory, Grigory... Hey? Is that you?" he muttered calmly and equably into the emptiness, suddenly flagging.

At last, he stood up. A strange contentment persisted on his face.

Mechanically, but in an experienced, knowledgeable way, he tidied up all the traces. And then he went deeper.

A narrow, winding path eventually led him out of the forest. In the distance he saw a small, isolated station.

He stepped into the bushes to fool around a little. "What can I say about Grigory," he thought later, "when I don't even know whether I exist?"

He turned his ugly face up and looked through the bushes, to the now visible expanses. Either he had no thoughts or they galloped contrary to nature's existence.

He was warm by the time he reached the station. He sat at the counter with a beer.

The sensation of beer now seemed like the sole reality on earth. He plunged his thoughts into this sensation and they evaporated. In spirit, he kissed the inside of his belly and fell still.

A train was approaching from far off. Fyodor suddenly came to life. "Back to my nest, my nest!"

And he slipped bulkily through the train's open door.

II

The small town of Lebedinoye, outside Moscow, which Fyodor reached at noon, was isolated even in and of itself.

Whatever people did here, it was strictly for themselves. So inwardly bereft was the work that went on in this corner of the world that it seemed a continuation of the inhabitants' selves.

After "work," some dug in their gardens, as if digging their own graves; some whittled sticks; some tended to their feet.

Loose and mismatched, the single-story wooden houses in the greenery broke your heart, they were so lonely. Here and there, sticks occasionally poked out of the ground.

The house Fyodor was nearing stood on the outskirts, to one side, shut off from the other houses by a high fence and from the sky by a solid metal roof.

The house was divided into two large halves. A family, simple folk, lived in each and the house had lots of annexes and nooks, dim crannies and human burrows—and a huge cellar that extended deep underground, as well.

Fyodor knocked at the heavy door in the fence. It opened on a woman standing at the threshold. She shrieked, "Fedya! Fedya!"

The woman was about thirty-five and full-figured; her backside poked out significantly, forming two huge, voluptuous mushrooms; her sloping shoulders were pampered and soft; her flabby face was so full as to seem indeterminate of expression at first; her eyes were cloudy and looked as if they were licking the whole world, plunging it into slumber; and there was a vulnerable amazement

at the bottom of her eyes. Naturally, all this was visible only to the intent, loving gaze.

Outwardly, her mouth didn't go with her puffy face; it was thin, sinuous and nervous, and very smart.

"Yes, me!" Fyodor replied and, spitting in the woman's face, he started down the path to the house. The woman followed him as if nothing had happened.

They ended up in a simple, rather vulgar room: little pots of pathetic flowers on the windowsills, cute watercolors, large unwieldy furniture, sweat-stained chairs. But all of it bore the insular, symbolic trace of some kind of corner, as if the secret spirit of separateness had passed through these tacky, ordinary things.

"Here you've come, and I was thinking you'd wandered off. The world is great," the woman said.

Sonnov was resting on the couch. His awful face sagged like a sleeping child's.

The woman lovingly tidied the table, cradling each cup like a woman's warm breast. A couple of hours later, they were sitting at the table together talking.

The woman spoke a lot, while Sonnov kept silent, occasionally opening his eyes wide at his saucer. The woman was his sister Klava.

"Well, how was it, Fedya? Had enough of roaming?" She grinned. "Get your fill of hens' and cocks' backsides? Still as thoughtful as ever. As if every door were closed to you. That's why you're so much to my liking, Fyodor." She spoke muddily, but forcefully, enveloping Sonnov with her warm, rotten gaze. "For your twistedness, too!" She winked. "Remember chasing down the train? Eh?"

"I'm not in the mood for you now, Klava. I'm just not," Sonnov mumbled in response. "Lately I've been dreaming nothing but devils. It's like they've been passing through me."

At that moment there was a knock.

"It's ours come over. The hobgoblins." Klava winked at the ceiling.

It was the Sonnovs' neighbors, the ones who lived in the other half of this homely and neglected house.

"We've come for a look at your rowdy, Klav," old man Kolya said. He had a small, very youthful face, childlike in places, and droopy jug ears.

Rather than respond, Klava silently started setting out chairs. She went into states when she looked at people as if they were shadows. At least then she never flew off the handle.

Pasha Krasnorukov—Kolya's son-in-law, a great big skinny fellow of about thirty-three with an inanity-swollen face—sat down next to Fyodor, who hadn't budged. Pasha's wife Lidochka stood off to one side; she was pregnant, but you could barely tell, so skillfully did she hold herself in; her face was constantly giggling in obtuse felicity, as if she were perpetually sipping some invisible fruity drink. Time and again, her small, delicate hands would dart out at something.

Mila, Lidochka's younger sister, a girl of fourteen or so, sat down on the couch; her pale, translucent face expressed nothing. Her seventeen-year-old brother Petya slipped into the corner by the stove; he completely ignored everyone and folded in on himself.

Thus the entire Krasnorukov-Fomichev clan assembled. Klava lived alone; Sonnov was "visiting"—for the umpteenth time.

Meanwhile, Fyodor ignored them at first, but soon his gaze, as heavy as the planet Earth, began to settle on folded-in Petya.

"Petya's our dashing boy!" Klava said, noticing his glance.

What was, in fact, different about Petenka was that he cultivated on his scrawny, sinewy body various colonies of fungi, herpes, and pustules, which he later scraped off—and ate. He even made soup from them, thus feeding himself mostly at his own expense. He barely recognized other food. It was no wonder he was so skinny; nonetheless, life clung to his long, pimply-faced figure.

"He's going to scrape the herpes off his throat again," old man Kolya said softly, "but don't you look."

And he batted his eyes.

Truth be told—strange though it seemed and completely out of character though it was—Fyodor actually envied Petya. He may have been the one person Sonnov did envy. For this reason, Sonnov stood up bulkily, all of a sudden, and went to the outhouse, not to reappear as long as the "guests" remained in the room.

Klavochka barely reacted to the "shadows"; her puffy face was plunged into a dream in which she saw Fyodor's bulging ass. So only the guests talked in the room, as if they were the hosts.

Old man Kolya, instead of asking Klava about Fyodor's visit, loudly constructed various idiotic assumptions.

Sonnov came here to see his sister often, but vanished just as suddenly, and none of the Fomichevs knew where he lived or roamed.

Once, a couple of years before, a few hours after he'd suddenly vanished, someone called the Fomichevs from very far away and said he'd just seen Fyodor there on the beach.

Lidochka listened to old man Kolya attentively—not to the "meaning" of his words, but to something she thought hidden behind them, independent of old man Kolya.

That's what was behind her stinky, lewd, little puckered-white face, sniggering as she looked at the empty cup by Fyodor's empty place.

Pavel—her husband—was covered in heavy crimson blotches. Mila was playing with her pinkie.

Finally the family, led by old man Kolya, stood up, lamely took their leave, and went back to their half.

Only Petya stayed in the corner for a long time, and when he did scrape himself off, no one but Sonnov noticed.

Klava tidied up the room, splashed water on her face, and went out into the yard. Fyodor was already sitting on the bench.

"Well, are those hobgoblins gone?" he asked indifferently.

"You and I are fine ones, Fedya," Klava replied simply.

"Well, no better than anyone else," Fyodor thought.

There was still plenty of time, so Fyodor decided to go for a walk. But the sun was already dropping to the horizon, illuminating this small town's deserted lanes almost playfully.

It wasn't so much the murder that had worn Fyodor out as his conversation over the corpse. He barely ever talked to the living, and even with the dead it went against his grain. When he made these speeches, it was as if he were drawn by a power from beyond the grave. He wasn't himself, he didn't recognize himself speaking, and it left him wasted for a long time, but qualitatively he'd always been wasted like that. He meandered down the street and, spitting into the emptiness, noted dispassionately that Grigory was a stranger, from far away, that they weren't likely to find the corpse any time soon, and when they did, they'd just shrug, and so on. At the beer stand, indifferent, he punched a guy in the teeth who'd just happened to turn around. He polished off two mugs, scratched his knee, and headed back, mentally scattering the houses around him. As soon as he entered the room, he collapsed on the bed.

Klava leaned over his warm, sleep-gray face.

"Guess you finished someone off, Fedya." She grinned. "Make your dreams sweeter, did it?" Klava tickled his penis and then hid in the dark of a nearby nook.

III

The Sonnovs had known the Fomichevs since childhood. But Pavel Krasnorukov had shown up five years before, after marrying Lidochka.

Before her marriage, the only thing in the world Lidochka had recognized were insects, and then only the ugly and lewd ones; because of that, she bummed around garbage heaps for days on end.

Pavel had her the first time near a huge, decomposing garbage pit; she writhed and jerked like an insect, pressing her wrinkledly blissful little face into Pavel's jacket, and then sniggered absurdly for a long time.

But none of that particularly bothered Pavel; he was much more bothered by the world as a whole, which he always gazed upon with his mouth wide open. He made no distinctions in it and, at bottom, thought life was just an add-on to the sex act.

This was why he was flattered by Lidochka's brazen sexuality. He himself, for instance, felt that his heart was located in his penis and therefore didn't hold much stock in doctors.

Lidochka's light, sewery and airy quasi-imbecility simplified the intervals from coitus to coitus for him. More than once he'd patted her blissfully sniggering little face and looked into her eyes—as usual with his mouth open. But he didn't even laugh when he did. Lidochka clung to his powerful figure with her exceptionally filthy, delicate hands. These little hands were so filthy, it seemed they were endlessly digging in her genitalia.

"They can't without filth," old man Kolya usually said affectionately, wiggling his ears.

Pasha's savage, ton-of-bricks sexuality was also to Lidochka's taste. Often, sitting with turbid eyes at the common dining table, she would tug Pavel by the penis.

Often she dragged Pasha off—it was her constant, blissful habit—to go copulate near some garbage heap. Pavel didn't even notice where they were copulating.

A year later, though, it was discovered that Pasha was nonetheless a very difficult and hard man, even for a lady like Lidochka.

The first dim, meager suspicion arose one day on a walk around a pond where lots of children were playing; Pavel got ugly; his eyes filled with blood and he watched the jumping kids very uneasily, as if he wished he could drown them.

Even before this, Lidochka was a little surprised that Pasha would howl savagely, like a wild animal being slaughtered, during coitus; afterward he would roll on the floor or the grass, biting his own hands out of sheer sensuality, as if they weren't his hands but two huge penises. And all the while he paid no attention to anything but his pleasure.

Of course, she was unable to connect this fact in her mind with Pavel's attitude toward children, but when Lidochka—four years ago—started to grow a belly for the first time, it all came out in the open, as if the shadow from Pasha's hanging chin were advancing on the world.

At first, Pasha looked at her belly with nervously mute amazement.

"Where'd you get that, Lida?" he asked cautiously.

When Lida said from him, his whole large, ponderous body shuddered.

He kept sleeping with her as before, blindly, crazed. Sometimes, though, harshly, through his teeth, he would say, "I should rip your belly open. Rip it open!"

The bigger it got, the greater Pasha's unease.

He looked for chances to shove Lidochka and once poured hot soup on her belly.

In her ninth month, Pasha exhaled into her face and said, "If you have it, I'll slit that pup's throat. I will." Lidochka had it nearly right on schedule, at home, at the dining room table.

Pasha leapt up from the table like a scalded cat and dashed to grab the baby by the feet.

"Down the toilet with him. The toilet!" he hollered. (For some reason his hair was hanging over his forehead.)

Old man Kolya rushed at Pasha, scaring him with a terrible look. For some reason, the old man had decided that the baby was him, that he, himself, had cleverly just sprung from Lidochka. Therefore, the old man rushed zealously to defend himself. Somehow he managed to push the distraught Pasha out the door.

But the infant's presence—its heartrending chirp—sent Pavel into a savage fury and he tried to break down the door, howling, "I'll drown it! I'll drown it!"

Pasha also had some trouble on this score previously, before Lidochka. The explanation was this: He bore a twisted hatred of children because in all the world he recognized only his own naked sensuality, as big as elephant ears covering the ground. All collateral, intermediate, and secondary elements troubled and clouded his mind. It's not that they—children included—got in his way. No, the reason wasn't practical. Children simply troubled his mind with their detachment from naked pleasure and flowed into his reason the way a dirty river flows into a clean lake, bringing sediment, driftwood, filth, and junk.

"Why are children born from my gratification?" Krasnorukov often thought as he dashed through a field. "Where do children come in?"

Whenever Pavel saw children, he would compare them to his sensuality and lapse into a blind, instinctive rage over the discrepancy. Subconsciously, he wanted to fill the whole world with his sensuality, all the space around himself, and his sensuality seemed to exclude children; if he'd felt his own children in a real way, as himself, that is, say, if his kids were like these apparently separate drops of sperm, jumping and singing songs, or rather, like tips of his penis that he could feel and savor as if they were on his body, then Krasnorukov wouldn't have had anything against the little creatures; but children were independent beings and Krasnorukov always felt like drowning them

in revenge for the fact that his pleasure, rather than remain just his own, produced absurd, defiant consequences separate from his moans and screams: human beings. For Pavel, nothing existed other than his own howl of sexual self-assertion, and he couldn't make sense of the fact that children must be born from his wild, sensuous feelings, which belonged to him alone. He viewed this as a grave, hostile challenge and was prepared to chase children—those shadows of his pleasure, those nonentities from his sensuality—with a knife, day and night. All this rested solidly in Pavel's consciousness, albeit in other forms and words.

They managed to spirit the child away that time; old man Kolya ran with him through the bushes, climbed on the roof, and even hid the child in a chamber pot. Absent little Mila took part, too. Only Petenka kept up his scraping in his corner.

But Pasha wouldn't give up. Grave, with chin jutting, he galloped around the house holding a huge knife at his chest. Then he ran off into the forest.

The story resolved itself indirectly when the child died in its eighth day of life. The half-drunk doctor determined it was the heart.

Fortunately, Lidochka was a simpleton when it came to these kinds of disappearances; she seemed to view babies as a sweet bonus to copulation. She did shed a few tears, though not so many that she forgot about coitus.

Peace reigned in the family immediately.

Everything went on as before.

A second time—a year later—Lida got pregnant when Pasha got obsessively horny: he slept with her a few times a day, chased after her, stumbling into posts, and seemed ready to rip the bark off trees. He bit himself and her until they bled.

Pasha was so terrifying that eventually Lidochka promised him, in a panic, to get rid of the child. (It was too late for a legal abortion.) This was dangerous but feasible; she had to hide somewhere out of the way, in a cabin in the forest. A suitable pond was chosen. All around were a multitude of "unresurrected" babies: several toilets and garbage dumps

were heaped with tiny red children, the fruits of premature birth. It was no coincidence that a women's dormitory partied nearby.

The cabin in the forest was cozy, with low ceilings, and had black spiderwebby corners and low windows.

Every day, Pasha went to see Lidochka and, ignoring her belly, lay on her ferociously.

The matter ended unexpectedly and outrageously: right before the birth, Pasha went wild and climbed on Lidochka; on its way out, the child was supposed to turn headfirst toward the exit, into the light of day, but Pasha, without even realizing it, smashed its head with his penis. Lidochka wound up in the hospital and the child was stillborn with a round, broken spot on its sinciput. The story was hushed up. After this, though, Pasha became thoroughly conceited; he derived an ardent, scandalous satisfaction from killing his "pup" with his own penis. Realizing this, he rolled around on the grass laughing for a long time.

It turned out to be easy to make things right with simple Lidochka. "The babies were only in your mind," old man Kolya kept telling her. Nonetheless, she stubbornly refused any abortions.

Pasha himself adjusted to finishing off the "blessed babes"—and a little earlier, in the seventh month of pregnancy—by tearing the amniotic sac with his hysterical long penis.

Premature births followed and the babes—very successfully, by the way—always came out dead; only one time, having observed the scene with his mouth wide open, did Pasha have doubts; he approached, squatted, and gave the bundle a shake.

And so, several years passed happily. Lidochka was fine after these "endings"; she just got a little distracted and enjoyed the flowers at the garbage heaps.

Now, before Sonnov's latest visit, Lidochka was, in fact, in that condition and it was time to "end it." Her smiling face transparent and pleasure-stuck, she said, pointing to her belly, "Dead babies. I have dead babies inside me."

IV

The day after his arrival, Fyodor woke late and started wandering through the house. Klava kept her eye on him; she was afraid he'd go astray.

For Klava, life came hard without an objectivized absurdity to offer some help to her soul, and for her, this absurdity was Fyodor. "He only eats at night and kills people over nothing," Klava said, deeply moved.

She was a little sexual and gratified herself any way she liked, from the normal to the psycho. But she often thought of Fyodor when she did.

The more absurd the form of her sexual pleasure, the better she liked it. Sometimes, she would stick the head of a small, live goose up her womb. It would flap its wings desperately, dropping feathers on her belly. Mostly this was cumbersome and clumsy and the geese acted more as a symbol than a means. For sure, God alone knew how she managed with all these crazy props and what functions all these living creatures filled. In her eyes, though, Fedya embodied not only sexual absurdity, but constant absurdity, permanent absurdity even more.

She couldn't even bring herself to sleep with him, and Fyodor's own sex life was like a dark bucket to her.

Klava followed Fyodor behind his back, like a shadow, at a distance, as he staggered around the house's different nooks and sheds.

"Just so he doesn't hang himself. For show," she thought. "But I'd bury him here... I have all kinds of nice money from our father's business... and my job is almost domestic. I show up once every other day!"

The yard attached to the Fomichev-Sonnov home was not divided in half by a fence in the customary way and several times, roaming

through the yard, Fyodor found himself on Fomichev territory. Old man Kolya would call to him, in an attempt to start up a conversation. But Fyodor turned a deaf ear to all ideas; only Petenka, scraping himself in some corner by the fence, scared him. Sometimes Fyodor was afraid of truly strong people.

That was why he often roamed the nearby lanes, especially around the beer stand.

True, beer and water were all the same to him now, and one time he vaguely drank a mug of fruit slush passed off on him instead of beer. He seemed not to care that the surrounding houses were permanently, irreally staggering; even the air was staggering or drowning in a shroud, but the moment he focused on anything, that object surfaced from the general illusoriness and stabilized, although it remained just as alluring and indefinite at its core.

When he drank beer or just sat somewhere on a bench, Fyodor would put his hand on the head of whatever lout or urchin was handy for greater stability.

Klava sensed with alarm that he instilled fear in those around him.

Several days passed in this way. Fyodor's presence weighed on people. He scared old lady Mavka, their neighbor, out of her wits by walking up to the hole in her fence and staring into her window with a heavy gaze for a long time, a couple of hours. A rumor started that he caught kittens by the tail.

Things got bad when suddenly, while out walking around, he took the orphan girl from Dalny Lane by the hand.

They said he played with the orphan as if she were a dead kitten. But Sonnov, unembarrassed, just stared into her face. He probably used her instead of a stick.

Things got worse when Fyodor, who'd hidden from Petenka before this, lay in wait and, out of the blue, ate the soup Petenka had cooked from his own pustules.

There was a terrible uproar and Pavel was ready to beat Sonnov with a beam. Old man Kolya—who was actually a grandfather only

to dead grandkids—hopped around Fyodor telling him to regurgitate the soup.

Klava stepped in and led Fyodor into the house.

"Go down in the cellar, Fedya," she told him quietly when they were alone. "Hide. It's hot now and I'll provide you with everything. That's how you'll live. And I'll tell people you left. But you never know what might happen. They could pick up your trail—think how many fools' throats you've cut. Climb into the cellar." Fyodor didn't object, and his bulky figure hid below.

V

The cellar Fyodor climbed down to was wild and improbably deep. He could walk around standing at full height. It was divided into two halves that corresponded to the division of the house. Through three small windows in the brick wall, narrow distorted daylight poured into this half-darkness as if into a live, dusty monster made up of broken objects.

Klava fixed Fyodor up in a corner, on an old iron bedstead, covering it with a soft, puffy mattress, which she kissed. For some reason, she adapted a shiny new chamber pot for his food—probably because of its sturdiness.

Fyodor slept and ate through several days. Then he began peering into the darkness.

One time he had a dream that was more real than life. He dreamed of the street where he drank beer at the stand, near his sister's house. At home, they weren't staggering around anymore. They were standing tall and even, and seemingly nothing could budge them. He was drinking beer at the stand—and really drinking, really, mug after mug, but he could see that this was someone else, not him, someone big, bigger than the houses, drinking beer.

Fyodor woke up. He didn't like dreams. The gloom in the cellar stirred. Sitting on the bed, he peered at the light outlines and suddenly decided that reason was in the far corner. He moved his lips a little and then sat beside that spot, as if riveted to it.

One time, Fyodor saw an infinite stirring of flies, which alarmed him. Soon, the stirring of flies shifted to one side, toward a window.

The light pierced this oscillation in one place. Of course, there were no flies.

Fyodor felt a little better in the cellar than up top. There was no undue fuss, and he could plunge wholly into his indeterminate meditation. It was very bad that he couldn't give a name to what he saw as a mystery.

Klava alone looked in on him.

He treated her as an odd necessity, a necessity that bypassed his consciousness.

He liked to slap her on the ass; Klava grinned at the spiderweb.

Soon, though, Fyodor started missing people, missing human puzzles. In other words, he didn't have anyone to kill. (Klava didn't count. He didn't even consider her a person.)

At that point he decided to mentally replace people with isolated wooden beams, odd two-legged stools, and broken branches. Picking up an ax, he suddenly emerged from his coziness and hacked at figures with a frenzied effort of the imagination.

He told Klava he needed to do it for a reminder.

Meanwhile, Fyodor gorged himself, and in the darkness—after long months of indifference—he often got an erection, but didn't notice at what point he started connecting this with death.

At first he simply sought pleasure and roamed all over the cellar with an erect penis, rummaging through objects, moving around with arms raised, as if for an embrace. He may have been searching for something sexual in the wall.

But death and everything that went along with it continued to reign in his soul. Or rather, death was his soul.

Suddenly Fyodor had an idea. When he thought about it, his hard, stony face became mobile, mobile from surprise, as if it were sculpted from clay. Apparently, his face had turned around and looked up, at the ceiling.

VI

Meanwhile, events up top had been set in motion. He got the impression that this time Lidochka didn't want her "blessed babe" murdered. It may have just been foolish obstinacy in her talking. She may also have had a premonition that this babe would be her own future bridegroom or simply her lover.

One way or another, she looked at Pasha as a small beast and conveyed this to the other members of the family—except Petenka, of course. Old man Kolya climbed into the attic and tried talking to Pasha from there.

Mila picked flowers for the babe.

Klava gave this commotion a cursory look. The whole situation made Pasha seriously anxious. Absurdly, in the hallway, in front of everyone, he rushed at Lidochka, pressing up against her in order to rape her and pierce the child.

But Lidochka wouldn't yield. Often you could see her galloping away from him over the huge, scattered garbage heaps. (Pasha had hurt his leg and couldn't chase her down.) Old man Kolya gave serious thought to the police, but Lidochka locked herself away from Pasha in her room. Meanwhile, below, under the floor, Fyodor began digging a passage to the Fomichevs' half.

One evening, Pasha suddenly flew into such a rage that he was able to break into Lidochka's room. He ran in with a naked, erect penis, which he had scalded with boiling water—for greater fury. The sight of his scalded penis, which actually looked like it was steaming, suddenly amused and tempted Lidochka; thunderstruck, she surrendered to Pasha.

Pasha, who was beside himself, managed to burst the amniotic sac holding the infant instantly.

When the child started to emerge, Pasha fled, and Lidochka suffered alone, although old man Kolya came in later. He was the one to catch his dead grandson. Mean- while, Pasha was playing tag with himself in the yard. Weak though she was, this time Lidochka was enraged.

"I'm sick of him, the parasite," she said. "And his penis is all weird now."

"And I'm tired of christening dead grandsons," old man Kolya suddenly shouted and waved a wet rag at the lamp.

Lidochka laid the child out in a box, which she kissed and held to her breast.

"He has all the luck, the brute; they keep coming out dead," she added. "They could come out alive, even if they were premature. I'm going to tell the bastard it was born alive, for spite. And that we took him to the hospital. Papa, you back me up. Maybe then he'll run away to the forest."

Old man Kolya wiggled his ears. Fyodor's intent, heavy gaze followed them from below, from his cellar corner. (Fyodor had already dug through to the other half, to the Fomichevs'.)

Pasha didn't come home until evening, seriously inebriated.

"Was the doctor here? Did you write it up? Bury it?" he barked at Lidochka.

They were alone in the room.

"Gladness, Pasha. God protected him from your penis," Lida replied lucidly, inwardly mocking him a little. "He was born alive."

"What are you talking about? Can't be. Where's the baby?" Pavel dropped to a chair.

"They already took him to the hospital; he's weak, premature."

"You're off your head. What?"

"Ask the old man."

Pavel disappeared. He returned unstrung, his face wild and red.

"Give me the child! I'll rape him! I will!" he yelled. "Why did you have one live, bitch? What did I scald my penis for?"

Lidochka stuck out her tongue at Pasha.

This undid Pavel completely; in a flash, like a bird of prey, he rushed to beat Lidochka. After the first blow, Lidochka gave a terrible scream and even Klava ran over to the Fomichevs' side. Only Petenka, as always, kept scraping himself in the corner.

When old man Kolya, Klava, and Milochka ran into the room, Lidochka was already nearly unconscious.

Only a heartrending scream—"Fiend, you'll kill her!"—frightened Pavel, and he seemed to come to his senses. Even the old neighbor lady Mavka came running. Pavel, plastered from vodka, swayed and left the house.

Lidochka was in a very bad way. She barely revived and they wanted to call an ambulance, but Lida desperately shook her head.

"There'd be a scandal. This way it'll die down," she whispered, fixing her turbid and sewery eyes, now suddenly wide open, on a spot in the corner. "I never imagined he'd go crazy like that right away." They applied home remedies and Lidochka seemed to feel better. Meanwhile, night approached without Pavel's return home. Exhausted and dazed, they all scattered to their own niches. Now revived, Lidochka wanted to be left alone to sleep peacefully. All the doors were bolted firmly shut and the windows had iron bars—a common sight around there.

VII

In the middle of the night, Lidochka started feeling bad, but she couldn't tell whether she was dying or dreaming that she was.

A wormy, hole-eaten space surrounded her on all sides. Inside, it felt as if devils were rising up to her throat. Oddly, it never occurred her to get up or call for help. For a minute, the thought flashed that, on the contrary, she was getting better.

In the room it was first light. Suddenly, in the half-dark, through the pain and reality, she saw a floorboard in the corner slowly lift and someone's bulky, black, bent figure climb out from under the floor.

Although her heart started pounding, she didn't cry out, as if this person were merely a continuation of her boundless, dying state of mind. At the same instant, the wormy, holey space crumpled before Lidochka's eyes and was invaded with lightning speed by that figure, which now stood alone in the room and became the focal point of Lidochka's agony.

As if hiding from himself, Fyodor walked up to the bed and sat down on a chair.

"I have to get it exactly right," he thought. "To capture her soul. To engulf it. Only when death comes…death is the main thing." Troubled, devastated, he glanced at Lidochka.

She was looking at him with stupefaction and amazement.

"Don't be a baby, Lidochka," Sonnov said quietly, touching her coverlet. "God forbid I slit your throat. I'm strange. We have to talk."

The devils, the devils inside her kept rising to Lidochka's throat. She barely knew where she was. For some reason, she thought Fyodor had a dark crown on his head.

"What's there to talk about, Fedya?" she whispered. Her face was ablaze; her features had petrified, like right before death, but her eyes streamed an unprecedented and sewery light, as if her whole life, all her screams and vigils, were pouring out through her gaze.

"Looks to me like she's already dying, Fyodor rejoiced privately in surprise. "That makes everything simpler."

"Fyodor, Fyodor," Lidochka babbled, and suddenly she stroked his knee, maybe so Sonnov's look wouldn't frighten her.

"I've come for a visit," Fyodor replied, looking at the wall. "A visit."

"A visit... Then take away this fever... This fever"—and she thrashed around. Fyodor abruptly pulled the blanket off her, leaned over, and suddenly, bringing his face close to her burning little face, ransacked her with his eyes.

"What do you want, Fedya?" She looked at his mouth. Meanwhile, out of the depths, something nudged her awareness.

"The scamp. She's going to die, to die," Fyodor thought, and he feverishly fumbled over the pillow and through Lidochka's hair. "Here it comes... Here it comes... It's mostly in her eyes..."

Suddenly he stepped back and rested his famous, bulky, anesthetizing, incomprehensible gaze on Lidochka.

She froze. For a second the nudging of her consciousness stopped. "I won't give in, I won't!" she squealed at the devils inside her and again fell still, infected by Sonnov's gaze.

"I want to sleep with you, Lida," Fyodor said loudly.

Lidochka's half-dead little face suddenly turned coquettishly on the pillow.

Not taking his wild, staring eyes off her, Fyodor started cautiously, almost stiffly, taking off his pants.

When he lay down, his eyes lost Lidochka for a second, then he came closer to her face again and saw there, on her blazing, half-alive little face, an expression of convulsive, sniggering bliss; her face wrinkled up in a viperous lassitude and hid on Fyodor's chest, as if shy of God knows what.

Fyodor was thinking of just one thing: death. The idea that had suddenly gripped him in the cellar was to have a woman at the moment of her death. It seemed to him in that moment the cleansed soul would be bared and he would couple not with the half-corpse but with the emerging, throbbing soul itself and, in a way, grab onto the ominous specter that had constantly eluded him—the specter that always slipped away and hid on the other side of life before, when he'd simply killed his victims.

Meanwhile, Lidochka started laughing; her face swelled up from the unnatural laughter that was muffled Fyodor's huge, pillow-like body.

She was laughing because something had shifted in her mind and pleasure appeared amid death and the devils' wails.

Meanwhile, Fyodor was groping for Lidochka's death; inside, he felt it coming; he gasped in a furious shivering, groping for it like a mole; he looked into Lidochka's decaying face and held back, so that he could come at the exact moment she died, on the brink between death and life.

Lidochka understood nothing; she was shaken by the leaping absurdity.

"It's hot, Fedya, so hot... Let's fly, let's you and me fly. Up the chimney," she squealed.

Suddenly something collapsed in her chest and in a flash he realized she was dying. She was dying and her eyes froze in an unspoken question before the emptiness.

Now only the faint shadow of sexual filthiness flickered in them.

Fyodor realized the end was near; leaning his head back just a little, steadily gazing into her eyes, he started crushing her body to death, pressing on her heart—to hasten the desired moment. "I have to help her, help her," he mumbled to himself.

"He caressed me... into eternity," flashed weakly at the bottom of Lidochka's mind.

Suddenly everything disappeared except for one last awful question in her eyes: "What's happening to me? What's going to?" Fyodor

made one last effort, as if trying to squeeze out that question, that last shred of an idea.

He saw her eyes roll back. Lidochka twitched and emitted a stinking wheeze that reached her tender lips, which looked as if they'd been scattered with invisible flowers.

At that moment, Fyodor came.

Woozy, as if he'd shed a burden, he sat on the bed next to Lidochka's corpse and fumbled around himself. He compared his relief with Lidochka's departed soul. He felt that he had come into contact with something invisible made solid. The house was quiet as before. Even the mice were rustling very, very quietly.

Not having fully revealed himself in himself, Fyodor got up and cautiously but mechanically tidied the bed.

Then he hid below, in the cellar.

Exactly thirty minutes later, the floorboards opened in the hallway in Klava's half of the house. Fyodor made his way from shed to shed to his sister's door and knocked.

Sleepy, her face spotty from dreams, Klava opened up.

"A corpse, Lidochka's a corpse now," Fyodor mumbled, looking Klava over vaguely.

He was still entirely in the grip of the pleasure he'd experienced, which had woven inside him with the stiffened pillar of death.

Klava squealed quietly.

"I'm leaving, little sister," Fyodor continued, touching her, as if in a dream. "I'm going to stay in the forest a couple of days. In that place… You know… Lidochka almost died by herself… There aren't any marks on her throat… I just pressed on her heart a little. I thought I'd make it heavier and heavier… But she must have died herself, from Pavel. But maybe not. Who knows?" Fyodor turned his bullish head toward the window.

While he was saying this, gloomily, in snatches, Klava, without saying a word, collected what he needed.

"I tidied everything up in the cellar, Klava, all the passages," Fyodor confirmed precisely.

Suddenly he sat down on the bench and started singing at the top of his lungs— something idiotic, idiotic but terrifying. Klava gave him a shove, but lovingly.

"You'll wake the whole house! Some singer!"

At last, Fyodor got up and left.

In the morning, when Klava had made her own twisted sense of everything that had happened and got up, the Fomichevs' was crawling with police, doctors, and neighbors.

Old man Kolya was weeping on the ground; Mila ended up in the attic; Petenka was nowhere to be found.

Everything happened out of inertia, and Klava had no cause to tremble; it turned out Lidochka had picked up some kind of infection during her terrible labor, plus the beating had torn something and the witnesses were right there: the proximate cause of death—her heart couldn't withstand it, and so on. It never occurred to anyone to do an additional examination. By evening they'd already caught Pavel and taken him to court; it seemed undeniable and, anyway, even he was sure he'd led Lidochka to her death.

They buried Lidochka two days later, in the morning, on a sunny day; the coffin was adorned with flowers, as if they were seeing Lidochka off on a trip.

"Spray her with cologne, perfume!" the neighbor lady Mavria exclaimed.

But no one paid any attention to her cry. When they lowered the coffin into the grave, far past the trees, unnoticed, the figure of Fyodor flashed by.

It was as if he'd come for a rendezvous with that invisible something Lidochka should've left behind, something with which he, Fyodor, had attempted to establish a frenzied, fateful connection.

VIII

It was light and deserted in the Fomichev-Sonnov house. Pavel was in prison, Lidochka in her grave. Everything seemed to be as before, but there was still something missing.

Little Mila often visited her sister at her grave and, for some reason, she fell in love with some blind, newborn kittens, as if they brought her news from the next world. She played soldier with them.

Old man Kolya hung Lidochka's portrait in a corner.

"Well done, old man," Klava sobbed. "Lidochka should hang in a smart place at least once."

"Well, they're in their graves," old man Kolya responded. "The girl's dead, and you're all thinking about her mind. Go away."

The sun baked mercilessly for a few days, plunging all the yards and structures into a distinct, figmentary life. Even Klava's kitty Tangle rolled around in the grass, doing battle with its own hallucinations. Fyodor arrived a month later, thinner, tired, still mumbling.

"All quiet, Klava?" he asked.

"All long forgotten, Fedya," Klava gave him a smack. "Old man Kolya wanted to hang himself, but the rope broke."

"Well, well," Fyodor replied, and he went to the outhouse. He set up base in one of Klava's four rooms. He almost never came out. He just sat dully on the bed and mumbled his awful songs to the guitar.

"Mine's gotten merry," Klava grinned lewdly to herself. "All he asks of life is to be left to his queer doings."

Sometimes she would cautiously crack the door open and, whispering delightedly, observe Fyodor intently.

She liked the way he'd roam around the room, from chair to chair, or drop to all fours and crawl under the bed.

Meanwhile, Sonnov was searching for a way out. Not knowing the correlation between himself and the world, he was nevertheless already sniffing out where his next victim—or "peace," as Fyodor sometimes put it—might be in this foggy world.

One day he took a very long nap, exhausted by a senseless and long dream about a wooden beam.

Klava woke him up.

"I brought you some nice milk, Fedya," she said. "And there's news. I have a lodger in the upstairs room. From Moscow. Temporarily, for the summer. From Semyon Kuzmich, you know. It's not good to refuse him."

Fyodor stared at her nonplussed.

"Only, Fedya," Klava added, sitting beside her brother, just barely refraining from putting her arms around him, "as far as your game goes—strangling or knifing—that's a no-no. That case would get solved right away. It's a no-no. I know you listen to me, otherwise I wouldn't have taken her."

"But, but," Fyodor grumbled.

Klava wagged her little face and left.

In the afternoon, there was no one left in the house. They'd all gone about their business, and Petenka didn't count.

Klava's lady lodger—a slender, elegant woman of about twenty-five—roamed around the yard alone, belonging to herself and nobody else.

Fyodor would stand at his window, behind the curtain, and stare at her, his jaw clenched. His pants dropped a little and he held them up at his ass with one hand. The woman—she was wearing a simple shirt and trousers like a little boy—made many elegant movements and suddenly she was holding... a jump rope; she started jumping quickly around the lonely yard, surrounded by the high fence and junk, sweetly lifting her feet.

This utterly astonished Fyodor.

After the woman stopped jumping, she lay down on the bench. She was so intoxicated by the sun—or, more likely, by bathing in the sun—that she quietly lifted the edge of her shirt and started stroking her bare belly.

Fyodor went looking for his binoculars; finally he found his old opera glasses and, mumbling absurdly, started examining the woman's face.

This, too, bewildered him. Meanwhile, the woman stood up, thought for a moment, and then wandered over the grass. Outwardly, her face resembled a china teacup, it was so white and fragile. Her forehead was pampered and intelligent; her mouth sensual but not provocatively open, rather held sternly in check; and her eyes were special: deep blue and slightly rounded, but deep and languishing, with a fathomless ligature of deep blue shadows at the bottom. Her eyebrows were delicate and painfully sensitive, like the wings of a spiritual bird; her general features were gentle and intelligent, inspired and narcissistic, but stamped by worry of some kind and by a convulsive intellectual unease. Fluttering, her languorous hands were constantly stroking her throat, especially as she swallowed involuntarily.

Such was the appearance of Anna Barskaya.

Fyodor stood by the window for a couple of hours.

Then Klava came. Fyodor heard Anna talking upstairs. Her voice—quaking, permeated with music—again riveted Fyodor's attention. Late that evening, Sonnov, at his wits' end, knocked and entered Anna's room.

"How are you doing, miss?" He coughed bulkily.

"You're Klavdia Ivanovna's brother? Why are you here?" was the reply.

Fyodor sat down at the table and dully surveyed Anna.

"Like from the next world," he decided for some reason and fixed his cold, piercing, almost paralyzed gaze on her pretty, white, gentle neck.

"So, like it?" she asked suddenly, noticing his glance. Fyodor wiggled his fat fingers putridly. And grinned.

"That's not the word," he said.

"What is, then?" She looked him over with vague curiosity.

"Skeleton," Fyodor replied, staring at the table. Anna laughed ringingly and her sweet throat vibrated in time to her laughter.

"That's what I think, and I'm not a big one for jokes," Fyodor spoke ominously. "How can I check, eh?"

"What are you a big one for?" Anna asked.

Fyodor stood up and, casting infrequent, dull glances at Anna, as if she were an empty but strange dimension, he started slowly walking around the chair where she sat, like a paralyzed ghost walking around a piece of meat.

Anna was getting a little worried.

"Damn it, you're a curious person," she said, regarding Fyodor closely. "I wasn't expecting this. You mean you're interested in corpses?"

Fyodor suddenly stopped and froze; he turned his bullish head directly toward the woman and said loudly, "Yes, I am!"

"Interested how?" Barskaya exclaimed.

"I'm interested in the life of the corpse, not the corpse. That's how," Fyodor replied and, sitting opposite Anna, he gave her a slap on the thigh.

With his other hand he covertly felt his knife—a big one, the kind used to slaughter hogs.

"Oho!" Anna exclaimed. What Fyodor said and his gesture aroused her. She jumped up. "And did you know," she interrupted him, "that a corpse is the feces of the next world? What are you, a sewer hog?"

"What? What do you mean feces of the next world?"

"It's very simple. We, or rather that which is eternal in you, depart for the next world, but your corpse stays here, like waste. Death is the act of separating out the feces, and our body becomes feces. You know."

"Who knows what I know," Fyodor answered calmly. "Anyway, "corpse" is a good word. You can take it different ways," he added.

"You like dead symbols and words?" Barskaya retorted.

Fyodor shuddered and thought, "You mean you know them?" ("I've never talked like this before with anyone.")

Anna lit a cigarette and resumed the conversation. A few things Sonnov said made her pupils dilate just a little. Suddenly Fyodor felt like getting up and slitting her throat then and there—at one go,

and producing the maximum blood. "We'll just see how talkative you are then, with your smart words," he thought. "Take that, smartass. You can be fancy-smart in a pool of blood."

But something stopped him, and not just the unfavorable circumstances and Klava's warning. Lately Fyodor had been in a haze and even forgot the characteristics of reality, as if it were a dream. No! Something in Anna herself stopped him. Never before had he met anyone who, as he could dimly see, had entrée into that sphere—the sphere of death—that alone interested Fyodor and in which Anna herself evidently felt like a fish in water.

For a second, Fyodor even imagined she knew so much that, in comparison, his experience was like a puddle compared to a lake, so cleverly and confidently did Anna speak. At the same time, there were subconscious currents running from Anna to his now heavy soul. Out of interest in how this conversation would end and what Anna might say in general about death in the future, Fyodor neither got up nor slit her throat, but remained seated, focusing his heavy, fixed gaze on Barskaya's small shoe bobbing in time to the conversation.

They spoke in this vein for another hour or so.

"Are you really that interested in life in the next world?" Anna asked.

Perhaps for the first time in his existence, Fyodor smiled.

His face dissolved in a content, viscerally amicable, in its own way happy, but stony smile. All of a sudden, he nodded like a kid.

"We intellectuals rattle on," Anna resumed, staring at Fyodor. "But don't think the best of us can't feel everything keenly, too, just like you primitives. If you like, Fyodor, I'll introduce you to people who know this business inside out. They know that life."

Sonnov was tormented by the somber blueness of Anna's eyes. But this offer wrapped around him. He felt a vague attraction to these people.

He got up and started pacing around the room.

"You mean, you're offering friendship? All right, then, let's be friends," he said gloomily. "But how's about I sleep with you?" he tossed out suddenly.

"Forget it. Don't try anything with me. Onanism would be better," Anna flared up drily.

"It's hard without a corpse," Fyodor rumbled sleepily. "Oh well, all right. I'm not very lively. Who cares."

"Fedinka, Fedyush"—Klava's worried but treacly voice was suddenly at the door.

The door opened slightly and she walked in. Somewhat perplexed, Klava was suddenly touched.

"Look, Annushka's alive! What joy!" she rumbled softly to herself, throwing up her hands.

"Fedusha, go, go to your room. Before you know it you'll be marrying Annenka. Hee hee. And don't you be bothering her. Naughty boy," she shouted at Fyodor, her puffy body shuddering.

Fyodor went out.

"Anna, don't pay him any mind." Klava was moved again, wrapping her shawl around herself. "He's got a good heart, but he's foolish. And sometimes he looks like a beast, out of sheer foolishness."

But Anna had forgotten all about Fyodor. Evidently she had something more important on her mind.

The next morning, when her eyes came across Fyodor dozing gloomily on the bench in the yard, he intrigued her all over again.

"You know, Fyodor Ivanovich," she said, gazing with delighted surprise into his awful, petrified eyes, "I'm going to keep my word. I'm going to introduce you to some truly great people. But not right away. First you'll just see one of them, but the meeting will be with his...how can I put it... servants... or rather, his jesters. They're entertaining. You'll have a good time. To us they're jesters; to others, divinities. I have to go now, to a little place not far from Moscow, though. Will you come?"

Fyodor mumbled in reply.

Half an hour later they were at the gate. Klava's puffy white, translucent face flashed from the bushes.

"Fyodor—it's a no-no!" she quickly whispered to her brother. Sonnov nodded in agreement.

IX

They had to take the suburban train. Two painfully dissimilar figures approached the station: one was Fyodor, huge, hunched, and tawdrily detached, like a surreal thief; the other was Anna, elegant, small, white, and sensuously aroused by something mysterious.

The solitary drunk invalids sitting on the ground followed them with their dull gaze. Even in the jam-packed train they attracted attention.

"Papa's taking his little girl to church. To get married," an imbecilic but observant little girl who'd sat down on the floor of the car said, giggling.

Fyodor looked out the window, his face addled, disgruntled, as if the little houses, factories, ponds, and churches flashing by might interest him.

Anna smiled ever so slightly at her own thoughts.

They got off about twenty minutes later. The forest began immediately—or rather, the park, deserted but not somber, whimsical and cheery, sunny.

Anna led Fyodor down a path and soon they found themselves near a glade, in the middle of which were several people of the male gender.

"Sit down, Fyodor Ivanovich, here on the stump, and watch." Anna smiled at him. "You have a performance in store for you."

Leaving him there, she headed toward those men. There were just four, and Anna started talking to one of them—an asthenic, average-sized, slightly effeminate young man of about twenty-eight, wearing a white shirt. Obviously she was telling him something about Sonnov

and he laughed without even looking in the direction of Fyodor, who was not far away.

The man in the white shirt sat down abruptly on a stump and leaned over to unwrap a bundle of cold snacks and a bottle of dry wine. Anna stretched out alongside him. The young man tied a napkin around his neck and poured glasses of wine. Suddenly he clapped and the other three—one squat but large, with a bull's neck and a mysteriously degenerate face; the second tall and delicate, sinuous; and the third elegant and blond, like a little Mozart—let up a howl and rushed to a tree where satchels and string bags lay.

They pounced on the string bags and started pulling things out. To Fyodor's considerable surprise, they produced two puppies, kittens, birds in cages, and various other living creatures. The one with the mysteriously degenerate face grabbed a pup and bit its throat. The delicate one sat down, made some awkward, ritualistic movements, pulled out a needle, and started jabbing the kittens' eyes. The blond, hiding his face against his gentle chest and turning red from the effort, dismembered a chick with pincers. The young man in the white shirt sat on the stump and wept as he sipped the dry wine.

The screeching of animals and grunting of people ran all through the glade.

The delicate one was moving his ass as if he were masturbating.

The squat one, having ripped the head off one puppy, went after another, chiseling through its skull with a shoemaker's tool.

Preoccupied, the blond was destroying birds so zealously that feathers flew around in circles, on the wind. Evidently all this activity brought them tremendous pleasure. A few minutes later, all the bags were empty.

Anna applauded.

Two of the young men stepped away, leaving behind a pool of blood and dismembered limbs. The third—blond and mysterious, like Mozart—raced around the glade with a joyous screech, lifting his arms skyward.

Fyodor got a better look at the squat one when he came closer. He really was ferocious: a low-slung, sturdy being, about twenty-five years

old with a broad chest and long, hairy arms. What was astonishing, besides his distinctive, mysteriously degenerate face, was his pendulous ass.

The delicate one—although the same age—had a very delicate constitution and was timid and shy, as well; he kept blushing and turning his eyes inward, hiding them, as if they were an unearthly color.

When Anna's friend stopped weeping, he switched abruptly to dissipatedly hysterical laughter and struck the squat one with a stick, making him cringe like a dog.

Anna chattered on gaily about something with her friend; Fyodor walked up.

"And here is our colleague, from the very depths of the people. He's interested in this," Anna introduced Fyodor. Anna's friend burst out laughing and slapped Sonnov on the belly. "And I'm Anatoly Padov," he introduced himself. No one had ever addressed Fyodor like this, but he was drawn to these people and kept quiet, casting a turbid gaze over the now quiet lawn.

Anna presented the "jesters," too.

"Pyr," she called the squat one.

"Iogann" was the delicate one's name.

At that moment, the elegant one came running up. Through his pale, handsome face, a second little face could be seen, a face eaten away by gray death; it quivered with pleasure.

"And this is our littlest, Igoryok. He's only twenty-one," Anna said affectionately, and she ruffled the littlest's hair.

Her friend, Anatoly Padov—whose movements were quick and whose merriment was complete, but nervously hysterical—called her aside. Then, with a wave of the hand, he headed into the forest.

Anna walked over to Fyodor.

"Tolya has rested and wants to be alone," she said affectionately. "So, Fyodor Ivanovich, while I get you acquainted with the back rows, so to speak... You, too, must need some entertainment. That's just what they're good for. Simple boys. By the way, couldn't we move this to your house? For a day or two?"

"Bring them all... Klavusha will allow it," Fyodor snarled.

So the company headed for the station.

Up ahead walked Sonnov and Anna. The sadists trotted a little behind.

"Some dinner would be nice," Pyr rumbled unhurriedly.

"You know, that's true," Anna rejoiced. "Gentleman, not far from here I think there's a dive of a restaurant."

(Fyodor liked the fact that she called them all gentlemen. Evidently this was their custom.)

The dive resembled a cafeteria for fly-breeding.

"That's all right, the more the merrier. Under God's little wing. Just so," Anna cooed.

Everyone took a seat at the sticky, lifeless table. Barskaya was in a good mood, and she chattered endlessly. "That girl. She's gabby, but she's got a mind," Fyodor thought, recalling a few of Anna's statements as he took a mouthful of soup.

"You know, Fyodor," Anna chattered, sipping some wine, "I'm a woman, after all, which means I'm not always thinking about death. Right now, for instance, I want to be a child. Just a child. A naughty child on the edge of a volcano. Now I'm going to explain to you about Pyr."—and she pointed to the squat one. "He's his own man. Pay no attention to his ferocious facial features. That's from thinking. Pyr, show him the noose."

Opening his torn jacket hem a little, Pyr shyly displayed a mighty noose.

"See how timid he is," Anna continued. "Pyr only uses that noose against people. He hates them with a fierce hatred. Once in Moscow he went to a movie matinee with that noose. There was almost no one there, and he sat behind a fat housewife who was stuffing her face, the kind who snatches time between lines in stores to see a picture. When the light went out and the show started, Pyr threw the noose over her fat neck and pulled. Ha ha. The animal wheezed and started stamping her feet. For some reason, Pyr gave up and left the theater

unnoticed, and the animal, though she didn't crap out, completely lost her mind out of horror and incomprehension, and by the time Pyr got to the street, the ambulance had already pulled up."

And so dinner passed in light and cheerful conversation.

As they were walking to the station down the broad, dusty road lined with low-slung little houses that shaped their sweaty world, Anna said, pointing to the delicate one, "Iogann's our violinist. A lover of Romantic music." The delicate one was embarrassed.

"Then there's Igoryok," she added, displaying some affection for the youngest. "He's in a category all his own."

Fyodor turned his bulky head first to one and then the other.

At the approach to Klava's house, Anna smiled. "That was a pretty good time today," she thought.

X

At the end of the day, after a thorough break, everyone spilled out into the yard. Old man Kolya and little Mila, who was weighed down by Lidochka's nonexistence, emerged from their half. Her face expressing nothing, Mila sat down in the grass by the fence and started murmuring. The birdies chirped around her. Surrounded by a high fence and the house, the yard was its own desolate, degenerately cozy little world.

All around grew half-living, blatantly stunted grass; the three jagged little trees looked like angel hallucinations; benches—clumsy beams with snags—jutted up in the corners. In the middle was an enamel table crippled by human contact, again with benches.

An outsider might have expected mutual interaction to endure. At the restaurant, they'd been together, after all.

Suddenly, though, everyone's actions became absently disjointed. True, all the living creatures that came to hand were instantly destroyed. Iogann slit the throats of two old, semi-feral cats and Pyr tore the head off an ugly, scrawny hen. Only Igoryok, for whom they'd left nothing, raced around in shorts and undershirt, chasing after a butterfly that turned up out of nowhere.

Klava dozed at the table; she saw towers with naked backsides on spires; Fyodor sat facing her, orphaned from himself, taking small sips of vodka.

Old man Kolya, who'd found a haven on a wooden beam, was busy sewing, for some reason; little Mila fell asleep right where she was, in the corner where she'd been murmuring. As always, Petenka was nowhere to be seen.

Anna viewed this scene from the window of her room and laughed inwardly. Finally, she couldn't help herself and, gripped by a sudden and amorphous fear, threw herself on the bed and fell asleep.

Meanwhile, in the yard, the disintegration thickened. Blond Igoryok, having failed to catch the butterfly, retreated into himself and, sitting by the fence, started pinching his own handsome, gentle feet out of inertia. When he roused from dozing and saw he was pinching himself, quiet, stinking tears flowed from his light eyes.

Pyr was practicing, hurling a large ax at a tree. Iogann, huddled over, removed a box of beetles from his pocket and started dissecting them with a needle. "Golden hands"—that's what they said about him. He might as well have been dissecting poems written in an ancient language.

Everything had congealed in this savagery.

A couple of hours passed. Suddenly the silence was broken by old man Kolya, screeching hysterically from a nook behind the shed.

Everyone shuddered in unison, but they didn't regain their senses immediately. Only when the screech turned into a howl did everyone slowly, reluctantly start getting up from where they were—everyone except Klava, Pyr, and old man Kolya, who'd gone missing. Even Anna woke up and went out to the yard.

First to go over to the nook behind the shed was Fyodor, and this is what he saw: Klavushka, spread-eagle, jerking on the ground from either fear or bewilderment, her neck in a noose held firmly by Pyr. "Caught her, caught her," he kept repeating in a metallic voice. Old man Kolya, so befuddled he'd leapt onto the fence, screeched in his clumsy, half-womanish, half-wolfish voice.

Though he didn't understand what was going on, Fyodor frightened off Pyr, who let go the noose. Klava was alive and not even very suffocated, but it was all so unimaginable that she stayed on the ground and let her fat thighs flop around.

When everyone came running, Anna slapped Pyr in the face.

"I didn't mean to, I didn't," he mumbled like a frightened bull. "She just turned up. Her neck's so fat and white. My thoughts threw the noose around it themselves."

Klava sat up and then ran at Pyr.

"You were playing? Playing?" she asked.

She was so terrified at the thought that Pyr might've actually strangled her that she drove out the very thought, imagining that Pyr had really just wanted to play with her, like a child. "It can't be, that something would bring me death," was the screech somewhere in her belly.

"Yes, I was playing," Pyr echoed dully. Fyodor took a look at him.

"It's all right, Klav. He'll cool off," Fyodor said, putting his heavy hand on Pyr's head.

Klavushka was so insistent that it had all just been play, and her throat closed up so tightly from terror at the opposite thought, that everyone managed to agree and leave it at that.

By way of rapprochement, Klava even gave Pyr an obscene slap on his pendulous ass. (As if someone you have sexual feelings for couldn't kill you.) To smooth over this flap, they decided to have a drink.

They sat down at the small table in the shed, to the side of the house, for greater coziness. Right next to them sprawled a feral cat Iogann had dissected.

"Why do you kill them? What are you looking for?" Fyodor asked with a grunt.

"We're not looking for anything."

"What do you mean you're not looking for anything?"

"We get satisfaction. That's all. Pleasure... Pleasure," all three sadists wailed, altogether. Pyr, Iogann, and Igoryok. They sat side by side, in order of height, and their eyes gleamed in the gathering dark. Igoryok actually blushed like a girl.

"Where's the pleasure?"

"There's lots...and the nuances to it... First, there's hatred for happiness, but that's different," Igoryok suddenly rushed to say, after downing

a shot of vodka. His face became even more beautiful and his hands shook in anticipation. “Then, they’re alive, but we put them to death, just like that. They’re gone. That means we’re kind of like gods.”

The faces of all three came to life and invisible crowns did seem to appear. Iogann rose abruptly and went for his violin. It was lying around in some shed there; no one knew whose. Soon after, touching, sentimental sounds were heard. Iogann was huddled over, playing on the back steps.

It was time to do the night thing, in a new form of isolation.

“We’ll find a place for everyone,” Klava cooed, pleased with her belly.

“Pyr, I think you should go home,” Anna said.

“Why?” Klava intervened plumply, but Pyr headed obediently for the door.

“I’d sleep in a bed with him. He shouldn’t have tried to hang me,” Klava squeaked and, hopping up, she patted Pyr on both his meaty cheeks.

But the next day, the situation changed drastically. A rumor reached Klava that the local authorities had a few minor difficulties in store for Fyodor. The rumor was vague and indeterminate, but fairly alarming. This time Fyodor decided to leave. Taking a little money, he gave Klavusha a goodbye smack on the ass and disappeared.

“Let him wander...through Russia,” Klava thought. By evening, of the whole noisy company, only Anna Barskaya remained.

So far, Fyodor hadn’t laid eyes on Anna’s real people.

XI

The days passed desolately in Klava's house. Klavusha would sprinkle a little water on herself and stick a live, sometimes stolen gosling up inside her one more time. "You can't go without pleasure... You'll get old," she thought briefly as she relaxed on her feather bed, looking at the ceiling.

After work, old man Kolya staggered around catching flies. Mila gathered pretty flowers from the garbage heaps. Anna alone was nowhere to be seen. One day, though, Barskaya went into Klava's room to see her landlady.

"Klavdia Ivanovna, something bad has happened to one of my old friends, Khristoforov. His father is practically on his deathbed." She told the story of how the Khristoforovs—father and son—had fallen on hard times. The old man was clean, but sick with some internal disease, and he needed fresh air and a change of setting.

"Couldn't I bring him here for a while...to the other downstairs room...with his son to look after him?" Anna said, and suddenly added, "Don't think he's my lover. It's just a very old friendship with his family."

To Anna's surprise, Klavusha agreed.

"Bring them, Anna, bring them," Klava said. "I'm a compassionate woman. I even have pity for that goose over there."

She nodded at the fat, maddened gosling with the beak lightly bound so it couldn't nip too much.

The next day, Anna brought to Klava's a very pale, gray-haired old man and his twenty-seven-year- old son.

The old man was so mellow that everything around him simply dissolved in love; his gray hair circled his head like a halo of humility and quiet; his small, deeply hidden eyes shone with such touching emotion, it was as if he were being resurrected, not dying.

In certain circles, the old man—Andrei Nikitich—was considered a teacher of life.

He walked with one hand resting on his son—Alexei Khristoforov—and the other on a stick that looked like an old-fashioned cane, which he occasionally tapped on the ground as gently as if it were his mother.

Stopping at the front steps, the old man wept quietly. Quick as a chick, Klavusha caught him under the arms and actually carried him into his room, where she'd made up a bed for him.

Later, after the old man had been put to bed, they wanted to feed him, but Andrei Nikitich objected.

"After all, there are many other unfortunate and hungry people in this world besides me," he said.

In the little shed, at the table where the sadists had recently had their drinking bash, Klava got to talking with Alexei and Anna.

"Don't worry, Klavdia Ivanovna," Alyosha said, agitatedly. "I'll be looking after him, and Anna has already reached an agreement with a nurse."

"Our nurse is okay," Klava said, "only for some reason she likes sleeping in the burdock."

"You're exaggerating, Klavdia Ivanovna," Anna broke in, glancing uneasily at Alyosha.

He let Klava's expression pass and beamed all over with benevolence, because they'd found his father a place in the fresh air. His asthenic figure expressed such satisfaction, it was as if he'd been raised up to a better place.

In the evening, everyone gathered in the old man's room. Of the neighbors, old man Kolya found his way there, but for some reason he got flustered and tried to hide under the table.

Andrei Nikitich was already feeling much better, and once he'd adjusted to the soft, cozy bed, he suddenly started to instruct.

"Life is very simple and God is very simple, too," he blurted out. "Look at those people"—Andrei Nikitich gestured out the window with his elegant and very white hand—"they aren't thinking about death, because they see it every day when they mow their hay or slaughter their animals. They know that death is just as much a law of God and life as consuming food, so they aren't surprised, as we are, when they start dying. It is them we must learn from!"

Andrei Nikitich cast a rather triumphant glance at those around him. True, the kindness remained, but a passionate, egotistical desire to live was suddenly revealed at the bottom of his eyes; there was the sense that the old man wanted to simplify death to the maximum in his own eyes in order to make it more acceptable and less frightening.

"Love is the only law of life," he began again. "Love your neighbors and you will have nothing to fear."

Klava didn't even know what he was talking about; she was a little sad, thinking of Fyodor. "He's snuffing someone now, the darling. Such a child," she sighed to herself.

Anna left soon after.

"I know, Christian teaching comes hard for people," the old man rattled on, paying no attention to anyone. "The truth isn't a glass of sweet water..."

The next morning—Alyosha had only just woken up—Andrei Nikitich was already sitting on his bed.

"What's the matter, papa?" Alexei asked.

"I'm going away, my son," the old man answered. "There is no love in this house. I'm going to see the gray-haired old men in the monastery...at the edge of the world. There is no love here."

"What do you mean, father?" Alyosha said and jumped right up. "How is there no love here? What about Anna? How much good has she done for us? You know my feelings about her. And she said that Klavdia Ivanovna is a charming, refined person. Anna was just very sorry her brother Fyodor had left."

Andrei Nikitich didn't answer and total silence ensued, during which he fell still on the bed, huddled.

Finally, the old man broke the silence.

"I won't go, only because there cannot be wholly bad people in the world." He smiled. "Each person has a mite of good, which can be awakened."

The old man plunged into his own contemplation of God. When he thought about God, his thoughts became so mellow and touching that the whole world, all that existed, took on a sweet, smoothing, benevolent guise. God took on the same guise inside him. Given a God such as that, one could die peacefully. The old man felt better. His emotion spread to the very depths of his soul, making it as soft as cotton wool.

In the evening, Andrei Nikitich took another turn for the worse.

Alexei and Anna were by his side. Klavusha kept coming in and going out.

Andrei Nikitich's face seemed to be dissolving in complaint; he was gasping for air. A big, black fly settled on his nose. Alyosha was about to chase it away, but the old man objected, whining, "Thou shalt not kill, Alyosha. It wants to live, too. Don't touch it." He continued to lie like that for a while with a death rattle and with the fly on his nose.

"You should put a towel over his eyes," Klava said into Anna's ear. "A towel."

Meanwhile, the doctor arrived, gave a whistle, and was gone; but nothing in the old man's condition changed; even he believed he was close to dying. His main concern was a well-done death, with good thoughts, with tender emotion in his soul, and God forbid he should offend anyone.

"I didn't push you, did I?" he yelped and, almost weeping, suddenly addressed old man Kolya, who'd just walked in. Instantly, Kolya hid behind the door.

Suddenly, the old man felt a sharp sting in his heart, as if it were about to burst. He looked at Klava in fright and, in the dead silence, murmured, "Do you love me? Oh, how I need people to love me!" He elicited a stream of hidden malice in Anna. She'd thought, at the moment of death,

his face would become wholly good and equable. “He’s like a child who’s afraid of life and the dark,” she said to herself irritably, “and who thinks that if he’s good and obedient then trouble will bypass him and everyone will pat his little head, and then the whole world will be nice and tame. All the dogs will stop barking because Vova is such a good little boy. Death itself will shed a few tears.” She was pained for the world, that dark, cruel, and mysterious world she knew and loved.

Meanwhile, the old man really did want to placate death; he really did think that if he was very good and philanthropic, then death would appear to him in the form of a kind, simple, and lucid fellow. And, therefore, he wouldn’t find it so terrifying. From time to time, he even played it up a little, sulking that death—so simple and lucid—still hadn’t come calling. He strove to use his love for God and life to wash away and cushion his latent fear of death and the next world. Subconsciously, he wanted to use this love to transform his picture of the world and make it less terrifying. At a certain point, he stopped rejoicing when he suddenly felt better again; on the contrary, he wanted this emotion to continue, an emotion that made him feel so soft and saintly and that tamed his impending death.

Actually, when he felt completely better, he revived for a moment, without lifting his head off the pillow, surveyed everyone with his pointed, piercing gaze, and said, “Love for a fly is superior to love for the Lord.”

Everyone’s mouth opened in surprise, but Andrei Nikitich suddenly asked Alexei to write down his thoughts, but that never did happen because the old man took another turn for the worse. Andrei Nikitich didn’t know whether these transitions meant he would die or recover.

Yet again, he peered at those around him. Klava’s face luxuriated in its puffiness. The lucid eyes of old man Kolya, who’d just returned, looked at him from a slightly opened cupboard.

Suddenly, Andrei Nikitich bolted from his bed to the nearest window.

“Where are the people? The people?” he shouted.

“Do you love people?” Klava walked over to him and, before the old man’s eyes, her numbingly sensual face suddenly froze.

XII

The next morning, Andrei Nikitich was sitting on his bed as if nothing had happened, lecturing Alexei.

By midday he was again so weak that he was tearing up. He started reminiscing, regretting each and every unfortunate person who came to mind. "You have to love people, love people," he repeated. By treating others with love, he forgot about himself and seemed to lift the burden of existence and the fathomlessness of his love for himself; after all, it would be awful to tremble for yourself all the time—one way or another, you were "doomed"—and his love for people lulled him, distracted him, and plunged his consciousness into a sweet fog; in addition, it was almost safe—after all, it was easy to bear the deaths of the people he loved inside himself, unlike the approach of his own end.

Later, after the doctor's visit, Andrei Nikitich's spirits recovered completely; he got up and decided to take a walk around; meanwhile, the house was deserted. Everyone had gone about his own business; only Klava and Petenka (who, in order to scrape himself at will, had climbed a tree) remained.

Tapping his cane, the old man wandered around the yard, deep in his thoughts of love, as if deep in the clouds. He sat down on a bench.

Suddenly, Klava was standing before him.

"Are you bored, Andrei Nikitich?" she asked.

"No, I'm thinking about the Lord," the old man corrected her, although good-naturedly.

Suddenly, Klava patted him on the neck and sat down beside him. Smiling broadly, she turned her face, round as the moon, toward the old man, gazing into his small, good eyes.

"Is there something you want to say, Klavdia Ivanovna?" the old man asked uneasily.

Still gazing at him, Klava didn't answer, but suddenly started singing something she'd made up, wild and absurd.

After a pause, Andrei Nikitich said that God and love were one and the same.

Still singing, Klava suddenly began slapping the old man's ass with her puffy little palm.

Andrei Nikitich froze to the bench.

"It's not so terrible if you die, Andrei Nikitich," Klava said, leaning her breasts toward his old mouth and breathing in his face. "Come see me after death! Right to my bed! All bony!" And she gave him a little pinch in the side. "Tell the Lord "hello" for me. I love him." And she gave the old man's ear a lick with her soft tongue.

Andrei Nikitich was struck dumb; meanwhile, Klava was breathing deeply.

"You're crazy!" That was the first thing the old man said, or rather squawked, when he came to his senses a little.

"Why is that, dearie?" Klava rumbled, obscenely feeling up Andrei Nikitich below the waist. "I'm not crazy. I'm luscious. Come off it!"

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" the old man shouted, now all red. He slipped out of Klava's clutches and jumped up from the bench. "Leave me alone. I just want to live...to live. I don't want to die."

"But it's after death that there's real life," Klava said with conviction, letting her whole body sink in on itself.

She was about to say something more, but the old man suddenly broke away and ran at a trot, tap-tapping his little feet, to the front steps—and darted into his room, where he locked himself in with a key and caught his breath. Klava, meanwhile, oblivious to his disappearance, crawled out to the middle of the yard and, baring her

piggy flesh, sprawled out on the grass and rolled around, offering up to the last rays of the sun her world-encompassing belly. Nearby lay Petenka, who, after scratching himself, got so distracted he'd fallen from his branch.

Once he rested up in his room, Andrei Nikitich found he needed to leave again right away, but then he started feeling so bad that he got scared of going anywhere and decided to bide his time, thinking only about how to avert an attack. He got stuck on the same thought: "After all, I was perfectly fine just now, and I recovered miraculously."

Alexei arrived and the old man, worried only about his health, seemed to forget the incident with Klava, merely ordering Alexei to request that his landlady not disturb him. At the bottom of his soul, he was actually flattered that Klava had pawed at him and come onto him like she would a man—which is how he assessed Klava's actions. ("That means I'm still alive," he thought.)

Klava stopped by to see him that evening and acted as if nothing had happened, though he was alone. She sat on a chair and looked silently out the window, spitting sunflower seeds and swinging her legs.

That night, when everyone was asleep, the old man, whose soul had departed for the unknown darkness, truly felt bad, especially mentally. Fright actually made him sit up in bed. It wasn't that he was dying, but all of a sudden he was gripped by the horror that he was going to die soon anyway and there was no getting away from that. He also felt there was some kind of monster growing inside him, sweeping away all his reason's former conclusions about death and stripping him naked before his very eyes. Horrified, he actually started squealing in the darkness, the way a werewolf pig probably grunts when faced with a knife. This monster was his second inner being, which had been glimpsed in him before, in the depths of his affectionate, Christian eyes—a being that stubbornly wanted to go on living, no matter what, and that now awakened in him with a violent fury.

It demanded a simple answer to the question: What was going to happen to him after death?

The old man suddenly realized he wasn't at all interested in whether there was a God or love or not, that this—like all other stratagems of the heart and reason—had nothing whatsoever to do with him, and the only thing that worried and truly interested him was his own fate. He needed to know what was going to happen to him afterward. In irritation, he even banged his fist on the nightstand, as if the answer to this awful question depended on it. In this terrible loneliness, facing death and himself, all his ideas about God and love collapsed like a house of cards. His second being howled viciously and insistently, seeking an answer to the question of what was going to be. What?

Then, bathed in sweat, clutching his head with one hand, the old man summoned all the forces of his consciousness and began calculating, practically counting on his fingers.

He started analyzing all the conceivable options that might happen to a person after death.

"One," he thought, bending down his thumb and shying away from his own thoughts, as from the plague, "I will turn into nothing for eternity. Two, I'll end up in the world beyond the grave. But this brings up the question of whether that world is eternal or just a postponement of inevitable death. What happens in life beyond the grave? But I shouldn't peek further," the old man squealed. "I just want to understand what's going to happen immediately after death. Then we'll see." He stopped for a minute, transfixed by his own thoughts, his gaze stuck on the dark clothes rack with the empty dresses. "But a different life," he continued thinking feverishly, "could have its own occasions. Life there will be a continuation of my life here, in another form. That's great," he squealed viscerally. "I will be transformed into a being that doesn't know about my former life and has no connection to it, but a being still relatively decent, conceivable, and even in some way resembling me. Hee hee hee."

"Three, I'll be transformed into something unimaginable and incomprehensible to my mind right now—into a squiggle. Ho ho ho!"

The old man got stuck again. These thoughts, accompanied by the pictures racing through his imagination, first scared him and then, on the contrary, set him against going on with life; he was bathed in sweat one minute and hiccupping the next.

Then his thoughts began functioning again at an unusual speed. "Finally, another option," he resumed thinking, "transformation, transmigration of souls; immediately after death or in the life beyond the grave, I'll find myself back in this world. We'll assume this world, not others; that's easier to imagine. Here there can be sub-options. №1. I'll remain in the same place, myself, as in a vicious circle. №2. I'll be born again in another body as a worthy person, the continuer of my current affairs; that would be very good, logical, and desirable." In the darkness, the old man quietly stroked his own thigh. "№3. I'll become a person who is not the continuer of my current being, but is still worthy of me...or...I'll be transformed into a nonentity, a halfwit"—the old man gasped in fear—"or maybe an animal...a turkey...a petal."

The old man froze; his soul sank at the yawning abyss.

Then he stirred and stiffened again and looked out the window; a big yellow moon hung over the earth in the night's emptiness.

Something unusual and swift had happened to his soul; all the old years-long kindness and goodness had slipped from his face, which became insanely pathetic, aloof, apprehensively lost, and, at moments, even vicious.

For some reason, of all the options for life after death, the foulest ones crept into his mind.

So fear-crazed was he that suddenly he pulled his checkers out from under his pillow and started playing himself on the nightstand, groaning and hacking. But various specters kept trying to overpower him; he thought someone was emerging from the corner, tall and big, and pointing at him menacingly; crazed, he flung his head on the pillow, peering with fixed, wide-open eyes into the advancing darkness.

In the morning, after he'd slept, something quite extreme and wild happened; hopping off the bed in just his underwear, Andrei Nikitich

announced that he'd died and turned into a chicken. With a playfulness unusual for his illness, he scampered into the yard, flapping his arms and crying out in anguish, "I'm a chicken, a chicken...cluck cluck cluck...I'm a chicken, a chicken!"

At first, no one took all this seriously, although many did stop in their tracks. The doctor, who'd come by now, felt the old man's pulse and listened to his body and said the danger had passed, the crisis was over, Andrei Nikitich would start to get better, and he—the doctor—was quite amazed. The old man was stubbornly silent.

But at breakfast in the yard, everyone was astonished. Andrei Nikitich hopped off his chair and, flapping his arms like wings, with cries of "cluck cluck cluck," he rushed to the grain that a few chickens were pecking. Startling the chickens, he got down on all fours and started sort of pecking the grain. Alexei ran up. The old man looked up and Alyosha gasped, because this wasn't Andrei Nikitich anymore.

There wasn't so much as a trace of his former kindness or other Christian attributes; looking at Alyosha was a new and completely different being; the old man's face had sharpened and taken on a dead, waxy tinge; and his little eyes gazed viciously and mistrustfully.

There was the sense that, inwardly, Andrei Nikitich ached to hop sideways on all fours, the way a chicken would hop in his situation, and he was prevented from doing so only by his lack of experience.

"What's the matter with you, Father?" Alexei muttered and, grabbing him by the arm just as he was sinking down, led him to the dinner table.

It was odd that the old man said nothing human at all, other than his recent words about being a chicken.

"The time of transformations is nigh." Anna malevolently uttered someone's dying words.

That afternoon, the old man completely entranced everyone with his behavior; old man Kolya left for the bathhouse; Klava was just about to take a broom to Andrei Nikitich, so well had the old man convinced her that he was a chicken, and Mila's wide-open eyes watched

him from the attic. Actually, the girl thought a wheel was racing around the yard, not Andrei Nikitich.

Alyosha alone attempted to engage his father in conversation. He caught the old man when he'd jumped from the fence and sat on a stump.

"Reason philosophically, Papa," Alexei admonished him, after sitting on the grass. "You tell everyone you're a chicken, which means you're aware; you're thinking; consequently you are a thinking being and no kind of chicken. Chickens don't reason."

But Andrei Nikitich stared at him with frightening mistrust, almost like an animal. Instead of raising logical objections, he jumped at his son with cries of "Cluck! Cluck! Cluck!"—and tried to peck Alyosha with his nose.

Klava separated the scuffling men. Andrei Nikitich didn't seem to recognize his own son.

On the second day of this absurd behavior, Alexei lost it.

"What am I supposed to do with him now?" he asked Klava, dazed.

"You don't think he's faking?" interjected old man Kolya, who'd been eavesdropping, and he cautiously wiggled his big ears.

"Maybe call a psychiatrist?" Anna said after a brief pause.

"Nonsense," Klava tossed out. "We'll lock him in the shed for a day, so he doesn't jump on the fences and hurt himself. Maybe he'll cool off."

She went into the house after giving a handy post a hug. Andrei Nikitich found himself in the shed.

XIII

That evening, Alexei, practically in tears, went to see Anna in her room.

In Anna's milieu, life and metaphysics meant the same thing; living meant steeping visible life with one's otherworldliness; therefore, love here frequently melded with recognition of the inner world, which was not a simple bonus to love, a tacit agreement.

Alyosha didn't belong wholly to that milieu; he was both drawn to it and scared of it; but he had been in love—for a long time and unrequitedly—with Anna, in part because she was so enigmatic and belonged to that dark, irrational milieu.

Today, in addition, he wanted to prove to Anna, who represented all those strange people who'd taken on too much, that a firm belief in God was still man's sole fortress amid all this metaphysical chaos, this shower of deaths, absurd machines, and screw-loose brains.

He was also doing this to reinforce his own faith and elevate himself in Anna's eyes. Ultimately, he valued recognition over love. Recognition of his worth.

Wound up as he was by his father's idiotic transformation into a chicken, on top of everything else, he started straight from God, and the necessity—and even logic—of believing in Him.

Stroking her bared leg, Anna responded abruptly and even spitefully this time. Her nostrils flared slightly and her eyes glittered from a sense of her own being and opposition—opposition to these ideas.

She talked about why she didn't like the usual religious systems, which were played out and placed a limit on metaphysical

freedom, even though the spirit had long since broken free into a new and inscrutable sphere; the more ancient esotericism was more attractive now, since it offered greater scope for investigations and metaphysical journeys; there needed to be another way of penetrating to the otherworldly.

"Ultimately, the usual religions are too one-sided," Anna exploded, "and right now metaphysics needs a radical revolution, up to and including the destruction of the old concepts and the appearance of new ones—perhaps even more "absurd"—but nonetheless symbolizing our spirit's condition; and it is this—metaphysics itself, religion itself—that must make this revolution...because all the other, previous revolutions were beside the point, since they replaced metaphysical values with concepts from incomparably lower spheres, rendering the replacements absurd and leading only to negative consequences... And so we need a genuinely religious cataclysm," she flared up again. "The world is expanding and, with it, our metaphysical presentiment; modern religions can only constrict our notion of the world, for they are merely the distorted shadows of once great religions."

Alexei was utterly crushed and distraught. Intellectually, he was most stunned by what she'd said about the limit of metaphysical freedom; and emotionally, by her comment that those strong of spirit, so to speak, were setting out on an unknown, frightening, and otherworldly journey.

Still, he objected. "So you're saying that this is a distorted path, a profanation, that the keys to true Christianity have been lost...almost. Even the meanings of words now are not the same as they were then. But what if the keys were found? If only among a few."

"That would be another matter, of course," Anna replied quite calmly. "Intuitively, though, I can tell that this isn't for me. I don't know about the others. Though, why not? Maybe. ...As to the few...everything is monstrous and confused, to the point of improbability."

Mila's expressionless face, with its wide-open eyes, appeared in a window. What was she looking at? Alyosha sat in the corner

by the stove; Anna paced around the room, slightly agitated; the wind howled; and Klava sang her absurd songs in the next room.

"You've sided entirely with Padov and his friend Remin. And that nightmare Izvitsky," Alexei muttered.

Anna let that pass. Lighting up, she silently looked out the window, where Mila's absent face had already disappeared.

"Well, all right"—Alyosha again summoned his courage—"so what if a great deal is closed to us...and people get told only a small part of everything, of the highest, and even then it's poorly understood. But God, what do you do with God? I'm not talking now about the God of specific religions, but about the God we can't know?"

"God!" Anna said. "What can I possibly tell you about God?"

"No, answer me, why you...you specifically...apart from this, and not in general!" Alexei shouted.

"God is something else, of course," Anna, suddenly deeply calm, began, as if she were talking to herself. Kicking off her shoes, she curled up on the sofa. They could hear old man Kolya outside, shouting intermittently but piercingly at the shed where Andrei Nikitich had been cackling for over an hour.

"In general," Anna went on, "if we forget certain former attributes of God, especially mercy, kindness, and the like, and in their place put others, awful ones taken from our present-day life, that is, from God's real actions, then we might come up with a God...who it would be interesting to meet somehow in the next world. Maybe something grandiose and outrageous, a completely different God who, if our former truth-seekers had dreamed, then only in their nightmares."

"The Devil, not God. That's the substitution you want," Alexei forced out of himself.

"We don't want it; we see it," Anna replied. "God, but different. Inaccessible in a different way now. Whose purposes are totally concealed from humanity, not connected to morality."

"Sheer Satanism," Alyosha said with disgust.

"Ultimately it's better to have a transition from the idea of God to something further. Better to have absolute transcendence," Anna added. "Or even more..."

"You don't mean Glubev and the absolute raving he calls the new religion? With his religion of I?"

"I don't know. I don't know. We're still searching."

"At least Glubev has his ravings," Alyosha screeched. "You have nothing... but despair!"

Anna actually burst out laughing.

"And what do you modern believers have?" she replied. "Petty, dimwitted metaphysical comfort, a parody of the golden dream, a laboratory for the creation of a good spiritual mood, immortality for nonentities. You have to understand, Alyosha," she checked herself, not wishing to offend him. "We need the right to search. Even if the search is preceded by a great fall."

"The great fall you, Padov, Remin, and Izvitsky are in, naturally," Alyosha broke in.

"Why do you keep reducing this to individuals?" Anna said. "We're talking about ideas. Even if we're not participants in this great fall, though I'm sure we... Let others, it doesn't matter. But after the great disaster, a new faith will ascend. Maybe even Glubev's." (Alyosha laughed maliciously.) "Maybe someone else's. I don't know."

"This is all the worst kind of fall, the worst," Alexei muttered fervently. "But answer me, finally, answer me: What specifically so alienates you from God?"

"If God is something outside my "I," then I would answer you: My bottomless love for myself. Not only that, I don't like it when people try to put a white muzzle on that power you call God, as you do," Anna replied wearily, and she moved to a chair. "Then, I love this mysterious, black world where we've been abandoned," she said, as if thinking aloud, "and the very concept of God is a given that impedes the radical search, a search alienated from everything human, a search in the transcendental. Not only that, I feel the world

as a game of monstrous, individual, otherworldly forces. God is something very modest compared to my perception of the world. We need a super-mystery, freedom, raving even—metaphysical raving."

"You're all clinging so tightly to the immortality of the soul," Alyosha interrupted. "You tremble for your own "I." But you don't need God anymore. Or you transform Him, as Padov does, into an inaccessible monster...just to frighten each other."

At that moment, the door flung open and into the room flew Andrei Nikitich, who'd broken out of the shed.

"Cluck cluck cluck! Cluck cluck cluck cluck!" he screamed, hopping onto the table and stamping his foot.

Meanwhile, outside the door, the dark figure of old man Kolya appeared, holding a huge knife. He might've already taken Andrei Nikitich for a chicken.

"Papa! How can you?" Alexei shouted.

But Andrei Nikitich clucked and jumped out the window.

And so their weighty religious conversation wound down in a most unexpected and timely fashion.

True, Alyosha was beside himself and, not noticing Kolya's knife, dashed outside.

The rest of the evening passed in all kinds of trouble.

They collected Andrei Nikitich, though he was unbearably silent, and made him drink a bromide.

Alyosha was supposed to take the late train to Moscow on urgent business for a few days. Klava and Anna agreed to look after the old man during that time.

XIV

A man of twenty-eight or so, young and intelligent-looking, but with a frantic face that rushed headlong away from itself, ran through the small, beleaguered streets—some deserted, some not—of Lebedinoye. The inhabitants watched him with identical dull gazes.

Every once in a while, he'd take a hop and yell wildly, raising his arms skyward.

In the sky he saw a huge, black spot, which he thought equal to what was inscrutable in his soul. That's why the young man howled so.

Down the twisting lanes, over scattered garbage heaps, he came closer and closer to the Sonnovs' house, quickly checking street names as he went.

In his pocket was a letter from Anna:

"Tolya... come here, come visit me. The old-time Russian, slumberingly folk obscurantism I discovered here is mingling with our "intellectual" mysticism... This is going to be the great synthesis... that we've been awaiting for so long... Come here, to the darkness, away from the brazen smoke of visibility."

The young man was, of course, the famous Anatoly Padov. He had a narrow face with a sullen, enflamed gaze; the weight of nightmares completely suppressed all of his other expressions; you could see he had a small bald spot; people said that Padov was balding out of terror at life beyond the grave.

Meanwhile, the spot in the sky pursued him; he couldn't take his eyes off it, so strangely did he link his inner life with that spot, which, he felt, was the detached inscrutability of his soul.

Padov stopped and sat down. And suddenly he burst out laughing—hysterically, as if content with his terror and even admiring it.

What had thrown him off so?

Ordinarily he lived by a self-destruction mixed not infrequently with an insane terror at life beyond the grave and the next world, a terror that forced him to advance delirious hypotheses—one more delirious than the next—about posthumous existence. Sometimes it seemed he was saved from his real fear of death or the unknown by the fact that he was even more inflamed by a fear of himself that was itself inflamed to gigantic proportions, heated up by his delirium and clearly prepared to burn up in this delirium.

To say nothing of the fact that he regarded all religious and philosophical ideas and systems, even those seemingly closest to him, with a visceral negativity.

Everything that was "not-I" evoked in him a latent, ardent revulsion; his troubled, warped mind shied away from even the worlds dearest to him, finding even in them something of the "not-I." But insofar as these worlds and ideas did, in some way, enter into his "I," his madness was frequently self-destructive; he was capable of regarding even his own, pure "I" with unease, as if it had a catch or was a substitute. One could imagine his attitude toward the world, when he treated even his one and only, beloved "I" with hysterical negativism.

Such was Anatoly Padov.

Apart from all this, he was sometimes overwhelmed by a small, very specific nightmare in which a vile imp crawled out of the general wall of devils. So it was now. True, he had long been pursued by the idea of "things in themselves" or that aspect of the world inherently inaccessible to cognition; in his soul, even as a child, when he heard about this for the first time, something shuddered and cracked. The metaphysical took possession of his imagination and was always ominous and direct—no less direct than a disease or a nuclear explosion—by force of its effect. For now, though, the point was that the outer world specifically was merely a phenomenon, a semblance that

perhaps concealed something absolute and inscrutable and was still endurable, although Padov had dreamed more than once of the shadow of this "absolute and inscrutable." Once, though, as he went deeper into this element, he stumbled across an idea that amazed him, one he'd somehow missed before—the point being that our "I," which we love so, might also be just a phenomenon, a semblance hiding the absolute and inscrutable, the thing in itself. The "I" might merely be the outward manifestation of this thing in itself, or rather, just a "huff" and nothing more, as Sobakevich put it.

That's where it all started!

As someone ardently in love with his own "I," he couldn't bear this kind of humiliation. Although in the end this theory was merely a hypothesis not subject to criticism, he wound himself up to the point of hysterics, gradually forcing this idea on himself and developing it until it was transformed into an image, a monster.

A few days before his arrival in Lebedinoye, he wandered to the edge of Moscow, to a filthy, angular beer stand.

"The fact that everything is illusory, that's fine," he thought, convulsively sipping his beer and gazing malevolently at the waitresses" fat asses and the sun peeping through the window. "But the idea that I, myself, am an illusion—that's too much. I don't want it, I don't! What does it mean if I stroke myself and this doesn't correspond to a profound truth? Or that my "I" conceals an inscrutable "being" that is somehow directing me?"

Padov walked up to the counter and asked for a beer. As soon as the beer poured down his throat, he thought this wasn't him at all, but that inscrutable "being," invisible and even sedately present behind his back, drinking the beer through him, and he was nothing but a marionette, even in this vulgar, everyday situation.

This one thought alone made him jump up and vomit on the counter. The fat, fly-crazed waitress indifferently cleaned up the absurd vomit.

Tolya got some tea and sat by the window, not far from an invalid wrapped in an incredibly large quilted jacket.

This combination of the everyday and the metaphysical actually made him laugh, but his ideas continued to weigh. "Let's think." He grinned into the darkness. "It would be more correct to consider my "I" to be merely the outward manifestation of this inscrutable *x* or the thing in itself. This implies that my "I" is basically not my "I," because my "I" comprises my outer surface, so to speak, which is unknown to me. Or an illusion... So my "I" is not my "I."" Tolya actually slapped his palm on the table and laughed lightly. "But who am I? That's just the point, that I can't know who I am because the powers of my "I" don't let me penetrate this inscrutable thing that is my "I" in and of itself, in truth. That means I'm more alienated from myself than from the sky. That inscrutable something may even be the enemy of my "I." I may be my own enemy."

Beyond this, Padov could no longer think. He was drunk on emotions. A wild, spontaneous merriment fell over him. He sensed his "I" not as an independent principle, but as a kind of ball bouncing on a board and speeding under its own steam through an unknown space to another, even more unknown world. He felt pathological laughter coming on.

He walked over to the invalid, who lay on the floor wrapped in a jacket, and poured his tea on him. The invalid pulled out his wrinkled, rag-framed face. Then Padov patted him on the kisser, got down on all fours, and took a half-liter of vodka from his pocket. He ended up lying beside the invalid under the table, wrapped up like a caterpillar. "The main thing is running wild," Padov said into the invalid's caked-over ear. The man's black, caved-in mouth smiled joyfully. Padov poured half the bottle of vodka into it and drank the rest himself. Bloated by the vodka, the invalid crept back into his jacket and Padov sprinkled him with crumbs.

Everyone at the beer stand was busy with his own affairs: One was drinking, his nose buried in the vodka; one was asleep; one was just standing in the corner. No one paid any attention to Padov. Woozy from himself, he took the late trolleybus home to his lonely cell, where a portrait of Dostoevsky hung in the corner by the window.

The evening light filled his narrow room as if it were a resurrected coffin. Inside, under his blanket, Padov suddenly turned cold, like a corpse, and gave himself a crystalline, besotted look in the huge mirror looming over the room. He mumbled tranquilly, "Well, my "I" isn't all that much an illusion. So there!" He wagged a finger at his reflection. "Still, it'd be awful if my "I" were ever to lose its value."

He fell asleep, drifting off into oblivion. That night passed calmly. The next night, on the other hand, was nightmarish. The "inscrutable" appeared to Padov again. The inscrutable, or better put, the inscrutable's messenger usually arrived in various guises, but this time there was simply a powerful knock at the door.

"Who is it?" Padov screamed in his sleep.

In response, as if without warning, he heard a loud voice.

"You're not at all what you think you are."

"I'm a man...or rather, a spirit," Padov thought.

"But...but," the voice answered.

"I'm an individual," Padov thought again.

"A fool," the voice replied.

At that, it was over.

After these abrupt, awkwardly intrusive visitations, Padov awoke from his subconscious in a cold sweat. The specter of being incomprehensible and devalued tormented him. That night, it took him a long time to fall asleep. Early in the morning, the postman knocked at the door, bringing that famous letter from Anna, summoning Padov into the darkness, into the "folk obscurantism." Good professor's son that he was, Padov didn't have much faith in the common people's powers, but he had nothing against seeing Anna. "She's dear to me," he knew. That's why Padov found himself in Lebedinoye. He ran through town like a metaphysical wild boar and finally sat down, haggard, on the bench by the wrecked beer stand. The black spot he'd seen in the sky suddenly disappeared, as if hiding away in his soul. Padov stood up and soon after found himself in front of the Sonnovs' house. Up above, in a tree, he heard a sloppy whistle: Petenka.

XV

Anna greeted Padov with open arms. But he ran away from her, like a child, all over the room, laughing the whole time. From below, they heard Klava's bestially mysterious laugh, as if in response. Darkness had already fallen, a darkness that mingled with this house.

Anna lit a candle, illuminating the upper corner of the room—and there was Dostoevsky again. She set the table: a bottle of vodka, a slice of black bread, and salt. They didn't have to start from the beginning; their conversation had broken off and turned inward at a specific point, a month ago.

Padov, his pale face sniggering, began telling her about his present condition, all the while pointing behind his back.

"Fyodor's somewhere now." Anna sighed for some reason.

She wore a kerchief, peasant-style, and this lent her refined face a certain depraved and hysterical look, as moans seeped through the floor from downstairs.

But as Padov told his stories, transforming his world into merriment, Anna got more and more caught up by his images. Before too long, she was looking at Padov as if he were a joke concealing "the thing in itself." She expressed her idea and Padov squealed in ecstasy. "I want to regard myself as a joke, too," he howled, pouring vodka into his glass.

As the conversation deepened, however, Anna saw, in the dark space of corners that seemed to be closing in, flashes of the inscrutable, more and more. At first "it" was merely emitted by Padov, and he gradually became like a black saint, in the halo of the unknown.

Passion was already overpowering Anna.

She walked over to Padov and stroked his knees. “A saint, Tolenka’s become…a saint,” she murmured with an invisibly bloody foam at her lips.

Padov shuddered in oblivion. His thoughts, as if losing their value, slipped off him, like snow off a wizard.

And behind his thoughts it remained: the inscrutable.

Finally, leaning against the wall, Anna had a vision of Padov becoming very small, the inscrutable that emanated from him in the form of a halo growing into an enormous black wall where a small worm-man-spirit squirmed.

Her heart shuddered and she had an urge to join this black spot, this thing in itself.

She rushed toward him.

Although the inscrutable appeared visually as a black wall in which Padov was immured, spiritually it appeared as the limit of human capabilities, as that which extinguishes thoughts the closer they get to it, losing power in flight. And it was there, behind them, behind those thoughts, that her blood rushed.

A few moments later, they were in bed. Anna felt inhumanly strange when the black wall appeared above her. Padov’s face seemed to flounder in her darkness. Soon it was all over and the inscrutable that had gripped her entire being for an instant moved off somewhere, into the alienated distance. But they’d managed to connect the crude and narrow reality of the sex act with the refined and ominous existence of the unknown.

The next morning, all this went deeper still, as if the unknown had curled up and hidden behind the ordinary.

True, these inner minglings made the ordinary, the barely illuminated, seem as if it were a thing in itself turned inside out. It seemed to Anna that Padov’s forehead was glowing, but with a simple light. Tolya silently cleared the table and moved around the room, past the cupboard. The ordinary had already been cracked by the recent inrush of the unknown. Nearly everyone in the house was asleep, but Anna and Padov’s peace was broken by a knock at the door; the door seemed to open of its own accord and in walked little Mila.

"Why, she's blind," Padov exclaimed, and these were his first words since the previous night. Indeed, silently, like a blind girl, Mila walked from the door to the window.

"Oh no, she can see. She just doesn't like to talk," Anna replied, gazing into Mila's face.

In fact, the more precise impression was that Mila did see...only what?

Of course, neither Padov nor Anna knew that Mila, whose face didn't normally express anything, had a bizarre condition born in her recently. Seeing, she saw nothing. For example, formally, Mila saw the objects in Anna's room, but this did not arouse in her a subjective sensation of seeing them, although she could orient herself.

That's why Mila sat down on a chair, simply, irrespectively, and asked for some tea, which she drank as if it were air.

Padov and Anna left her and stepped out into the Sonnov yard. Old man Kolya was already lying there, under a bench, good and drunk. He had covered his dear face with a cap. Seating herself next to Padov at the small wooden table, Anna initiated him into the secrets of the Sonnov house. Especially enchanting for Padov was the transformation of Andrei Nikitich, whom he now called the cock-corpse.

Suddenly, behind him, Klava's mellow, vaguely insane voice rang out.

"So cozy! So divine! Annulya might as well be suckling the Divine poison from his penis. Ah..."—and she affectionately mauled Anna's breast with her puffy hand.

"Nice!" Padov thought briefly.

"I brought a little water with me. It's refreshing," Klavusha babbled on, taking a seat. "Here."

She put a pail of water on the table.

"Nice looking!" Padov thought with even more delight.

Right then, the sound of a body's brittle fall came from the shed. It was Andrei Nikitich, scampering out like a chicken; only he looked pretty ghastly, more like a chicken headed for the next world.

He shook himself off and "walked" over to the people talking. Everyone waited for him tenderly; but only now that he'd become

a chicken did Klavushka, for some reason, consider him, on the contrary, a person.

Two days before, Andrei Nikitich had started to converse, but rather monosyllabically. Terribly changed even outwardly, he now looked, after a few days of his new life, more like a dead chicken than a live one, and now, in his monosyllabic expressions, he no longer insisted so much on being a chicken, but rather opined that he was simply dead.

When the cock-corpse walked up to the table, Padov embraced and kissed him. They sat down at the table. Each drank some water from the pail.

"Tell me, Andrei Nikitich," Padov turned to him. "They say you used to be a very religious man, right? I've read your unpublished books about the Lord."

The cock-corpse looked at Padov in consternation, jumped up, and, with a ghastly yellow face like a hanged chicken, pecked him on the cheek.

"Have psychiatrists examined him?" Padov asked.

"Alyosha was wasting his time." Anna grinned. "Before you arrived, a whole gang of them invaded and, you know, they said his psyche was normal, only a little diminished. It's just that Andrei Nikitich's intellect has declined, they said. Can't you see that psychiatry has nothing to do with this, Tolya? I think he's obviously been transformed into another being that's completely different, inhuman."

"The psychiatrists should've been called in when Andrei Nikitich believed in the Lord," Klavushka interjected bawdily. "Not now."

"I'm just dead," Andrei Nikitich suddenly responded in normal human language.

Everyone fell silent and tears welled up in Anna's eyes.

"That's just what I thought, that psychiatry was beside the point," Padov exclaimed, breaking the silence. "Andrei Nikitich, you say you're dead. You say it, which means you're alive."

Padov walked over and stared coldly into Andrei Nikitich's eyes, which were as dull as a cock's.

"You're alive, but living a special, dead life! Do you see?" he went on. "Do you remember how you used to live, how you believed in God?"

For a moment, the spark of some monstrous, inhuman consciousness flashed in Andrei Nikitich's eyes.

"That was all drivel," he said. The spark went out and his face again took on its cockish expression. Padov froze, struck by that spark.

"You know what?" He turned to Anna. "His change to a cock, that may be a transitional stage. Some new consciousness is being born in him right now, only it's a dead consciousness. Dead with respect to what's human and in the sense of being underground, in a way."

"Cluck cluck cluck!" The cock-corpse interrupted, jumping onto the table and overturning the pail of water.

"He's perfectly normal," Klavushka said, coddling Anna's ass.

"As to a dead consciousness, let's wait and see," Anna added.

"Yes, let's wait and see," Klavushka rejoiced juicily. "How about some night-night now? To start the day right. A long time ago, I dug up three pits in the garden, the front garden. I even put some grass down there. Like grass graves. I've slept there twice already."

Padov burst out laughing, looking at Anna. "A synthesis—and what a synthesis!" And all three did indeed head for the grass graves. Mila's shadow flitted past them.

"Too bad Fyodor's not here," Anna thought.

"What did Andrei Nikitich say about the inhabitants of this house before his transformation?" Padov asked Klava when they'd all lain in the pits. The graves were side by side, immured in themselves, but Padov lifted his head slightly above the ground, for conversation.

Klava's voice came from underground and, for some reason, carried rather obscene intonations. "Oh, I believe he thought we were all evil."

Padov laughed loudly. "But we aren't evil, we're just otherworldly," he said, and he hid his head in his grass grave.

As evening fell, merriment reigned throughout the Sonnov-Fomichev yard. Mila, while seeing nothing, had climbed a tree. Petenka scraped himself under it, with a face frenzied over himself. Tipsy old man Kolya,

barely keeping his feet, searched all over the yard for the grave of his little girl Lidochka, though she was buried on Lebedinoye's outskirts.

First to climb out of her grass grave was Klavushka.

Mentally absurdifying everything around her, so that the absurdity was squared, Klavushka wandered off to put some food together.

Padov was called the "favorite of the world beyond the grave" for good reason; in his grass grave, he'd come up with something about his future life that he couldn't bring himself to tell even Anna. His face drained and he climbed out. Metaphysical nightmares often filed through his soul, one more monstrous than the other. The change of situation may have been a factor this time.

Anna was still lying in her grave, admiring herself in a hand mirror, searching for the inscrutable in herself.

Anna was also haunted by the previous night and her coupling with Padov and the thing in itself. Before this, she'd lived for stretches with Padov, but never with the thing in itself. Even the physical satisfaction from that night seemed awful and well beyond the ordinary. She couldn't even tell whether she was gratified or simply calm—calm with the cold of the unknown. "You're our metaphysical courtesan," Padov often told her.

They ate in the yard again, at the usual table. They couldn't get Andrei Nikitich to sit with them; he kept crowing and sulking. Finally, taking pity, Klava scattered groats on the grass for him and Andrei Nikitich got down on all fours and happily pecked them up. Old man Kolya, who'd previously gone after Andrei Nikitich with a knife, now had a special intimacy with him. He gave the old man a complicated sign with his fingers and the cock-corpse suddenly sat timidly on the bench, at the table. Soon after, old man Kolya jumped up and dashed off after Petenka, but Andrei Nikitich stayed where he was.

Catching his rather intelligent—from the human standpoint—look, Padov asked, "Andrei Nikitich, what's wrong with you, really? Explain it to me, for God's sake. The same fate may await us all. What's wrong with you?"

"My thoughts are numb," Andrei Nikitich answered abruptly.

"What do you mean, "numb"? You mean you aren't thinking about anything?"

"No."

The cock-corpse shook his head and fell silent again, like a very real chicken. He gave the impression that he had spoken cursorily, with the very last atom of human consciousness left to him.

"He has to be shaken out of it somehow," Klava said, squeezing her tasty little fingers. "Annulya, have you ever slept with fowl? Try to seduce him!"

Padov sniggered. Klavusha suddenly came to life.

"We should have a drink, everyone," she said, looking at the tree. "Let's go inside. It's nicer there."

Everyone stood up. Padov led Andrei Nikitich by the arm and mumbled, "He's totally incommunicative. But we'll get through to him."

The room where Klava led her friends was gloomy and cozy; there were strange, dark images in the corner by the plump bed.

A gosling appeared out of nowhere. It was Klavusha who'd brought it in, pressing it to her full breast. Then she snatched it up and darted into a small, adjoining storeroom, the door to which sheltered between the corner and a bulging cupboard. The cock-corpse took a leap onto the bed with an indifferent guffaw.

Anya and Padov poured themselves a little vodka. A bloody sunset looked at them through the windows.

"Klavusha's getting her kicks." Anna winked at Padov. "Only how, no one knows."

Anna's soul remained occupied by the inscrutable, and even Padov's face was like a surrealistic window on the inscrutable world, but outwardly Anna was there.

A flushed Klavusha appeared about ten minutes later. She was holding the gosling, which was twisting and turning.

"A gathering like this," she said, glancing at Padov, "calls for an appropriate morsel. I'll slaughter this gosling in a flash and prepare it the quickest way I know how."

A slightly tipsy Padov gave her an approving slap on the hip. Klavusha disappeared in the darkness of the corridor.

Utterly exhausted by the sincerity and horror of his inner life, Padov was behaving hysterically, like a holy fool.

Now he went to Anna with a request that she seduce the cock-corpse at least to some degree.

"Maybe then he'll rise from his grave. A kind of resurrection from the dead." Padov sniggered.

A little drunk and absorbed in her own thoughts about the unknown, Anna, like a sleepwalker, suddenly began to act.

She sat on the bed next to the cock-corpse and, stroking his hands and looking into his face, began to speak of love and tenderness, mostly with her eyes.

But Andrei Nikitich didn't react at all; afterward he even started bucking and drooling.

"Hopeless," Padov muttered.

Suddenly, perhaps because Anna made some movement or because of something else, Andrei Nikitich's dull eyes lit up.

"Oho!" Padov said.

The strangest thing was that the cock-corpse's eyes hadn't lit up at Anna; he was obviously looking past her, into space. His body was still, but his eyes lit up more and more with a dim, ghastly interest. He kept gazing into the emptiness, as if he saw something there. Not only that, Anna thought his eyes expressed an avid sexual interest in that emptiness.

Instinctively, Padov pressed close to Anna. A switch suddenly flicked on and Anna, standing and clinging to Padov, began dancing with him quietly, as if they were alone in the room, intoxicated by their substantial insanity.

Sometimes they looked over at the cock-corpse. But Andrei Nikitich was not aroused.

He got up and, with the same expression of ghastly interest in his dull eyes, wandered off. Something had occurred in him and Anna suddenly saw (or imagined?) that this "something" was adequate

compensation for the absence of a sex life "there." Compensation that might occur only in the world where the old man now found himself.

The old man mumbled, occasionally crouching and nodding at the emptiness. In his consciousness, evidently, certain processes were taking place that outwardly, since he was still in his earthly form, were expressed in an ugly and absurd way. Once, Andrei Nikitich even bayed.

It seemed to Padov that since the old man's thoughts had been numbed, he wasn't thinking by thinking.

For some reason, Anna recalled the idea of the large number—the infinity, maybe—of worlds that exist apart from, but somewhere close to ours. "We're looking at one of them," she thought.

All of a sudden, Andrei Nikitich stumbled and slowly dropped into a chair, like a stiffened monster. The door swung wide open and in walked Klavusha with the cooked gosling on a platter; she was smiling with her whole collapsed, puffy, greasy face. "Look how fast I am!"

The vodka wasn't finished off yet; it was on the table, swimming in the evening light, and everyone sat down except, of course, the cock-corpse, who'd lapsed into unconsciousness and was crawling around the floor.

Anna and Padov were struck by the live gosling's swift transformation into a dead, juicy dish. This story stabbed very painfully at the heart, underscoring all of life's illusoriness.

Anna couldn't put a piece of meat in her mouth without shuddering. Klavusha good-naturedly tucked the pleasure away.

"You're eating your little lover, Klavdia Ivanovna?" Padov was moved.

Klavusha blushed, but unrelatedly somehow, although a piece did get stuck in her throat.

"Did it go down?" Anna sympathized.

"Yes." Klava smiled. "All the way down." And she stroked her belly contentedly. The piece had, indeed.

XVI

Alexei Khristoforov arrived the next day. After he'd checked up on Andrei Nikitich, he learned about Padov and wanted to slip away, but Tolya wouldn't give him the chance.

Annushka, too, tried to detain him until the evening, taking her own unique care of him. Khristoforov hid from them in various corners, in the shed, and amid the firewood.

The cock-corpse didn't react to him at all, but was quite embittered and sat in the shed, sulking and red-faced, high up on the boards, the way chickens usually sit on a roost.

Stunned by it all, Khristoforov went to see old man Kolya, but on his way there, little Mila gave him a bit of a scare.

If Anna and Alexei had their own relationship, then Khristoforov had lately found Padov and his circle utterly unbearable. Especially the combination of Anna and Padov.

He was afraid of Padov, afraid of summoning up—through him—hideous impulses in himself. Though Padov often had about him the utter rubbish of a holy fool, Alyosha sensed that all this concealed something, the sight of which would make him run into the grass and pray.

But this time, at the Sonnovs', he couldn't get away from Padov.

"You do know, Alyosha," Padov said, looking lovingly into his eyes, "that God is at variance with your existence"—and Tolya gave a snigger, the viscerally hysterical and, as far as the outside world was concerned, moronic laugh he always laughed in these instances.

Khristoforov opened his mouth in consternation. He didn't even try to make sense of this statement—that is, to imagine that God,

in this case, could be at variance with what He had created—but he did feel quite offended and even rather injured. The more irrational these pranks, the more they drove him to distraction.

"God is not at variance with my essence at all," he said perplexedly, drooling a little. "God loves me very much," he added, now looking very silly, as if he were at a psychiatrist appointment.

But then he came to his senses. He jumped up and ran to see Anna in her room.

"I'm leaving!" he exclaimed. "That black bastard is starting to taunt me again!"

"Oh, quit it, Alyosha," Klavusha suddenly interjected, from out of nowhere. "You just don't understand kindness!"

Khristoforov shrieked, grabbed his bag, and rushed off—across the yard and to the street. As he went, it seemed to him that God, as He is in fact and not in His teachings, truly was at variance with his, Alyosha's, existence. This soon made Khristoforov feel terribly foolish and abandoned by the world. Even his own body didn't feel like it was where it should be.

Meanwhile, Anna went to scold Padov. She saw that after all these storms over things in themselves, after this "burgeoning synthesis" with the people's latent, dark confoundment, Padov himself was in thrall to inner hysterics, in thrall to his own element. She also sensed that, right now, he wasn't up for her.

Amid the general detachment and her own sparks of love for ideal, comprehensible essences and "delirious" worlds, Anna was frequently hypersensitive to people, too—people close to her in spirit, naturally.

That was why Padov's attitude hurt her. She was offended that she wasn't at the center of Tolya's state of mind, so to give herself a boost, she stroked her own breast as she went down the stairs, for a moment awash in love for herself.

"Leave Alexei alone," she pounced on Padov. "What did he do to you? Let him live in his comfortable little Christian world."

But Padov interrupted her.

"Here's what," he said softly. "I feel that something is imminent. You stay here if you want, but I have to go. We'll see each other soon anyway."

From Tolya's face, Anna could see that he spoke the truth and was going somewhere irrevocably—or rather, fleeing.

"The sooner the better," she thought.

An hour later, Padov left the house, but first he'd spent a long time whispering with Klava—about Fyodor, as Anna later learned.

XVII

Anna saw Padov nearly to the station. She didn't know who she was saying goodbye to, a thing in itself or a person.

A filthy cat kept running and meowing at her feet. Frightened by thoughts aimed at the world, Anna retreated inward and there, at the bottom of her soul, saw illuminations all the way home.

Far away, under a tree, someone was wailing heartrendingly.

Exhausted, Anna collapsed on her bed and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, she had a dream. At first, she saw Izvitsky—the very same man whom Alyosha Khristoforov had called nightmarish. After Padov, he was probably the person closest to Anna.

Izvitsky walked in very quietly after opening the door to Anna's room, there in the Sonnov house. But as often happens in dreams, the spaces were confused. The room itself looked like Anna's in Moscow, though the window looked out, not on Moscow, but on a deep blue space where doves soared, as if they'd broken free from religious paintings.

Izvitsky seemed to linger, looking around as if he didn't recognize anything. In one corner, the room's wall moved back slightly and beyond it gaped an abyss.

Anna sensed that her own presence was somewhere nearby, here in this room, although she didn't see herself. Izvitsky had a soft, smooth body with little folds that sank into themselves, but she later recalled the expression on his face as spiteful and dreary.

Eventually, he walked slowly toward Anna's bed, where she suddenly not only sensed, but saw herself. At this, Anna began dreaming something completely incredible and awful. As Izvitsky came closer, she disappeared.

Disappeared, expelled from her dream into a kind of nothingness.

That fierce, subjective attachment the sleeping person feels for himself in his dream also began to fall away because she had no self left. This gradual disappearance was not only frightening and tortuous, but also bizarre, like a slow expulsion from the world itself. Anna felt a warm sweat on the insides of her spread-eagled legs, like the moisture of pity and mercy.

Suddenly, everything changed and there was an abrupt, designated break: All at once, her "I" completely dropped out of her dream, which took on a new quality.

Her dream became formalized and awful, as if it were happening outside of her; if it weren't for the simultaneous continuity with her soul, she could have observed it with detached calm, like an action on another planet or outside the present. The agony passed and Anna watched her dream almost coldly, not feeling where or what she was.

Meanwhile, Izvitsky continued to approach her bed slowly, with the same or even greater desire. "What's he looking for?" Anna thought. "After all, I'm not there."

She began to feel uneasy. What could he be looking for in an empty space? Suddenly, Izvitsky hovered directly over the bed. Something moved under the blanket and he threw the blanket back with passion and hope... and Anna saw an emptiness, but a coiled emptiness. There was nothing on the bed, but that emptiness was jerking, and very sensually; that's what made the blanket move. It seemed to Anna that Izvitsky was smiling filthily and knowingly at this emptiness. What happened afterward can't be known, because Anna started to wake up. Slowly, she recovered. She'd taken her absence from her own dream ominously hard, harder than any phobia, especially for its consequences; her soul had a definite chill now.

Once she'd recovered a little, she got out of bed. It was night. The stars flickering in the dark suddenly began speaking and, to Anna, these were the voices come to life, scattered all over the world, of all the idiots yearning on earth.

Part Two

I

After Fyodor quit Klava's comfort, he went right about his business and headed north, to remotest Russia, Arkhangelsk.

He didn't so much as glance at people; more often, he was preoccupied by Anna and something else, awful and indeterminate as always.

Sometimes, when he did take a good look, people appeared not as live enigmas that needed killing so he could somehow guess their secret, but, on the contrary, like glowing, ready-made corpses, without any secrets whatsoever. "So many corpses," Fyodor thought at the train station square filled with milling crowds. Twice, looking up out of childish curiosity, he distinctly saw skeletons glowing like a blue flame inside living, air-smoked human flesh.

"They're going to grab each other by the throat now," he thought artlessly, looking at some hysterically talkative businessmen on the train.

In the train car, his long, senseless gaze startled a live young woman who was a little afraid of her own thoughts.

For some reason, she decided he was hungry and offered him a sandwich.

Fyodor froze and looked out the window: vast, drear-gripped fields and small abandoned houses flashed by; sometimes it seemed as though everything was just about to disappear or drop through the earth.

There was a calm in his soul like a dead mass; even asleep, he dreamed of nothing but stones. Trying to stay awake, he listened to his stomach, as if it were the only thing alive in him; he listened to its modulations, plunging into the bottomless flesh of his soul, but the presence of consciousness numbed even his stomach.

The sensitive young woman near him even wondered whether Fyodor thought only with his stomach and had a head merely for appearance's sake. He drew those around him to his stomach, as if his stomach were a ghastly temple pulling them in.

Pretty fine was that look of his, his gloomy stomach heaving in its dark thoughts and his perfectly rudimentary head, like a heel or a piece of meat.

In the clickety-clack, Fyodor reached his station, D. The consciousness returning to his head made his head feel very odd, meandering, kind of. That was how Fyodor found himself in this town shot through with wind and staggering people. At the square, which was too big, especially compared to the small, cozy, one-story houses, Fyodor would catch the bus that went to the ridiculous little airfield, and from there he'd fly to R., which couldn't be reached any other way because there were no roads. Fyodor spent two days around that square, plunging his face into the ditches and paths around the houses. One night, he woke up and howled wildly under the windows of one house, and, for some reason, the inhabitants dreamed of nothing but angels.

Finally, Fyodor boarded a filthy, half-wrecked, absurdly moldering, jam-packed bus. The driver—a crazy, balding, strapping guy—started out driving fast, madly, as if he were heading for the next world. But once he got past the station and onto the deserted, half-forested road, he drove as if he were sleeping the whole time. He yawned so loudly the whole bus could hear and spat at the ceiling, but the people were still and self-absorbed.

Fyodor even got the impression that this wasn't a bus at all, but a house of worship speeding along on wheels. Evidently, each person was praying to his own loneliness. Only the driver was too peppy. He kept looking absurdly from side to side and turning around, barely holding the steering wheel with his paws. He treated the wheel mostly as a place to rest his elbows.

So Fyodor rode halfway in peace. Intermittently, there would be a fine north Russian drizzle, like the tears of some withered divinity.

The driver suddenly stopped the vehicle and leapt out. Sullenly, standing outside, he addressed the passengers sitting in the bus.

"Anybody want a drink?" he asked dully. The passengers stirred turbidly, but evidently they were used to this. Strangely enough, no vodka lovers were found, though it's true, there were none but old women and old men.

"Well, we'll wait here a little, until I have some hair of the dog," the driver said and, pulling a bottle of vodka and some sausage out of his pocket, he sat down at the side of the road.

The passengers' spirits sank a little and someone started singing. After drinking his vodka, the driver came back to the passengers.

"Hey, I'm going to take a nap and then we'll go," he said lazily. Everyone was silent.

"What do you mean? I'm late for the airfield," an old woman with three baskets squeaked.

"You won't be late," the driver interrupted her sternly. "The plane's more likely to be late than you. He doesn't look at the schedule. Hey, it's sunny up there again."

And the driver went over to a tree—to sleep.

"He'll be a while now, Petya. That other driver, Kostya, he doesn't sleep so much during the trip," one of the local old men said.

The driver slept under the tree and the passengers wandered off. One paced around the bus; another went into the woods for mushrooms.

"Don't get lost!" a tattered little old woman shouted despairingly. Fyodor went into the woods, too, but he just stood by a tree for a long time. There were no more skeletons in his mind. There was Anna.

That afternoon they reached the airfield, a vast wasteland that reminded him of the train station square, only not bordered by little houses. There were a few mangled planes on the ground. The right plane, in fact, hadn't arrived yet; it was about four hours late and a line had formed near the emptiness at the airfield, as if it were a lawn. The old woman with three baskets tried to be first. An old man sang songs. But Fyodor saw no one. Sometimes posts would

surface in his consciousness, instead of people. Wet black birds cawed restlessly and flew around.

Finally, the plane showed up. It was small and looked ready to fall apart at any moment. It was even more unassuming than the filthy bus. The little crowd climbed happily into the plane as the half-drunk pilot herded them on: hurry up, hurry up. The full little plane made its ascent, toward the ravens. Through the dividing wall, the passengers could hear the pilot cursing and hooting drunkenly as he talked to someone over the radio. When they were high up, the door to the passenger cabin fell off and flew to earth. "I hope we don't fall out," the tattered little old woman thought in fright, and she shifted away from the newly formed emptiness.

Fyodor felt like sticking his face into that emptiness indifferently. Meanwhile, the pilot was arguing with someone on the ground over the radio.

"I'm not gonna land at that field," the pilot muttered. "I'm flying past Solnechnoye, and then I'll land. I'm not landing at Solnechnoye today."

The pilot landed by the skin of his teeth on the grass near R. Stunned, but energetic, the passengers poured out.

"We're not flying any farther for now," the pilot warned sullenly. "Out of fuel. I'll go see the village chairman. He'll give me some. We traded our fuel for vodka."

As if under a spell, the little crowd spread out where they could. But Fyodor was right where he'd meant to go.

"A fine machine; it'll put up with anything," the pilot said in parting, and he kicked the plane as if it were a wagon.

Fyodor liked this indifferent attitude toward equipment; he himself almost never noticed the existence of machines.

In R., Fyodor had certain monetary transactions to complete.

A distant relative, a local old-timer who looked more like an old woman, first waved a rag at him and then ran off into the woods, but Fyodor caught up and held onto his sleeve. He slept on the floor, in a cabin, squinting mistrustfully at the worldly light, hiding head

down in the dark. Surprisingly, he played hide-and-seek with a small, withered little girl.

It was crazy to see him, so huge he blocked the sun, but at the same time, hiding from who knows what.

In a field near the houses, the young people were still playing knucklebones. Fyodor himself was prepared to play for scandal's sake. The young people staggered back at his heavy, sullen, and grave expression—that's what he looked like playing knucklebones—and he wheezed as he played. He returned to the cabin alone, constantly looking around awkwardly, and was met by the howling of homeless cats that had accurately picked up his scent.

II

Fyodor wrapped up his affairs, and in the morning, alone, he headed toward the rising sun and the nearest train station. Sonnov hadn't regarded the sun as the sun for a long time; he saw it as a lifeless, scorching being that was dead inside and made its rounds for others. He liked to warm himself in these rays of death, to suck up the warmth of the being that had died for him.

Sometimes he would stop and threaten the sun with his huge, black fist. In that instant, he felt he was the only thing in the universe capable of doing away with all the accumulated junk.

But when he found himself among people again, in the human bustle, their presence started gnawing at him all over again. Naturally, they didn't press on his being; no, he still felt self-contained, but at the same time they irritated him strangely by being so mysterious and illusory, while making the whole world illusory.

This wasn't that durable, tickling, and somehow real illusoriness Fyodor sometimes felt in himself, but a turbid, superficial illusoriness, a frightening burden to be actively fought. On the train, Fyodor even pinched one sweet old woman hard on the thigh. She shrieked, but Fyodor immediately leaned over and gave her such a look that the old woman nearly vanished. Even animals began irritating Fyodor; at one stop, by a well, he smashed in a horse's head with a beam. Then he hid and, for a long time, watched through the beer stand window as they cleared away the horse's body. Closer to Moscow, in the little town of N., he suddenly scratched the fat coiled neck of a young woman when she turned around.

Meanwhile, Fyodor was once again drawn in his ghastly old way to killing. Rocking on the commuter train, he considered possible victims. It wasn't that he'd completely lost his mind and counted on killing at will; he was simply conducting a psychological exercise: who would he kill with pleasure and who without?

He had no desire to touch dead and repulsive, talentless beings; he was more drawn to spiritual, angelic little faces or unusual ones, distorted and frightened ones. There was a youngish, fat, slimy lady quaking in fear at the train's wild motion, whom he especially wanted to strangle then and there, in the dark corner where she thought she'd be buried—put an end to her and then gaze with his entire face into her dead, glassy eyes, which might reflect the entire inner course of her life, as it vanished into eternity.

Later, at a station—in the buffet—Fyodor felt a hellish desire to skin the overstuffed woman who sat with her back to him, chewing with relish, skin her and see how she'd eat all bared flesh and skinless. This desire actually frightened him a little because it bore no direct relation to his killing idea. Fyodor stood up and went to the square, into the open. After a brief walk, he quickly lapsed into his usual state of mind.

Every now and then, he'd find people walking toward him and, as usual, their disconnect from their own existence irritated him. "Just look how many crosswords the Lord put on earth," he thought, spitting juicily and looking carefully into the faces of passersby. "They talk and they walk, and all without me. And they seem to be just like me. Hmm… It's a puzzle. I wish I could sweep them all…away…into emptiness."

Not only was death his soul, but so was the general enigma of other people's existence. Or rather, it was all tied together in his unified, vast, and perplexed attitude toward what was outwardly alive, toward people.

Soon after, Fyodor got tired and darted onto the local commuter train.

The dear, mysterious, eternally Russian fields and forests that flashed by seemed to him, deafened as he was by this world, slightly hysterical and off, even in their forsakenness and nirvana.

Sonnov knew where to go: the "little nest."

This was the village of Fyrino, far in the opposite direction from Lebedinoye. There, in a run-down little house, lived a wrinkled, nearly hundred-year-old woman, Ipatievna, who was so demented she drank the blood of live cats, but she adored Fyodor. Ipatievna was demented only in the trivial, earthly sense; she had a sharp and never-closing eye on the otherworldly. Klavusha considered her very reliable and even some kind of distant relative. Fyodor had every reason not to hide much from her. On his way from the station, as he passed through a field, Fyodor looked into the eyes of a little boy out hunting mushrooms. The boy was dumbfounded by that look for a long time.

Old Ipatievna's little house was in the center of the village, but so dilapidated that it was on the verge of falling apart. Across the way was an insane, almost incomprehensible, three-bench bazaar where—following their inner feeling—they sold nothing but emptiness, although lots of people crowded around the benches.

Ipatievna greeted Fyodor with a blood-curdling, gut scream; darting out from the blackness of her semi-uninhabitable, tumbledown rooms, she threw herself around his neck; Fyodor shook off the old woman in his own way and petted her.

There was one bed in her poor and messy room; everything was covered in dirt, but on the floor, where you'd usually find chamber pots, there were also jars of fresh cat's blood; the skinny, little, fear-distorted face of the neighbor boy who supplied Ipatievna with cats for small change peeked out from under the bed.

In the other room, where the ceiling had collapsed in places, the threesome celebrated their meeting at a table set with candles. A huge and cautious donor-cat looked into Fyodor's eyes from the floor and meowed. But Fyodor was alienated even from strange animals. Moving the boy aside, he went into the dark, to the hayloft, to sleep.

III

The next day, Fyodor stepped out into the world and its open expanses. The morning purity embraced his flesh and penetrated his lungs.

But Fyodor had just one thing on his mind: killing.

"Great joy you bring people, Fedya!" old Ipatievna cawed as he left.

But the freshness seemed to bury everything otherworldly; the birdies flew around gaily, chirping, practically at Fyodor's feet.

Sonnov boarded a nearly empty morning bus and rode a few stops to the village of Petrovo. Memories drew him. It was here, in the forest, or rather, in an abandoned manorial park, not far from the only absurdly remaining bench, that he'd killed a youth engrossed in reciting poetry to himself a few years earlier. And then, apparently, he'd bit his neck... Sluggishly, Fyodor got off at the stop and looked around. The same or a very similar road led to a nearby, encroaching forest.

Along the way, he met two men and a little seven-year-old girl; her eyes looked like inserted sky. This made Fyodor sad. He wouldn't mind killing one like that.

Sonnov divided up his victims into ordinary, "irritating" ones, whom he killed just because of the general characteristics of his soul, and "blessed" ones, whom he also loved very much, having felt a languorous attraction for them while they were alive, through his sullen and otherworldly soul.

But those he'd already killed, those who'd gone "into the emptiness"—whether ordinary or blessed—Sonnov loved with a different, even, sweet, almost religious love. As soon as a person he'd killed disappeared,

that victim was gradually transformed for Fyodor from an object of irritation or puzzlement into a quiet and holy, albeit incomprehensible being. Fyodor hoped for his intervention in the next world.

Scattered throughout Russia were Fyodor's "holy places," where he'd erected invisible temples at killing sites and frequently prayed for himself. Even in their absence, on the road or in solitude, Fyodor often addressed those he'd killed with tender emotion and begged for their help, whether earthly or heavenly.

"Somehow we'll meet up there," he would sigh with relief, and their presence in the next world was the sole reason Fyodor sometimes yearned for that world himself. For some reason, he believed they guaranteed him personal immortality.

"You bring people great joy, Fedya," he now remembered Ipatievna saying, as he wandered over to the bench. Images of those he'd killed raced through the air or his imagination; they'd become his guardian angels.

Once he'd driven his consciousness into every cranny of his body, Fyodor relaxed; occasionally he prayed in his unique way, slapping his thigh. Minutes like this did not come easily to him; he treasured them, reveling in their tender emotion. Usually they happened abruptly and Fyodor found himself in his usual, slightly disturbed state of mind.

That's what had happened now. His guardian angels had vanished, the forest's existence pressed on him, and Fyodor began breathing heavily into the emptiness. He looked around, got up with satisfaction, and shook his fist at the heavens. Loosened up now, he plunged deep into the forest, into madness. Everything dear and familiar was already alive in his chest. Straying down paths, deeper and deeper, Fyodor thirsted for a killing.

Finally, when he'd lost hope of finding anything alive and conscious, he saw an older—inwardly he seemed even older—man, sitting on a stump behind a bush. He was skinny, tall, and graying with a handsomely frightening face, like the Devil praying. Actually, Sonnov didn't linger on his face. Cautiously making sure of the man's solitude, he walked toward him with a long, decisive

stride, staggering slightly from impatience. Fyodor jutted his ugly face forward at his victim and, making no attempt to hide, pulled from his pocket his enormous, rusty knife.

When the man saw Fyodor, he got up from the stump. With his legs spread slightly apart, he looked at Fyodor sullenly and with blank suspicion, without moving, gradually realizing that this stranger wanted to kill him. As he approached, Fyodor looked inside his victim, trying to pluck his essence. Suddenly, when Sonnov got close, the man abruptly stripped off his pants and his absurd underpants, turning so as to better show Fyodor his nether regions.

Fyodor froze in surprise and was totally stunned when he saw that the nether regions on this man were empty. No penis, no balls. Nonetheless, the man was putting his empty place on display and even trying to make sure Fyodor got the point. Sonnov dropped his knife.

"Name's Mikhei. Mikhei," the man mumbled, advancing toward Fyodor, half-naked and extending his hand. "Mikhei."

Sonnov suddenly lost his desire to kill; entranced, he looked at the man's empty nether regions. In turn, Mikhei realized immediately that he wasn't going to be killed. Without putting on his pants, he sat on the nearest stump. Fyodor settled next to him, on the ground.

"Let's have a smoke," Mikhei said amicably.

Fyodor relaxed and even took an interest in all this. He pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.

"Were you born like that?" he said gloomily, looking at the man's nether regions.

"Oh no, I just...chopped "em off myself...because I was sick of it... gallivanting around night after night."

"What do you mean "sick"?"

"You know, sick of it all. Chopped 'em off in the shed myself with the help of God and man. And Vanyutka cauterized it."

Fyodor got up, walked away, and angrily kicked his knife well away. Mikhei watched him with surprise and delight. His handsome, mobile, meaningful face broke into a filthy smile.

"Are you sure you're not one of us?" he asked Fyodor.

"What do you mean, "one of us"?"

"You know, from over there"—and Mikhei made a meaningful gesture with his hand, pointing either at his head or deep under the ground.

They emerged from the forest almost friends. Mikhei wasn't the least bit afraid of Fyodor; on the contrary, Mikhei, since his shock, looked grave and significant, wise, even handsome; he'd taught Fyodor something. Sonnov listened to him with turbid, visible pleasure. One was tall, with gray hair, and insanely mellow; the other, shorter and thickset, had a wolfishly knowing face. And so they walked down the road, toward the village. Cautious, clamorous people gave them a wide berth. An hour later, they were sitting in a dirty little sort of beer stand near the bus stop. Mikhei lived alone, not far away, in the next suburban village. He invited Fyodor home, to his small nest. Mikhei's vacant and handsome, scratch-free face was consoling. "He's an apparition, not a man," Fyodor thought with satisfaction.

"Maybe you're a sectarian?" Fyodor suddenly asked, after the first mug.

Mikhei's face puckered.

"Ugh"—and he spit. "I'm my own person. I cut it off because I was sick of it, not because of philosophizing. I know those sectarians. Ugh. Dreamers. They take me for one of them. If you want"—Mikhei leaned spittingly toward Fyodor's face—"I'll show "em to you. It's not far. I know...only, shh...secretly."

Fyodor clearly wanted to spend time with Mikhei, so they decided to meet the following day, here, by the bus stop, but for the time being they dispersed to their burrows.

The next day Fyodor was waiting for Mikhei right on time, huddled at the agreed-upon spot. For the first time in his life, he had something like a friend.

Mikhei appeared in the distance; he was walking drunkenly, scuffing one foot, but his face was significant.

"How about stopping by the church first?" Mikhei inquired of his friend.

"Is there anything here to eat?" Fyodor mumbled mistrustfully.

"Sure there is. This isn't some empty place we live in," Mikhei mumbled, and he drew Fyodor cater-corner, into a lane.

They were supposed to go see the sectarians late that afternoon, but first they went to Mikhei's. His room was nearly empty; a ripped up bed was buried in the corner and there was herring and a book on a stool. Fyodor and his unexpected friend chatted over tea. The steam from the boiling water clouded around their faces. Fyodor liked Mikhei more and more. "He's subtle and always floating off," Sonnov thought. Invisibly somehow, Mikhei's face was turning red from the tea and he and his consciousness really were floating off. Fyodor softened gloomily, as if drops of favor were dripping from his stern, stone-hard soul. But he still looked savagely aloof, especially when he stared out the window. Mikhei rose cautiously and, smiling, gently touched Fyodor's shoulder. "You wanted to kill me, but you shunned the idea when I spread myself and showed you. You have a heart."

Mikhei liked it a lot when people shunned him; this gave him great joy and independence. He had bared his empty place to people more than once, admiring himself and their disgust. This time, his "baring" had saved his life. Mikhei liked recalling this so much that he constantly grinned blissfully and sniggered. It occurred to him to defend his life in this strange way in the future, especially against robbers.

He felt so favorably disposed toward Fyodor for what he'd done that he considered the man a kind of god in and of himself, though sometimes Mikhei affectionately chided him.

By evening, the friends were very comfortable.

Mikhei told Fyodor about his bizarre relations with the sect of eunuchs that had formed "in great secret" in this suburban village; it was why he'd settled here himself.

Mikhei had committed his maiming before he met the eunuchs, "independently," "out of my very own will and desire." As it happened, though, a fat eunuch with pop eyes had sniffed this out and decided that Mikhei had done it "out of philosophizing," "in their way." To be

polite, Mikhei agreed with everything he said and, without wanting to, had penetrated the secret eunuch sect, finding comfort there.

Mikhei himself regarded the sect ironically, considering the eunuchs not "white doves," as they called themselves, but little sparrows; wiping the crumbs from his mouth, Mikhei lovingly called the Lord or Creator of the universe "Master," but privately believed that he himself had no relationship to the Creator. This is how he talked about the eunuch sectarians: "They all rip off their penis for the Master. But I did it on my own. I have my own special mystery that helps me decide what to rip off and what to leave on." Still, he bore the eunuchs no ill will, pitying them. Mikhei barely acknowledged other people.

Fyodor was in luck. The eunuchs held Mikhei in great trust for some reason, and he'd previously agreed to bring his old friend to the ritual, vouching for him; Mikhei presented his friend as a "spiritual eunuch," that is, basically a member of the sect, but from another "ship" and another direction.

Fyodor's sinister and fierce look was not much like the look of a "spiritual eunuch" or a "white dove," but Mikhei lovingly combed Fyodor's hair, trying to make the obscurely cruel face look mellower, and, after that, said he'd pass.

That night, when the whole village was asleep, Fyodor and Mikhei were let through the gate of a fence as tall as eternity, into the yard of a house whose owner was the "chief" eunuch. A narrow path that petered out from time to time led deep into a garden and to a black, hidden bathhouse. There, in a pilfered space with a small, lonely window, their ecstatic rituals took place.

Mikhei whispered with a man sprawled out on the bench in front of the bathhouse and introduced Fyodor, who grinned and whispered a few terms Mikhei had given him.

Stooping, Mikhei and Fyodor went inside. The ritual turned out to be in full swing, so no one paid much attention to them. In the corner, they saw Orthodox icons, and between them,

in the middle, the portrait of the most "beloved father," "the second coming of Christ," Kondraty Selivanov.

The elder looked moved; in his hand was a small white scarf; Kondraty seemed to be admiring his "little children" from the next world and, as he gazed upon them with otherworldly eyes, his heart was gladdened.

Meanwhile, the sectarians—there were about seven of them—were spinning stickily in place; the genitally deprived parts of their bodies writhed; their white shirts fluttered like shrouds; their yellow, sere faces, illuminated by lifeless wax candles, crept up toward the Lord; sweat poured over their trembling skin, which looked like it was peeling off; their eyes were popping out of their orbits as they tried to catch Kondraty Selivanov's beyond-the-grave look.

Someone shrieked, "I'm jumping, jumping, jumping."

"Christ I'm seeking, seeking, seeking!"—and he jumped from corner to corner on all fours, tearing through the emptiness.

Mikhei sat very quietly, on a bench, hands folded, with a mellowly lecherous expression on his face; they were evidently used to his quiet role. Sonnov sat next to him, lifelessly turning his head from side to side. Crawling near his feet was a soaking wet, convulsively puckered old man with stern eyes.

"I'm crawling, crawling, crawling."

"To the new Christ!" he hissed angrily, dragging himself across the floor.

Outside, under the narrow window, a heavenly, shrill, hysterical woman's voice rang out:

As it is in on the Don,
The Savior himself comes,
With his angels
And archangels.

The voice fell still and a trembling woman, nearly naked, who looked incinerated, crawled into the bathhouse; her breasts had been cut off, but you could see the dried up, blackish-red wound-scars.

At first Fyodor looked dully at those praying, then suddenly everything vanished and his being seemed to fill the entire bathhouse and even spill over, into space, leaving no more room for anyone.

He didn't come to his senses until it was all over.

Mikhei had put tea together somewhere in the house and brought it in, along with a kiddie table, complete with white tablecloth; all the tea-drinking appurtenances appeared, too: the samovar, the cups.

The weary and sweaty but peace-loving eunuchs placidly took their seats for tea. Fyodor alone said nothing, which made everyone think about his own inaccessibility.

...In the morning, walking back down the highway with Mikhei, Sonnov hummed a stern song to himself—an indication of his good mood.

True, the eunuchs had made a rather pathetic impression on him. Everything they held in common, everything that united them, seemed silly and childish.

"My own, I have to have my own," Fyodor mumbled faintly, kicking away trash as he went.

He thought of Anna and Padov. "Now those are people..." That which was "his own" felt so vast and immense, he had a hard time comparing it to anything.

"Still, it's better than completely ordinary ones...who go to school," Mikhei murmured.

"Well, we're not even talking about those. They're just mushrooms," Sonnov replied.

A new day was dawning. Fyodor had taken a step back from his killings. But when he walked up idly to old Ipatievna's lopsided little house, there was a human figure in the window. It was Anatoly Padov.

IV

The moment Padov arrived in Moscow—nearly a month before—after quitting Lebedinoye in order to replenish his powers in the face of life's horror, he rushed to the cemetery near V, where they'd long known him. The gravediggers greeted Tolya with joyous, ghastly visceral shouts. He spent a few days with them, drinking, helping dig graves, spending the nights in one shed or another, if not in the church itself. The gravediggers—simple, feebleminded fellows already touched by decay—considered him a "refugee." They really liked it when he laughed while digging graves.

One night, Padov talked them into letting him stay in the cellar with a corpse, a young, beatific girl of about seventeen. Padov drank so much for joy that the night wasn't quite up to standard.

Still, he recited Blok's poetry from memory, by candlelight, over the deceased's face; he tickled her soles; and he peered into her eyes with a magnifying glass.

In the morning, the girl was buried; Padov walked behind the coffin and sobbed, so unbearable was his inner laughter. In addition, he now thought hysterically that it was this girl who would lead him to the Elysian Fields. In the coffin, the girl really did look sexy—with mystical overtones, of course. At the end, he nearly got into a fight with one homely, exceptional gravedigger who, for some reason, mistook all the deceased for himself. In his three years' service, this gravedigger had gone completely around the bend, thinking that he was burying himself over and over. He didn't even understand where he was now, or what state he was in, since he believed that, with each new death, he left for the world

beyond the grave and ended up in the next world, to a degree approximately equal to the number of corpse-selves he'd buried.

Naturally, he thought himself incredibly distanced from the world.

But he took Padov's insolent and unprecedented molestation of the dead girl as a reference to himself. (The gravedigger decided that Padov wanted to sleep with him, the gravedigger, in the person of the deceased.) The result was an incident. The scandal was just barely hushed up, actually, but it brought Padov great joy and calm.

To thoroughly restore his vitality, Padov began taking trips to the slaughterhouse, where he made friends with the butchers and put his mouth under the warm, living blood of a carcass, drinking two or three mugs of blood a day.

This calmed him a little, but not for long. The society of his soul and the people of that world tormented Padov. He was afraid of losing his mind.

That's why he cast about, dropping by Lebedinoye and, not finding Fyodor, getting a note from Klava and the address of the "little nest."

Early one morning he turned up at that little nest. Ipatievna greeted him amicably and with kindness, as if he were her cat. When Fyodor arrived, Padov took a close look at him and was horrified.

Fyodor recognized him immediately, drilling through him with a bastardly look.

Silently, he took Klava's note, unfolded it, saw her scratchings, and, without undressing, still in his pants, collapsed on the bed.

Sometimes Fyodor liked to sleep dressed, as if he liked being alienated from his sleep. This time his body lay immobile, but his head kept turning, as if it were alive.

By the afternoon all three of them—Fyodor, Padov, and Ipatievna—had napped and gone outside to drink tea.

The little yard was uncomfortable and filthy and exposed for all to see; even the sky covered it deep and wide, from edge to edge. A lonely plank outhouse stood like a tower at the end of the yard. The grass was dusty and sparse, as if the ground were balding;

a stripped gray cat skeleton lay in the middle of it, like a discarded stick; a warped table nestled on its side not far away.

Groaning, Ipatievna was the first to sit; she'd drunk her fill of cat's blood early in the morning and now was content with some black bread. Sonnov ate in a self-contained and visceral way, ignoring everyone; Tolya smoked, baring his teeth and rejoicing at the nice sun.

"People have told me a lot about you, Fyodor Ivanovich. Especially Annushka," he said. Fyodor was silent.

Finally, through his teeth, he said, "So, everything's fine in Lebedinoye."

"Excellent," Padov replied, and he told him something quietly, cozily, and with a flash of inspiration. Fyodor livened up a little.

"Well, is Klavushka jumping around like she's not human or what?" he muttered.

"I don't know. Maybe just when she's alone." Tolya smiled. Fyodor grunted with satisfaction, admiring the word "alone." Ipatievna looked at both of them vigilantly, crazily, puckeredly, and as if through her kerchief. Forgetting everything, she'd come unbuttoned, exposing her old woman flesh.

"Well, but what about those...jokesters who were slaughtering the dogs and birds," Fyodor asked, recalling Padov, Anna, the sun-drenched glade, and the bloodletting there.

"Ah!"—and Padov burst out laughing. "The jokesters burned out and each went his own way. Pyr got the hell out and became ringleader of an ordinary gang, sixteen-year-old kids wild from emptiness. They knife people in back streets now. Just because... Like wolves... Iogann wormed his way into a monastery; he felt so sorry for the birdies and rats. And he turned off. He's praying for forgiveness, and at night he prays in the dark, not to God, though, to the rats he killed. Only Igoryok's left. You know, that cunning little angel. He'll be turning up in Lebedinoye soon. He's learned a thing or two and isn't a total joke now."

Fyodor blissfully contorted his mouth, frowned like a cat at what Padov said, and finally got up.

"Let's go for a walk, Tolya," he said, and he hissed at Ipatievna to stay where she was and not get up.

"What a starer," Fyodor thought. "Sit there and suck your cats."

They went outside. A quiet, calmed rain was falling. People were hugging the wet fences. Fyodor jutted his lower jaw out, as if he had a cold: catching raindrops.

Tolya saw that Fyodor noticed nothing around him. But at the well, Fyodor stumbled, and suddenly his glance froze on a cluster of people: women, maybe, or maybe men, but totally ordinary. His eyes became glassy, as if he'd seen something otherworldly. Fyodor spat and exchanged heavy glances with Padov.

Tolya sniggered and soon they'd concealed themselves in the tightly wrapped gloom of a beer stand that had darkness instead of windows.

Like outsiders, they sat in the corner, at a table covered in corpse-like secretions, and did not make a sound. The discomfort of the place and the clouds, as well as the darkness around, turned people's close, grinning faces white, as they do in the back of beyond.

Fyodor looked gravely at Tolya, but his mind was on Mikhei and the fact that he hadn't killed him; Padov began feeling a little easier: the fact of someone else's burden lessened his own torment.

Fyodor idly narrowed his consciousness to an inadequate, dull, and sleepy beam; then his eye fell on the fat back of an effeminate little drunk looming nearby. Fyodor made an abrupt movement of his hand, which landed somewhere near the drunk's neck, and before the drunk knew what was happening, he collapsed to the ground, as if he'd fallen asleep.

Padov was stunned by Fyodor's movement: it exactly imitated a knife blow.

"Well, I might've dispatched one more," Fyodor muttered, turning to Padov.

"Where? Under the wing of the Lord?" Padov screeched.

Fyodor nodded with satisfaction.

Tolya could not shake the impression of that blow, which he found horrific, for some reason, and which surreally reproduced

a knife blow. Even a real knife blow couldn't have been as real, in its essence. Pavlov linked this with Fyodor's evident attitude toward other beings.

"Fyodor Ivanovich, could you kill?" Padov asked straight out.

Fyodor gave a sudden shudder and started laughing.

Half-unconsciously, Padov took this for tacit agreement.

He felt like testing Fyodor. Feverishly, in vivid, surprising strokes, he drew for Fyodor the commonly accepted picture of the first stages of life beyond the grave, focusing especially on inevitable, almost automatic retribution: retribution for the evil committed in this life, particularly for killing.

"Vanity of vanities, all that," Fyodor reacted indifferently, chewing his noodles.

Padov squealed softly, ecstatic, but he continued his interrogation, though by earthly measure, Fyodor was obviously not normal.

"You're not afraid of retribution either!" Padov exclaimed, smiling at his beer.

"What retribution there?" Fyodor grunted. "And if there is, what of it? Life's retribution as is."

But Padov was searching for complete understanding; gradually, issuing abrupt, intuitive, mystically explosive questions, he revealed a picture that made his thoughts stand on end—from ecstasy, naturally. It wasn't hard to translate Fyodor's heavily slumbering language and silence into ordinary metaphysical language.

Padov discovered that, for Fyodor, killing probably symbolized soul-killing, though he seemed to have his own way of believing in the next world; but here, for Fyodor, killing evidently meant the killing of the soul, an attempt to crack the mystery.

Possibly, Padov thought, since Fyodor believed killing to occur primarily in the spirit (albeit accompanied by an "ordinary killing"), he wasn't afraid of anything and hadn't given any thought to empirical posthumous retribution; spiritual retribution, which he ignored, was already part of Fyodor's present state, so otherworldly

and incomprehensible, but internally real were the spiritual goals he was moving toward, without fixing on minor details.

Padov was ecstatic to see that Fyodor wasn't frightened by something empirically beyond-the-grave because the otherworldly lay on the other side of our consciousness, not life. Besides, to some degree, Fyodor was otherworldly to the otherworldly itself.

This was even more genuine and more magnificent; Padov felt that Fyodor was "one of them," that his dark confoundment was of the highest quality, as Anna put it; he sensed with awe that Fyodor himself was that horror and, before him, all the horrors of posthumous everyday life were trivial, especially this world's lamentations and retributions.

"Why should Horror fear petty horrors?" Padov thought.

Sometimes he felt a foreboding that Fyodor had set himself against the world order.

Finally, in a frenzy, retreating inward, both of them—Padov and Fyodor—started for the exit and the street. They left spots of their thoughts, desires, and passions on the beer stand's walls. The lacerated, exhausted invalid crawled behind them all the way to the door. Then, the sudden sun struck them in the face, as if it were a sinister, rather than kindly portent.

A question began spinning in Padov's mind: Had Fyodor killed in "reality," that is, in regular life?

Mystically, in his secret depths, he was sure the answer was yes, but he didn't allow that thought into his human, external consciousness. Ultimately, he felt that these yeses and noes weren't that important, for in Fyodor he saw, above all, a metaphysical killer whose goal was to push people and all humanity completely out of his consciousness and render the very idea of other people's existence empty. Just as an ordinary killer ousts people from the outside world, so Fyodor ousted people from his soul. And whether or not this metaphysical ousting involved an ordinary, parallel killing, Padov thought, didn't change the essence of the matter.

"Are you going to Lebedinoye?" Padov suddenly asked Fyodor.

Fyodor mumbled. But when they were at the house, at Ipatievna's, and the little boy who kept her in cats crawled out from under the bed, it became clear that Fyodor would go to Lebedinoye. He said this as he sat on a stool, looking at the floor with his eyes very wide open.

But Padov was drawn to Moscow, to the vortex, to his friends, to his familiar mysticism, and then— definitely—to Lebedinoye. He wanted to accommodate both Fyodor and "the old" in his mind. "I'll go see Remin," he decided.

Bowing to Ipatievna, who had been silent in the emptiness, Padov disappeared.

V

Gennady Remin belonged to the same generation as Padov. He was considered one of the best underground poets, but some of his poem cycles never reached his unbridled admirers; some—"His: A Corpse Lyric," for instance—he kept in a drawer without showing anyone.

Through Glubev's disciples, he had encountered the religion of "I" and his soul caught fire. He had a deep sense of certain theoretical nuances within this underground metaphysics.

He was enraptured, for instance, by the new religion's main tenet that the object of worship, love, and faith should be the believer's own I. However, this "I" referred, above all, to an immortal, eternal principle, like the spirit. In this way, the I was the absolute and transcendent reality. At the same time, it was the believer's personal I, now realized spiritually. Consequently, one's being as a person was understood merely as a moment in one's own eternal objective reality.

The second principle that especially appealed to Remin was this: at all stages of existence, one's own I remained the sole reality and highest value. (Therefore, the concept of God as distinct from the I reality lost its meaning in this religion.) On the other hand, all forms of the self's objective reality (forms connected to the supreme I by a single thread) had value, assuming love for them didn't contradict love for the supreme I.

In this way, these teachings turned out to be, in some points, close to solipsism, but a fairly special kind; not the ordinary solipsism. Mystical, infinite love for Oneself had tremendous significance.

Superhuman narcissism was one of the chief principles (and clearly an analog of that profoundest love of God for Himself, of which the medieval mystics spoke).

A specific type of meditation and prayer was directed toward the supreme I, i.e., essentially toward the otherworldly reality, which was simultaneously one's own I (or its highest form) inherent in the given moment.

Consequently, this wasn't a religion of egoism (egoism being a betrayal of the supreme I) or a religion that deified man or the individual (since the supreme I, as a transcendental beyond, transcended the circle of human existence). However, this religion (or rather, metaphysics) did not correspond to any teachings based on the idea of God, including the variation that led one to understand the supreme I through God; for, in that case, only that side of the I identical to God was made absolute, whereas the religion of "I" connected with a special type of solipsism and went much further.

Remin believed that many organic tenets of this metaphysics were close to the profound essence of his soul. He felt that he'd finally found something genuine for himself... but he couldn't be in it for long. He couldn't withstand the full abyss of this faith; he was tormented by various doubts and fears; he would lapse into hysterics and, ultimately, inwardly, he moved away from the religion of "I" and into the metaphysical "madness" so dear to Anatoly Padov's heart.

Having returned to Moscow after seeing Fyodor, Padov started looking for Remin. He wanted to take him to Lebedinoye.

Tolya spent the night in his gloomy and narrow Moscow room, where Pinyushkin—a strange being, so afraid of himself that he was repeatedly drawn upward, to the roof—had peeked through the windows more than once as he shinnied up a drainpipe. Tolya woke up early in the morning: in the mysterious, half-morning darkness that was about to explode, the lights in the windows of the big apartment houses were spontaneous and unexpected, like spirits. The post-sleep cold of resurrection pricked Padov's consciousness.

Slightly incomprehensible even to himself, he went outside, suddenly hoping to see Remin in the earliest Moscow beer stand on Gruzinskaya Street.

Approaching, he peeked into the murky but unusually wide windows and saw it was nearly empty. But at one table, right there by the window, amid a raggedy and clamorous company that looked like it was bursting toward the ceiling, Padov saw Remin sitting with his elbows on the table and his poetic, drink-saturated head resting on his hand. The others were vaguely unfamiliar to Padov: four itinerant philosophers who, along with their admirers, had formed a special closed circle in Moscow's underground. They looked crushed and crumpled, their movements angular, not of this world, but their common facial expression was unbridledly transcendental.

Written baldly on one little face was an unearthly insolence, as if nothing material existed for this guy. He was constantly spitting into his mug of beer. For some reason, they called him by a woman's name, Tanya, and, though one got the creeping impression that he was constantly bombarded by invisible but weighty forces, he was hysterically insolent toward everything earthly—darkly mad.

Another philosopher—Yura—was quite fat and turbid, a transcendently vomitous pig with an ascetic's slightly watery eyes; not only that, he kept thinking he was just about to be knifed.

The third—Vitya—was really god-knows-what: all the points of his face jutted out, but his soul was, in essence, puckered.

People said—in a whisper, in all the mystical-sewery corners of Moscow—that Vitya wasn't the only one who'd grasped the "thoughts" of the Supreme Hierarchies, but he hadn't withstood their weight and had... run amok.

The fourth philosopher was nearly invisible.

Meanwhile Tolya ran into the beer stand with a joyous shout.

Yura was just winding up a speech about the Absolute.

"Gentlemen, we've been betrayed!" Padov shouted.

"Who by?"

"The Absolute. I just found out."

The friends exchanged kisses. Remin actually hung on Padov's neck. Tanya even squealed with delight: he loved metaphysical gossip.

Tolya sat down beside them.

Puckered Vitya looked at him with inspiredly covert eyes; a few times he mumbled something and then bent over, hissing, and fell under the table. The nearly invisible one took this as a sign.

"Are you full of longing and vodka, Gena?" Padov began.

Remin looked at everything around him with eyes lucidly pure from alcohol.

"The corpses, oh, the corpses
Want to scold me with curses,
And my mother, on the wall,
Will smile on them all."

Remin sang, shooting a glance to the side.

"The Absolute has a heavy hand, though," Yura said, nervously checking on the cloud outside. "Its Power lies in the fact that no one sees It, but, on the other hand, they know what It feels like.

"A black monk in a quilted vest
Is sitting at a table, blind,
A child screams nearby, bereft,
Left—just inside the door—behind.
I do not want to guess at all.
When I'm going to die..."

Remin continued.

"You know, you're the drunkest of all," Padov interrupted him. "You don't blend in with the philosophers at all. Let's go, we need to talk."

Puckered Vitya crawled out from under the table and gave everyone a stern look.

Padov said goodbye to the itinerants and led his friend outside, into a small garden; before long, Remin was feeling better.

After a while they found themselves at a friend's, in a gray, unused room, beyond which—from the balcony—they could see a receding, tattered expanse. "There's good reason distance and space became the Russian Spirit's alternate reality long ago," Padov thought. They walked into the room without asking: it was meant to be open always for the underground. The occupant was sleeping on the couch. He spent nearly all his time asleep, quietly gesticulating as he dreamt. You could drink vodka on his back. His mouth hung half-open, as if a hallucination emanating from his dream had put its finger in there.

Padov told Remin about Lebedinoye in inspired spurts. Gena, gratified by what Padov said about Fyodor and Klavusha, fell asleep on Padov's chest.

The next morning they decided to go to the "nest."

VI

Soon after, all hell broke loose in Lebedinoye.

"They've come, they've come...they've come!" little Mila shouted loudly, and she clapped, looking straight ahead with unintelligible eyes.

Indeed, besides its owners, the cock-corpse, and Annushka, Lebedinoye now also had Padov, Remin, and the little angel Igoryok, one of the sadists. Mad and fluttery, just like the young Mozart, he rushed around the yard, ready to embrace and bite everything alive.

Anna watched her child with a benevolent smile. Klavenka was nearby, too. The thing was that they'd decided to celebrate the cock-corpse's appearance. By now, everyone realized that Andrei Nikitich himself had died long ago, but instead of dying normally, he'd become a new being—the cock-corpse. It was the birth of this new being that they'd gathered to commemorate in Lebedinoye. The celebration's culprit himself looked unnaturally rabid and overwrought, but very dead, all to his utmost, as if he were tossing and turning in a walking coffin.

Thinking himself in the next world, evidently, the cock-corpse started misbehaving, as if death gave him carte-blanche. He tugged old man Kolya by the penis, called him "his dearly deceased," and stuck his tongue out at the sparrows.

"Wherever death is, you'll find truth," Klavusha said, moved by looking at him.

They'd spread out a black blanket in the middle of the yard, intending to celebrate around it. Everyone gathered around, even little Mila. Only Petenka wanted to sleep; he wandered from corner

to corner and, pressing his hands to his chest, he sang, "Rock-a-bye, baby..." But he wasn't holding anything and Remin was horrified to guess that Petenka was singing himself a lullaby. "Rock-a-bye, baby..." In the end, Petenka curled up beside the fence and, humming himself the lullaby, dozed off.

The cock-corpse was sitting in the shed, peering out at the celebration unnaturally, through a crack.

After the abundant food, many were drawn to languor and reminiscences. They prayed for the husband of dearly departed Lidochka, the unforgettable Pasha Krasnorukov, who'd scalded his own penis because he hated children so much. He was now serving a long prison term, but had settled in quite nicely there.

"The main thing for him was that there be no children," Klavusha interjected, sighing. "And what kind of children are there in prison? So they say he's beside himself with joy there, Pasha. No one's ever seen him that happy anywhere."

"He climbs poles with a naked penis," old man Kolya corrected her glumly. "But on the other hand he really is happy. He's yet to come across a single child there. All in all, he says, it's more beauteous there in prison than at liberty."

Darkness was gathering. The cock-corpse's eye became even more unnatural and gleamed invisibly through the crack.

Suddenly, Klavusha rose to her full height. Her full, bearish figure loomed over everyone sprawled on the grass. She held a glass of vodka.

"All right now," she said in a deep voice. "That's enough drinking for the departed Andrei Nikitich. Let's drink to those...we're going to become!"

Wound up and excited, everyone jumped up as if they'd been stung.

"Hah, scared you," Klavusha sighed deeply and, moving a little to the side, shook her wet hair.

"Klavenka, I won't, I won't!" Igoryok the sadist shrieked.

Old man Kolya jumped up and ran for the ax. Little Mila understood nothing.

But Padov and Remin, swaying, chimed in ecstatically: "She's one of us..."

Before she knew it, Annushka was standing next to Klavusha.

"All right then...I'll drink to my future embodiment," she murmured, bowing gently. "To the unearthly snake!" And she pressed up as hard as she could to Klava's sweaty and loose belly.

Igoryok crawled over to Klavusha's feet and lifted his angelic, blond, little face: "To a midge! I'll drink to a midge!" he mumbled, and his eyes turned black.

Klavusha stood there magnificently, like an otherworldly Cleopatra. The only thing missing was for Igoryok to kiss her toes.

All of a sudden they heard a strange, incredible wail and breaking boards. Out of the shed dashed the cock-corpse holding a huge beam.

"I'll drive him out, I will!" he howled, but so absurdly that no one knew how to get out of his way.

Igoryok darted behind a log.

Meanwhile, there was obvious and terrible suffering written on the cock-corpse's face, but there was the sense that he found the reason for it completely incomprehensible. He was totally split off from those he wanted to drive out, unless he meant some other beings he could see among those gathered for the celebration.

Casting the beam aside, his eyes bulging with half-tears that wouldn't fall, he waved his arms around, standing in place.

This suffering, wedded to his total detachment from any outward cause of his agony, made an especially awful and devastating impression.

Everyone tried not to look.

Klavusha, ass swaying, went around the corner of the house to the water barrel. Soon after, the others found themselves off to the side and the cock-corpse suddenly fell silent, as if a little door in his mind had slammed shut.

Dead silence, interrupted by birds' timid chirping, reigned in the gathering darkness.

Only old man Kolya, who'd run away even before the cock-corpse jumped out of the shed, was dancing in front of the window to his room.

When they'd all dispersed to their burrows to sleep, only Igoryok the sadist stopped Klava shyly on the path.

Wishing to pour out his soul, he clung to the space around her body and quietly whispered, "It's true that the most hateful thing in life is happiness, isn't it? People should declare a campaign against happiness. Then they'll see new worlds."

Igoryok lifted his arm in front of good-natured Klava, turned pale, and vanished.

"Off to his obscurity," Klava thought.

VII

Meanwhile, Padov and Annulya locked themselves into a certain room. After a little tea, they began discussing the otherworldly. Annushka was mad about giving herself to men distinguished by the most insane notions about the world beyond the grave. In this regard, Padov could give anyone a hundred-point handicap.

But right now he was in a darkly weak, gentle condition stemming from a desire to steady himself after the Lebedinoye celebration. First, he plunged Annushka into a comfortable, cozy little world of purely infantile notions of the future life. Relaxed, wearing his nightshirt, serene, Padov wandered around the room intoning, "I'll have some tea, Annulya. I'll have some tea and, after that, I'll remember again I might die... And I won't understand and that will be either sweet or unbearably frightening."

This was exactly the right moment to surrender, so Padov and Annushka coupled, a little hysterically, but tenderly.

Annulya gave herself a shake and then daydreamed in the little bed, next to Padov.

But now, for some reason, they craved madness and insanity, as if their thoughts had separated from the body's bliss.

Tolya set the tone.

He especially stressed that nothing in the next world would be like it was in the teachings about it. Instinctive clairvoyance, dedication, and the teachings, he said, all covered only a pitiful part of the otherworldly, and people, he said, were wrong about even that

part, more than likely. “It’s inevitable,” Padov sniggered. “After all, if people are wrong about this world so often, what can we expect about others?”

Anna squealed ecstatically. This view helped them instill the otherworldly with even more fog and nightmares than there was in even the gloomiest and most cruelly alienated teachings.

In this state of mind, pressed up close, stroking each other’s gentle bodies, in semi-sweetness, they loved digging around in the little details of otherworldly worlds, developing individual known propositions or remaking everything according to their own intuition.

When he went into ecstasy, Tolya even took a little jump, mentally copulating with the Supreme Hierarchies, and Annulya exclaimed, “Madness, madness!”

They were magnificent in that little bed, when they poked their naked bodies out from under the blanket and shouted at each other, “Madness, madness!”

Once they’d calmed down, they reignited their imaginations, trying to imagine what they would look like “there,” what they would think about, what their consciousness would be like; zealously inclining away from a “simple” understanding of posthumous life as a more or less ordinary continuation of this one (in another form), they imagined themselves ultimately transformed into inhuman beings living God knows where and God knows how, having lost all ties with the here and now. They tried to penetrate how “they”—in the here and now, genuine—might be completely different, how “they” would cease to be while, at the same time, “they would be.”

Later, mentally returning to earth, squealing, kissing each other in secret fear, they tried to anticipate all the nuances of their condition during their transition from this world.

Annulya pictured herself after death, when consciousness returned for the first time and, invisible to the living, she could still see this world, but as a world of “shadows”; for some reason, she

felt convulsively sorry for her own corpse, which she could see from the next world.

"I'll adorn it with flowers from beyond the grave; or I'll ride it, invisibly; onward, onward...into the vastnesses," she murmured into Tolya's ear.

Tolya twitched and hissed that his long-held dream was to copulate with his own corpse and that, even now, he could feel the warm coldness of that act.

After this, Padov and Anna coupled a few more times.

In the morning, in the deep and soft rays of a sluggish and non-warming sun, they looked tired and dissolute.

Wishing to please his masters, Igoryok served them coffee in bed.

But Tolya, who, after his madnesses and flights, liked to sink into a viscous and opaque marasm, lay there without pulling his penis out of Anna's body and dozed, sipping his coffee.

He spent the entire day in a kind of viscosity.

Toward evening, visions began pursuing Padov. Even the Sonnov house itself, with its sheds, schizophrenic corners, and transcendentally sewery cut-holes, helped the "invisibles" appear. Besides, everyone (in the late afternoon!) gathered, for some reason, to hunt mushrooms in the woods, leaving Padov alone in the house.

At first, he thought someone would suddenly rush out from some corner— not a person but a "something," or at best an apparition from the next world.

But he tried to bind space to his consciousness.

And he started seeing something completely inhuman that he'd nonetheless had a secret presentiment of in his soul.

At first, an underground of otherworldliness dimly showed through; then beings, its inhabitants, began appearing.

First to appear was a type that was allowed to squeak once in a million years, but not for more than a minute; all the rest of the time between those squeaks, it was in total nonbeing. This darkly mad fatty appeared for its one and only minute; nonetheless, it behaved

unusually significantly and even pompously. Evidently it held fast to its right to squeak and treasured it in the extreme.

A chain of other visions, one odder than the next, passed before him.

Toward the end, it seemed to Tolya that he was seeing the "being" from the world that "lies" beyond the finite world of all religions and occult-mystical discoveries.

Screeching, "Enough!" Tolya jumped out of bed and started shouting. Everything dispersed to the secret corners of reality. But a terrible, thunderous pounding at the gates came from outside.

Wound up by this abrupt transition from the covert to the visible world, Tolya staggered toward the pounding.

He opened the gates to the Sonnov house and saw a drunken peasant, and behind him...a shyly smiling...Evgeny Izvitsky.

"Now this is a meeting! How did you find Lebedinoye?" Padov exclaimed, embracing his friend.

The little peasant kissed a tree and disappeared.

"Oh, Annulya secretly wrote a little letter here," Izvitsky said, abashed, shooting sharp looks at Padov.

Giving him no time to recover, Padov led him to the rooms, pointing out the corners where he'd just seen the "invisibles."

Izvitsky huddled up; he was a pudgy man with a tousled head, about the same height as Padov; his eyes burned with an inner, mystical, and, at the same time, sexual fire; the skin on his face was soft, but not feminine—soft in its own, special way.

With Padov and Remin, he formed a rather unique triangle. People said that, like Remin, he had, at one time, some connection to the religion of "I."

Soon after, the travelers returned from their mushroom hunting, all except Anna, who'd gone to Moscow for the day. The lights went on in the Sonnov-Fomichev house, as if spirits now stirred in the darkness.

Little Mila hid her mushrooms in a chamber pot; Petenka's turbid and covert eyes watched Izvitsky through a crack. Even the cock-corpse brought back one mushroom. But Izvitsky wasn't feeling well. He craved

turning inward, into his soul, or at least contact with Padov and Remin. Even Klavusha didn't surprise him very much.

"Better your own louse than the Gifts from on high," he kept mumbling to himself, and he moved off.

"He's slipping away. Zhenichka's slipping away from us," Remin intoned.

For a long time, none of them seemed able to connect and they staggered from side to side, as if forsaken.

In his corner, Gena knocked back a poetic quarter-liter. Then Tolya whispered something and sat down with him.

Meanwhile, an outrageous rumor about Izvitsky, complete with moans under apartment houses, was circulating in Moscow. They said Zhenya was mixed up in a terrible story, wild and fanatic, possibly having to do with a devil cult. Others believed this explanation profane, though, and talked about a negative, monstrous path to God that passed through blasphemy as well.

But one little old lady, Zhenya's neighbor, had a vision of an angel after a conversation with him, and, according to her, the angel winked at her and said there would be no salvation.

Rumors popped up in an absurdly metaphysical cluster, with the inevitable Russian holy fool overtones, and people were already asserting that the sick, half-dead cat noticed around Zhenya more than once was the spirit incarnate of the Marquis de Sade. One very young person began to worship it and kneeled before it.

Imaginations were wound so tight that, according to the rumors, a strange girl of eleven or twelve, who Izvitsky frequently fondled and singled out, had a part in the "story."

People recalled that Izvitsky had said more than once that this little girl was "filled with light."

And it was true. To a certain degree, the little girl really did glow: her pale face, with its slightly jutting jaw and rotten teeth, seemed illuminated by lightning-leaping inspiration, and the eyes in her beaming, inspired face seemed to pop out of their orbits when she rejoiced at the Invisible and her own thoughts.

People said that, spiritually, she constantly revolved around herself and she had been given much.

Be that as it may, no one knew the story exactly, or even very approximately.

Everything may have happened differently, or with a different subtext. But the little self-loving, holy-fool rumors grew and spread to the most secret, cellarly-metaphysical corners of Moscow.

Such was the talk about Izvitsky.

Finally, when all the other Sonnov inhabitants had gone to sleep, the friends—Remin, Izvitsky, and Padov—cast aside the raving of awkwardness and gathered on the second floor, in a tucked-away room with a half-blocked window.

Only a candle lit their faces.

Compared to his friends, Izvitsky was outwardly soft and gentle. Padov laughed at the spots on the walls.

Remin snuggled up in an armchair, rocking to the beat of his thoughts. A green, clandestine vodka bottle had rolled into a corner.

Their discussion—or rather, their touching of souls—shifted from the failures in their raving, expanding relations... to mysticism.

The air was black from their exploding, then decaying thoughts.

Having had a taste of life beyond the grave, Izvitsky now stressed the laughter of the Absolute—it was an extraordinary quality, if the Absolute had its own laughter. Savage it is (the laughter) and unattainable, he said, because it's not in contrast to anyone and the reason for it, naturally, lies not in any discord with reality, but in that which is unknown to us.

A hysterical little laugh passed down Padov's throat; he thought he could see the laughter's ends.

The three men sat far apart in dilapidated armchairs, but each had a glass of vodka at hand—for the quiet.

Remin poured fat on the fire and raised a stink from his corner about the life of the Supreme Hierarchies, claiming that, compared with them, any spiritual human achievement is like a rat's squeak compared

with Dostoevsky, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to snatch, or at least vaguely imagine something from them when one tried to make the leap from the Spirit... to the unknown plane.

Padov was especially affected by this reminder. "What's there for dumb clucks like us?" he mumbled tearily.

But then he got angry.

And although Remin was still going on about the need to break away into post-human forms of "consciousness," the thought of the distance to the Unknown stung both Padov and Izvitsky, even throwing them into a visceral logical negativism.

"But maybe we're the only ones the whole Absolute is moving in... even now," Izvitsky suddenly sniggered from his corner.

He choked; everyone really did want to embody the absolute right away, to incorporate it now, in their present-day guise, otherwise their "here and now" state and "here and now" thoughts lost too much value. Padov actually trembled at his impatient love for himself. But even before, Izvitsky had, for good reason, sought the world's back door, a way leading to the supreme, bypassing all hierarchical degrees.

Finally, after a gloomy silence, Izvitsky began talking about a paradoxical path.

He sketched out a world where one could arrive at the transcendental through negativism, negation, a world in which the positive had been destroyed and everything stinkingly negative had, on the contrary, become affirming.

In this world, or rather, antiworld, everything negative and evil was given vital life; even oblivion itself "existed" there; it was as if the reverse of our world suddenly achieved independence and the ordinary world of the positive was inverted and vanishing.

All this found a soul-warming response in Padov and Remin, of course, but Izvitsky wasn't really looking for fellow travelers.

Therefore the conversation shifted (as if their souls were casting about) and took another turn.

First, lightly—jeering—they touched upon a few odd, even comic moments in posthumous transmigration. Then, after they'd had a good laugh and were fired up, they mentioned the sect of the Devil's salvation—and then suddenly moved on to the teachings of Sophia Perennis.

Coldness and transcendental calm immediately came over them all—and then onto the incarnation of Logos, onto the Vedas, Sufis, and Hinduism, everything sprinkled with grains of immortality. And onto the gaping abyss of the Absolute and His Holy Darkness, on the far side of any being.

Finally, after an unexpected fit of hysterics, onto what should never be discussed.

"Don't, don't go into that. We'll perish!" Remin exclaimed in horror.

Everything subsided in a kind of tension. There was no going any further. The discussion came to a halt.

"There you have it. Russian esotericism over vodka!" someone said in the end.

VIII

The next morning, after Anna arrived, the gate to the Sonnov residence opened and two absurd, strange figures appeared in the yard. One was leading the other by the arm. The former was Fyodor Sonnov; the latter, Mikhei, who liked being shunned. Slowly, as if sniffing it out, they walked all the way around the house. Klavusha greeted them through an open window, slowly waving her brush. First to run out to the guests was old man Kolya; shrill and thin, with fixed, bulging eyes, he waved a rag at Mikhei. Mikhei stood there humbly, smiling with enlightenment into Kolya's face. Fyodor suddenly collapsed on the grass like a hog and it was strange to see his awful, half-dead figure lying on the ground, like an ordinary hog marked out by nature.

The other inhabitants began drifting out of the house. Even the sun, which shone fiercely and inexhaustibly now, looked black, as if the sun had intellect. No one was even getting ready for breakfast; they were all absorbed in themselves and their own rotten thoughts.

Fyodor didn't even pay any attention to Annushka, who was so spaced out, she wouldn't have minded flirting with him.

"Only through our death do I touch a woman," he snarled in her face, and he started from the house toward the Lebedinoye cemetery, where Lidochka's grave had been orphaned.

There, in solitude, Fyodor danced around her grave for a long time—if you could call what he was up to dancing. He jutted his lips out at the invisible.

That afternoon, Alyosha Khristoforov turned up, completely exhausted and withdrawn.

The cock-corpse barely poked his head out; all anyone could see was his incomprehensible shadow.

Alyosha was still convinced it was "good" for his father here—at least physically. If there was to be any "treatment," Khristoforov decided, then the only formal place for him was an insane asylum. But knowing the procedures there and all the rest, Alyosha discarded that thought; all he could do was wait. For this reason, Khristoforov was thinking only about getting away from here to take care of urgent business.

He prayed hard to dismiss the blackness and no one came up to him directly, either. His main ridiculer, Padov, was so removed from the outside world just then that he'd frozen stock-still with a glass of vodka at his mouth.

After returning from the grave, Fyodor walked around Alyosha as if he didn't exist.

Outside the Sonnov gate, a nurse crawled out of the burdock and felt up Khristoforov, trying to take off his pants. Slipping away, Alyosha admitted, "You know, that's the same nurse who treated my papa. Klavdia Ivanovna was right in saying she liked to sleep in the burdock. But Annushka also said that was an exaggeration."

As if to keep his thoughts outside the fence, a deep part-shout, part-wail of "Papa" rang out, sounding more like a trumpet than a human being.

Following his instinct for the incomprehensible, Alyosha wandered back into the Sonnov yard, skirting around on the other side. He didn't forget to whisper something biblical.

There was no one left in the yard except Mikhei, who'd fallen asleep by a log. The filthy cat was trying to lick his empty place. Alyosha walked past this scene and went deep inside, through the house's wide open door. On the stairs, he heard voices coming from the nearest room.

He made out Anna's harsh, triumphant, spiritually visceral voice.

Alyosha went downstairs and into the yard.

The filthy cat wasn't around Mikhei's empty place anymore. Nearby, his face altered, blond Igoryok was crawling into the shed to see the cock-corpse—to be not-human. As Alyosha left the Sonnov residence, the last thing he saw was the fixed stare of Petenka, who'd stopped singing to himself. Avoiding the ditch the sister of mercy was already climbing out of, Khristoforov started running toward the train station.

IX

Meanwhile, Petenka was no longer scraping just his pimples and herpes; he was actually eating himself. Going deeper and deeper, eating more and more every day. Even he couldn't understand why he lived like that, though there was probably a reason—and its name was his extreme mistrust for the outside world, from which Petya disdained accepting even sustenance.

Petenka treated the world with contempt, as something infinitely insulting and boorish, and was prepared to tear himself to pieces rather than take anything substantive from the world. For him, doing so was tantamount to religious or, rather, existential suicide. Even a gentle spring breeze put Petenka on his guard if he noticed it.

Usually he tried not to notice anything, existing in himself as in a cradle; he perceived even food as merely something that came from the darkness, solid and inedible. And so he ate himself. At first, this was simply a necessity, but lately he'd started to derive a convulsive, stinking, and convincing pleasure. So he moved on from scraping to more direct self-devouring. In his own eyes, this made him more real, as if he were plunging into his own abyss-cradle.

In connection with this shift—one night, when the wind was howling, a wind Petenka did not perceive—he developed an especially fierce desire to sink his teeth into himself. Bending over, he fell on his leg and took a bite; blood gushed for a long time in a warm stream over his deadened lips, and it seemed to him that he'd hidden completely, that even the usual darkness no longer surrounded him. "Deeper, deeper," he whispered to his lips and his gushing blood.

These acts buried him once and for all. While strange mysteries played out in the Sonnov yard, Petenka stopped wherever he happened to be and fell on himself, like an epileptic in his sleep. But no one noticed his condition somehow. Just little Mila would sometimes bump into him when he was all contorted, but, though she could see, she saw nothing.

Petenka's pale face became completely distorted. He only breathed into his blood. All torn up, he staggered from corner to corner, no longer present. But he wanted to go deeper, inside, and that's where he was going. The situation was obviously heading toward death, which he associated with his last swallow.

One morning, a few days after Fyodor and Mikhei showed up at the nest, Petenka arose with the firm intention of eating himself up, not that he had a clear idea of how he'd do it: whether he'd start by cutting off body parts and gobbling them up with dead desire, or start with the main thing all at once, fall on his most critical artery, and sink his teeth into it, as if swallowing himself, and thereby end his life.

But he was too weak from his previous self-devouring; his head was spinning and his hands were shaking. Frowning, he looked out the window at the tall trees and, for an instant, saw them, though he usually didn't really see anything. He moved the curtain aside and suddenly, instead of wounding and eating himself by gnawing on his body, he fell down and started licking, licking himself, sticking out his tongue like a dying witch and licking the seemingly most inaccessible and intimately lifeless places.

His eyes suddenly turned white as snow and he seemed to become nothing but this big red tongue licking his body and his blank white eyes, into which this body dissolved.

Sometimes, just at the nape of his neck, he heard unprecedented song coming from inside himself, or, rather, the song of an unprecedented "joy"—not the usual earthly or heavenly joy, but an absolutely extra-human, dead, and otherworldly joy.

Petenka licked his shoulder and gave up the ghost.

His body was discovered at noon.

Petenka's death immediately cast a spell over everyone. Old man Kolya slipped up a tree and, for a long time, watched from there with empty eyes. Little Mila became lost in thought. At shouts of, "Death, death!" Klavusha rushed outside in her apron, holding a dishrag. She seemed eager to wipe Petenka's forehead to drive away his ghost. The guests—Padov, Anna, and their ilk—stirred, as well, feeling something they could relate to. Fyodor alone genuinely envied Petenka. He'd envied Petka when he was alive, sucking the pimples off himself, and he especially envied Petka now that he had died. He alone truly understood that Petenka had eaten himself up. "Petenka will go far, very far...in that world," Fyodor muttered, with foam at his mouth. "This isn't like killing other people. Petya gave birth to himself." Fyodor detached himself from everyone and stood in a corner behind a tree, mechanically and gloomily biting off its bark.

Mikhei prowled around the body, as if opening the scar-eye of his empty place to the corpse.

"Shoo, shoo, damn you!" Klavusha hollered at no one in particular, but loud enough for the whole yard to hear.

Old man Kolya finally came down from the tree. They had paperwork to fill out. The corpse was covered with a scarf and the practical fuss began. Once everything had been dealt with, Petenka, all white and transparent, lay in a coffin on a table, opposite the windows that looked out on the garden. The next day, he was supposed to be buried, not far away, at the Lebedinoye cemetery. But in the morning they discovered the coffin empty. Petenka—or rather, his corpse—was nowhere to be found. Old man Kolya checked here and there; he even looked in the cellar and behind the cupboard—not a whiff of the dead man anywhere. True, the coffin remained brazenly and nakedly on the table, as if inviting someone to climb in.

Strangely, the corpse's disappearance had an immeasurably more powerful effect on old man Kolya than his son's actual death. He staggered around like a drunkard, sniffed at corners, and even roused little Mila from her usual state. Eyes wide open, arms spread, as if taking the visible for the invisible world, she crawled through

the bushes in search of the corpse. At any rate, old man Kolya never did get a response and only sleepy Igoryok remained not-human somewhere, in one corner or another.

Meanwhile, the official, earthly part of death came into its own. Some half-drunk types crowded by the gates and some official representatives hung around on the street. It was time to carry the coffin out and onward, to its hole. Old man Kolya yelped at the idea of burying an empty coffin. It was the emptiness that bothered him, for some reason. If instead of Petenka, there'd been a decaying, stinking-evaginating monster in the coffin—he could have stood that. But emptiness? Not for anything! He ran up, bent over and teeth bared, and started snapping at the emptiness, clacking his teeth as if the emptiness were something real. Mavka, the old neighbor lady, turned up and tried to stuff rags and even a brick into the coffin, but old man Kolya shoved her aside.

Meanwhile, they couldn't wait any longer. Dusty, excited voices could be heard outside and the gravediggers might not wait the whole time and leave. The fat, paunchy bosses were knocking at the gates. Crazed, old man Kolya snatched up the coffin as if it were a feather.

"Where'd you get that energy, Kolya? Where'd you get it?" old lady Mavka mumbled, and she took a place at the front.

The funeral procession with the empty coffin began to move; old man Kolya goggled, but his feet wouldn't obey him very well and turned aside, just barely descending to the yard. The people outside the gates were noisy. Little Mila, looking around, was next to the coffin. They had to move forward, toward the people. But old man Kolya rushed aside out of fear; he had a sudden desire to throw the coffin in a ditch and run away to God knows where—far, far away.

But old lady Mavka had sunk her claws so deep into the coffin and her feet so deep into the ground, that old man Kolya couldn't tear her away. Then he had the sudden desire to jump in the coffin himself and have Mila and old lady Mavka carry him, farther, onward, to the grave. And he would wave his arms around and shout to the sky. Old man Kolya somersaulted like a swimmer and dove into the coffin.

The coffin was upset, old lady Mavka fell, old man Kolya landed nearly upside down, and Mila kept looking around. It was just the three of them, alone on the grass around the somersaulted coffin. Meanwhile, the gates gave way, little by little, to the impatient rubberneckers of death. Suddenly, old man Kolya's eye fell on the cock-corpse, who'd darted out of his shed and ran crookedly, clucking, toward a lonely, log structure that belonged to Klava, kind of like a country bathhouse, hidden behind some bushes, off to one side.

There was something lifeless and curious in the cock-corpse's cry and, sensing a resolution, old man Kolya leapt after him like a quick-moving idol.

This is what happened: That night, after midnight, Padov woke up and something made him look out the window. In the yard—in the moonlight—he witnessed Klavusha, belly jutting forward, moving something in a wheelbarrow. That "something" was—no doubt about it—the body of self-eater Petenka. His emaciated arms looked like sharp swords. Padov recalled that, according to Anna's stories, there was a secret entrance leading to the Fomichev half. Klavusha had undoubtedly used it to spirit Petya away.

"But why does she need the body, and where is she taking it?" he thought. Seeing that Klavusha was having a hard time getting the body to the log bathhouse, Tolya quietly went downstairs.

Neither Klavusha nor the body was anywhere to be seen; the wheelbarrow just stood by the entrance. For a long time, Padov couldn't bring himself to approach. Finally, he spat and made his way to the door, pushed it, and looked in. He'd been expecting all kinds of things—a tearful preparation of the corpse, fellatio with a dead penis, monstrous caresses—but not this.

Klavusha sat peacefully, in candlelight —her ass at the corpse's foot—and seductively ate the chocolate cakes she'd placed on the dead man one after another. Padov screamed, but Klavusha, who turned her good-naturedly gluttonous face toward him, with white icing on her lips, intoned, "Come in, Tolyushka. Come in. We can eat together now."

"But why on the corpse?" Padov cried.

"Petenka himself is chocolate. He's my main cake. My most delicious cake," Klavusha said with conviction, licking her lips and looking at Padov with her usual drunk and certain eyes.

Padov went in.

The bathhouse was dark, but the candles did a good job of plucking the corpse and chocolate cakes from the darkness.

"Have a delicious treat!" Klavusha rumbled. Padov sat down. Klavusha dipped her fingers in her mouth, ran them over the corpse, and then started licking them. She paid no attention whatsoever to Padov. For some reason, Tolya suddenly realized that she really did see the body as a chocolate cake.

"But why isn't she eating Petenka, literally?" he thought.

Evidently, Klava distinguished "essence" from empirical knowledge of a thing and instinctively kept them straight. In her soul and in a real way, she took Petenka for a cake; though she was, to all appearances, eating ordinary cakes, in her consciousness she was eating a cake-corpse. Padov understood this intuitively when, huddling and mentally sniggering, he'd observed Klavusha's behavior for an entire half-hour. Understood and rejoiced. Klavusha, meanwhile, gave the corpse's nose a carefree tickle and sat right on its stomach, evidently wishing to drown in the pastry.

There was a quiet knock at the bathhouse door. Padov shuddered. "It's us"—came the whisper. Remin and Ann appeared in the crack without a sound. Apparently, Padov had awakened Annulya and a chain reaction had ensued. After explanations that resembled murmurings in a wall, everyone took seats around the corpse. Remin pulled out the inevitable bottle.

"You got the stuff, Gena," Klavusha said. "Well, a treat, a treat"—and she took off his socks.

This was how old man Kolya found them in the morning. He gave a grunt and smiled knowingly. The cock-corpse, it turned out, had been drawn by the wheelbarrow and had been circling around it. All the rest

followed, as if nothing special had happened. With the help of Gena and Padov, they dragged the body outside, but there the gates gave way to pressure from the gathered crowd, who were presented with the following scene: the coffin lying off to the side, old lady Mavka clucking around it, and the corpse being dragged by its hair toward the coffin.

The on-lookers were dumbstruck, but the fat village authorities knew what to do.

"Must've been extracting his fat for soap or something," they trumpeted, half in jest.

The crowd suddenly started laughing, and somehow it all went smoothly from there.

"We've brought wreaths from the organization," the authorities said in a bass voice, "to preserve the decencies."

Everything now looked right and proper. Petenka was in his coffin and everyone else started moving. Old man Kolya waved his cap at Klavusha.

X

Old man Kolya returned from the cemetery thoroughly undone. He was repeatedly drawn, first up into a tree, then forward into space. He brought some things from the house into the yard and bundled them up, as if he were getting ready to go somewhere. Indeed, melancholy had eaten away at him. He sat down on a small log for a smoke and "talked" with the cock-corpse. The cock-corpse was sitting, ruffled, like a hen hewn from a tree.

Spitting tobacco, old man Kolya said, "I'm leaving here, leaving... I can't live in this place."

"Cluck cluck cluck," the cock-corpse responded woodenly.

But the old man's desire suddenly ran into resistance from his only living offspring—little Mila.

While Petenka was eating himself and coming closer to death, another quiet, estimable story had been playing out in the corner of the Sonnov-Fomichev house: little Mila had fallen in love with old Mikhei.

How could this have happened? After all, while seeing, the little girl saw nothing. On the other hand, she had many gifts. It all started when Mikhei was sitting on a small log. As was his wont, he bared his empty place and watched the filthy cat lick it. Mikhei wanted very much to be shunned even by sewer cats, but for now he was still far from that. At that moment, something trembled in Mila's eyes. As usual, she first saw clearly the formal side of reality, but she had no inner sensation of seeing it. Then, all of a sudden, at the point when she saw Mikhei, who, at the same time, she was not-seeing, she imagined she heard singing and saw before her inner gaze a black spot

that evoked in her the idea of a rose. Smiling, she clapped her hands and ran like a baby goat toward Mikhei. Kicking aside the filthy cat, she fell to her knees and started licking the empty place. Mikhei went on the alert. The half-absent old man's ears wiggled and his nose turned red. He couldn't connect this fact with his mind and just moved the lower part of his torso flirtatiously. Igoryok, who alone witnessed this scene, began to applaud.

That was when it all began.

In secret corners, in one mysterious shed or another, behind logs, Mila's lost gaze began penetrating cloudy worlds that she firmly connected to Mikhei, or rather, his empty place. Sometimes she saw a black spot and the recent singing. At times, a wail came from the black spot. Sometimes, just noticing Mikhei, she felt the distant movement of something else, something beautiful and stinking, and it was imprinted in her eyes by a light sparkle shifting into consciousness. But this movement, this spark of the transcendental, aroused a blatant sexual interest in her. In her mind, roses bowed; her knees trembled and she walked toward Mikhei. Mikhei never was able to connect her appearance with anything specific and could only grin at the incomprehensibility.

He wanted people to shun him, yet he always blissfully connected her—Mila—to a puzzle of his own. Therefore, at first, like a wolfhound in the flowers, he avoided her, turning sideways. Sometimes he growled, looking for a crack in the sky. Eventually, though, he surrendered. With a limp movement, surveying the space with a single glance, he would bare his empty place. Milochka would drop to her knees and her entire face looked like it was sprinkled with heavenly dew. Actually, sometimes small black dips appeared. Her tongue especially was black... Fellatio with Mikhei's missing penis made her look utterly, childishly faint. "Far, the little girl will go far," Mikhei mumbled. It was in this state that they were found when old man Kolya got the idea to flee Lebedinoye. But it wasn't that easy to tear Mila away from Mikhei. Old man Kolya banged on pots, threw sheets, and sang songs. Milochka, with her slender, sensitively empty little fingers, seemed to cling to Mikhei's

nonpresent body. Fyodor defused the situation—cursorily, with the edge of his being, he had noticed his "friend" completely leave himself.

"That was wrong what gramps was doing," Fyodor mumbled at Mikhei in secret.

Soon after, Mikhei vanished completely from his field of consciousness, and their "friendship" came to an end of its own accord, but Fyodor couldn't stand his human presence—not even in passing. Therefore, he once simply threatened Mikhei with a beam, and Mikhei instantly backed down. The thing was that, after the empty place lickings with Milochka, he'd discovered, all of a sudden, an interest in life and a desire to extend his existence. He became more fearful and anxious, though all this seemed completely independent of the former "otherworldliness" he maintained. His interest may have been aroused by the outrageous form of intercourse. Within an hour, Mikhei had talked Mila into running away from Lebedinoye on condition that he go with her.

They packed the basics the night before and, early the next morning, three ugly, unearthly figures weighed down with bundles left the gates of the Sonnov house: one, old man Kolya, despite the weight, was skipping from joy; the second, Mila, was absurdly absent; the third, Mikhei, was gravely focused, as if on his way to church.

Klavusha's unctuously awful face smiled at them from her window.

XI

Meanwhile, Padov got bogged down in his interest in Klavusha. Simultaneously, his own longing tormented him. A strange state came over him that, for starters, could have been characterized as an inferiority complex relative to the Supreme Hierarchies, which he sometimes took to be the consciousness of the Angels, but sometimes surmised as the existence of the heretofore unknown Supreme Inhuman Spirits.

Sometimes Tolya would sit down on a berm, stroking his tummy and spacing out...about the Supreme...trying to penetrate to the "unknown consciousness."

At times like this, Tolya's mood could be squealingly elated, since, as he went deeper into this lightning gnosis, he raised sparks of unprecedented, trans-human spirituality...and this flattered his pride.

But now a dull depression came over him.

He kept having glimmers in his mind of the true supreme being, something you couldn't even ask about, and anything you could ask a question about, even if it was hard to do, and no matter how fleetingly—anything close at hand was just not all that lofty. Still, no matter how he excelled, he would remain insignificant before the unattainably supreme, at least for now.

Of course, the supreme hierarchies didn't appear directly, and even the very fact of their existence was by no means clear, but his imagination definitely slipped its chain and drew one picture more piquant than the next.

"Here we are suffering from violence inflicted by inferior beings," he wailed once in his mind, dropping to the grass. "And yet we're

aware of our profound superiority over everyone. “Here” we’re the salt of the earth and sky; but “there”—“there,” although our superiority over our inferiors will become objectivized and manifest, on the other hand, we’ll see that we are, by no means, the salt of the earth and the Supreme Beings will look into our eyes with cold curiosity. How am I to endure this wretchedness? And we still don’t know which is better: this way or that. So you get jerked from one extreme to the other.”

Suddenly Tolya felt like a pork chop, trembling and half-baked; his thoughts moved away from the lofty and became like flies struggling to escape a net; he even slapped his forehead, trying to crush those flies. His thoughts twined, indeterminate and senseless, weaving together with nonsense and really no longer belonging to his own great “I,” which had shrunk down to a kind of tiny imp.

Padov spat. The filthy cat froze, looking at his mouth.

“Feeling sad, Anatoly Yurievich?” He heard Kla-vusha’s moist voice. Tolya sniggered.

“I adore you, Anatoly Yurievich,” Klavusha continued. “I’d like to put a skillet on you. I like it when a stump has a mind.”

“So now you take me for a stump, Klavdia Ivanovna”—Padov smiled joyously—“but I’m sad because I’m nothing but a man and cast out into this filthy cellar of the universe, as the famous expression goes.”

“Is this really a cellar?” Klavusha broke into a wide grin. “That’s something I never expected from you, Tolyusha. What cellar? This is the vault of heaven! Paradise! Look at the birdies. What pointy little heads they have! They’re nothing but bloody, flying pillows or burdocks. Aren’t they charming? And the mutt”—Padov looked at the huge, red-mawed bulldog dully observing them over the neighbor’s fence— “it’s a half-manifested angel, and his pretty teeth practically talk. And the earth”—Klavusha stamped her foot—“where are you going to find a whore like this?”

“Then what about the soul?” Padov playfully recalled the wounds of childhood. “Is it immortal?” And he winked at her.

"Don't get so steamed! "Immortal!"" Klavusha had a good laugh. "It's eternal. It just is. No question. What a thing to worry about."

"You're so confident, Klavusha," Padov said half-jokingly, hurt. "That's a good mood for living in hell. You wouldn't be out of place there."

But he became more and more interested in her world, where everything was inverted and had a different name and meaning.

That evening, they pressed close. Only Fyodor climbed on the roof somewhere. There was a gathering in the yard, in a corner of the vacant Fomichev half. Sitting at the table were Klavusha, Padov, Anna, Remin, and Izvitsky. Igoryok was cavorting in the grass nearby.

Klavusha was practically inhaling her tea. The blanket she'd wrapped around herself gave a kind of shudder and she clutched it in a bad way. Padov got the idea that Klavenka saw her blanket as the continuation of her own skin. Klavusha's breasts sagged and she looked at them, as if into a mirror. Anna smoked, thinking about destruction.

"A present for you, and you," Klava said, and she put an overturned glass before each of them. "There are mushrooms for you, too," she shouted to Fyodor on the roof, having given up on treating him in any special way.

She lowered her hands into the pot, as if into an abyss. Many already thought her hair looked like slime.

"You take everyone for idols, Klavenka," Izvitsky said gently.

"What do you mean, Zhenichka?" Klavusha smiled faintly. "Some for paper, some for a goose."

Igoryok really did seem like paper as he ran past them all. Darkness was gathering.

Klava's eyes seemed to head for the unknown. She looked into the sky as if it were a hole. Suddenly, she cast her awkwardly embracing gaze over everyone.

"All right, let's all dance. Evil spirits..."

Little by little, everyone joined in her delirious, but real steadiness, picking up on her "idea." On the roof, even Fyodor woke up.

At first they danced, still referencing past metaphysical creatures. The dancing Padov was basically awful, like a dancing Mephistophelian thought. His hair looked like a dissertation from beyond the grave. Their essences themselves seemed to be dancing—on the horizon, in the moonlight.

Later, though, Klavusha's world definitely washed over everyone. She, herself, shaking, stared at the dancers, though her consciousness reflected not them but clumsy logs and skillets turning in their place, as if they'd been stripped of ten skins, specters. Klavusha emptily wanted to jump on Remin, as if he were a bobbing log. She tickled Igoryok like a cat, as he sat strumming a guitar. Padov's seeming apparition scared her and she regarded Annulya, who suddenly broke off her wild dance, as herself, dressing the woman in her own dress.

Meanwhile, the merry dance went on.

"You live interestingly, Klavenka," Izvitsky said tenderly into her ear.

"Come here, Igor, come here"—Klava suddenly stopped, marking a circle.

The dance ended. From his corner, Fyodor stared at the "metaphysicals," understanding everything in his own way.

The night passed in tumult.

Padov had entered Klavusha's world and he envied her a little. "Her world's irrational and absurd," Padov thought, "yet protected and self-sufficient, stable precisely because of the absurdity she's locked reality into. No alien winds ever break through; my world is my fortress."

At the same time, he saw that this wasn't insanity, but a state in which the I was preserved. The practical orientation remained intact, although the transcendental perception of the world had changed and the old irrational underpinning of things and their significance had fallen apart. Klavusha could now perceive the world otherwise, absurdly and with a gloomy joy.

"I'm laughing, laughing, laughing!" Padov felt like screaming. But, for some reason, he feared the "metaphysicals'" laughter in response and the complicity of other worlds in general.

In the morning, everyone was totally self-absorbed.

Klavusha was talking about her guts, saying she'd like to toss them in the air, and drinking tea straight from the pot, winking at it as if it were a lifeless ear. She was talking about the world as a whole being, a cute little hut flying up, turning upside down, firmly grasped by her strong and all-encompassing mind. She shook her fist sternly into the distance. Izvitsky reveled in dark sexual fantasies, drawing figures with his hand as if it were a penis with a mind. Remin thought about his fouled relationship to the religion of "I"; Anna nurtured her inner intellectualized witch; and Padov became irritated again by hints at the Supreme Beings' existence.

Tolya was angry about Klavenka's defenses: "I'd like to breach her world." Klavusha was sitting, peacefully stroking her bared shoulders, as if her shoulders were divine.

A disjointed discussion began, during which Zhenichka strummed a guitar and Remin knocked back the vodka.

"We're lacking something, but we can already sense... We're at the razor's edge..." Padov chirped. "To survive beyond the grave, you have to be quick and have inside you a satanic pride and the feeling of a mouse!"

Tolya suddenly spat into his mug of beer.

"You have to be Satan and a mouse!" he expounded, raising his little eyes skyward. "Be a mouse to get used to inferiority and so defend yourself from the Supreme, and be Pride that blocks out the light so you don't perish from longing and encroachment on the I. So there!" And he downed his beer.

This scene provoked hysterical laughter in those around him, but Klavusha looked at Padov fairly good-naturedly.

"We all have it in us, Tolenka"—and she heaved a stinking sigh. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't need another world. This one's fine as is, especially when there's a little death in it. And those supremes... Phooey. I couldn't care less. There's no such thing. There isn't."

And she looked at Padov with suddenly still eyes suffused with a distant turbidity.

Padov froze, but Remin, paying no attention, started chirping, "We don't, we don't have Satan and the mouse in us simultaneously. The contradiction would drive us insane."

That evening, Tolya was eager to carry out an assault on Klavusha. "My ideas are apart from her, but maybe my feeling, my feeling"—and he sniggered. "Anyway, I'm curious."

Tolya decided to seduce Klavusha; the others went to bed early and Padov started picking his way there in the evening blowing of the breeze. Secretly, he was tortured by the desire to go up to Klavenka and immediately—and he meant immediately—kiss her cheek as if it were a huge, world swamp. But he dreaded kissing that strange world. Klavenka hadn't gone in yet. She stood in the yard, by a window, leaning over a bucket of sheets. Washing. But could sheets be white in her hands? Her huge figure puffed out in the sunset rays that broke through the leaves.

In his soul, Padov had sexualized her figure, trying mentally to squeeze her spirit into her flesh. He grabbed her abruptly from behind and planted a heavy kiss on her fat, soft neck. When he recovered, Klava was standing in front of him with a delightedly astonished face and a net in her hands.

"A little mosquito, a mosquito," she squeaked, smug, beleaguered. And she threw the net over Padov's head. "Got you."

Padov started laughing. Klavusha's entire world rose up before his eyes. Sex fell away and there was just Klavenka's darkly mad gaze.

Rejoicing, dodging, laughing, Padov threw off the net and darted away from the lively, splashing Klavusha, who was trying to catch him in her net like a mosquito. The bushes cracked under their absurdly leaping bodies. "Hop-skip-jump, you won't get away," Klavusha exclaimed in an otherworldly-joyous little voice. The world took on an explicit, realistic, and senseless look. Suddenly, Padov yelled and was swallowed up by the darkness.

XII

In the morning, everything seemed to have settled into the soft valleys of thought. His soul wasn't weighed down by the jumping and the net or by the last outrageous philosophical scene over Satan and the mouse. Padov only thought, gloomily, "For that woman, sex and its displacement are huge... With her, you can't go at it the usual way."

But an inner, underground rumbling was mounting. In her soul, Klavusha was frantic; her Klavenka-Sonnova powers had shot up and then plunged into a tailspin of frightening force. This was obvious from her movements and her particular, drunkenly turbid, encompassing gaze.

She now took a goat for a sorcerer, a tree for an idol, mushrooms for thoughts, and the sky for a cage. The giants of her absurdity were everywhere. Once, when it started to rain—rain she took for the Lord's tears—she brought out a huge bucket to collect the tears. But inside her, something sang and this song may have accompanied the collapse of the old world, the gist of which was that the previous essence of things had sunk to the bottom and they themselves had been twisted by the naked will and power of consciousness. As a result, the entire world had plunged into chaos and quasi-destruction, and, owing to that, Klavenka's soul had acquired stability.

Anxiety (other people's) had led only to a manifest, visible acceleration of the process in the last few days.

Meanwhile, everyone else was still in a spin. Their spirits were enveloped by what was former and dear, but their behavior—thanks to the tightly wound situation—was more and more reminiscent

of the behavior of mental cases. The absurd immediacy of their outward behavior matched the secrets in their souls.

After a couple of days, Klavusha, who was totally relaxed from the special spiritual warmth characteristic only of absurdity, went out into the yard with quite darkly mad eyes. Even her movements sped up, as if she were catching invisible flies. She tossed a goose into a tree and, suddenly, as if someone were driving her on, she started sweeping the trash onto the street. She let the animals loose, too.

An understanding and amazed Padov laughed nearby.

But she rushed to drive him out, too, practically with a rag, onto the street.

Tolya tried to explain himself, but obviously she took him for an object. All hell had broken loose inside the house. Chairs were being moved and bundles tied up for some reason. Klavusha worked nonstop.

"What is this?" Anna asked.

But Klava, good-naturedly and devastatedly, drove everyone out of the house, like metaphysical roly-polies. Only her own coat hung high up, for some reason, almost at the ceiling. Even Fyodor didn't oppose her.

There was no particular spite (only Izvitsky grumbled), since the ejection was somehow too otherworldly, too much "not of this world." Klavusha even mentioned that she was leaving with everyone else and locking up the Sonnov house.

"Onward, onward!" blond Igoryok gestured into the distance.

The windows were slammed shut again and Fyodor stirred. The filthy cat looked for old man Mikhei.

The "metaphysicals" clustered in the yard, on the grass, and watched Klavusha nail the windows shut with Fyodor's help.

"Where to now? Where to now!" Igoryok exclaimed impatiently.

Klavusha hung several strange cloaks on trees.

Everyone set out. "Dark, dark is Klavenka's fat," Padov whispered, pondering her flesh. As they exited the gates, they looked back and saw a deserted nest: a large wooden house with several boarded up windows.

Each little beam seemed soaked in human obscurantism. But now the house was sad, as if it hid everything secret.

Klavushenka was so preoccupied that even Fyodor didn't know where she was going. They walked nearly to the train station in silence. Evidently, it was time to go their separate ways.

XIII

Only the cock-corpse stayed behind in the deserted house, like an eye. From time to time, he looked over the fence, as if trying to detect the nonexistent. His eyes iced over, his hair hung from his "head" like incomprehensible junk, and he, himself, now resembled in his outward image not a dead chicken, but a cube. Occasionally, in the evening, the old neighbor lady Mavka heard his wooden howl, or rather a howl emanating from wood.

What was strange, though, was that the cock-corpse washed up in the mornings. Or rather, he ran a wet hand over the unsuitable parts. Of course, he failed to notice the absence of all the inhabitants. The rats were probably the only ones to know what he ate. But even they didn't often see his "head," which he pulled in, as if hiding in some corner.

The rats, watching him, bared their teeth, but, for some reason, they couldn't bring themselves to come close, as if Andrei Nikitich weren't even a corpse. All day long, the "cube" listened closely to the sounds he made. Once, when the moon appeared, he pointed in its direction. But evidently the outside world had died for him long ago and cleared out of his soul.

His wooden face, meanwhile, had a strange, elongated grandeur, as if someone invisible had taken on his "individuality," as a replacement, and prayed even more to the Invisible, but then stepped aside. In the long intervals between these "prayers," the "cube" was filled inside with a naked howl of meaningless thoughts. It was a quiet, half-dead howl. Thoughts not filled with any content, even meaningless content, revolved quietly, as if waiting to be "filled." But they weren't.

Nothing connected this blank progression of thoughts to other worlds. But that sought-for, covert world may have been right there.

The “cube” kept feeling the space’s edges and corners, as if playing hide and seek with the emptiness.

The only outrageous reminder came from the prayers that went through that Unknown, which was like some kind of chess piece, but it was killing him, even though this sort of killing was the last thing about him reminiscent of life. As time passed, the prayers became fewer and fewer. The cock-corpse was left wholly to himself.

His big, iced-over eyes no longer asked any questions.

One not-terribly-strange little peasant cutting through the Sonnov yard to the street suddenly stopped and kissed him. But the “cube” paid no attention whatsoever to the little man, not even noticing the kiss.

XIV

They said goodbye at the station. In parting, Padov whispered to Fyodor, "Does Klavenka have these kinds of outbursts often? She's not usually like this."

Fyodor mumbled something in reply.

Klavenka took a commuter train in one direction; Padov, Remin, and Igoryok in the other. Fyodor set off on foot. Anna remained instinctively with Izvitsky. This was where the twists and turns in her relationship with Padov had led—to his coldness or dark madness over his states of mind. And if Anna wasn't with Padov, most often she was drawn to Izvitsky.

She was actually relieved when everyone scattered and they found themselves together. Izvitsky's trembling and mysterious little face looked unalienated.

Annulya winked at Izvitsky. They drank a mug of beer apiece in honor of Sonnov obscurantism and took the bus to Moscow.

Little by little, the immense city, outwardly messy, as if made up of shreds, enveloped them. They saw the familiar mud, the bottomless dust, the absurd side streets without a single sapling, as if in the grip of scrap metal. On rare occasions, these side streets had beer stands that looked like wooden latrines where flabby little people clustered around. Occasionally, little green gardens would show up, fouling the heart with a reminder of life. And, finally, the people, their huge mass, the flow—and suddenly among them, strange, playfully otherworldly people who delighted the eye. Annulya smiled when she saw ones like that.

"I see scamps are being born here in Russia again"—and Izvitsky understood her.

They decided to stop by and see their people, the "metaphysicals," as Fyodor put it.

There were the following possibilities: First, they could visit separate individuals for personal, strictly secret, subjective contact. Usually, there were no gatherings in those apartments. On the other hand, the "individuals" themselves were magnificent, no less so—as Anna put it—than Padov and other extremes, although in their own way. These individuals were deeply hidden from the uninitiated, boarded up, you might even say. Second, there were apartments where "gatherings" of more open, but still quite nightmarish individuals took place. Finally, at least in summer, there were places, usually filthy, deserted beer stands that gravitated toward cemeteries, where a varied, existential public would gather from time to time.

Of course, they could go to a few "leftie," fairly sophisticated, but at the same time enlightened salons where Padov's group was fairly well known, but Anna and Izvitsky were now drawn only to the deep underground, not even to the intermediate, quiet abodes, like the "sleeping" one where Padov was resting with Remin. Succumbing to their desire, they went to a funny little beer stand not far from the Bogorodskoye cemetery, counting on running into one of their own there.

The beer stand was impossibly ugly and, for exactly that reason, endearing. The ugliness consisted of the one (broken) window, the absurd beam lying by the door, and the particular stink that came from the subtle combination of the nearby graves and the alcohol fumes. Otherwise, the beer stand was fairly orthodox: dirt, puke, bottles steeped in black dust, and drunks singing fractured songs.

From a distance, Anna looked into the "customers'" barely visible faces. This time no one seemed to be there, but suddenly Izvitsky was delighted to pick out...at a lonely, little table...a cynic with regard to everything earthly: Tanya. He was alone, without the other itinerant philosophers.

He greeted them with a raised mug, like the Messiah. Izvitsky patted Tanya on the head. Anna herself looked at him lovingly, as if absolute salvation itself, albeit somewhat bared, shone through Tanya's face.

"Where are the itinerants?" Izvitsky asked.

"Crawled back to their nooks and crannies," Tanya replied. "There was an awkward situation."

And he told them the latest metaphysical gossip.

"No one ever comes here anymore," he added, looking cheerfully and insanely at the nice sun. "Only me. I drink beer with Him. Mister X."

At that, a small, vile, tousled being with blue, devoted, quasi-Raphaelesque, quasi-doglike little eyes appeared.

"This isn't Him." Tanya grinned.

"Then who is it?" Anna exclaimed.

"A stray. Let him suckle for now."

The evening ended traditionally for this place, that is, at the graves.

Everyone lay down on them, and the bodies they were lying on seemed to inspire them to pleasure. Anna even felt a touch of something sexual. From the black and meaningful earth. Familiar, troubling currents ran down her white, tender, and very sensitive leg.

But all this happened in peacefully smiling, calm tones.

Only the stray smiled nastily at every word.

The next day, Anna and Izvitsky met up, drank a glass of wine apiece, and ended up alone in the room where Anna lived. Anna knew that Izvitsky had been (or was?) very much in love with her, but she also knew that there was no one more underground than Izvitsky in the sexual respect.

Touched by this puzzle, she came closer to him with all her breath. Her very skin seemed to emit a cloud of tenderness and the quiver in her voice invited him in. Once again—as had happened long ago, in the summer, outside Moscow—Izvitsky couldn't resist. As if surrendering to the effect of some intoxicating field, he began kissing the half-undressed Anna the way people kiss a flower.

Soon after, plunged into pleasure, Anna forgot everything else. But in her imagination, which underpinned her sensory pleasure and poured "abysses" into him, floated something dark and dead. Nonetheless, this dark and dead something, while evoking an obscure shriek in her soul, so intensified her passion and orgasm, she thought her brain would explode. Anna just moaned, "so dead...so dead...so dead," and her sweet body jerked.

Barely recovered, she looked at Izvitsky's face, and its torment and extreme alienation struck her. The caresses weren't even over when Izvitsky suddenly started laughing. His laugh was utterly sick and seemed to converse with the wall.

Anna froze and Izvitsky started senselessly poking the body he'd just possessed. From his face, which had shed the softness of pleasure, she could tell he was astonished by what had happened and especially astonished by the sight of Anna's body. At the same time, there was the sense that some invisible, but effective barrier had arisen between him and Anna. Suddenly, smiling weakly, Izvitsky began stroking his own chest, as if begging its forgiveness. A terrible thought flashed through Anna's mind. "Your self is jealous of me!" she exclaimed.

XV

Izvitsky's sex secret dated far into the past, when he was still "simply" sexual.

At the time, he went through a series of "initiations," mainly involving a woman and a man. But neither one engaged him completely. He sought sex of "his own" that would consume his entire subconscious and not skip a single undercurrent.

Izvitsky believed that the person who mastered his penis mastered the world, because, for Izvitsky, the whole world, everything otherworldly and secret, hung on the thread of sex.

Ultimately, he simply sought an appropriate object for his love. "This monstrous, underground, spiritual, and at the same time sensory energy can't have been aimed just at these insignificant beings," he thought.

Izvitsky cast about among perceptions, including every mechanism of the imagination; he'd populated his bed with every imaginable and unimaginable monster: a gorgon with the poetic gift of Rimbaud; a kind of synthesis of Pure Love and Devil-Bearer; a sexualized Spirit; a snake with soft feminine skin and the soul of Blok. They'd all been there. This reconciled him to life, but nothing more; in parallel, he maintained contacts on an extrasexual, meta- physical level.

His liberation did not come all at once, but rather after secret, mystical shifts in his soul, which, it turned out, were being used by a latent, subconscious, erotic energy. And it all came about in a rather amazingly organic and natural way.

It happened about a year earlier. In the abyss, Izvitsky concentrated on the fact that sexual fury and the depth of its penetration

increased for him as the object of love came closer to his I. In addition, he started noticing that the increasingly frequent, spontaneous touch of his hand to his own skin (whether on his chest or his other arm) evoked a peculiar sexual shudder in him. This sensation had a completely different quality than if his skin had been touched by someone else's (say, a woman's) hand. This shudder held something painfully intimate and immediate, as if a curtain had come crashing down.

Finally, he also saw something strange happening, not only to the sensory, but also to the spiritual object of his love. He was steadily shifting toward what was most subjective and dear to him, that is, ultimately, his own I.

Even before this (but lately especially) he'd often been drawn, even during lovemaking with an ordinary, "real" woman, to somehow place his I (if only partially) in her body. The degree of his arousal depended significantly on the success of this operation. More and more often, he needed either to find himself in the woman or (without this, it didn't work at all) let his imagination commit the forgery.

Now, since these changes, the woman's envelope suddenly and mysteriously slept and behind it he distinctly saw the true object of his love—himself.

The first time this happened (in explicit form) was the morning after a wild and debauched night. His own dear and incredible self had risen up in his imagination, and it was toward this image that his erotic energy had surged. This monstrous ecstasy even made his heart beat faster. "This is it! This is love!" he cried out mentally, nearly collapsing to his knees. "The dearest, closest, most priceless... The one and only... Nothing can compare!"

Looking at himself in the mirror, Izvitsky shuddered. A spasm of black sensuality ran across his face. Instinctively, he touched his cheek and immediately jerked his hand away: his fingers had been penetrated by the heat of superhuman love. They trembled and seemed drawn to drown in his face, to embrace himself from the inside.

"But how can I possess it? How?" flashed through his mind. His body itself, though, singing from the rush of tenderness for himself, seemed to answer that question. His mind clouded over, a shudder passed through his limbs, and he looked with delighted horror at his own hand, which now seemed more desirable and sweeter than the hand of the most refined voluptuary. The quality was different, too. "After all, this is my hand," he moaned, "my skin, mine, mine, not someone else's." The barrier between the subject and object of his love came crashing down; the lover and the loved merged into one; there was no distance between them; the same skin loved and was loved by the same skin; "there is nothing to contrive regarding possession"—shuddered in his soul—"it is always with you...for you and your lover are one and the same."

Naturally, he had to use his imagination to "learn" how to present himself in a sophisticated way as something external. This was the simplest and truest thing, and since then—in his mind—he saw his own individuality whole and all his heat was aimed toward it. Besides, there were additional, no less precious possibilities: a mirror, photography, meditation on unseeable body parts, and, finally, the very peculiar state of pleasure, when he didn't have to present himself at all, and the pure objective reality, eschewing imagination and meditation, seemed to pleasure itself. His existence, his whole body, all its currents, seemed to embrace each other without splitting. This last way he could perform thousands of invisible, gentle, refined, microsexual intimacies with his beloved, with himself, hourly, daily.

As for the method of direct pleasure, Izvitsky immediately envisaged all the possibilities—and not necessarily onanism. Soon after, for example, Izvitsky worked out a secret psychological technique for intercourse with a woman (or a man) whereby she (or he) was only the mechanism for naked pleasure and his passion, imagination, love, and so forth were aimed only at himself.

Thus the turning point came. For a long time, though, Izvitsky was haunted by the specter of effeminacy. Still, no matter how nature

was transformed, it persisted in trying to return to the old channel. Therefore, even an object of love like his own I was frequently arrayed in a female form. More than once, Izvitsky imagined himself in the form of a woman, or at least with sensuously effeminate features. That way it was simpler and more familiar to direct his libido at himself. Even in daily life he tried to "feminize," to soften and smooth his own body. To do this he ate and drank a lot, moved around less, and tried to sleep in a soft bed. He even tried to put a cushion on a chair before sitting down. He noticed with mounting bliss that his shoulders were getting rounder with each passing month, his detested muscles were disappearing, his belly was becoming softer and more sensuous, and here and there on his dear body soft dimples were appearing and intimate pockets of fat. He made a special, almost hysterical effort to soften his skin and turn it into a steady source of sensuality. His hands were already soft and effeminate, as if created for pleasure and caresses.

Eventually, over time, his aspiration to imagine himself in the form of a woman was nearly erased. More often he saw himself directly, in the form he existed in, and this was superior from the standpoint of love for his I, and therefore sweeter. Besides, even his appearance was growing softer and softer, although this was a secondary point, of course. Time took on stormy, inextinguishable tones. His entire existence trembled in a light, endless, sexual shudder, because the burning source of sexual excitation, that is—his own body, was always with him. Amid the crash and din of the warped world, amid the dust, the sirens' wail, and the streams of people, any contact, even accidental, with a bared part of his body caused a spasm in his soul as well as his body. The world was vanishing, as if castrating itself, and his sexual energy was directed inward, enveloping his I with limitless love. Then it was easy and joyful for Izvitsky to pass through this castrated world, which lacked flesh and interest. On the other hand, he was filled with a passion that never left him. He could feel like a lover for days on end. His orgasm was stronger and more outrageous and rocked his soul more than while making love with any woman or man. The awareness

of fleshly union with himself, alone, plus the awareness that he'd finally gained love for the dearest and most eternally priceless thing he'd been given—his orgasm—constituted the ultimate, superhuman frenzy.

When he tired of possession, Izvitsky could look at his reflections in mirrors with infinite tenderness. Every curve of his body tormented him with its inimitable closeness; he wanted to bite into it and smash the mirror. The world wafted an infinite emptiness; so little did Izvitsky notice the women he used from time to time as a mechanism for his lovemaking with himself that their bodies and souls seemed filled with nothing but air. On the other hand, what joy it was to wake up alone in bed and feel your own body's enveloping gentleness, which was yours alone! Every morning, contact with his own skin, his own puffy, rounded little shoulder, aroused a hysterical, sexual cry, as if his own body concealed thousands of outrageous beauties. But—oh, happiness!—these were not alien beings, but his own, his own incomparably dear, unalienated ball of priceless I; more than once, in an ecstatic frenzy, Izvitsky sunk his teeth into his own body. His own eyes followed him at night. Sometimes they held so much love that he was horrified.

Such was the long poem, which had already been going on an entire year. It was in this state of mind that Izvitsky had arrived in Lebedinoye.

XVI

Anna's cry of "Your self is jealous of me!" took Izvitsky by surprise. Making love to himself meant using women as a mechanism, but what happened between him and Anna bore a different stamp. Izvitsky could not view Anna as a mechanism, above all because, even before he found his love for himself, he had experienced a powerful, overwhelming emotion for her. In Lebedinoye, the metastases of these feelings had suddenly revived. Izvitsky sensed the arousal of old, seemingly forgotten emotions, outwardly directed emotions. Their reanimation was facilitated by their ambiguity, as well; after all, Anna was not simply on the outside, she was also incredibly close to him in spirit and wholly from the same circle, the same world, on the inside, in a way. At first, Izvitsky gave himself over wholly to the stream of emotions, but then his feeling for Anna encountered mounting, organic resistance.

Above all, his consciousness (one might even say his supreme I) met this rush of emotion with extreme hostility, as a betrayal. His feelings did seem to split: he saw the possibilities of loving both himself and Anna. Knowing how dangerous it was to let his inner censor suppress an attraction, he decided not to resist his love for Anna. His worries were in vain, though. Over the past year he'd fallen too deeply into love with himself for that emotion to desist for long. Unfailingly, it existed, although at the same time he felt a strong attraction to Anna.

Split in this way, ironizing, almost sniggering at himself, Izvitsky departed Lebedinoye with Anna. But once alone with her, in his room, gripped by her charm, intoxicated, he rushed into her arms, giving himself over wholly to the new attraction. His former feeling suddenly

vanished, only to arise implacably at the most inopportune moment. Kissing Anna, drawing close to her, he suddenly felt a sharp, absurd pity for himself—because his sex was directed not at himself, because he was kissing someone else's shoulder. Simultaneously, a thought flashed through his consciousness about his former unique emotions and sensations. His body slackened and the alien body seemed ridiculous and far away—precisely because it was alien. That was when Izvitsky started laughing and Anna looked at him.

He looked very embarrassed. Anna quickly touched his knees: "Dear." Somewhere she loved him even more than Padov. In that same moment, the terrible thought scorched her, shedding light on all the twists in Izvitsky's former conduct. She asked him, "Am I right?"

Izvitsky submissively bowed his head: "Yes." There could be no other answer. A nervous shudder seized Anna. In fragmentary, but specific words, Izvitsky drew her a picture.

They got up. A while passed in total silence. Anna went into the kitchen to smoke.

"But that's Glubev," she said suddenly after she came back. Izvitsky burst out laughing.

"More likely a distortion of the religion or a sect within it," he replied. "After all, for them love for the I is religious and spiritual in nature."

"Yes, but even religious love has a sexual moment."

"Usually sublimated. And it's only a moment. For me, as you see, it's completely different."

"The spirit can be introduced even into naked sex."

"Naturally. That's no secret to me, of course. It all began when I—independent of everyone—got close to the religion of "I." When you truly—with every fiber, your entire consciousness—sense your I as the sole reality and supreme value, then even sexual energy, subconsciously at first, is naturally aimed at this unique, priceless thing. Nothing else even exists. This is my path. My belief in my I gave the impetus for sex and freed the field for it."

"That's what I thought. Metaphysical solipsism leads to sexual solipsism," Anna interrupted.

"Not always. It's different for the Glubevites."

"Yes." Anna smiled. "As they say, sooner or later asceticism is inevitable. After all, you have to curb this monster inside you. Not only that, the pure Spirit is above eroticism."

"But in my way," Izvitsky continued, "which can be considered drastically sectarian within the limits of the religion of "I," metaphysical worship of one's own I has taken on a purely sexual form. Even my transcendental I is best envisaged in lovemaking. Every touch of my own skin is a prayer, but a prayer to myself."

Izvitsky's eyes had lit up. Anna was incredibly agitated. Deep down, this ego-sex impressed her and she could only welcome it. But, at the same time, she was hurt and a little irritated and she wanted to restore the balance. After all, she'd thought Izvitsky had only recently loved only her. She had to try—almost unconsciously—to seduce Izvitsky.

Somewhere, they got some wine and Anna used all her secret charm. She knew what spiritual intimacy with a woman through their shared, obscurantist worlds meant for people of their circle. She greeted Izvitsky's sexual discovery with silent delight, but as if challenging him to share his victory with her. She charmed Izvitsky with this understanding of his secret for the last time; he was divided and just couldn't tear his gaze from Anna's body, comparing it to his own. She seemed so dear to him that at certain instants he couldn't tell the difference between his own body and hers. She enchanted him with a certain inner similarity.

Then, gently touching her shoulders, he nonetheless, even in his heat, caught that unfathomable, terrible difference, which at that moment, though, affected only his sensations. Unfortunately, there wasn't that absolute sensory unity between the person loved and the person loving that accompanied his own eroticism. It was still as if Anna were behind a kind of curtain.

Little by little, he resurfaced, anticipating deep in his heart that Anna would be unable to gain a victory in this outrageous duel, especially when he completely recovered his senses.

He seemed to see Anna through a fog. Izvitsky was so deep in his own thoughts that he couldn't understand her state of mind. Was she smiling or not?

Finally, they went outside. Suddenly, Izvitsky felt an inchoate desire to possess himself. Even the buildings seemed like projections of his own body.

His previous attraction had triumphed: it was stronger and more real and indissolubly linked with his I, his being.

They stopped at a lonely glass-fronted cafe. Anna was gentle, but in a sad way. The reality of her face tormented him somewhere on the surface now. The question of her existence was still undecided—it had just been set aside—and in his consciousness, his own realities, his own features heated up.

The world's confoundment and duality, which sometimes existed and sometimes didn't, disappeared along with the world itself. Every bite, every touch of himself brought to the fore the totality of his own being and its pulsing sexuality.

Anna smiled, told Izvitsky good-bye, and quietly kissed him on the lips. He watched her go. Suddenly he realized that if Anna hadn't been able to divert him from his new path, then no one could. The only thing left was to plunge into the abyss.

XVII

After a while Izvitsky found himself alone, near an odd, tumbled-down building. Everything had been wiped away except his love for himself. But there was languor and a light weariness in his soul. He wished he could bear himself on wings. He surrounded himself with a swarm of tender mental kisses. An otherworldly, twisting flirtatiousness toward himself was even aroused. He decided to buy himself flowers, to greet himself like a lover.

They were gentle, violet flowers. He took them to a cafe to drink a glass of wine and placed them in front of himself. They seemed to embrace him inside his circle of I. He spent nearly half an hour in a gentle, foretokening lassitude. But the first clouds were already gathering. His blood was bubbling up and his skin was shuddering from self-tenderness. At the same time, visions were foretokened everywhere. His own shadow quickly blocked out the whole world, the whole sun. He wished he could stroke it quietly. By an effort of will, Izvitsky controlled himself. His I-ness flared up in bursts, as if squeezed. Stepping aside, he saw his eyes in the wall, eyes full of noble tears and a prayer. Bending his knees slightly, in his mind, he entered on them, as he would a temple.

The fat lady at the counter was behind a shroud.

"You have to calm down," he whispered to himself. He started back to his table, but his entire being trembled, unable to withstand the passion and languor. "Darling, darling!" he began murmuring, now almost out loud. A light sweat crossed his brow. He sat back down.

"Just so I don't touch myself," he whispered, sipping the wine. "If I do, I'll explode, I'll explode to pieces."

But even the languid bite of the wine, without making him drunk, only aroused a rush of tenderness for his belly. His hand was so drawn—in a soft, almost airy way—to touch the place where the wine's warmth was singing.

Doggedly, he restrained himself. His eyes filled with blood and the desire surged to rip open his belly, pull everything out, and, trembling, kiss it all. His balance was supported by his secret idea of extending, drawing out the present pleasure. He zoned out and found himself for a minute in a kind of emotional emptiness, thanks to which he was able to withstand the first rush.

"Take it easy, you have to take it easy," he babbled then, but his tongue still trembled from desire. "You have to wrap yourself up in the quiet trifles of love for yourself."

He got up, went outside, and boarded a half-empty streetcar, leaving the flowers on the table, like a sculpture of his abortive orgasm. The "trifles" that staved off the end, constantly keeping him at the necessary level, were the various sighs and half-moans that came from deep inside and the fuzzy outlines of his own body in the window—and finally, the overall sensation of his body-self. The nervous anticipation of being pierced by the needle of destruction. Even a visceral, inner laugh cossetted his belly with a fantastic, unbearable caress. Most of all, though, he was afraid of touching his own body. A wild, limitless, world-shattering tenderness for himself rose to his throat, entered his brain, and shuddered in his shoulders. Tears welled in his eyes and his lips quivered. The constant tenderness for himself made his head spin and, at moments, sent him into a half-swoon. Even feeling his upper lip touch his lower aroused him.

"Stop it, stop it"—and he parted his lips, opening his mouth ever so slightly.

To calm down, it was best to close his eyes and sit there without moving. Then, first of all, the world was excluded, even formally, from his field of vision, which was a bonus of tenderness for himself. Secondly, his inner tenderness for some reason became tranquil

and, permeating his entire body with a quiet lassitude, buried him as if in a vessel. Each cell sang of fathomless sympathy of love for himself, but there was no "insanity," no outburst, nor that laugh, all of which were like frenzied, hysterical kisses to his insides.

In this state, immobile, Izvitsky rode through endless streets, until his neck's special tenderness began torturing him. His neck was very feminine, with its I-ish little fat, and through it passed vessels carrying blood to his head, to his "consciousness." It may have demanded this all-devouring tenderness because it was too defenseless from a knife blow, say. Izvitsky couldn't stand it and touched the smoothest, softest part of his neck's nape. He jerked and nearly cried out. It was nearly impossible to sit now. Izvitsky quickly got off at an unfamiliar stop. The murderous attraction to himself, the desire to sink his teeth in, to plunge his hands into himself, as if he were the sole, fathomless universe, blocked out his consciousness. The change of setting revived him a little. Izvitsky looked at the world and all of a sudden he saw himself walking straight toward him from around the corner, slightly hunched, with trembling hands and arms wide open. He made a dash for himself, but realized he was already there. The vision vanished, but the world seemed filled with I-ness.

"Zhenichka, Zhenichka, stop it," he said, trying to calm himself. His mind clouded over and, formally, he admitted he should go home, to his hovel. He made his way on foot, down a street filled with the nonexistent. Parts of his own body floated out from behind all the buildings, bushes, and cars. Voluptuous, bared, with mind-bogglingly transparent skin, they looked like his own dear heart floating through the world, a heart he wanted to kiss all over. He reached out to warm them with his hands, the warmth of his own palms. "Kidder," flashed in his mind and he grinned.

Finally, the objects disappeared.

Except for the super-pampered, almost maidenly, barely visible part of his inner thigh, which took a long time to disappear, as if begging

for a kiss. It would appear in building windows, then right in the sky. Finally, it, too, disappeared.

A while passed in total absence.

Then, all of a sudden, straight out of a dark corner, his own head poked out, its mouth wide open. It stuck out its tongue and seemed to wink its frozen eye.

Izvitsky realized that he shouldn't let himself get sidetracked anymore, that this was asking for it. As the saying goes, there can be too much of a good thing. He managed to stop himself; he directed his love toward his own I as a whole.

Now he wholly sensed what was visible as a continuation of himself, or rather, as his own shadow: the shadow of his own finite and unique individuality. Only sometimes, as if from without, his unique, no longer dismembered image would appear in a halo and frequently in unearthly, vanishing colors. He tried to catch himself, only suddenly to discover with tenderness and joyous horror the presence of his own dear I inside, and his chest would swell from the exorbitant, universal triumph. The visible was becoming blacker and blacker, as if impenetrable night were gripping it, but a sun—his own I—was beating inside and fawning over itself all the more so. Inside, pure, naked, ineradicable "subjectivity" howled. Izvitsky sent kisses into the air, trying to inhale them. A few times he stopped to lean against a "tree."

The tenderness of his skin seeped into his blood, spreading to his heart and brain. This tenderness was so great, it seemed as though this skin could peel away as easily as a bit of fluff and appear before his eyes in the air, where it could be squeezed and kissed like a child without pain or moan.

His languid eyes hurt from the needlessness of the world that would occasionally surface.

He didn't notice that he was already home and "looking" out the window. A light entered him like a planet: his dear, shining, unattainable I, mysterious, infinite, and solely real amid this whole stirring garbage heap of quasi-oblivion. He saw "above his own head" what

looked like a stream of stars, the tip of his immortal I, "departing" his body as if from its warm bed. He was drawn to penetrate this dear, spiritual I with his penis, enveloping it in a fountain of sperm, drowning it in bliss and a unique, shuddering caress—because it was his I. And he felt that this pure, detached I, this center, was blazing from tenderness and responding to his caress.

Also wrapped in bliss, contracting and pulsing, was his own individuality, his soul, dear and unique, mysteriously and delightfully connected to his I.

His body shuddered, too, with the unending, inwardly penetrating shudder of self-love, because it, too, his body, was also dedicated to his I, as if soaked with its immortal I-spray. All this—the pure I, his soul and body—inasmuch as they were his, comprised a single, unique synthesis, an emanating howl at the summit of which shone his eternal I. He didn't understand whether he was praying or in an Ecstasy of Love.

Somewhere over the edge, his transcendental I, dear, covert, and gentle, flickered, an inscrutable band; and a black and superhuman spume of pounding sperm seemed to rush at him.

His soul uttered a cry, a single cry.

For seconds, he saw himself first approaching out of the dark depth, then soaring in the sky, then hurtling toward the stars, then voluptuously naked and twisting. Suddenly, so near and dear that tears practically mixed with blood fell from his eyes, his soul shuddered, kissing itself. For seconds, as he fell into oblivion, he felt his touch on himself, especially the gently rounded belly of his own body. His belly sank in on itself and his soul emerged and came toward him, rising, kissing the feet of the supreme I, sending delightful, fleshly waves of self-love. And in his I, his own dear I, an answering moan of the same self-love rang out, going deep inside, into infinity. Spume-covered lips touched his own lips.

"My darling, my darling," he whispered suddenly, as if embracing his own back, and his body collapsed into itself, as if into a bottomless but dear abyss.

His self-feeling, caressing itself, howled from pleasure.

Suddenly, somewhere, a monstrous, long, and kissing moan came forth, and then a stream, and he saw himself illuminated by a light both rising into the sky and immortally dear, never leaving him.

"You will be eternal, beloved!" he shouted at the sky. "Eternal."

And exhausted, he fell to the floor.

XVIII

After leaving everyone, Fyodor spent a few days with Ipatievna and then headed for Moscow. Even Klavenka—his sister—didn't interest him anymore. His stony face had shifted and, deep down, one could see an awful, final inspiration. He cautiously avoided even quiet, insinuating little girls.

The area of Moscow where Fyodor ended up was as charming as the foot of hell. To one side, along the hills, barracks clung to each other, as if in an obscene, filthy sexual caress. The small trees buried in between seemed to have gone mad long ago. To Fyodor's left, identical new box-houses advanced on the barracks in endless, idiotically formed rows. This was spoiled Moscow, a corrupted district.

Fyodor took moderate pleasure in inhaling the smells of perversion. He had come to the city to fulfill his growing new desire: to kill all the "metaphysicals," i.e., Izvitsky, Anna, Padov, and Remin.

He had various addresses in his pocket. His soul was filled with a brain-killing, mesmerizing joy, and when it cut through to his consciousness, he howled. He howled, gazing at an outside world that had been rocked for him, like a world receding into the beyond.

He boarded a streetcar headed to the far end of the barracks and, dumbfounding the conductor with his excessively deadly gaze, took a ticket, stepped aside, and ate the ticket as he dimly surveyed the impassable gray space in the distance.

The reason for his murderous desire was his mounting, stormy need to break through to the otherworldly.

Or, in other words, to act in accordance with his own internal state, which apparently had no name in human language. The "metaphysicals" were the answer to his mystery. "There's no one else but them to kill," Fyodor muttered, smiling to himself. "The rest are dead as is."

Still, he could express to himself the realized part of his state of mind only vaguely and awkwardly, and there were gaps. (The rest was forever buried to man.) He hazily thought that killing these highly spiritual, one might even say spirit-filled people would solve a mystery, perhaps the mystery of the soul's existence, and interrupt the world's sleep and precipitate a shift into the beyond. This was why—he had to do it to it, to the spirit itself!— Fyodor was so drawn right now to do his own, Sonnov thing. "This was what the sacrifices were for. I'll be plunging my knife into the very soul...the very heart," Fyodor repeated. He envisioned something happening to him after this act, something so significant and incredible that he would find himself somewhere between worlds. Sometimes at these visions, his head would turn upward, skyward, cold drops of sweat would sink into his body, and his eyes would well up with what was missing, even at the bottom of his I.

He somehow still perceived the envelope of this inner state, which was the basic reason for his desire to destroy his unusual friends, but there was also a black series of parallel, bizarre, latent, sometimes secondary sensations and even emotions that went along with his need.

At times, cursorily, in an incoherent, almost subconscious form, he had thoughts of seeing suddenly, during the killing itself, that the soul was an illusion and all his activities were just a terrible pastime, but in return, a hole would open up to another reality and he would see that his soul was merely a detected field, a crumpled, twisted ray of some unfathomable, almost incomprehensible, and unapproachable reality. And he was only chasing shadows.

At times, to the contrary—again subconsciously, lifting his previous feeling, but holding it inside—arose the grandeur of this future killing, its supernatural significance, and it seemed as though this unprecedented feeling could envelop any covert reality.

Simultaneously, more touching and even slightly childish feelings swarmed his insides, as if winding around everything awful, everything Sonnov. He was overcome with emotion when he imagined Anna falling to the ground and "being smart" in a pool of blood.

An even tenderer emotion came over him when he imagined their corpses, which hitherto he couldn't gaze upon without tenderness. And he had a foretaste of his own, almost reverential, religious mood.

He saw himself in white.

At times—in his emotion—everything was blocked out by one thing: majesty and more majesty.

But all this was a mere puff of smoke and did not block out the main thing, the Sonnov thing.

XIX

Fyodor rode in a streetcar, approaching a section of barracks that was filthy, but had some stunted vegetation. He needed to see a certain quiet person he'd known for a long time, immediately, on a practical matter. From above, the streetcar seemed to have a circle of meager houses with black holes instead of eyes strewn around it, and from these holes emerged crumpled people, definitely not in their right mind. Fyodor got off at the "square" and, looking around at a gnarled pole, wandered toward a low-slung barrack. Clouds roved the skies, like reflections of his thoughts.

In the barrack hallway, he was greeted by a howl, an apocalyptic crash of plates hurled at rats, and a frighteningly mute guffaw. A little girl masturbating on a hobby horse crept out of the kitchen. His soul numb, Fyodor knocked at the far door by a dark window. The room he entered was quite large; a bald, middle-aged man with an angular face and wearing a sweater greeted Fyodor delightedly, raising both his heavy arms and jumping up from his chair.

The three other people sitting in the corners didn't move a muscle. Fyodor pushed the bald man aside and sat down at the table, which was covered with a cloth as white as angel's blood. The bald man sat right down next to him and, as if nothing had happened, continued what he'd been doing: throwing a huge, sinister knife at the floor. A large woman standing by the wall stirred. Near her, a pale little man played cards by himself on the floor, spitting at will. A powerfully sluggish fellow with thinning hair and the languid, pimply face of a murderer started going around to all the houseplants on the windowsills, sniffing

them attentively and aloofly. Thus, some time passed. Fyodor floated off into infinity. Finally, the large woman walked over to the table with her hands folded on her chest, looked at Fyodor, and started laughing in a wild, horsey voice.

Fyodor was suddenly embarrassed by this flirting and even blushed a little: at times, Sonnov could be as pure and timid as a child.

The woman looked at him steadily with her sewery, but at the same time amazingly bright, all-encompassing eyes. Another moment and she might've raped Fyodor. Even her breasts felt like weapons of violence. But the powerfully sluggish man walked over to her, cautiously put his paw on her shoulder, and said something. The woman sat down on a chair, aiming her gaze at the half-garbage heap, half-glade visible out the gray window.

Fyodor stood up, nodded at the door to the man with the murderer's face, and walked toward the exit. As he was passing, he stopped and, in an amiably absent way, pulled the large woman's nose.

The bald man was still throwing the knife at the floor.

Fyodor found himself outside the room with the "murderer," at the end of the hallway, by the dark window. They discussed something for seven or ten minutes. Then Fyodor put his paw around the "murderer's" neck, waved, and walked to the exit.

A bright, earthly world met him with kind, chirping sounds and sky. Looking into the distance, Fyodor began to hobble toward the streetcar. Soon after, the streetcar was slowly rolling past the uniform house-boxes. A filthy cry reached Fyodor's hearing from far away. Strangely enough, the same stinking-eternal life stirred here in these extremely close houses as in the barracks. But against this backdrop of total facelessness, it seemed even more abnormal and lost. The contamination of the "boxes," which had only begun, lent certain places individual nuances.

Finally, Sonnov reached the old part of Moscow.

Fyodor got off at a small, deserted summer cafe. Sipping juice indifferently, he thought his own thoughts. His thoughts went far, far away, into

the trans-existent; his own consciousness felt lonely, slightly odd, and, albeit his own, mysteriously unknown, like a Martian wind; Fyodor actually thought of himself as a Martian voyager. He indifferently pinched his legs, as if they were a table. His state of mind was leading him on, toward killing the "metaphysicals." He had completely discarded any thought of outer consequences; he didn't care what happened to him afterward, whether they arrested or destroyed him; the only thing that interested him was this new, all-encompassing killing, his ultimate achievement, after which everything on earth would be third-rate and he, himself, might well move off into a new form of being; therefore, all the precautions he'd taken when preparing for his old and, as it now seemed to him, "petty" killings, were irrelevant.

Formally, he decided to use two addresses that he'd learned by chance, from conversations with Padov and Anna: Izvitsky's Moscow apartment, one-room and neglected, where he lived alone; and the other, Padov's "nest" just outside Moscow, where, as he'd heard, the "metaphysicals" should have taken shelter right about now. The latter especially attracted Fyodor: he was drawn to committing his act at once, with a single blow. But after thinking it over, he decided first to wander over to Izvitsky's and then make a dash for the Padov "nest."

Fyodor dragged himself inhumanly past the old apartment buildings on the deserted Arbat lanes. He kept stopping to gaze into the emptiness. He looked closely at the barely apparent figures of people and squinted at the windows, which glimmered in indifference.

The entrance to Izvitsky's apartment was on a Petersburg-esque courtyard: small, cold, squeezed between the hulks of seven-story stone buildings, yet disgracefully and hideously befouled by a dead, grayly disappearing and nonetheless stinking garbage heap.

The stairs, with lifeless gaps on the sides, led steeply up and through the service door, apparently. Here and there he saw dirty, ripped-off apartment doors and heard faint voices, but Fyodor knew this was the only way to Izvitsky's room. He panted as he climbed, and his eye kept catching the light from what were either windows or cracks; when

there was total darkness, he turned his head to the side at a barely audible, soft command; his knife was absurdly loose in his pocket.

Finally, at the very top, a light shone through a crack; the cold and dull trembling in his heart told Fyodor that this was Izvitsky's apartment. A strange languor came over him; there was sweat on his face, but deep inside he heard singing; objective reality rose up inside him and he sensed what surrounded him as death, the beyond. Fyodor saw that the door was ajar and, as if pressing up to the emptiness, he peeked in. What he saw astonished him: a corner of the room absurdly cluttered with half-old-timey, half-futuristic things; an enormous mirror that seemed to pull things into itself; in front of it, a ripped, Voltaire armchair; and in that chair, Izvitsky, in a frenzied pose, gazing at himself in the mirror. Fyodor shrank, sensing the impossible. Mechanically, he took out his knife and suddenly he heard moans, deep, endless moans that seemed to emanate from a self-enamored abyss. Fyodor froze, staring at the reflection, and couldn't move.

Izvitsky's eyes, wide open, suffused with an awful revelation that scared Izvitsky himself, point-blank, unwavering, stared at the exact same wide open eyes of his double. Fyodor had a good view of everything. Izvitsky's two faces shuddered in the ineffable caress they flung at each other; the skin of his face relaxed in tenderness; only his eyes, looking at each other, about to jump out of their orbits, were still, and in them froze a self-tenderness, a horror before the I, and the insanity of the superhuman cataclysm. Izvitsky's face and his entire half-naked body expressed a never-ending sensuality, the raving of self-ecstasy, and a fear of himself, all mingled with awe at the impending orgasm and an impulse to fling himself at his own reflection. His hair was tousled; his hand reached for his double and, when they met, the two hands trembled from arousal, prepared to penetrate themselves and drown each other in tenderness. His entire body seemed to be gushing sperm and shuddering in a continuous, spontaneous orgasm, as if all his skin, each of its millions of pores, had turned into the tip of a penis. The moans from the two faces moved toward each

other. The mirror was cold and imperturbable, like the world. From the corner, it reflected the terrible portrait of Dostoevsky, his fixed gaze full of suffering.

All of a sudden, Izvitsky rushed toward himself, into the abyss; his face fell on its own reflection and his body bent over; lips twitched and started kissing lips; a whisper crept through the whole space: "my darling, my darling, my love"; a nervous shudder of sensuality passed over his damp cheek; his eyebrows curved as if a sick angel had run an invisible hand across them; and his eyes were closed like a corpse in a fit of passion. From behind, Fyodor had a good view of his sensuous neck nervously trembling, sweating, curving at every little fold. At that moment, Fyodor instinctively moved to plunge his knife into that neck, but suddenly an incredible, infinite languor overtook and paralyzed him. At the thought of interrupting this inexpressibly sensuous, gentle, infinitely swimming-in-itself act of self-love, pity struck him like thunder. He had never experienced even a weak semblance of that kind of pity for anyone, even himself.

As soon as he understood the essence of what was happening before him, it felt like a miracle, an explosion; if Izvitsky had been romping with a lover or someone else, Fyodor would have put an end to both of them without a second thought, but killing a man who loved himself so much, who loved ferociously, to the point of derangement, to tears—that would mean interrupting a life that was monstrously self-in-love, representing for itself not only a supreme value, but also an absolute. Who could raise a hand against that? All this flashed through Fyodor's brain in a flash, in a single comprehensive thought; he couldn't kill a being that loved itself so ferociously and pathologically. That would mean touching something new, unprecedented, painfully otherworldly, and too super-dear for himself.

Fyodor imagined how horrifically unimaginable it would be for this being to say good-bye to his dear, infinite self, if only for a moment, especially in that moment of ferocious orgasm for himself; he imagined that, dying, this person would lick his own blood, like sperm, like flowing pleasure, and cry tears that would turn the world upside down.

Meanwhile, the knife flashed in Fyodor's hand and reflected in the depth of the mirror, near the Dostoevsky portrait. But Izvitsky, swallowed up with passion for himself, didn't notice. Like a huge, otherworldly toad, he crept over the mirror, trying to embrace his own reflection. Fyodor shuddered and dropped the knife into his pocket, frightened by its murderous touch; now he feared interrupting this outrageous act, even for a second. Afraid of himself, his own unexpected outburst and a possible blow against this shuddering body, he inched backward and quietly passed unnoticed through the door. He stood there without stirring for a couple of minutes, breathing into the stone. Then, stealthily looking around at the emptinesses, he started down the dark stairs.

Suddenly, from the room he'd just left—the door was ajar— Fyodor heard a cold, abstract, inhuman laugh that seemed to come from the enormous, unimaginably ripped armchair. The memory of this laugh haunted Fyodor to the end of his journey down the entire dark staircase, with its endless turns and gaps. Evidently, it was all over and Izvitsky was "relaxing," gazing at himself in the mirror.

Distinguishing nothing, frothing, Fyodor ran outside. But his previous, omnipotent state of mind—for killing those incredible individuals he'd met—did not leave him. All of him howled at the contradiction. This was incomparably more important than the break with Mikhei, whom he didn't even pity. This was another terrible, profound break; his own otherworldliness had been countered by another, no less powerful otherworldliness, whose fluids penetrated him. In a rage, Fyodor decided to rush on straightaway and leave Moscow proper for Padov's nest, in order to catch them all—Padov, Anna, and Remin—and carry out his intention at long last.

XX

Alyosha Khristoforov had not been himself for several days now because his papa, his dear papa, had gone missing. Indeed, Alyosha, whom Padov had had so much trouble finding, soon after went to abandoned Lebedinoye to collect "Andrei Nikitich." At first, all went well. Alyosha did have trouble, but found the lifeless cock-corpse in an out-of-the-way spot, on the stove-bench; holding his hand, like a dead idol, Alyosha managed to lead him to the Sonnov house, where only the filthy cat remained, which, not finding Mikhei's empty place, was licking posts. Alyosha put his papa to bed beside him, on the nearby couch, though the cock-corpse appeared to fight the air limply. Matters were further complicated in the morning, when Andrei Nikitich's impatient followers, whom Andrei Nikitich had taught in the spirit of Christianity and universal love, were supposed to come, anxious as they were over Andrei Nikitich's long absence. Naturally, Alyosha had no hope of any communication; he realized this immediately from the cock-corpse's lifelessly arrogant face, which didn't even hold senselessness, and from his absolute silence. He didn't even try to tell his father what was wrong; all his thoughts were aimed at somehow outfoxing and scaring off the young Christians thirsting for salvation. Making matters even worse, the young people already suspected something was wrong and presumed Alyosha was hiding his father, so they were feeling quite bellicose.

Early in the morning, Khristoforov was awakened by a bastardly brazen knock at the door; hastily, wearing just his nightshirt, he opened the door and was struck dumb. Before him were several of Andrei Nikitich's followers.

"What did you want to talk to him about?" Alyosha said clumsily.

"What do you mean?" one of the youths said, affronted. "Our theme: God is love. We've been waiting for this conversation for two months."

At that moment, far back in the hall, the cock-corpse's disgraceful dead face appeared for an instant; the youths joyfully shouted something, but Alyosha, frightened and desperate, dazedly slammed the door in front of them. The youths let up a howl and Alyosha rushed to his papa, who wasn't reacting to what was going on, utterly oblivious to everything around him. Alyosha rushed back to the door the youths were pounding on. A noisy, psychopathic scene played out, bringing nearly all the inhabitants running from the yard, and a tousled Alyosha beat his chest. Once everything was relatively calm, Alyosha rushed to see his father, but the cock-corpse was nowhere to be found—not in the building and not in the surrounding area. A police search didn't help. In a clamor, Alyosha rushed around Moscow, from one priest to another, from one friend to a third. Finally, learning that the Padovites had gone back to their old nest, twenty kilometers from Moscow, Alyosha hurried there, expecting to learn something about his father from Padov and Anna.

The Padovites' nest sheltered on the edge of a settlement, near a fairly deserted road. It was a small, one-story house, crooked and tilting, covered with something that was either grass or bushes. The house had just one big room, but there were various outbuildings nearby; one window had been knocked out slantwise; a second had been blocked up for some reason.

Khristoforov positively flew into the house; the room was dark and two candles shone on the people sitting on the floor: Padov, Remin, Anna, Igoryok, and two others, Sashenka and Vadimushka, very young novices Padov had brought in order to foster young growth. Their almost childish pink faces had relaxed from delight in the murky candlelight. Apparently, someone had just been wailing. At the same time, the words of a famous schizoid song were heard:

"And seeing himself in the portrait, my goat picked up the clap..."

Without stopping to take a breath, Khristoforov started shouting, "My father! I've lost my father! Papa!"

"The cock-corpse?" Padov said sleepily.

"Not the cock-corpse! My father!" Alyosha shrieked, approaching the wall.

"All right, calm down, tell us about it," Remin mumbled.

"The Lord lost his Heavenly Father, too, for a while, but later, they say, he found Him," Anna put in, unable to restrain herself.

A few minutes later, in some strange, incomprehensible way, the conversation about the loss of the cock-corpse jumped to God.

"I don't accept it! I don't!" Padov screeched. "I don't want to be created; I want to be the Creator of myself; if there is a Creator, then I want to destroy that dependence and not piss and moan over it ecstatically."

Anna got up from the corner; her face was burning.

"Our creatureness may be an illusion; this, in essence, is faith. One can say for sure only that we don't seem to know where we came from; therefore, we have the right, just as you who believe in the Creator do, to believe in the idea—for this is preferable to us—that we come from ourselves and don't owe our life to anyone but ourselves. All in I and all for I!"

But Khristoforov was already stamping his feet.

"I don't want to hear this. Give me back my father!" He dashed around the room like a shadow, from corner to corner, scattering some rags lying on the floor; Sashenka and Vadimushka, their jaws dropped like two young jackdaws, watched him curiously.

"You're the ones who drove my father crazy!" Khristoforov shouted. "Before you, he was quiet and a believer, and you made an idiot of him."

"Such are our Christians," Padov sniggered, doubled over from a visceral delight. "Latched onto rationalism right away. Madman... Sick man... Medicine... Where are the doctors?" he taunted. "But he doesn't get it that doctors aren't even in the picture."

"You've hit the nail on the head," Remin chimed in. "All this pseudo-Christianity is too rational for our consciousness. Ultimately, it's just not absurd enough for us."

"I don't want to hear this!" Khristoforov screamed. "You turned my father into an idiot."

"If, of course, you call anyone not in this world an idiot," Igoryok squeaked in reply.

They finally calmed Khristoforov down, at which point he burst into sobs. "Forgive me," he mumbled awkwardly.

"You do see, Alyosha, that this has nothing to do with us." Anna was moved. "Who knows what might happen to any of us?"

"But we still believe in our I, in its immortality and victory over the world," Remin interjected heatedly. "There's nothing else to believe in, let alone to love."

"What's happened to you?" Khristoforov said, as if suddenly waking up from his grief. "You haven't become Glubevites, have you?"

He was half-right.

After he left Lebedinoye, Remin had rushed to seek out a meeting with the Glubevites and ultimately found who he'd been looking for. He spent a few days in their company and went from there to Padov's nest—where Anna (after her story with Izvitsky) had already been joyfully welcomed—transformed, disheveled, and gripped by a surge of faith in the religion of "I." Here he had infected everyone with his rapture; this outburst was probably just what they'd been waiting for, or else too much love for the I and too great a thirst for its eternity and immortality had built up in their souls. Even Padov, as much as his powers and capabilities allowed, had tamed his negative forces.

So Khristoforov had put his finger on it. At the mention of the religion of "I," Anna, Padov, Remin, and even Igoryok let up a howl, putting the youths, Sashenka and Vadimushka, who were sitting side by side, on their guard.

Staggering, Remin moved toward the window. The distorted light picked out his white face; something seemed to move in the corners, but the old vodka bottles and messy rags on the floor were lifeless.

"Our I is the sole reality and the supreme value," Remin began. "One must not only believe in its immortality and absoluteness, one

must not only love one's own I with an infinite spiritual love, but one must attempt to realize this supreme I in life—to live it, to experience pleasure from it, to turn everything around one hundred eighty degrees—and then the world will be transformed into a flock of shadows. Everything creaturelike and independent in us will vanish, and God—that concept makes sense only if it's not distinct from the I…" Remin was gasping for breath. "To live in the I, to live by the new spirituality."

It felt as if everyone was rushing about inside themselves, toward themselves, as if Anna's hands were stretching upward, and the air seemed to tremble from these secret desires and this outburst of salvation. Khristoforov alone was grimly silent.

Glancing quickly at him, Anna suddenly felt an organic superiority; unable to contain herself, bending over slightly, so this feeling of superiority, its trembling, would run through her entire body, she sat down next to Khristoforov and tenderly stroked his hand; he had the feeling that somewhere behind him, in the corner, a sewer rat was starting to keen.

"One detail, Alyosha. One detail," Anna whispered, plunging Khristoforov into her eyes. "I want to tell you about the delectation of solipsism. Moreover, this is a special, unusual solipsism. So you see, Alyosha"—she stroked Khristoforov—"you will never know, you understand…never, what a pleasure it is to consider yourself not just the center of the world, but the sole existing thing. There is nothing else…a shadow… not even a shadow. It's as if it weren't there. What ecstasy this is, what self-affirmation. No brilliance or devotion can compare. Only think, get used to it, face this fact: there is nothing but me, myself." Anna's nostrils started trembling sensitively from pleasure. Khristoforov winced in disgust. "What ecstasy this is! What a mystery! What an embrace! The feeling of the world disappearing before the sun of my I! Nothing but myself! You have to feel this in its entirety, with every cell, every minute of existence, live and tremble at this. The more absurd the absurd is, the truer. After all, my I is above everything, and it doesn't give a damn. Phooey to the world, the I is everything."

Padov was shaking from ecstasy; in the dust and shadows of this strange, huge room, he crept toward Anna and Khristoforov.

"Solipsism—what a word." Padov sniggered viscerally. "Really, Annulya, there's something slimy, secret, and twisted in the word itself. Sexual even."

Anna started laughing.

"I can just imagine. Two solipsists in bed, he and she." Anna winked at Padov. "Not bad: love between two big fat solipsists."

Padov let up a howl and reached out to her with both hands. "Sister!" Smacking his lips, he made this twisting sexual phrase all syrupy: "Big fat solipsist!"

Khristoforov jumped up. He couldn't take it anymore. The picture of kissing solipsists rose before him like a nightmare. He forgot he had ever loved Anna and was gripped by a purely transcendental horror. Pushing away a stool, Khristoforov headed for the exit.

"What about your dear papa!" Padov screamed after him.

But Khristoforov had already slammed the door. He was greeted by rain, wind, and a hiding sun.

Meanwhile, in Padov's nest, the mystery of the belief in I continued, fired up over their bared souls.

But the old, dark forces of opposition and resignation suddenly revived in Padov.

"Gentlemen!" he announced. "It's good, you're aspiring to the immortal, eternal I that is in you. There are different I's in a person. The whole problem is which I you're aspiring to! There is an I on the level of the Brahmin, a God in itself, an Absolute; there is an I on the level of divinities; there is, finally, a pseudo-I, the ego, an illusion, and there is another... Let's just say—I'm not arguing—but you may find, say, within the confines of Hinduism, the correct path to the supreme I, a path to the God who is inside you and who is indistinguishable even from the Brahmin, from the Absolute; and say this supreme I of yours, this God, does turn out to be your genuine, real I, at which point the detested alienation of the I from God will fall away and the duality will collapse. Or maybe you'll arrive

at this eternal I within the limits of the Glubev religion, which is even more radical than Hinduism and which follows somewhat different paths. ...Maybe... But look: what if I want to send it all into the Abyss—this I, and absolute reality, and Nirvana, and God, and even the God who is in me and who is my supreme I—if I want to reject all that? What would you say? Of course, this is all wonderful, as is immortality, human longing, and hope. But I hear the call of an abyss. Not only that, I'm an eternal negativist, a denier. Finally, another point: what if another principle appears?" Remin started laughing by the window.

"So what do you propose?" he began. "What? The Abyss? That could drive you mad! The main thing is that love does exist, love for this eternal I of yours! After all, your love for it, your striving to possess it in all its eternity—that's what this is about! It's more than likely you don't have a total, definitive love for your supreme I, if you're drawn by senseless abysses or simple denial. No, no, everything has to be aimed at what you love, at your own immortal I: your faith, your impulse, your metaphysical knowledge, all of it. And then, utilizing ancient methods, knowledge, and meditation, we can plainly and practically acquire eternity; all the curtains will come crashing down and the otherworldly will cease to be otherworldly."

Suddenly, there was a rustling and a squeak, and out from behind a torn, ragged table crawled young Sashenka. His lips were quivering. He didn't really understand the main thread of this conversation, of course, for his thoughts moved only in one direction.

"What if you don't have the patience?" he shouted in an inhumanly shrill voice. "What if you don't have the patience? I, for one, can't do this anymore...wait for death and what's there, behind the curtain! My nerves are shot. Rip it, rip that curtain—make it obvious, so that everyone has access, not just the few—so the then-perceptible otherworldly world becomes ordinary, a part of our very selves!" he exclaimed, his whole body shaking.

"So the barrier comes crashing down... So everything merges together... And then, then"—inwardly it was as if he rejoiced—"everything

will change. Humanity will be freed from all earthly nightmares; famine, war, and fear of death will lose their meaning; and the prison of the state will collapse, for it is powerless before the spiritual world. Everything will be overturned."

"Whoa, someone got carried away"—Anna smiled— "into a little social theory. Well, write that off to youth. You could organize a party called Beyond the Grave. Its program and goal: to rip the curtain... with all the ensuing consequences. After all, up until now everyone's been trying to do the opposite, Sashenka, to protect humanity from knowledge of the otherworldly. I'm afraid your impulse would lead to the replacement of earthly nightmares with other, more fundamental ones. Actually, it all makes sense."

But no one reacted to all her mumbling and everyone defended and excused the young one; not only Sashenka's excessive outburst, but his very appearance: still a boy, with wandering eyes aimed at the unknown, elicited in everyone a vision of their own beyond.

The air was again filled with inscrutable, hysterically inspired ghosts and a guffaw that was viscerally otherworldly, as if barking at itself—Padov's guffaw. All this intermingled with currents and spasms of love for the I, with a pathological desire to self-assert in eternity, and with a vision of one's own I—in the halo of the Absolute.

It was just the time not to make room...but the soul somehow put up with it all. Only Sashenka and Vadimushka suddenly couldn't stand it and asked to go home. Igoryok led them out the gates.

"The individual must accept the burden of birth and the burden of the beyond!" he shrieked to them in parting.

Vadimushka's face was even a little joyful.

Night was falling. Only Padov, Anna, and Remin were left in the nest. Igoryok, too, had gone.

XXI

Fyodor observed all this through his crack. There were so many nearby niches in Padov's nest that it was no trouble to keep watch nearby, in anticipation.

"Wipe them out; they're beyond our grasp... They have to be wiped out," Fyodor had mumbled as he made his way down the darkening path toward Padov's building that evening, climbing in a window and passing through various holes. His soul led him on, into the beyond; every tree swaying in the wind looked like a scarf waved from the other world; every ledge and every object seemed to wink its torturedly inhuman eyes without moving. Fyodor thought of Anna, her laugh and smile; he thought about Padov's metaphysical jerking. Grinning, he recalled Remin's poem about him.

The previously described stormy discussion between the inhabitants and Khristoforov slowly entered into his soul. Safely sheltered close by, he took his time, waiting for his moment. Anna's disemboweled belly floated in his imagination, and her cry, too: "I... I... I... To eternity! Eternity!" He imagined Remin's poetic little head, perfectly still in self-love, cut off and vainly trying to kiss itself with its tongue. "A ball. Make it a soccer ball!" Fyodor muttered furiously, clutching the doorjamb. He saw himself in the clearing in front of Padov's nest, wearing just a tee-shirt and no pants, sweatily chasing Remin's dead head, as if it were a soccer ball. "A ball, make it a soccer ball," he keened. "And kick it, kick it through the goalposts of eternity."

Padov was a special matter; Fyodor just wanted to strangle him with his bare hands, as he looked into the man's eyes—so a wheeze would issue not only from his red mouth, but also from his soul, his nightmarish soul, filled with unimaginable horror, asking itself pathologically unanswerable questions. He imagined himself covered with that soul, like a black veil, and running out of the building like a bull, blind—onward, onward, into the unknown!

Fyodor did not experience all this in words, but in inexpressible thought-states, understanding it all in his own way. Like an enormous idol, he shifted back and forth, nearly hopping, listening to the wheeze and muttering in the next room.

Gradually, though, a languid and otherworldly unction enveloped his soul. He began to think he'd partially found what he was looking for in the very souls of the "metaphysicals," in their existence. He squinted stinkily at every word Padov aimed at the "main thing." This contact gave him almost the same feeling as killing did.

Unexpectedly, it slightly diminished his desire to kill; on the other hand, the desire mounted and strengthened even more specifically, so he could resolve the paradox and realize himself no matter what happened.

Fyodor cautiously heeded this on-rushing contradiction and shuddered slightly, afraid of failure; but then he felt that the dead joy from the Padovites' existence would only lead to the desire for an identical, but even more morbidly supreme joy from killing them (one tension being replaced by another, even more catastrophic).

Still, he couldn't shake the temptation to keep on feeling them alive; because no matter what they said, especially now, for some reason, before their impending deaths, he continued to sense them as something otherworldly but present among the living; and there was nothing more otherworldly than to turn them into the otherworldly, that is, kill them; in part that was how Fyodor would've liked to see the whole world.

But only in part. Even here, the curtain still had to be ripped.

Meanwhile, Fyodor heard Sashenka and Vadimushka leave; Igoryok, too; and Khristoforov had fled even earlier.

This brought the practical implementation of his plan closer: it would've been hard to kill so many people, even in a sophisticated way. Now there were only three left: Anna, Padov, and Remin. But they were the main ones. And night was falling.

Fyodor's soul cast about, in search of an appropriate death. At first, it occurred to him to burn them alive at night, as they slept, when visions were rising to their throats—especially since there was hay nearby, in a shed.

Fire! Fire! Right now, that suited his soul. The drawback to this method was that he couldn't gaze into their dying eyes and sate himself with their looks. Therefore, it made sense to use an axe—also while they slept. Ultimately, after killing the first two at once, he would kill just one—better Padov! He could caress him, start a conversation with him, even kiss him before the murder.

Fyodor didn't know which to choose.

Meanwhile, Anna, Remin, and Padov were alone in the room. For the most part, they were silent, each in a different corner; occasionally muted moans, sighs, and fragmentary words skipped between them.

Anna stood up and, like a pale, self-filled ghost, walked over to the window to drink. Remin was wailing softly: he'd seen his own, dear I leaving his body and wandering in divided worlds. His I glowed with an unprecedented I-ish light, expanding like a star, like the Universe...and all the wild, imaginable monsters vanished, dissolving in its rays. His I, identical to pure spirit, kept expanding and there was no end to its triumph. But was this the limit?

Fyodor stirred silently in the next room; he could feel these states of mind breathing; he hefted the big, rusty ax.

"Only eternity! Eternity!" Padov exclaimed, reaching out toward himself and the heavens.

It was as if the barriers on the path to trans-human consciousness had come down.

Though he wasn't sure why, Sonnov waited, holding the ax.

Anna wept in her corner.

She was pierced by gnostic pity for herself; in form, Anna actually saw her I—at least outwardly—in a more human guise; she was a little girl roaming in an inscrutable hell-heaven, a little girl playing hide-and-seek with the Unattainable.

"Immortality! Immortality! Right now!" Anna moaned, lying on the boards of the rusty bed, which leaned up against some iron rods. Her hair was swept around and there was foam on her lips. She seemed about to surrender to this immortality, if only to suck it into herself.

"My darling, my darling," she babbled, knowing not where she rested her gaze.

"There it is, floating among the stars, but here— on earth—it's just sitting on a bench... And that is holy."

"Immortality! Immortality!" she howled and, trying to embrace and kiss her own I, she extended her spiritual hands from her own consciousness to her own self.

Occasionally, her eyes rolled back from the unattainable happiness and her mind clouded over from the desire to objectivize her love for herself. She thought she'd go mad trying to express her love for her own I; she would jump off the bed, scream like a Martian monster, and run outside, knowing not what she reached out toward.

Fyodor listened closely to every moan and mumble of the "metaphysicals"; once again, he felt like coming into contact with them, listening to their conversations, and fully sensing the living Padovites.

But the moans grew softer and softer. Evidently, their inner storms were dying down. The silence became increasingly palpable, even spiritual. Neither Padov nor Remin nor Anna made a single sound.

Fyodor waited stubbornly. The night deepened and the darkness in his corner soon became such that he felt it as an object. In the middle of the night, Fyodor could tell that his favorites had fallen asleep.

Now, both practically and to the point, there was no reason to delay.

But in defiance of fate, he felt like waiting. The desire even arose in him to wake them up, drink a little tea, look into their little eyes, and talk without giving himself away. And then, when they fell asleep again, kill them. Cautiously, he went out into the small hallway; Padov, Anna, and Remin were nearby, behind the glass door, which was ajar.

Fyodor stepped inaudibly, like a flying bear. He tasted the breakthrough—to the otherworldly—with his wide open snout. He breathed inaudibly, as if to highlight his solitude. He held the ax, which was being tugged grimly toward the door. The walls fell still, receding into nonexistence.

Fyodor—with all his consciousness—listened to Remin, who was sleeping next to the door, breathe. Where, in this terrible moment, did the sleeping man see his eternal I?

Fyodor was irritated by the transition's ephemeralness: one blow—in these moments he could be inhumanly strong and deft—and that's all she wrote.

Again, the desire blazed up in his soul to wake at least Remin, so he would sit up in bed and converse, right before death, to pat him on the cheek.

Finally, though, Fyodor made up his mind. Killing might well solve more than contact could. His gaze grew heavy, as if he faced his own death.

Nonetheless, he wanted to have a little deathbed conversation within himself, the other way around. He was immediately drawn to total solitude, to spend just ten minutes alone in a garden and then quickly come back to pull the curtain. He clenched his fists, simply cheered by the awareness that his decision was now tantamount to action, and went out to spend some time—in solitude—in the garden.

It was already beginning to grow light, and the air was clear and moist. He walked along the fence, admiring his own shadow as a symbol.

Suddenly, three men emerged through a big hole in the fence behind him. They had weapons. Their appearance was incomprehensible. "You're under arrest," one of them said.

Epilogue

A few weeks later, two youths wandered down one of Moscow's curving lanes in a halo of startling auras: one was thin and tall, with a transcendentally expectant, impatient face; the other was shorter and curly-headed, as if intermeshed with himself. Sashenka and Vadimushka. The eyes of empty window were on the other side of their existence. The friends were on their way to a small, disjointed, absurd beer stand that hid alone, between a square and a garage. Tanya's old friend Vitya, of the itinerant philosophers, was waiting for them there.

Sashenka's face was burning.

"Does a great future really await us?" he said. "Immortality, encounters with spirits...the curtain falling...the farewell to man and the appearance of new worlds... Is that really all going to be?"

"Hee, hee. And this after all the stupid, idiotically dead hammering on I did as a kid about how there's nothing after death," Vadimushka sniggered. "Now the prospects are staggering. Not bad. A change, to put it mildly."

But Sashenka wasn't listening to him.

"And I'm convinced," he continued in a whisper, trembling from excitement, "that posthumous reality should be an object of knowledge, not faith. That's how we bring it closer to us." To Vadimushka, Sasha seemed to be squeezing his own fingers convulsively and swallowing the drool of desire. "Faith should be extended to something more abstract...unattainable almost."

Suddenly, they saw a hole in the beer stand. A restrained Vitya smiled, baring his teeth, and waved at them from deep inside.

They walked up. Vitya's look was pure and nastily transparent, like the backside of a corpse. They had the usual beer. A fly crawled on the outside of the clouded window, looking bigger than the apartment buildings. They started talking about a visit to one of the underground metaphysical groups.

"What about your contacts with Padov and Co.?" Vitya asked finally.

"It's been great. Just great. I can't tell you how great. I feel like I'm at the beach!" Vadimushka shouted, nearly frightening the invalids in the corners.

"That's great that it's great," Vitya replied, surprised. "But, well, I think you put too much emphasis on joy. That's far from the strongest feeling the Padov world can evoke. It is fairly gloomy, after all."

Suddenly, Vadimushka exploded. He actually grabbed Vitya by his jacket button.

"You have to understand, Viktor," he mumbled. "We've just come from a completely different world." Vadimushka's face suddenly contorted in disgust. "Do you know what the average, even more than that, I'd say the simply human consciousness is? I'm prepared to accept the Devil, the underworld, the sufferings of hell, the most refined evil, only not this. After all, this is the eternity of insignificance, a zero that's become a rattle, a direction we're absolutely opposed to, ultimately."

Viktor shrugged, indicating that this was obvious.

"Everything they've done," Vadimushka continued, "the official history, so to speak, rather than the spiritual or esoteric history of humanity, none of that is ours. It's qualitatively different, baser. Especially compared to the new born-again elite or caste, if you like, inside humanity, the spiritocratic caste. Another, higher reality—another world. Not their bedbugs, all those Napoleons and Darwins. I'm young and that's what I feel."

"If so," Sashenka interjected, "then we have to defend ourselves from them. The intelligentsia could be our earthly armor. If only their better part would accept the idea of a spiritocracy. In crude

terms, a spiritocracy could play the role of the ancient Egyptian priests, and a self-aware intelligentsia that finally takes its place at the head of humanity, after long years of subservience to other people's ideas, would be like the earthly envelope of the spiritocracy, its outward defense, its second estate."

Viktor burst out laughing.

"Well, well. Don't get too carried away by all that," he interrupted. "Our task is to move away from humanity, not define our place inside it. Even ruling over them would demean you, since you'd have some contact with them."

They drank another turbid, quasi-well-meaning beer. The drunks dropped their bottles on the floor as they left.

"Well, how's the beer?" Vitya smiled.

"His insides feel all warm, like the grave of the Angel," Vadimushka whimpered. "That's what Annulya said recently—"

"Where's Padov now? We haven't seen him for a good five days," Sashenka asked.

"He's in a bad way, a very bad way." Vitya frowned. "I saw him yesterday in this lair I know. He was looking at his face in the mirror, or rather, at himself, his inner self—and laughing... Laughing wildly, like he was detached from himself. It even reached his eyes in a wooden sort of way." They reviewed a few other states of mind. Suddenly Sashenka mentioned Fyodor's name. Everyone knew him well from Padov's stories.

"He's traveling somewhere right now, in some beyond." Vitya sighed.

"He's playing cat-and-mouse with the Lord now. A miracle worker," Vadimushka added, copying Anna, who he was already practically in love with.

They'd also heard about the recently concluded trial against Fyodor, which was held in a miserable, filthy district court. It turned out that the police had picked up Sonnov's trail around mid-summer, but they'd been confirming the details. When they had everything nailed down, they picked him up. The trial, for some

reason, was quiet, conciliatory, unseeing in a way, but strict and detailed. Fyodor was accused of "murder for reasons of rowdiness" and sentenced to execution. Sonnov was a blank at the trial. He greeted his death with utter calm, but also unfeigned interest. Apparently, he was practically smiling on the way to his execution. He did manage to send the Padovites his highest regards, along with a note explaining how he'd observed them and planned to kill them. In reply, on her part, Annulya found a way to send him a package: Mishka candies, cookies, and a cake. Fyodor sometimes had a sweet tooth. She also sent him her wish that he get through this "formalist farce called death" quickly.

The friends stood up from the beer-stand tables. They drank their last swallows for Fyodor and went out into the rain and mud. A slanting downpour was washing away all the remnants of urban oblivion. Vitya parted from the youths at the corner.

Vadimushka and Sashenka decided to stop by Izvitsky's, since they hadn't seen him in a long time and legends were circulating about him. The two were met by the same gloomy, gray, Petersburg-esque apartment building and a staircase that seemed to lead to heavenly sex. Zhenichka greeted them with a concealed grin, but he was reserved, as if he had no time for them. Vadimushka and Sashenka understood immediately. Every cell in Izvitsky was trembling with love for himself. He carried himself relentlessly, like a black god in love with himself. His things—the crummy armchair, the antique chests of drawers and chairs—seemed to revolve around him, plunging Izvitsky into profound comfort. His look was gloomy—at least toward the outside world—but covertly satisfied, with an endless desire to shut himself up in eternity. The dark delight that could be discerned in his face hid itself in him. Delight—secret and endless—burned at every point, but especially in his eyes, which went from dark to light and back at his wild and covert metaphysical pleasure. Vadimushka could tell that Izvitsky had turned every minute, every touch of himself, into sex, as if his body had become his eternal bride

and lover. Evidently, Zhenya had withdrawn completely. After a few frightened glances at the huge mirror, Vadimushka and Sashenka hightailed it down the stairs and into town.

Never again could they bring themselves to go anywhere.

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A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since Fyodor tried to destroy the "metaphysicals" at the Padov nest.

The house in Lebedinoye stands vacant. Someone even ate the filthy cat. Of the inhabitants of the Sonnov nest, only old man Mikhei, with his empty place, and little Mila apparently arrived at a happy ending, in the human sense: they got married. Without official sanction, of course. It was a marriage with nothing to it. Outsiders often saw granddad Mikhei, who'd settled in a small town outside Moscow, far from Lebedinoye, taking his wifey-granddaughter, little Mila, for a walk, holding her hand. And even kissing her, in his way. And smiling afterward at some bushes, with his white, vanishing face.

The couple ran old man Kolya out; he lost his mind and was now gallivanting all over Russia, sometimes—in a black, drunken delirium—recalling Lebedinoye, Klavusha, Padov, and the filthy cat. "Not the yard, I never went to the yard, no I didn't, not to see Mikhei and little Mila," he would mumble sometimes, playing dominos with himself. "I'm not like that...not...crazy." Every once in a while, the images of his dead children would flash by the bottom of his tearing eyes, which were aimed joyfully at a vodka bottle: sewery Lidochka and self-eater Petenka... Klavenka, too, set up house far from Lebedinoye, in an isolated new nest.

"She's swelling up, swelling up...big as the world. Pretty soon she'll crowd out everything," Igoryok recounted in fright, his eyes wide, after he'd accidentally found himself in the vicinity of that nest. The "blond sadist" himself had abandoned all the "mockeries" long ago; the only thing that interested him now was the fight against happiness; he

fought it—human, all-loving happiness—persistently, gloomily, and fervently, disappearing for long stretches as he made the rounds from one magical nook or corner to the next.

Alyosha Khristoforov found his own final resolution as well, but first he looked for the cock-corpse, i.e., his father, for a long time and in anguish, following up on every lead. But the cock-corpse's trail went cold. Khristoforov broke all ties with the "metaphysicals," called on God, and prayed—all in vain. Now he was living alone, in a small wooden house, with a tall, skinny woman for a maid. He immersed himself in ancient Christianity—or rather, not even ancient Christianity, but pure ceremonialism, especially its endless, secret, long-forgotten details—he didn't want to know anything else; he barely went outside. He frightened priests with his knowledge of Christianity, so they avoided contact with him. Alyosha considered them decadents and continued to experience a quasi-bliss in his own service.

The religion of I had swept like a storm through the "metaphysicals'" souls:

Anna, Remin, and Padov. For a long time they couldn't forget those nights in the Padov nest, the explosions of faith they had, those chilling flights into infinity—for a long time this state of mind lingered.

Soon after, though, the black lightning bolt began to recede and all were left with their old complexes and doubts.

Padov retreated to his former state of mind especially abruptly. "It's not like me, all this positive stuff," he murmured, "though maybe it's better than the other. Oh well, according to this faith, I can't lay a hand on myself; or, if I decide to kill myself for real—and it may be that I secretly want that—like a spirit, say in the form of occult suicide—even that's prohibited; after all, the I is an absolute, the supreme value. But maybe I'll still want to destroy my I and the absolute and the supreme value and all the transitions into trans-consciousness and everything in general. Hee, hee..."

This time, though, Remin did not go down that path. Apparently, Gennady was getting more and more into the religion of I; he

even started meeting less and less with Padov, hanging around the Glubevites or alone and threatening to write a cycle of poems about the religion of I.

Annulya cast about between her faith in her own I and her own unforgettableness. All this got mixed up with her longstanding sexual obscurantism and a certain surreal gnosticism. Suffice it to say that she pictured the otherworldly life increasingly outrageously... and in her womanly way, she hysterically organized extraordinary orgies involving readings of Dostoevsky during séances of occult magic. She became especially frantic and laughed at the summoning of certain "souls" and guises.

In late fall, near a lonely, suburban highway, as the wind ripped off leaves and tossed them about, forming gaps in space, a sober young man in a worn-out suit lay in a ditch, moaning softly. It was Anatoly Padov.

Before this, he'd spent a long time laughing in his room and looking at himself in the mirror. He seemed to himself like a miracle and he saw what had to happen. Suddenly, he felt his own meaning denuded, as if his soul had bared itself and passed ominously through the visibility of the body. He couldn't remember how, but he'd wound up in this ditch. The sensation of naked thought did not pass, as if he could touch it, and the usual trappings of familiar thinking had been removed. He could see the bared field of his own I. He was especially struck that pure thought was pounding against itself, as if feeling and assessing its own existence and constantly asking itself questions: Who am I? Where do I come from?

The worst part was that these questions pierced his thinking, but kept slipping away from it unanswered, precisely because they'd been asked, and these impulses could not go beyond the limits of reality. The strangeness of this self-awareness, this revelation of what was most candid, this lack of answers to the "main questions," wrenched a hysterical cry from Padov. All of him, lying in the ditch, was transformed into this awful cry, which was so puzzled over himself.

Thought pounded against thought; I ran into I. Naked self-awareness wailed, as if it didn't know where it came from, and Padov was fevered by the strangeness of his naked, questioning existence; his naked thought—both insanely real and outrageously frail—seemed to break down.

Suddenly Tolya felt a chill: that which comprised his I was about to come crashing down. "Soon everything will come crashing down, and what will be left?" he whispered.

Padov staggered to his feet and out of the ditch. And so he walked on, with bugged-out eyes, down the lonely highway, toward the hidden world that doesn't even allow anyone to ask questions.