

Sergey Kuznetsov

BUTTERFLY SKIN

Translated from Russian by Andrew Bromfield

I wanted to dedicate this book to two of my friends. They refused to read it and said they didn't want their names to be associated with it. So I dedicate the novel to my wife Katya. She has absolutely nothing at all to do with this story, but her love helps me survive in this beautiful world.

As Joan was burning, she looked round and said:
"See, I have taken off my dress and shaved my head.

See, now I am not hiding anything,
The second dress I tear off is my skin.

Pluck at the veins and feel the flesh
There is only a single moment left."

Alexander Anashevich

1.

You are ten years old, or perhaps younger. You are riding in the subway with your mother, looking forward along the train through the transparent doors of the cars. Suddenly you notice that somewhere up ahead, something has happened: people jump to their feet in a strange state of alarm and run back against the movement of the train, as if they are running away from something, until they run into the locked doors between the cars – and they tug at the handles, tug and hug ... But then their faces contort as the panic sweeps away their normal features, like the wind driving ripples off the surface of a pond. Something invisible is approaching, something nameless and formless, more terrible than death, more horrible than a nightmare. Something they have known about and tried to forget about all their lives.

And now the front cars slowly enter the transparent wall of condensed horror, but you can no longer bear to look at the faces flattened against the glass, the mouths opened in mute screams, the eyes bulging out of their sockets – you turn your gaze to the passengers still untouched by the horror, sitting in the nearest cars, and again you see that faint shadow of anxiety change to panic, you see them jump to their feet and run, run and pound on the locked glass doors ... and the invisible wall gets closer and closer, advancing implacably, like in a dream. But you don't leave your seat, you don't feel for your mother's hand, you just think with relief that it will all soon be over.

These are only my fantasies. I was ten years old, or perhaps younger, and I often imagined this scene. As I got older, however, everything changed, it was no longer a wall, but more like a wave, a wave from a distant cold sea that froze the blood, a wave that swept along the train from the front to the final car. But now no one jumped up from his seat, everybody sat there until the shuddering crumpled up their faces like a hand crumpling a used paper tissue.

Yes, as a boy I certainly had a rich imagination. When I grew up a bit, I started telling other people what I used to believe when I was a child: that there was a place in the subway where Hell seeped through into the tunnel in a thin layer of horror – and the trains passed through it so quickly that only really sensitive people noticed. I used to give the girls a suggestive look at the words “really sensitive”. Sometimes it worked.

Now I know it has nothing to do with sensitivity. It is my own personal Hell, my personal horror, my concentrated nightmare. The passengers will never have any idea about it, nothing will distort their faces, not a single hair will shift out of place. I am the only one who notices the signs, the only one who senses the approach, the only one who understands the language of the things and objects that warn me in vain of *the approach*.

The fine hairs on woollen scarves stand up on end, leather coats are covered with fine cracks, feathers creep out of down-filled jackets as if they are trying to escape, stockings grip legs even tighter, the colours drain out of the advertising posters, any moment now the glass in the windows of the car will flow down on to the seats, the hand rails cringe under my fingers, the doors scream in horror. Everything stops, as if time has been switched off, the clatter of the wheels fades away, and suddenly you can hear what the two girls standing by the closed doors are talking about. One is small and skinny, with tousled black hair, the other is graceful, with long legs and light hair. Just a minute ago they were laughing and nudging each other as they discussed how they were going to spend their first money, but now their faces have aged ten years, and you hear the light-haired one say: “I can’t believe she’s gone” and see her wipe her eyes with a handkerchief as crumpled as your own face, and the little one takes hold of her hand and replies: “And I still can’t even cry”. And then the sounds get duller, space scrolls up round the edges of your vision like old wallpaper on a damp wall and everything goes dark in front of your eyes, as if the entire world is hiding behind those whirling black spirals: the sudden surge overtakes you, sweeps over you. You can’t breathe, the outlines of your body blur and it is transformed into a black cocoon as the despair and hopelessness congeal: reach out your hand and you can touch them.

The old horror of childhood? No, this is not horror, it is anguish, concentrated anguish, a stifling feeling, a constant ringing in the ears, the flow of your own blood, darkness, darkness – the dark cloud will hang on the folds of your clothes, cling to the bulges of your face, to the hairs stuck to your forehead, to the gnawed ends of your fingers.

You carry this cocoon, this cloud, with you as you leave the subway. You will make conversation, discuss work, take decisions, write business letters. You will flirt with girls, play with your children, smile at people you know, try to live the way you always do. But on days like this, if you reach out your hand, you can touch the boundary of Hell: suffering oozes out of doors slightly ajar, flows across the walls of buildings, crunches under your feet like the glass of broken bottles; every gesture causes pain, every touch makes you shudder convulsively, your skin dissolves, leaving only the naked bleeding flesh, just barely covered by the grey cloud of anguish.

Days like that are very difficult for me. In order to cope somehow, I start remembering the women I have killed.

An electric beeping. Not a metallic chime, not the tinkling of a small bell, but the artificial trill of a microchip. The signal of an alarm clock bought in IKEA, a child's alarm clock covered in bright-coloured soft plush, with a big dial with yellow hands. Out from under the blanket comes a hand, a thin hand, with a silver ring on the index finger, an arm with a faint scar just above the elbow. The little palm swats a blue velvet pimple, the ringing stops, the arm disappears.

You don't want to open your eyes, you don't want to wake up. As if through half-closed eyes we see the corner of a pillow, a braid of hair, the edge of a blanket. You want to sleep, with your head hidden under the blanket, swaddled up as tight as you can get, hidden away, as if you were nestling inside a cocoon, sleeping like that forever, ever since you were a child.

"Good morning!"

Who did you say "good morning" to in that muffled sleepy voice? There's no one else in the room. A patch of yellow sunlight – it matches the hands of the clock – on the bright-coloured khilim by the bed, an open laptop with its matt screen reflecting nothing, a fluffy pink rabbit lurking between the wall and your body. Good morning, as if you were trying to wake yourself up. Yes indeed, good morning, Xenia.

Yes, your name is Xenia, you live in a rented flat, 250 dollars a month, cheap, found through friends. That's about a third of your salary, everything's very Western, the way grown-ups live. You're completely grown up now, 23 years old, you work in the news department of the internet-newspaper "Evening.ru". E-v-e-n-i-n-g dot ru, not a very well known newspaper, second flight – maybe you've never heard of it, but our news section is good.

Outside the window there is rain, outside there is December, grey sky, not a single snowflake . You only imagined the patches of sunlight in your sleep. Slip your feet into the fluffy slippers, pick the white dressing gown up off the armchair, push the "Play" button and turn up the volume. The Gotan Project playing a remix of Gato Barbieri. That's how the morning starts.

On the way to the bathroom you can't resist looking at the post. Five messages, including four pieces of spam, two of them offering to increase the size of your penis and your breasts. You don't need either – you don't have a penis and your breasts are just fine.

What do you look like? Thin, short, with tousled black hair, lips puffy from sleep, big eyes that simply refuse to open in the morning. You look at the fifth message. Aha, from your friend Olya, good that it's not about work. But then, how could it be about work? You went to bed at three and got up at eight – at that time everyone's asleep, no one's writing work letters.

You walk through into the bathroom, turn on the shower and freeze in front of the mirror, trying to put the day together in your mind. What's in store for us today? The usual stuff first thing in the morning, then a talk with Pasha about money, lunch at the Coffee House, mum's birthday, she asked you to be there at seven and not be late. You take off the dressing gown with a sigh and look in the mirror, already dewy with condensation: it's damp, steamy and warm in here, the way you like it.

The bruises on your breasts and shoulders are barely visible, but your thighs – oh, that's quite a different matter. And the welts on your buttocks sting in the scalding water. Yes, you like your body to retain its memories of your assignations for a long time. You like to be hurt. You have a small

collection of various amusing gadgets at home, black leather toys, whips, gags, nipple clamps. On good days you don't see anything unusual about your preferences. The way you think about it is more or less like this: sometimes I want to dance the boogie-woogie in a club in the Kropotkinskaya district, sometimes I ask someone to beat me and hurt me. Sex is like dancing; the important thing is to have a good partner. That's the way you think on the good days, but on the bad days you remember that sex is not dancing, and it's not easy for someone with your tastes to find a worthy partner. It's not easy, but you cope one way or other. More or less.

But you're not coping too well, to be honest. You parted company with your last lover a week ago, it's over between you now – that's why, instead of the sweet pain of gratification, your skin is smarting with the nagging pain of separation.

You turn off the shower, rub yourself down with a towel and your raw spots ache. Smiling, you walk through into the kitchen and put the kettle on. The music from the other room is almost inaudible. You look at the clock: you still have enough time for a cup of coffee.

This is how the day begins. Outside the window, a colourless sun in a gap between December clouds. Good morning to you, darling Xenia. Don't forget to dress warmly, there's a strong wind today. Don't forget to take the present for mum, your cell phone, money, ID, travel pass. Don't forget – you have a lot to do today, darling Xenia, take good care of yourself. Ah yes, and the keys too. Don't forget them, please.

3

And so ... Once upon a time a little girl lived with her mummy and daddy, went to the kindergarten, then to school, danced and laughed and never cried. Mummy and daddy got divorced, school came to an end, the little girl went to work and now, six years later, here she is sitting in a tiny office cubicle with her strong fingers pounding away at a keyboard, her tousled hair more or less held in place by a hair slide, her painted lips pursed in concentration and not a trace of the morning's relaxed mood left in her voice.

"Xenia, are we putting the news about Berezovsky at the top or is everybody already pissed off with him?"

"He's the one who's pissed off. What else have we got, apart from Berezovsky?"

"I'll just take a look."

This is an ordinary day. The Little Lady of the Big House. It's just a title – Senior Editor of the News Department – a pitiful staff of three, plus the free-lancers. True, they're all a few years older than you, and some even have formal qualifications in journalism. Think of themselves as professionals, shit! Sharks of the pen, jackals of the keyboard, freebooters of the computer mouse. There was a time when you had to have sharp words with them, it's true, but now you have them all in line, working at full stretch.

Alexei from the next desk asks on ICQ internet messenger: "how are you doing?" She answers: "ok" and then asks: "when will I have the interview?" "I'm just typing it up." yes, he's sitting there in his earphones, deciphering it.

Daily work inevitably becomes routine: making sure they choose the right news, correcting mistakes, telling off the young girl translators, deciding who to take commentaries from today. A couple of times a week you end up with good material something you can really take pride in, not feel ashamed of. But then, you don't feel ashamed of what you put out every day either, although there's really not that much to feel proud of, except maybe the successful start to your career: after all, at twenty-three you're already the department's senior editor. The boss. It's funny.

Xenia likes her job. She enjoys rummaging through the news and she enjoys coordinating, managing and controlling even more. In a few years' time she'll be a good manager, although it's not yet clear where. Maybe she'll become a genuine senior editor, get into paper journalism, if Putin doesn't grab all the newspapers the way he's already grabbed the TV channels. Or perhaps she'll go into pure IT business. "IT" stands for Information Technology, and it's part of everything to do with the Internet. In America they like to add the letter "e", from the word "electronic", but in Russian it's not always convenient to add that letter. You definitely can't add it to the word "business", for instance. "You know," Xenia explained to one of her foreign friends, "the combination 'eb' in Russian is the same as 'fuck' in English. So you get 'fuck-business'. I can't even say that to one of my friends, let alone my mom."

Xenia likes her job. She enjoys feeling confident, successful and prosperous. She likes being able to do everything at once: edit an interview, talk on ICQ, look through the news. By twelve they'll put the first section of material out on the web, and then she can go to the cafeteria with Alexei, read the latest jokes at anecdote.ru, call in to see Pasha and have a word about money.

Pasha Silverman, Xenia's immediate boss, the editor-in-chief and founder of the newspaper "Evening.ru", had no interest at all in journalism until the age of thirty-seven.

He moved from the Chechen capital, Grozny, to Moscow in the late eighties – just in time: first there were no more Russians left in the city, then there were no Chechens, and then the city itself disappeared. By the mid-nineties Pasha was heavily involved in advertising, but during one of the repeated market carve-ups, he got squeezed out of TV and billboards, and by the beginning of the next decade all that remained of his former glory was an internet agency, which was lifted up on the rising wave of the investment boom of 2000.

When Pasha first came to the Internet, the major form of advertising was banners – little rectangular pictures at the top, bottom or side of the internet page. If the picture caught someone's attention, he clicked on the banner with the mouse and found himself on the advertised site. Basically, that was all there was to it. You could take money for the number of people who would see the banner (that was called "pay-for-views") and for the number of people who clicked on the banner ("pay-for-clicks"). Since then variations had appeared – square banners, pop-up window banners, flash banners and lots of other wonderful technical innovations – but the general principle hadn't changed. The technology made it possible to show the advert to the right audience on the right site – that was called "targeting" – but basically Pasha made money out of people looking at little pictures on their computer screens and occasionally clicking on them for some reason or other.

Pasha had always believed that dealing in advertising was dealing in something unreal. That didn't frighten him: it had been explained to him many years before that in mathematics imaginary numbers like the square root of -1 were just as important as ordinary numbers. Trading in advertising in virtual space was a double unreality – and just as the number “i”, which didn't exist in the normal scale of numbers, made it possible to solve equations and create graphs, the ephemeral banner advertisement allowed Pasha to consolidate his own business and help others to build theirs. Pasha liked the idea of working with things that weren't real – perhaps because there wasn't a single stone left standing in the city where he had spent his childhood.

A couple of years earlier the logic of business development had led Pasha to the idea that it would be good not just to trade in views on other people's sites, but to have a platform of his own where he could show his own banners. He decided to set up a newspaper, intending at the same time occasionally to publish *advertorial*, or paid articles, especially since the time for elections was approaching and the political parties and independent candidates were still prepared to pay well for such material although, of course, not as well as in the nineties, when the elections were really fascinating.

As an advertising man, Pasha was convinced that to get *high traffic* all you needed was the right kind of promotion campaign. After six months he realised that an online newspaper was not the same as washing powder or a new model of cell phone. The competition in internet media was pretty stiff, and Pasha sacked almost all his editorial staff and took on new people to replace them. One of these was Xenia, and today Pasha knew it was her energy and talent he had to thank for the large numbers of people who read the news on his site, even if Tickertape.ru did provide much broader coverage.

Xenia has a sense of style: she can make any banal news story entertaining – news about the economy comes out as a story about urgent daily realities and the experts' comments sound like providential revelations. Pasha has raised her salary twice during the last year, but now, seeing her sit down in a chair and cross her legs, he regrets that he allowed himself to be sold on the idea. I won't give her another kopeck, he tells himself and smiles amiably.

“How're things, Xenichka?”

“Fine, thanks,” she replies.

Tousled hair, stubborn lips, strong thin arms wrapped round her knees. She doesn't like Pasha's “Xenichka” – to everyone else she is just Xenia, even to her lovers. And she doesn't allow anyone except Olya to call her by her childhood name “Ksyusha”. Only Olya can pronounce “Ksyusha” in a way that doesn't remind her of the fifth class at school and mocking children's rhymes.

But Pasha calls everyone by familiar pet names and he has persuaded her to accept Xenichka – persuaded, sold, soft-soaped – he told her that he was prepared to address her formally as Xenia Rudolfovna if she wanted, but he asked her please, please to let him say “Xenichka” sometimes, because otherwise he wouldn't be able to do his job properly: I'm not young any longer, it's too late for me to learn new ways. Xenia agreed and, of course, now he called her nothing but “Xenichka” and since then she had seen over and over again in business negotiations how Pasha extorted advantageous conditions while emphasizing that he had absolutely no right to them and was only

asking as a personal favour. Maybe, if Pasha was not coping well with his business, it wouldn't work – but when it came to PR support and advertising promotion, he was the best there was, and the clients let him have his way.

“How're things, Xenichka?”

“Fine, thanks.”

“Fine?” Pasha repeats, turning his monitor towards Xenia. “Let's just take a look at our rating. Look, this is Rambler – and what spot are we on?”

A screen with light-blue strips running across it. The Rambler Top 100 Ratings – the most important rating on the Russian Internet, the unofficial table of ranks, a kind of independent audit. With meters set up on almost every site in the Russian internet, measuring the *traffic*. Ever half hour Rambler generates new ratings of sites according to about fifty subject categories. Whoever gets the most hits has the highest rating. Of course, everyone knows that this rating can be hyped up too, but even so, the advertisers take their bearings from it, and the small investors use it to decide if their money's working hard enough.

The liquid crystal display of Pasha's monitor shows the “Media and Periodicals” section. As usual, Tickertape and Newsru are fighting for first place, while Evening is in the doldrums somewhere between ten and twenty.

“What do you expect, Pasha?” says Xenia. “That's what comes of being tight-fisted. You know yourself that within the limits of the present budget I do the impossible.”

Her face turns even more stubborn, her lips squeeze together angrily.

“Xenichka, darling,” Pasha replies, sitting on the edge of the desk, “how can you call it being tight-fisted? Look, in the last year I've raised your salary twice. Sure, the first time was when I put you in charge instead of Lena, but the second time was simply because you deserved it, and that's all. But you tell me, have you started working any better since then? Or, rather, will you start working any better if I give you another 200 dollars?”

“If I say yes,” says Xenia, “you'll say I'm not putting in enough effort, so I don't deserve a pay rise, if I say no ...”

“... then I won't give you a rise anyway,” Pasha says with a nod. “You understand the whole thing. Every employee has a natural limit: after that, no matter how much you raise their pay, you won't get anything more out of them. Now, if you came up with some special kind of project – one that generated lots of advertising and lots of traffic! – then I'd give you a separate budget. And, of course, part of that budget would go towards a raise for you. But sorry, I won't give you any money just like that.”

“What kind of project would you like to have?” Xenia asks with a smile.

“I don't know,” Pasha answers with a shrug. “Something that would fit into the concept of our publication and also attract readers. And wouldn't be like what our friends in the other internet media have.”

I get it, Xenia thinks with a nod. Magical fairytale stuff – I don't know what it is, but bring me it.

"I'll think about it," she says, getting up.

"You have to understand my position," Pasha says apologetically. "I haven't got a lot of money, the election advertising didn't come up to expectations ... well, not entirely up to expectations."

"I sympathise," Xenia says morosely, and for a moment Pasha remembers that he is lying shamelessly: business is going well and there's plenty of money, but that's no reason to start giving it away to the staff. Because if someone works for 750 dollars, there's no point in giving them a thousand. At least, not until someone else starts trying to poach them. And so before every conversation about a raise, Pasha tells himself "there's no money, there's no money, there's no money" until he starts to believe it – and then he can repeat these words with a clear conscience. In the unreal world that he inhabits, it's the only way.

Xenia has only a vague idea about all this. But even so, she goes back to her desk feeling quite satisfied: now at least she knows what to do. She just has to come up with some project, then go back to Pasha and start the conversation by saying: "Remember, you promised me ..."

She doesn't take offence at his obvious lies about the election campaign money: deep in her heart Xenia suspects that if she were in Pasha's place, she would act the same way. She enjoys observing her boss: he is far from stupid and there are things she can learn from him. Her colleagues sometimes complain that they're pissed off with Pasha, he's so mean. They might be pissed off with him, and he might be pissed off with them, but who else do we have apart from Pasha, she asks herself. A good boss who's sociable without fraternizing too much and friendly without any harassment.

Before joining Pasha's Evening.ru Xenia used to work as a journalist in the internet section of the Moscow branch of a western publishing house. Almost all the employees were local, but the office was still dominated by an extreme spirit of American political correctness: a strict dress code, no jokes about sex, no flirting. Her friend Marinka, who dropped in occasionally, used to joke that the tea in the plastic cups was about to freeze solid in the positively benevolent atmosphere of the place, but at the beginning Xenia had actually liked the atmosphere there. Coming to work with her nipples still itching after the clamps and fresh bruises on her thighs, she used to smile to herself and think complacently that her colleagues would recoil in horror if they only knew how she spent the nights. Xenia had good career prospects, with a chance of moving from the internet department to the advertising department, and she was already mulling over this option. From the age of nineteen, when almost by accident she had found herself as an assistant in one of the laboratories of the Central Institute of Economics and Mathematics she had always been involved in the Web, and sometimes it seemed to her that real life and real business were not here, but out in the *real world*. But all that come to an end rather sooner than expected, at the out-of-house pre-Christmas party.

They rented a guesthouse outside Moscow. Some people were thinking of going back to the city, but most were intending to stay overnight. The table was laid in the banqueting hall, the Big Boss proposed a toast in fairly decent Russian, the local DJ turned on the strobe lights, the Euro-pop started playing – and an hour later, as she watched her colleagues hopping about friskily, Xenia was reminded of the old school dances. She liked to dance and she was good at it, but this mawkish

oompah-oompah didn't inspire her. When she was a bit younger, she used to bring her favourite CDs with her – but this wasn't the right occasion for that. She shrank back against the wall and exchanged a couple of words with Liza from the marketing department, who was wearing an unusually short skirt and already slightly drunk, and then she went to the table to pour herself a fruit drink. When she leaned over, someone's hand gave her buttock a gentle squeeze. Two fingers landed precisely on a fresh mark, a long diagonal bluish-black stripe, but that wasn't important – before Xenia even realised what she was doing, she swung round and struck out.

Fifteen years earlier, when karate emerged from the underground, her parents had immediately sent her brother Lyova to a club. Lyova had practiced his blows on his little sister and tried to teach her a couple of *katas* and *mawashis*. Xenia was a bad student and she thought she'd forgotten everything in the years since then, but her body's memory proved very retentive: her blow landed with perfect precision.

Something squelched under Xenia's fingers and she was amazed to see blood spreading across the white shirt of the deputy director, ruddy-faced thirty-five-year-old Dima. He had started off as a Komsomol businessman, but come off the road on the steep curve of the 1990s and ended up as a common-or-garden executive, or, to use the modern term, a manager. Now he was on his way up: if you didn't count the Big Boss, Dima was the third most important person in the whole office. Fortune seemed to be smiling on him again, and perhaps that was why he didn't move aside and pretend nothing had happened, but tried to hit Xenia back, and she saw her own right hand move in a slow-motion movie sequence to deflect the blow, and her left hand swing and jab once again into that astonished pink-and-red face.

Afterwards, as she tried to thumb a lift on the snow-covered highway and rubbed the stinging knuckles of her fingers with the bitten nails, Xenia blamed herself and wondered: *Did I break his nose or just split it?* Yes, Lyova would have been delighted with her, but Xenia felt ashamed anyway. Good girls didn't behave like that, and neither did bad ones. Maybe he had touched her by accident, and she had just struck out without bothering to check? Xenia felt so upset she could have cried – but she never cried. When she got home, she rang her lover at the time and asked him to come over and be rougher than usual: maybe so that the drops of blood would take the place of her uncried tears.

After the holidays she gave in her notice: not even because of that guilty feeling she'd had, and certainly not because she was afraid of revenge. In a single instant Dima had suddenly ceased to be a boss for her. And not because of the harassment, it was just that Xenia couldn't respect a man who had let through two of her amateurish blows in a row.

But she's sure of Pasha. He doesn't confuse the office with the bedroom, and if anything did happen, he'd catch her hand. Or hit her himself.

And anyway, Pasha avoids direct conflicts. He knows nothing about Xenia's sexual preferences, but he understands her very well – far better than many of her lovers.

*

It was like this: the two of you were in a large group of people you didn't know very well, some friends of Sasha's, at the birthday party of one of the girls from his class at school, someone he used

to be in love with. Sasha called to collect you, and before you went to the party you made love, never suspecting that it was the last time. At the party people started talking about sex, and you couldn't resist saying that you liked rough sex, BDSM, to be exact, also known as "playing": What do you mean, you don't know what that is? Well, it has a triple meaning: BD is Bondage/Discipline; DS is Domination/Submission; and, well, SM is sadomachism, that's obvious. In principle, these are all different things: some people who play like bondage, others like submission, and some just like pain for its own sake, but sometimes someone likes all of them together, although I'm pretty much indifferent to bondage. Everybody stopped talking, as if they were embarrassed, and Sasha said something like, *that's too much for vanilla people like us to understand. I never thought you were such a pervert.* You immediately tensed up. Although, of course, that was his right, if he wanted, he could stay in the closet, as the fraternal fags put it, let him pretend to be a decent, *vanilla* individual, if he felt so ashamed in front of his friends. You got up and walked into the kitchen. Sasha followed you. *Get on your knees and take me in your mouth,* he said, and you flew into a rage. You never promised to submit to him anywhere except in the bedroom, no 24/7, and you had no intention of sucking him off in the kitchen at a birthday party for an old classmate he used to be in love with when he was a delicate little boy and no doubt incapable of beating a girl so hard with a riding crop that the marks on her buttocks took a week to heal. *I don't want to,* you said and then, remembering your games, he tried to grab you by the hair and force your head down, and then you said it again, feeling yourself getting angrier and angrier: *don't,* and he said: *If you don't do it right now, it's over.* And then you pushed him away and said: *Then it's over.*

"If you don't do it right now, it's over." That was the last straw. Not the vanilla public image, not the demand to suck him off. No it was those nine pitiful words that decided everything. Sasha could have tried to break your will and force you down on your knees (oh, how glad you would have been to suck him off then!) or retreated smoothly, pretending it was all just a joke. You would both have forgotten about it, and the next time at your place you would have been his submissive slave again, but those words – *if you don't do it right now* – those words meant he lacked the strength of will to be a genuine Master, and he lacked the wisdom to realise it. A pitiful attempt at blackmail, a little boy moaning and telling his mother: *If you don't buy me that railway engine, it means you don't love me any more.* So it means I don't love him, you thought, and that was the most terrible thing, because the words – the ones he said and your reply – couldn't be taken back now. You couldn't pretend they were never spoken. That evening you deleted him from your ICQ and put his telephone number on your Motorola's black list.

Moscow is a small town, you're bound to meet again – but never again will you lie on the floor in front of him, with your hands tied above your head and your eyes closed so that you can't see which breast will take the next blow from the double length of telephone wire.

4

Afternoon, and the cars are already bumper to bumper. The creeping afternoon traffic jam. Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street looks like a river covered with drift-ice in spring. Olya, that is, Olga Krushevnikskaya, a successful businesswoman of thirty-five, an IT-manager and co-owner of a small online shop, manoeuvres in her Toyota, cursing through her teeth. On her way to have coffee with her friend, she repeats to herself: "So, what was it he said? *I wouldn't even shit in the same field.* Just

slammed the door and walked out. And what am I supposed to do now? No point in complaining – they warned me: Olya, you’ll come unstuck with these two, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Three years earlier Olya herself invited Grisha and Kostya (that is, Grigorii and Konstantin) to join her business. Or rather, the business wasn’t hers then: Olya was a hired manager on a salary, and she only managed to grab herself a quarter of the business when the shop was bought from the first owners – who, by the way, got three dollars for every one they had put in. That was the way they set up the shares: money from Grisha and Kostya, and from her – knowledge of the market and experience, three years of hard graft. But at the very beginning of the whole thing, someone at the Internet Business Club told her: Those two bears will never get along together in your little den.

They won’t get along together in my den. Won’t shit in the same field. They’ll take their money – then it’s goodbye and farewell to Olya’s business. Wolves. Bears. She’d served them faithfully for three years, fed them with her own flesh and blood, interest on profit, flattery and lies. You know how much I like working with you, Grisha. Believe me Kostya, in our business everything depends on you.

Our business? But that wasn’t right. Olya had always thought of the business as hers alone. She had started it and kept it going for all these years, she was the only one who had the vision and understood the development plans, who could anticipate the future. But she had honestly torn chunks off to feed the wolves, trying to forget that wolves were always looking back to the forest. She had held out for three whole years, and now Grisha and Kostya were both bolting from the common field, back into their homeland in the depths of the forest to look for Little Red Riding Hoods – or anyone else they could find to gobble up.

Olya stops at a traffic light, pulls down the mirror and looks at herself. A well-groomed thirty-five-year-old woman. An elegant arm lying on the driving wheel with a bracelet of dark stones round the wrist. A prosperous business lady, the co-owner and general director of a small internet shop. No, she didn’t look a bit like Little Red Riding Hood, it wasn’t so easy to gobble her up. She knew every bush in this forest too – and she wouldn’t go to her granny’s little house, she’d go into the dragon’s cave, then we’d see which of the wolves would risk following her in.

And there’s the first miracle of this lousy day: a silvery BMW pulls away from the curb at just the right moment – and Olya parks her Toyota. She jumps out on to the pavement, trying not to step in the dirty puddle of melt water, slams the black, mud-splattered door shut, presses the button on her remote and, just as she’s walking into the Coffee House, she hears the quiet beep of the security system. That means everything’s all right. Now she’ll try to choose a table by the window and on the way take a moment to check that everything really is all right. When you live on your own for a long time, you get used to things: to the laptop that should have been changed ages ago, to the bracelet that you were given, hanging round your wrist, to the car that you ought to sell, but you can’t bring yourself to do it. You don’t admit it to anyone except yourself, but you feel a kind of inner kinship with it: six years for a car is like thirty-five for a woman, still running, but with the price tag falling faster every year. And so you look after it as if it was your own body – regular services, fresh oil, BP gasoline, comprehensive insurance. And there’s the result: great condition, not a single scratch, as good as new.

Ksyusha’s already sitting at a table, toying with a cell phone in a kitschy bright-pink fluffy case.

“Look what I’ve bought,” she says. “Isn’t it just delightful?”

Olya politely takes the mobile in her manicured hands and buries her fingers in the pink fur.

“It reminds me of something,” she says,

“Aha,” Ksyusha agrees, “my rabbit, remember, I showed it to you?”

Yes, the pink rabbit. Every over-aged Little Red Hiding Hood should have her own pink rabbit: that way there’s something to give the Big Bad Wolf when he comes knocking at the door of the hut. But Olya doesn’t have any fluffy toys, and you can’t put a case on a Sony-Ericsson P-800. All she has is an aging Toyota, well-preserved, but already doomed.

“I was thinking,” says Ksyusha, “if you crossed a cell phone and a rabbit, what would their children be like?”

“Well, little fluffy mechanical devices,” Olya replies. “Like the rabbits in the Energizer advert.”

Little rabbit girls hop around in the dark forests of Russian business and shudder at the roaring of the big bad wolves who can’t share the same field, only the same forest. Because in the field there’s no one to eat, but in the forest there are fluffy pink animals and aging Little Red Riding Hoods who aren’t mobile enough to avoid the wolves’ teeth.

“You’ve got everything mixed up.” says Ksyusha. “A cell phone isn’t a mechanical device, it’s a communications device. They’d probably be telepathic rabbits.”

“There was some story about telepathic rabbits,” says Olya, “remember?”

“Na-ah,” says Ksyusha, “I haven’t read very much. I mean, not as much as you.”

That’s probably a good thing, not to read so much, Olya thinks. She spent almost thirty years stuck in the gingerbread house of their library at home and Leningrad University’s castle in the air. Probably it really is a good thing not to fritter away your time on books, not to know every word of Brodsky’s *Urania* and *Part of Speech*, smuggled into the country by other lovers of poetry like yourself, but to find yourself out in the dark forest right away, before you got midway through life. To find yourself there without even being able to recognise the hidden quotation (at least one) in that last phrase, but not to feel daunted when you met the wolves, panthers and lions – or whoever it is that Dante and successful IT managers ran into along their way.

“So what happened to the telepathic rabbits in the story?” Ksyusha asks.

“I don’t remember,” Olya replies. “I think they’ve all been eaten before the story even starts. Before anyone has even realised that they are telepaths.”

“Bang-bang, aye-aye-aye, see my little rabbit die,” says Ksyusha, citing the old children’s song. And she knocks her cell phone over as if it has been hit by a hunter’s bullet.

Olya smiles, and her lips cramp at the memory of two wolves glaring at each other from behind the trees in the dense forest of their joint business.

“Listen, Ksyusha,” she says, “I need your help. Will you help me?”

Ksyusha suddenly turns serious – a businesswoman, IT manager, senior editor in the news department of a popular online newspaper – she sets her thin elbows on the table and leans her head to one side, as if to say: I’m listening, come on Olya, tell me what’s bothering you.

And Olya tells her.

Three years ago at the height of the investment boom, two major internet companies decided to invest in the shop that Olya managed. They bought it from the first owners, gave Olya her 25%, and divided up the rest between them. Two major companies? Actually just two investors, two men who had known each other since before the Internet. Kostya and Grisha, Konstantin and Grigorii. Friends and competitors, rivals and comrades. For three years their furious skirmishes didn’t interfere with the business, it remained a joint interest, until this December they quarrelled big-time over dividing up the funds from the election campaign. And this morning Grigorii slammed the door of Olya’s office and shouted “I wouldn’t even shit in the same field”. The little online shop – rather trivial business by Kostya and Grisha’s standards – turned out to be the little goat from that other children’s song that took it into its head to go wandering into Dante’s dark forest at just the wrong time. The situation was tragic in an entirely literal sense – Olya’s business was about to sing its farewell *goat song* and become a ritual sacrifice in a squabble between two former friends.

She can repeat the old familiar move and bring in a big new investor to buy the business from Grisha and Kostya. There isn’t anyone like that in the Russian Internet – but Olya knows who she could go to. If, that is, she can really take the risk of going to him – because Olya doesn’t like this man. He’s an outsider, someone from a different and dangerous world, from offline, ordinary business, business that makes Kostya and Grisha’s wild, remote forest look like a tidy English park.

Olya explains all of this to Ksyusha now, explains it carefully, trying to avoid any allusions to Dante, jokes about the little grey goat and goat song – because she’s not sure that Olya knows about scapegoats, Dionysian sacrifices and the birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music. After all, Ksyusha didn’t graduate from the history faculty in Petersburg, immediately after school she set out like an emancipated Little Red Riding Hood along the winding path to a place where there had never been any granny, but there was at least some faint hope of earning your own piece of bread and butter.

As Olya tells her story, Ksyusha watches the way she waves her hand, and the bracelet on her wrist shimmers. Large dark stones, as dark as Olya’s eyes. Olya waves her hand beautifully, she draws beautifully on her long cigarette holder, she talks beautifully and even sighs beautifully. If Ksyusha could fall in love with a woman, she would definitely fall in love with Olya. You might say she has already fallen in love: at the negotiations three years earlier she said “Wow!” to herself the moment she saw this tall woman with the well-groomed hands, short light-tinted hair and deep, dark eyes. They discussed the terms for yet another advertising campaign, and Xenia thought she wanted to be like Olya someday. Perhaps she simply liked Olya’s way of inclining her head during a conversation, smiling with just the corners of her mouth and waving her hand fluently when she rejected an unacceptable proposal. Xenia even liked the not exactly old-fashioned, not exactly provincial-Petersburg way she smoked a cigarette, drawing in the smoke through a long cigarette holder. On that first occasion they got through the business quickly and spent another forty minutes talking about all sorts of nonsense, she can’t remember exactly what now. They immediately started

calling each other “Olya” and “Ksyusha”, and now they meet a couple of times a week, and Ksyusha is glad her premonition didn’t deceive her: it was friendship at first sight.

“And so,” says Olya, stubbing her cigarette out in the ashtray, “I want you ask you to make some inquiries about him, about this man. I don’t really know anything about him, but you’re a journalist, so you can manage it, right?”

5

Xenia walks through the passage from one subway line to the other in a dense crowd of people, in a vortex of deep human waters, a subterranean reflection of the traffic jams on the Moscow streets. Instead of frosty Tverskaya Street with its smell of petrol, there is the stale air of Pushkinskaya Station, instead of the stench of tobacco in the front seat of a private car acting as a taxi, there is the smell of sweat in the stuffy car. Save fifteen, no, twenty minutes and 200, no, 150 roubles, get there for seven as she promised, not be late at least this once.

She was never late for business meetings or assignments, but somehow she had never managed to get to her mother’s place on time, ever since she was a child, when it used to take her an hour to get home from school, stopping for a chat with Vika, and then with Marinka, saying goodbye ten times on every corner, and then deciding to make a detour anyway, walking to the garages first, and then to the bus stop. It took her fifteen minutes to walk to school and an hour to walk back. She had to be at the dance studio by three. Xenia didn’t really have to hurry, but her mum was nervous anyway, she said she would go crazy, times weren’t what they used to be, now they didn’t even let little children go to school on their own, let alone Xenia, a beautiful ten-year-old girl, the delight of any paedophile, a future Lolita, the light of her parents’ lives, the fire of God only knew whose appalling loins. Xenia was stubborn, she forbade her mother to meet her, swore she would come home on time, but she still came late. Her mum made a show of drinking her decoction of 100% natural valerian from virgin forests somewhere in Siberia or the Urals, her mum clutched at her heart, her mum said her daughter didn’t love her at all. Xenia persuaded herself that these reproaches were a proof of love. Not of her love for her mum, of course, but of her mum’s love for her. Because if her mum didn’t love her, why would her mum get so anxious?

Lyova was already in eleventh grade at school and he was regarded as quite grown up already, he had even applied for a place in college amid a general atmosphere of approving indifference: who could ever doubt it, of course he would get in. Xenia heard Lyova telling a friend or a girlfriend on the phone that if not for the army he would never have applied for college, who needed an education now, and he probably wouldn’t be a physicist, there was no money in it, unless you went away to America. Afterwards, many years later, Xenia was surprised at how much he knew about everything in advance: he had been right twice over— he didn’t become a physicist and he went away to America.

She was always late home from school, only once, when half the class, including Vika and Marinka, was off sick with flu, she came on time and ran into Slava in the entrance of the building (he was the one, by the way, who never wanted to be called “uncle” – just Slava, that was all) and he hesitated, as if he was embarrassed about something, mumbled “Hi” and hurried off to the bus stop. She walked in, shouted “Mum, I’m home!” and through the half-open door of her parents’ bedroom she saw the crumpled sheets and didn’t understand at first, then her mum came out of the

bathroom wearing a robe over her naked body, with her hair all clumped together. "What are you doing here so early? You could at least have rung the doorbell." She'd never asked Xenia to ring the bell before, Xenia had had her own keys since third grade, and now as she stood there in the corridor Xenia started blushing uncontrollably, as if she'd done something unforgivable, almost criminal. She whispered, "Sorry mum, I didn't think" and went to her room, trying not to look round at the grinning door of the bedroom and burning with shame, feeling like a criminal for having found out something she wasn't supposed to know. The latest number of mums *AIDS-Info*, the sex education tabloid, was lying on the floor beside her bed, she'd been reading it yesterday before she went to sleep, she was proud that her mum and dad weren't like other girls' parents, they didn't hide anything, on the contrary, to her grannies' horror, they had explained everything to her at the age of six with a little book translated from French, so that now, at the age of ten, Xenia knew absolutely *everything about that*. But today this pride and this joy had disappeared somewhere. Xenia felt ashamed. She would rather not have known what had been going on only half an hour earlier in her mum's bedroom. It would have been better if she didn't read *AIDS-Info*, but read what all the girls did, something like Alexandra Ripley's continuation of *Gone With the Wind*. She wanted to cry, but she'd forbidden herself to do that, big girls didn't cry. Xenia never cried, and anyway, what point was there in crying, tears wouldn't help her grief, her mum was right, it was Xenia's own fault, she shouldn't have come back at the wrong time, if she was so grown-up already and understood everything so well. And so Xenia sits there in her room, takes the textbooks out of her briefcase and starts doing her homework. Mum always said: if you feel like crying, go and do your lessons. Especially since she has a test tomorrow, and she has to get an A.

Xenia walks through the passage under the stone vaulting of the Stalinist subway system. There are little wind-up khaki-coloured soldiers crawling along the wall, with their machineguns chattering, but the toy guns can barely even be heard above the noise of the crowd. The soldiers crawl along as if they are delirious, with their entire bodies squirming, squirming as if they are dodging blows, as if in erotic ecstasy, crawling as if their legs refuse to carry them, crawling to some unknown destination, invalids continuing a futile war, a war that was over long ago. They will survive and ride through the cars in the underground in metal wheelchairs, collecting money in paratroopers' berets, crippled, with no legs, either drunk or stoned. Xenia will lower her eyes into her book, trying not to look at them, trying not to remember how every time she encounters pain, suffering and physical deformity, people who have lost arms or legs, it is like some kind of prediction that could affect her personally. The same way she used to feel frightened by articles about psychotic killers, sadists and perverts who tortured their partners by hanging them from a hook in the ceiling by their outstretched arms, covering their bodies with the parallel stripes of scars, weals and bruises. It's still there, that aching pain of separation, now what have you done, where are you going to find another lover like that? But it's over – don't you understand that? It's over.

Xenia walks through the passage. Clattering heels, dark business suit, short winter coat. One thin hand lightly holding the purse in place on her shoulder. Walking through the passage. Twenty-three years old, a good job, excellent prospects. Walking through the passage.

The room that used to be Xenia's is her mother's study now. There's a computer on the desk where she used to do her lessons all those years ago. There are dictionaries on the shelf where the pink rabbit used to sit. Every time she comes here, Xenia gets a bitter feeling. It's not that she would really like to keep everything just the way it was. But perhaps she would like the flat where her childhood was spent to have remembered her for a little bit longer. It seems to Xenia that her things have disappeared so easily because she herself was only an accident in her mother's life, an accident who was easy to forget, forgotten. She never admits these suspicions even to herself: of course not, after all, she knows how much her mother loves her, didn't her mother talk about love all the way through her childhood, and specifically about her love for Xenia? There was never a word spoken about her love for Lyova, that was somehow taken for granted, not a subject for discussion. Almost everything to do with Lyova was taken for granted – but from early in her childhood Xenia can remember her mum's voice saying how much she did for her, for Xenia: she gave up a trip to London when Xenia was six months old, she didn't sleep at night when Xenia was ill, she didn't divorce dad for all those years, she put up with his drunken friends and weeks-long work assignments, with his coming home after midnight whenever there was a deadline for delivering another *computer program*, and all so that her daughter would have a father, at least some kind of father, although it was hard to call him that. *How many times a week do you see your daughter?* She used to hear that from the next room. *You don't care about anything at all apart from your job, but it's not as if you even earn decent money. If not for Xenia, I'd have divorced you ages ago.* She covered her head, trying not to hear, but a pillow was poor protection against her mum's loud, harsh, piercing voice, that voice she loved so much. Xenia lay there with her eyes closed and her hands over her ears, she swaddled herself in the blanket, trying not to hear those words – and she lay there in the same way on those other nights, when dad went away on his assignments and mum had visitors and they drank wine in the kitchen and laughed in the corridor. Mum would come in to kiss her goodnight, looking beautiful in high-heeled shoes, smelling of perfume and wine, and Xenia went to sleep surrounded by those smells and the quiet laughter coming through the half-open door. Then she would wake up in the night and cover her head with the pillow, trying not to hear her mum's heavy sighs suddenly breaking through the silence, sighs that changed into a deep, frightening scream. Once she asked Lyova why their mum screamed in the night and he said she was "too little to be asking questions like that" and Xenia blushed, because there was nothing in the little French book about sighing and screaming, and Lyova gave her a gentle slap on her bottom and led her off to play at Sarah Connor and the Terminator.

That was their favourite game. First Xenia had to do a chin-up on the children's sports frame, and then Lyova appeared from the hallway, holding a toy pump-action shotgun and shouting "I'll be back!" and Xenia screamed "It's him, it's him, I knew he would come!" and made a dash for it, and Lyova pursued her all round the flat. The skirt covering her childish knees trembled in terror, Xenia ran and ran until Lyova squeezed her into a corner, grabbed both her wrists in his fist and said: "Calm down, Sarah, I've come to save you". Their parents didn't like this game – perhaps because one day, during a gallop along the corridors of the imaginary insane asylum Xenia (Linda Hamilton) and Lyova (Arnold Schwarzenegger) caught the cable of the VCR standing on the old Soviet "Ruby" TV and the video went crashing to the floor. Fortunately, it wasn't damaged, apart from a crack in the silvery plastic. It was symbolic, said dad, that when they played Terminator, they knocked the video recorder over. After that their favourite game was banned, which only made them like it all the more. When their parents were out, Xenia ran round the flat time and time again, choking on

her fear and fatigue as she anticipated the feeling of Lyova's strong hands, the crunching of her wrists and the calm voice that spoke at the peak of her terror: "Calm down, I've come to save you".

Standing in the corridor where Lyova once used to pursue Xenia is aunty Mila, a small brunette the same height as Xenia, or perhaps even shorter. She's standing on her toes, kissing Valera (or Vadim? – Xenia can't remember) who is married either to aunty Sveta or aunty Lera – or was married first to one and then the other. They take no notice of Xenia, perhaps they're too absorbed in what they're doing, or perhaps they're too used to the idea that Xenia is only Masha's daughter, still just a little girl – funny, she looks so much like Masha, but she isn't beautiful at all.

Today mum is wearing a green dress that she brought from America when Xenia was fifteen. She kisses her daughter on the cheek and for a second the half-forgotten smell of perfume and wine is back again.

"See, I'm not late," Xenia says.

"You could at least have gone home to change," her mum replies. "This is my birthday party and you've come dressed for work."

"I'm sorry," says Xenia, lowering her head. "I just didn't think."

"Never mind, it's too late now," says her mum, giving her a gentle nudge in the side. "Go in the kitchen and help Sveta with the salads."

*

They've already drunk to their hostess, the birthday girl, our beautiful Masha, to this house and to love, yes, of course, to love. Mum never laid tables crowded with food, like the parties at granny's house. She preferred the "a la fourchette" approach, even though she still cooked a whole series of different dishes: hors d'oeuvres, salads, entrees and then tea with cake. Mum was an excellent cook, so good that Xenia couldn't even hope to achieve such perfection. That was probably why now, when Xenia celebrated her own birthday, she simply bought ready made food or invited everyone to a café or a club: it didn't cost much more, and you didn't have to clear up in the morning. But mum! Mum was a born cook. Dad always said that if no one needed translators any longer, Masha could always get a job in a restaurant. He used to say it every time they had guests and one day aunty Lelya, Slava's wife, couldn't stand it any more, and at the end of dad's tirade she added "as a waitress". Mum ran out of the room and slammed the door, dad went running after her to apologise, and he never mentioned the restaurant gain, while aunty Lelya, a beautiful plump blonde, carried on turning up at the important events with Slava, twisting the corners of her mouth without saying anything as she waited for the chance to put in her drop of poison. This annoyed Xenia and one day, when she was already fifteen, she actually said to aunt Lelya – it was while the two of them were cutting the vegetables for the salads in the kitchen – "You don't like my mum, do you!" Lelya shrugged her white shoulders under her loose-fitting semi-transparent blouse and answered: "I don't really have any reason to like her much. Your mum's never done anything good for me" – and at that moment the knife in Xenia's hand slipped, she shrieked, the blood spurted into the plate and the salad was ruined. The scream brought her mum running in, she grabbed Xenia's hand and lifted the cut finger to lips painted the same colour as Xenia's blood, kissed it several times and shouted into the flat: "Lera, bring the first-aid kit!" Then she sat Xenia on her knees, stroked her hair and kept

stroking it until aunty Lera and aunty Sveta stuck a plaster over the cut with a glance of reproach at Lelya, who briskly threw the salad into the rubbish bucket and started slicing everything all over again. Xenia didn't cry, but she felt resentful and ashamed, not because of her finger, but because a few minutes earlier, for just a second, she had thought there really wasn't any reason to love her mum – as if she loved her for some reason or other, and not just because she was her mum, the best mum in the world, the only person who loved Xenia, the most beautiful, the sexiest, the kindest.

Lelya had got divorced ages ago and married some German from the Siemens office: she didn't come to the parties any more. Slava still attended all the birthday gatherings but, looking at him today, Xenia thought for the first time that he was five years older than mum, really old, his beard was almost grey, he was almost completely bald and his face was covered with wrinkles. He'd got drunk very quickly and now he was passionately trying to persuade the other guests in the kitchen about something or other. Xenia didn't remember all of their names any longer. They were talking about the explosions in Moscow, about Berezovsky, the FSB and Zakaev, and if they weren't her mum's friends, Xenia would have put in her own two cents' worth and explained how it was all done, how the media created events and put out exaggerated conspiracy theories that were designed to lay the truth bare and obscure it in equal measure. Whatever you might say, she was the only person there who had any direct connection with the mass media, although the guests probably didn't know that, because her mum usually just said simply "My daughter does something on the Internet". Xenia's achievements paled in the light of the brilliant career ahead of Lyova: after the third year at college he had gone away to America and suddenly been transformed from a physicist into a businessman with an MBA and an unbelievable annual salary.

And there they are talking about Berezovsky, Zakaev and the FSB: Slava, who never wanted to be called "uncle Slava", Vadim (or Valera), who had been kissing aunty Mila, uncle Kolya, who never objected to the word "uncle" and liked to tickle Xenia when she was little, and after she turned fifteen took a liking to kissing her when they met, pressing her against himself so tightly that one day she had to say "don't" in that voice that already worked on men even then, regardless of their age or how intimate she was with them. When Xenia grew up, that "don't" served her as an effective replacement for the stop-word that they wrote so much about on the BDSM sites, because that "don't" worked even on the most arrant of dominants, who liked a girl to come crawling to them on her knees, hanging her head and exposing her breasts, submissively handing them a riding crop or a paddle; that "don't" stopped even them without any advance agreement about a stop-word. So it's not surprising that uncle Kolya recoiled at Xenia's response as if she had struck him, struck him with one of those *katas* that Lyova had once tried in vain to teach her. After that uncle Kolya was always emphatically polite, but his eyes still followed Xenia as she walked round the room.

And there they are talking about Zakaev, Berezovsky and the FSB, and her mum comes into the kitchen in her green dress and high heels, with her lips the same colour as Xenia's blood, enveloped in a cloud of perfume and wine, she comes into the kitchen and looks at them, all steamed up already and shouting at each other as if their words can change something in this world, as if they can stop the suburban trains and apartment blocks being blown up, stop the soldiers raping and killing, make the bullets pass through the flesh without damaging it, like a ray of light passing through a cloud of dust, make the federal forces and the Chechens suddenly stop making money out of this war and turn the pain into pure joy, happiness and love. Her mum looks at them, smiles sweetly and says: "What excitable boys you are ... and you know ... you all have something in

common, and I know what it is ...” and then she gives them the look that Xenia remembers so well from her childhood, the look that heralds sighs in the night, she looks at them, smiles sweetly and pronounces these words so loudly that they can probably be heard by her girlfriends in the next room, the former or present wives of these grey-haired boys, and they understand perfectly well what the men who have gathered here today all have in common, what unites them above and beyond their excitability, the smell of alcohol, the mid-life crisis, imminent old age and inevitable death.

Xenia walks out of the kitchen and opens the door of her room – the room that was hers. The light is off, but as always the street lamp is shining in through the window, and by its ghostly light she sees aunty Mila standing on tiptoe and kissing someone enthusiastically ... but who is it? What difference does it make, these people have known each other for so many years, they’ve probably all slept together as couples, perhaps even as threesomes and foursomes. Xenia closes the door, there are loud voices in the large room, Zakaev, Berezovsky and the FSB are in the kitchen, and she decides not to go into the bedroom, not because the childish prohibition is still in effect, but it would simply be awkward to see two fifty-year-old people making love in the bed that to Xenia is forever her parent’s bed, although her father hasn’t spent the night here for many years now. But whoever might be in there, it would certainly be a primal scene, Xenia thinks. Just the month before, Olya had finished explaining to her about psychoanalysis, childhood traumas and the Oedipus complex – all the things she hadn’t remembered from *AIDS-Info* when she used to read it, in those days when her parents’ bedroom really belonged to her parents.

Xenia walks along the corridor: the sound of voices, Leonard Cohen singing in the room, uncle Kolya walking towards her, opening his arms wide, and for a moment Xenia cringes in fright, because she suddenly has a very clear vision of her right hand sinking into his solar plexus. This vision is so real that Xenia takes a step back, and just in time, because Sveta comes out of the room carrying a pile of plates and falls straight into uncle Kolya’s embrace. The top plate falls and breaks, Xenia ducks into the bathroom and locks the door behind her.

She is shuddering in revulsion, despair and arousal. There are clothes pegs hanging on a line, she chooses a green one and a red one, then sits down on the edge of the bath and pulls down her skirt and panties. There is a tight ball of warmth rolling about somewhere below her belly, she pulls up her shirt, unfastens her bra, bites on her lip to stop herself crying out, clamps the clothes pegs on her nipples – first the red one, then the green one – closes her eyes that are filled with tears of pain, puts her right hand on her clitoris and the fingers of her left hand into her vagina and starts to masturbate.

At moments like this she doesn’t have to think about anything. She forgets about her mother and her father, she forgets about the Evening.ru office, she forgets about Sasha, she forgets about her own loneliness – until eventually the pain and the pleasure climax and intersect, merging into one.

Still in the darkness of her closed eyelids, Xenia unclamps the clothes pegs, freeing her nipples, and they flare up, sending a final tremor through her entire body; there’s a salty taste in her mouth, she must have bitten her lip after all. Then Xenia opens her eyes and looks at the pattern traced out by the small tiles on the bathroom floor that she has known since her childhood. A dark skirt, black

panties, two clothes pegs – red and green – today's *MK* tabloid newspaper, open at the "events" page, a blurred photograph and a large headline: "Moscow psycho kills again"

7

I remember very clearly the first time it happened. When I realised that I would kill soon.

It was evening, I was masturbating in the shower. The jets of water were streaming over my skin, my prick seemed huge. It was swollen up as if all the blood in the world had flowed into it, that evening when I realised for the first time.

I always found it hard to come quickly. Except perhaps when I used to toss off as a kid, after waiting for my little brother to go to sleep. I used to imagine Roman patricians raping female slaves by the hundred, or barbarians on prancing horses bursting into Rome to dishonour and kill. I don't think I was the only one who imagined such things: naked flesh was only accessible in the form of classical statues, sex was taboo and it seemed quite impossible that women could do it of their own free will. So I used to imagine Red Indians in the deserts of the Wild West, standing beside a wagon and tearing the clothes off the juvenile granddaughters of a grey-haired patriarch with a biblical name. A chief with the noble profile of Gojko Mitic, the star of the East German Westerns, would tell his deputy – or whoever it is that Red Indians have: "I'll rape the youngest one, you rape their mother. Then we'll swap."

I didn't know any other verbs. In my fantasies they never said "fuck" – I thought that word sounded vulgar, and I never heard the word "screw" until I was nineteen, in a dubbed version of Russ Meyer's film *Faster, Pussycat, Kill, Kill*. The characters in my fantasies didn't fuck or screw. They preferred to rape or even dishonour. "I'll dishonour the youngest one, you dishonour their mother. Then we'll swap". I was a bookish boy and it couldn't be helped – I could never find the right words. Although, as you recall, I certainly had a rich imagination.

Sex was taboo, and even the word seemed almost obscene. In my adolescent years they used to write it on walls in English, beside the word "prick". It was hard to believe that the word "sex" even existed in the Russian language.

Then I grew up and learned about the right words and the warmth of women's bodies. I was considered a good lover, they used to think I was taking care to please the girl and that was why I took so long to come. In my young years this was highly valued. But in fact, the reason I didn't come for a long time was not at all that I was concerned to satisfy the girl moaning like a wild animal with her eyes closed somewhere underneath me. It's just that in order to come, I had to imagine a knife slicing through skin, blood streaming from the wound and a severed nipple falling to the bloody floor. Imagine flayed scalps, a stake transfixing someone from anus to throat, little girls, with breasts that are still tiny, weeping, down on their knees with their hands cut off.

All the blood in the world, yes all the blood in the world.

Imagining such things is not really very pleasant – especially when a woman you love is lying beside you. And so I used to take a long time making love, holding back right to the end, only letting my imagination off the leash when I was really tired. When I was tired or when it got too boring. Then I came quickly, in the same one or two minutes as my peers who were regarded as quick finishers.

That evening I was home alone. I stood there masturbating in the shower, the jets of water were streaming over my skin, but not the jet of cum, no, the jet of cum was still biding its time. All in all, it was a comic scene. A grown man who has been tossing off for so long he's starting to get tired.

You know, like in the joke: “change hands” said the doctor. I did change hands, and more than once. The jets of water were streaming over my skin, my prick seemed huge, the fantasies that used to bring me to orgasm flashed past one after another in front of my closed eyes. But nothing happened.

All in all, it was a comic scene. But I didn’t find it funny at all. When I was tired I sat on the edge of the bath, looking at my prick, which was still aroused, its head as huge and red as if all the blood in the world had flowed into it. As a young child I had already guessed what the world around me was like. I didn’t even have to watch TV, I already knew anyway. Although I do remember the anchorman on the Sunday politics program explaining that in America a rape took place every fifteen minutes. The Sunday politics program, a fatted hog, a privileged swine. Every fifteen minutes. Only in America.

My parents sat beside me, watched the same screen, listened to the same words. Not a single muscle twitched in their faces, as if this had nothing to do with them – incredible, every fifteen minutes a woman weeps and struggles with tears of despair in her eyes, her scream is smothered by a sweaty palm. I didn’t know then how much time one rape takes, but I did understand that just as one rapist started cooling off, the next was setting to work – at the other side of the country, with a different woman. Believe it or not, but I felt that this concerned all of us, not just the ideological struggle, the conflict between two systems and TV propaganda.

I was 14 years old, I already masturbated, imagining youthful plantation owners flogging black female slaves with canes – but at that moment I wasn’t thinking about my fantasies, I wasn’t aroused – after all, I didn’t feel aroused when the TV news told us about the labour camps in Cambodia, and Soviet war films showed Nazi German newsreels with dump trucks piling up skeletons covered with skin from the concentration camps. I wasn’t aroused – I just felt I’d heard something that was directly connected with my life.

I was 14 years old, it was my life then, and it was still mine now. I sat on the edge of the bath and my prick seemed huge, and I realised that somehow I had to tell people about the world I had lived in for as long as I could remember. I was a bookish boy, but I could never find the right words. Perhaps because I had seen them too often on paper.

This is a comfortless world, a world that has no place for hope, where death is inevitable and suffering is routine and unendurable. This is a world in which children’s heads are piled up into pyramids in Ruanda, to make it easier to count them, a world in which a thirty-year-old man sits on the edge of his bath in Moscow and cries because he can’t come, he can’t come even when he imagines how, strip by strip, he tears the skin off a fifteen-year-old girl who is begging for mercy, a girl who has no more tears, because her eyes have been gouged out.

He cries precisely because this picture is the only thing that arouses him