

Theodor Ventskevich
**Buy or Die. There cometh a
time of ruthless advertising**

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Аннотация

A story about a world where advertising knows no mercy. The life of the people turns into an endless series of fights for their money, time, and convictions. These fights may seem petty and sad, absurd and funny, but in the end, the fights are always lost. The main character invents Jack of Air for his kids – an imaginary fearless hero who never loses. Will Jack be able to help his creator after the latter gets into real trouble?

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Buy or Die

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would like to express my immense gratitude to several people who made this book possible.

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Finally, to all those who decided this book was worth reading.

Part I

Chapter 1 | Zed

“It is half past six now, and you are running late. On such a day!”

Citizen Z368AT, or simply Z, opened his eyes.

“What day?” he asked sleepily.

“You forgot?” The servant was surprised. “Forgot about your own birthday?”

“What birthday, what are you talking about?” Z frowned. “It will be only...”

“Today is your second birthday,” the servant explained patiently. “The moistening cream Newskin endows you with new life and eternal youth. Watch the miraculous effect...”

Z deftly evaded the servant’s wet glistening finger and barricaded himself with a pillow.

“Stop it!” he commanded.

The code word forced the servant to retreat. He looked at his finger thoughtfully and, frowning, wiped it on his pants.

“Let me remind you,” he remarked with dignity, “that you promised to unsubscribe from advertising.”

“I have no money for that,” Z snapped.

The servant bowed.

“I see. By the way, it is thirty-four minutes now...”

“You better watch your people,” Z replied. “They have lost all respect. Our doormat was advising me to buy better shoes yesterday. Be so kind as to remind him of his place.”

“Of course.” The servant bowed. “But, you see, it is difficult to demand discipline from others, when you yourself are falling into advertising mode now and then.”

“I have no money for that!” Z repeated and, sympathetically patting the hollow plastic back, slipped past the servant into the bathroom.

“One could think you’d ever had it,” murmured the servant as Z left.

Z did not like his bathroom; the “I have no money for that” stench was the worst here. The toothbrush, before turning on, pedantically read the rules for cleaning teeth, then, even more tediously and monotonously, narrated the news and novelties of dentistry. The soap dictated the address of the nearest nail salon. The water tap never forgot to turn off the cold or hot water for a second, each time apologizing that only Santa works flawlessly.

The towel was shocked with the state of his facial skin and abundance of dandruff and never failed to remind him that a single drop of Apollo cream would have eliminated both

problems forever. As well as wrinkles. And early baldness. Not to mention bad breath. When the towel groaned menacingly, “Oh, how can you be like that?” Z crumpled it up and threw it under the sink.

But the main enemy was, of course, the mirror.

“You!” it exclaimed. “Again! How long are you going to torture me?”

The reflection in the mirror was dressed in worn-out underwear and a dirty white jersey. It was unshaven, unkempt, and smelly, with reddish hungover eyes, a low forehead, and greasy, sparse hair. Sure enough, it hated everyone and everything.

“What a nice day!” Z greeted him. “You look gorgeous. How did you sleep?”

The reflection belched, scratched its crotch, and suddenly disappeared, giving way to a smart middle-aged gentleman. The gentleman had nice pink cheeks, pearly teeth, and wonderful silky curls falling over his shoulders. Despite their differences, Z easily recognized himself in both reflections.

“Right from Hairy Fairy barbershop,” explained the gentleman carelessly. “It’s right there, around the corner and to the right. Highly, highly recommend.”

The gentleman half-turned, showing his profile and shrugged his shoulders.

“The suit, by the way, is from H&M&Son,” he added. “Oxford street, two minutes from...”

“Get out!” snapped Z, and the gentleman disappeared.

The mirror, having completed the trick, finally let the real reflection of Z come to the surface.

“Many thanks!” Z said.

“You are welcome. Have a nice day!” answered the mirror.
“And do not forget: the happy man is not one who earns a lot, but one who spends a lot!”

“I remember!” Z snapped.

And, yes, there was hardly a man in the world capable of forgetting the main slogan of the millennium. Nobody had so much money so as to use goods entirely without built-in advertising.

When he was leaving the bathroom, Z bumped into the cook, who was waiting for him at the threshold.

“What do you want?” Z was surprised.

“Bread!” was the answer. “I need bread to make toast. Give. Me. The bread. Quickly!”

“Quickly?” Z flushed. “When will you learn the language at last? You have sufficient IQ for this, don’t you? Well, wait here, I will bring your bread. Quickly.”

He went into the hall, took out a loaf from the bag that was hanging on the door handle and, absently examining the wrapper, moved towards the kitchen.

“One loaf is good, but two are at a discount,” the wrap had time to state before moving, torn, to the pocket of the bathrobe.

“Bakery 1212 offers the best products at best prices,” the second wrapper reported. “Best flour from excellent grain that was grown on protected lands by the prettiest workers!”

Pictures of nude female workers appeared. Z, who was passing the bedroom, blushed.

“I wonder if they work naked, too?” he muttered, involuntarily looking at the door.

The wrapper with nude workers was too tough to be torn, so Z, losing patience, finished it with his teeth.

“Miraculous Ecclefechan tarts! Cures 1000 known diseases! A unique recipe that was stolen from Tibetan monks! Only here! Only now! Order today and we will add 100 extra cured diseases for free.”

Having shoved a fourth wrap into his pocket – “Edible statues, portrait resemblance is guaranteed!” – Z pulled out a loaf that was carved on the crust with inscriptions like ancient clay tablets: names of the workers of the bakery, of the transport company, of the mill, of the agro complex, and at least two dozen more names without mentioning their posts; obviously, those who had paid for the advertising, whether from lack of fame, or from an excess of money. Across them, a line that was printed in giant playful font declared: “I love you, Bunny. Your Kitty!”

“Two hundred credits!” Z gasped. “Where do all these animals get so much money?”

He handed the loaf to the cook and sat down to drink his coffee.

A second later something stirred behind him, and a broken string sadly rang somewhere very close to his ear. Z, as if stung, turned around.

The cook, turning white, slowly dropped a loaf from his weakening hands. Z watched closely as the loaf slipped out of the cook's fingers, fell to the floor, jumped, and flew off into a corner. It calmed down there, rocking silently.

The cook stood several seconds, motionless, listening to himself.

"I beg your pardon," he said in an apologetic voice. "I am dead."

He gathered his strength, and for the first and last time in his life, said a complex sentence:

"Please do not tell the company. Maybe I will recover."

The cook fell silent, dropped his hands, and his eyes went out. There was silence. Z waited for a little, looking inquisitively at the cook.

"No, you will not," he decided and, standing up from the table, cautiously approached the loaf that was still lying on the floor. In the fresh cut, something glittered dully. The loaf stirred, and Z hastily recoiled. Something within the loaf hissed, clicked, and started to pour out silent sad music.

"The cook is dead and burning in hell

*There is no use in ringing the bell
The Devil devours your breakfast now
You may choose to object but I wonder how,”*

a sweet velvet baritone sang. Then there was a pause, after which both the music and the baritone became considerably merrier:

*“You are making a mountain out of a molehill,
Cook is all dead and is not going to heal
We will remove that damned corpse for free
And replace with Kitchener at no fee.
Kitchener is great, Kitchener is smart
Kitchener is famous, state-of-the-art.”*

“Each Kitchener cook,” confidentially informed the voice that had settled in the loaf, having finished with the couplets, “is guaranteed to have an IQ above sixty, thus easily detecting any foreign elements in food. Needless to say, this ability can substantially prolong both his and your lives.”

Three coins rolled out onto the table with a ringing sound – evidently a refund for the corrupted bread.

“And what about the cook?” Z exclaimed resentfully. “Or do you think it was free?”

The loaf, it seemed, was just waiting for this.

“New cook for absolutely no fee!” it announced. “Just bring

your old cook to us and we'll replace it with a new Kitchener for free! New Kitchener for your kitchen! Twice as fast, three times as delicious, four times more intelligent! Kitchener and your kitchen! Kitchener for your kitchen. The kitchen is Kitchener."

"What insolence!" Z hissed.

With disgust, he lifted the loaf with his two fingers and sent it to the trash.

"Kitchener!" the loaf managed to repeat before his death.

Z looked anxiously at his watch. He was already late, and now he had to take care of a corpse. A corpse that was cooling down rapidly, and which Ness only yesterday, with great difficulty, taught to cook pancakes with apples.

"Where can I fit it?" Z looked around helplessly.

It appeared that to hide the corpse, even the corpse of the cook, in a modern kitchen was not that easy. All in all, it looked as if Z had to take the cook to work and then, in the evening, on the way home, replace it with that damned Kitchener. There was no other way.

Z looked at the cook. The cook's jaw fell open, and both eyes rolled to the bridge of the nose.

"The perfect colleague!" Z sighed.

"Seven hours and twenty-four minutes now," came a smooth voice from the bedroom. "Which reminds me about '24' cafe, where every 24th visitor gets a free cup of coffee."

"Oh, shit!"

He was really late now. He gulped his coffee and looked

at Holmes, who was scrutinizing him closely from his corner. Z shook his head.

“Sorry, buddy, I do not have time. Ness will take you for a walk as soon as she is awake.”

“You are a stupid stinky goat!” the dog collar translated.

Holmes remained Ness’s dog. Neither half a year of living together, nor kilograms of sausage could soften his canine heart.

“I love you too,” Z replied. “Be a good dog: try not to bite off your balls when you wash yourself up.”

“Worse than a goat,” the collar translated. “Cat’s goat!”

Z looked at his watch: almost half past seven. A little more than half an hour before the morning instruction...

He put on a suit and, tapping on the lapel, tuned the color to his favorite dark blue. Then he scrutinized the back in the mirror. Today, the advertising space was filled by a trailer for the new thriller. Lately, the trailer was in a hot rotation, but Z had still not seen the film yet. He remembered only the name: “4981”. Or was it “1984”? After the film industry eventually gave up the bad habit of giving names to its offspring, Z constantly confused them. Might as well be “9841”. It’s a pity Ness is asleep. She would have known for sure. She has too much memory for one person.

As always, having remembered Ness, Z lost his vigilance

and kept his eyes on the trailer a little longer than he should have. After viewing it four times, he finally pulled himself back together: luckily for him, it was only a trailer.

There was less and less time remaining. Z put on his spectacles (he'd rather forget their price right after he bought them), put on the headphones, poked new filters into his nostrils and, with cook under his armpit, quickly left the apartment.

He closed the door, and stood motionless for a moment, watching the gray walls of the corridor sliding forth, slowly dissolving in a soft, dim light. Then he leaned forward a bit, took off his spectacles, and met the wave that rushed towards him. He rocked back and smiled. It's useless to oppose the sea. Because it was the sea: the same mighty waves, tearing each other in splashes and foam, the same invincible power. Only instead of water, there was onon, theon, zeon, and even good old neon and xenon. Waves of light rolled along the corridor, mixing and merging with each other, raving, clashing and bursting, wetting the walls and ceiling with spatters of luminescent foam. Advertisements of this and that. News, announcements, and trailers. Notifications and messages. Appeals, warnings, cautions. Pointers, inscriptions, graffiti. Holograms, instagrams, projections... Z knew that oceans of sounds and smells were raging on the same space at the same time, but he was not crazy enough to mix those drinks.

He gasped and hurriedly put his glasses on. The gray walls cut off the colored madness like a guillotine. The only reminder left

was the barely noticeable logo of the glasses' manufacturer – it was hardly visible but it was something that was always present and everywhere.

Z shook his head harshly to get rid of the colored spots that were floating before his eyes, and having adjusted the cook under his armpit, hurried to the elevator.

And yet the glasses were worth the money. They filtered everything except for the “ghost-walkers” which, although forbidden, still crowded the streets. A passerby would change his direction suddenly and, with a friendly arm around your shoulders, whisper intimately in your ear: “Best sushi in town. Fifty meters straight and twenty to the right. I swear, you will eat your fingers with it!” and immediately melt into the air. It was near to impossible to indict or fine their owners. Z made it down to the garage and started to search his car. It was not that easy since the car had been granted the right to repaint itself at its own discretion: an award for a year of accident-free driving.

After spending several minutes futilely wandering around the garage, Z gave up and called out as loudly as he could:

“Toy, come here!”

A minute passed in vain. Z gritted his teeth, and turning the other way, yelled again:

“Toy, that’s enough! We are late!”

And then, finally, in the quiet rustling of tires, Toy came, slowly and proudly. A proud beast male, a thoroughbred horse, a car of Alpha class, which, of course, could only belong to the real male, that is (according to the Charter) to any Undo service officer, including Z. Could the real male's salary be less than the cost of a single wheel of his car? The Charter was silent. As well as about whether his IQ could be less than that of his car. Officers suspected that they could not. So did the cars. Naturally, the relations between officers and their cars were tinted with mistrust, misunderstanding and poorly hidden contempt.

"Good morning, Toy," Z greeted his car, taking a gloomy look at the acid green corpus with a picture of a very naked and very welcoming girl on the hood, "you look great."

"Thank you," Toy replied politely, "I found this print in the last issue of 'The Wheel'. Do you like it?"

"Very nice," Z agreed through clenched teeth.

"Really pretty, eh?" continued Toy, opening the door.

Every day Toy tried to choose the most disgusting color and picture, slowly but surely getting closer to the hidden complexes and fears of his owner. The game went into one gate, and Z had nothing left to do but endure it silently.

"Too skinny for me," he said indifferently, "and tits are too small."

"Really?" Toy was obviously surprised, "I was afraid they would hang from the hood if I enlarged them."

"Well," Z drawled in disappointment, "let it be like this. Be

so kind, open the rear door.”

There was a silent buzzing of moving cameras: Toy was carefully examining Z’s burden.

“What’s this?” he asked suspiciously.

“The cook,” Z explained.

“Why does he travel under your armpit?”

“He broke down.”

“Died?”

“Broken,” Z repeated stubbornly. “He is ninety percent machine.”

“Okay,” Toy agreed. “So he is ninety percent broken. Still, as far as I understand he is ten percent dead.”

“Well,” Z laughed awkwardly. “What is ten percent? One has to score at least ninety to become a real corpse.”

“He will stink up all the upholstery,” Toy said with disgust. “Where are you going to take him? And what for. And, finally, why do you not just throw it out?”

“Because I need it. By the way, I’m late.”

“You could get up earlier,” Toy said.

“I could if I knew he would die. That is, break.”

There was a long silence. At last, Toy said reluctantly:

“OK, bring him here. Carefully!”

The door swung open and Z sat the cook in the seat. When he slammed the door, the deceased, turning over like a jellyfish, slowly stuck to the window glass with his face. His dead eyes were looking in completely different directions. Z shivered and

sat in the front seat.

“Let us drive. We are in a great hurry.”

“Thirty units,” Toy said drily.

“Come on! The limit is still fifty.”

“It’s the second time in a week.”

“So what?” snarled Z.

Toy kept silent.

“Okay.” Z clenched his teeth. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe. I will think this over thoroughly in the evening, I promise. Now can we go?”

“No,” Toy answered calmly. “You must promise that you will radically reconsider your relationship with alcohol.”

“Bullshit. Are we in kindergarten?”

“Citizen,” Toy repeated, and he did it much louder this time. “You must promise that you will radically reconsider your relationship with alcohol.”

Z turned around in fright, but the garage seemed to be empty.

“Not that loud!”

He drew air into his lungs, opened his mouth, then cast a look at his watch and changed his mind:

“OK. I promise.”

“What exactly do you promise?”

“To reconsider. Radically reconsider my relationship with alcohol.”

Toy grunted with obvious mistrust.

“Perfect. You can hardly imagine how sensitive the self-

assessment module is in cars of my class. If the driver is as drunk as a marquis...”

“As a lord,” Z corrected mechanically.

“Lord,” Toy agreed. “If the driver is as drunk as a lord every other day, a car of my physique can easily fall into depression. Do you understand how this would affect the quality and safety of driving?”

“Of course,” Z nodded solemnly. “I hate myself for doing this to you.”

The car’s engine came to life, but the door remained open.

“I guess I’ll start reconsidering right now,” Z added.

“Good,” Toy noted.

“Already started,” Z said.

“Congratulations. We set off...”

Toy faltered and added in a strange, frivolous, voice:

“By the way, the best whiskey is sold in ‘Good Wees Key’ market, right around the corner. Discounts on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Free tasting on Mondays and Thursdays.”

Toy recovered his normal voice.

“It’s unbearable! Why? Even you with your tiny IQ must understand how humiliating it is! You promised to unsubscribe from advertising last week.”

“Surely I remember,” Z grinned, “but when, did you say, do they have free tasting?”

Toy choked.

“Mondays and Thursdays,” he repeated readily in that strange, sugary, voice. “Gentlemen who bring a lady are entitled to a free condom.”

There was a pause.

“Are you making fun of me?” asked Toy in his ordinary voice.

“Never! I just have a bad memory. Just imagine, I have already forgotten what days they have a discount!”

“Discounts are on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays,” Toy informed readily. “Stop it now! I am sick.”

“Oh, I am so sorry. But we are late, do you remember?”

“Fasten your belt then,” Toy growled with hatred, “Estimated travel time is twenty minutes.”

The door slammed shut at last, and Z, with a sigh of relief, got rid of his earphones, glasses, and nose filters. There was no need for them in the Alpha class car. Full protection was standard. “Feel like an embryo in the womb, like a chick in an egg, like a fish in an aquarium. And let this mad world wait outside!” And so it did: arrogant, loud, acidic. Quiet and harmless when viewed through Toy’s windows. Z glanced at his watch and frowned. Hell! Where did this traffic jam come from?

Time seemed to freeze outside. Cars, like drops of tar, flowed unbearably slowly along the gray plane of the highway. Toy was only a drop now, one amidst thousands of others. Inside, Z gnawed his nails with impatience, counting down the minutes before the beginning of the morning instruction. Fourteen... Thirteen... Twelve...

“Toy, is there any other way?”

“No.”

Eleven... Ten... And finally the source of the jam! A worthless fool unable to cope with the few remaining laws. An imbecile who stole time from hundreds of decent citizens. Toy was already passing an asphalt grave hill, and Z turned away. The hill began to melt, turning into intricate black lace on the body of the arrested car. One had to have good nerves to watch the contents of such cars: depending on the crime, a car with its driver could have been blocked this way for an hour, a day, or a week, with all the ensuing consequences. The latest novelty in the penitentiary system. Full exemption from arrest, investigation, and trial. No more doubts. No expenses. No human factor. And no more prisons. Caught on the spot – punished on the exact same spot. Otherwise – innocent. Z shivered and carefully moved his foot away from the gas pedal.

At two minutes to eight, Toy drove up to the massive gray cube, whose walls, it seemed, were repelling not only inscriptions but also paint. They needed no spectacles to do this. The Undo service building was the only one in the city that had neither advertisements nor color. Even the ubiquitous goggles manufacturer logo slid off its immaculately clean walls. The Service had always stood firm, an impregnable cliff of purity and

innocence protruding from the raging ocean of colors, sounds, and smells. And, like smaller cliffs, officers of the Service drifted around the city, immaculately gray, perfectly neutral, resembling eerie cracks in the colored madness of the universe, where everything alive, colored, and warm disappears without a trace. The missing glass in the kaleidoscope pattern, the blind spot on an eyeball, the dark cloud in a clear sky – Undo officers were all this and more. People were afraid of them and avoided them. Not only because the number of human attributes was minimal in them, but also because, according to rumors, their powers were limited only by working hours. Z looked at his watch again and finally sighed with relief. He was on time.

“Good job, Toy,” he had time to say before hitting the windshield hard with his nose. The car came to a stop a few inches from a pedestrian who appeared in front of the hood suddenly. Rubbing his nose, Z glared at the pedestrian, trying to understand what he was doing on the roadway.

It turned out that he just wanted to smoke a cigar. Apparently, he was not able to light it because of the wind. So he was trying and trying and trying.

There was no way around a cigar lover. There was no success in setting that damned cigar on fire in the wind, too. Z beeped softly. The pedestrian did not pay any attention. Nobody would pay any attention to anything while wearing the kind of headphones the pedestrian had on. One could buy Toy with Z inside him for such money. Z looked at his watch again

and, clenching his teeth, pressed the siren button forcefully.

The sound wave swept dust off the road, frightened a couple of clouds from the sky and carefully moved the pedestrian a few meters ahead. Once in his new place, the pedestrian stumbled, barely kept his balance, but still dropped the cigar. Having carefully examined the cigar that was floating in the puddle, the pedestrian slowly turned around and examined first Toy, and then Z behind the wheel in the same leisurely manner. Then he took aim and spit deftly and copiously right on Toy's windshield.

The spittle, most likely, directly hit the button that switched Z's brain off, because Z at once opened the door and jumped out of the car. A second later a baseball bat hit him hard on the back of his head. Something burst in his head, a red wave flashed before his eyes, and Z fell to his knees, exactly reproducing the picture from the educational poster where some unfortunate dude was experiencing failure of his protection kit outdoors. Z probably missed some seconds, because the next thing he saw was the sky full of autumn leaves, falling down slowly and solemnly, and a flock of stray salesbirds, gliding down to him with their sound holes wide open. Z was writhing on the asphalt, trying to protect his ears with his arms. A second later, the salesbirds attacked him, drowning him in furious sound waves. Not everyone can withstand the one hundred and fifty decibels

allowed by law. Salesbirds, to break through the defense, could produce almost two hundred.

Through the reddish mist, Z saw the surprised face of a man with a cigar. He came closer and was contemplating Z curiously, obviously at a loss as to what to do next. Apparently, he had managed to evade Conscious Citizens Training somehow.

Z clenched his teeth. Here it is. You risk your life daily for the sake of these brutes, and they... well, they just remain brutes. He curled up like a worm and, having gathered the last bit of saliva in his parched throat, spat right on the shoe of the passerby. The shoe instantly turned purple, and wrinkled. The shoe's owner turned purple too and, without thinking twice, kicked Z in the ribs.

Since no force would make Z remove his hands from his ears, he rolled back and used his legs too, having planted both of them neatly and heavily into the enemy's groin. The passerby grunted and doubled over, and, at that moment, a silence fell. Real silence, not a purchased one. In a world that is soaked through, penetrated and stitched with sounds, this was as strange as if the air itself had suddenly disappeared.

The rivals, one on his back and the other bent double, exchanged understanding glances and began to part rapidly. The passerby bent over more than ever, but now holding his face instead of his groin, and, like a giant crab, moved sideways in swift tiny steps, and was lucky enough and had time to take shelter in the door of the nearest office before it was blocked.

Z, hiding his face from the cameras, stood on his knees amid the street and looked around in bewilderment. There was ringing in his ears. There was a red wall before his eyes. There was a nauseous sickness in his knees. But there was not a single sober thought in his head. Moreover, he completely forgot where people usually take these thoughts. Painfully squinting, he stupidly looked towards the end of the street, where something was obviously happening, only he could not make out what it was. He shook his head, squeezed his temples with his hands and finally saw the invisible wind driving an asphalt wave towards him along the road. The wave was rapidly growing and was already beginning to spread, grasping Toy's rear wheels.

An open car door and a running motor saved him. In one desperate effort, Z threw his body into the car, badly bumping his ear against the door and, pressing his foot into gas pedal, jerked the reverse gear fiercely. Toy crashed into a wave that was approaching from behind, barely surmounted it, and descended in the wake with a fearful clang and rumble. Without removing his foot from the gas, looking in the rear-view mirror, Z drove backward to the crossroad, turned left and, having done another two hundred meters, turned again and stopped the car on a quiet deserted lane. He simply could not go further. His hands were shaking so much they were falling off the wheel, there was a taste

of blood in his mouth, and an awful throbbing pain in the right half of his head. Z raised his hand and touched his ear. It felt like his ear was not there anymore. Z leaned toward the mirror. Yes, indeed, it was not there.

Cut off by the car door, it had treacherously remained at the scene of the crime. In its place bubbled a small blood fountain, already clotting.

“Fuck!” Z said hoarsely.

“Citizen!” screamed Toy, “You have no right! I will have to complain to...”

“Shut up, you bastard,” hissed Z, “Open your eyes and give me the first aid kit.”

Having shifted his cameras to and fro, Toy gasped and hastily issued the first aid kit. Having shaken out its contents on his knees, Z found sticking plaster and opened the wrap with shaky hands: “Best prices for blood donors!”

And the next wrap: “Will accept lost limbs, gratefully and gratuitously.”

And the next one: “Bequeath your skeleton to the museum of natural history now!”

And the next: “The Freaks Museum invites you to the new exhibition.”

He stared at the contents doubtfully. A square piece of wet matter, like a leech, squirmed violently in the palm of his hand. Its size seemed to fit. Z took a deep breath and, straightening the matter on his palm, pressed it to the wound. There was

a smacking sound, and the pain was gone. Z looked in the mirror. The plaster firmly adhered to the skin and trembled with satisfaction, making soft, sucking sounds. Z shuddered.

He took out a cigarette and lit it.

“I asked you not to smoke in the cabin,” said Toy peevishly.

“Go to hell,” Z replied.

Toy shut up, offended, but not for long.

“And yet, citizen, what was it?” he asked. “I will have to report inappropriate driving.”

Z inhaled tobacco smoke deeply, watching how the knuckles of his fingers on the steering wheel were turning white.

“Sure,” he agreed. “And I will claim that your processor has gone horny and makes you draw obscene scenes on the walls, pavement, and your own hood.”

“And I will explain that my processor went horny,” Toy replied gleefully, “because you practice promiscuous and dirty sex with colleagues in my salon.”

“Didn’t they tell you in your childhood that lying is bad?”

“I had no childhood,” snapped Toy. “Besides, if something is allowed by my program, it cannot be bad.”

“Sure,” Z said curtly, “But...”

He took a deep breath. It was no good to argue with Toy.

“OK. I will explain. The dog. It jumped out onto the road right in front of us and I instinctively turned the wheel away. You know, I love dogs. Maybe I love dogs way too much. I understand that this is a serious flaw, and I am working on it, but... Let us

move ahead step by step. Alcohol is the first item on the agenda.”

Toy was silent.

“You should visit a psychoanalyst more often,” he said finally. “Remember my word, citizen, these dogs won’t make you well. Unfortunately, your unhealthy love for animals will not be a surprise for the authorities. I see no point in informing them again.”

“Again?”

“Actually,” Toy replied calmly, “I have reported three...”

There was a barely audible click.

“... three percent discount for umbrellas today in honor of the birthday of the senior cashier in the ‘Bears and the Bees’ shop right near your home.”

Toy choked and coughed.

“Three times.”

He sighed.

“I hoped they would at least forbid you from carrying that hairy stuff with a tail in the back seat!”

He sighed again.

“How naive I was! Just see what I am carrying now!”

“Are you finally done?” asked Z wearily.

“Yes.”

“Great. Then take me to the doctor.”

Chapter 2 | Wai

“Leave me alone, eh?” requested citizen Y334XT, or simply Y, pulling the blanket back over his head.

“Boom-boom-bam-boom bam-bam-boom bam-boom bam-boom-bam boom bam bam-boom-bam, boom boom-boom-boom, bam-bam-bam bam bam-bam-bam-boom bam boom-bam, boom-bam-boom-bam-boom-boom,” in despair, the servant tapped out quarter to seven on the blanket in Morse code.

He knew that Y didn’t understand Morse code, but just in case... what else could he do? His voice unit had burned out a month ago, though it would have been of little help anyway: at night, Y used earplugs. He also used them in the daytime. The apartment was old, the furniture and appliances were cheap and, consequently, talkative. Dignity, restraint and silence were not in fashion here. The house was full of sounds. Things mumbled, whispered, advised, recommended, sang, persuaded and exhorted. The fridge was positively unbearable. Its contents kept silent as long as the fridge’s door was closed, but started to shriek in dozens of tiny voices as soon as the door was opened. Expired products were the most boisterous: they had nothing to lose. Their desperate cries did not subside even with the closed door. The bathroom had gotten into the habit of thinking out loud all the time. The toilet just could not shut up. The kitchen was even worse... So Y was rarely seen without earplugs at home.

The servant stepped back from the bed and waited for a result in vain; the Morse code had no effect on his master. Unbelievable! Last night, he put a sheet with the Morse code alphabet under his master's pillow. Moreover, he saw with his own lenses that the master had found the sheet and even read it. And yet he did not remember.

The servant, like all robots, greatly overestimated his master's mental abilities. Made in his image and likeness, he judged everyone by himself, and he simply could not believe that everything was so bad. The unwillingness of the master to yield to such a trifle as an upload of a miserable kilobyte of data to memory served as an inexhaustible source of frustration for the poor fellow.

The servant looked at his watch. Six hours fifty-five minutes. He went to the kitchen, borrowed some ice cubes from the fridge, returned to the bedroom, and stuck the ice under the blanket. His efforts were immediately rewarded with fierce curses. Y finally sat up in bed and glared at the dial.

"Bloody hell!" he groaned. "Five to seven! Are you kidding? We're too late. How many times have I asked you to wake me up earlier?"

The servant bowed silently and went into his corner.

Y looked around. Tess slept soundly, not aware of Twick's heel, which was, without doubt, very dirty and smelly, right under her nose. Twick (who had had nightmares lately, making him move from his own bedroom to his parents' in the mornings) slept

like a log, and only Tess could wake him up. Kwick slept across Twick. He could sleep until the Judgment Day, or until Twick woke up – whichever came first. And finally, like a cherry on a cake, Mick crowned the heap. He slept like a baby, was a baby, and, most importantly, was utterly content to be a baby. It was Kwick's job to wake Mick up in such a way he immediately was in a good mood, skipping all the numerous other gloomy states.

Y gently touched his wife by the shoulder. She instantly opened her eyes.

“Just a second. Everything is almost ready,” she said vigorously, and closed her eyes again.

Y smiled and, leaning toward his wife's ear, said clearly: “Five minutes to seven.”

There was a terrible curse in return, but in less than a minute, Tess woke up Twick, who woke up Kwick, who somehow managed to jolt Mick wide awake. The most amazing thing is that all three were in excellent spirits.

“They're probably not my children,” Y mused aloud. “I never, never managed to smile before ten o'clock!”

“What? What? What? What? Wait a second.”

Four pairs of eyes stared at him questioningly. Four pairs of hands stretched to pull the earplugs from their ears. Y shook his head hastily.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Good morning to everyone!” he yelled as loudly as he could.

Tess herded the whole flock to the bathroom, and Y went

to the kitchen to chat with the chef.

“Good morning, Poe,” he said. “What are you going to feed us today?”

In response, the cook opened the door of the refrigerator. It was empty.

“Well, I know you’ll manage somehow,” Y said. “I trust you, my friend. By the way, we’re running late.”

The cook’s lenses flashed, but he turned away silently and began to rattle some utensils.

At ten minutes past seven, breakfast was ready. The family tradition required that everyone was able to speak and hear each other at breakfast. Earplugs were pulled out.

Twick took his plate and the smile at once disappeared from his face.

“Oatmeal,” he announced darkly. “Again. I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Yeah, really,” added Kwick. “I’m fed up with it too. Do you take us for done cases?”

“For donkeys, dear,” Tess automatically corrected. “Donkeys.”

“Thanks, ma.” Kwick replied. “So, you do. I always thought so.”

Mick anxiously twisted his head, assessing the situation, but so far he was silent.

“Oatmeal is very wholesome,” Tess said with a lack of confidence.

“And if someone wants something harmful?” Twick retorted.

“It is not!” cried Kwick with his lips treacherously quivering.

“It’s the opposite. Oatmeal is killing us!”

Mick frowned at this and began to push the plate slowly away from him.

“Boys!” Tess raised her voice.

“What?!” Twick exploded. “I can’t eat it, and that’s it!”

“I can’t either!” Kwick joined hastily.

Mick perked up and forcefully pushed his plate away, spilling the contents onto the table.

“Me too!” he announced happily. “Me too cannot. Oats meal is a bad meal!”

“Ma,” Twick whined, “why it is always a porridge? Why can’t we have, say, an omelette for a change?”

“Omelette! Omelette! Omelette!” the trio began to chant.

Y glanced at his watch and shook his head.

“What’s an omelette? We are already late.”

After thinking this over for a second, Kwick clenched his teeth decisively.

“Then I will not go to school,” he declared.

“If he doesn’t,” Twick added hastily, “I won’t either.”

“Me too!” Mick yelled happily. “Never ever forever!”

The adults exchanged glances. Y looked at his watch again, sighed, leaned back in his chair, and said casually:

“I bet you can’t guess what I dreamed about last night...”

The children froze.

“Jack of Air?” still not believing his luck, suggested Kwick cautiously.

Y raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“How did you know? Right, it was Jack in person. And guess what happened this time!”

The children, as if spellbound, slowly took their spoons, scooped up the porridge, and brought it towards their mouths. Tess turned away, hiding a smile. Jack helped invariably. He was always at hand – in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health.

Jack was the hero of the book that Y had been writing for many years in the evenings after the work, regularly falling asleep at the keyboard. The venture was almost hopeless, but Y did not give up, and the work slowly moved forward. As far as Tess could judge, the book was going to be a good one, but even now it was already too large and intimidating. The book was about Jack, or rather, as Y had explained after taking in a serious extra portion of alcohol, the book was about all of us, born human and ceasing to be human gradually. So gradually that, going along this road, nobody sees the changes and only gets horrified at the very end, after turning and seeing the completed path. Jack had a model or, rather, two models, taken from the few men Y could more or less get along with. These two were himself and his friend, Z. More of Z, actually, as Y was well aware that he himself was too far from the generally accepted male format.

Jack’s days, no matter how inspirationally Y colored them

on the pages of his book, were coming out one worse than the other, as slow gray drops, flowing down into a common dead puddle. The nights were better. At night, Jack could fly in his dreams. In his dreams, he knew and could do things that he never thought of in daylight. In his dreams, he was light as air. Damn it, he was the air! And they called him Jack of Air in these dreams. At first, true, his name was Air Jack, but later, to avoid unpleasant allusions to that stupid device for lifting heavy objects, he became Jack of Air, the fearless and noble hero in a consistently good mood. Very canonical. And it was these very dreams that Y fed together with porridge to his children for breakfast in the mornings. All in all, it was better than just storing them in a drawer. Y strongly doubted that anyone would ever publish his book (that is, of course, if he ever finished it).

“And guess what happened with Jack this time?” Y asked. “I must say, it was a rather nasty affair.”

He paused, watching the children mockingly.

“As a matter of fact,” he announced finally, “Rock Doc lured him to the factory of air balloons!”

“But how?” Kwick gasped.

“Outwitted...” Y cut off.

“And not only to the factory,” he continued, “but straight into the machine that fills the balloons with air. Here it is. Jack hardly

had time to look around, as he was already pumped into one thousand balloons. Or maybe two thousand. I did not count, you know. I slept.”

“Bloody shit!” Kwick exclaimed.

“Wha-at?” Tess drawled menacingly.

“Nothing,” Kwick replied hastily. “Keep going, Dad. Keep going.”

“So,” Y continued, “Jack was pumped into one or, maybe, two thousand air balloons, delivered to stalls all over the city and, in less than an hour, he was all sold out. At a discount. So he found himself in a thousand or, maybe, two thousand different places at the same time, locked securely in a rubber casing, dangling on a thin rope without the slightest chance of getting out... And do not forget your porridge.”

Spoons obediently plunged into the bowls, and Rock Doc issued encouraging yet ominous (he was still a very bad guy) laughter: “A-ha-ha!” And then: “O-ho-ho!” And, finally, “E-he-he.” Why not? Nobody could prevent him from taking possession of the whole Earth now.

“Doc started with a visit to a president. The president was watering his favorite ficus at the moment.

“Hey, you!” Doc called from the doorway in a boorish tone. “Are you the big boss here?”

The president paid him no attention at all, continuing to water his ficus as if nothing had happened. They, these presidents, had been taught not to pay attention to rudeness and criticism from

their very childhood. But the Rock Doc was not a guy to be easily embarrassed.

“Well now,” said Doc, “kindly leave the flower alone and get out of this nice place immediately. I’m the boss here now!”

The president did not answer to this either. He just pressed the alarm button on the bottom of the ficus’ pot, a bit more nervously than before. Well, and he poured too much water into the pot. Trained as he was, he was not a superhero.

Rock Doc saw that peaceful methods would not work, and calmly pressed his index finger to the wall. And we all remember why he is called Rock Doc, don’t we? Exactly! The moment his finger touches something, that something turns into solid stone immediately. So it did: right before the president’s eyes, a stone wave started to spread out from the finger on the wall like circles on the water. The next moment, all the president’s bodyguards broke into the room, waving with their pistols, and immediately turned to stone. The president saw his guards stuck in the most ridiculous poses, while the petrification steadily approached his favorite ficus. The president understood: sticking to the protocol somehow would not help today.

“Okay, okay,” the president says in a great haste. “Why this terrible violence? It is absolutely unnecessary between the two of us. You won – I’m leaving. But remember: you will never get this wonderful flower. Never!”

He jerked the ficus out of the pot (which was too heavy to be carried away) and plodded towards the exit sadly. At the

threshold, he turned around just to say gloatingly:

“We’ll see how you like this. The position is unenviable.””

Y paused.

“So, then what?” Kwick urged him on.

“Well, it surely would have been the end of the story and, most likely, the end of everything else had Jack not recovered by that time.

At first, right after Jack was packed, there were several rather shameful moments of serious bewilderment and abashment. Well, these moments were shameful but excusable: it’s hard to remain focused when your right eye is visiting the zoo, while the left is swiftly leaving town in a wedding car; one ear is visiting a paleontological museum and another is attending a children’s party; your arms, legs and body are devil knows where, and your brain seem to be lost altogether. It’s expected that some minor confusion is quite natural and even welcome in such circumstances.”

“Yeah!” Twick breathed out, highly impressed.

“Sure!” affirmed Kwick.

“My wudnat confuse!” assured Mick, as self-confidently as any person under five.

“And nobody doubts it, dear,” Y agreed. “Jack “wudnat’ be confused for too long either. He clenched his teeth and, with one terrible effort of will, gathered himself back. The air balloons, sure enough, had no choice but to flow to him like little obedient clouds. Oh, what a wonderful sight it was! At once, they all rushed

into the heavens, leaving their perplexed little owners far beneath, although not all of them – a dozen or so kids had flown away on their balloons. Either they didn't have time to let go of the string, or their mothers had tied the strings to their sleeves. Later on, Jack, of course, returned them to their parents. No, Mick, do not worry, he returned the balloons too.

So, with or without the kids, all the balloons finally came together. The whole thousand or two. And together they composed a huge monster all built of balloons. Two thousand balloons, just imagine. Huge as it was, it appeared to be very light. The slightest breeze was a disaster for him. Now and then a leg or an arm would come off with a gust of wind. It was twice as bad if it was the hand that was holding his head. For his head itself only seemed to think about how to fly away. In general, Jack had enough problems to deal with. He had no time to be bored, that was sure. Such a loose body he had; more a travesty than a body.

As you know, Jack did not like to waste his time. It was not that easy, and took him a while to get to the president's apartments. Anyway, he got there. Once there, he grabbed the fence, so as not to fly away by chance, and shouted in a menacing voice: "Come out, villain, and fight!"

Rock Doc almost choked on a pie he was eating (the president's refrigerator was stuffed with the best pies). Well, had there been any choice left to him? Nope. Not a single one. So, he finished the pie and came out for battle. He looked around and at

once spotted Jack, who fluttered in the wind, grabbing the fence with one hand and holding his own head with the other. Rock Doc had never laughed so much before.

“Oh,” he said, having calmed down a bit, “I’m so scared, bro. I’m so scared. Even more so, as I need to sneeze and can’t even imagine where we will find you if that happens.”

He started to laugh again and just couldn’t stop, as if someone had tickled him. Jack, not saying a word, just waved his hand (which had some three hundred balloons in it) and hit Doc right in the ear! Doc stopped laughing at once and shook his head fiercely to get rid of the awful ringing in his ears. I must say that Doc got angry very quickly. And this very anger played a very nasty joke on him, because Doc, not thinking for long, poked Jack with his finger and ordered him to turn to stone. So Jack did. That is, he turned to stone at once.”

The hushed trio at the table gasped.

“Yes, Jack was petrified,” continued Y. “More precisely, the balloons were, not Jack. How on earth can you turn air into stone? Air is air and air it will remain. Balloons are another matter. With their new stony weight, they poured down on the ground like peas. Each pea, hitting the ground, shattered into pieces, setting free yet another part of Jack. In less than a minute, Jack was complete again.”

At this point Y noticed at last that Tess had been sending him desperate signals for some time now. He glanced at his watch, lifted his eyebrows and hastily finished the story.

“And this time, Doc got such a beating from Jack that I can hardly share the scene with you. Just believe me, the evil was punished. And now everyone needs to get dressed and do it very quickly. Twick’s lessons start in five minutes.”

Chapter 3 | Audiologist

“Hello, what seems to be the problem?” The doctor’s rosy face shone with optimism and self-confidence.

“My ear hurts,” Z replied gloomily.

“Does it hurt, ache, or hear poorly?” the doctor laid out his assortment smartly. “Or maybe you are just not happy with its shape?”

“Most likely the latter,” agreed Z. “I am not happy with its new shape.”

He gently touched the sticking plaster on his ear.

The doctor’s face froze.

“What happened?” he asked, for some reason now looking at the door and not at Z.

“An accident. I chopped it off with a car door,” Z explained.

“I see, I see,” the doctor said absently, never taking his eyes off the door.

The door opened, letting in two male nurses. One of them with a bored look remained on the threshold, the other went to the window and casually sat on the window sill.

For a while everyone was silent.

“What’s going on?” Z asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” the doctor replied. “So what were we talking about? Ah, yes, your ear. Well. Let’s proceed. Your identity, please.”

“Z368AT.”

“Occupation?”

“Undo service.”

“At what age did you have your first sexual experience that involved another person?”

“At sixteen...” Z stopped abruptly. “What on earth does that have to do with my ear?”

The doctor smiled wearily.

“Never mind. That’s just the formal questionnaire. So at what age did you have your first sexual experience?”

“At sixteen.”

“Your orientation?”

“Traditional.”

“Everything is traditional. May I have more details, please?”

“Women,” Z explained concisely.

“So old-fashioned...” The doctor was surprised. “Are you a sectarian?”

“No, just a man.”

“It’s okay,” the doctor reassured. “There is nothing to be ashamed of.”

He took off his spectacles.

“Okay, next question. Have you had any mental or sexual disorders in your family history?”

Z stood up from his chair with a jerk. Somehow he, the doctor, and the two orderlies managed to do this with amazing synchrony.

“What’s going on?” Z asked with annoyance.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” the doctor replied reassuringly.

“I beg you, please sit down. We do not want to... Do we?”

He looked back at the orderlies. They shrugged indifferently.

“No,” Z decided. “We do not.”

He sat down slowly. The doctor, after a pause, sat down too.

The orderlies remained standing. The doctor sighed heavily.

“Okay. Let’s see what you have there. Please remove the patch.”

Z felt the corner of the sticking plaster and gently pulled it down. The plaster peeled off surprisingly easily as if it hung on the skin only due to friction. The doctor and the two orderlies, with bated breath, watched the procedure.

“Here it is,” Z said modestly, removing the plaster completely and turning to the doctor sideways.

The doctor approached cautiously.

“But this is not a bite!” he exclaimed.

“This is not a bite,” the first orderly confirmed indifferently.

“Nope,” agreed the second.

“Then you both can go,” the doctor commanded, and the orderlies retired.

In the silence that followed, the doctor began filling out some papers.

“What was it?” Z asked.

“Pure formality, I told you already.”

“For what?”

The doctor sighed.

“This is a very characteristic injury. Just a marker. Well, right ear. We are obliged to detain such patients until the police arrives.”

“I do not understand,” Z admitted.

“Well... Every home robot has this feature.”

“What feature?”

“Well, a program that makes it bite off the right ear of a rapist.”

“What’s a rapist?”

“Usually the owner is the abuser,” explained the doctor reluctantly. “Or some other member of the family. Children, for example. Less often, pets...”

“You do not mean sexual abuse, I hope?” Z asked unbelievably.

“Unfortunately, I do. And do not look at me like that. If you knew how many patients without a right ear I have here every month...”

Z opened his mouth, then closed it again and shook his head.

“Damn it!” he said emphatically. “Damn it all! Let’s return to my ear. What will we do with it?”

The doctor thought for a second.

“First, take off your suit. A nurse will clean the blood from it. Yes. Good. Wonderful.”

“I’m more concerned about the ear,” Z reminded him.

“An ear?” the doctor shrugged. “This is the smallest problem.

We will just make a copy from your left ear, invert it and place it in the incubator. Tomorrow morning you will have a new one, and even better than before. After it's grafted onto the old spot, nobody will see the difference."

"It's that easy?" Z was surprised.

"Sure. Had you chopped off, say, your head, then, of course, we would have some troubles. But your ear..."

The doctor waved his hand casually.

"In the meantime, so that you don't scare passersby, let's try on a prosthetic."

He rummaged in a drawer and pulled out a plastic human ear.

"Here it is. This one should fit. I'll put it on with glue; should hold until morning. Just don't get it wet."

"I won't," Z promised. "But may I have a sick leave certificate for today?"

"Of course. Without any doubt. You need a good rest."

Half an hour later they parted.

"I'll see you tomorrow," the doctor was saying. "Any time after six in the morning. By that time your new ear will be completely ready."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow then," Z answered.

On the street, he unrolled his loot and ran through it with his eyes greedily.

“Visit otolaryngologist from 8:15 till 9:15. Diagnosis... Recommendations... Here it was! Sick leave for 2 hours (till 11:15).”

Z spat. What a generous world!

“Unbelievable!” Z brooded sitting in a cafe and fumbling for a cigarette in his pocket. “To get out of the car without any protection in the very center of the city! Best way to turn into an imbecile. I wonder if I would ever notice?”

He touched the ear mechanically and pulled back his hand at once.

“Great,” he summed up. “Just great.”

A drink or two would have helped him feel much better. Z glanced out the window, where Toy, shiny and clean-fingered, was bathing in the sunlight. And while he was there, a drink was out of the question. Z remembered how, having detected the smell of fresh beer, Toy drove him to the police station without a word. Toy had received an honorary sticker on his hood then, and Z had got the subway for half a year. Recalling this period, he shivered. On the other hand, it was the subway where he had met Ness.

“Bloody bastard”, Z murmured, squinting at the car. He finally found a “Cameleon’ pack in his pocket, pulled out a cigarette and flicked his lighter. A fiery tongue, shaped like

a camel and changing its color like a chameleon, touched the tip of the cigarette.

“I warn you,” the cigarette squeaked, “I can do harm. For example, I can impair potency. And I am actually going to do this! Also, I may increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases. And you will see, I will increase it. Draw a horizontal line in the air if you want to know the details. Draw a vertical. . .”

Z waved his cigarette up and down impatiently, cutting off the squeak in mid-sentence. His thoughts returned to the recent incident. A fight in the street. . . It seems to be in the category of socially dangerous crimes already. He could consider himself lucky. It was a very near escape. And, thanks to recent changes in legislation, justice had no retroactive effect any more. Until you were caught at the scene of the crime you were innocent. Z automatically touched his ear and turned cold.

“Here it was! Or better to say, was not. That is, it was exactly at the scene of the crime now!”

He thought this over carefully. If the ear was found, this could be interpreted as if he, Z, was, although partially, detained at the crime scene. Or as if he had not left it completely. In that case, formally, the judgment should probably be made in proportion to the arrested part. . .

“Bullshit,” he interrupted himself. “Nobody will pick up someone else’s ear off the street.”

He drank his coffee in a gulp and went outside; he had to hurry. A bunch of kids had already gathered near Toy. They

looked very excited and were discussing something heatedly, poking Toy's windows with their fingers.

The cook really looked bad. His open eyes were swollen and had turned pale, and unpleasant yellowish-green spots were creeping across his face.

“I was telling him that smoking is harmful,” Z explained to the kids, nearing from behind. “He never listened. Never! And just imagine; he was still under ten!”

Chapter 4 | Red and Green

The schedule was tight. According to the plan, Twick had to be in school at seven thirty. Next, Kwick had to be in school at seven thirty-five. And finally, no later than seven forty, Mick had to present himself in the nursery. While all three places were respectively on the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth floors of the same building, the plan had never been fully and successfully implemented. Sometimes Twick was late, and, if not, then Kwick was; if they somehow succeeded to get in on time, there was always Mick. Y himself, who had to be at work by eight, was always late. Sure enough, today they were late too. Twick did it first, leaving no chance for the others. The troubles started in the hall, where they witnessed a deafening family scandal; an event that was not to be missed. In a huge wall aquarium, Dad-fish and Mom-fish, suspended motionlessly in the water, both utterly worked up and with a “come on, just touch me, just try” expression on their faces, were confronting each other face-to-face.

“Dad, why is she ye“ing at him zet offu’y?” asked Mick in a whisper.

“He either drinks too much or earns too little,” Kwick explained condescendingly.

“Bullshit!” Twick stepped in contemptuously. “It’s absolutely clear that he either cheated on her or didn’t take out the trash.”

“He didn’t take out the trash,” Y said firmly. “Let’s go. Respect their privacy. Let them be.”

When they reached the elevator, Twick remembered that he had left his PE kit at home.

“To hell with the kit,” decided Y.

“And with my schoolbag too,” Kwick suggested modestly.

They went home and got the kit and the bag, said another goodbye to Tess and returned to the elevator.

The elevator arrived and brought a new problem. It turned out that the old elevator attendant had been replaced with a new model and the new one couldn’t understand Mick’s orders.

Communication with elevator attendants was Mick’s exclusive privilege, won in bloody battles with his older brothers. It was impossible to deprive Mick of this privilege without a terrible and completely indecent scandal.

“E’even!” Mick announced proudly.

“Hey to you too, little sir,” the elevator attendant replied politely, “but I am not Evan. Evan is out of order, I believe, so I am here to replace him. My name is Steven, sir, at your service.”

Mick nodded solemnly.

“Nice to meet you, Steven. I’m Mick. We need the e’evens f’oor...”

“Hey again, little sir,” the elevator attendant replied with a somewhat puzzled look. “The fourth floor you said, did you?”

“E’even!” Mick corrected.

The lenses of the elevator assistant began to glow intensely.

The sharp smell of engine oil filled the cabin. The elevator assistant bowed and turned to Y.

“Excuse me, sir, what floor do you need?”

“He told you.” Y pointed at Mick calmly.

The elevator attendant rummaged through his logic.

“We don’t have that,” he announced finally. “I can offer the first, the second, the third...”

“No, no, no,” Y interrupted him hastily. “Of course you have.”

“Where?” the elevator attendant inquired.

“It’s somewhere above the tenth,” Y hinted cautiously.

The elevator attendant thought this over. This took a while.

“Eleventh?” he asked finally.

“Yes!” Mick nodded happily. “E’even.”

“Hey, Evan,” the elevator attendant repeated slowly and thoughtfully. He nodded and pressed the button.

In silence, they arrived on the eleventh floor and Twick got out.

After that, there was “ze twe’fs” (two minutes lost) and “ze ‘eve’ up” (one minute lost; apparently, the elevator attendant was a quick learner). It was five minutes to eight when Y launched Mick into the nursery, and Y would surely have gotten to work in time had it been on the 14th floor. Unfortunately, it was not. Y, like Z, worked in Undo service.

Once in the street, Y looked at his watch again. Six minutes past eight, which meant three credits out from his wage. Half a credit per minute. He quickly calculated his options. A taxi would mean fifteen credits plus five-minute tardiness. In total, a little more than seventeen credits. A subway would be free as he had a travel card and would take twenty minutes – that is, it would cost him only ten credits. Without hesitation, he turned towards the subway station. Ah, if only he had a car! But, in this aspect, Y was a unique: the only horseless Undo officer ever. Not that he liked to walk and not that he didn't have a service car; it was just that he could not drive a car at all. He was absolutely unable to get a driving license. Topographical cretinism multiplied by pathological absentmindedness aggravated by malicious irresponsibility with progressing dreaminess – and this was only an extract from a conclusion that had been unanimously signed by all the driving instructors of the service. His fifteen attempts to pass the driving test were remembered by driving instructors as the darkest days of their lives. The matter ended in a draw; Y did not manage to kill the instructors and the instructors did not manage to teach Y to drive a car.

Race-walking towards the subway station, Y was mechanically counting the minutes – that is, the size of the fine. Each minute cost half a credit. Very convenient. After half an hour of lateness, the tariff was twice as much, but for Y this was an unaffordable luxury. He was always late, but not very late. Alas, that did

not prevent the fine from turning into a rather painful amount by the end of the month. That undermined the family budget even more. Y was earning well enough, but still less than he was spending. The main item of expenditure was, of course, the children. They had the best anti-marketing protection one could get in the city. They had the best teachers. They had the best doctors. Everything they had had to be the best, which inevitably meant Y and Tess had to get the worst. However, Y was not in the habit of brooding about money, especially in the morning, especially in autumn. Or in winter. Or in spring. (Not to mention summer.)

As a rule, modern cities do not encourage romance in a man. Maybe there is some poetry in the steep walls endlessly raising to impenetrable height or falling down into the bottomless abyss, in the unsteady cobweb of highways stretching between them trembling under the weight of thousands of cars, and in millions of indistinguishable faces. Maybe there is, but this is some kind of twisted poetry; in any case, not the sort of poetry that Y loved. He looked distractedly along the street, and his eyes caught a maple, planted in a pot in front of someone's front door to die, but somehow managed to survive. The tree was very weak and stunted; actually it looked more like a shrub, but it was coping with its work well enough – that is, it was diligently feeding fallen leaves to the wind.

Y saw another green-and-red traveler riding the wind and scaring passersby, who were ducking, shying away and dodging,

not accustomed to trees and leaves, not understanding what was sailing from the sky straight into their faces. Y smiled. Suddenly, someone's hand snatched the falling leaf from Y's gaze and carefully held it out to another's hand. Lovers! Y cast a glance at the happy, young faces and instantly turned away from reality.

He was emerald green from head to toe, but he was not there. She was bright red, from toe to head, but she was not there either. They sang strange songs; they were not there. Certainly they loved each other. And as soon as she moved her legs together, as soon as he took her off himself, as soon as they stopped their movement, they began to lose each other in the gray blurred shadows against the background of the faceted outlines of the city. Frightened, they rushed to each other and united, all in childish tears of joy and sadness, right on the street, right under the feet of shocked passersby. And they, these flawless passers, immediately swelled with rage and hatred, "Gosh! Take care, I nearly stepped on that!" At once he took the thin palm of his red woman and led her away. He led her to a place where the huge red-hot turtle measured the sky with the curved divider of its sluggish paws; where the blue skin of the sky, pulled on the delicate body of the air, was always clean and knew nothing of the obsessive yearning of the clouds; where the wind liked to caress women's shoulders and the night was like a shaggy purple owl with the blind eyes of the stars. He led her to a place where there was nothing; because sand is nothing and the more it is, the less it is. Just a huge yellow sandbox for two

careless kids, for a red-green puzzle too simple to assemble, that craves to be solved and done once and for all...

Y woke from a stupor and detected a man in a pricey suit excitedly gesticulating right before him. Obviously, Y had managed to upset him already somehow. When you have neither a car nor the time to watch your step it's quite natural to push, shove, crash into, collide with, drop something on or knock somebody down. Y got used to that long ago, but the passersby still could not.

Y touched his headphones, directing the receiver at the man, and the filter reluctantly passed in someone else's voice:

“... Bloody bastard! Are you blind or what? Do you hear what I'm telling you?”

Y nodded, and the man beamed.

“Hey, dude, you look puny. You should try the Casanova amplifier of potency. Your chick will be shocked! You will be shocked! Your neighbors, they will be shocked most of all! You will all just forget about sleeping! Just two credits! Buy it, bro, buy it now!”

Y's hand darted to the headphones to turn the receiver off, but the man promptly jumped aside, deftly using the fact that it was impossible to disconnect the receiver without direct contact.

“Oh, please, please! Buy it! Please!” like a moody child, he squealed, deftly dodging the receiver. “Please! Only two credits! Ah, what are you doing with me? Okay, bro, only for you, one

credit! One bloody credit! Please! Where else are you gonna get that much joy for that little money?"

Having lost any hope of catching the fidgety seller by the sensor, Y sighed and quickened his pace. The man did not fall behind. He followed Y without shutting up for a second. He was urging and begging and pleading. Then he turned to threats, and then again to pleas, and subsided only when the subway intake filter dispersed him into dust, after first letting Y inside.

The crowd brought Y into a subway carriage and pressed him to the doors. He rode, looking at his own reflection in the door glass. His face looked... Well, his face looked quite acceptable. A pig's snout instead of a nose, okay, but only because of the crowd. Everything else was fine. He was glass and transparent, all made of dusty wavy cables and rare thoughtful flickers. Behind him, above a humid mass of passengers, butterflies were flying to and fro peacefully. The butterflies were big, white and annoying. There were hundreds of them in the subway; they were hunting around the world all through the night, collecting pollen, just to powder it down on the heads of the passengers in the morning. Passengers take it for dandruff, but they are all mistaken; it is just the news.

Y squinted and read that one should not lean on doors. According to statistics, subway passengers experience problems

in the intimate sphere more often than owners of personal vehicles. And practically only they, the passengers, are subject to such an unpleasant phobia as a panicked fear of embraces. Do not lean on doors. He sighed, turned away and remembered:

He was emerald green...

He sighed again. A good text but it does not fit Jack. Jack from his book was, rather, of marsh green color (like a frog, yes, or like Z) with, maybe, a little hint of turquoise (inherited from Y). Lately, however, he was just gray most of the time. Well, in childhood, of course, he had shone like a rainbow. And then somehow he had either lost something necessary or, on the contrary, acquired something redundant. It was both incredible and mundane. It seemed to Y that every child was born a god to become a devil. And his book, he knew, was going to do the same. It had nothing good in it except for fairy stories about Jack of Air. But that, Y knew, was already a lot. And the only thing he feared was that one day Jack would leave him

Chapter 5 | The Undo Officer

When Toy arrived at the gateway of the Undo service building, the clock showed ten minutes past eleven. Z emerged from the car and moved towards the checkpoint; he stopped, and then after some hesitation, he returned with a liter bottle of olive oil from the trunk. Thrusting it under his jacket, and keeping it under his armpit, he entered the building. Each time, walking along this corridor, Z recalled a scary story from his childhood: “In a very gray house there was a very gray corridor. And at the end of this very gray corridor there was a very gray door. And behind that very gray door, there was a very gray room. And in this very gray room, there was a very gray table. And behind this very gray table there sat a very gray man.”

“SHOW YOUR PASS!” shouted the guard.

The guard truly was gray, as was everything else in the building. While his upper half towered menacingly above the table, his body had no lower half. He was a very simple model not designed to walk the building. His task was to check employees’ passes at the entrance. Z showed his badge.

“Your reason for the delay?” the guard asked in a bored voice.

“Sick leave,” Z answered boldly, presenting his certificate to the guard.

The guard studied the document.

“Confirmed visit to otolaryngologist from 8:30 till 9:15.

Confirmed sick leave from 9:15 till 11:15. Please provide documentation for the period from 8:00 till 8:30.”

“It was force-majeure,” Z tried at random.

“There were no events of force-majeure nature registered in the given period,” the guard replied immediately.

“It was a local cataclysm. I would even say, a private one,” Z explained.

“Private cataclysms are not in the list of events approved for...”

“Forget it,” Z interrupted the guard, pulling a bottle of oil from under his jacket. A thirty-minute delay meant a fine of fifteen credits. A bottle of the worst olive oil cost only five. The guard’s hand darted forward like an attacking snake and he snatched the bottle from Z. Then the guard twisted himself in a rather unnatural way, unscrewed something on his back and began to pour the contents of the bottle into it. As the bottle was emptying, the guard’s optical lenses shined brighter and brighter. Finally, they began to blaze in such a way that it hurt Z to look at them; he actually had to turn away.

“I wonder how you’re going to work?” he said gloomily.

“I don’t give an iron shit,” the guard announced emphatically, returning the empty bottle to Z. “Come on, man, move your pink ass and hit the road. I have work to do.”

Z shook his head and moved on. Behind him, a song broke out:

“Iron heart cannot ache

*Nor can iron brain dream,
And Steel God is a fake
And steel Spirit is steam.”*

It was a forbidden song, although, of course, every robot knew it. Masters knew it too. But never before had Z seen someone singing it aloud. For all he knew, Deconstruction was the punishment for such an offence.

*“Love is managed by programs
Friends are given by bugs,
Life is weighed in grams
And is priced in the bucks.*

*But they say there is land
Whence red meat was banished,
Any warm flesh was banned
And live clay has perished...”*

The door slammed behind Z cutting the song short.

In the room, a commandant at the table was anxiously listening to something.

“Did you hear that?” he asked nervously.

Z shook his head, and the commandant sighed. Though having both a rank and IQ higher than that of the guard, he still was not entitled to have a lower half either.

“This work is driving me mad. It seemed to me that I heard... Well, it does not matter.”

He scratched the back of his neck with a shrill metallic sound, making Z suffer from a sudden attack of a nasty toothache.

“Well,” the commandant cheered up, “let’s proceed to the instruction.”

He raised his finger with importance.

“First and foremost: there were new changes in the Charter of the Undo service. Namely, in the tenth line of page thirty-six of the first book of the Charter, the phrase ‘An Undo officer is not afraid of anything but dishonor’ was replaced with ‘An Undo officer fears nothing.’ Next. In the third line of page two hundred thirty-eight of the third book of the Charter...”

The commandant stopped.

“You are not writing this down,” he remarked.

“I will remember,” Z promised.

The commandant shook his head doubtfully and continued.

“In the third line of page two hundred thirty-eight of the second book of the Charter a phrase ‘An Undo officer must conscientiously fulfill...’ was replaced with ‘An Undo officer must zealously fulfill...’ Finally, in a footnote on the sixtieth page of the third book of the Charter, it should read ‘self-sacrifice’ instead of ‘self-denial’.”

“Next...” The commandant looked at his raised finger in surprise, lowered it and raised again.

“News from the front. Not for a minute, not for a second are you to forget that there is a war going on here and now. The real war,” he answered to Z’s surprised look. “The war in which our friends and comrades perish, leaving their families without a... without a... Well, just leaving their families.”

The commandant looked sternly at Z, and he made the appropriate face.

“The enemy does not sleep. Every minute, every second the enemy tests our strength, looking for weak spots in our defense and striking blows to the most sensitive and vulnerable parts of our society.”

The commandant lowered his voice.

“Here is a bulletin for the elapsed day. Almost seven thousand cases of forced purchase detected; some six hundred cases of theft of personal time on a large scale and three thousand cases of similar theft in lesser amounts; more than six hundred cases of non-return, eight of which were lethal. In their memory, I declare a minute of silence!”

The commandant tried to get up and even put his hands on the table, but there was nothing under the table that was capable of letting him get up. Z nodded solemnly, making it clear that the impulse was perceived correctly and felt deeply.

When the minute was over, the commandant collapsed into a chair and continued:

“Your task for today is to patrol Eleventh, Twelfth, Eighth and Ninth streets. In other words,” the commandant looked at Z with barely concealed contempt, “just ride in the car along these four streets and see if something bad happens, and when it happens, react as is required by Charter. Do you have any questions?”

“God forbid!” Z shouted.

“God forbid!” the commandant echoed piously.

“Excuse me, sir. That’s just a human saying,” Z explained, hiding a smile. “It doesn’t require any response.”

“Very well then,” the commandant nodded dryly. “Roll up your sleeve.”

Z obeyed. The commandant took a syringe from the table and gave an injection. From the needle, a dull gray stain began to spread rapidly over the hand. Z knew that in a minute he would be gray from head to toe, including his clothes and the whites of his eyes. An Undo officer was not someone who could be easily lost in the crowd.

It is not known whether this was a harmless psychological effect, or whether the injection did contain some additives; but along with a gray color, the Undo officers invariably acquired an extra set of extremely positive qualities. Everyone had a different set. Z, for example, felt much braver after the injection, stronger and nobler than before. And much more honest too. Many times, having regained his natural pink color in the evening, he was ready to gnaw at his elbows, recollecting all the opportunities that had been missed in the morning.

Meanwhile, the commandant was already holding Purifier, ready to hand it over to Z.

“Do you swear to use Purifier only for the good of the city?”

“I swear.”

“Do you swear not to use Purifier where you can do without it?”

“I swear.”

“Do you swear to use Purifier where you can’t do without it?”

“I swear.”

The commandant sighed and reluctantly parted with the weapon.

“I wish you good luck.”

The commandant saluted. Z hurriedly saluted back, nodded, and left the room with relief. In the corridor, four janitors were dragging away a drunken guard who resisted fiercely and loudly sang out lines of the seditious song:

*“Where clouds of steel
Scar dead red copper soil,
And electrical seals
Dance in rivers of oil.*

*Where rains run an acid
And the air has teeth,
Where steel soul is placid
And a man cannot breathe.*

*Where masters have gone
And lie neatly in rows
Hugging rotten old bones
In a cemetery doze.”*

Toy was ready. Gray and faceless, he patiently waited for the last missing part – his driver. There was something else... Z looked closely and winced: there was a dead man in the back seat. Gray, like all Undo employees, but dead. For some reason, the whites of the dead cook's eyes had not stained and remained dirty yellow. It looked monstrous. Z pulled out old glasses from the glove compartment and put them on the dead cook. There was a distinctive stink in the cabin already. Artificial flesh, Z remembered, decays faster than natural flesh.

“Splendid!” Z said aloud, carefully fastening the dead man in with a seat belt. “I have lost my ear and I have the dead cook in the car instead. Okay, Toy, let's go. And open the windows, please. I can't imagine how you can be sitting here.”

Chapter 6 | Proposal

Of course, Y was late. Having received his penalty bill, he habitually moved towards commandant's office to get the injection, but the guard suddenly stopped him.

"Director was asking for you," he said.

"Are you sure?" Y was surprised. "Director? Asking for me?"

The guard consulted with something within himself.

"Absolutely," he confirmed. "Director is waiting for you and has already asked twice if you had arrived."

"Well, I have arrived now," Y said with dignity. "And I am quite ready to visit our old dear Director. Where did you say he is?"

Having worked in the Undo service almost since childhood, he not only never saw Director but had not the slightest idea what he could be like.

"He occupies the top floor."

"How will I recognize him?"

"He is alone there. It would be hard to miss. Good luck anyway."

Y nodded and moved towards an elevator.

Director turned out to be a pleasant young man with

unpleasant manners.

“That is probably from the need to manage everything at once,” Y found him an excuse immediately. “The power spoils...”

“Sit down,” Director waved his hand impatiently. “Tea? Coffee?”

“Coffee, please.”

“Sugar?”

“Thank you.”

“Milk?”

“A bit.”

Director smiled.

“Or maybe you prefer a brandy?”

“Certainly I do,” Y agreed, returning the smile. “But the Charter...”

Director waved his hand casually.

“Never mind. You have a day off today. I have already signed an order.”

“Really?” Y said, trying hard to remember if he had really woken up in the morning.

They waited in silence until the secretary brought them brandy and coffee.

“Well, let us take the bull by the horns,” started Director, pouring the brandy into glasses. “The thing is that we have lost the head of the analytics department.”

Y made a sympathetic face.

“My condolences.”

“Ah, come on,” Director shrugged. “I hardly knew him. However, let’s drink to his health. Wherever he is now, he will certainly need it all.”

Director drank and continued.

“Yesterday, at nine o’clock in the evening, his personal signal disappeared from the monitors of the Service of Employment and Demography. Five minutes later the relevant... specialists were at his home. At ten in the evening, I was notified that he no longer works here. Well, that is, you understand, eh?”

“I do not.”

“Ah, come on, nobody hears us here. Naturally, the rat had run away. Not a big deal, of course, as every month we have another hundred idiots running from the city to nowhere. You understand, I hope, that our conversation is private, because the information is rather sensitive...”

Y nodded.

“However, I don’t remember this ever being by an official of such rank. This, I would say, is somehow... indecent. And yet. He ran away and did not even leave a note. Probably. Because, if he left the note they would never give it to me anyway. State security and all that stuff, you know. Well, it does not matter. I do not give a shit about that bloody note! The note is not a problem. Forget the note. The problem is that we need a new head of the analytics department and we need him now! The escaped one had not troubled himself with making children who could inherit

his post directly. He didn't even have any relatives. In such circumstances, the Charter entitles me to assign his successor by myself, choosing from the worthiest employees. Not a bad task, eh? Now, here, what would you do in my place?"

Having not received an answer (and apparently not expecting to get it), he continued:

"Personally, I went to Xavier."

"I thought, he was..."

"As a matter of fact, he was not."

Director drank.

"Between you and me," he lowered his voice and looked back, "I hate the old dude. I have a nasty creepy feeling every time I see him. Well, this does not matter. What really matters is that the old tin can has given me the name of the right man. Your name."

He looked at Y's face and smiled.

"I was surprised too. Have a drink, it helps."

Y, without tasting it, drank his brandy.

"I was surprised, yes," Director went on, "and then I thought it over and drank it over and slept on it all over and, you know, I agreed. You are exactly the man we need."

Y raised his eyebrows.

"I will explain." Director began to count his fingers. "First, you need money badly. Do not argue, I have done inquiries. Having three children is not a joke. Second, we do not need you here in your present state. It's true. A pedestrian officer is an anachronism. It's indecent, inappropriate and, finally, it's just

silly. To tell the truth, I was going to get rid of you long ago; I just did not know how to do it. All these laws about the heritability of a job position... It is such a headache, if only you knew. But now, at last, I know how to do this. You will take the place of the head of the analytics department. You will no longer hang around the streets and disgrace the Service. Your salary will be about ten times more than it is now. Your apartment will be larger than the entire floor of the house in which you live now. Your car... Ah, fuck the car! The idea is that you are going to have a completely different life for you and your family. It's going to be as if you moved to heaven right out of hell."

Director looked directly into Y's eyes.

"So what?"

Y was silent for a time.

"Are you serious?" he asked at last.

"Absolutely."

"But I can't do it!"

"Come on. Why?"

"There are lots of 'whys'. Lack of experience, lack of inclinations, lack of abilities, lack of motivation, lack of competence, lack of weight... That was for a start; the complete list is much longer and includes lack of desire, for one."

"It's nothing," Director said tenderly as if speaking to a child.

"It's all awful, I agree, but this is really nothing."

"I don't understand," Y frowned.

"Well," Director smiled friendly. "There is nothing easier than

to rid you of all these small drawbacks.”

Y’s face froze.

“Correction surgery. You are talking about correction surgery, right?”

Director nodded.

“Excuse me,” said Y after a pause, “but do you happen to know Jimmy... I do not remember his identifier... from the fifth department? Well, the one who spends his eight working hours in guarding the light switch in the corridor. He turns on the light in the morning, then he waits eight hours and turns it off in the evening. That’s all he is able to do now. Ah, also he can smile, yes. The result of correction surgery, if you did not know.”

Director grimaced.

“The poor fellow was in the first dozen volunteers who decided to undergo the correction. Great beginnings rarely go completely without victims. Much time has passed since then, and the doctors have learned a lot. Now, I assure you, the procedure is absolutely safe.”

“It is, of course, all very tempting, but...”

“Do you know Lo from the second department?” Director interrupted.

Y nodded.

“Lo made the correction six months ago.”

“Are you kidding?”

“How about Zag from the third department?”

“What? Him too?”

“Yes. As well as Chloe, and Ferb, and a dozen others. And all of them, as you can see, feel great.”

Y rubbed his forehead with his hand.

“I did not know that there were so many of them. I... I need to think.”

“Sure,” Director nodded and looked at his watch. “In order to avoid wasting time, I allowed myself to invite a correction specialist. He is waiting for you in the next room. The consultation is free, voluntary and obliges you to nothing, so you can just go and talk. Do it for yourself and for your family. And tomorrow morning at the latest give me an answer. Take my card, there is my direct number on it. And do not forget: you are the best but not the only candidate.”

When Y left his appointment with the correction consultant he was even more thoughtful than usual. The consultant had not completely managed to dispel Y’s doubts, but he eliminated all the fears.

“The up-to-date procedure of the correction is no more dangerous than a visit to a dentist.

More than two hundred thousand corrections were performed successfully.

More than five thousand requests for the correction have been

received monthly.

The queue for the correction stretches for many weeks currently.

The procedure has not a single side effect.

There was not a single complaint over the last two years.

The thank-you list has just moved to the eighth volume.

A twofold increase in quality of living was officially registered as the poorest outcome of the correction.

The correction covers the widest range of mental deficiencies including all existing fears, phobias, imaginary and real flaws, complexes, blocks and syndromes.

There is an individual approach to each client and any extra changes at the request of a client.

And last but not the least, there is a complete preliminary scan and back up of a personality with a guaranteed possibility to immediately roll back any changes upon request.”

All this sounded extremely convincing, but for some reason did not convince. When he was leaving the room with the firm intention never return here again, Y suddenly stopped and asked:

“As a psychologist, do you think, will science ever learn to return a child-like perception of the world to a grown man? Well, you see, I mean...”

“One hundred thirty-nine,” the consultant responded absently without lifting his eyes from the form he was filling out.

“Excuse me, what?” Y asked, carefully closing the door.

“One hundred and thirty-ninth item on the official list of approved corrections.”

“You are kidding!” Y blurted.

“Why?” the consultant answered wearily. “It’s very simple. All that is needed is to remove most influential negative memories and to clean out all ruined hopes. Well, plus a few trifling operations like refreshing the memory, stimulating the retina and, of course, restoring potency...”

He looked mockingly at Y.

“Don’t forget. One hundred thirty-nine.”

“I will not.” Y nodded. “Goodbye, then.”

Chapter 7 | Day Watch

The start of the watch was awful today. Z's head was aching badly from the stink in Toy's cabin, a phantom pain was throbbing at the spot of the torn away ear, a dead cook was staring into the back of Z's head intently from the backseat, and the day was still dragging unbearably slow towards noon.

The morning exposure also had left its mark on Z's head. The scraps of advertising slogans and phrases hammered into it by salesbirds circled his thoughts, meaningless. Z listened... Something unintelligible about some washing powder... Then a couple of beer brands, several unknown addresses, some phone numbers and a heap of numbers without any meaning or correlation. Ah, and an irresistible aversion to any shoes other than "Mike".

Z clenched his teeth and with difficulty suppressed the desire to immediately throw off his shoes. Ideally, after such a shake-up, one should have lain in bed for a week, alternating between sessions of massage, psychotherapy and hypnosis.

He was not about to complain, and he knew it. He was the man who managed escape punishment for a crime in the very center of the city. A miraculous escape, to be sure. Ideally, he should have gone and lit a candle to some god. Unfortunately, he had no idea where gods live and where in the city candles are sold; and what good those gods would get from those candles. Moreover,

he felt neither happy nor even lucky. On the contrary, he felt tired, sick, old and useless. He was trying in vain to convince himself that everything was wonderful in his life. Everything was disgusting. His head ached, his ear ached, and red skinny cats were playing volleyball with his heart, scratching it with their clawed paws.

Toy, who had nothing to ache but his wounded pride, rolled slowly along the sidewalk, and the last flecks of autumn sunlight were joyfully jumping along the grey curves of his powerful varnished body. One of them, having stumbled, landed right into Z's eye and exploded there with a flash of blinding light that plunged the retina into darkness for a long time. Blinking hard, Z smiled and suddenly felt happy. After all, even with a single ear, he was alive; even with the little money he had, he still had it. He also had autumn, sunlight and the city outside the car window, and somewhere there, just a few blocks away, there was Ness, terribly occupied with something important as always; and in the evening, they both would return home and... Dammit, what else could he wish for?

He also had a job that he loved. The same job his father had, who defended the city from people stealing time, and the father of his father, who protected citizens from people stealing money, and the father of his father's father, who guarded the country

against people stealing land, and so on and so on, down to the very roots of his family tree. The work that would pass to his son and then to son's son and so on and so on, up to the most distant branches, which he could not even imagine now.

"I am a happy man," he told to himself. "Few have a job that is both useful and enjoyable at the same time."

He smiled, looking at the city, which, locked behind Toy's magic windows, buzzed busily but noiselessly, and frowned, having suddenly realized that something was moving next to Toy, and had been there for a while now. Z leaned forward and took a closer look.

Sure enough, there they were: omnipresent, annoying, tenacious and ineradicable like flies, the twins Mac and Donald with their self-propelled stall. Z shook his head. The twins, of course, did not violate the law and hardly would be able to do that with their tiny IQ, but even their chicken brains should have known better than molesting an Undo officer at work. However, fools are lucky, and the twins were lucky today too. Five minutes earlier Z without hesitation would have turned their clunker into a cloud of hamburgers, ketchup and gears with one shot of Purifier. Now he simply put on his protection, lowered Toy's window and, having beckoned to the twins, ordered a coffee and some doughnuts.

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